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MEDIA & EVENT REVIEWS

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A love interrupted: A Tribe Called Quest's resilient path of rhythm

ABSTRACT

In 2016, the rap group A Tribe Called Quest returned with their long-awaited sixth and final album, We Got It From Here... Thank You 4 Your Service. *Behind it was a long and turbulent story without which the record's full significance cannot be properly understood. In this longform critical essay, hip hop scholar and critic James McNally examines that history, drawing on an extensive archive of historic interviews and visual material to illuminate the impact this pivotal group made on hip hop's golden age. It maps the disruption in music and values created by the freewheeling collective they belonged to, the Native Tongues; in particular the new, looser, more expressive modes of Blackness and everyteen vitality they injected into hip hop's late-1980s moral and stylistic universe. Unpacking the tropes of familiality the Native Tongues promoted, the essay is drawn in particular to the de facto sibling relationship between Tribe's two core MCs – Malik 'Phife' Taylor and Kamaal 'Q-Tip' Fareed (born Jonathan Davis). It argues their friendship – as ultimately embodied in the sound of Tribe's music, but also, increasingly, as public biographical knowledge – was central to the group's appeal. Engaging*

KEYWORDS

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with their fraternal ambivalence as well as their love, and with the group's drawn-out implosion after 1998's The Love Movement, the essay explores themes around masculine friendship and platonic male love, around estrangement, reconciliation and resilience, and, ultimately – following the interruption of We Got It From Here… *by Taylor's untimely death – the personal tragedy of loss. Bringing these themes together, 'A Love Interrupted' provides a critical reading of A Tribe Called Quest's poignant final album.*

MOVEMENT 1

There is a thunk of inevitability to the title for A Tribe Called Quest's (2016) final album, *We Got It From Here... Thank You 4 Your Service*. A gracious response to the guillotine that, part way through recording, dropped on Tribe's future as a collective force, it is certainly a Tribe title. It stretches out like *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* (1990) – a virtual haiku, begging interpretation. A metonym of sorts, it's also suggestive of the record's poignant mix of melancholy, camaraderie, joy, middle-aged reflection and – given the unfolding crisis that haunted its making – a sometimes almost unbearable sense of positivity in the face of adversity.

Recorded as much-loved emcee Malik 'Phife' Taylor succumbed to the diabetes diagnosed 26-years earlier as he embarked on his career with Tribe, it is a New Orleans funeral of an album. For the members of Tribe, its creation was both a reunion, a healing and a long goodbye. The group had not recorded since 1998's *The Love Movement* and the chances of doing so again seemed increasingly unlikely as late as November 2015.

Michael Rappaport's 2011 documentary *Beats, Rhymes & Life* offers a painful window on the acrimony that had grown between Taylor and Kamaal 'Q-Tip' Fareed (born Jonathan Davis) – Tribe's de facto leader. By April 2011, as the pair's grievance went meta, arguing over the depiction of their arguments in Rappaport's film, Taylor – the reluctant divorcee of the piece – did not sugar coat his words: 'We definitely be at each other's throats', he told MTV (Thomas 2011).

Two years later, when Tip, apparently unilaterally, announced that Tribe would no longer play live, it seemed an ignominious end to a once great band. Between 1990 and 1998, Tribe had released five albums that helped define and develop the sound of underground hip hop. They co-created a more polyphonic rap world attitudinally too; one in which it was *possible* to be complex, human and vulnerable; where rap music was able to be – in an overt sense – self-consciously artistic.

Yet, Tribe's devoted fanbase seemed invested beyond this in something altogether more mythic, and the group's public dissolution struck an unusually emotive chord. It is only by following this turbulent path – by exploring Tribe's rhythm – that their final album can be fully understood.

MOVEMENT 2

For a generation of fans that advanced with Phife and Tip into middle age, Tribe had once radiated brotherhood. Part fleet-footed chemistry, these two childhood friends – just 19 when they recorded their debut – exuded a rare magic. Records like 'Electric Relaxation' and 'Check the Rhime' suggest a sibling connection – no sense of lesser partnerships' rigidly demarcated bar trading patterns, or of verses quantity surveyed by competing managers. They slide into each other's wakes, pick up trails with a casualness that makes you feel you are eavesdropping on a barbershop conversation – Tip the philosopher, Phife the sportsman, shooting the shit with an emotional truth.

That horseplay evidenced the two emcees' shared childhoods in Queens. Tip remembers pre-teen days spent '[making] up routines that would emulate Run-DMC' (Coleman 2007: 438). As a history it was engrained in the group's peppy interplay, but as subject of reflection it periodically bubbled to the surface in light-handed fragments of autobiography:

> *Phife*: Yo, Tip you recall when we used to rock
> Those fly routines on your cousin's block
> *Tip*: Um, let me see, damn I can't remember
> I receive the message, and you will play the sender

Listening to 'Check the Rhime' Tribe's appealing origin story comes to life. We can envisage these young minds folding around the deft interplay of their Queens borough heroes ('Now Peter – Piper – picked – peppers – but Run rocked – rhymes…'); two still-just-pre-teens, breaking down raps to molecular exchanges, eye-to-eye, smiles breaking their banks, a psychic bootcamp. By the peak of their partnership in their early 20s, Phife and Tip possessed a fluidity evocative of a single life force. This was enhanced by the compatibility of their vocal timbres – a chance of nature that was critical to their appeal: both light and mirthful, their voices vibrated with the intensity of teenage friendship.

This came together with the optimistic sonic energy of Tribe's music to create a uniquely spirited sound. In 1990, asked about the origin of the sample used on 'Rhythm (Dedicated to the Art of Moving Butts)', Tribe DJ Ali Shaheed Muhammad equivocated, 'We called that sample The Sunbelt. It's like ahhhh… sunshine' (Abrams 1990: 22). It is possible, of course, Muhammad just did not want to divulge his source – it was, it is now well known, a delicious snippet of keyboards, that emerge warm and fuzzy from the dubbed-out breakdown of Grace Jones' 'Pull Up to the Bumper' remix. Nevertheless, his nickname reflects the fundamental generosity of spirit of the group's sound – one that was designed, according to Muhammad, '[to] just try to get people to have a better feeling about themselves' (Abrams 1990).

For Tip, his co-architect of that sound, the music was conceived in no less positive terms. He described the beat-making process on *People's* as 'questin' for musical liberation' – a freeform, synaesthesic procedure he envisaged in tones: a sample of Grover Washington Jr here, Roy Ayers there, a smear of Eugene McDaniels, or Little Feat. 'We have a canvas', Tip explained, 'and we have a whole bunch of different colours […] we're just paintin' whatever the fuck we want to' (Chiesa 1990: 33).

Composed of warm tones, deep chords, and buoyant rhythm, that sound suggested release, positive action, freedom – the 'self-betterment' Jarobi White, Tribe's until 2016 mostly silent fourth member, saw as indivisible from musical creativity (Chiesa 1990: 32). For Muhammad, the hope was that the group's music would serve to mitigate the 'social problem of low self-esteem' he saw accumulating from every crevice of Reaganite America (Abrams 1990: 22).

But while peers used hip hop as an overtly political device, channelling the righteous rage of inner-city America, Tribe conceived a more emotive tool. 'What we try to do is uplift the human mind', Muhammad said, 'make you feel better about yourself, have a good time. Laugh a little, smile a little, you know, cheer up'.

Tribe were remarkably consistent in achieving that goal. Records like 'Verses From the Abstract', 'Award Tour' and 'Find A Way' emanate a fortifying sunshine that is hard to quantify. It goes beyond sample sources, harmony and mix-downs, and, like Phife and Tip's chemistry, resides in intangibles that separate the group's output from its most musically aligned contemporaries. Forgive the bombast, but at its best Tribe's music sounds like *love*.

