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Perspectives on Public Enemy

In critical writing on a great deal of Black music, especially Black popular music, there seems to be a tendency to use vague and superficial language in descriptions of the musical construction and theory. For instance the description of ragtime is often limited to something like, a syncopated musical form that draws on the American march tradition. While that isn't necessarily an untrue statement, it doesn't go nearly deep enough into the musical construction of pieces by trained composers. No academic discussion of a European composer would be allowed to stay at that level. More would need to be addressed. This is not to say that there is not in-depth discussion of Black musicians and composers. Highly nuanced and academic arguments are made in the field of musicology. In my discussion of the rap group, Public Enemy, I aim to combine these two sides of musical discourse by addressing some of the cultural implications and contexts and then providing a musical analysis of their controversial, but also Grammy nominated, song, *Fight the Power*. It is always difficult to analyze, in rigorous terms, hip-hop and rap music, as it tends to resist classical harmonic, melodic, and to an extent rhythmic analysis. For this paper, I will not employ these tools, but rather try to discuss the song on these terms in which I imagine it was created: layering of sounds and samples, and lyrical content (which cannot be separated from cultural contexts).

The history of Public Enemy is one that doesn't fit neatly with the stereotypical rap group coming out of violent and impoverished neighborhoods. Most of the members of Public Enemy grew up in the Black suburban, middle-class, town of Roosevelt on Long Island, New York.¹ While not the rough background associated with aggressive rap artists, growing up in the Black suburbs presented its own experience and set of problems. Hank Shocklee, producer for Public Enemy and lead member of the hip-hop production team, *The Bomb Squad*, commented on the experience growing up in a

¹ Hale, James. Public Enemy: Prophets of Rage. Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMCvWeWnsJw>. 2011, BBK, UK.

middle-class black suburb of New York as well as their communities status with regards to its all-White neighboring communities.

We lived in the suburbs. And were sandwiched by nothing but White communities. It was like we were the leftovers: We got what the White communities didn't want to have. We got their spillovers. So we always had to kind of fight this adversity.²

Beyond their communal background, many members of the group have been educated at the college level. Chuck D, Public Enemy's leading rapper and lyricist, studied graphic design at Adelphi University, at the B.F.A. level, and in 2013 was awarded an honorary doctorate. This background gives Public Enemy a unique set of privileges and access to a certain type of knowledge base from which to draw, and almost certainly adds to their ability to be such a powerful political presence in the world of Black popular music.

Coming to be at the end of the 80s, under Presidents Reagan and Bush Sr., the members of Public Enemy saw Black rights and representation in the United States take a turn backwards. As a reaction to this, Chuck D decided to make his mission to incite revolution among Black Americans and to give them information so that they may become aware of their situations with relation to White America and to learn about, and value, their own heritage and history. Beyond their role as outspoken political activists, Public Enemy also brought education to young Black, as well as non-Black, children who were unaware of important black historical figures, due to these figures' lack of representation in school curricula of the 80s and early 90s.³ Chuck D, in discussing his purpose in rapping and making aggressively political music, is quoted as saying, "My goal is to write shocking lyrics that will wake people up."⁴

The visual aesthetic of Public Enemy was of radical, militant, revolution against the status quo of White America. Led by Professor Griff, the groups' manager and "Minister of Information" (the researcher of political information for Chuck D's lyrics),

² Hank Shocklee, quoted in: Grow, Kory. "Riot on the Set: How Public Enemy Crafted The Anthem 'Fight the Power.'" *Rolling Strong Magazine*, June 30, 2014.

³ Hale, James. Public Enemy: Prophets of Rage. Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMCvWeWnsIw>. 2011, BBK, UK.

⁴ Chuck D, quoted in: Robert, Walser. "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy." *Ethnomusicology*. Vol. 39, No. 2 (Spring - Summer, 1995), p. 193

were a group of militant looking figures in combat fatigues and berets called the S1Ws. S1W stands for “Security for the First World.” This title was meant to show that the Black community was also a member of the first world and deserved to be treated as such.⁵ The S1Ws helped to present the strong, intimidating, and unified image to bolster the message of revolution. The S1Ws also served a secondary role as security for the band.

