

# Faith Evans/The Notorious B.I.G.: The King & I

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Daniel Bromfield

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“I don’t want the money,” says Faith Evans in the opening seconds of *The King & I*. “I just need you back with me.” It can’t be read as anything but a preemptive defense. Only three releases have been credited to the Notorious B.I.G. since his death, and they stink up the idea of the posthumous cash-grab as bad as anyone’s since Hendrix. *The King & I*, a cobbled-together collection of duets between Big and his widow Faith Evans, is the first not helmed by Diddy, who no doubt owes a couple islands to the verses he extracted from his dead friend and plopped over au-courant beats. So maybe she’s not out to make money, but if she really wants him back, that’s creepy as hell too, the archival-album equivalent of Jimmy Cross digging up his baby.



The lack of cynicism is what saves this album from absolute wretchedness. It doesn’t play like the theoretical Biggie Smalls albums we might have heard had he lived, which was the vibe its fellow Frankensteins *Born Again* and *Duets: The Final Chapter* went for. It’s light on the bangers, focusing mostly on love-drunk R&B, and its all-legend guest list is sequestered in its final third. This is really just a Faith Evans album with a bunch of recycled Biggie verses on it. Biggie isn’t even on it as much as you’d expect, occupying perhaps a quarter of its runtime.

Evans is a great singer who’s produced some great music, and she’s best here on songs like “Fool For You,” where she’s singing about being in love with... somebody. Then there are songs like “10 Wife Commandments,” which rehashes the Crack Commandments of one of *Life After Death*’s most indelible songs into a pamphlet he gives his wife. In addition to the fact that no one will ever pick this version to play at a party over the original, it sounds creepy. Who the fuck gives their wife a list of commandments? The raps are great – after all, it’s Biggie, perhaps the best rapper to ever walk the earth. But they’ve all been released before, many are recognizable even to casual fans, and the fidelity of his verses is audibly lower than that of Evans’ vocals.

There are better ways Evans could have honored her husband’s legacy. One would have been to cut the dead rapper off the album altogether and simply frame it as a concept album chronicling her memories with Big. That would have humanized the late star instead of zombifying him, casting him not as a larger-than-life legend but as a husband who really made this woman happy. Perhaps she could have woven little samples of Biggie throughout, as a frill rather than the focus, or kept the heartbreaking dialogues with the MC’s mom Voletta Wallace that she weaves throughout. (How often are the interludes the most poignant part of an album?)

Alas, *The King & I* becomes another entry in the rancid Biggie revival catalog, and it does little to create the impression Biggie Smalls was a living being. His career was so brief and his image so larger-than-life that it’s hard to really picture him as a person; even the movie *Notorious* was a little uncanny in showing him as one. Not to say he had no personality beyond his persona, but albums like *The King & I* have made it so difficult to imagine one that it’s hard to understand what the adulation is about. It’s hard to imagine anyone falling in love with a folder full of samples, and *The King & I* takes on the uncanniness of a woman-on-robot romance. Evans sounds sincere and sad – and there’s Biggie, sounding every bit as lifeless as he is.

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