MOVEMENT 3

This sonic impression of fellowship is, I think, at the heart of the group's appeal. When you were plugged in, the energy expended by these beings from Queens was transformed to sunrays: a charisma machine, a love movement. The sense was of an inclusive community of 'us' in the face of the increasingly individualist world Muhammad lamented. But that feeling of belonging, however vicarious, was not simply a result of what was on the tape. It was also contextual – a consequence of Tribe's membership of a confederacy of rap nonconformists called the Native Tongues.

Arriving like a sunshower on rap, NT's first wave – which additionally included the Jungle Brothers, De La Soul, Queen Latifah and Monie Love – opened up radical new possibilities in 1988–89, in a genre already racing towards multiple futures. Some of this impact was aesthetic, of course. *People's Instinctive Travels* (1990), the Jungle Brothers' *Done By The Forces Of Nature* (1989) and De La Soul's *Three Feet High And Rising* (1989) stand as a triptych of transformative albums in the same way the Beatles' *Revolver*, the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* and Bob Dylan's *Blonde On Blonde* converged on 1966 to signal the onset of rock. Without them it is hard to imagine a hip hop that produced the Pharcyde, the Roots, OutKast, the Neptunes, Kanye West or Anderson .Paak.

But, just as importantly, it was a shake-up in ways of being. As Tip later reflected, the Native Tongues' philosophy was paramount. It said:

> You can be who you are […]. You don't have to fit in with everything else that's going on. It's okay to be black and be smart, black and like art, and want to read […] and [to] say I love you or cry.
>
> (*Wax Poetics* 2008: 96)

To say this was disruptive is an understatement. Rap, as it entered its adolescence in the late 1980s, was a creature of its decade. For all its abundant virtues, it was egocentric, macho and materialistic. It was certain of itself, sometimes morally proscriptive. Inasmuch as it was also cacophonous and moved in leaps of sonic invention, as a genre built on teenage machismo, it could be conservative – its vision of what constituted proper subject matter or appropriate expression surrounded by shibboleths. Vulnerability, if it reared its head at all, usually came with a chaser. If that was not revenge, misogyny or self-validating wealth, it was the *Rocky* outcome: 'fuck you, I won'.

As the Native Tongues began to gather at rap's door in 1988, the masculine ideals inside told a story. There was real-life enforcer Just-Ice, hench and muscle-bound, having recently beaten a murder rap; Slick Rick decked in gold and Bally – his modern-day morality tales laced with pre-emptive misogyny ('Treat Her Like a Prostitute'). There was Chuck D's militarism – the charismatic Black nationalist leader reimagined for the 1980s, in a rush of Uzis, Adidas and Farrakhan; a whiff of the gender wars emitting from records like 'She Watch Channel Zero' and 'Sophisticated Bitch'. There was Rakim's laser-guided cool – all indomitable Miles Davis poise and pre-tin foil hat Bobby Fisher strategy… thinking of a masterplan.

Certainly, hip hop's portrayals of hypermasculine Blackness discomfited bastions of middle-American values like the PMRC. Yet these postures were simultaneously comfortable, coherent with the 'racial etiquette' Black rock scholar Maureen Mahon describes keeping 'black Americans confined to a limited set of separate and unequal positions and practices that are widely understood to be appropriately black' (Mahon 2004: 8).[1] In 1988, there was little room to disrupt the consensus – not in rap, and not in the culture at large.

But here, arriving at rap's door, were the Native Tongues – these overtly non-macho guys, male and female, espousing a version of rap that was accepting, loose and expressive. Forget for a moment the invention with which their music displaced 1988's James Brown clip and grit – the giddying eclecticism of De La's sampledelia, or the Jungle Brothers' imagined Brooklyn Africa, with its cross-woven funk, tribal hand drums and sampled chants. Let us pause for a moment on image.

Here were fashion departures as stark as Afghan coats from Beatle jackets. While peers flexed muscles in greed-is-good Gucci warm-up suits, the Jungle Brothers came dressed for safari. Tip created neo-bohemian skirmishes pitting batik trousers against rice farmer hats, Lennon glasses against 1940s dress sandals. De La showed up in hand-me-down paisley shirts and mutated Gumby hairstyles that Greg Tate likened to cauliflower crowns. Queen Latifah, meanwhile, posed regally, self-styled something like an Afrocentric feminist airline pilot. Hip hop's gold rope chains were nowhere – black beads and leather Africa pendants everywhere.

These looks, by and large, were relaxed and free spirited, and so were the Native Tongues' projections of self when they were photographed. Contrast, if you will, Eric B & Rakim's crew on the back of 1987's *Paid In Full* with the cover of the Jungle Brothers' 'Doin' Our Own Dang'; the inner sleeve of *People's Instinctive Travels* with Public Enemy's 98 Posse on 'You're Gonna Get Yours'. The Native Tongues replaced hip hop's lingua franca of militaristic unity with a more natural familiality – even if occasionally it looked slightly awkward, like teenagers made to pose at a family function.

'Being different', as De La's Dave Jolicoeur rationalized in one early interview, was something 'we always liked to do ever since we were in school. We were the most popular kids', he claimed, 'due to the fact that we dressed differently, spoke differently and our attitudes were different' (Smash 1990: n.pag.). Now they were in rap – which Posdnuos more than once described as 'just high school' – that approach showed up in these groups' music (Frazier 1993: n.pag.).

Steering well clear of the hardening clichés of rap's existing lunchroom cliques (its jocks, gigolos and activists), the Native Tongues took on an easy roaming subject matter: youthful introspection met everyday observation; Afrocentric pride abutted teenage fun and social commentary – their light deliveries and matter-of-fact tones, far removed from the macho fast rolling momentums and self-conscious virtuosity of popular lyrical emcees like Big Daddy Kane and Kool G Rap. (It is worth noting, the Native Tongues' conventionally 'hardest' rappers in this respect were women: Monie Love and Queen Latifah.)

1. 'The distressed poor, the drug-addled, the violent, the highly sexed, the long-suffering, the religiously devout, the good-time partyers' (Mahon 2004: 8).

2. At least not in the sense of E. Franklyn Frazier's (1997) *Black Bourgeoisie*.

To what can we attribute this apparent lack of posture? Tip suggests it's significant that 'as individuals [they] shared an upbringing based on love' (Leger 1996: 91). Few of the Native Tongues maybe were straight forwardly middle-class,[2] but this emotional security – and Posdnuos also recalls the groups shared a 'very good background, family wise' (Frazier 1993) – surely brought a useful inner fortitude. They also tended to the modestly suburban and the educationally enfranchised. Posdnuos – a business freshman when De La were signed – 'definitely felt it was important where we came from' (Frazier 1993).

In Tip's case, it is more obvious, though, his upbringing encouraged a profound identification with women's perspectives – which remains somewhat unusual for a man in rap's macho culture, but was almost unheard of when the Native Tongues first emerged. Born Jonathan Davis in 1970 to a mother from Alabama and father from the Caribbean island of Montserrat, Tip grew up above a nightclub on Linden Boulevard in Queens, surrounded by an older sister and a lively extended family.

A rare personally revealing interview from 1999 suggests it was an intensely matrifocal upbringing, and that his was a curious, empathetic mind (McGregor 1999):

> I've watched a woman love her man; I've watched a woman raise her daughter; I've watched a woman deal with another elder woman in the family, my grandmother. I've been put in the little bedroom with the kids, while all the women in my family were in the living room playing bid whist and gin rummy. They would be in there talking, and my ear was to the door listening to their conversation. I learned. I think that really led me to have a deep love and understanding of women.
>
> (McGregor 1999: 197)

Tip emerged almost fully formed as that rare lyricist who could be sensitive in love *and* lust. In that much, Tribe's first hit 'Bonita Applebum' (1990) joined an elite milieu of similarly minded records by the Jungle Brothers and De La Soul (e.g. 'Black Woman' and 'Eye Know'). As one critic put it, 'women swooned and fellas bobbed their head in approval' (Jazzbo 1993: 17). Tip, who is 6ft and Hollywood handsome, quickly became a progressive sex symbol for the thinking women of rap.

