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Everybody is Talking About the Good Ole Days: RZA on the Soul of Music [EXCLUSIVE SOULHEAD INTERVIEW] @RZA @ErickaBlount

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Everybody is Talking About the Good Ole Days: [RZA](#) on the Soul of Music
by Ericka Blount Danois

If hip-hop tours, white appropriation, anniversary celebrations, books and hip-hop documentaries aren't an indication that hip-hop has reached the status of Beatles-style nostalgia and reverence, then releasing a [Wu-Tang Clan](#) 20th anniversary reunion album, *A Better Tomorrow*, is solid proof that the genre has officially *arrived*.

RZA, always the heart of the operation, worked tirelessly to round up the troops and dissolve beefs for the reunion album that dropped Dec. 2, 2014. "I wanted to make a record that pays homage to soul music and hip-hop," he said about the making of this album. "I went to the past to make something for the future."

RZA came out of his own pockets to fund the album to the tune of half a million dollars. Some of the best in the industry are featured on the album—Rick Rubin, Adrian Younge, David Porter, Kenny Gamble and Rob Cavallo, all had their hands in the pot.

Wu-Tang has always done things big and with vision. RZA led the 9-member group to an unprecedented label deal where each member was able to launch solo records. The deal allowed them to become the most revolutionary rap group of the mid-'90s releasing five group and 19 compilation albums totaling over 6 platinum records and over 40 million sold.

Earlier last year, the group put out another 20th reunion album entitled, *The Wu: Once Upon a Time in Shaolin*, a 128-minute, 31-song, double-album no one has yet heard. The intention was to elevate hip hop back to its art form by making the album a museum show piece. The plan is to sell the only copy. So far, they have received a bid for \$5 million.

In 1997, *Wu Tang Forever* was released and the group unofficially disbanded though they released *The W* in 2000.

From the 80s when three cousins, RZA, GZA and Ol' Dirty Bastard united to form the crews Imperial Masters and All in Together, until today, Wu Tang represents a lot of soul, hip-hop eternal, shaolin, plenty of bongs and the crew that is always about getting Bugs Bunny money.

soulhead.com spoke to RZA about all things Wu:



Q. You guys have always incorporated soul in your albums like Gladys Knight on “Can It All Be So Simple.” I saw the behind the scenes video for this album where you’re talking to David Porter and Kenny Gamble. Were you just getting licensing from them or they were helping with the album?

A. David came to a few sessions in Memphis to add and give his support and his appreciation for what I've done. It's actually great what he did. He validated that what I was doing had a bigger cause than myself and he also pointed out that we had sampled some of his records, whether it was on "Cream" or "I Can't Go to Sleep," he pointed out how it rejuvenated him and his family and he appreciated that and he appreciated that I would actually take the time to come back to those roots. He saw that I took it serious. We had some folks playing on the album from Stax, some from [Hi-Records](#), the guitarist that plays on Love is Teenie Hodge, —he's on this record—and all the organs you heard from Stax they came in. The Memphis horns are on this record and "Never Let Go" and "Ron O Neal". That was with David.

When I went to Philadelphia, my aim was to get some wisdom from **William Hart** and the [Delfonics](#). Wu-Tang always loved the Delfonics. You hear Ghostface rapping over the whole Delfonics songs on some of his production. When I thought about today's times and the music I thought about people who were able to make songs and not only did you groove and dance and have a good time, but it had a social conscious to it. I knew that [Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff](#) were the ones who did that. They always had great songs with great morals. Soul train, love train, get on board the soul train. All the O'Jays stuff. These songs were important to my parents. I remember my mother playing them and feeling good and my grandmother playing them and feeling good. My older aunts playing these songs. I said I am going to go to the source. I didn't want to just sample it. Kenny said we'll get what you need, we'll give you the multi-tracks. He told me to have fun. That's what I strived to do. When I finished the song, "A Better Tomorrow," which uses the song, "Wake Up," I had this multi-track without Teddy's vocals and I'm like, wait a minute. I guess somebody made a mistake on this one. I said let me reach back out to Kenny and get Teddy's vocals and he sent it right to me. To take that record and take that spirit of what he was trying to infuse and to see that its still relevant and prevalent today is amazing. Kenny and I talked for about three hours. He was laughing about the name Wu-Tang and the name [Ghostface Killah](#).

