It was a chilly January morning when I made my way to Rikers Island for a conversation with Tupac Shakur, what would be his first words to any journalist since being shot last November 30. After passing through a series of checkpoints and metal detectors, I reached a dingy white conference room in the same building where Tupac was being held on $3 million bail. Within weeks, he'd receive a one-and-a-half- to four-and-a-half-year sentence for a sexual abuse conviction in his New York rape case. Tupac strutted into the room without a limp, in spite of having been recently wounded in the leg-among other places. Dressed in a white Adidas sweatshirt and oversized blue jeans, he seemed more alert than he had been in all our interviews and encounters. He looked me in the eyes as we spoke and smoked one Newport after another. "I'm kinda nervous," he admitted at one point. After a brush with death and the barrage of rumor and innuendo that followed, Tupac said he'd summoned me because "this is my last interview. If I get killed, I want people to get every drop. I want them to have the real story."

How do you feel after everything you've been through these past few weeks?

Well, the first two days in prison, I had to go through what life is like when you've been smoking weed for as long as I have and then you stop. Emotionally, it was like I didn't know myself. I was sitting in a room, like there was two people in the room, evil and good. That was the hardest part. After that, the weed was out of me. Then every day I started doing, like, a thousand push-ups for myself. I was reading whole books in one day, and writing, and that was putting me in a peace of mind. Then I started seeing my situation and what got me here. Even though I'm innocent of the charge they gave me, I'm not innocent in terms of the way I was acting.

Could you tell me specifically what you mean?

I'm just as guilty for not doing nothing as I am for doing things. Not with this case, but just in my life. I had a job to do and I never showed up. I was so scared of
this responsibility that I was running away from it. But I see now that whether I show up for work or not, the evil forces are going to be at me. They're going to come 100 percent, so if I don't be 100 percent pure-hearted, I'm going to lose. And that's why I'm losing.

When I got in here, all the prisoners was, like, "F*ck that gangsta rapper." I'm not a gangsta rapper. I rap about things that happen to me. I got shot five times, you know what I'm saying? People was trying to kill me. It was really real like that. I don't see myself being special; I just see myself having more responsibilities than the next man. People look to me to do things for them, to have answers. I wasn't having them because my brain was half dead from smoking so much weed. I'd be in my hotel room, smoking too much, drinking, going to clubs, just being numb. That was being in jail to me. I wasn't happy at all on the streets. Nobody could say they saw me happy.

When I spoke to you a year ago, you said that if you ended up in jail, your spirit would die. You sound like you're saying the opposite now.

That was the addict speaking. The addict knew if I went to jail, then it couldn't live. The addict in Tupac is dead. The excuse maker in Tupac is dead. The vengeful Tupac is dead. The Tupac that would stand by and let dishonorable things happen is dead. God let me live for me to do something extremely extraordinary, and that's what I have to do. Even if they give me the maximum sentence, that's still my job.

**Can you take us back to that night at Quad Recording Studios in Times Square?**

The night of the shooting? Sure. Ron G. is a DJ out here in New York. He's, like, "Pac, I want you to come to my house and lay this rap down for my tapes." I said, "All right, I'll come for free." So I went to his house-me, Stretch, and a couple other homeboys. After I laid the song, I got a page from this guy Booker, telling me he wanted me to rap on Little Shawn's record. Now, this guy I was going to charge, because I could see that they was just using me, so I said, "All right, you give me seven G's and I'll do the song." He said, "I've got the money. Come." I stopped off to get some weed, and he paged me again. "Where you at? Why you ain't coming?" I'm, like, "I'm coming, man, hold on."

**Did you know this guy?**
I met him through some rough characters I knew. He was trying to get legitimate and all that, so I thought I was doing him a favor. But when I called him back for directions, he was, like, "I don't have the money." I said, "If you don't have the money, I'm not coming." He hung up the phone, then called me back: "I'm going to call [Uptown Entertainment CEO] Andre Harrell and make sure you get the money, but I'm going to give you the money out of my pocket." So I said, "All right, I'm on my way." As we're walking up to the building, somebody screamed from up the top of the studio. It was Little Caesar, Biggie's [the Notorious B.I.G.] sideman. That's my homeboy. As soon as I saw him, all my concerns about the situation were relaxed.

