

A Tribe Called Quest:
Jarobi White, Q-Tip,
Phife Dawg, and Ali
Shaheed Muhammad
(from left), 1990



PERFORMERS

A TRIBE CALLED QUEST

AS PART OF THE NATIVE TONGUES COLLECTIVE,
THE INNOVATIVE GROUP BECAME THE PREMIER HIP-HOP
AUTEURS OF ITS GENERATION.

BY MICHAEL A. GONZALES

In the late 1980s, New York City rap music was beginning to change. Since the release of Sugarhill Gang's pioneering "Rapper's Delight," most people – including the music's creators – believed hip-hop artists had to project a streetwise persona. Even when a crew hailed from the nicer part of Queens or Long Island (RUN DMC, Rakim), they were expected to front as though they might shoot if a sucker stepped to them wrong.

In 1987, with the introduction of rap duo the Jungle Brothers' first single "Jimbrowski (featuring Kool DJ Red Alert)," the foundation of the soon-to-be-known-as Native Tongues collective was set into motion. Coloring outside the lines of what rap was supposed to be, De La Soul came next. Those two crews are what gave A Tribe Called Quest (ATCQ) the courage to dress different, sample more fusion than funk, and vocalize in a playful manner while still taking themselves seriously. The innovative Tribe would become the premier hip-hop auteurs of their generation.

ATCQ formed in 1985, composed of main verbalizer Q-Tip (Kamaal Ibn John Fareed) along with fellow rappers Phife Dawg (Malik Izaak Taylor) and Jarobi White. Both had known Tip since childhood church days in Queens, and DJ Ali Shaheed Muhammad met the head rapper at Murry Bergtraum High School (which the Jungle Brothers also attended). Both Q-Tip and Ali were

heavy crate-diggers, with each contributing to the sound of the group.

Q-Tip made his debut on the adventurous Jungle Brothers track "Black Is Black" in 1988. The record received much love on the New York rap show hosted by Red Alert twice a week on 98.7 Kiss-FM. Red, who served as an early mentor and supporter of the Native posse, was the uncle of Jungle Brothers member Mike Gee. That same year, the late Jive Records A&R man Sean "The Captain" Carasov introduced ATCQ to his boss, Barry Weiss, who signed them to the label in 1989. The single "Description of a Fool" was Tribe's first release. "I thought they were great musically with commercial rhymes," Weiss said in 2016. "They single-handedly put hip-hop on their backs and brought it to another level."

"Before Tribe, hip-hop was kind of stiff," DJ Ali Shaheed Muhammad explained to *Wax Poetics* in 2010. "I don't mean stiff in a bad way, but the music we created had a different kind of movement and flow. Be it the bass lines, chord structures, or the different time signatures, the music always moved."

In 1990, Q-Tip contributed a verse to De La Soul's goofy single "Buddy," which opened with him screeching, "Say what?" a few times. ATCQ's debut album, *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*, also dropped in 1990, and featured singles "I Left My Wallet in El Segundo," "Bonita Applebum," and "Can I Kick It?" The



album quickly became a fan and critics' favorite. As critic Mark Blackwell described the album, "A sense of journey through time and place endures throughout this music; and, whether the Quest are pushing it along or kicking it, the trip is smooth and flows like a magic carpet."

Tip was the arty but nasal-voiced, abstract rapper, while Phife was every B-Boy: a sports-loving guy who'd rather be at a Knicks game than writing rhymes. "Phife was so spontaneous in the studio," Barry Weiss said. "His wordplay, his analogies, and sports references like, 'Bo knows this and Bo knows that,' would become part of popular culture. The yin and yang between Phife and Q-Tip was just wonderful."

In addition, the studio prowess of engineer Bob Power, who worked with them at Calliope Studios, makes him an honorary member of the group. Much like George Martin with the Beatles, Power helped ATCQ sharpen their sound, raise the sonic bar, and define their aural genius. "Tip and Ali both had this uncanny way of hearing music," Power said in 2014, "where they can hear a bunch of different records, get an idea of different samples to use from those different records, and not just

hear them in their original context but also hear in their mind's ear what they will sound like when combined."

Even in their early years, the Tribe crew planned on being visionaries. "Musically, we aim to keep changing, so that people never get bored with us," Q-Tip told *Blues & Soul* in 1989. "Look at someone like Stevie Wonder . . . he's always tried to change musically and that's why he's always remained popular."

Into the next decade, ATCQ would prove their staying power in the studio with four more albums and onstage with many years of performances, as well as collaborations with RUN DMC (Q-Tip), D'Angelo (Ali Shaheed Muhammad), and Pete Rock (Phife). "For any card-carrying bohemian B-boys, A Tribe Called Quest felt like our avatars, our stand-in representatives in hip-hop," writer Miles Marshall Lewis said. "The musical bed underneath their rhymes also always reflected a more sophisticated well of influences."

