

**The following interview with
RZA
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on May 4, 2022**



Library of Congress: When did you first know that you had a gift for music?

RZA: Wow! I think I realized it when I knew I had the ear for it. And an “ear for it” means to realize the emotions of music and how it resonated with me: the pain of some music, the aggression of some of it, the smoothing of music. That was my first entry. I had to be no more than four or five years old.

The first time I heard hip hop, I was seven years old. And though I was too young to be at a block party, I was at a block party and I heard the DJ spinning back and forth, and the MC, just saying a few words--simple things--but I was enamored with it and I realized I had to learn to open my ears and open my eyes to this. And I knew hip hop was the love of my life.

LC: For the “36 Chambers” album, I read that you had in-studio “battles” among group members to see who would participate on various tracks. Is this true? And did things ever get ugly?

RZA: Yes [we had them], but it was a friendly competition. I would have either of the artists spit their lyrics and then if they were a fit [for the track], I would have them go into the booth and do their part. And some artists, I cut: they might have put down 20 bars but then I kept just, maybe, four bars. The ones I kept were the most cohesive. It never got ugly but it felt pretty competitive. Our second release off the album, “C.R.E.A.M.,” that started as a studio argument and, finally, I just said, “We’ll put it all on the record and then let the audience decide!”

LC: Much of the album, from what I understand, was produced quickly and without much of a budget. Do you think, in a way, that was an asset to the final product?

RZA: I think it made it greater. The life with pressure and deadlines [it makes you] have to commit. It makes everything you do be out of necessity. Even today, when I’m under pressure, I think it’s when I function at my highest level of output. Also, let me add this, although there was a tight timeline, this was also about a culmination and a revelation of our ideas and of our art and of the creative process—our experience.

You know, the version of “Method Man” on the album was not the original version. We had done it as a demo, playing around with it in the neighborhood. We were so free. I had recorded the track prior, but it wasn’t until the album that we landed on the best version for the album. It was a lot of trial-and-error, but I knew the material I was going to bring into the studio. A first album is a culmination of your life’s work up to that time but we had a lot of talent and we had a lot of pressure but we were ready.

LC: Were you surprised by the commercial and critical response you got to the album and the fact that so many people seemed to “get” what you were saying?

RZA: I won’t say I was surprised, I was thankful. Look—this part will sound egocentric—but during the creation, I knew we were making something special. And that there would be an audience for it. For me, it [the album] didn’t exist and it needed to exist. It felt like we were capturing New York life and youth in a way that had never been exposed before, not the way that “36 Chambers” and Wu were doing it. Old Dirty Bastard and I were always like, “They are going to LOVE it!” They had never had it before, it was like the first time a kid gets candy.

LC: At its core, what is the difference between East Coast and West Coast rap?

RZA: I won’t claim I have the answer to this but the experiencing of the city, city life, are vastly different. With Dr. Dre and Snoop coming from Compton and Long Beach. They are rough and it’s tough growing up but the sun is going to be shining. The majority of the time, even though their neighborhoods are rough, they are still living in a house.

But in New York, Chicago, these project-building cities with thousands of families in a small amount of space, people on all sides, up and down, packed, concrete, that plays out into a different experience. So it’s that experience, [and] you hear it.

One last thing: the diversity of New York and of some other major cities, that is different than it is on the West Coast. I mean they might have Anglo, Latin but [in New York], we have 20 versions of each! New York has so many cultures—the Little Italys... That’s the thing, that’s part of the evolution that exists.

LC: “36 Chambers” has been called the “greatest hip hop album of all time.” What do you think of that?

RZA: I mean,... it’s a great compliment. We did strive to make ourselves great. And, me, as a producer, I wanted to make something great with that... It was like the very first lightbulb, it was very crude but... We definitely wanted to do something to show to the rest of the world. It is a lamppost now: there was nothing before it, but there is after it. And it’s going to inspire so much more. It’s become a marker.