

“Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)”—Wu Tang Clan (1993)

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Wu Tang Clan, c. 1993

The Wu-Tang Clan changed how the world viewed hip-hop with their first album, “Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers).” The group conveyed some of the most traumatic aspects of being African American with humor and charisma unlike any other African American musical group before. The Wu-Tang Clan was assembled of nine MCs, and they completely reinvented the standards of a hip-hop crew. Their debut album was designed to be an impactful and assertive to establish the band as a force to be reckoned with in the music industry; “Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)” did just that.

The Wu-Tang Clan formed in Staten Island (dubbed “Shaolin” by the group), New York, in the early 1990s, and they adopted the name “Wu-Tang Clan” from the kung-fu movie “Shaolin and Wu Tang.”¹ This first album featured all nine original members, including RZA, GZA, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, Method Man, Raekwon, Ghostface Killah, Inspectah Deck, U-God, and Masta Killa.² The lineup of these legendary rappers is one of the reasons this album is credited as one of the finest albums the genre has ever produced. The group signed to Loud Records in 1992 and released “Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)” on November 9, 1993.³ The album loosely adopted a Shaolin vs. Wu-Tang theme, dividing the album into Shaolin and Wu-Tang sides.⁴ One of the most iconic rappers in the group, RZA, produced the album by creating sonic collages from classic soul samples and clips from martial arts movies “Shaolin and Wu Tang” (1983) and “Ten Tigers from Kwangtung” (1979).⁵

The late 1980s and early 1990s were considered the “golden age” of hip-hop; the genre was experiencing one of its greatest peaks.⁶ The light and party sounds of hip-hop during the 1980s started to shift to darker and more serious tones right when the Wu-Tang Clan came to their

peak. The off-kilter sounds RZA produced were organic and held a certain untouched tone that the genre had never before encountered. “Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)” did a superb job reflecting the overall theme of the music: lucid, surreal, hazy, and almost uncomfortable. The MCs rapped over these beats in passionate ways that made them easily recognizable by 1995, only two years after the album was released.

“Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)” was a menacing and intricate collection of music entirely new to the world of hip-hop; the album also formed the foundation of a theme the group would carry into other albums they produced. The title of this debut album hailed partially from a mythical kung-fu sword used by a strong group of warriors,⁷ portraying the toughness and resilience the rappers exhibited during their childhoods. More importantly, the sounds of this album reflected the lives that these rappers lived in New York City during the early 1990s. The haunting keys of the piano perfectly capture how they felt facing challenges within their predominantly African American communities when they were just young children met with strife and violence. There is urgency in their voices, and most listeners pick up on this urgency easily. The vivid imagery and lyrics even further solidify the idea that these MCs used this debut album as a means to shine a much-needed light on the violence that shaped their lives and their communities.

In one of the most famous songs on the album, entitled “C.R.E.A.M.,” some of the lyrics detail: *“I grew up on the crime side, the New York Times side. Staying alive was no jive”* While this is only a small section of the narrative content of the album, the words perfectly encapsulate just how violent this side of New York was for these rappers. The album allowed the group members to display their pain on a large scale, and they used this as their medium to raise awareness. While their music shines a light on the violence in their home communities, these songs glorify and idolize this way of living. The music makes it clear that they are justifying their actions of living and giving into the violence of their communities, but dually, it makes the listener aware that when faced with this violence, the only option at times is to give into it in order to survive in these situations. The Wu-Tang Clan wear a hardcore face in this album, and they utilize this face as a way to hide the real pain and suffering reflected in their work. One of the other major influences for this album was the Nation of God and Earths, also known as the Five-Percent Nation.⁸ This movement was a Black Nationalist faction that left the Nation of Islam in 1963.⁹

Fans were attracted to these new sounds that challenged the norms of the hip-hop genre during the 1990s and “Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)” is widely regarded as one of the most significant albums of its decade. In “Rolling Stone,” Touré noted that, “Wu-Tang ... are more ciphers than masterful creations. In refusing to commodify themselves, they leave blank the ultimate canvas--the self.”¹⁰ He added, “This is hip-hop you won’t find creeping up the ‘Billboard’ charts, but you will hear booming out of Jeep stereos in all the right neighborhoods.”¹¹ Nonetheless, the album received widespread critical acclaim. It peaked at number 41 on the “Billboard” 200 chart, selling 30,000 copies in its first week, and reached number eight on “Billboard’s” Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums chart.¹² The “Source” cited “Enter the Wu-Tang” as one of the “100 Best Rap Albums”¹³ and gave it a “classic” five mic rating.¹⁴ In its retrospective 2007 issue, “XXL” magazine gave the album a classic rating of “XXL.”¹⁵ “Enter the Wu-Tang” earned a critical rating of 8/10 in the book “Spin Alternative Record Guide.”¹⁶ MTV declared it among “The Greatest Hip-Hop Albums of All Time,”¹⁷ while

“Blender” named the album one of “500 CDs You Must Own.”¹⁸ By 1995, it was certified platinum, and it went triple platinum by October 2018.¹⁹ “Rolling Stone” considered it one of the “Essential Albums of the 90s”²⁰ and “100 Best Debut Albums of All Time,”²¹ and in 2020, the album was ranked 27th on the magazine’s list of the “500 Greatest Albums of All Time.”²²

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

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