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SHAOLIN SECRETS

Backed by his usual army of MCs (minus the late Ol' Dirty), **RZA** forges ahead with seasoned production tricks, recently absorbed music theory and a new-fangled fondness for live instruments

By Wasim Muklashy | Photos by Scott Spellman



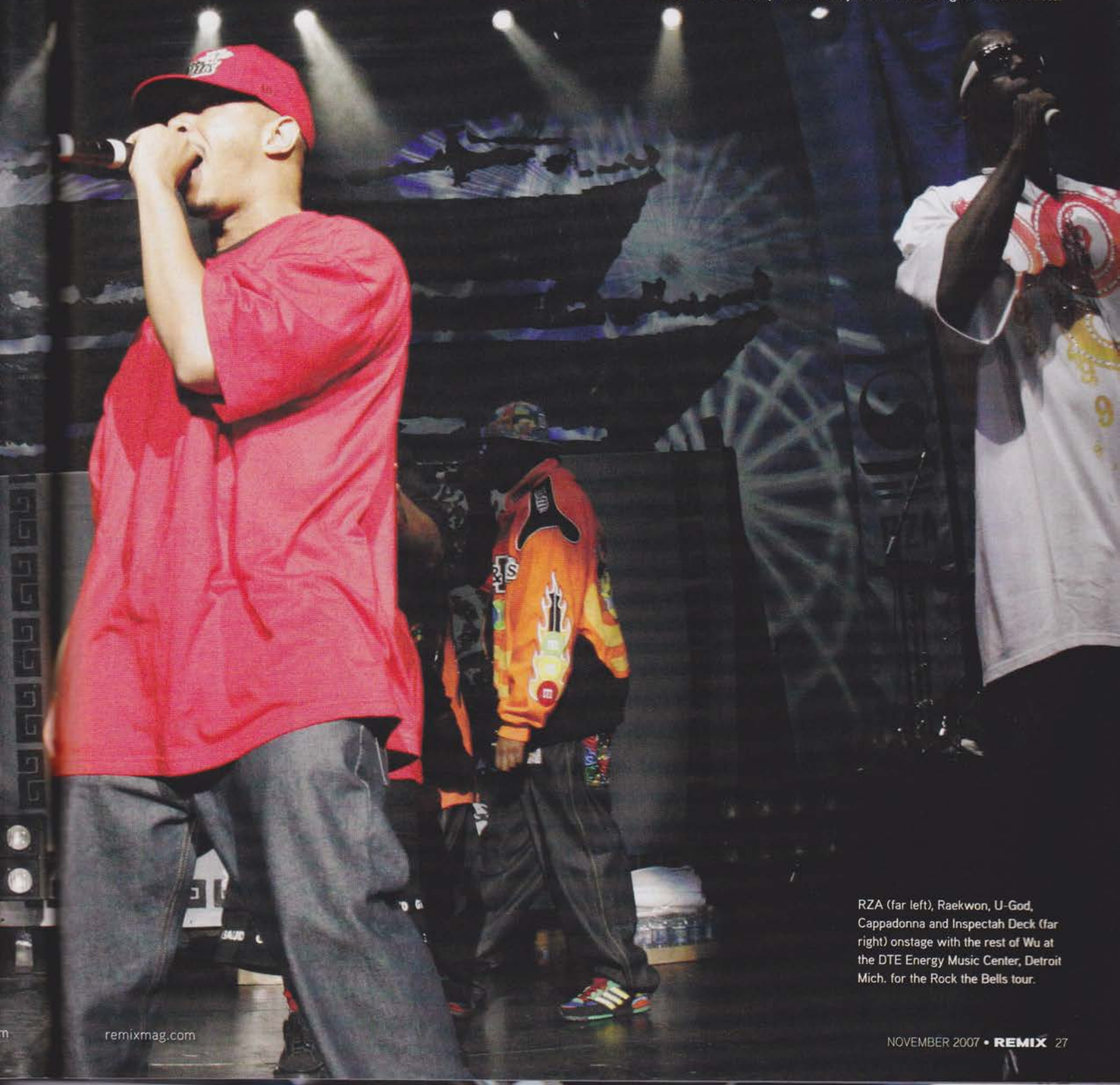
People growing up in this cursed generation ought to consider themselves awfully lucky. Yes, you look at the news, you see the papers, you hear the polar bears cryin', the Middle East bleeding and the religious zealots choking on their own excrement, and it's hard to immediately agree. But consider this: How many generations can rightfully claim being witness to the unlikely birth, rapid rise and glorious apex of one of the world's most influential musical genres?