Yet, this broadly womanist agenda went beyond vague romantic sensitivity. In 1989, Tip used Tribe's debut single 'Description of a Fool' as a platform to bait the kind of unreconstructed masculinity then endemic in rap. As a statement of intent, it overtly aligned him with the powerful feminist agenda Queen Latifah was simultaneously proposing. During these early days even his way of speaking sometimes, in fact, seemed to be couched in gender studies' language of fluid possibility. 'A Tribe Called Quest is basically a group, right now, for the time being, of Afro-Americans who happen to be all male […]' he explained in 1990 (Chiesa 1990: 32).

If Tip's register, entangled in self-aware qualifications, had something in common with the kind of whip-smart, anti-sexist, art educated British indie bands that populated music papers like the *NME* in the mid-1980s, it was not an analogy anyone happened upon. The Native Tongues were hip hop hippies, or rap bohemians, or even, as one Italian publication boxed Tribe, with unintended hilarity: 'vegetarian rap' (Chiesa 1990: 31). Naturally too, they found themselves labelled rap's revenge of the nerds: a bunch of hip hop Poindexters, with pocket protectors for their microphones.

None of these stereotypes, of course, held true. The Native Tongues were, if anything, complex. Humans. Critic Dimitry Leger wrote, 'Nerds coexisted with thugs, who got down with macks, who parlayed with wise guys, who hung with preachers, who chilled with feminists, who dug the romantics' (Leger 1996: 91). This was closer to the truth. Phife, for one, could be as blunt a critic of gender relations as Ice Cube. The Jungle Brothers, thoughtful as they were, recorded the juvenile ode to penises, 'Jimbrowski' – a record more like 2 Live Crew's 'Throw the D' than their own more reflective output. De La Soul, architects of the peace-loving DAISY Age, were 'thrown off the LL Cool J tour for fighting', according to producer Prince Paul (Mason 2002: 98).

And Q-Tip? Though quickly flattened into shape as rap's leading beatnik, Tip was not averse to producing records absorbed in street nihilism like Mobb Deep's 'Give Up the Goods (Just Step)' or Apache's 'Gangsta Bitch'. And his personal reality was more complex too. 'I'm not a thug, I'm not a gangster, but I do own a gun', he later revealed. 'Growing up where I grew up, I've been in situations where I've been shot at and things of that nature' (McGregor 1999: 199).

No, the Native Tongues were not rap's nerds, hippies, beatniks or vegetarians. They were something far more compelling and *real*: Black New York everyteens of the brainiac variety, grappling magnificently with their own fluid possibility – no masks, no postures, no spectacular. And in 1988, there was no cultural analogy for that.

MOVEMENT 4

The key strand in all this – and one that was crucial to Tribe – was a sense of ordinary teenage camaraderie. The Native Tongues were friends. Not record company friends, or Disney Club friends: high school buddies, in the cases of Tip, Ali and the Jungle Brothers; de facto ones the rest. Forget the metaphors. If they had not staked out their own table in the real-life lunchroom of Manhattan's Murry Bergtraum High – a place to bang out rhythms, bond and pontificate hip hop's lightning-fast mid-1980s evolution – they *had* been on sleepovers to each other's family homes, or pulled all-nighters together at New York recording studios like Calliope or TTO in Coney Island.

It was 'a family affair', Phife later recalled, 'not like a marketing thing [...] we had fun being around each other, and that was really the main thing' (Coleman 2007: 438). And so, ordinary teenage rap fans could sit in their own lunchrooms, fiddling with Walkmans, listening to these friendships aggregate and spill across vast terrains of rap. And it felt to them special, authentic – as if its spirit of openness and 'vibe of brotherhood', as Adam Mansbach suggested, somehow 'extended to them' (Mansbach 1997: n.pag.).

Sure, there was unity in rap already. The tightly wound possess, from NWA to Public Enemy, often oozed camaraderie. But in 1988–89, with rap striated by beefs, their esprit de corps had a different aura – in some cases, like those of the mafia crews of screen myth, where the internal dynamics could switch on a misplaced utterance, or in others the militarized brotherhood of the armed forces. The Native Tongues, as a formation, seemed spun from freewheeling magnanimity. As Malu Halasa wrote, these groups refused 'to perceive other rappers as competition' and were 'influential in helping each other' (Halasa 1990: 37). As NT emerged, they did so on an appealing cooperative currency –

the Jungle Brothers introduced Q-Tip (on 'In Time', 'Black Is Black' [both 1988] and 'Promo No. 2' [1989] and wrote affectionate liner notes referring to Tribe [then officially consisting of Tip and Ali], as 'the first birth of the JBs'). De La helped expose a rookie Monie Love. Q-Tip guested with Black Sheep. The Jungle Brothers mentored the Beatnuts. Tribe broke Busta Rhymes to a national audience via the 1991 posse cut 'Scenario'.

For Busta, who made a singular impact performing 'Scenario' on the Arsenio Hall Show (3.2 m viewers), it was both the long-springboard to a successful solo career (in 1991 he was quarter of Leaders Of The New School) and an induction into the creatively accepting headspace of the Native Tongues. 'Whenever I was going through the shit that I was going through with Leaders', he later reflected, 'I would go get with Tribe to get to embrace being who I was and not having to compromise that. They embraced all of it, to the point where they put me on like 10 fucking features on all the Tribe albums. I was like the unofficial fifth Tribe member' (Ortiz 2013).

This, apparently, was the intersection of friendship and unfettered creativity – karmic chains not supply chains.

'It's really never ending, so to speak', Tip explained in 1990. 'We stick together, and the Tribe always grows' (Chiesa 1990: 32).

3. For peak Tip awkwardness, see *Bomb* magazine, November 1993:

> Bomb: What makes [*Midnight Marauders*] different from the last two?
> Q-Tip: It just shows progression.
> Bomb: What do you mean?
> Q-Tip: You just progress, y'know. Just movin' on. [*this goes on for a few more questions*]
> Bomb: On the new record, are there any songs that you want to talk about? What are some of your favourite songs?
> Q-Tip: I don't have any.
> (Jazzbo 1993: 17)

MOVEMENT 5

At the climax of Michael Rapaport's Tribe documentary *Beats, Rhymes & Life: The Travels of A Tribe Called Quest*, which takes place on 2008's Rock the Bells tour, there's a scene fit to break any Tribe fan's heart. Phife is struggling with health problems and needs regular dialysis. The band, in an apparent gesture of brotherhood, has reformed to tour so that he can cover his medical bills. But all is not smooth. The scene focuses on the aftermath of an explosive backstage row between Phife and Tip, over claims Tip had made in an interview with *Spin* about his relationship with his erstwhile partner.

The contentious passage maybe seemed innocent enough to Tip: 'I never really had problems [with Phife]', he told *Spin*. 'He more had problems with me, because I was the type of person who would voice my opinions. He viewed me as this kind of figure [in the group]. Every issue I had with him, I would say it, and it would be done afterwards. I wouldn't let it affect me years down the line. But I always had love for him and continue to have love for him' (Golianopoulos 2008: 88).

Phife, understandably, took umbrage. He felt, he later told Rapaport, thrown 'under the bus' by his partner's words – as if the blame for Tribe's woes had been laid squarely at his door. Tip maintained his intention was to be 'self-effacing', to present himself as the pain-in-the-ass of the equation. And from that perspective, it is just as easy to see how his comments might have been a genuinely private man's ham-fisted attempt to shut down a difficult subject before it was properly broached.

