

Wu-Tang Clan

Emerging in 1993, when Dr. Dre's G-funk had overtaken the hip-hop world, the Staten Island, New York-based Wu-Tang Clan proved to be the most revolutionary rap group of the mid-'90s -- and only partially because of their music. Turning the standard concept of a hip-hop crew inside out, the Wu-Tang Clan were assembled as a loose congregation of nine MCs, almost as a support group. Instead of releasing one album after another, the Clan were designed to overtake the record industry in as profitable a fashion as possible -- the idea was to establish the Wu-Tang as a force with their debut album and then spin off into as many side projects as possible. In the process, the members would all become individual stars as well as receive individual royalty checks.

Surprisingly, the plan worked. All of the various Wu-Tang solo projects elaborated on the theme the group laid out on its 1993 debut, the spare, menacing *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. Taking their group name from an powerful, mythical kung fu sword wielded by an invincible congregation of warriors, the crew is a loose collective of nine MCs. All nine members work under a number of pseudonyms, but they are best known as RZA (formerly Prince Rakeem; aka RZArecta, Chief Abbot, and Bobby Steels; born Robert Diggs), GZA (aka the Genius, Justice, and Maxi Million; born Gary Grice), Ol' Dirty Bastard (aka Unique Ason, Joe Bannanas, Dirt McGirt, Dirt Dog, and Osirus; born Russell Jones), Method Man (aka Johnny Blaze, Ticallion Stallion, Shakwon, Methical, and MZA; born Clifford Smith), Raekwon the Chef (aka Shallah Raekwon and Lou Diamonds; born Corey Woods), Ghostface Killah (aka Tony Starks and Sun God; born Dennis Coles), U-God (aka Golden Arms, Lucky Hands, Baby U, and 4-Bar Killer; born Lamont Hawkins), Inspectah Deck (aka Rebel INS and Rollie Fingers; born Jason Hunter), and Masta Killa (aka Noodles; born Elgin Turner).

Although RZA wasn't one of the two founding members -- GZA and Ol' Dirty Bastard were the first -- the vision of the Wu-Tang Clan is undoubtedly due to his musical skills. Under his direction, the group -- through its own efforts and the solo projects, all of which he produced or co-produced -- created a hazy, surreal, and menacing soundscape out of hardcore beats, eerie piano riffs, and minimal samples. Over these surrealistic backing tracks, the MCs rapped hard, updating the old-school attack with vicious violence, martial arts imagery, and a welcome warped humor. By 1995, the sound was one of the most instantly recognizable in hip-hop.

It wasn't always that way. Like most rappers, they began their careers trying to get ahead whatever way they could. For RZA, that meant releasing a silly single, "Ooh, I Love You Rakeem," on Tommy Boy Records in 1991. On the advice of his label and producers, he cut the humorous lover-man single, which went absolutely nowhere. Neither did the follow-up single, "My Deadly Venom." The experience strengthened his resolve to subvert and attack record industry conventions. He found partners in GZA and Ol' Dirty Bastard. GZA had also released a record in 1991, the full-length *Words from the Genius* on Cold Chillin', which was preceded by the single "Come Do Me." Both records were unsuccessful. After the failure of his album, GZA teamed with an old friend, Ol' Dirty Bastard, to form the crew that would evolve into the Wu-Tang Clan within a year.

RZA quickly became part of the crew, as did several other local MCs, including Method Man, Ghostface Killah, Raekwon, U-God, Inspectah Deck, and Masta Killa. The nine rappers made a

pact to form an artistic and financial community -- the Wu-Tang Clan wouldn't merely be a group, it would be its own industry. In order to do this, they decided to establish themselves through a group effort and then begin to spread the word through solo projects, picking up additional collaborators along the way and, in the process, becoming stronger and more influential.

The first Wu-Tang Clan single, the hard-hitting "Protect Ya Neck," appeared on their own independent label and became an underground hit. Soon, record labels were offering them lucrative contracts. The group held out until they landed a deal that would allow each member to record solo albums for whatever label he chose -- in essence, each rapper was a free agent. Loud/RCA agreed to the deal, and the band's debut album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, appeared in November 1993. *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* was both critically acclaimed and commercially successful; although its financial success wasn't immediate, it was the result of a slow build. "C.R.E.A.M.," released in early 1994, was the single that put them over the top and won them a devoted following. The group wasted no time in pursuing other projects, as a total of five of the members -- GZA, RZA, Raekwon, Method Man, and Ol' Dirty Bastard -- landed solo contracts as a result of the success of "C.R.E.A.M." RZA was the first to reenter the studio, this time as a member of the Gravediggaz, a group he founded; in addition to RZA, who was rechristened RZArecta, the group included De La Soul producer Prince Paul, Stetsasonic's Frukwan, and Brothers Grimm's Poetic. The Gravediggaz's album *6 Feet Deep* appeared in August 1994; it eventually would go gold. Labeled "horrorcore" by the group, it was an ultra-violent but comical *tour de force* that demonstrated RZA's production prowess. Shortly after its release, Raekwon released his first single, "Heaven and Hell," on the Fresh soundtrack; the song was produced by RZA and featured Ghostface Killah.