While hip-hop was gaining credible steam in attempting to prove itself as more than just a passing fad through the '80s, there was a clan of cats from the streets of Staten Island, N.Y. who were honing their craft, paying each others' bail, fine-tuning a style, dodging bullets, stealing electronic equipment, street hustlin' and spiritually evolving all at the same time. They embraced the culture that they lived in, immersed themselves in the movement and locked themselves in a chamber. What they emerged with grabbed the music world by its horns,

turned it upside down and shook the hell out of it until any semblance of doubt fell from its pockets.

Embraced by everyone from computer geeks to Australian pop-rock bands to every hood this side of the prime meridian, Wu-Tang exploded with a five-year plan to take over the hip-hop world—masterfully crafted by its de-facto ringleader Robert Diggs, aka RZA. And the plan worked.

Within the 14 years following the release of its raw and dirty debut masterpiece, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* (RCA, 1993), the Wu managed to build not only a hip-hop supergroup composed of nine of the most talented MCs on the planet but also a multifaceted cross-generational superpersona that has spawned an entire industry. With the successful solo projects of each of its members (not to mention countless affiliates) and an internationally recognized clothing line, video game and comic book, the Wu exploited a wide appeal based on obscure kung fu samples, keen cultural commentaries and an identity dominated by its Shaolin ideologies and references.



RZA (far left), Raekwon, U-God, Cappadonna and Inspectah Deck (far right) onstage with the rest of Wu at the DTE Energy Music Center, Detroit Mich. for the Rock the Bells tour.

KEEP ON MOVING

Following the 2004 death of one of its most unique and celebrated, albeit trouble-prone members, Russell Jones (aka Ol' Dirty Bastard, Unique Ason, Joe Bananas, Dirt McGirt, Dirt Dog, Osirus and, who could forget, Big Baby Jesus), a bit of the air was understandably taken out of the group's sails. But with an insatiable appetite to evolve, RZA corralled the rest of the crew: GZA, U-God, Method Man, Masta Killa, Raekwon, Inspectah Deck and even Ghostface Killah. He also enlisted master wordsmith and former honorary member Cappadonna as an official member. The Wu refocused, realigned and, thankfully, soldiered on.

"It really just took a phone call and an explanation that, 'Yo, it's time for us to do our thing,' and everyone felt the same," RZA says over a heaping plate of Thai spaghetti at Lanna Thai in Sherman Oaks, Calif. "So I went up to New York myself, booked the studio and started the process. We promised this to the people, so now it's time to deliver *The 8 Diagrams*. It's gonna be in their veins."

In between records, RZA added to his arsenal both materialistically and spiritually. Inspectah Deck divulges that there are "well over 1,000 Wu or Wu-affiliated songs," the majority of which RZA has had a leading role in producing. It's this tireless résumé, along with numerous movie scores (among them *Kill Bill Vol.1*, *Afro Samurai* and *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*) and an ever-increasing thirst for knowledge that prepared RZA for *The 8 Diagrams*.

"What I did over these last 10 years, I picked up my first music book," RZA says. "I started studying music theory, and now I've got 10 years in. I know how to play piano on an intermediate level. I know how to play guitar on an intermediate level. Now I know that he went from C to F; he went to B minor and then to A minor. Harmonic progression, that's what I mostly studied. In hip-hop, you don't need melody because the voice and the rhymes are the melody, so you need harmony. That's a secret right there."