If there are three Kamaal Fareeds, Tip's close friend Gary Harris once proposed, there are two he inhabits day-to-day: the private man (Kamaal) and the obsessive studio tinkerer (the Abstract). The third is the 'persona he adopts when he performs [Q-Tip]. And that's the most public it gets' (Stats 2016). It seems fair to say, in fact, few interviews with Tip have gotten past one or two in the 'ring of moats' that Hunter S Thompson argued protected the similarly mysterious Muhammad Ali's private self from intrusion by the press (Thompson 2012: 419).

At worst, Tip skipped out on early interviews altogether – once leaving an unattributed group member to grapple, 'He's just a figurehead anyway' (Abrams 1990: 22). Other times, he seemed uncomfortable enough, he answered questions in put-on voices or turned them back on interlocutors.[3] Even in 1996, when press junkets should have been second nature, journalist Kris Ex described Tip as 'in a constant state of struggle and evolution, even throughout the course of the interview' (Ex 1996: 36). He rewound sentences, retrofitted them with alternate analogies, retracted 'I feels' and replaced them with 'I believes'. Ex reflected, 'Makes you just wanna tell him he's a good kid who undoubtedly makes his mama proud'.

Many viewers of *Beats, Rhymes & Life*, subsequently took his rant – delivered at full pelt, bewildered as it was agitated, to peacemaker Vincent 'Maseo' Mason of De La Soul – as evidence of a diva-ish temperament. There in a wood clad anteroom, with the muffled fizz and thud of the rap concert going on outside, Tip had vented, his eyes becoming glassy with tears. But as he worked the steam from his system, he seemed to reach an ironic conclusion. If he had a problem with Phife, he intimated, it had been with his propensity for laying it all out in interviews while nursing dissatisfaction in private.

His voice became raised in exasperation. 'Nigga, if I'm asking you if something wrong', he said, audibly close to tears, 'say the shit, B. Don't come and talk all this crazy loose shit! That shit make me angry, man'.[4]

4. All quotes in this section taken from *Beats, Rhymes & Life* unless otherwise referenced.

It is a deeply uncomfortable scene that must have felt crushingly exposing. But as it settles, you realize you've been exposed to a tantalizing explanatory riddle: if in good times Tip's interiority and Phife's exuberance created the marriage of abstraction and heart that made Tribe so appealing, in bad, they were apparently part of why the group seemed to repeatedly end up, as Phife put it, 'in parentheses – meaning shaky'.

A few moments later, Rapaport goes off in search of reaction and finds the film's most resonant point. Outside in the stadium, he asks De La's Dave Jolicoeur if he thinks this will be Tribe's last ever live show. 'I hope it is', he confides, with surprising candour. 'It's disappointing. The guys probably know my sentiments about it. I'm a fan. To me, I feel like, you know, when we see Tribe on stage we want to believe that there's love. And if it's really not, and behind the scenes there's some BS going on, I'd rather them not be up there'.

Here, in a nutshell, is the story of how Tribe's troubled denouement fell so heavy on the hearts of the bookish kids that had absorbed their sunshine – even if now most, like Jolicoeur, were full grown adults in their 40s.

MOVEMENT 6

For the two Tribe MCs, 1994's *Midnight Marauders* had marked a high point in their creative relationship. It was 'like a pair of worn-in Air Jordans', Tip remarked in 1999, 'comfortable and shit. We were definitely involved and we were confident and happy' (McGregor 1999: 196). The result had been probably Tribe's best-loved album. And the group's run until this point is widely considered one of the greatest in hip hop's history. By the time Tip uttered those words, however, the group had broken up. He was embarking on a solo career and had barely spoken to Phife for a year.

The love had begun to cool some time before Tribe's 1996 LP *Beats, Rhymes and Life.* For Tip, the strains were obvious – he now admits, exacerbated by his decision to bring fresh blood into the group for their fourth album (his cousin Dexter Mills Jr, aka Consequence, as a third emcee, and producer James 'Jay

5. *Beats, Rhymes & Life*.

6. Some fans were less flattering: 'The Bowel Movement'.

Dee'Yancey, aka Dilla). The new relationships were a personal 'bright spot' for Tip, but the unintended fall-out was that 'everybody started feeling threatened' (Kevito 2017).

At the same time, adulthood had begun to take the childhood friends in different directions. Phife had moved to Atlanta, Tip converted to Islam. The physical distance seemed workable to Phife, but he later suggested the media speculation accompanying the changes 'really put a border between us' (Golianopoulos 2016).

'They tried to make me out to be the black sheep or the lost child', he recalled in 2005. 'That was one of the reasons why the chemistry did break down. That was why it didn't have that bright chemistry. I just felt like we really couldn't work together anymore. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't just my fault' (Golianopoulos 2016).

Reading interviews from that period, it is easy to understand why. In one, a reporter took the opportunity of a difficult encounter to lever open Tribe's rift, pitting a sagacious Tip against 'Napoleon complex' Phife (Ex 1996: 34).

'During Phife's inquisition, Ali and Tip suddenly found other facets of the room interesting', the journalist wrote:

> The Abstract rested his chin on the palm of his hand and moved about the room like a disappointed father, periodically rolling his eyes and staring out the window; Mr Muhammad simply looked to the ceiling as if to ask Allah for help – both of them letting out measured sighs as Phife Dawg, to put it bluntly, made a fool of himself.

Worse, Tip was reported appearing to belittle his partner's acumen. 'You gotta be careful who you delegate the power to', he remarked, ending a long treatise on the nature of society. 'A lot of people have that mentality like Phife, because people live short term' (Ex 1996: 34).

The first break-up came two years later. In August 1998, Tribe were moving through the Midwest, on tour with the Beastie Boys. Their fifth album *The Love Movement* was in the bag, but suffering pushbacks in Jive's schedules. By Milwaukee, Tip had started to announce each night that this would be their last tour. Crowds booed. Rappers confessed their sorrow in the media (Everlast: 'I'm genuinely sad to hear that […] [it's] a real loss for hip hop' [Reiss 1998]). 'Mournful fans' posted accounts to clunky Usenet newsgroups, memorializing the end of the Native Tongues era.

News travelled slow in 1998, though, and there was little of the public trauma that would accompany later breakdowns. The album finally came out at the end of September, fizzling to a halt shy of 700,000 sales. It sat there like a hangnail – the fifth instalment on a six-album contract: a postscript *and* a limbo.

MOVEMENT 7

I remember picking up *The Love Movement* from a London record store in late summer 1998. I had no idea it would be more aptly titled *The Last Movement*, as Phife later joked.[5] On the tube home, as we clattered towards the southern suburbs, I recall carefully unpacking the record to examine its credits. On the inner sleeve, all in white, was a photo. It had the three members of A Tribe Called Quest dressed head-to-toe in crumpled white linen. At the time, my first thought was that they could have been the principals in a cinematic beach wedding. My second, came just as quickly: Ali Shaheed Muhammad was wearing a sarong – a bold statement in the aggressively macho fashion context of hip hop in 1998.

Having recently picked up the sleeve again, though, after re-watching *Beats, Rhymes & Life* with my teenage son, the film bleeds into every subsequent perception. I now see my initial interpretation was off. The mood was wrong, too solemn. Tip's head is bowed, Ali's cocked in thought. Phife, with his hands clasped – in what seems a deliberate, and more defensive, echo of the pose he took in Robert Lewis' batik-clad publicity photos circa *People's Instinctive Travels* – appears to be praying. The thoughts it provokes now are of white funerals or angels at the gate: a requiem for the sunshine.