When a man turns 40, it's a different energy in life. I met Kenny before when I was younger. He pointed out to me that the weight is on us now. He pointed out how Moses had to go find himself in his 40s. The prophet Muhammad found his prophethood. He felt and I felt what Wu-

Tang should be on had nothing to do with money. He was like somebody needs to do what you're doing and I'm glad you guys are taking the chance to do it.

Q. Yup, those were the hottest soul labels of the time period—the black sound from Stax and Philly international records—interesting that you chose those for the album.

A. And **Hi Records**. We recorded about 50 percent of the record at **Willie Mitchell's** old studio where all the Hi Records were used.

Q. “Preacher’s Daughter,” “A Better Tomorrow” and “Wu Tang Reunion,” all have a soul sound to it. Then you switch it up with a little bit of rock on “Miracle.”

A. I went to rock on “Miracle” cause I love rock and roll. I grew up hating it. My cousin had a guitar and we thought he was the weirdest dude in the family cause we were into turntables and beat machines and he's coming with his guitar. He was a big **Jimi Hendrix** fan and psychedelic stuff and the Rolling Stones. He was into [Led Zeppelin](#). Listen to Wu Tang's first single where [the GZA](#) says “Protect Ya Neck,” he says, “First of all, who's you're A&R, a mountain climber who plays an electric guitar?” We were anti-that. But I grew to respect all music, because I understand what it means to the musician and I grew to understand what it means to the listener.

Q. What inspired you to do “Miracle”?

A. The idea is it starts off with a [Disney](#) feeling. I spent some time in Malibu writing music for movies and something about Malibu is very uplifting to a musician's spirit. A lot of composers live there. I rented a house and stayed there for awhile and I was getting these kinds of inspirations of very optimistic, joyful, children-inspired-type music was coming to me. When we got the track for “Miracle,” the track was made by Fourth Disciple and we decided to use it. I said I wanted to change the vibe of it and so it started off as if it was Disney.

It was hard rock. He's like it's hard we need this shit, we screaming for it now. That was my vision for that song.

Q. That was a great, timely video for “A Better Tomorrow?”

A. The video wasn't made by us. I don't know if it was somebody on the Warner Brothers staff or a fan. All I know is that the marketing president called me up and said he wanted me to take a look at it and see if I wanted to release it. I saw it and I wanted to make sure some of the images matched the lyrics. Eighty percent of it was done, the kid was inspired to do this. It was right on time and right on point about what we're talking about. I don't remember the kid's name. I spoke to him on the phone. When they sent it to me, I was like this is so on time.

Q. This is your 20th anniversary album and Wu-Tang has made some very smart financial decisions. For this album, you put up a lot of your own money.

A. I spent a lot of money from my own company for this record to get it done and of course, I looked at it as an investment. I was definitely looking for a return on my investment. I don't want to take a total loss.

But to me the gain is what it inspires. There's no money on that.

If your purchase a book on Kennedy, Gandhi, or Malcolm X and you get the book for 20 bucks, but it inspires you, then the 20 bucks was nothing. It's nothing compared to the inspiration and knowledge contained. For hip hop fans, they get a hold of the record and they can listen to "wiggle wiggle" and all these other songs that's out there and have a good time but they take a chance to hear this and it inspires then my mission is accomplished.

Q. You worked with Rick Rubin and Adrian Younge ?

A. Me and Adrian worked two songs on the record together and Rick Rubin collaborated with us on "Ruckus in B Minor." He added that Rick Rubin guitar when Cappadonna comes in that's so cool to me. He spent like 10 days in the studio with that record.

