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The Latest Albums Reviewed

A New Quest

Written by Silas Valentino

Musically speaking, 2016 will go down as the year the Grim Reaper wreaked havoc. The year began with the death of Bowie, soon after it was the Purple One Prince, Merle Haggard then reached his sunset, the last breath of Leonard Cohen's became air this year and in March, in what was to be hip-hop's most shocking death in recent memory, Phife Dawg passed the mic for his last time.

Since Phife joined forces with Q-Tip, Jarobi and DJ Ali Shaheed Muhammad to form A Tribe Called Quest in early 1990, the group have perfected the balance: hip-hop beats that pump your shoulders to release bravado matched by lyrics that could curl your eyebrow as you considered the wordsmith poetry which unpacked, reshaped and then returned socio-political fodder into the streets as a light to guide peace.

Tribe pulled this harmony off every time they gathered in the studio and their sixth and final studio LP, *We got it from Here... Thank You 4 Your Service*, proves that even posthumously, Tribe are able to successfully signal this message.

Prior to Phife's passing, the Queens-bred MC laid down vocals at Q-Tip's studio in New Jersey. Even though he was gone, he left behind a trove of raw and introspective rhymes that forever cemented the Five Foot Assassin's brilliance. Tip took these recordings—oozing with spirit from beyond the grave—and spent the next six months crafting the perfect eulogy. Phife Dawg may be dead but he helped create the best hip-hop album of the year. What *To Pimp a Butterfly* was to 2015, *We got it from Here...* is to 2016: conscious-laden rhymes and progressive beats that echo between the microphones of these linguistic overlords.

So how does the year's top hip-hop album break the silence? "The Space Program" begins with an audio clip from 1974 Blaxploitation film *Willie Dynamite* where the speaker yearns for dealing with the bigger insult: the heat. Which in 2016 terms continues to mean police brutality or political calamity but the message is that we're forever stronger together. Soon Tip and Phife call the show into order: "It's time to go left and not right" before later opining "Let's make something happen." Droopy electric keys build the beat as Tribe sound the alarm. To maximize captivation, Phife and Tip swing the microphone back and forth ("to make it"—"to make it"—"to make it") and with ease, we the people are transported into to the honey-smooth flow from hip-hop's slickest co.

"Dis Generation" makes a party out of forum. Tip, Jacobi and Phife are in full form as they spit licks back and forth, creating a sensation akin to the cinematic twirls in Eric Forman's basement à la *That '70s Show*. They synchronize together, rapping: "See, these written words are poetical science/Brain's defiant, thoughts heavy, baby/They're a major appliance." Further down the line, Tip singles out the new class of hip-hop pioneers: Kendrick Lamar, Earl Sweatshirt, Joey Bada\$\$ and J. Cole. It's Tribe's last album and they appropriately pass the torch to a new generation of Americans.

In the same vain as Metallica's latest album, *We got it from Here...* enters our ears at a time of political and social upheaval. (Tribe's record was released three days after the election.) The album's final song is titled "The Donald" but in a twist of assumption, the song is not actually about the 45th President, rather, a nickname to Phife Dawg: Don Juice. Before we can begin to tackle the woes ahead we have to assess ourselves and confirm what to hold true. For Tribe, Phife was always a foundation and now that he's passed, before moving ahead, a 5-minute requiem for a friend must resound aloud.

The the last two words ever spoken on a Tribe album are "Phife Dawg" and that the first two words ever spoken—at the beginning of "Push It Along", track one from their debut album 1990's *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*—are indeed "Q-Tip".

A Tribe Called Quest, 1990–2016, Brothers forever.

Artist: A Tribe Called Quest

Album: We Got It From Here...Thank You 4 Your Service

Website: atribecalledquest.com

★★★★★

Label: Epic, SME

Release Date: November 11, 2016