As a musical figure, Public Enemy was innovative in their use of sampled materials to build backing tracks over which to rap. The process of creating backing tracks for Public Enemy’s songs involved combining multiple samples from different funk, soul, RnB, and rock records, manipulating them and compiling them into a final track to be spun by DJ Terminator X. These backing tracks set up the necessary grooves and aesthetic for Chuck D’s, and to a lesser extent Flavor Flav’s, raps. The process has been described as, “Take[ing] snatches of recorded music and use[ing] it in a recording, creating almost an orchestra or a band with all the samples.”⁶ While many hip-hop songs of the time used only a few samples per song, Public Enemy’s songs usually had a collage of fifteen or more. The production team in charge of creating Public Enemy’s tracks was known as *The Bomb Squad*. This six member team, comprised of: Hank Shocklee; Keith Shocklee; Chuck D; Eric "Vietnam" Sadler; and Gary G-Wiz, were known for their experimental techniques in sampling and altering pre-existing audio. Chris Weingarten (a writer for such magazines as SPIN and Rolling Stone) describes some of these techniques in documentary on Public Enemy entitled *Public Enemy: Prophets of Rage*. “They broke every rule possible...If a sample wasn’t gritty enough, Hank would throw the record to the ground and rub it on the floor.”⁷ This was in the days when vinyl records were used, so dirt was a factor in the sound quality.

Fight the Power

Fight the power was a track written for director Spike Lee, as an anthem to his 1989 film, *Do the Right Thing*. Apart from being part of Lee’s soundtrack, this song was

⁵ Hale, James. Public Enemy: Prophets of Rage. Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMCvWeWnsjw>. 2011, BBK, UK.

⁶ Hale, James. Public Enemy: Prophets of Rage. Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMCvWeWnsjw>. 2011, BBK, UK.

⁷ Ibid.

also released as a single on Public Enemy's 1990 album, *Fear of a Black Planet*. This song blatantly takes on several issues regarding the racism and cultural supremacy of White America towards Black American communities, while stating multiple references to cultural and musical figures and works of the past. One of these references, as well as the inspiration for the song, according to Chuck D, was a song by the same name, released by the Isely Brothers in 1975. The Isely Brothers' tune contains the same lyrical hook as the Public Enemy song, with the words "fight the powers that be," although the two songs are extremely different in tone and musical content.

Just as with many other Public Enemy tracks, this song's backing track incorporates a barrage of samples from 19 different songs, creating a complex sound world of riffs, hits, and grooves from such artists as James Brown, The Isely Brothers, Sly and the Family Stone, Bob Marley, Afrika Bambaataa, Rick James, Public Enemy (themselves), as well as a handful of others. To add to their wide array of samples from previously recorded pieces of music, *Fight the Power* also includes samples of newly performed improvisations by Branford Marsalis and record scratches from Terminator X.

The track begins with a quote from the Civil Rights attorney, Thomas "TNT" Todd,⁸ "Yet our best trained, best educated, best equipped, best prepared troops refuse to fight. As a matter of fact, it's safe to say that they would rather switch than fight." The quote used in this song was originally part of a speech on Vietnam War dissenters and was a parody of a 1960s cigarette ad campaign.⁹ For *Fight the Power* the quote is set in the context of Black struggle in the US and provides a call to unification, action, and ultimately revolution from the Black American community against the oppressive White power. Following this quote, the dizzying collage of samples enters and sets up a funky groove.

The lyrical content of *Fight the Power* feel like an endless stream of references to Black cultural figures and attacks on various elements of the White accepted reality. These references serve to place this song in a lineage of musical development and racial discourse. Within the first verse of the song, there are two major historical references.

⁸ Wikipedia contributors, "Fight the Power," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Fight_the_Power&oldid=649819818

⁹ "Fight the Power: Public Enemy." Genius. <http://genius.com/1858100/Public-enemy-fight-the-power/Yet-our-best-trained-best-educated-best-equipped-best-prepared-troops-refuse-to-fight-as-a-matter-of-fact-its-safe-to-say-that-they-would-rather-switch-than-fight>.

