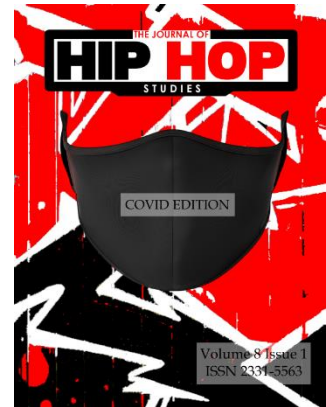


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Marcus Smalls

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Clan in Da Front - Wu-Tang: An American Saga Review

Marcus Smalls

@MarcusSmalls is a Teaching Artist and writer who uses his lifelong love of Hip Hop to moderate creative environments around spirituality and identity. He has been a writer in residence at *Teachers & Writers Collaborative* and a WritersCorps fellow at *Bronx Council on the Arts* and is the recipient of the 2021 St. Luke's Alumni Artistic Achievement Award. Marcus has workshopped with award winning authors, M. Evelina Galang at *VONA/Voices* in 2015 and A. Naomi Jackson in *Catapult's Master Class* in 2017. Marcus is currently featured on The MixTape Museum website. Marcus is a Teaching Artist for the *Brooklyn Academy of Music* (BAM) and is currently querying Literary Agents for his debut novel, *The Divine Sinner Chronicles*.

"Protect Ya Neck"- RZA

May '93: My initial introduction to a Wu Tang chamber. I was a twenty-one-year-old "student," locked away in rural Pennsylvania at the Teen Challenge Training Center. I was frustrated and shuttled far from home because of my poor lifestyle choices and listening to a small contraband radio while folding shirts. The Wu Tang Clan, much like the young men I was locked away with, were so entrenched in their real lives that public perception mattered little. They only wanted to climb out of their abyss of the Shaolin Slums.¹ What the outside world thought was cool did not exist inside Wu-Tang's slang rap democracy, but their combined experiences would dictate the styles and trends for most of the '90s decade and beyond.

Hip Hop, like all other cultural production, is experiential. And also like every other culture, Hip Hop has foundational elements that guide this experience. Knowledge of Self, which is the ability to understand and articulate your experience, is paramount. One should be able to interact with the culture like a mirror or timestamp of personal development. Not so much as a gauge of what we used to listen to in the '90s compared to what we listen to now. But more like, I remember when. Through lyrics and music videos, I can trace almost all of my most memorable experiences via these cultural timelines. I remember exactly where I was and who I was with when I first saw the "Method Man" video on *Video Music Box*. Hip Hop Culture is an outward signifier that cannot be taken off for convenience. It is the very image of who I am and how I experience and express myself.

¹ Shaolin Slums is another Wu Tang name for Staten Island.

The aspirational elements of Hip Hop Culture are often dismissed by those who've already gained certain levels of success or status. But for most within the Culture,² this aspirational aesthetic is of the utmost importance in the representation of self. 'I am here but one day I will be someplace else' is fundamental to the Culture and all its expressions. The journey of who we are, where we come from and where we are going are continually woven through every Hip Hop Cultural narrative, from our style of dress to our speech and worldview, each is an expression of our hope, dreams, and aspirations. Hip Hop lyrics are extremely important to us as listeners. They're the equivalent of a preacher's sermon to a faithful congregation. To paraphrase rapper and producer Talib Kweli, "We relate to rap N*ggas because they writing what we felt." Wu Tang lyrics are vividly mapped out in their origin story, *Wu-Tang: An American Saga*. Mirroring the opening panels of a comic book, these introductory scenes provide thought-bubble like insight and reasoning into the word choice and worldview of each Dennis David Coles, professionally known as Clan MC. Ghost, and Corey Woods, professionally known as Rae, lyrically speak in what almost seems like a different language. Their words are seasoned with the broth of coded language. They each described death merchant activities so extreme they required an intricate method of lyrical expression.

"Peace to Power and my whole unit"- Raekwon

In the premier episode, "Can It Be All So Simple," we are given the visual foundations of the Wu origin story. We are introduced to RZA working on the beginning stages of the song, "Clan in da Front," his present practice to change an unpredictable future. The viewers are welcomed by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)³ signage to Park Hill projects which is scratched out to reread "Killer Hill" and we are quickly ushered to the block with scenes of crack dealing. We are introduced to the Clan's main obstacle as a music group, Power, as he is overseeing the corner work. The Wu Tang documentary, *Of Mics & Men* goes a long way to explaining the nature of the power struggle between Power, Ghost, Raekwon, Divine, and RZA. It's important to watch this Showtime documentary, to better understand Power and Divine and the foundational reality of pain and dysfunction this fictional narrative is built around.

