

“Fear of a Black Planet”—Public Enemy (1990)

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Essay by Rickey Vincent (guest post)*



Public Enemy

The late 1980s was a time of swirling racial conflict in the US, particularly in Northeastern cities. Advances in black racial progress were met with violent street backlashes. The 1986 mob murder of Trinidadian immigrant Michael Griffith by whites in Howard Beach, Queens, and the 1989 mob attack and killing of Yusuf Hawkins in Bensonhurst were flashpoints of this. The 1988 Presidential race of Jesse Jackson and his controversial ties to Nation of Islam leader Minister Louis Farrakhan were also national news. Within this cauldron of tensions, rap music was gaining popularity, and some rap groups had begun to amplify undiluted voices of racial resistance and rage. The singular rap act at the time with a voice and a message was Public Enemy.

The meteoric rise in the popularity of Hip Hop coincided with the rise of Public Enemy. Following up on the group’s groundbreaking 1988 album, “It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back,” the texture and tone of rap music had matured and reflected anger at racial injustices with a complexity and fire that was rarely heard, if at all, from other black musical forms at the time. In early 1989 filmmaker Spike Lee sought the group out to produce an “anthem” that would fuse together his upcoming film “Do The Right Thing.” The subsequent soundtrack song “Fight The Power,” played throughout the film and solidified P.E. as the group with the most to say to, and from, black America as the 1990s dawned.

Public Enemy did indeed “shock the world” when they emerged as a collective that had come together while producing a radio program at Adelphi University in Long Island. Carlton “Chuck D” Ridenhour was lead rapper and verbal instigator on record, and suave communicator in the many press conferences and interviews he orchestrated. William “Flava Flav” Drayton was the multi-talented hype-man for Chuck, and was such a sonic counterpunch (“yeah boyeee”) that meant P.E. tracks could never become predictable. Deejay Norman “Terminator X” Rogers drove the irresistible beats; while the team of producers, brothers Hank and Keith Shocklee, with Bill Stephney and Eric “Vietnam” Sadler, known as the Bomb Squad, layered edgy funk samples and pure noise to make sure there was an aggressive edge to every track. “We didn’t want nothing to be consistent, because to be consistent did not signify to us rebellion,” Hank Shocklee

told VH1¹; and Minister of Information Richard “Professor Griff” Griffin arranged the “security detail” (the S1W’s--Security for the First World), a group of stoic black youth in uniform, which was also part of the performance, onstage stepping in the image of a military outfit.

While their first release in 1986, “Yo Bum Rush The Show,” on DefJam records made very little noise, the 1987 release of the single “Rebel Without A Pause,” and every subsequent song and video from “Nation of Millions” amped up the confrontational tone both sonically and lyrically. With “Fight the Power” sustaining the group through 1990, the music world was primed for the next powerhouse release from the group.

Ironically P.E. would spend more time on the nightly news than in the party mix that year as a result of an interview Griff gave to “Washington Times” journalist David Mills. Mills published a transcription of Griff’s claim that “Jews are responsible for the majority of the wickedness of the world,” which sparked a firestorm no one in or outside the group could put out.² Denials, suspensions, apologies and retractions only fueled the controversy, while the group continued to seek their own agenda of racial confrontation, their highly anticipated upcoming album “Fear of a Black Planet.” Somehow being criticized as racist, misogynistic and anti-Semitic did not slow them down. As group biographer Tim Grierson stated about that time: “if the group was fracturing, the music wasn’t. ‘Fear’ may have been one of the quintessential albums in the history of pop that reflects the tension of its creation.”³

The title “Fear of a Black Planet” is based upon race theorist Dr. Frances Cress Welsing’s “Color Confrontation Theory,” which posited that based on current social constructions of *races*, “race-mixing” between a white person and a black person would produce a child *of color*, and that kind of “miscegenation” would eventually lead to a disappearance of the white “race.” These fears of social contact were behind the Jim Crow era segregation laws that sought to separate the races in the Southern US, earlier in the twentieth century, and were still present in the racial biases of the 1980s. The rap group included Dr. Welsing’s materials in the press kit associated with the album release.⁴ P.E. had everyone’s attention.

Chuck D said that, early on, the plan for the group was to “get in, shock the industry and get out in two years.” With that sense of finality, the group artistically could produce as if there was no tomorrow, controversies or not. However, Chuck admits, things did not always go according to plan, “But nobody thought it would mean so much to so many people.”⁵ “Fear of a Black Planet,” their third album, was four years into that two-year plan.

The album begins with “Contract Out On The World Love Jam,” a sound collage of dramatic tones, beginning with audio claiming “the future of the group, is in doubt,” and culminating with what appears to be the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu stating “there’s something changing in the climate of consciousness in the world today.” Global geopolitical shifts, such as the 1989 toppling of the Berlin Wall and the 1990 release of South African leader Nelson Mandela, were indeed ushering forth new threads of racial meanings into a new “global north” and a “global south.”