So you're saying that going into it...

I felt nervous because this guy knew somebody I had major beef with. I didn't want to tell the police, but I can tell the world. Nigel had introduced me to Booker. Everybody knew I was short on money. All my shows were getting canceled. All my money from my records was going to lawyers; all the movie money was going to my family. So I was doing this type of stuff, rapping for guys and getting paid.

Who's this guy Nigel?

I was kicking it with him the whole time I was in New York doing Above the Rim. He came to me. He said, "I'm going to look after you. You don't need to get in no more trouble."

Doesn't Nigel also go by the name of Trevor?

Right. There's a real Trevor, but Nigel took on both aliases, you understand? So that's who I was kicking with-I got close to them. I used to dress in baggies and sneakers. They took me shopping; that's when I bought my Rolex and all my jewels. They made me mature. They introduced me to all these gangsters in Brooklyn. I met Nigel's family, went to his kid's birthday party-I trusted him, you know what I'm saying? I even tried to get Nigel in the movie, but he didn't want to be on film. That bothered me. I don't know any nigga that didn't want to be in the movies.

Can we come back to the shooting? Who was with you that night?

I was with my homeboy Stretch, his man Fred, and my sister's boyfriend, Zayd. Not my bodyguard; I don't have a bodyguard. We get to the studio, and there's a dude outside in army fatigues with his hat low on his face. When we walked to
the door, he didn't look up. I've never seen a black man not acknowledge me one way or the other, either with jealousy or respect. But this guy just looked to see who I was and turned his face down. It didn't click because I had just finished smoking chronic. I'm not thinking something will happen to me in the lobby. While we're waiting to get buzzed in, I saw a dude sitting at a table reading a newspaper. He didn't look up either.

These are both black men?

Black men in their thirties. So first I'm, like, These dudes must be security for Biggie, because I could tell they were from Brooklyn from their army fatigues. But then I said, Wait a minute. Even Biggie's homeboys love me, why don't they look up? I pressed the elevator button, turned around, and that's when the dudes came out with the guns-two identical 9 mms. "Don't nobody move. Everybody on the floor. You know what time it is. Run your shit." I was, like, What should I do? I'm thinking Stretch is going to fight; he was towering over those niggas. From what I know about the criminal element, if niggas come to rob you, they always hit the big nigga first. But they didn't touch Stretch; they came straight to me. Everybody dropped to the floor like potatoes, but I just froze up. It wasn't like I was being brave or nothing; I just could not get on the floor. They started grabbing at me to see if I was strapped. They said, "Take off your jewels," and I wouldn't take them off. The light-skinned dude, the one that was standing outside, was on me. Stretch was on the floor, and the dude with the newspaper was holding the gun on him. He was telling the light-skin dude, "Shoot that motherf*cker! F*ck it!" Then I got scared, because the dude had the gun to my stomach. All I could think about was piss bags and shit bags. I drew my arm around him to move the gun to my side. He shot and the gun twisted and that's when I got hit the first time. I felt it in my leg; I didn't know I got shot in my balls. I dropped to the floor. Everything in my mind said, Pac, pretend you're dead. It didn't matter. They started kicking me, hitting me. I never said, "Don't shoot!" I was quiet as hell. They were snatching my shit off me while I was laying on the floor. I had my eyes closed, but I was shaking, because the situation had me shaking. And then I felt something on the back of my head, something real strong. I thought they stomped me or pistol-whipped me and they were stomping my head against the concrete. I saw white, just white. I didn't hear nothing, I didn't feel nothing, and I said, I'm unconscious. But I was conscious. And then I felt it again, and I could hear things now and I could see things and they were bringing me back to consciousness. Then they did it again, and I couldn't hear nothing. And I couldn't see nothing; it was just all white. And then
they hit me again, and I could hear things and I could see things and I knew I was conscious again.

Did you ever hear them say their names?