² Editorial note: Due to the author's identity as Hip Hop, a part of the Hip Hop culture and an emcee, the *Journal* decided to maintain the author's integrity and leave Culture capitalized.

³ The New York City Housing Authority is a New York State public development corporation which provides public housing in New York City. It was the first agency in the United States to provide housing for low- and moderate-income residents throughout the five boroughs of New York City.

Wu-Tang: An American Saga was created by RZA and Alex Tse, and premiered on September 4, 2019, on Hulu. It patiently orchestrates the environment for us, constructing the circumstances that created the urgency within their creativity. We meet Raekwon, referred to as Sha, throughout the show, as a nod to his full Five Percent Nation name, Shallah Raekwon, as he is passing RZA's house on the way to Stapleton Houses to kill Ghostface. We meet Ghostface as he is feeding his two younger brothers he referenced on "All That I Got is You" from his own classic debut, *Ironman*. That song includes the same Papa Wu shown throughout the show speaking Five Percent Nation wisdom that forces Ghostface to begrudgingly consider his place in this world while he (Ghost) is selling weed in Battery Park to Wall Street white boys. When Raekwon stashes the gun he just attempted to murder Ghostface with, we are given the complicated underpinnings needed to introduce the Wu Tang origin story. Even the opening credits wash you with visuals from every corner of Wu's creative influences. *Wu-Tang: An American Saga* is filled with easter eggs for all the true Wu believers.

Episode two is named after one of my all-time favorite Wu songs, "Winter Warz," another classic from Ghostface's *Ironman* (1996) debut. It opens with an overhead shot of Staten Island into the back of the Stapleton Houses housing project, which looked almost like an actual jungle, then quickly shifts to the Park Hill side with a thriving African community which is controlled by the underworld. Power's conversation with Raekwon reveals Power as a cut-throat opportunist who is an extremely wise and knowledgeable hustler. He is one who is willing to share enough of what he knows but never enough to liberate in the moment. An origin story about a ten-member group will already come with a large cast, so storytelling concessions must be made to stay on task. The Shurrie character is a composite of RZA's three sisters. The story arc shows in detail how important his sisters were to his family and a later episode is dedicated to showing us this same world through Shurrie's eyes. I'm not sure if Haze is a composite character but he is one of the most interesting. His character has the presence of story. A portrayal that carries the weight of responsibility survivors carry in order to tell the story of those that didn't make it out. Though Haze has a connection to most of the main characters, his deepest is with Meth. They share a deep brotherly bond.

Haze never attempts to recruit Meth into the game. Instead, he is more of a mentor and a well-respected voice of reason. Reminding Meth of his gifts and the ability of that gift to change the trajectory of Meth's life. Everyone knows or knew some like Haze while growing up. That person who had the leadership ability to encourage others to be the best version of themselves. Even while doing something so destructive to the community as selling drugs. Haze's military training gave him the ability to navigate the dangers of the drug industry. But not the respect needed from local law enforcement to see his life as valuable. This episode also continues the arc of Rae and

Ghost's attempted murder beef, which finds new and inventive ways to keep RZA caught in-between Raekwon his childhood friend and Ghostface, a dude who is literally like a brother. The situation boils over when Raekwon finds out that Ghostface found his gun and now intends to murder Raekwon with it. The writers use another clever Wu easter egg with a reference quote from the *Cuban Linx* album skit about the "Killa Tape" during the argument over the gun.