OFF-KILTER COOL

An important aspect of RZA's unique production prowess comes not from something he's learned but from something he was born with—an innate ability to trust his own instincts. "If you go listen, I may have a slight off-beatness to my music, and I realize it's *me*," he says. "*Forever* may have been more quality than *36 Chambers*, but it still never met the quality of what Dr. Dre's doing...I still never had that wide-EQ produced quality. I got the same SSL they got, the same big speakers, the same system. I just don't hear it how they hear it. I hear it how I hear it."

"Method Man will vouch for this and Tru Masta will vouch; if you come to my studio session, if you touch one fader after I mix everything, you'll be like, 'That's not on beat.' The only thing keeping it on beat are the levels of where everything is at. You got like 15 things making one sound. I take all these different elements

and make it one tone, but if you move anything, it falls apart like a card-house."

Although some producers will tell you that the rhythm section has to lock together, RZA sees it differently. "Most producers want their bass to hit with their kick," RZA demonstrates with an impromptu beatbox, "but I don't think you need to. The bass can be wherever the fuck it wants to be, as long as it has a space of operation. Sometimes my bass note isn't even the same key as my kick note. A long time ago I realized music isn't only a note and a melody and a harmony, it's also a pulse."

"A lot of people are straight 1, 2, 3, 4," Inspectah Deck chimes in. "They're so formatted, they think the snare has to come *here*. With this dude, the snare may come in on an off-beat, but when it come in, it come in with a smack. It come in and announce itself. That's the difference between him and a lot of other producers. That's why we sound the best when we rhyme with him."

BATTER UP

RZA's certainly come a long way in the 14 years of recording and adjusting to the nuances of 9—and often more—MCs, each with their own subtle quirks requiring different approaches and levels of attention. "In the old days, it was more like I knew whose voice would go on which beat, but over time, everyone's talent has grown and expanded and voices have changed somewhat," RZA says. "In my opinion, no producer ever mixes Ghostface's voice the way I mix his voice."

8 DIAGRAMS OF GEAR

Computer, recording hardware, DAW

Apple Mac G5, Logic
Digidesign Digi 002,
Pro Tools|HD

Samplers, drum machines

Akai MPC4000
Roland MV-8000,
MV-8800

Soft synths, plug-ins

Propellerhead Reason,
ReCycle
Sony Oxford EQ,
Dynamics
McDSP Filterbank
Waves Platinum bundle

Synths, guitar

Gretsch 1961 guitar
Korg Oasys
Roland V-Synth
Yamaha VL7

Console

SSL G Series

Mics

AKG C 12
Neumann U 67, U 87
Shure 55 Unidyne

Mic preamp, EQs,
compressors, effects
dbx 160 compressor
Eventide Harmonizer
3000

Lexicon D-Verb
Neve outboard EQs,
1081 preamp, 9080
compressor
Pultec EQ
SSL onboard EQ

Monitors

Augsburgers with TAD
components
Genelec 1031s
Yamaha NS10s



I always had his voice warmer. A vocal only sleeps between 70 Hz and 10 kHz. Between that range, you got to find that perfect balance for your artist that takes away some of the nasal high, while still keeping the warmth of the mid and a little bottom."

For *8 Diagrams*, RZA used Avalon and Urei preamps, as well as the dbx 160 compressors with Pultec EQs. There's enough to go around. "Each Clan member had his own compressor, so when he came to my house or studio, his compressor was always set to his voice," RZA says. "I had a preset channel that I would never touch."

"Basically, he's the conductor," Inspectah Deck says of RZA, "so all I got to do is give him what I feel was decent to me—my vocals, my ad libs—then I let him seal the deal. I know by the time he's done with it, it's going to sound how it's supposed to sound. It's gonna have that Wu-Tang edge. There's only one RZA."

Being the conductor has its downside, though. It means having to be honest for the sake of the music. And because egos get involved and RZA didn't treat every situation with kid gloves, there's been plenty of tension in the studio. "He'd be like, 'Get the fuck out the booth!'" U-God

reflects. "Next day I'm back in again: 'Get the fuck out the booth!' Next day I'm back in again...it got to a point where it was like 'Motherfuckerrrrrr!' I mean, the last time he kicked me out the booth, I done killed the whole booth, slammed the door, boom boom boom! Went home. But he brought it out of me. He made me go back and correct it and made me perfect my shit. Now, it ain't nothing. He made me a beast."