The first is in the lyrics, “Swinging while I’m singing,” which is an homage to Malcolm X’s ‘Ballot or the Bullet’ speech,¹⁰

Any time you live in the twentieth century, 1964, and you walkin' around here singing “We Shall Overcome,” the government has failed us. This is part of what’s wrong with you do too much singing. Today it’s time to stop singing and start swinging.¹¹

The second major reference is, “Our freedom of speech is freedom or death,” which Chuck D states is based on ideas from Bob Marley and Fredrick Douglas about how “if there is no struggle, there is no progress”¹² However, the line also bears resemblance to the original slogan of the French-Revolution, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, or Death.”¹³ Figures 1-3 show lyrical breakdowns of references, as well as interpretations of each of the verses within the song.

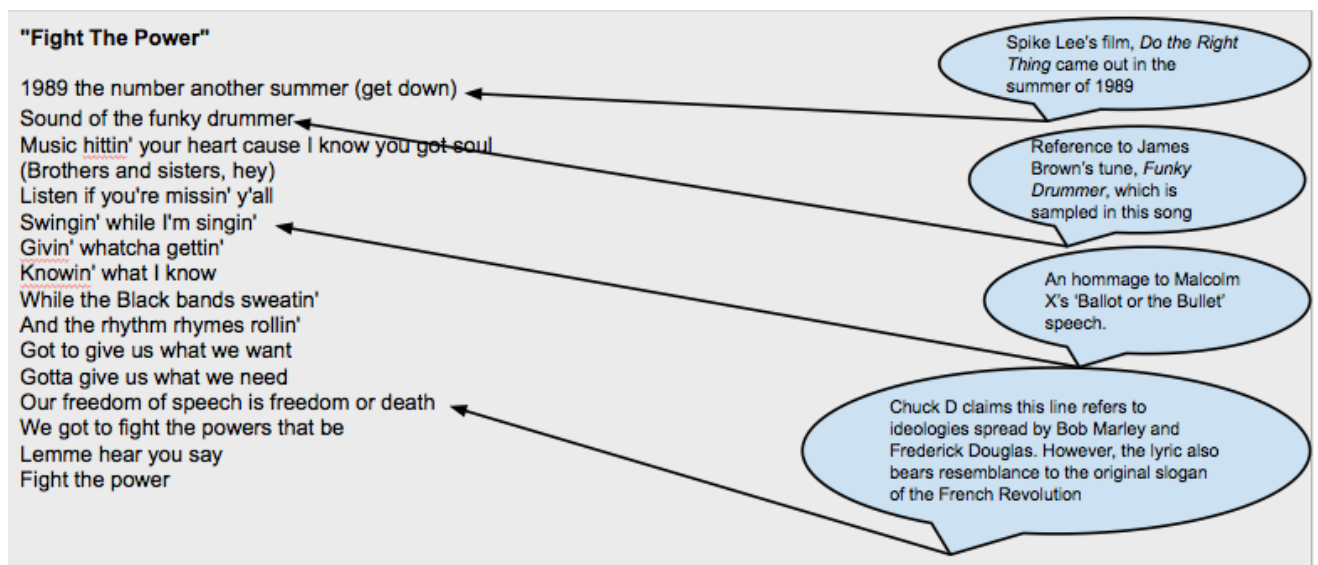


Figure 1

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Say it Plain, Say it Loud - American RadioWorks (Say it Plain, Say it Loud - American RadioWorks)
<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/mx.html>

¹² Chuck D, quoted in: Grow, Kory. “Riot on the Set: How Public Enemy Crafted The Anthem ‘Fight the Power.’” *Rolling Strong Magazine*, June 30, 2014.

¹³ “Fight the Power: Public Enemy.” Genius. <http://genius.com/1858100/Public-enemy-fight-the-power/Yet-our-best-trained-best-educated-best-equipped-best-prepared-troops-refuse-to-fight-as-a-matter-of-fact-its-safe-to-say-that-they-would-rather-switch-than-fight>.