*"Call an ambulance, Jamie been shot, word to Kimmy
 Don't go, son, nigga, you my motherfucking heart
 Stay still, son, don't move, just think about Keeba
 She'll be three in January, your young God needs ya
 The ambulance is takin' too long
 Everybody get the fuck back, excuse me, bitch, gimme your jack
 1-7-1-8, 9-1-1, low battery, damn
 Blood comin' out his mouth, he bleedin' badly
 Nahhh, Jamie, don't start that shit
 Keep your head up, if you escape hell, we gettin' fucked up" – Ghostface*

As a group, Wu-Tang has always musically represented the struggle. Their music is filled with pain and loss and the allure of the streets as pure necessity. The quest for material possessions while understanding that only the outer shell will upgrade. Never grasping the peace that possessions advertised. Jah Son embodies the magnetism of the hunt and the consequences of being one-of-a-kind-fly. Jah Son lives the life within the life. The stick-up kid with the throbbing sweet tooth: Jah Son is a cat who takes it simply to rock it. The Omar and Michael characters from the critically acclaimed and universally loved show, *The Wire*, are probably our most celebrated stick-up kids, but Jah Son's comedic timing make him just as memorable. This episode also employs animation whenever drug dealing is happening to show Ghostface and Bobby Digital as their larger-than-life alter egos from wax. This seems like not only a wise use of budget, but it also highlights Wu's love of comic book mythology while passing on glorifying the age-old act of street corner drug dealing. When Divine gets locked up, we're given another Wu easter egg when Cappadonna aggressively reintroduces himself to Divine by spitting bars that become part of his verse from "Winter Warz." I love that RZA added the story of Easy Moe Bee copping the last SP1200, which left him with the floor model and no manual. This scene highlights his self-determination and drive to recreate his reality. The responsibility to self-teach took away from his time in the streets and reminds the viewer that even though Ghostface and Raekwon come across as street dudes who don't want to be MC's, RZA and Method Man are MC's who definitely don't want to be street dudes.

RZA's dedication to the craft and not the street game comes with disastrous results which once again put Raekwon in the middle of some serious life and death choices. Many of us who came of age during the same decades as the Wu understand the clash of living under the roof of Bible-believing parents and how those lifestyle clashes can have disastrous results during our most vulnerable time of human development. These clashes inevitably hit when we feel we're stable enough to guide our own ships but lack the vision for proper navigation. This same clash leaves Raekwon sleeping in vulnerable spaces.

"All That I Got is You" is probably the most difficult episode to watch because it reminds us with sharp detail of the debilitating grip and power the racist Italian mafia had over the lives of the characters on Staten Island. Combined with the "Cold World" episode it gives the Jerome character an opportunity to become very important in sustaining the narrative. Jerome's reappearance rescues the family from a fate at the willing hands of the sadistically cruel and racist mafia. It's not only important to see a Black father figure care deeply about the welfare of his family, but it was equally refreshing to see actor Bokeem Woodbine play a well-adjusted man with some regular people's baggage. The combination of characters he's played in the past and the unreliable Black father storyline arc leaves the viewer with the feeling he might do something crazy and damaging each time he is on the screen. These episodes explain how the Ghostface and Shurrie love affair blossoms, as well as revealing the catalytic actions by Ghostface that started the beef with Power and Raekwon. When Power hits Raekwon off with a Benz, the first person he wants to chill with is RZA, but RZA instead attempts to recruit him again to spit over the sample that becomes "Criminology" on *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*. Once again allowing the story to show the aspirational determination of Hip Hop to transform one's circumstances through creative forces. This scene is reinforced by the introduction of oratory from Papa Wu, which brings balance to the equation. The power of his message and what it meant to the life of young Black men lost in the scramble cannot be overstated. This sentiment is again layered and shows in great detail the tangled trajectory of the lives in the hood. The episode "Impossible" deals with the killing of Haze from a choke hold by the NYPD officer who grew up with them. As the son of the lady who called the police in the first place, it shows the inverse relationships our communities have always had with justice. That Haze as a known drug dealer had a better relationship with the hood than the NYPD officer and his mother is a familiar reality. Most true Wu believers had no idea how deep Method Man's love is for lacrosse. The next episode, "Box in Hand," gives insight into how Meth was raised and shines a light on why he was such a reluctant breakout super star during the Clan's early years. We are shown the outcome from the constant theme of "tough love" given to Black kids because of respectability politics and how young Black life is consistently compromised because of such views

and misguided pursuit of standard. Meth's rocky relationship with family members who didn't appreciate his need to live in their space predictably creates subsequent anger issues, which jam up his quest for self-betterment. These scenes remind us why we love Wu so much. We understand the emotional wounds caused by hubris and false piety and we also understand the poor decision-making process that follows. Even while life-altering opportunities were brewing Meth was still couch surfing, bringing further uncertainty to his living situation, mental stability, and professional opportunities. The thought that RZA might move to Ohio with his family as everything seems to be in motion brings on once again the potential of lost connectivity. Even before his journey to find Knowledge of Self, RZA showed an understanding about the importance of community and the power of unity.

