Hip hop group Wu-Tang Clan to release “secret” album to highest-paying bidder

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26 June 2014

The decision by well-known rap group Wu-Tang Clan to auction off an album the group secretly recorded to a single bidder for millions of dollars expresses in the most repugnant fashion the integration of the popular music establishment and massive global wealth. The notion that the official hip hop world represents anything “subversive” or “oppositional” is laughable and should be put to rest, once and for all.

Wu-Tang Clan announced the plan in April, indicating that the release of the album would take place in July. The new work, to be named *The Wu: Once Upon a Time in Shaolin*, will be available for listening at “renowned galleries, museums, venues and exhibition spaces around the world” for $30 to $50 per attendee, before being sold to a private bidder.

The project’s mastermind, RZA (Robert Fitzgerald Diggs, born 1969), told *Billboard*, “So far, $5 million is the biggest number [as an offer for the album] … I don’t know how to measure it, but it gives us an idea that what we’re doing is being understood by some. And there are some good peers of mine also, who are very high-ranking in the film business and the music business, sending me a lot of good will. It’s been real positive.” No doubt many major figures in the entertainment business, where unprincipled money-grubbing is a way of life, understand the project very well.

Appropriately, *Forbes* magazine (which regularly lists the richest people in the world and, in fact, has a special photo spread on “Forbes Five: Hip-Hop’s Wealthiest Artists 2014”) sent a reporter to get the facts about the new album.

The May 6 article noted that the album, recorded over the past several years, was soon destined to be housed, under tight security, at the exclusive Royal Mansour hotel in Marrakesh, Morocco (the album was produced by Moroccan-based Tarik “Cilvaringz” Azzougarh).

The *Forbes* correspondent took note of the conditions surrounding the Mansour, “protected by red-and-white sawhorses and a security hut manned around the clock. A few hundred feet beyond, past a clutch of idling Range Rovers and a stand of palm trees helicoptered in from as far away as the ancient city of Fes, a cedar-and-metal gate large enough to fit the fuselage of a jumbo jet guards the Mansour’s front entrance.” Morocco is a desperately poor country, ruled by the autocratic Mohammed VI, backed by a brutal military and secret police.

Of the Mansour itself, writes the *Forbes* reporter, “Built by the King of Morocco at a cost insiders place north of $1 billion, the hotel is actually a collection of 53 smaller riads—mini-mansions that contain their own open-air courtyards, patios, bedrooms, dining rooms and roof decks. Nightly rates at the Mansour range from $2,250 to $50,000, depending on the size of the riad; as such, the guest list routinely contains a mix of billionaires and heads of state. It’s hard to imagine a more regal place for the vessel set to contain Wu-Tang’s album as it awaits its next move.”

Before the album is finally sold to the highest bidder, according to an earlier *Forbes* piece , those fans eager to hear it “will go through heavy security to ensure that recording devices aren’t smuggled in,” adding that, “as an extra precaution, they’ll likely have to listen to the 128-minute album’s 31 songs on headphones provided by the venue.” The album is to be preserved in a hand carved nickel-silver case, designed by British-Moroccan artist Yahya, “whose works have been commissioned by royal families and business leaders around the world,” the article adds.

The justification for the project is equal parts avarice and ignorance. Wu-Tang, on the one hand, seems driven by jealousy over the current prices in the art market. The group’s manifesto begins, “History demonstrates that great musicians such as Beethoven, Mozart and Bach are held in the same high esteem as figures like Picasso,

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Michelangelo and Van Gogh. However, the creative output of today's artists such as The RZA, Kanye West or Dr. Dre, is not valued equally to that of artists like Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst or Jean-Michel Basquiat."

The statement continues, "Is exclusivity versus mass replication really the 50 million dollar difference between a microphone and a paintbrush? Is contemporary art overvalued in an exclusive market, or are musicians undervalued in a profoundly saturated market?" The solution to this supposed problem is to make an album as rare and irreproducible as a van Gogh painting.

The reference to Hirst is especially significant. The British artist-entrepreneur is famous for a series of aesthetically worthless but exorbitantly priced works, including *For the Love of God* (2007), a platinum cast of an 18th century human skull encrusted with 8,601 diamonds, priced at £50 million ($US 85 million). Hirst's net worth was placed at £215 million ($US 365 million) in 2010.

The manifesto argues that "By adopting a 400 year old Renaissance-style approach to music … a new approach [has been] introduced, one where the pride and joy of sharing music with the masses is sacrificed for the benefit of reviving music as a valuable art."

In other words, the group proposes to return to a time when monarchs, nobles and church officials functioned as patrons and commissioned artists to work for them. The social and personal subservience of art to authority and wealth, its "court character," was open and transparent at the time. The Enlightenment and the popular, democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries stand between that period and our own.

Furthermore, the notion that the "value" of a work of art is determined by its price on the market, susceptible to many arbitrary influences, indicates the extent to which these figures have entirely swallowed the defense of the profit system and its workings.

The document concludes by announcing that the release "Simultaneously … launches the private music branch as a new luxury business model for those able to commission musicians to create songs or albums for private collections. It is a fascinating melting pot of art, luxury, revolution and inspiration."

Leaving aside the fact that the manifesto puts the names of Beethoven, Mozart and Bach in the same paragraph as those of The RZA, Kanye West or Dr. Dre, one has to ask: what sort of music can come of this sort of conformist and reactionary endeavor? Certainly nothing that will disturb the sleep of the rich and complacent.

RZA and other artists who follow his lead are placing their genuine talent at the beck and call of the most rapacious and self-absorbed social layers. Far from a "renaissance" in music, their decision reflects the ongoing transformation of present-day cultural life into a playground for the super-rich to enjoy at the expense of the majority.

Wu-Tang's move has understandably upset many of the group's fans, some of whom have started campaigns on the crowd funding website *Kickstarter.com* to buy the album in order to leak it publicly. This sentiment was echoed in statements by Kickstarter's founder Russell Meyer, who said that "we don't want some guy in Dubai who literally has money to burn to buy it as a collector item that only six people will get to listen to."

In the *Once Upon…* project one sees the crassest anti-democratic sentiments and worship of wealth. Such sentiments would not be out of place in the company of individuals such as Oracle owner Larry Ellison, who recently bought up considerable portions of the Hawaiian island of Lanai for several hundred million dollars. No doubt, RZA and likeminded "artist-entrepreneurs," such as rap and "pop" celebrities Kanye West, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter, appeal to this social layer.

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