



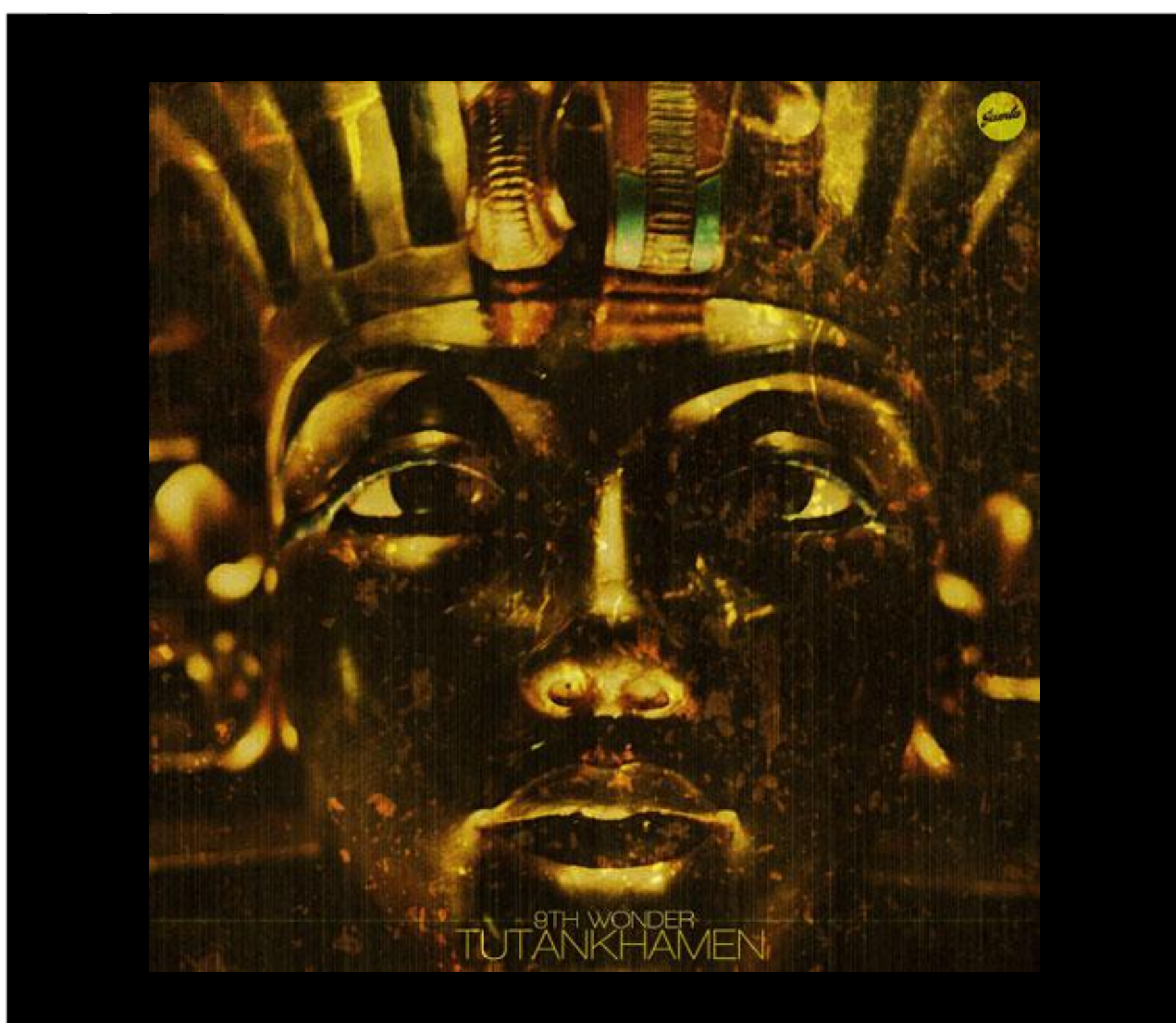
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And the Beat (Tape) Goes On: With Tutankhamen, 9th Wonder Drops an Instrumental Gem

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These days, not even Nancy Drew could find the line between producer and rapper.

It didn't disappear over night. Even though most rappers considered the greatest of all time outsourced beat-making jobs, that line's been vanishing slowly since the dawn of hip hop. And in the past decade, it's been fading faster than ever. If you're looking for somebody to blame, you can always blame Kanye West, the producer-rapper who bum-rushed the charts in 2004 and laid down tracks for young rappers to follow. Now you've got these dexterous, ambidextrous up-and-comers — J. Cole, Big K.R.I.T., Tyler, the Creator, Childish Gambino — all "getting high off [their] own supply," as Yeezy would say.

