

Watch Your Step Kid

Seventh graders rarely have their finger on the pulse of interesting culture, but in one important instance, one seventh grader did. His name was Vince and he sat across from me in study hall. The class was held in the cafeteria and we were assigned seats at long tables. We were expected to work during study hall and the monitor, a shop teacher, made two rounds during the forty-five minute period. As long as he didn't hear you talking, he didn't reprimand you. It still surprises me twenty years later that the shop teacher took the job of study hall monitor so seriously; I doubt any administrator was coming in to observe him and the students in the class behaved so mildly that you would need to hop them up on something serious to even provoke them, but nonetheless, he treated that assignment as if a riot could break out at any moment. I wasn't so concerned with talking, at least not in the beginning of the year. I was the new kid and I didn't really know anybody; I had just moved from a small town to a sprawling suburb and even though I'd officially moved in July, my family was living in a Hampton Inn because we couldn't get into our house yet. Needless to say there were no kids my age living at the hotel. The few friends I had were all from the soccer team and none of them had the same study hall period as me. This left me to fend for myself and it was much easier to sit quietly and attempt to get some work done instead of trying to establish a reputation for myself. After a few weeks, I realized that the kid across from me was on the same after school bus route as me. This didn't make us best friends, but I knew who he was and he recognized me, which is all I needed as the new kid to make second-period study hall bearable.

Vince had the fortune or misfortune of looking older than he was. He looked like he'd never had baby features to lose and he had dark thin hair above his lip and creeping down from his sideburns. In most instances, this would be a bad thing for a seventh grader, but Vince was

more mature than most of the guys in middle school. He dressed in trendy baggy clothes, and possessed an exotic air that attracted girls. He could easily chart his middle school years by the girls that he dated, though they might be too numerous to remember them all. He lived in the trailer park that neighbored my housing development and many of the guys who resided there had suburban street cred. Grunge rock was big and gangsta rap still had a hold on the public conscious, so anything that resembled struggle was deemed cool. There wasn't any beef between the kids from the trailer park and any of the surrounding housing developments, at least nothing major; for reasons that I still cannot grasp, guys who lived in the trailer park were universally popular, whether they were athletes or not, but the girls that lived there were destined for tragically sad lives. Vince carried himself with swagger, as if he would always be the more interesting guy from the wrong side of the metaphorical tracks.

He played football and I played soccer and our respective residencies were many miles from the school, two of the final destinations deep in the dark of the night. That we would be two of the final kids dropped off meant that we had an unspeakable bond – add to this the fact that our last names placed us near each other in study hall meant we were destined for one important encounter.

While I tried to study or finish assignments during study hall, Vince mostly doodled in his notebook. Whether he did his homework at home or not at all is unclear to me, but he never used that forty-five minute block of time to get work done. He sketched different things in his notebooks and made small talk with the girl that sat next to him. This impressed me not because she was attractive but because she was a ninth grader. I had just the right amount of self-confidence to have friendly conversations with girls my own age and it completely blew my mind that he would kick it to a girl two years older than us. Vince took R. Kelly's mantra, "age

ain't nothin' but a number", to heart; if a beautiful twenty-five year old woman sat next to him, he would have talked to her with the same confidence. It's still impressive two decades later.

Vince's ability to talk to girls isn't what bonded us though. I wasn't mature enough yet to devote myself to impressing and dating girls. I liked girls and talked to some and dated a few, but these relationships were of the hand holding and quick lip kisses variety. Vince was beyond that. I'm glad that I never tried to emulate his success or become his student because I would have missed out on something far more important. One day, close to Thanksgiving break, I noticed an interesting symbol that he was drawing; he was spending a great deal of time perfecting its nuances. Most of the time, he'd whip through sketch after sketch, not caring too much what he was doing. That day was different. He had his Science text book in front of him; it was covered with a brown paper bag, which had a graffiti style front cover consisting of the class name and his full name. His latest sketch was being applied to the back cover of the book. At first I thought it might be the bat symbol or a bird, but it was far more menacing than that. I put aside my math homework and watched him work like a surgeon, first to outline the emblem and then to color it in with a Sharpie. The black symbol popped off the brown paper. I didn't know what it was and was too afraid to ask. Vince was so in tune with his drawing that he didn't realize he had an audience. Once the logo was perfect, he labeled it: two words, separated by a hyphen atop the emblem and one word beneath it.

Wu-Tang Clan.

Little did I realize at the time that he hadn't drawn the logo as it appeared on their first album, but the sketch looked official. I didn't know what or who it was but I wanted to know everything. Vince looked up and I didn't pretend that I wasn't looking. He nodded his head and I nodded mine. He understood that I was praising his artistic skills.