No. No. But they knew me, or else they would never check for my gun. It was like they were mad at me. I felt them kicking me and stomping me; they didn't hit nobody else. It was, like, "Ooh, motherf*cker, ooh, aah"-they were kicking hard. So I'm going unconscious, and I'm not feeling no blood on my head or nothing. The only thing I felt was my stomach hurting real bad. My sister's boyfriend turned me over and said, "Yo, are you all right?" I was, like, "Yes, I'm hit, I'm hit." And Fred is saying he's hit, but that was the bullet that went through my leg. So I stood up and I went to the door and-the shit that f*cked me up-as soon as I got to the door, I saw a police car sitting there. I was, like, "Uh-oh, the police are coming, and I didn't even go upstairs yet." So we jumped in the elevator and went upstairs. I'm limping and everything, but I don't feel nothing. It's numb. When we got upstairs, I looked around, and it scared the shit out of me.

Why?

Because Andre Harrell was there, Puffy [Bad Boy Entertainment CEO Sean "Puffy" Combs] was there, Biggie... there was about 40 niggas there. All of them had jewels on. More jewels than me. I saw Booker, and he had this look on his face like he was surprised to see me. Why? I had just beeped the buzzer and said I was coming upstairs. Little Shawn bust out crying. I went, Why is Little Shawn crying, and I got shot? He was crying uncontrollably, like, "Oh my God, Pac, you've got to sit down!" I was feeling weird, like, Why do they want to make me sit down?

Because five bullets had passed through your body.

I didn't know I was shot in the head yet. I didn't feel nothing. I opened my pants, and I could see the gunpowder and the hole in my Karl Kani drawers. I didn't want to pull them down to see if my dick was still there. I just saw a hole and went, "Oh shit. Roll me some weed." I called my girlfriend and I was, like, "Yo, I just got shot. Call my mother and tell her." Nobody approached me. I noticed that nobody would look at me. Andre Harrell wouldn't look at me. I had been going to dinner with him the last few days. He had invited me to the set of New York Undercover, telling me he was going to get me a job. Puffy was standing back
too. I knew Puffy. He knew how much stuff I had done for Biggie before he came out.

So people did see blood on you?

They started telling me, "Your head! Your head is bleeding." But I thought it was just a pistol-whip. Then the ambulance came, and the police. First cop I looked up to see was the cop that took the stand against me in the rape charge. He had a half smile on his face, and he could see them looking at my balls. He said, "What's up, Tupac? How's it hanging?"

When I got to Bellevue Hospital, the doctor was going, "Oh my God!" I was, like, "What? What?" And I was hearing him tell other doctors, "Look at this. This is gunpowder right here." He was talking about my head: "This is the entry wound. This is the exit wound." And when he did that, I could actually feel the holes. I said, "Oh my God. I could feel that." It was the spots that I was blacking out on. And that's when I said, "Oh shit. They shot me in my head." They said, "You don't know how lucky you are. You got shot five times." It was, like, weird. I did not want to believe it. I could only remember that first shot, then everything went blank.

At any point did you think you were going to die?

No. I swear to God. Not to sound creepy or nothing-I felt God cared for me from the first time the niggas pulled the gun out. The only thing that hurt me was that Stretch and them all fell to the floor. The bullets didn't hurt. Nothing hurt until I was recovering. I couldn't walk, I couldn't get up, and my hand was f*cked up. I was looking on the news and it was lying about me.

Tell me about some of the coverage that bothered you.

The No. 1 thing that bothered me was that dude that wrote that shit that said I pretended to do it. That I had set it up, it was an act. When I read that, I just
started crying like a baby, like a bitch. I could not believe it. It just tore me apart. And then the news was trying to say I had a gun and I had weed on me. Instead of saying I was a victim, they were making it like I did it.

What about all the jokes saying you had lost one of your testicles?

That didn't really bother me, because I was, like, Shit, I'm going to get the last laugh. Because I've got bigger nuts than all these niggas. My doctors are, like, "You can have babies." They told me that the first night, after I got exploratory surgery: "Nothing's wrong. It went through the skin and out the skin." Same thing with my head. Through my skin and out the skin.

Have you had a lot of pain since then?

Yes, I have headaches. I wake up screaming. I've been having nightmares, thinking they're still shooting me. All I see is niggas pulling guns, and I hear the dude saying, "Shoot that motherf*cker!" Then I'll wake up sweaty as hell and I'll be, like, Damn, I have a headache. The psychiatrist at Bellevue said that's post-traumatic stress.

Why did you leave Bellevue Hospital?

