



LET'S GET

BACK

FOR
THE

FIRST TIME

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After constant delays and an extended hiatus, Wu-Tang's master storyteller **RAEKWON** finally returns with the sequel to his classic debut, *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx...* The question remains, though: Will hip-hop heads finally let him live?

Talk to Raekwon for any amount of time and it becomes apparent why he's called The Chef. Not only does the Wu-Tang Clan lyricist cook up some marvelous narratives to get your mouth watering, he also peppers conversations with a heavy dose of food analogy. Ask how his long-awaited album, *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx... Pt. II*, will be consumed by an audience too young to recall his 1995 original, and he serves up this response: "It's like trying to give a kid a fuckin' chicken salad or something that's better than eating a Big Mac. He gonna look at you like ya crazy, but, at the end of the day, he may respect it and be willing to taste that chicken salad, and be like, 'Damn, this shit is good.'"

Fourteen years ago, business was all good for Wu-Tang, specifically Raekwon. The Wu-Tang's iron flag was flying at full mast, and the first batch of solo albums to drop were all heralded as instant classics, from GZA's *Liquid Swords* to Ghostface Killah's *Ironman*, but especially Raekwon's *OB4CL*, which die-hard fans affectionately refer to as "the purple tape," since the cassette was made out of dark purple plastic. It was also a dealer's reference to labeling his product. The Chef's recipe for success was steeped in vivid criminology raps and RZA's gritty production, which

hip-hop heads ate up like free cheddar biscuits from Red Lobster. While the album positioned Raekwon as one of the game's best storytellers, it also left the lyricist's plate full with the high expectations associated with a classic LP.

Following the platinum success of his solo debut and the Clan's eventful 1997 double album, *Wu-Tang Forever*, Rae returned, in 1999, with *Immobility*. RZA had long been the primary producer for all Wu-affiliated releases, so, in an effort to further build his own identity, Rae sought out new beatmakers for his soph-

small mention, five years earlier, on the inset of *Immobility*, that a follow-up to his classic debut was coming "spring/summer 2000," but nothing more was ever really spoken. Now it was time for the Wu-Tang MC to take it back to the basics. In an effort to satisfy fans' hunger for more, Rae promised that the album would carry on the tradition of the original and include RZA, Ghostface and the rest of the Clan, as well as a few unexpected contributors. Busta Rhymes, whom Rae describes as his motivational coach, would be serving as the

first one on fire, and it's mad years later. To go 'head and focus on something that's Rae's shit and having his man on there like the first time, it's real important. To just give people a chance to get that feelin' back and that creativity—it's a big deal."

While all the pieces were coming together, there was still one major holdup—Raekwon didn't have a record deal. Carefully weighing his options, The Chef finally made a decision this past March, when he signed a distribution deal with EMI Music for his Icewater Inc.,

"I DON'T CONSIDER MYSELF THE AVERAGE RAPPER; I CONSIDER MYSELF AN ICON. I'M FROM AN ICON CREW. I'M WORKING FOR ME THIS TIME."

omore disc. *Immobility* also lacked assistance from *OB4CL* guest star Ghostface Killah, who, at the time of recording, was serving a six-month jail sentence for attempted robbery. Sales of *Immobility* stalled at a respectable but downgraded 431,000 units to date. The lack of overall fan support and mixed reviews were tough pills for Rae to swallow.

"[Critics] kept saying shit like, 'Rae's lyrical content is as strong as ever, and you can tell he's growing as an artist,' but then they come in shootin' me down with, 'RZA ain't make the beats, and Ghostface ain't on it, so that's where the album lacks the luster,'" Raekwon says. "That, I felt, was a disrespect. That hurt my feelings. I ain't even gonna front. I'm always gonna take the good with the bad, but respect creativity."