That a group in the throes of grinding to a halt, as this one was in 1998, could still make records as majestic as 'Busta's Lament', 'Common Ground' or 'Find a Way' is, however, fairly remarkable – more so, given *The Love Movement* is considered a failure by many fans and critics. 'A constant bombardment of the not particularly noticeable', was how *Rolling Stone* greeted it (Sheffield 1998). *Ego Trip* meanwhile suggested 'Tribe's new production sound wavers between musically subtle and subtly boring' (Chow 1998: 117).[6] But, frankly, I have never agreed. This was Tribe's route map to a new kind of cyborg soul – and as a statement of musical futurism, it was at least halfway to now.

Gone were the dusty jazz loops and thick boom bap beats of Tribe's earlier sound. In their place was a microsurgery of fragments – partly courtesy of Yancey, by now a full member of Tribe's Ummah production unit – and an unfashionably clean electronic aesthetic. The squareness of funk's 'one' is gone. Instead, a loose tectonics of drums, bass and keyboards coalesce haphazardly around the beat. Rhythmically, this visceral funk pushes, pulls, bounces, bumps and slaps, forging a new template for the art of moving butts – one we now recognize as the 'Dilla feel', but which in 1998 had only begun to make it into Yancey's officially released output.[7] Hot bass bubbles up in bold melodic thumps. Earworms emerge from hummed melodies – some calypso-ish, complementing Phife's increased yen to channel his Caribbean heritage; others roboticized in the then brand-new cladding of Auto-tune.[8]

The Love Movement, in all of this, sounds at once human *and* synthetic – like a band of tipsy robots, plugged into the neural networks of their hopeful, broken-hearted paymasters: a music of dopamine and dope beats. Yet, for 1998's authenticist hip hop underground, then engaged in a one-sided culture war with rap's so-called 'shiny suit' mainstream, this perhaps was too much. Tribe was totemic of all that was good to this section of hip hop fandom, and *The Love Movement* became its Dylan goes electric – a contentious rejection of the crunchy, human textures and sampling techniques of Tribe's earlier music, by the late-1990s an aspic-preserved avatar for hip hop *realness*. A year later Tip lamented:

> a lot of the cats coming up now look at Tribe and De La as kind of like trailblazers of these underground hip-hop lyrics, ill beats for the heads and all that. But I'm so many different things […]. I can't close off anything. I'm an artist.
>
> (McGregor 1999: 199)

Listening again now, I realize how prescient the group's departures in 1998 in fact were. *The Love Movement*'s trails can be discerned in everything from the swathes of hip hop and neo-soul that later applied Yancey's rhythmic ideas, to

7. For early examples of Yancey's distinctive rhythmic feel and searing bass bump, see, for instance, Consequence's (1997) 'The Consequences' and Phife's (1997) 'Ya Heard Me?' (released on white label under Phife's alias Mutty Ranks). Yancey's work as part of the Ummah on Keith Murray's (1996) 'Dangerous Ground' and Busta Rhymes' (1996) 'Ill Vibe' are both noticeably pushing towards his distinctively 'loose' aesthetic and intricate rearrangement of fragmentary samples, though the drums on 'Ill Vibe' still have a more 'swung' feel closer to contemporaries like Shawn J Period and DJ Spinna. For the crowning glory of this proto-'Dilla feel' era, however, see the Ummah's remix of the Brand New Heavies' (1997) 'Sometimes'.

8. 'Like It Like That' might just be rap's first use of auto-tune as an aesthetic tool. Cher's 'Believe', the first pop hit of the auto-tune era, was released a month after *The Love Movement*.

9. Here, I am a referring to a nuanced and emotionally honest view of platonic male relationships beyond the clichés of brotherhood, which hip hop invokes widely.

the melodic sensibilities of popular R&B in the era of Drake's 2016 *Views*. But it is also, I think, augural for being a rap album about love and sex. Charting a range of emotions, from infatuation and unconditional love to jealousy, the LP sets out to explore the cycling intensities of the human heart in a way not dissimilar to Bill Withers' (1972) *Still Bill* – certainly it is more unusual in its genre, even post-Native Tongues. The record that's deemed Tribe's great failure here anticipates the emotional architecture of hip hop records as dissimilar as Kanye West's (2008) *808s and Heartbreak* and NxWorries' (2016) *Yes Lawd.*

Even so, I now wonder, if *The Love Movement* is always so straightforward. In laying bare these vulnerabilities, might the two emcees at its heart, in fact, sometimes be employing a rhetorical strategy as old as Black America to discuss a subject hip hop has traditionally found even more difficult to address: platonic male love.[9] Encoded in its grooves, might we, that is, discover something of Phife and Tip's own star-crossed relationship?

MOVEMENT 8

'Common Ground' is everything that's fresh about *The Love Movement* – superficially, a charming meditation on a some-way-gone difficult romance. Lyrically, it finds Tip back in the metaphorical barber's chair, running through an account of a needy lover and their bust-ups. The main melodic content – a sample manipulated into long reedy notes – likewise circles up and down at uncertain intervals – sonically, an analogue for a fairground steam organ, but also a metaphor. He has gone through her tragic beauty, lively mind, their mutual exploration of music and food. But the song is as mercurial as its subject and Tip suddenly finds his way littered with booby-traps:

> Gotta do her hair, take her out to the fair
> Win a teddy bear, make sure you don't stare
> At another one comin', don't be startin' nothin'.

It might be just another 'rapper-chastises-gold-digger' narrative, were it not for Tip's honeyed tones, and melancholy sensitivity – or for his willingness to brook compromise: 'if anybody wanna make it work, it's me', he implores, 'but we gotta come to a common ground, baby'.

The question marks only really begin, though, when, in the final minute, Phife turns up. As the beat snaps silent, he is alone in a cathedral of emphasis – every word measured:

> You see, I'm not the one to be taken advantage of –
> And if you really think about it, I got nothing but love –
> Now if your heart isn't in it, please let me know –
> There's no need to waste time, if it's no then I'll go –
> And if it's me, then let's get it goin' on.
> And if it's me, then let's get it goin' on.

Six lines? It is little more than the song's coda, really. But I would argue that short verse is the emotional core of Tribe's would-be final album. Over twenty years later – after Rapaport and miscellaneous other twenty-first century blowback – 'Common Ground' feels like more than a romantic ultimatum. It feels like *Tribe's* ultimatum: a metaphor, intended or otherwise, for the troubled waters the group had come to by 1998.

Could this be their means in a gentler time – before the neon lit fish tank of celebrity in the age of the Internet – to quietly explore the group's uncertainty? Tip's verse certainly chimes with his opinion that 'the hardest part about being in a group is constantly considering somebody else, even before yourself' (*Beats, Rhymes & Life*). After all, the compromise of the song's romantic settlement is no less pertinent to creative partnership – particularly in a group thrown off balance two years earlier when Tip effectively stared at another two comin', by inviting Consequence and Yancey into the group's core.

Then there's Phife's verse – a platonic *Here, My Dear* in six lines. There's his anxiety about being side-lined; the reassurance of unconditional love that, even as his interviews became painfully disillusioned in the late 2000s, he always seemed careful to deploy ('At the end of the day', he told *Dazed* in 2011, 'that's my brother. And you know, families are gonna argue, but he knows I'm gonna hold him down and vice versa. I got his back regardless' [Noakes 2011]). There's the what-may-be bravery that seemed to define his public persona – particularly as he later battled diabetes. But like an advertising copywriter of the Madison Avenue school, he makes a turnaround on a penny, finishing on the hope of the pitch: 'and if it's me, then let's get it goin' on'. Here, Phife does not so much leave the door open, as will it so – repeating the phrase like a mantra 'til song's close.