At one point during lunch at Lanna Thai, RZA shot *Remix* a judgmentally discerning glare before offering, "I don't know if I want to tell anybody...but I'll tell you. I'll tell your magazine only. I recorded the vocals in two to three mics at one time. I put a mic right at the chest, one up close to the throat and one right in front of them," he says. "It's a mess for the engineer. You have like 20 tracks of vocals for Raekwon alone, but I wanted to have a new vocal sound. I wanted to be able to catch a nigga's chest ambience, his throat ambience and maybe his nose ambience."

For this process, he used Neumann U 87s as the main sensor, with AKG C 12s and a Shure 55 Unidyne ("the mic that Elvis used to record his shit," he says), and the positions were slightly altered depending on the MC up to bat.

LAND OF HARDWARE

In addition to using different vocal-recording techniques, the RZA draws a few new pieces of gear, among them the Roland MV-8800 drum machine. "I had a lot of beats already on the 8000 because I had the 8000 for almost three years now," he says, "but the 8800 I had for a couple of months, and it had some hot new kicks and some hot new sounds in it that I wanted to use. With the MVs, you can record the vocals right into there and do a whole song... mix it, master it and put it out."

RZA also uses the Roland V-Synth quite a bit. "You can actually plug anything through it so you

can make your whole beat and put it into the V-Synth and elastically stretch it out," he says. "Just plug into a MIDI keyboard or plug a mic directly into it and do your hooks and alter the sound or add an extra voice on top of the chorus. It's also like a vocoder. It has great vocal cards in it, so you can have the flute sound like a vocal."

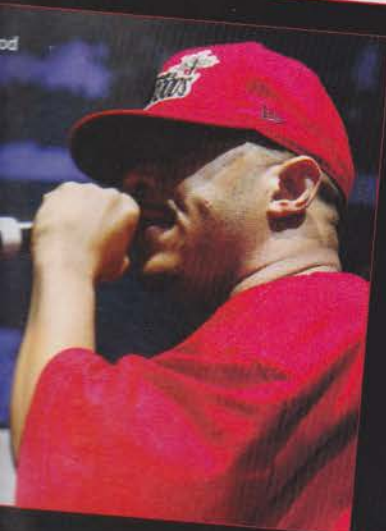
If you've seen RZA's mug in the Roland ads lately, you'll know that he's got a little sponsorship love from them, but he wasn't always a believer. "I've been using more Roland, but I actually hated Roland growing up. To me, their equipment wasn't user friendly...their interface wasn't proper, but now, I think they got it. Also, now I'm smarter, so I can figure it out."

The most expensive keyboard kit used on *8 Diagrams* was a Korg Oasys, on a track called "Tar Pits." "I made a beat that I liked and recorded my guitar directly into the Oasys," RZA says. "I could be programming beats and have a live sound all coming out of one thing. Also, the preamps inside the Oasys are much better than the preamps in the Digi 002. Sometimes I even dump the MV tracks into the Oasys because it has a better preamp."

Meanwhile, RZA also found himself pulling out older gems such as the Yamaha VL7. "If you plug it into an MPC, for some reason, MPC modulation causes all the notes to stutter, so it sounds like an Isaac Hayes type of delay, which I actually discovered accidentally, but once I found it, I ran with it. I did recently bring out the VL7 for this album for a song called 'Wolves.' I used it for the horns, and it has one of these kinds of flute synths."

