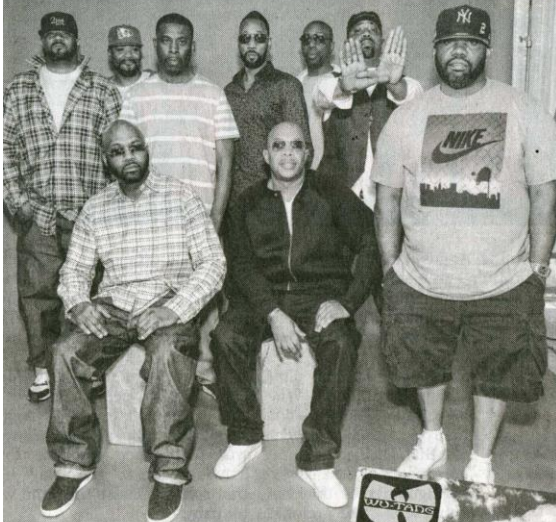


DECEMBER 1, 2014

MUSIC

5 WAYS WU-TANG CLAN CHANGED HIP-HOP FOREVER



On the eve of the release of Wu-Tang Clan's sixth and purportedly final album, *A Better Tomorrow*, music writer **Martín Caballero** examines how the group has shaped hip-hop over the years.

CHELSEA LAUREN, WIREIMAGE

1 HARNESSING A GROUP DYNAMIC

Managing a group of nine supremely talented and stylistically diverse rappers was never going to be easy, so why even bother? As part of Wu-Tang's initial contract with Loud Records in the early '90s, each member was free to pursue separate deals for solo careers, and the likes of Def Jam (Method Man), Elektra (Ol' Dirty Bastard) and Geffen (GZA) came calling with offers. Rather than concentrating under a singular cumbersome entity, this allowed the Wu-Tang brand to quickly permeate the music industry — resulting in a string of classic albums that highlighted each member's original style while presenting their collective aesthetic to a larger audience. Their successful divide-and-conquer strategy opened the door for large crews such as The Diplomats, Odd Future and Beast Coast to follow.

2 PUSHING PRODUCTION FORWARD

In the decade before, producers such as Marley Marl and Prince Paul helped make sampling an integral element of the hip-hop aesthetic. But with Wu-Tang, RZA took things to another level. Using dusty, eccentric soul and "blaxploitation" movie soundtracks as his source material, along with poorly dubbed dialogue and sound effects from low-budget kung-fu flicks, he transcended simply making beats, arguably becoming hip-hop's first great composer. Mixing these elements, he forged atmospheric, bizarre and hypnotic sounds that continued to influence countless producers in subsequent years, including the likes of Kanye West and The Alchemist.

3 STICKING WITH THEIR OWN LANGUAGE

There's a reason member RZA's book *The Wu-Tang Manual* contains a glossary: Wu-Tang has always painted vivid pictures of urban life using the language of the streets. But it was more than just slang; the band helped introduce a lexicon that weaved influences from Five Percent Nation (an offshoot of the Nation of Islam) philosophy, Asian cinema, food and other elements into a unique vocab. "Biscuits" were guns, "sharks" were those who "bit" (copied) their style, "Earths" were women. Rather than simplifying their speech for a mass audience, they brought that audience into their own world.

4 BRINGING ON THE EAST COAST REVIVAL

For many, the grimy New York feel of the Clan's 1993 debut *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* is synonymous with '90s hip-hop, but at the time, it was the exception. The glossy funk sounds emerging from Dr. Dre's Death Row Records dominated commercial charts, while the heroes of New York's first hip-hop Golden Age, such as Rakim and Kool G Rap, were transitioning into new phases of their careers. The Clan responded by taking a path that shifted away from California's sunshine and gang culture toward a harsher, more menacing and aggressive style that helped set the scene for landmark releases by the Notorious B.I.G., Nas and others who would solidify the East Coast rap renaissance.

5 EXPANDING INTO DIFFERENT VENTURES

No one could ever accuse the Clan of thinking small. They were pioneers in creating their own fashion line, Wu Wear, which was sold in major department stores as well as their own official outlets, and they even eventually released a limited-edition shoe through Nike. In 1999, they took on the video game industry with *Wu-Tang: Shaolin Style* for Sony's PlayStation. Their success in translating the Wu-Tang Clan brand into commercial opportunities created space for the next generation of hip-hop entrepreneurs, such as Jay-Z and 50 Cent, to expand their own empires.