At what was perhaps his lowest ebb in the late 2000s, Phife was set adrift as a solo artist, recording only peripatetically for small labels. He faced a challenging brew of medical difficulties and treatment bills, nursing an apparently painful sense of rejection. The frustration was palpable – written all over the interviews he still dutifully performed at press time. Yet even as things began to look irreconcilable – even as he took the step of publicly classifying his and Tip's kinship as a 'love-hate relationship'; even as Tip told journalists Tribe would never tour again, pushing a reunion further still from the horizon – even in these dark times, Phife always worked his way back to the subject of reconciliation.

'I think it is ludicrous that we are not performing together', he told *Rolling Stone* in November 2015, just days before A Tribe Called Quest's final rapprochement and four months before his death. 'It's dumb, and I don't agree with it and we're doing the fans a great injustice by not getting together and rocking' (Newman 2015).

'I believe in consistency', he went on. 'If we're not a group, we're not a group. If we are, we are. Let's get this money'.

And if it's me, then let's get it goin' on.
And if it's me, then let's get it goin' on.

MOVEMENT 9

A Tribe Called Quest's bumpy maturation became a story of archetypes. If Tupac Shakur's place in rap history was as its most celebrated Stagolee figure – a tragic Black rebel, whose unfocused rage was a hair-trigger forged on American society's brutal inequity – Tribe's roles in the American playbook are entirely more universal.[10] Like Roy Hobbs, the baseball player in Bernard Malamud's novel *The Natural*, Phife was the preternatural talent interrupted, his early promise cut-short by circumstances beyond his control as his career seemed to stall post-1998. 'I have knocked around a lot and been hard hurt in

10. For Shakur as Stagolee, see Brown (2003: 13).

plenty of ways', Malamud's hero confides in the 1952 book. 'There were times I thought I would never get anywhere and it made me eat my guts, but all that is gone now. I know I have the stuff and will get there' (2015: 103).

Phife's story, like Hobbs', is one of pluck and determination. It is a story of elemental force of character and justified self-belief; of ticking clocks and laser-focussed one-last-pushes. This, to all intents, is the Blues Hero archetype critic Albert Murray saw radiating from African American history into all American myth: a model of 'perseverance' and 'resilience', whose 'equilibrium despite precarious circumstances', and improvisatory eye to the transformation of luck, is very much also the American everyman ideal (Murray 2016: 509). Phife can be seen to embody this mythic everyman figure: unpretentious, charismatic audaciously gifted, besieged by obstacles.

For this reason, I think people rooted for Phife like they root for blue-collar heroes at the movies. For fans who invested in Tribe, and grew with them into middle age – and it should be no surprise here, I count myself among them – my guess is his struggles made him a convincing stand-in for their own fear and yearning. Which of them had not grappled with the pieces of a life they had hoped for? Or with the expectational dissonance of workplace middle years? And here, I think, is the nub: like Malamud's Roy Hobbs, Phife seemed to confront *our* existential dread with a character that said it is never yet over. That is not just the American story or a Black story. It is a universal one as old as the life cycle itself.

Yet, in A Tribe Called Quest that personal struggle was entangled with a familial one every bit as mythic: one that held a looking glass to men's platonic love; to brotherhood, with its dramatic ebb and flow intensities. When, in 1993, the Native Tongues had reached a tumultuous fork in the road, De La's Posdnuos reached for that popular trope by way of analogy. 'It's nothing negative really', he said. 'It's almost like family. Like you can have blood relatives that you're just cool with, or even friends, and gradually you just grow apart' (Coker 1993: 23). For Phife and Tip, though, brotherhood was more than a close-at-hand metaphor. In and out of each other's lives since the age of two, their sibling baggage was real. They knew all the paradoxes of brotherhood – the love and antipathy, the intimacy and unknowability, the comings, goings and constant ghostly presences. And they knew, perhaps more than anything, the enduring nature of the big brother-little brother relationship.

Tip was able to suggest, 'We know each other so fucking well and we have each other's backs. If you're going left, they're turning left. If you pause, you feel their feet stop before your feet stop' (Lynskey 2016). Meanwhile, Phife could declare, without apparent contradiction, 'I can't ever put a finger on Q-Tip, even though we've known each other longer than anybody in this world outside our respective families' (*Beats, Rhymes & Life*). If you have grown up with brothers, sisters or any kind of symbiotic friendship, you have likely experienced this sibling uncanny – the sense that they are at once a part of you and utterly foreign territory. And most will know that on other days, each of these men probably would have reversed their statement.

Tribe's story, as it waded through a swamp of question marks towards its final act, was an affecting vessel for the tropes of brotherhood. Like James Baldwin's estranged brother-protagonists in his short story 'Sonny's Blues' – who know everything but nothing of one another, and remain locked in terms and conditions set in boyhood – Tribe's predicament spoke to the world at large: having carved our own paths in life, can we ever really reconnect with our youthful muse? Can we ever really disconnect?

MOVEMENT 10

We Got It From Here… – the album whose making finally answered Phife's call – was released suddenly and without press hype in November 2016. On 27 October, just a fortnight before the album went on sale, Tip confirmed its existence in a 'letter' issued in lieu of a press release. Handwritten in the expressive script of a sharpie-wielding teen and widely circulated on Twitter, it seemed a move calculated for its Native Tongues air of inclusion – a mnemonic, despite its 2010s mode of dissemination, for the hip hop age of Aquarius that never quite was.

'To all the good people worldwide!' Tip began, all looping tails, emphatic underlinings and key words picked out in gold. 'We hope this letter finds you & yours safe and without a scratch!' He went on to tell of an unexpected turnaround of events. Following a brief reunion for a *Tonight Show* performance on 'the night of the PARIS BOMBING' [*sic*] in 2015 – 'November 13th… Friday', which a flourish of old variety correspondence added, was 'an unseasonably warm night in NYC' – what was supposed to be a one-off promotional jaunt for the 25th Anniversary of *People's Instinctive Travels* had mutated into a closing of the circle. 'The energy for us that night was one that we hadn't experienced on stage together in some time!'

Though few outside Tribe's circle would know for almost a year, established assumptions about the group became obsolete with almost comic swiftness. On the morning of the 13th, *Rolling Stone* had made the seemingly safe assertion that the *Tonight Show* jaunt was part of 'a bittersweet promotional cycle' for Phife 'who must now dwell on a more innocent time of his life while still retaining past (and possibly present) grudges' (Newman 2015). By night's close, their notice was out of date. So too, 24 hours later, was the suggestion that despite Tribe's performance, 'there are still no plans to tour or record any new material'.

The *Tonight Show* 'vibe was crazy', *Q-Tip* later told *The Guardian* (Lynskey 2016). It was perhaps 'a little bit weird' for the grim aura of history unfolding in Paris, 'but everything about it seemed special. We had the same energy that we did when we was kids'. For Busta Rhymes, a key player behind the scenes in Tribe's reunion, seeing the reunited group perform 'was a tear-jerker […] the first time I saw all my brothers onstage happy. It put a super battery in my back'. The following night when he and Tribe's long AWOL fourth member Jarobi White joined Tip in the DJ booth at the launch for the 25th Anniversary issue of *People's Instinctive Travels*, the pair were convinced a reunion was now or never. 'That was the first time Q-Tip said, "A-ight I'm with it"', Busta recounted. 'I thought he was bullshittin' […] I thought it was just in the moment. But the next day he was still saying he's with it, so that's when I knew shit was on and poppin. Phife, understandably, was more leery. He told his wife Deisha Taylor, 'We're talking about doin' an album, I'm not sure if it's gonna happen […] but if it does, then that's cool and I'm down to do it' (Stats 2016).