“You listen to them?” said Vince.

My limited music knowledge informed me that the Wu-Tang Clan was a group of sorts, which genre I didn't know. In the moment, I wanted to lie, but I knew I'd be called out as a fraud within minutes and the only way I'd learn more – at least in that exact moment, which was everything to me – was through Vince.

“No.”

“You should. Their shit is real,” said Vince.

That was it. The brief exchange had turned me into a fan of something I could not comprehend. The name alone was mind blowing. Whatever type of music they created, the Wu-Tang Clan had to be legendary.

Although I didn't know much, I was certainly into music, even if my main source was MTV. I wasn't allowed to stay up late, so I never caught *Yo MTV Raps*, which would have introduced me to not only the Wu-Tang Clan, but many of the other wonders that I should have been absorbing. I knew a whole lot about Guns 'n' Roses and Janet Jackson videos, as did most people my age, not realizing that there was another world so close and yet so far. I was determined after that study hall period to get my hands on any Wu-Tang Clan tapes I could, not realizing that it would be far trickier than I imagined.

Roughly at the same time that I was really getting into music, especially rap and hip-hop, the United States Government was also obsessed with the emerging cultural force. My love was born out of an interest in the unknown: hip-hop was urban, black, vital, filled with references I had no understanding of, concerned with braggadocio, and Loud; my existence was small town, white, sheltered, and quiet. This was an art form that reflected nothing of me within its world and yet I gravitated toward it. Millions of white kids around the country were doing the same and

many artists were exploited because of this. The music was still a few years away from being completely co-opted by suits in the music industry and its unpredictability and diversity was its greatest strength. It was, much like the early years of rock 'n' roll, impossible to define and pigeon hole with so many artist planting their flags in the sand to proclaim "this is hip-hop". MC's and producers were writing history on the fly and who better to sweep into its fold than impressionable young minds. Which is why the United States Government became so concerned with rap music. Or more appropriately, gangsta rap. Led by the efforts of Tipper Gore, people with limited exposure to any relevant music decided that certain albums should be branded with a scarlet letter "A". The Parental Advisory wave crashed just as soon as I became a consumer. This was a problem. I wasn't a kid that looked older than my age or had parents that were willing to buy me records branded with that infamous label, so I was forced to walk through the aisles of National Record Mart and make a mental list of all the albums that I would buy when I was of a certain age.

And what age was that? As a thirteen-year old, I was never quite sure what the restrictions were attached to that Parental Advisory Label nor did I have a reliable resource on the topic. Based on casual conversations at school, I learned that the legal age to purchase branded albums was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and twenty-one. It depended on who I spoke with and what second-hand news they had. It didn't matter to me what the exact age was because I was consumed by the simple fact that I couldn't buy the one album that I really wanted. Not being able to purchase the album only built the album into something otherworldly and I truly believed at that age that my will would conquer any obstacle. Any chance I got, I would stalk the narrow aisles of National Record Mart and hold the cassette tape in my hands. Would they think my sister, two years my senior, was the appropriate age to buy it? No. She was

a supporter of me owning 36 Chambers if only to stop me from talking about it's hypothetical greatness. When she went up to the front counter the woman at the cash register, somewhere in her twenties and treating her job with the same seriousness that a secret service agent would, asked for her ID. My sister lied and said it was in her car and the woman responded with, "go ahead and get it". My sister exited as easily as she entered and I stood there waiting for her to return, hoping that the ruse would fool the cashier. After waiting for my sister to return for what seemed like forever, I reluctantly gave up the fight. Other times I considered stealing the album, but the bullet-proof plastic used to encase it was too much for me to break through. Once I broke down in the store and asked my mother to buy it for me, masterfully placing my thumb over the Parental Advisory label and hoping she wouldn't pay too much attention to the crew with masked faces and hoodies on the cover. She did and told me to pick something else.

So I did. Over and over again I would buy albums that I didn't really want simply because I had an appetite to buy new music. Anyone with a healthy or unhealthy relationship with music understands the need to own, even if you only listen to the album once. Having it *is* the thing. This extends beyond music, of course, to shoes or books or anything else that people collect and to an outsider the habit seems absurd. Why own 100 albums when you only really listen to two? Why fill a closet with hundreds of pairs of shoes when you only have two feet? Why stockpile thousands of books when there is only but so much time to read in a day? Because. It's not a thorough answer, but it is true. Since I had that urge to own music and I couldn't buy the one single album that would have sated my appetite, I bought a lot of other stuff. Some things I'd read about in Rolling Stone or Spin and some I'd heard on the radio or absorbed from MTV, but mostly I just wandered through the store and picked up something that caught my eye for no good reason. It went on like this for nearly three years. In that time, I

bought a lot of bad music, all of which I still own and on occasion, I will look through my collection and recognize albums I bought out of desperation to buy something else and I try not to be too hard on myself for my terrible choices. Somebody had to buy records by the Gin Blossoms and Candleboxes and Better than Ezras of the world and why not it be a frustrated teen with \$15 to spare?