I left Bellevue the next night. They were helping me, but I felt like a science project. They kept coming in, looking at my dick and shit, and this was not a cool position to be in. I knew my life was in danger. The Fruit of Islam was there, but they didn't have guns. I knew what type of niggas I was dealing with.

So I left Bellevue and went to Metropolitan. They gave me a phone and said, "You're safe here. Nobody knows you're here." But the phone would ring and someone would say, "You ain't dead yet?" I was, like, Damn! Those motherf*ckers don't have no mercy. So I checked myself out, and my family took me to a safe spot, somebody who really cared about me in New York City.

Why did you go to court the morning after you were shot?

They came to the bed and said, "Pac, you don't need to go to court." I was, like, no. I felt like if the jury didn't see me, they would think I'm doing a show or some shit. Because they were sequestered and didn't know I got shot. So I knew I had to show up no matter what. I swear to God, the farthest thing from my mind was
sympathy. All I could think of was, Stand up and fight for your life like you fight for your life in this hospital.

I sat there in a wheelchair, and the judge was not looking me in my eyes. He never looked me in my eyes the whole trial. So the jury came in, and the way everybody was acting, it was like a regular everyday thing. And I was feeling so miracle-ish that I'm living. And then I start feeling they're going to do what they're going to do. Then I felt numb; I said, I've got to get out of here.

When I left, the cameras were all rushing me and bumping into my leg and shit. I was, like, "You motherf*ckers are like vultures." That made me see just the nastiest in the hearts of men. That's why I was looking like that in the chair when they were wheeling me away. I was trying to promise myself to keep my head up for all my people there. But when I saw all that, it made me put my head down; it just took my spirit.

**Can we talk about the rape case at all?**

Okay. Nigel and Trevor took me to Nell's. When we got there, I was immediately impressed, because it was different than any club I'd been in. It wasn't crowded, there was lots of space, there were beautiful women there. I was meeting Ronnie Lott from the New York Jets and Derrick Coleman from the Nets. They were coming up to me, like, "Pac, we're proud of you." I felt so tall that night, because they were people's heroes and they saying I was their hero. I felt above and beyond, like I was glowing.

Somebody introduced me to this girl. And the only thing I noticed about her: She had a big chest. But she was not attractive; she looked dumpy, like. Money came to me and said, "This girl wants to do more than meet you." I already knew what that meant: She wanted to f*ck. I just left them and went to the dance floor by myself. They were playing some Jamaican music, and I'm just grooving.

Then this girl came out and started dancing-and the shit that was weird, she didn't even come to me face-first, she came ass-first. So I'm dancing to this reggae music; you know how sensuous that is. She's touching my dick, she's touching my balls, she opened my zipper, she put her hands on me. There's a little dark part in Nell's, and I see people over there making out already, so she starts pushing me this way. I know what time it is.

We go over in the corner. She's touching me. I lift up my shirt while I'm dancing, showing off my tattoos and

"If thug life is real, then let somebody else represent it, because I'm tired of it. I represented it too much."
everything. She starts kissing my stomach, kissing my chest, licking me and shit. She's going down, and I'm, like, Oh shit. She pulled my dick out; she started sucking my dick on the dance floor. That shit turned me on. I wasn't thinking, like, This is going to be a rape case. I'm thinking, like, This is going to be a good night. You know what I'm saying?

Soon as she finished that-just enough to get me solid, rock-hard-we got off the dance floor. I told Nigel, "I've got to get out of here. I'm about to take her to the hotel. I'll see you all later." Nigel was, like, "No, no, no. I'm going to take you back." We drive to the hotel. We go upstairs and have sex, real quick. As soon as I came, that was it. I was tired, I was drunk, I knew I had to get up early in the morning, so I was, like, "What are you going to do? You can spend the night or you can leave." She left me her number, and everything was cool. Nigel was spending the night in my room all these nights. When he found out she sucked my dick on the floor and we had sex, he and Trevor were livid! Trevor is a big freak; he was going crazy. All he kept asking me was, "D-d-did you f*ck in the ass?" He was listening to every single detail. I thought, This is just some guy shit, it's all good.