Despite the ominous intro, the most optimistic track followed; “Brothers Gonna Work it Out,” was a rowdy mashup of guitar samples from “Let’s Go Crazy” by Prince, which spoke of

possibility and unity among their black peers: “Our goal / indestructible soul / answers to this quizzin’ / to the Brothers in the streets, schools and prisons.”

“Welcome To the Terrordome” followed, which was the hypnotic, electrifying club beat of choice at the time, and yet the track produced a tone that reflected of the claustrophobia and chaos of living black in America. Chuck D invoked controversy once again with lyrics that reflected his views and fueled the evening news controversies. “Crucifixion ain’t no fiction / So called frozen chosen / Apologies made to whoever pleases / Still they got me like Jesus.”⁶ The lines were dissected and analyzed in the media for months, yet Chuck D approached them as inspired verses from someone tired of the hyperactive media scrutiny he and the group were receiving. “I felt that all the lyrics I put down there was on the top of my head and in my heart,” he said in 2000.⁷

Flava Flav’s sardonic, comical turn on “9-1-1 is a Joke” exposed his ability to deal with political struggles with a level of humor and realism unmatched in entertainment at the time. The punishing, noisy song exposed the lack of response by emergency services in black neighborhoods, which has had tragic results in the black community.

“Burn Hollywood Burn” was an explicit attack on the race biases in Hollywood, referencing such stereotypical (servant oriented) films as “Driving Miss Daisy” with the bitter lines, “Like a guess I figure you to play some jigaboo / On the plantation, what else can a nigga do.” “Who Stole the Soul” dealt with issues of black identity, assimilation and the exploitation of black entertainers such as Wilson Pickett and James Brown.

The title song, “Fear of a Black Planet,” made plain the issues involving miscegenation by using the words of legendary black comedian Dick Gregory stating: “black man, white woman, black baby.” These lines were followed by some clear, yet awkward declarations of “what’s wrong with some color in your family tree?” The beat was subtle and the lines delivered slowly for maximum clarity, unlike the typically hyperactive sounds of the album. “Revolutionary Generation” is a less than convincing oeuvre to black women (a female rapper might have helped this out), but considering the attacks on black women from other rappers it was an important gesture. As the album continues, there seems to be an endless lists of topics of outrage, yet nothing stops the rhythmic power of the sample-driven funk. The comic turns of Flava Flav emerge again on “Can’t Do Nuttin’ For Ya Man,” while the magnificent chaos of deejay Terminator X shines through on “B-Side Wins Again.” All of this is a prelude to the final track, “Fight The Power,” which could have been the album title perhaps for a less visionary group.

The Spike Lee soundtrack anthem “Fight the Power” was an afterthought by the time the “Fear” album was released in April of 1990, and was the final song on an album that will be remembered for taking a courageous position of anti-racist agitation while the group was at their most popular and influential moment. Public Enemy had the courage to agitate and innovate-- while at the top of the charts--a feat only the most respected acts such Bob Dylan, the Beatles, or Sly Stone could claim. By July of 1990, the album had sold over 1.5 million copies.

Chuck D told “Billboard,” in 2010, that “‘Fear’ was the second half of a back to back ‘movement’ of albums that immediately signified that rap could be as significant an album genre

as rock, forcing respect.”⁸ Despite their controversies, the group had, according to music critic Robert Hilburn, “the most acclaimed body of work ever by a hip hop act.”⁹ Public Enemy was certainly acclaimed, and they were the unquestioned leaders of the emerging world of conscious Hip Hop that they helped to create. They continue to be regarded among the most respected rap acts of all time, and in 2013 were among the first rap acts inducted into Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

¹ VH1, *Public Enemy: Behind the Music* (Season 1, Ep. 127), July 16, 2000.

² Robert Christgau, “The Shit Storm,” *LA Weekly* (1989).

<https://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/music/pe-law.php> Also Robert Christgau (January 16, 1990); “Jesus, Jews and the Jackass Theory,” *The Village Voice*.

³ Tim Grierson, *Inside The Terrordome*, Omnibus Press, 2015.

⁴ Francis Cress Welsing, *The Cress Theory of Color-Confrontation and Racism (White Supremacy) A Psycho-Genetic Theory and World Outlook*, C-R Publishers, 1991 (1970)

⁵ VH1, *op cit*.

⁶ Richard Harrington, “Public Enemy's Rap Record Stirs Jewish Protests,” *Washington Post* (December 29, 1989).

⁷ VH1, *op cit*.

⁸ Gail Mitchell, “Chuck D: The 'Black Planet' 20th Anniversary Q&A,” *Billboard* (March 3, 2010).

⁹ Robert Hilburn, “Is Anyone Out There Listening?,” *Los Angeles Times* (July 5, 1998).