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PROFILE



HOW THE WU WAS WON Cappadonna, Masta Killa, GZA, RZA, Raekwon, U-God, Inspectah Deck, Ghostface Killah, Method Man (from left) in October

## Wu-Tang Reload Their Chambers

How hip-hop's greatest crew overcame bad blood and logistical headaches to rise once more **By Christian Hoard**

**R**ZA STARES OUT THE WINDOW OF a room at the Soho Grand hotel in New York, looking a little weary. The Wu-Tang Clan leader just got off a marathon conference call with the rest of the group, who are releasing a new album, *A Better Tomorrow*, on December 2nd. As so often happens when the Wu talk to (or about) one another, gripes flew: Inspectah Deck was irked RZA had told the MCs what to rhyme about on the album; Raekwon refused to appear in the video for a new single. "Making our last album was difficult," says RZA, referring to 2007's *8 Diagrams*. "This one knocked it out of the box."

The year's most complicated comeback story almost never happened at all. In the mid-2000s, relations within the Wu-Tang Clan turned especially ugly: RZA faced lawsuits from both Ghostface Killah and U-God for unpaid funds (Ghostface's was settled and U-God's was voided, according to RZA), and he was accused of diluting the group's sound with his live-instrument-based production ("Shit is wack," Ghostface said of *8 Diagrams*). Things came to a head when RZA had invited the entire Wu-Tang Clan to the premiere of

*American Gangster*, in which he had a key role. Only Inspectah Deck showed up. At the next group meeting, RZA says, "There was a strong verbal attack on me. So I told them, 'You're my brothers forever, but I will never do business with you again.'"

But a few years ago, as the 20th anniversary of the group's debut album approached, RZA began to think about reconvening the Wu. Released in 1993, *Enter the Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers* established the Wu as hip-hop's wildest, most talented collective, a nine-man crew steeped in kung-fu movies, mystagogic symbolism and Staten Island's drug trade. The more RZA thought about the anniversary, the more ways he thought of to celebrate it: a world tour, a revival of the defunct Wu-Wear clothing line, maybe even a Wu-themed comic and video game. He also decided to make two different new albums: *A Better Tomorrow*, as well as a second record that the group would release in one copy and one copy only. (That one – called *Once Upon a Time in Shaolin* – goes up for auction in the near future; RZA has said the group received a \$5 million offer for it.)

In early 2013, RZA began work on new Wu-Tang songs, doubling down on his live-band approach to production. He worked in L.A. with producer and vintage-funk guru Adrian Younge. He also headed to Royal Studios in Memphis, where Al

Green's classic records were made, and hired some of the session men who played on them. RZA, a proficient guitarist, led the band through the changes himself.

But with fresh tracks came fresh acrimony. As the anniversary of *36 Chambers* came and went, the new Wu-Tang album was only partly finished. RZA publicly called out Raekwon and Ghostface for lack of commitment, and said he needed "more energy" from GZA. In April, after Wu-Tang put out the single "Keep Watch," Raekwon – a master of grimy drug-rap and the biggest holdout from *A Better Tomorrow* – took aim at RZA in an interview with *ROLLING STONE*. "I hate that fuckin' [song]. It ain't the gunpowder that my brothers are spitting," Raekwon said. "It's the production. It's like being a coach and you won rings back in the day, but now your team is in ninth place."

Raekwon wanted to bring in outside producers like Dr. Dre; he also wanted more cash upfront before appearing on the album. RZA agreed to the second demand, paying the requested sum out of his own pocket. Then he met with Raekwon along with Ghostface, the other main holdout. The producer played some proposed beats for the MCs; each heard tracks they liked, and each ended up making key contributions to *A Better Tomorrow*. "I told Rae, 'You'll be like the guy who [Cont. on 18]"

**"This is RZA's album. I decided to get in line like a soldier."**

## WU-TANG CLAN

[Cont. from 16] came on my movie and stole the show,” says RZA.

“This is RZA’s album,” Raekwon says now. “I decided to get in line like a soldier and do what I needed to do.” As of mid-November, Raekwon still hadn’t heard the finished version of *A Better Tomorrow*, and he had concerns. “The production could have been grimier,” he says. “When I think of the Wu, I think of *bloody* shit.”

*A Better Tomorrow* mixes classic-Wu science (kung-fu movie clips, references to criminal pasts) with RZA’s organic beats and touches of warmth and light – the change-the-world positivity of the title track; the nostalgia of “Wu-Tang Reunion,” where Ghostface does a sweet impression of Ol’ Dirty Bastard, who died in 2004. Given its backstory, it all hangs together surprisingly well.

Of course, finishing a Wu-Tang record at all is a feat. The group is spread across L.A., New York, New Jersey, Atlanta, Arizona. The members, all in their forties, have solo careers and families to attend to. (RZA has seven children; Cappadonna has eight kids and a grandchild.) Method Man just shot a movie with Adam Sandler. U-God is working on a memoir that proudly delves into his rap sheet – “I got the most fuckin’ criminal record of anyone in the Wu,” he claims.

When GZA isn’t working on his chess game, he’s giving lectures at high schools and colleges about the cosmos and the importance of science education. “Supernovas, black holes, craters, galaxies – it’s all interesting,” he says. “I visited Neil deGrasse Tyson at the Museum of Natural History. We kicked it.”

RZA keeps building on the acting career he launched in the Nineties. He was superb as the villain in *Brick Mansions*, Paul Walker’s last full film, and he recently translated a lifelong martial-arts obsession into his directorial debut, *The Man With the Iron Fists*. When he gets home to L.A., he plans to ask his buddy Quentin Tarantino to screen the super-obscure 1976 kung-fu flick *The Big Boss 2* for him. “He has the only American print,” says RZA.

Try as he might, RZA can’t let the Wu-Tang Clan rest. “My brother told me, ‘The Wu is your legacy! You probably helped get Obama the presidency because your music attracted multiple cultures,’” RZA says. “On Staten Island, you couldn’t even walk to some neighborhoods without your gun. Now those kids and their childrens are our friends! Mike the Italian, John the Italian – they with us.”