In the near three years it took me to own 36 Chambers, I was able to steal a few snippets from people that owned the tape. My friends at the time weren't invested enough in hip-hop to seek out 36 Chambers; they were far more invested in punk and post-punk and that was fine because that too was leading me in interesting directions. Kids I played soccer with or kids in study hall that had the tape and a working Walkman were willing to sell me a five-minute listen. I don't know if this was common practice everywhere, but in the early-to-mid nineties in the Pittsburgh suburbs, kids would hustle a couple of bucks whenever they could by selling five-minute blocks of Walkman usage. This was a regular phenomenon that was a good enterprise for those that had a steady supply of batteries. My mom didn't allow my Walkman to leave the house unless we were going on a long drive, a lesson she and my father learned during the summer of '92 when we drove from Pennsylvania to Florida and the only music we listened to was what my sister and I brought along for the ride; we alternated between my sister's tape, Bon Jovi's *New Jersey*, and mine, Michael Jackson's *Dangerous*. It was somewhere in South Carolina when the tapes were banned and we were forced to enjoy hours of uncomfortable silence. My mom didn't quite grasp the concept that I could profit from taking my Walkman to school – instead, she thought of it as a distraction that would immediately destroy my GPA. What she didn't realize was that instead of me using my lunch money for its intended use, I would often forego the day's middle meal in favor of five minutes with someone else's

Walkman. Especially if that person had 36 Chambers. In my three-year pursuit of owning the album I heard the first track, “Bring Da Ruckus”, dozens of times. The rest of the album was a mystery. I never wanted to waste my five minutes fast forwarding to other songs. In retrospect, I could have asked someone to make a copy for me, but that was atypical for the times.

On July 5th, 1996, three days after my sister turned seventeen, she and I went to go see *Independence Day*, the movie of that summer due in large part to its trailer, which featured the White House being blown up by an alien aircraft. After the movie we had some time to kill, so we went over to National Record Mart to browse through the CD’s crammed into alphabetical order. I shifted over to the cassettes and stared down 36 Chambers once more; cassettes were located at the back of the store, next to the poster bins that promised instant cool with Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, and Kurt Cobain. I knelt down and rescued 36 Chambers from its landfill fate and asked my sister if she’d try to buy it. We’d been down that road before, but she figured it might work this time. She was, after all, seventeen and that might be the magical line one needed to cross to be baptized into the Parental Advisory congregation. The cashier asked her for ID and he nodded his head as he verified her. “Looks good to me.” It should have been a triumphant moment for me. I should have thrown my hands high into the air. I should have blasted “We Are the Champions” from the top of my lungs. Instead, I played it cool. I acted like this was just another purchase.

The fact of the matter was, I had no other option but to treat it with an air of indifference. Owning 36 Chambers two-and-a-half years after its release was like someone not getting around to buying Meet the Beatles until 1971 and realizing that a cultural shift had occurred. Not that 36 Chambers had the same impact, but it was a game changer. It introduced the rap world to grittiness, kung fu, and an X-Men dynamic. The RZA was Professor X and all of these other

members were mutants ready to save the world or destroy it, all depending on which day of the week it was. I so desperately wanted to be part of the conversation while it was taking place and I just couldn't – I was late to the party I wasn't invited to. At first I thought that this was a curse because every kid wants to be part of some relevant conversation; after some time, I realized that the datedness of the impact allowed me to absorb the album for what it was: a masterpiece. I didn't have to worry about forming opinions about which member was my favorite or which track was the best or memorize verses to prove I was devoted. Fans of its initial wave had moved on to members' solo albums or other artists like Mobb Deep and 2Pac. My passion was completely insular and that became suitable, especially since kids like me were supposed to be a lot deeper into "Bullet with Butterfly Wings" than "Da Art of Chessboxin'". I didn't care, not because I strived to be different but because I understood that I had some connection, be it cosmic or intellectual to that record. It became the first record that I exclusively listened to through headphones and then it became the soundtrack to the early days of me having my drivers license. The album made the most sense being confined – it was claustrophobic sci-fi horror rap made by a band of guys claiming Staten Island as home but they were really intergalactic time travelers from dimensions that weren't invented yet. Much has been written about 36 Chambers over the years in prose far more eloquent and insightful than I could ever employ and my connection to the album is all about memory and quest. The album is a classic and if it weren't for me being nosey one day in study hall, I might have missed it completely.