Enter the Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers—reconsidering a hip hop “classic”

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Enter the Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers (1993), the debut album from seminal hip hop group Wu-Tang Clan, has been hailed for nearly a decade and a half by music critics and fans alike as one of the finest albums the genre has ever produced. Given the widespread popularity of this music and the appalling state of most hip hop produced today, it is worth reconsidering this hip hop “classic” which represented something of a landmark in both the music’s development and its decline.

Formed in the New York City borough of Staten Island in the early 1990s, Wu-Tang Clan is notable for consisting of a line-up of nearly a dozen different rappers. Their debut album and the series of solo albums released soon after by the group’s leading members (Method Man, GZA, Raekwon and Ghostface Killah) between 1993 and 1996 took hip hop by storm and epitomized the new, grittier sound that was taking hold at that time.

The late 1980s and early 1990s are widely considered the “golden age” of hip hop music. In the late 1980s artists such as Eric B and Rakim, KRS-One and Big Daddy Kane left their mark with dynamic innovations in storytelling and lyricism, pushing the boundaries of rhyme and delivery in ways that had not been considered technically possible earlier in the decade. These developments were accompanied by innovations in music production in which the sampler played an ever more prominent role and DJs and producers were able to create an increasingly complex collage of musical backdrops.

The lighthearted hip hop of the early 1980s, having evolved from party and dance music, also gave way to a more aggressive and ominous sound, as the work of new musicians began to reflect more and more the bleak prospects and deplorable living conditions facing poor and working class youth in the inner cities.

Often credited for its “sparse” and somewhat off-kilter sound, the production of *Enter The Wu-Tang*, overseen by producer and rapper RZA, was more “raw” than anything that had come before it. The group released 6 singles from the 12-song LP, with the final single “C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me)” being the song that would garner them initial fame and earn them a record deal with the now defunct LOUD Records.

The song’s main musical theme, created with a loop taken from the 1968 Charmels hit “As Long as I’ve Got You,” has become iconic, easily recognizable to many fans of the genre. The piano’s haunting melody, driven along by RZA’s gritty drum programming captures something cold and forlorn about life in New York in the early 1990s.

The low-fidelity production style is complemented by the rappers, whose deliveries feel unpolished and urgent. Their imagery and lyrical content is at times extremely vivid. Whatever one ultimately makes of this music, one *can* get a sense of what so many find appealing in it.

Rapper Inspectah Deck’s lyrics from “C.R.E.A.M.” lament “Life as a shorty shouldn’t be so rough/As the world turned I learned life was Hell/Livin’ in the world no different from a cell.” Rapper Raekwon’s verse begins, famously, “I grew up on the crime side, the New York Times side. Staying alive was no jive ...”

While one finds evocative portraits of life lived in poverty and crime-ridden neighborhoods throughout this album, one also runs up against lyrics such as these, also from “C.R.E.A.M.”: Niggas gots to do what

they gotta do to get a bill." Or these: "No question I would flow off and try and get the dough off, stickin' up white boys on ball courts" and later "Catchin' keys from across seas, Rollin' in MPV's, every week we made forty G's". The rapper doesn't think twice; he simply wants "his." One finds little more in this than the glorification of the most ruthless and obscene backwardness.

If escape from the brutal conditions they have found themselves in is at all possible, these musicians seem to be saying, it's only by becoming as dangerous and savage as those conditions. Their music quickly becomes a glorification of that kind of life. Wu-Tang can paint very vivid portraits of hardship and crime, again, but they have a tendency to glorify, justify or make excuses for such backwardness.

Most songs on *Enter the Wu-Tang* seem to be reduced to braggadocio and/or other forms of anti-social boasting rather quickly. Alongside this, the references to kung fu films—a hallmark of Wu-Tang's music—become tiresome and one-dimensional. Though praised often for the wittiness of some of their lyrics, many of the group members' rhymes only seem to revolve around this or that level of self-aggrandizement.

Wu-Tang created for themselves a hardcore "persona". Rather than exposing the listener to any insight about this social type, they vanish behind it, wear it with pride as if a sort of battle armor were being donned. The outcome is predictable and far from healthy.

Also unpleasant are the many references to the Nation of Gods and Earths, a Black Nationalist tendency that split off from the Nation of Islam in 1964 and had an influence on Wu-Tang and several other hip hop musicians in the 1990s.

The extreme proliferation of religious and racial obscurantism on display leaves a bad taste in one's mouth. Taken to its ugliest forms, in some instances one finds on these albums conspiracy theories built upon race, attacks aimed at abortion as a tool of the "white devil" to wipe out minorities and other deeply reactionary sentiments.

Since their first wave of success in the 1990s, the numerous members of Wu-Tang Clan have gone on to found lucrative clothing lines, begin less than remarkable acting careers and have even had video games modeled after them, in addition to their musical careers. Like so many pop and rap stars today, their names became a brand from which the most money possible has been wrung. Whatever their intentions when they began their musical career, Wu-Tang wound up not a collective of artists, but a business venture. A hustler's mentality permeates too much of it.