

Protect The People: Tupac Shakur's "Code of Thug Life" as an Extension of the Black Panther Party Ideology

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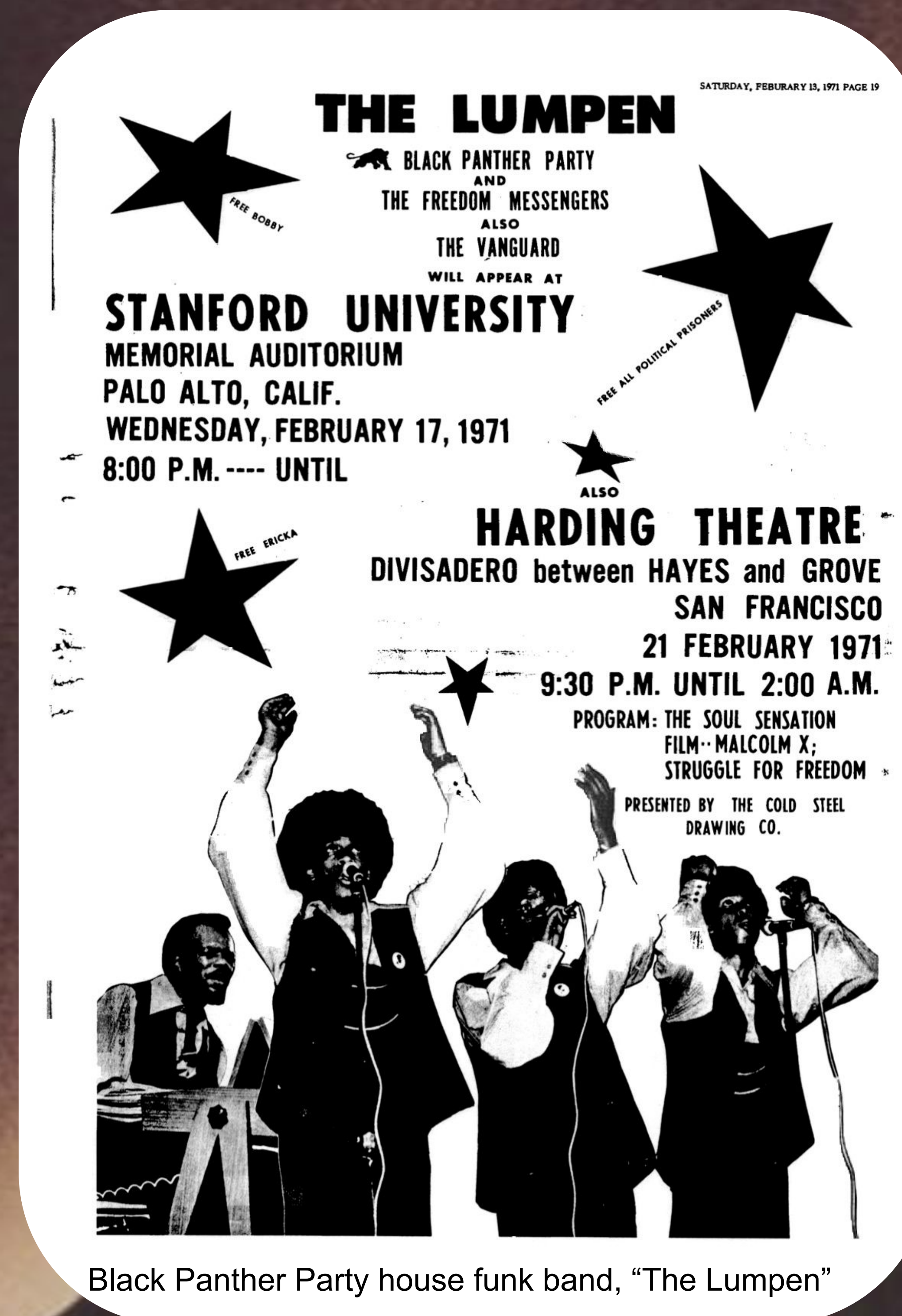
A huge thank you to my professor for the Source Project, Will Glovinsky, who went above and beyond to assist me during an incredibly difficult school year. It's truly been an honor to work with him.