The first Wu-Tang member to become a major solo star was Method Man. In November 1994, he released *Tical*, the first official Wu-Tang solo album. Again, RZA produced the album, creating a dense, dirty sonic collage. *Tical* became a big hit in early 1995, as did Meth's duet with Mary J. Blige, "I'll Be There for You/You're All I Need to Get By." Ol' Dirty Bastard followed Method Man's breakthrough success with *Return to the 36 Chambers*, which appeared in March 1995 on Elektra Records. Thanks to the hits "Brooklyn Zoo" and "Shimmy Shimmy Ya," the record became a gold success. Out of all the solo albums, it was the one that sounded the most like *Enter the Wu-Tang*, although it did have a more pronounced comic bent, due to Ol' Dirty's maniacal vocals. *Tales from the Hood*, a movie soundtrack featuring Inspectah Deck's first solo track, appeared in May.

Later in 1995, the two most critically acclaimed Wu-Tang records appeared: Raekwon's *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* and GZA's *Liquid Swords*. Raekwon released his album on Loud/RCA in August 1995; the record featured extensive contributions -- a total of 12 songs -- from Ghostface Killah, his greatest exposure yet. GZA's solo album was released by Geffen Records in November 1995. In February 1996, Ghostface Killah's first solo track, "Winter Warz," appeared on the *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While You're Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* soundtrack. Later that October, he released his own solo debut, the critically acclaimed, '70s soul-flavored *Ironman*; the record was the first released on RZA's new Epic subsidiary, Razor Sharp Records.

The Wu-Tang Clan finally reconvened and returned with their second album, the double CD *Wu-Tang Forever*, in June of 1997. Hugely anticipated, the album entered the charts at number one -- selling over 600,000 copies in its first week alone -- and quickly spawned the hit single "Triumph." There were several contributions from guest associate Cappadonna (born Darryl Hill), who'd appeared on *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* and *Ironman*, and would later become the tenth member of the Wu-Tang Clan. The group toured extensively in support of the album, getting into a few minor scuffles with the law along the way.

In the meantime, the next phase of the Wu-Tang plan started to take shape: unearthing new associates and spinning the resulting stable of talent into a brand-name franchise. A group of Wu protégés dubbed Killarmy released their debut album, *Silent Weapons for Quiet Wars*, on Priority Records in August 1997, drawing heavily upon the Clan's martial imagery. However, the real year for Wu-related side projects proved to be 1998. In March, Cappadonna released his solo debut, *The Pillage*, on Columbia. The same month, Killah Priest -- not an official part of the Clan, but a frequent guest and a member of another protégé group, the Sunz of Man -- made his solo debut on Geffen Records with *Heavy Mental*, an acclaimed album filled with spiritual imagery that established him as one of the more distinctive solo artists in the Wu-Tang orbit. In July the Sunz of Man released their own debut album, *The Last Shall Be First*, on Red Ant, and yet another group of up-and-comers dubbed the Wu-Tang Killa Bees released their first album, *The Swarm, Vol. 1*, on Priority, featuring a number of guest appearances by Wu members and associates. In August, Killarmy issued their second album, *Dirty Weaponry*.

The Clan kicked off a second round of solo projects in late 1998. This time around, RZA curtailed his activities somewhat, making appearances but often leaving the majority of the production duties to his protégés. Still, he released his own solo debut, the soundtrack-styled RZA as *Bobby Digital in Stereo*, in November 1998 on V2; the same month, Method Man's second album, *Tical 2000: Judgement Day*, debuted at number two on the charts. June 1999 saw the release of an excellent singles compilation, *RZA Hits*, which covered the first Wu-Tang album and the first round of solo albums (1994-1995); the very next week, GZA's second album, *Beneath the Surface*, was released. September brought plenty of new Wu product: Ol' Dirty Bastard's *Nigga Please*, released while the rapper was in rehab; Method Man's acclaimed duo album with Redman, *Blackout!*; and the first-ever solo album by Inspectah Deck, *Uncontrolled Substance*, which appeared on Relativity. Another Wu member made his solo debut in October, when U-God issued *Golden Arms Redemption* on Priority; Raekwon returned the following month with *Immobilarity*. Finally, Ghostface Killah issued his well-received sophomore set, *Supreme Clientele*, in January 2000.

In August 2001, RZA issued his second Bobby Digital album, *Digital Bullet*; November brought solo albums from Ghostface Killah (*Bulletproof Wallets*) and Cappadonna (*The Yin and the Yang*). This time, though, there was no full round of solo projects in between Wu albums; the full group (minus ODB) assembled for its fourth album, *Iron Flag*, which was released in December 2001, just one year after its predecessor. Despite a lot of activity for the various solo projects, Wu-Tang released only a live album, 2004's *Disciples of the 36 Chambers*, during the subsequent five years. That document was one of the last places to hear Ol' Dirty Bastard, who died of a heart attack in November 2004.

In early 2007, in anticipation for the Clan's upcoming album, *8 Diagrams*, Nature Sounds issued the Mathematics-compiled *Unreleased*, a collection of new remixes and hard to find, previously unreleased songs from the group and some of its friends. It wasn't until the end of the year, however -- after a couple of delays and some criticism from Raekwon and Ghostface directed at RZA regarding the overall sound of the record -- that *8 Diagrams* came out. Solo albums from most members would follow, but the Clan itself would remain dormant until 2011, when the Wu-related compilation *Legendary Weapons* landed with some new tracks from the full group.

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