Signed to Loud Records as a solo artist since 1995, until the label folded in 2002, Raekwon secured a new deal with Universal Records the following year and released his third course, *The Lex Diamond Story*. The LP was a concept album that followed the rise and fall of a fictional mob figure, but even with the lyrical darts, story-arc approach reminiscent of *OB4CL*, and an appearance by Ghostface, only 135,000 copies sold. "I think when I hypnotized y'all with *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx...*, and me and Ghost was really doing what we was doing collectively, people more or less just wanted that world," says Rae of the disappointing response to his second and third efforts. "When I started doing these [solo] albums, a lot of people wasn't looking at it like a nigga growing and still making good music. Sometimes I get frustrated because they tell you they want you to grow, and then when you grow, they say you didn't keep it the way they wanted it to be. You could never satisfy muthafuckas."

Raekwon figured the only way his career could move forward was by taking a step back. In late 2004, he announced that he was focusing on *OB4CL Pt. II*. There had been a

disc's executive producer. Early reports were that the project would be released through Dr. Dre's Aftermath Entertainment, the then-home of Busta Rhymes, but after several months of negotiation, a deal never materialized.

"I knew that Busta wanted [the Aftermath deal] to happen, but it wasn't in his control to make the decisions pop off," explains Rae. "Ain't no bad blood between me and Dre, because I know he had a lot of things to do. But once you can't cater to something that's as strong as *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx... Pt. II*, and I feel like it's not being reciprocated in that way, that makes me uncomfortable... It was a lot of back-and-forth and not enough understanding between the companies, so it never got to paperwork being signed."

For the past four years, many doubted they'd actually ever hear Rae's comeback disc, due to its numerous false starts. Once the Aftermath deal fell through, the Shaolin lyric master was prepared to shop *OB4CL Pt. II* around to different labels, but he put things on hold to focus on Wu-Tang's 2007 reunion project. "I pushed my classic back a year to be involved with this Wu-Tang [*8 Diagrams* album]," he says.

Once his obligations to the Clan were fulfilled, Rae reconnected with RZA to begin sculpting *OB4CL Pt. II*, and that included making sure Ghost, whose musical tastes have evolved from street raps to soul music over the years, delivered exactly the sound fans of the original LP would expect. "If [Ghost] wasn't on *Cuban Linx Pt. II* the way that I needed him up there, there would've been a problem," Rae says. "But he recognizes the power of what this is, and, at the same time, all he's doing is being creative."

"Rae been workin' on the project for a minute, and I been doing albums and all this other shit, so it was all about connecting the dots," says Ghost. "It's a honor, a pleasure [to get back with Raekwon on *OB4CL Pt. II*]. We done set the

including complete ownership of his masters. "With this kinda album, you don't think I wouldn't wanna own the property?" says Rae. "I don't consider myself the average rapper; I consider myself an icon. I'm from an icon crew. I'm working for me this time. A lot of times I would work for the record companies. They would make all the money, and we'd step off with scraps. Now it's the other way around."

With a home for *OB4CL Pt. II* finally in place, Rae amplified his promo run, releasing a pair of mixtapes—*Blood on Chef's Apron* and *Staten Go Hard, Vol. 1*—and whetted fans' appetites with "New Wu," a hypnotic RZA-produced track featuring Ghost and Method Man. He also stepped into the 21st century, bombarding the Internet with viral videos and even using Twitter as a way to update followers on the album's progress.

As for the finished product, *OB4CL Pt. II* delivers on all promises and anticipation. The production—including beats from RZA, Dr. Dre, the late J Dilla and Alchemist—is darker and more pristine than Rae's last two albums. Except for U-God, all living members of Wu-Tang are present, while the non-Wu void left by Nas's classic "Verbal Intercourse" performance on the original *Cuban Linx* is filled efficiently by Beanie Sigel, Jadakiss and Styles P.

After years of setbacks and negative speculation, The Chef will finally get to see if the fruits of his labor have paid off. Despite the hype surrounding this project, though, the living legend isn't worried about record sales and platinum plaques. All Rae wants is the respect of true hip-hop heads. "I know how important this [album] is to hip-hop," he says. "Not so much just as to me, but to hip-hop itself... When you makin' an album like this, you really wanna let everybody know you can do it, and not do it where you rush it and people can feel a rush job. I don't care—it coulda took a year; it coulda took three years. At the end of the day, it's about hittin' the bull's-eye." ♠