

Chuck D: Rap, Race, Reality and Technology
By: Stewart Dalley

Chuck D's appearance at Scotland's, now annual Triptych festival is not as one might first suspect from the front-man of rap music's most controversial group, Public Enemy. No flashing lights, not a trace of his clock-wearing sidekick Flava Flav or his personal security force S1W (Security of the First World). Triptych marks the British debut of Chuck D, as we've never witnessed him before, in the role of the lecturer.

With Public Enemy his lyrics have always contained a bite that has simultaneously landed the band in hot water and propelled them to the top of the rap game. In his native America, or Amerikkka as he prefers to call it, in an attempt to raise awareness of the country's racist past, Chuck is a regular on the high school, college and university lecture circuit - appearing at forty a year for the last twelve years. The remit of the lecture series usually encompasses, "rap, race, reality and technology", as a weary Chuck D tells me down the line from his home in New York, fresh (or not so in this instance) from a gruelling eight week PE tour.

Born in 1960 Chuck D comes from an era in black history that fought head-on with oppression and oppressors that has helped shape the nature of his lyrical content and driven him to reach out to the under-privileged the world through. Not in a smaltz Hollywood way, as is personified by artists like Michael Jackson, but with an angrier and more aggressive tone as depicted by many of his childhood idols; that culminated in him picking up a Patrick Lippert Award for community service in 1996.

In his best selling book 'Fight the Power: Rap, Race & Reality' he chronicles the journey that black people took, seeing them go from 'Negro' to 'coloured' to 'black' in the span of a decade. Unlike many rappers he actually witnessed, first hand, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. In his book he also touches on how the defiance of 1968 Olympic athletes Tommy Smith and John Carlos, the black Americans who adopted the traditional stance of the Black Panthers by raising their fists in protest, affected him and a nation. Chuck is right when he says that, "Athletes and entertainers could be, and should be, more visual and vocal sources of hope for young children in the ghetto and throughout the world." Going on to state that, "Regrettably, athletes and entertainers have become nothing more than high priced slaves." He is also one of the very few people who accepts that the content of a song or film can and does have an affect on its purchasers; a view vehemently denied by the industry itself, presumably in an attempt to avoid costly lawsuits. "If you have a situation where the facts aren't being made clear and the people's reality on education, economics and politics are not clear, then I think you can replace reality with a fantasy world that in-turn can be sold to a naive person. Images, especially in this day and time, can dictate more than reflect. Those images are being created in the boardroom and I think the black community could be controlling the boardroom as opposed to being reflected by that environment all the time."

In the public eye, mainstream rap music has become synonymous with childish posturing as expounded by the likes of P Diddy, Ja Rule et al, whose lyrics rarely get above the navel, let alone deal with issues of importance. That said the music business is like the film one, in that it has many different layers. Where P Diddy and his ilk represent the comedic side of things, Public Enemy comes under the sphere of drama and one that's 'based on a true story' at that. Songs like 'Fight the Power', 'Don't Believe the Hype' and 'Hitler Day' reign down abuse on the American viewpoint; dealing, respectively, with such issues as black people's role in the army, the skewed take on Nation of Islam leader Minister Louis Farrakhan and inappropriate public holidays, such as Columbus Day and Independence Day.

In the case of the later, it's the day he's chosen to unleash Public Enemy's latest album 'Revolverlution', which features four new songs, some live stuff along with remixes of classic PE material by members of the public, who in addition to a completion fee will receive royalties from the sale of the album itself. In the coming months you will be able to check out the first virtual 'making of' that has been put together to show the process of creating Public Enemy's newest album that will be available through Chuck's www.slamjamz.com.

The lecture series, as you might suspect, throws up a variety of questions surrounding the music industry, for whom Chuck has no time. Questions from the floor usually take the shape of, why can't I get a break? In terms of race, Chuck says it usually centres on "why am I prejudiced against?" Technology is a recent addition to the forum; "It has become such a big part of the youth's lives. In America you now have a situation where people are going into office shops to buy re-writable CDs ahead of music stores." As a recording artist it is surprising to hear that he doesn't buy into the whole 'bootleggers are killing the industry' theory, preferring instead to instruct other artists to take up the fight with the labels themselves, who he claims have been ripping them all off for years with substandard deals.

In the wake of September 11th, Chuck's lectures have also seen the question of 'America's War on Terrorism' come to the fore. What Chuck has to say about it is nothing new, he's been highlighting the affects that America's attitude towards the outside world is likely to have for nigh on 15 years now. At first reluctant to be drawn, stating only that the issue "has come up", it's not long before he's in full flow. "Its very easy to continue to tell the American public that everyone else is evil, and the axis of that evil, and not inform them of all the facts. The bottom line is that America has had a foreign policy that has been arrogant and I think there's an arrogance and a swagger from most Americans who think that they are a cut above the rest of the world, as opposed to being a part of it. Whenever a government tries to separate their people from the rest of the planet it's going to create all kinds of division."

If this little lot has prompted you to question Chuck then he is keen to interact with his audience and is happy to enter into correspondence with anyone. Email him at mistachuck@rapstation.com. Better still go and bend his ear in person when he makes his appearances as part of the Triptych festival.

An audience with Chuck D: Aberdeen, Friday 26th April, The Forum, 6pm.
 Glasgow, Saturday 27th April, Old Fruitmarket, 3pm.
 Edinburgh, Sunday 28th April, George Square Theatre, 6pm.

For further Trip Tych info: www.redt.co.uk/triptych