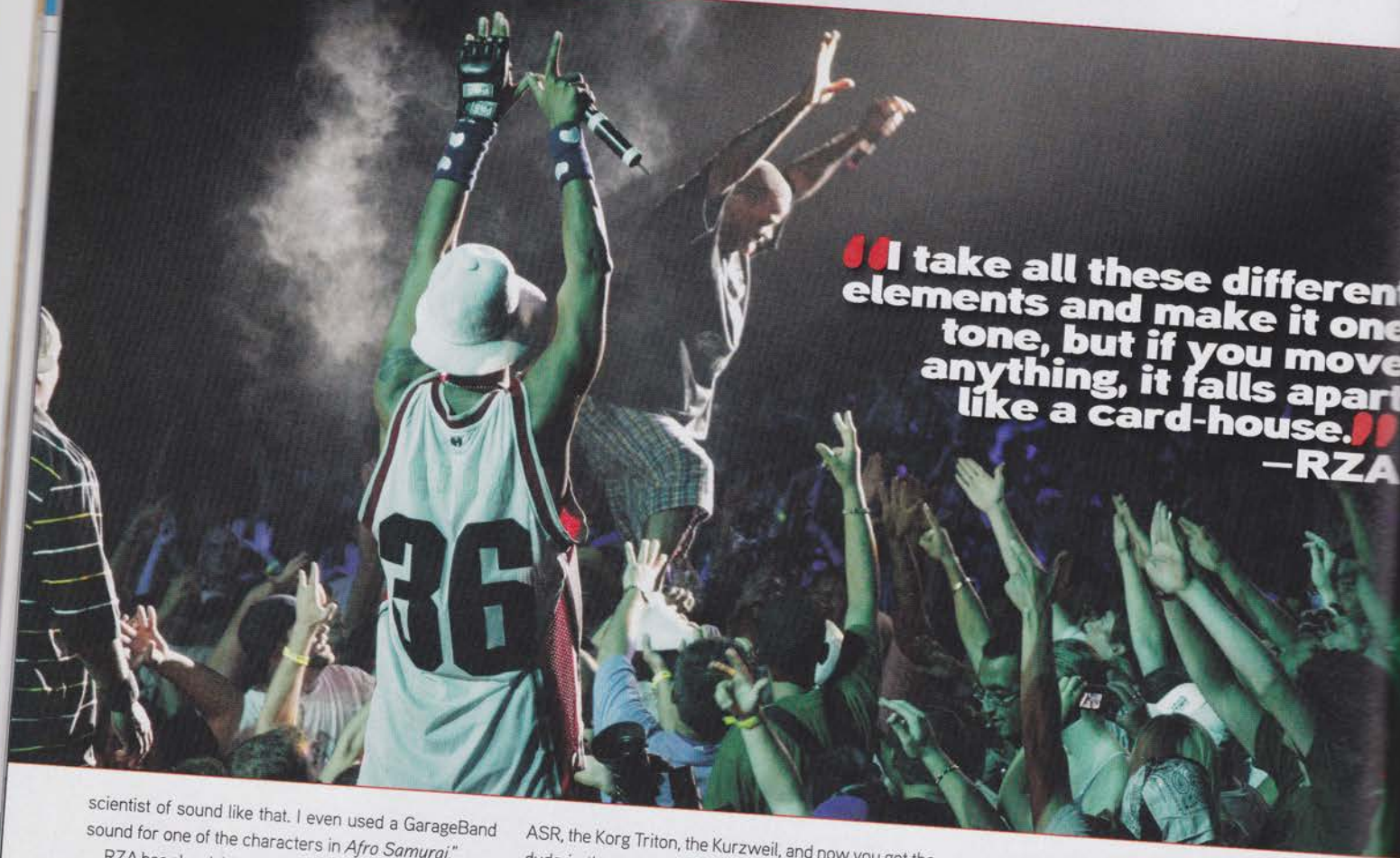
TRIFECTA OF SOUND

A guy like RZA can afford any piece of equipment he desires, but it's not always what he thinks he needs; it's what is readily at his fingertips. While the majority of the production process employs Pro Tools, RZA uses it all because "I'm just a



Ghostface Killah





“I take all these different elements and make it one tone, but if you move anything, it falls apart like a card-house.”
—RZA

scientist of sound like that. I even used a GarageBand sound for one of the characters in *Afro Samurai*.”

RZA has also dabbled in Apple’s more pro DAW, Logic. “George Clinton came in and bugged out, and I was like, ‘You know what? There’re a few good bass loops in Logic that we can drag-and-drop, and I’ll just take out some of the notes, but the sonics are going to sound good.’ So I started the session in Logic. We started smoking some weed, started getting into the groove, and to switch back over to Pro Tools was going to take a minute. I already had a spirit going on, so I wound up recording the song ‘Land of My Dreams’ in Logic, which I didn’t know I was going to do for this album.”

