

Chuck D – Public Enemy, erm, Number 2
Words: Stewart Dalley

With the rise of Osama Bin Laden, Chuck D may have lost the crown of Public Enemy Number 1, but as Stewart Dalley finds out he is a more than capable number 2.

Coming to prominence back in '87 with the release 'Yo Bum Rush the Show' Chuck D has never been far away from controversy. With fifteen years at the helm of hip hop's militia - Public Enemy - he still has plenty to say. He's one of the most quoted individuals on the planet. For the past twelve years he's been a regular face on the college lecture circuit, in the States, like his best selling book 'Fight the Power' the agenda usually encompasses, "Rap, race, reality and technology", says the man himself. Addressing an audience in Scotland, when here as part of the Triptych festival, he first warns that he is a "schizophrenic talker", and is therefore likely to jump from one subject to another. And he isn't kidding.

Unlike the man you hear on record Chuck D in person is jovial in his approach to serious subjects - be that the music industry, politics, sexism or racism. As way of an introduction he tells the crowd a few stories about his and Public Enemy's experiences of the UK. "Everything is so grey. You know if the sky is going to be grey most of the time why don't you paint your fucking rocks yellow or something. Cheer the place up a bit! It's the same with drinking. I ask people when you start drinking about here. And they are like 10 or 11. When I ask why, they usually tell me its cause it's grey and boring. I wonder if Queen Elizabeth (sic) and the royals didn't get you all drunk so that you'd fight amongst yourselves and leave them the fuck alone. It's like what they done to the native Americas, they gave them firewater and stole their land cause they were too drunk ass to do anything about it. I hear that cocaine is the new big thing here again. You only have to look at the very recent history of America to see that it completely decimated communities in the States." And he's off and running.

Talking to him personally is another thing. He's a quiet and humble man.....Well he's 42 after all. And you can tell that not a great deal of that time has been wasted. We speak about his book, African politics, the education system, both here and in the States, September 11th, the music industry, MP3s and politics in general. And for a man who's been interviewed more times than So Solid has received bad press, he manages to make what he's saying sound like it's the first time he's been asked the question. As he points out "because of rap music and its lyrics and the musical innovations that PE has brought to the table I'd say I was probably the most interviewed musicians, period. They don't ask a normal musician about a lot of shit I get asked."

And he's right. Journalists don't ask musicians anything close to taxing at all. I mean, is it just me or are interviews with artists becoming more and more like a press release? A quick glance through any glossy would lead you to believe that most musicians have nothing to say. Fine we're not expecting them all to be philosophers but an increasing number of them don't even have anything to say about their supposed area of expertise, music. The artists have started to believe their own hype as they try to emulate the lifestyles created for them in their own videos. A generalisation of many of rap's contenders seems to measure up to 'Look at me I'm the shit; I've got 40 bitches, platinum chains coming out my ass. And money? Fuck I got that shit to burn'.

Chuck sees this as a direct result of the changes that have occurred within the music industry over the past decade. "The marketing strategy has been ripped up. There is no artist development anymore. An artist gets two shots at succeeding. First single, second single and that's it. The industry wants paid immediately. They aren't interested in making a connection with fans. I've said to various groups that you've got to go out and do *all* the territories. In the UK alone, you can hit about fourteen spots. When record companies and artists talk about 'doing Europe' that usually means doing one night in London then Amsterdam and back off home. Sure

it might not be glamorous playing in all these small clubs but it's about connecting with your audience and people appreciate that. Today, especially in rap, artists don't give a fuck about their audience all they do is take. The least they can do is not rub their wealth in people's faces. The only inspiration being offered to their fans is the wish that one day they too can be that rich."

His scorn is not just centred on America, saving some for British youths that adopt the styling of their American counterparts. "Its not a great situation when people start copying from a negative standpoint of America because America has brainwashed Americans and black Americans are probably at the bottom of that heap, so when you have people abroad following that foolishness you can have a terrible situation."

Being on the other side of the Atlantic, Chuck isn't familiar with the intricacies of the UK scene but his words will strike a cord with anyone familiar with the R&B and garage scene here in the UK. People are scared to go to these club nights for fear of assholes emulating bullshit they see in videos. Chuck is one of the very few artists that actually subscribe to the fact that music's lyrics and films can, and do, have an affect on weak minds. As he says, "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 naïve person. Images, especially in this day and time, can dictate more than reflect."

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 fifteen years now. "I've lived with a legacy of fucked up R&B, that's Regan and Bush. We've got a situation now where we've got a bush as a president and a dick as the vice president, so there is lots of fucking going on. And you know whose getting fucked!" At first reluctant to be drawn on the issue of September 11th, presumably because the world is just waiting to pounce, stating only that the issue "has come up", its 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 is 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."

With a new PE album due to drop in July, entitled 'Revolverlution', which we are promised is a "trilogy within a trilogy" that deals with subjects like "George Bush and the rap scene and its cycle of greed." A new book set for release around September/October, "dealing with a lot of stuff that has happened over the past few years" and a worldwide PE tour with UK dates pencilled in for November, Chuck D and Public Enemy are anything but slowing up. Chuck is on a mission to educate himself and others, stating. "Sometimes I feel that there aren't enough days to do what I want to do." But the education will go on because as he says. "The more I think I know, makes me realise I don't know shit!"

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