Within days everyone bar Mohammad – who was in Los Angeles working on the soundtrack for the Netflix series *Luke Cage* – was squarely on-board, timetabling trips to Tip's New Jersey home studio, the AbLab – where over the next four months they would record the majority of the album. The first stage was to mend fences. Tip recalls he and Phife – who commuted from his home near Oakland a week at a time, recording around thrice weekly dialysis sessions – 'went through all of the stuff and apologized, and it was just so

11. It's also, ironically, the only song where his part was recorded in a different studio – closer to Phife's Bay Area home, at Fantasy Studios in Berkeley.

good, man. We was so back' (Touré 2016). Their rediscovered friendship would be at the heart of the project. 'I really believe he did the travelling back and forth, not for this record', Tip has suggested, 'but to make sure that me and him, Malik and Jon, were OK. Not Ali. Not Jarobi. He came to my house to make sure that he and I were OK' (Touré 2016).

The camaraderie is palpable throughout *We Got It From Here*. Recording together in one room for the most part, Phife, Tip, Jarobi (and frequently Busta, who is on four of sixteen tracks) fed off one another's energy, bringing a dynamism that harks to their greatest work. Phife's manager, Dion 'Rasta Root' Liverpool, the emcee's companion in Jersey, described the energetic mood to the *The Village Voice*. 'Every evening he'd go down to the house, and he and Tip would spend hours in there vibing and coming up with lines', said Liverpool. 'Seeing them together in the studio joking, coming up with ideas, disagreeing, vibing, and trading vocals, it was pretty incredible. It was like watching a unicorn' (Gonzales 2016).

In a music industry where technology has increasingly encouraged disembodied collaboration, such co-presence is increasingly rare. As John Seabrook's (2015) book *The Song Machine* highlights, it is not unusual in contemporary pop for hits to be produced less by production line, as in the days of Motown, than by a swarm of online contributors, bouncing ideas and tracks across cyberspace. The result, for all the great records still being made, is that the particular group dynamic Tribe once epitomized – with the spontaneity and quasi-psychic connectedness, the aura of community, that crackled from Phife and Tip's most vigorous recordings – has largely been lost to rap. Or at least to the kind of rap that haunts the upper reaches of the *Billboard 200*, as *We Got It From Here* did, debuting at number one in November 2016.

For Busta Rhymes the virtues of Tribes process are clear:

> Nobody don't sit in a room and write something no more. Everybody write in their little Pro-Tools and then you get the verse back in a [*sic*] email. The beautiful thing about [Tribe] now, is it's the exact same process as when we did 'Scenario', because you're in the same room, reacting directly to the verse that your man is over there impressin' himself wit.
>
> (Stats 2016)

In other words, *We Got It From Here*… marked a high-profile return of hip hop's collective improvisatory energy. Or, as Tip put it, '[w]e just locked in and became fucking kids again' (Stats 2016).

MOVEMENT 11

On an album powered by serious playfulness, and by a swinging pendulum of loss and social optimism, it is 'Dis Generation' that most seems to embody A Tribe Called Quest's rediscovered one-ness. The energy levels are hard to reconcile with the knowledge that this is the final recording Phife made before his death.[11] All nimble-footed syllables, Tip, Phife, Jarobi and Busta dance across each other. They jump in, drop out, unexpectedly burst into runs of jubilant unison. It is a Busby Berkeley routine performed on tongues; a sunny day on Linden Boulevard. For Liverpool, 'Dis Generation' is particularly touching for the way:

> [Phife] just sounds really vibrant and refreshing and happy and excited in his verses […] You just have to understand how the stars aligned [for Tribe's reunion] and the divine design of everything. He was able to hang out with his childhood best friends, doing what he loved doing, which is record music.
>
> (Radford 2016)

Musically, the song advances Tribe's aesthetic beyond earlier recordings. Produced by Tip with longstanding engineer Blair Wells, it is typical of the album's more developed attention to song structure and adept fusion of samples with live instrumentation. Tip told *The Village Voice* that formulating the album's sound, they 'knew we had to keep the thread but also push it forward' (Gonzales 2016). There remains the consistency of jazz harmony and the warm major–minor chord inversions that helped bathe the likes of 'Award Tour' and 'The Art Of Moving Butts' in aural sunshine. But, there's also a rock-edge to some songs – so it seems appropriate Tip began the process by 'listening to a lot of Stooges and early Iggy Pop solo albums' (Gonzales 2016).

That slightly rocky edge has conspired with the emphasis on songs and a penchant for rupture to create an album that sometimes resembles a more disciplined cousin to the Jungle Brothers' unfairly maligned 1993 *JBeez Wit the Remedy.* And, in a sense, the Native Tongues, long abandoned as a collaborative entity, live on through these affinities. Both records share moments of colligated rock guitar and bass drilling downwards into the mud, while Elysian colours à la Rotary Connection bliss out the upper registers of the mix (compare the JBs' 'Book Of Rhyme Pages', for instance, to the fuzzed-out empyrean richness of Tribe's 'Movin' Backwards'). Likewise, the albums share a magic carpet ride ambiance; the likelihood that at any given moment a song might dissolve into a montage of white noise wow and flutter or a psychedelic explosion of found sound (*Charlie And The Chocolate Factory* and *Willie Dynamite* are made easy bedfellows on Tribe album opener 'The Space Programme'). Still here, then, is the golden age hip hop album's distinctly conjurational approach to borrowing and juxtaposition.

In this sense, though Tribe still reimagine the obscurer reaches of 1960s–70s jazz – Andrew Hill's mesmeric 'Lift Every Voice', for instance – we find the album peppered with samples from rock records – particularly jazz-rock. On 'Mobius', krautrock duo Moebius and Plank's 'Two Oldtimers' establishes Mobb-Deep levels of icy street minimalism before giving way to a psychedelic spiral of the British folk-rock band Gentle Giant's 'Prologue' fifty seconds in. 'Memory Band' by Rotary Connection – a psych-rock-indo-bossa-nova – adds a familiar sitar to 'Enough!!' in a reference to 1990s 'Bonita Applebum'. And 'Lost Somebody' is all the more poignant for the delicate piano figure it abducts from a momentary apparition in the bad trip that is Can's 'Halleluhwah'.

The result is a record that often feels propelled by a kind of celestial rocket fuel. There is activist anthem 'The Space Programme' – an inspiring treatise on the merits of forging a better life on earth, while (to allude to Gil Scott Heron) whitey goes to the moon. Built initially on a lively Fender Rhodes bump and slap that would sit comfortably on *The Love Movement*, the second half sees the song resolve in a musical force field that pushes towards the heavens on a staircase of drones and chants. Organs pile on organs. Jazz guitars spiral in orbits of close harmony. Cymbals gallop and splash. Andrew Hill's remarkable choir urge us to 'move on to the stars', while Phife galvanizes: 'let's make something happen, let's make something happen' – everything reaching, building, oxygenating.

In such moments of intensity, Tribe have arrived at a kind of secular gospel, its central belief the power of collective will. 'We The People' is a Black Lives Matter era aural march against economic and semiotic violence – against 'the fog and the smog of news media', and the co-option of just enough Black funk by the forces of gentrification to sell condos ('niggas in the hood living in a fish bowl'). What might have been a disheartening lament about social cleansing, instead updates the hopeful compact of the civil rights era – seeming to propose a coalition of all those on the wrong side of rampant speculation *and* the Christian Right: Blacks, Mexicans, poor folks, Muslims and gays.

> We don't believe you, cause we the people
> Are still here in the rear, yo, we don't need you.
> You in the killing-off-good-young-nigga mood.
> When we get hungry we eat the same fucking food.
> The ramen noodle.