**What happened on the night of the alleged rape?**

We had a show to do in New Jersey at Club 88. This dude said, "I'll be there with a limo to pick you up at midnight." We went shopping, we got dressed up, we were all ready. Nigel was saying, "Why don't you give her a call?" So we were all sitting in the hotel, drinking. I'm waiting for the show, and Nigel's, like, "I called her. I mean, she called me, and she's on her way." But I wasn't thinking about her no second time. We were watching TV when the phone rings, and she's downstairs. Nigel gave Man-man, my manager, some money to pay for the cab, and I was, like, "Let that bitch pay for her own cab." She came upstairs looking all nice, dressed all provocative and shit, like she was ready for a prom date.

So we're all sitting there talking, and she's making me uncomfortable, because instead of sitting with Nigel and them, she's sitting on the arm of my chair. And Nigel and Trevor are looking at her like a chicken, like she's, like, food. It's a real uncomfortable situation. So I'm thinking, Okay, I'm going to take her to the room and get a massage. I'm thinking about being with her that night at Nell's. So we get in the room, I'm laying on my stomach, she's massaging my back. I turn around. She starts massaging my front. This lasted for about a half an hour. In
between, we would stop and kiss each other. I'm thinking she's about to give me another blow job. But before she could do that, some niggas came in, and I froze up more than she froze up. If she would have said anything, I would have said, "Hold on, let me finish." But I can't say nothing, because she's not saying nothing. How do I look saying, "Hold on"? That would be like I'm making her my girl.

So they came and they started touching her ass. They going, "Oooh, she's got a nice ass." Nigel isn't touching her, but I can hear his voice leading it, like, "Put her panties down, put her pantyhose down." I just got up and walked out the room.

When I went to the other suite, Man-man told me that Talibah, my publicist at the time, had been there for a while and was waiting in the bedroom of that suite. I went to see Talibah and we talked about what she had been doing during the day, then I went and laid down on the couch and went to sleep. When I woke up, Nigel was standing over me going, "Pac, Pac," and all the lights was on in both rooms. The whole mood had changed, you know what I'm saying? I felt like I was drugged. I didn't know how much time had passed. So when I woke up, it was, like, "You're going to the police, you're going to the police." Nigel walks out the room, comes back with the girl. Her clothes is on; ain't nothing tore. She just upset, crying hysterically. "Why you let them do this to me?" She's not making sense. "I came to see you. You let them do this to me." I'm, like, "I don't got time for this shit right here. You got to chill out with that shit. Stop yelling at me and looking at me all crazy." She said, "This not the last time you're going to hear from me," and slammed the door. And Nigel goes, "Don't worry about it, Pac, don't worry. I'll handle it. She just tripping." I asked him what happened, and he was, like, "Too many niggas." You know, I ain't even tripping no more, you know? Niggas start going downstairs, but nobody was coming back upstairs. I'm sitting upstairs smoking weed, like, Where the f*ck is everybody at? Then I get a call from Talibah from the lobby saying, "The police is down here."
And that's what landed you in jail. But you're saying that you never did anything?

Never did nothing. Only thing I saw was all three of them in there and that nigga talking about how fat her ass was. I got up, because the nigga sounded sick. I don't know if she's with these niggas, or if she's mad at me for not protecting her. But I know I feel ashamed—because I wanted to be accepted and because I didn't want no harm done to me—I didn't say nothing.

How did you feel about women during the trial, and how do you feel about women now?

When the charge first came up, I hated black women. I felt like I put my life on the line. At the time I made "Keep Ya Head Up," nobody had no songs about black women. I put out "Keep Ya Head Up" from the bottom of my heart. It was real, and they didn't defend it. I felt like it should have been women all over the country talking about, "Tupac couldn't have did that." And people was actually asking me, "Did you do it?"

Then, going to trial, I started seeing the black women that was helping me. Now I've got a brand-new vision of them, because in here, it's mostly black female guards. They don't give me no extra favors, but they treat me with human respect. They're telling me, "When you get out of here, you gotta change." They be putting me on the phone with they kids. You know what I'm saying? They just give me love.

What's going to happen if you have to serve time?

If it happens, I got to serve it like a trooper. Of course, my heart will be broke. I be torn apart, but I have to serve it like a trooper.

I understand you recently completed a new album.

Rapping...I don't even got the thrill to rap no more. I mean, in here I don't even remember my lyrics.