While the grimy, gritty and we-like-it-raw style still provides the foundation of everything Wu, the most surprising and unexpected element of *8 Diagrams* was RZA’s decision to use live instruments for the first time. “He’s redeveloped his skin,” U-God offers matter-of-factly. “That’s what basically everything is. You got to shed skin and redevelop. RZA surprises me every time because right when you think he ain’t got nothing, you swear he ain’t got nothing, he *got* something.”

“It was something I wasn’t used to back in the early Wu-Tang days, but since I have become a Hollywood composer, I had a chance to work with 80-piece orchestras,” RZA says. “So now I know. It’s actually something I’ve always wanted to do...to put those two worlds together.”

Inspectah concurs that the timing was right: “I think that’s a brilliant idea in 2007. With a live band, mixed with certain samples, it gives it a classic sound, but more up-to-date, more crisp, more clean. It’s crazy, man: I’m from the school where he’s on the [Ensoniq]

ASR, the Korg Triton, the Kurzweil, and now you got the dude in there hittin’ the violin strings at 100 mph, you got the dude on the drums—it’s different.”

This is evidenced best in what is possibly the biggest “WTF?!” on *The 8 Diagrams*: the group’s cover of The Beatles’ “While My Guitar Gently Weeps.” RZA, the last person you’d expect to ride the Yellow Submarine, can’t hold back: “I love it! I love the progression; I love the five chords they’re using up and down. I always wanted to record that song.”

The story goes a little something like this: A music executive friend of his told RZA that not only was it one of the few songs George Harrison wrote, but that he personally knew Dhani Harrison, George’s son. So “I get on the phone with Dhani, and not only does he know all the Wu-Tang songs, he knows the samples of the kung fu movies that I use,” RZA marvels. “So we had a chance to eat, meet, hang and I just said, ‘Yo, I want to do this song, and I want you to play acoustic on it. I already got John Frusciante to play lead guitar. And when I finished doing *American Gangster* last year, as a wrap gift, Russell Crowe gave me a 1961 Gretsch guitar—mint condition. So I told Dhani, ‘I want you to come in and play acoustic guitar on the song, but I want you to play on the Gretsch.’ Eight months later, we did it.” Employing an army of Fender and Line 6 amps, producer George Drakoulis (The Cult, The Black Crowes, Tom Petty) stepped in to support, and RZA got Ghostface, Method Man and Raekwon to do verses.

“I think I did good job of incorporating electronic hardware, software and live instruments on this album, and that’s a war,” RZA insists. “The software people act like you don’t need hardware, and the hardware

people act like you don’t need instruments, and musicians don’t like all that electronic shit because it takes away their jobs.”

THE STAGE AND BEYOND

Once the toils of production come to a close, the cathartic experience of the live show enters the picture. When you walk in and see 60,000 W’s up in the air, you know it’s going down. And surprisingly enough, there’s not much more on the stage than a posse of killa bees, their mics and a modest DJ setup. In addition to two Pioneer CDJs and two Technics turntables, DJ Mathematics uses a Rane TTM 56 mixer and 360 Systems Instant Replay, a device with hot keys that enables on-the-fly instant playback of sound effects.

“Basically, when we do a show, it’s the instrumentals from the albums,” Mathematics says, referring to the 100-plus instrumentals he juggles throughout a show. “Some of them I do certain things to; I may add an intro or a little breakdown or make beats to try to beef some of them up with an 808 or some hats, but basically it’s the instrumentals.”

Fortunately, with RZA constantly changing things up in the studio, Mathematics can easily distinguish track from track as he supports the MCs onstage. “One thing that may not be a good thing about the RZA,” RZA says modestly, “is that I strive not to repeat myself.” But his Wu-Tang brethren have his back.

“Sometimes it takes a minute to hear what he got,” U-God emphasizes. “Sometimes you got to have an ear for the future. Like, right now it’s 2007. He got shit in stash for 2012.” You heard it, Wu fans—stay tuned for the next five-year plan. 