Q. You also worked with Rob Cavallo, son of soul legendary executive Bob Cavallo

A. Rob coming in as an executive really helped me out because he is an executive who is also a producer. I call him my big brother cause he's older than me but he's also a glimpse of what I can become. I'm the kind of person that looks to the world like that. When I met him we hit it off very well and I didn't even know his whole track record. I found out he was the guy that did

Green Day and now he's doing Dave Matthews and other big rock folks. Plus, his father's history with EWF and all of that.

What made it cool for me was that he was a producer that was an executive. A lot of executives in our business are executives and they're not the ones that understand the process of making a record and what takes it to be an artist and to be in the studio at 4 o'clock in the morning. He does and it was nice when I was in that studio until 3 in the morning and most people were tired and Rob was hanging out. He was giving that executive producer support that he knew would push me a little further and I really appreciate his part in being an executive producer on this record. You notice on a lot of Wu-Tang records there's not a lot of executive producers. It's usually me (and) my brother for the last two records. Even Steven Rifkin wasn't credited as an executive producer. He's not a musician. Rob being a producer and being a musician—his presence and some of his advice helped out. On "Miracle" when he first heard it he said, "You surprised me with the Disney intro and then going back to the hardcore. He said on the third time you did it the surprise was over. That's why the third time I took it out and put the gunshots and came back hard with the rock.

He realized that I heard him. After being a movie director I realized that when great things are around you, great people, even the great artists of Wu-Tang, you must be wise enough to utilize that greatness. No spear can tear through anything without the strength of the wood and metal pushing it and I understand that.

Q. You've done a great job holding the group together, it's so rare to have any groups, Black groups in particular, to stay together. What has inspired you to hang in there as a leader?

A. Fortunately I have an older brother named Divine who is behind the scenes with us whenever I lose my faith. Back in the day he went to jail, he was doing crime. He wanted to keep me off the streets. He would save money and buy another drum machine for me trying to keep me off the streets. But when he got locked up I was forced to go on the streets. I stayed in the books, doing the positive thing while he did that. Seven **Wu-Tang** members have been in jail. He's part of us, so when I lose strength he reminds me and all of us of who we are and where we come from. I have genuine love for every member of my group. The best times in my life have been

with this group of men. We have been able to do something that's fucking elemental. When we come together it's something so special about it that I'm always willing to come together.

Let me share something with you that I didn't share with nobody ever. We had a sit down with Minister Louis Farrakhan one day and we did a one-on-one sit down with him. Divine was there too and we wanted to know what can we do. We were separated and going far apart and our 20th anniversary was coming up and we asked him what should we do. We had our business but what should we do about Wu-Tang and the minister said something. He said, "You guys individually have become great, but your greatness is in Wu-Tang. He said what Wu-Tang stands for means more than what you guys mean individually and if you're for the clan you should put what your doing individually to the side because the clan needs more than what you need individually.

That was more fuel to go back and do this. They were like we gotta do another album? I was like we gotta do what we gotta do cause it's bigger than me.

At the end of the day now that it's done. It is what it is. It's complete. It took a long time and I gained some gray hair. I gained some stomach fat from fucking stress. But it's done and I'm back in the gym. I'm getting myself ready for what's next. I feel very satisfied that we completed it. I'm grateful to every Wu-Tang member. I'm glad that they came to complete this album to celebrate our twentieth and give the world another dose of what the Wu-Tang is.

Ericka Blount Danois is a writer, social commentator and hip-hop music officianado. Blount is an award winning writer and author of "Love, Peace and Soul, Behind the Scenes of America's Favorite Dance Show, Soul Train."

Review of *A Better Tomorrow*

Grade: A-

Top Tracks:

40th Street Black/We Will Survive

Wu-Tang Reunion

A Better Tomorrow

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LXwlu1cdvI>

Preacher's Daughter

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WX0mOxn7FSY>

Miracle

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWrUDirNWDY>

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