Even as we watch RZA's solo career begin as Prince Rakeem, complete with the music video as an outro for the episode, he is constantly reminding management and the label that he not only produces but has a stable of hungry MC's. Crew is a prerequisite for the Hip Hop journey, it reinforces our views on success and our understanding of the need for connectivity. Though independent thought is needed, total disconnect is not. Disconnect only breeds resentment and resentment is fertile soil for danger. But we do not choose connectivity out of fear but from a sense of wanting to see true and prosperous development from our community. This is illustrated as the three cousins, RZA, GZA, and ODB begin their journey into the music business together. A collective journey for independence. But the joyous freedom touring provided as a break from the dismal reality of Staten Island and Brooklyn is quickly canceled by the business side of music. Frustrated by the second-class treatment from management, RZA gives more attention to his path towards righteousness. As he begins to attain more knowledge of self, his creative windows become a mosaic of inspiration. At every turn, RZA hears sounds and beats and lyrics.

In the episode "I Declare War," we are introduced to Atilla. His story arc contains several other real-life situations, which gives him the feeling of a composite. What is crystal clear is the level of danger and destruction Atilla brings on screen. He is the embodiment of the dangers that come with any level of success to those living in the hood. Even if the success is only a rumor. Just the hint of upward mobility instantly puts RZA's life in danger. Atilla also represents the lure of extortion that always follows rap artists. Simply combine the industry-mandated menace-to-society image with neighborhood history and let the contempt ensue. Atilla also represents the extreme situations we can find ourselves in during our quest for betterment. The options to resolve the situation often seem as dire as RZA's did. While the Atilla situation is at its height, Divine is beginning to spend his down time at work self-educating in the world of business. It is this self-investment in the midst of chaos that becomes the foundation for the Wu Tang business model. The evidence of positive self-investment. It seems

however as if Raekwon, Ghostface, and Method Man are drifting further away from making Wu Tang a reality. Raekwon's near miss when Cressy gets raided only gave Power more of a stronghold. That Cressy was preparing contracts to sign Raekwon only provides more evidence for Power to remind him this rapping thing is only a dream. One of my favorite portions of the show is when Ghostface is watching and reimagining the *Wu Tang vs. Shaolin* fight scenes from the movie. These scenes are a wonderful homage to the way stories are retold in the Culture of Hip Hop. There is never a straight telling of the story but a recreation and reenactment to bring the salient points the narrator deems important. Cipher storytelling is always animated and exaggerated, filled with ad-libs and add-ons. The art of competent storytelling is required if you decide to step up and tell it. If not, you will be quickly informed of what your story is lacking. Ghostface has his come-to-Jesus moment while watching these movies and is ready to follow through with the inspiration of the Wu Tang and the Shaolin becoming dangerous by combining their talents. "Assassination Day" is a musical treat for the true Wu Believer. It features the recording of *Wu-Tang: 7th Chamber* and positions it in the story as the first track created. Wu history teaches us that *Tearz* was really the first song recorded. But the visual of each MC spitting his verse attempting to best the prior MC in friendly competition is absolutely amazing. With the highlight being Raekwon spitting the lyrics he wrote on the back of a cereal box, a symbol of the hunger. Each verse is given enough light for you to rap along in total Wu Tang delight.

The other equally important theme is the character of Tonya as the bridge between the music industry and what the streets really want to hear. She instantly understands what is important about this new sound. Tonya's quest for pure boom bap is a head nod to the magnitude of contributions by women in Hip Hop. Nobody knew what it was until Tonya told them what it was.

We live in a time when most of our lived history is now depicted in memes, GIFs, and Twitter posts, so the reality of what the world was really like in the '90s for young Black teenagers is lost on many. The show gives us the visual foundations of the Wu origin story. The creative energy of the '90s is woven through the visual texture of the show and pushes back against the continual reshaping of lived history by people who didn't actually live it. The second season will reportedly focus on the recording of *36 Chambers* album, which will provide an amazing opportunity for the story telling of the Wu Tang artistic process. History hasn't been kind to the record executives that missed on Wu Tang. But the show decides to take a different route. By simply allowing history to guide the viewer, we can see how easy it was for the industry to have absolutely no idea how to package The Wu. But thankfully, Wu Tang Clan ain't nothin to fuck wit...