Background

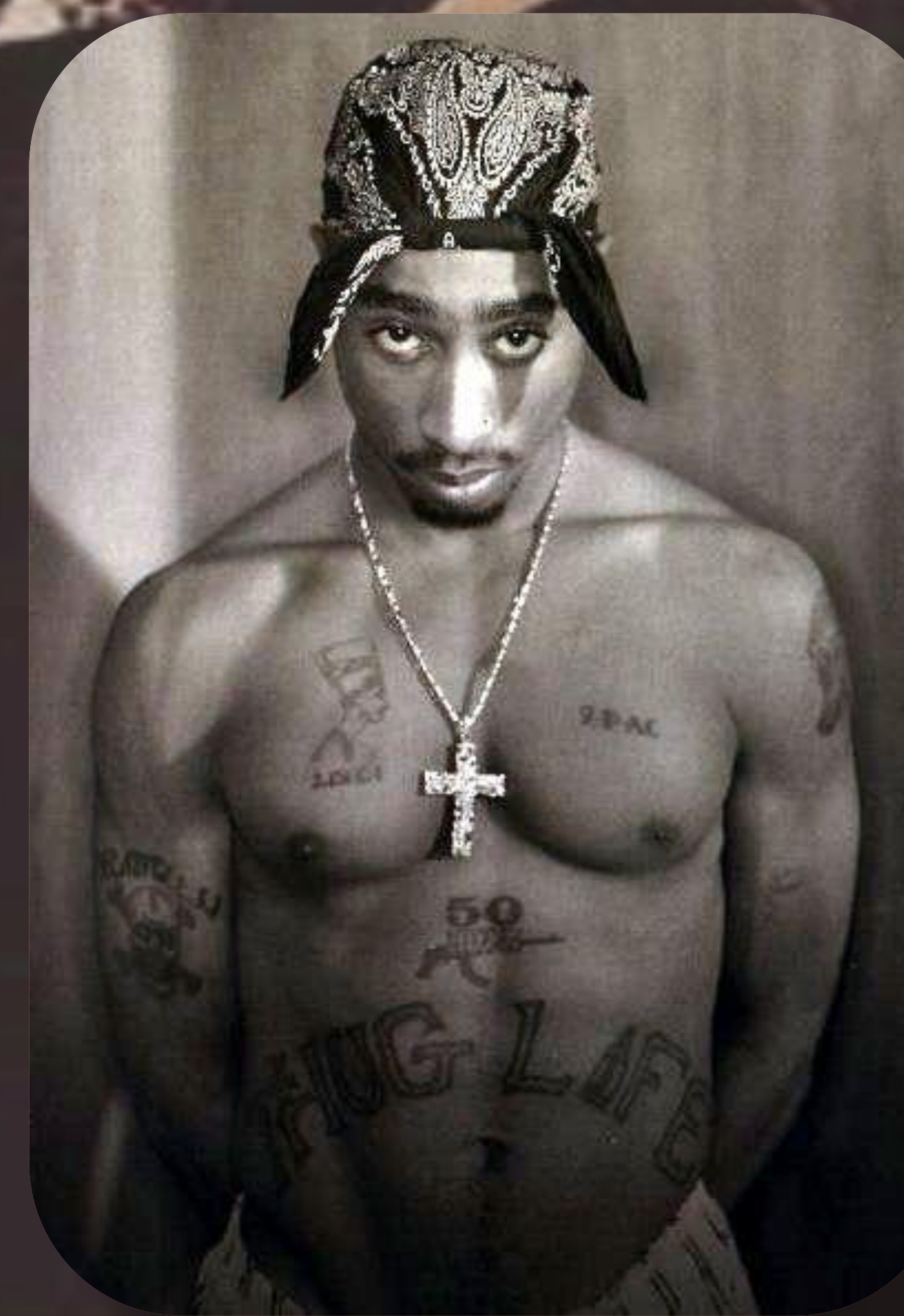
- The Black Panther Party (BPP) was a black nationalist group founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale.
- Influenced by Marxist-Leninism, it advocated for the right to Black self-defense
- Party theorist Eldridge Cleaver reclaimed the Marxian category of the "lumpen" – the outcast, disreputable poor – as a way of understanding the social position of structurally unemployed Black Americans
- In 1992, Tupac Shakur, whose mother was a prominent Panther, co-created the "Code of Thug Life" as a way of uniting gangs and convincing them to follow an ethical guideline to protect "the streets" from unwarranted violence
- Both the Panthers and Tupac sought to organize communities that often went dismissed or disregarded by the rest of society: for the BPP it was the Black lumpen, for Tupac, gang members

Methods

- Explored the BPP's re-theorization of the lumpenproletariat to forge connections with Tupac's regarding "Thug Life"
- Analyzed primary sources, including newsletters, pamphlets, speeches, and oral histories, to understand the ideology behind the BPP's fight for self-defense
- Examined the music and lyrics of Tupac's albums, especially *2Pacalypse Now* (1991), *Me Against the World* (1995), *All Eyez On Me* (1996)



Black Panther Party house funk band, "The Lumpen"



**"I'm not saying I'm gonna rule
the world or change the world,
but I guarantee I will spark the
brain that will change the
world."
- Tupac Shakur (1994)**

Controversy and Context

- The "Code of Thug Life" is often critiqued as being normalization or even glorification of criminality
- This reading fails to appreciate the conditions that inspired Tupac's ideology behind this code, as well as the longer radical lineage of his ideas
- This context is crucial for understanding the pattern of systematic oppression leading to an uprising of black and African-Americans taking their protection and survival into their own hands
- Misogyny/sexism seen in both hip-hop and the BPP

Conclusions

- The methods by which Black and African Americans secure their own survival are often deemed socially unacceptable, which points to the necessity of understanding the underlying conditions that caused them to resort to such measures
- Tupac's significance extends beyond his work as a hip-hop artist and goes beyond the political ideology centered around his former Black Panther mother. Although he respected and understood the rationale behind his mother's and the BPP's ideas, he wanted to be as realistic as possible and "learn to live in this world like it is today" (Vintage [1996]: "Kevin Powell Interviews Tupac") because he felt that the BPP battled for a world that was too unattainable.
- Tupac's political ideologies reflected the specific cultural moment of 90s hip hop, but they also mirror Eldridge Cleaver's beliefs of utilizing marginalized communities and enforcing self-defense