Though ATCQ might've been worried about the reception of their second album, the opposite occurred when they unleashed *The Low End Theory* in 1991. In fact, the album was hailed a masterpiece by many, even earning

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ATCQ in 1991; Tip (left) and Phife onstage, Milwaukee, 1991; Tip (left) and Ali, 1990; in New York City, 1991. **OPPOSITE:** Tribe ca. 1989.



the group a coveted five-mic review in *The Source*: “There’s no sophomore jinx to be found here – only real hip-hop.” There were also guest appearances from jazz bassist Ron Carter (“Verses From the Abstract”) and Busta Rhymes (“Scenario”). For those who thought Phife was lagging behind, Tip was pleased when the self-proclaimed “Five-Foot Assassin” stepped up his game.

When Tribe delivered that album, people were surprised how much of Phife was on there. Fans had gotten to know him a little on their first album, but on *The Low End Theory* he really emerged as a force to be reckoned with; Phife blew up on that first single “Check the Rhime” and was just amazing. “Everything was clicking on *Low End*,” Phife said in the 2011 documentary *Beats, Rhymes & Life: The Travels of A Tribe Called Quest*.

Although Tribe’s music and rhymes were smooth as

a black velvet poster, there was turbulence happening behind the scenes. In 1990, Phife was diagnosed with diabetes, which only became worse as the years progressed. There was also creative tension between him and Q-Tip. However, in 1993, ATCQ were still at a creative peak when they released the boomin’ *Midnight Marauders*, which former *Source* editor-in-chief Selwyn Seyfu Hinds called “their finest artistic moment . . . a work of elegance: the use of jazz samples as breezy sonic textures; the eschewing of sampled drum loops for skillfully programmed percussion. Do you know a hip-hop composition more beautiful than ‘Electric Relaxation’? An interplay of beat and soundscape more masterful than the pulsing ‘Lyrics to Go’?”

Considering that many 1990s rap artists rarely went past a third album, it was a small miracle that Tribe not

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: In the studio, 1991; Native Tongues posse: DJ Sammy B, Q-Tip, Mike G, Afrika Baby Bam, Maseo, Posdnuos, Chris Lighty, Monie Love, and Ali (clockwise from top left), 1990; Tip, Phife, and Jarobi (from left) reunite, New York City, 2013.







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only went back in the studio, but also returned with a new friend from Detroit, who went by the name of Jay Dee (J Dilla). Still looting ears, Tip and Ali formed a new production company called Ummah and invited Dilla to be a part of making their fourth album, *Beats, Rhymes and Life* (1996). While not quickly embraced by fans, writer Miles Marshall Lewis pointed out, “The record still reflected growth in maturity and spirituality, even as fissures within the group started revealing themselves.”

When ATCQ, having been in business together since their teens, headed into their late 20s, they looked to expand beyond the group. Phife moved to Atlanta in 1993,

Tip was training for an acting career, and Ali was thinking about relocating to the West Coast to work with Raphael Saadiq. Jarobi White had been in and out of the group for years. Though they still worked hard in the name of Quest, it all came to an end (or so they thought) with their ironically titled fifth album, *The Love Movement*, in 1998.

Eighteen years would pass before a few of the Quest tribe, namely Tip and Phife, would appear on record again. After performing on *The Jimmy Fallon Show* in 2015, Tip and Phife decided to return to the studio. However, after a few sessions, Phife passed away due to diabetes complications on March 22, 2016. Tip recruited Busta Rhymes,



**On Jimmy Kimmel Live!, 2016.
INSET: Phife pictured on
the back of Jarobi's jacket,
Wareham, U.K., 2017.**



SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



**People's Instinctive
Travels and the
Paths of Rhythm**
1990 (Jive)



**The Low End
Theory**
1991 (Jive)



Midnight Marauders
1993 (Jive)



**Beats, Rhymes
and Life**
1996 (Jive)



**The Love
Movement**
1998 (Jive)



**We Got It From Here
... Thank You 4 Your
Service**
2016 (Epic)

and Jarobi came back, but Ali chose not to participate. *We Got It From Here . . . Thank You 4 Your Service*, released on November 11, 2016 (a week after Trump was elected), was more political than their other projects. It became the perfect swan song from a group that had done so much for rap music and hip-hop culture.

Tribe's game-changing discs, particularly *The Low End Theory* and *Midnight Marauders*, gave birth to neo-everything: that entire class of D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, Maxwell, and Lauryn Hill, and moving on to André 3000, Kanye West, and Solange, as well as jazzbos Robert Glasper and Esperanza Spalding. "Their com-

bination of melody and harmonic content appealed to me," Spalding said in 2011.

Tonight, we celebrate their enduring influence and achievements as they are inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.