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Why Wu-Tang Will Release Just One Copy Of Its Secret Album

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The Wu-Tang Clan will sell only one copy of its secret album, which currently resides in a handcrafted silver box in Morocco.

Somewhere on the outskirts of Marrakech, Morocco, inside a vault housed beneath the shadow of the Atlas Mountains, there sits an engraved silver-and-nickel box with the potential to spawn a shift in the way music is consumed and monetized.

The lustrous container was handcrafted over the course of three months by British-Moroccan artist [Yahya](#), whose works have been commissioned by royal families and business leaders around the world. Soon, it will contain a different sort of art piece: the Wu-Tang Clan's double-album [The Wu – Once Upon A Time In Shaolin](#), recorded in secret over the past few years.

Like the work of a master Impressionist, it will truly be one-of-a-kind—in lieu of a traditional major label or independent launch, the iconic hip-hop collective will make and sell just one copy of the album. And similar to a Monet or a Degas, the price tag will be a multimillion-dollar figure.

"We're about to sell an album like nobody else sold it before," says Robert "RZA" Diggs, the first Wu-Tang member to speak on record about *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin*, in an exclusive interview with FORBES. "We're about to put out a piece of art like nobody else has done in the history of [modern] music. We're making a single-sale collector's item. This is like somebody having the scepter of an Egyptian king." [Twitter](#)

Wu-Tang's aim is to use the album as a springboard for the reconsideration of music as art, hoping the approach will help restore it to a place alongside great visual works—and create a shift in the music business, not to mention earn some cash, in the process. The one-of-a-kind launch will be a separate endeavor from the group's 20th anniversary album, *A Better Tomorrow*, which is set for a standard commercial release this summer.

According to RZA and the album's main producer Tarik "Cilvaringz" Azzougarh, a Morocco-based part of Wu-Tang's extended family, the plan is to first take *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin* on a "tour" through museums, galleries, festivals and the like. Just like a high-profile exhibit at a major institution, there will be a cost to attend, likely in the \$30-\$50 range.

Visitors will go through heavy security to ensure that recording devices aren't smuggled in; as an extra precaution, they'll likely have to listen to the 128-minute album's 31 songs on headphones provided by the venue. As Cilvaringz puts it: "One leak of this thing nullifies the entire concept."

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Though no exhibition dates have been finalized, Cilvaringz says Wu-Tang has been in discussions with a bevy of possible locations, including the Tate Modern (a representative from the institution did not respond to a request for comment). Other venues, including art galleries and listening tents at music festivals, could eventually round out the tour.

Once the album completes its excursion, Wu-Tang will make it available for purchase for a price "in the millions." Suitors could include brands willing to shell out for cool points and free publicity (just as Samsung [spent \\$5 million to buy copies of Jay Z's latest album for its users](#)) or major record labels hoping to launch the album through the usual channels (they're used to paying top acts seven-figure advances).

There's also the possibility that a wealthy private citizen could buy it and either keep the album or release it to the public for free in the name of democratizing a cultural artifact. That's essentially what clothing mogul Mark Ecko did by [purchasing](#) Barry Bonds' 756th home run ball for \$752,467 and conducting a plebiscite to determine if he should blast it into outer space, send it to the Hall of Fame unblemished, or brand it with an asterisk (he eventually did the latter and sent it to Cooperstown).

"The idea that music is art has been something we advocated for years," says RZA. "And yet it doesn't receive the same treatment as art in the sense of the value of what it is, especially nowadays when it's been devalued and diminished to almost the point that it has to be given away for free."

Once Upon A Time In Shaolin's origins date back to 1997, while Wu-Tang was on tour in Europe. At one show in Amsterdam, the group allowed a few of the fans to hop up on the stage—and one of them happened to be Cilvaringz, then an 18-year-old just beginning to study entertainment law and music management.

"I recognized his energy," says RZA. "There was something about him different from the rest of the audience."

Cilvaringz kept in touch with the producer and even took the step of traveling to New York with friends to try and arrange a meeting, only to find that RZA was too busy to sit down with him. But when the Wu-Tang star's mother met Cilvaringz hanging around the office, she was so impressed by his demeanor that she contacted her son and urged him to make time.

RZA did exactly that, and found himself even more knocked out by the up-and-comer than he'd been in Amsterdam, urging him to go back to school and continue learning about the music business. He soon became a mentor to Cilvaringz, showing him the ropes of production and the industry itself.

By the late 2000s, RZA and the rest of the Wu-Tang Clan were ready to start working on the project that would become *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin*. Cilvaringz's aim as producer was to create an album with a vintage Wu-Tang sound, the same one that drew him to the concert in Amsterdam a decade earlier.

The group was no stranger to collaborations with international artists like IAM, the French hip-hop group that collaborated on the 1997 track "[La Saga](#)" with members of the Wu-Tang Clan. The song features two verses in English, two in French, and shoutouts to cities from Medina to Marseilles.

So it wasn't much of a stretch for Wu-Tang to work with Cilvaringz, who'd subsequently relocated to Marrakech, for *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin*. The pieces slowly fell into place, with the group's original members agreeing to participate alongside few special guests. The lengthy leadup gave him plenty of time to think about how to ensure a lasting impact for the album.

"It took a long time," says Cilvaringz. "After five years, I'm sitting here and I'm like, 'Am I really going to release this record and see it die after a week?'"

That sentiment led him, along with RZA, to come up with the one-copy concept. After watching Jay Z debut his album in partnership with Samsung last summer—and [buy 100 copies of Nipsey Hussle's \\$100 mixtape](#)—Cilvaringz and his Wu-Tang compatriots had something resembling proof of concept for *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin*.

"I think it's a musical portrait that's going to revolutionize music in the future," said Wu-Tang member Jamiel "Masta Killa" Arief, via electronic message. "And I'm thankful to my brother Ringz, to collaborate with, and I'm ecstatic to be a part of it."

Now, all that remains to be done is to transfer the digital files of *Once Upon A Time In Shaolin* to a physical disc, enclose it in the silver box, and nail down some dates for the exhibition. To be sure, there's always a chance that this carefully conceived plan will combust before it sees the light of day, a possibility that Cilvaringz recognizes.

"I know it sounds crazy," he says. "It might totally flop, and we might be completely ridiculed. But the essence and core of our ideas is to inspire creation and originality and debate, and save the music album from dying."

The plan almost resembles a Kickstarter campaign in search of a single, super-wealthy backer; there are also parallels with [Jack Conte's Patreon](#). But it more closely mirrors the centuries-old patron model, where aristocrats would commission painters or bankroll resident musicians to create works of art.

Indeed, crowdfunding on the whole is the distant progeny of that system, as is the aforementioned activity of Samsung. Wu-Tang is betting that a full-circle return will yield industry-shaking—and pocket-fattening—results.

Cilvaringz is even hoping the album will mark the beginning of a [scaleable private music service](#). And as far as RZA is concerned, the move is an opportunity to attain a unique form of immortalization, not just through music, but through model.

"There will be a time when we can't tour, and that's just the natural evolution of man," he says. "And yet this particular privatized album, I think—this idea we have—will be something that will go longer than all of us."

For more about the business of music, check out my Jay Z biography, [Empire State of Mind](#); my next, [Michael Jackson, Inc.](#), will be published in June. You can also follow me on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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