But you're putting out the album, right?
Yeah. It's called Me Against the World. So that is my truth. That's my best album yet. And because I already laid it down, I can be free. When you do rap albums, you got to train yourself. You got to constantly be in character. You used to see rappers talking all that hard shit, and then you see them in suits and shit at the American Music Awards. I didn't want to be that type of nigga. I wanted to keep it real, and that's what I thought I was doing. But now that shit is dead. That Thug Life shit...I did it, I put in my work, I laid it down. But now that shit is dead.

What are your plans after prison?

I'm going to team up with Mike Tyson when we get out. Team up with Monster Kody [now known as Sanyika Shakur] from California. I'm going to start an organization called Us First. I'm going to save these young niggas, because nobody else want to save them. Nobody ever came to save me. They just watch what happen to you. That's why Thug Life to me is dead. If it's real, then let somebody else represent it, because I'm tired of it. I represented it too much. I was Thug Life. I was the only nigga out there putting my life on the line.

Has anybody else been there for you?

Since I've been in here I got about 40 letters. I got little girls sending me money. Everybody telling me that God is with me. People telling me they hate the dudes that shot me, they're going to pray for me. I did get one letter, this dude telling me he wished I was dead. But then I got people looking out for me, like Jada Pinkett, Jasmine Guy, Treach, Mickey Rourke. My label, Interscope Records, has been extremely supportive. Even Madonna.

Can you talk about your relationship with Madonna and Mickey Rourke?

I was letting people dictate who should be my friends. I felt like because I was this big Black Panther type of nigga, I couldn't be friends with Madonna. And so I dissed her, even though she showed me nothing but love. I felt bad, because when I went to jail, I called her and she was the only person that was willing to help me. Of that stature. Same thing with Mickey Rourke-he just befriended me. Not like black and white, just like friend to friend. And from now on, it's not going to be a strictly black thing with me. I even apologized to Quincy Jones for all the stuff I said about him and his wives. I'm apologizing to the Hughes Brothers...but not John Singleton. He's inspiring me to write screenplays, because I want to be his competition. He fired me from Higher Learning and gave my idea to the next actor.
Do you worry about your safety now?

I don't have no fear of death. My only fear is coming back reincarnated. I'm not trying to make people think I'm in here faking it, but my whole life is going to be about saving somebody. I got to represent life. If you saying you going to be real, that's how you be real-be physically fit, be mentally fit. And I want niggas to be educated. You know, I was steering people away from school. You gotta be in school, because through school you can get a job. And if you got a job, then that's how they can't do us like this.

Do you think rap music is going to come under more attack, given what's happened to you?

Oh, definitely. That's why they're doing me like this. Because if they can stop me, they can stop 30 more rappers before they even born. But there's something else I understand now: If we really are saying rap is an art form, then we got to be true to it and be more responsible for our lyrics. If you see everybody dying because of what you saying, it don't matter that you didn't make them die, it just matters that you didn't save them.

You mentioned Marvin Gaye in "Keep Ya Head Up." A lot of people have compared you to him, in terms of your personal conflicts.

That's how I feel. I feel close to Marvin Gaye, Vincent van Gogh.

Why van Gogh?

Because nobody appreciated his work until he was dead. Now it's worth millions. I feel close to him, how tormented he was. Him and Marvin too. That's how I was out there. I'm in jail now, but I'm free. My mind is free. The only time I have problems is when I sleep.

So you're grateful to be where you are now?

It's a gift-straight-up. This is God's will. And everybody that said I wasn't nothing...my whole goal is to just make them ashamed that they wrote me off like that. Because I'm 23 years old. And I might just be my mother's child, but in all reality, I'm everybody's child. You know what I'm saying? Nobody raised me; I was raised in this society. But I'm not going to use that as an excuse no more. I'm going to pull myself up by my bootstraps, and I'm going to make a change.
And my change is going to make a change through the community. And through that, they gonna see what type of person I truly was. Where my heart was. This Thug Life stuff, it was just ignorance. My intentions was always in the right place. I never killed anybody, I never raped anybody, I never committed no crimes that weren't honorable-that weren't to defend myself. So that's what I'm going to show them. I'm going to show people my true intentions, and my true heart. I'm going to show them the man that my mother raised. I'm going to make them all proud.