This pro-Black, pro-people politics weaves through the album, dishing an urgent response to the post-2016 crisis of social liberalism. Because of this, *We Got It From Here* feels like an album of its times – like Gil Scott Heron's 1974 *Winter in America* or BDP's 1988 *By All Means Necessary*. It is a missive from a moment when the social optimism that accompanied the election of Barack Obama has faded, while the advent of social media has made increasingly, and painfully visible the enduring character of racism: viral videos of police killings, below the line racist invective online, the rise of Steve Bannon etc. Still here is Tribe's conviction in the irreducible human complexity of Blackness, suggesting in middle age they are the same group that helped liberate rap's striving Black everyteen ('we're not just nigga rappers with the bars/it's kismet that we're cosmic with the stars'). But, more than ever, Tribe also explore the inescapability of that Blackness, invoking the condition Du Bois referred to as 'the veil' ([1903] 1994).

In this much, however bohemian Tribe may be as artists, however (relatively) financially comfortable, publicly visible and cherished as the acceptable face of rap by a certain type of white audience – all factors that logically would afford some insulation from the effects of racism – they still find themselves Black in a society with a blindspot for Black humanity. In 'Movin Backwards', a song whose title tells its own story about society, Tip recounts a timely *post*-post-racial epiphany:

> Can I vent? I was content being my own man
> Up until that night ill-fated, walking home I was faded
> Po [police] puts braces on my wrist, like he was clapping his hands.
> How demeaning y'all? Who could be blind to racism?

It is depressing, of course, half a century later to find continued relevance in James Baldwin's 1971 likening of Blackness in America to walking on a carpet booby-trapped with invisible wires (Baldwin and Mead 1972). Yet the album – as with 'The Space Programme' – has a habit of meeting challenging circumstances with the optimism of action. Here, Tip follows up with a promise to guide a younger brother figure through a mire of 'muck and malaise'. In moments like these, the album radiates a sense of community, providing a fortifying coda to the Native Tongues project. Once again, Phife finds himself at its heart, with his inclusive bid 'let's make somethin' happen'.

> Time to go left and not right.
> Gotta get it together forever.
> Gotta get it together for brothers.
> Gotta get it together for sisters.
> For mothers and fathers and dead niggas.
> For non-conformers, we're hit-or-quitters.
> For Tyson types and Che figures.
> Make, make, make, let's make somethin' happen.
> Let's make somethin' happen.
> Let's make somethin' happen.
> Let's make somethin' happen.

That call to action, repeated for the best part of three minutes, creates almost unbearable poignance, given the manner in which Tribe's reunion was cut-short. The verve of its speaker's voice, the generosity of its 'we', its belief in responsibility to others and the possibility of better futures all are hard to reconcile with a man who was dying. For a moment, perhaps we feel loss – not the emotion-effect of a 'Candle In The Wind' or 'We'll Be Missing You', with their grandstanding arrangements and language of grieving. Actual loss: the poignance of absence.

MOVEMENT 12

On 22 March 2016, four months into the album's making, Phife died at home in California, aged just 45. With vocals laid for eight songs, it left a literal hole in the album. It also exploded an emotional crisis at its centre, as Tribe's surviving principals grappled with their loss. Jarobi White has described an aftermath in which he and Tip were 'two puddles of goo on the floor' (Touré 2016). Tip, meanwhile, suggests they almost did not continue. Gary Harris was at Tip's home for a week, while the emcee effectively sat Shiva. Harris believes his friend was 'heartbroken that his lifelong, his Day One was gone. I mean you define yourself […] if you're 'Butch & Sundance', what happens when Sundance […] gets gone?' (Stats 2016).

In the subsequent weeks, the trail of mourners that passed through the 'very festive black wake' Harris describes taking place at Tip's home, morphed into an open-ended recording session for Tribe's extended family. Over the next six months, while Tip pieced together the finished recordings, he would 'take a break and walk away' whenever his friend's voice got too much. 'I literally feel the energy from him when I hear his voice', he told the *New York Times* (Touré 2016).

Rather than try to tidy over that loss, the album handles it with a thoughtful elegance. It is an explicit topic, as in 'Lost Somebody', which, comes as a traumatic rupture at the end of side three, and acts as a bridge into the album's invigorating final quarter. In an astonishingly compact and evocative piece of lyricism, Tip offers a pointillist reflection on Malik Taylor's life. It takes in New York's post-Vietnam trauma, his parents''Trinidadian love sprouting through the asphalt', and Tip's own overbearing tendencies to act the perpetual big brother. He ends on a tight encapsulation of Tribe's denouement: 'Gave grace, face to face, made it right, and now you riding out, out, out, out/Damn – '. Jarobi, for his part, provides a singularly economical character testimony: 'so, so beautiful, opined indisputable/Heart of a largest lion, trapped inside the little dude'.

Yet Phife's poignant absence is also reflected in more subtle ways across the eight songs that were recorded after his death. Fans who stuck with *The Love Movement* long enough to recognize the power of Phife's verse on 'Busta's Lament', will find a sly tribute to it on 'Whateva Will Be'. When Consequence signs off, 'This is for my dogs, from Shih Tzus to Terriers', he is riffing on Phife's opening allusion to the same hood-kid complexity that Dimitry Leger suggested defined the Native Tongues:

> Fuck the carjackin', Phife Diggy is rappin',
> Got dogs with love, and plus dogs that's packin'.
> So what's the deal captain?

The loss is alluded to in music – or at least it seems to be. No doubt *We Got It From Here* is an album filled with joy and energy, but on early listens it also has a tendency to wrong-foot with its fragmented structure. Songs fizzle into the ether, shift on their axis, pull elements from beneath you and sometimes collapse into a recurring segue sourced from the JBs' (as in the band affiliated to James Brown, not the Jungle Brothers) 'Gimme Some More' – a fortifying holler that sits on a knife-edge between war cry and mourning call.

Sometimes the unsettling is subtle. The exhilarating build-up of 'Dis Generation', for instance, reprises the feel of reaching found in the closing minutes of 'The Space Programme'. Surging for the clouds, a jagged jazz guitar ascends through a bright celestial wash of Arp string synthesizer, underpinned by programmed beats that feel like Jamaican drummer Sly Dunbar turning his hand to bossa nova. Just as the tense energy feels ready to explode, it dissolves mid-cycle, leaving us hanging on the second beat of a four-beat bar, while an incandescent guitar figure emerges beat-less from the abyss. As a means to frame an opening line it is close to perfection. As a metaphor for the turbulent changes that blessed and benighted Tribe's final album it would be tenuous were it not for 'Lost Somebody' – the record that gives meaning to all these devices.

In a drawn-out closing sequence that feels almost like Czech Surrealist allegory, A Tribe Called Quest struggle with the life cycle. At the end of Jarobi's verse, we are thrown into a cardiac arrest of jarring contradiction. The beatific piano figure that drives the song remains unrelenting, sweetened by a soft, church chorus – 'he's in sunshine, he's alright now'. But the record's heartbeat – its hitherto rock-solid drum pattern – stutters into a harsh metallic crisis.

It is difficult, wrenching, physically uncomfortable. The 30 seconds the arrhythmia endures feels like forever. When finally the beat snaps back in line, it is gentle relief. Then suddenly, mid syllable – as the choir sounds 'No more cryi-' – we are swept into a void: a precise minute in which silence slowly gives way to a willow-the-wisp of squawking guitar.

It's uncertain at first, primal. But like a hatchling exploring its possibility, it accumulates energy, discovering coherence, until, full voiced, it writhes in a rebirth of Hendrixian swirls – agonized, joyous, free.

There's a beat – bup, bup, bup, bup, ba-bup-bup – ba-bup-bup, ba-bup-bup

Then, thrillingly, guitar and bass drill downwards into the mud, united in potent energy. With them, we hear Jarobi White, the man Q-Tip describes as 'the spirit' of A Tribe Called Quest (Davis 2011).

He has locked into their cadence, basso voce:

> I hope my legendary style of rap lives on
> Affixed to the earth, like my feet they got cleats on
> Moving backward, never, that was never the plan
> Pushing shit along, render stillness in the quicksand.

And so the paths of rhythm somehow go on.

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