You knew it would come to this. The way technology was moving, it was only a matter of time before the one-man-band approach that's been critical in other genres crept into hip hop's hallowed chambers. Especially now. In our hybrid generation of self-centered multitaskers. Not that that's a bad thing. There's power that comes from having total control of your artistic vision, the same kind that [Quentin Tarantino](#) employs when he writes and directs his own films. Given the fact that self-sufficiency plays such a major part in how we assess status, it was only natural that the producer-rapper would eventually emerge like a Minotaur to lead hip hop into its next incarnation.

But this isn't a piece about life. This is a piece about the afterlife.

Because if this trend is true — and truth be told, it's all speculation at this point — what becomes of the producer? What will happen to those unhyphenated beatsmiths who live to live behind the boards, but stay out of the booth? Will they be rendered obsolete and simply die out? Will they seek refuge underground as an endangered species? Will evolutionary pressure force them to rap to survive?

Not if 9th Wonder has a say in the matter. The veteran North Carolina producer has officially parted ways with [Phonte](#) and Big Pooh of Little Brother, but that doesn't mean his time is up. Last month, 9th dropped a [40-track beat tape](#) called Tutankhamen, an expansive instrumental exhibit that features of some of his best work and never-before-heard material from his latest crate-digging expeditions.

He's a rare breed, 9th Wonder. Only a handful of producers have enough juice to put a price on a beat tape. And actually get something for it. The legacy of the beat tape goes back to the beginning with legends like Pete Rock and more recently with Madlib and the late J Dilla, whose psychedelic supersonic soul mosaic, *Donuts*, remains a gold standard of the magic that can happen after you take the rapper out of the hat. But on Tutankhamen, 9th isn't trying any new tricks. He sticks instead to his strengths, playing Midas to random soul samples and melting the "oohs" and "aahs" into one cohesive set-it-and-forget-it collection of cruising music. So smooth you can almost feel the wind in your face.

But a beat tape is a tough sell. It exists in this obscure purgatory of genre, where it can easily move from the hip-hop shelf to soul to R&B like a game of musical chairs. Such eclecticism, at its best, helps push the boundaries of what hip hop can be, but from a marketing standpoint, the beat tape remains a mystery. How can there be a target demographic for an album that can appeal to both a young'n looking for beats to spit that hot fire on and a grandma who likes to listen to soul while getting her crochet on? Still, this points to why I believe producers are invaluable.

Hear me out: On your average rap tracks, we the audience play the passive role of a therapist listening to an artist vent or boast or talk shit or tell a story. The beat, in many ways, represents a shrink's couch, custom-made for the emcee to stretch out and express his or herself. Now, if you take out the couch, all you've got is a rapper with nowhere to sit and suddenly bars become rambling psychotic rhymes without reason. (When's the last time you copped a rap a cappella tape?)

On the flip side, if you take the rapper out the room and keep the couch, possibilities open up. No more playing sounding board. The couch is yours. Sit down, kick back and let the cushion conform to the contours of your thoughts. As a result, you'll hear people describe the best beat tapes as "therapeutic" or, more specifically, according to [Stylus Magazine's review of Donuts](#), "a medicinal tonic cleansing your system of the toxic effects of 10+ years of boring, bloated rap full-lengths."

This is proof that the role of producer extends well beyond doing audio set designs for rappers. They give us room to let our minds roam. They are hip hop's historians/futurists who keep records of the past and keep their eyes on tomorrow. They are the curators who collect the samples to go in the tombs-turned-time capsules to be discovered by generations unborn.

And even if, in the worst-case scenario, lyrically challenged producers do start to go extinct, 9th Wonder has already begun a transition into his next life: academia. Right now, he's teaching hip-hop history at Duke University and this fall, he'll be joining [Harvard's Hip-Hop Archive](#).

"Producers live longer than rappers, that's for sure," 9th Wonder [told XXL](#). "But performing and this and that and the third has a timeline to it, and I just want to be able to extend the life expectancy of hip-hop past the stage and past records. I think the only way we'll be able to extend the life expectancy of hip-hop is if we do it in the classroom—higher education is where we can solidify this thing and make it a part of history."