The second verse contains a one major historical reference, “My beloved let’s get down to business.” This is a nod to Martin Luther King Jr.’s idea of a beloved community, which was a fully integrated community of love, justice, and brotherhood.¹⁴ Another primary reference within the second verse is the line, “Yo bum rish the show!” This is a self-referential line for Public Enemy. Their debut album in 1987 was titled “Yo! Bum Rush the Show.”

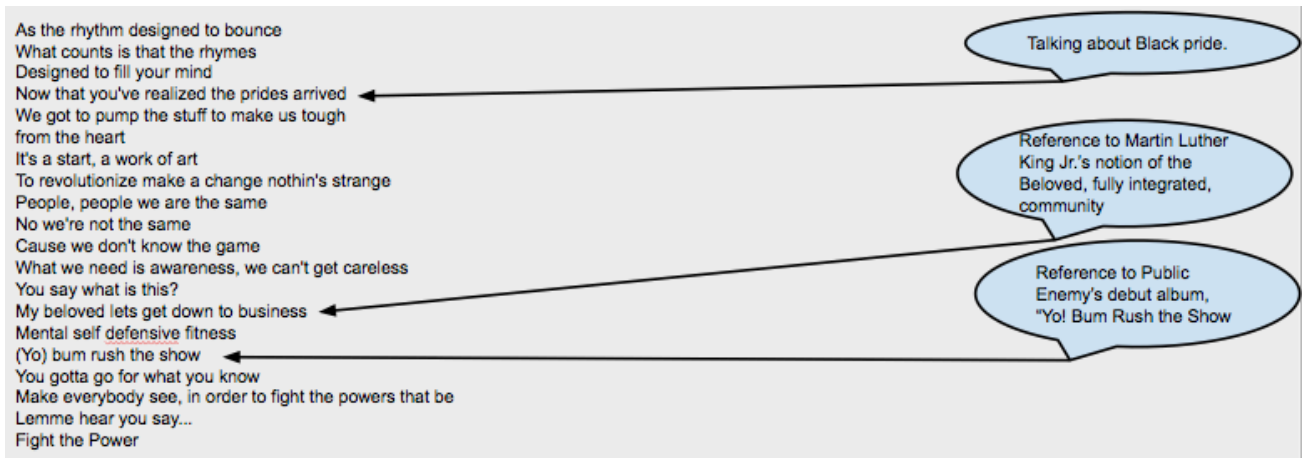


Figure 2

The third verse is perhaps the most incendiary in that it not only draws on historical Black figures the past, but it also seeks to tear down notions of authenticity surrounding Elvis, John Wayne, and Bobby McFerrin. The opening line of this verse, directed towards Elvis, is repeated three times, “Elvis was a hero to most, But he never meant shit to me you see, Straight up racist that sucker was, Simple and plain, Mother fuck him and John Wayne.” In a Rolling Stone interview, Chuck D comments on his intent with such strong language towards these American pop culture icons.

Elvis and John Wayne were the icons of America. And they kind of got head-and-shoulder treatment over everybody else. It's not that Elvis was not a talented dude and incredible in his way, but I didn't like the way that he was talked about all the time, and the pioneers [of rock & roll], especially at that time, weren't talked about at all... But as far as "motherfuck him and John Wayne"... yeah, fuck John Wayne to this minute [laughs]. John Wayne is "Mr. Kill All the Indians and Everybody Else

¹⁴ Ibid.

Who's Not Full-Blooded American." The lyric was assassinating their iconic status so everybody doesn't feel that way.¹⁵

The other major cultural takedown in this verse is the line, "Don't worry be happy was a number one jam, Damn if I say it you can slap me right here." This criticism is made in reference to Bobby McFerrin's song, *Don't Worry Be Happy*. The attitude expressed by McFerrin's song is in direct opposition to the idea of a disenfranchised group of people needing to push for revolution. If people are happy and not worried, they are not discontent with the oppression coming from above. "'Don't Worry Be Happy' doesn't apply to protests. If you're not worried and you're happy, you're like, why protest? Not everybody's gonna feel like that."¹⁶

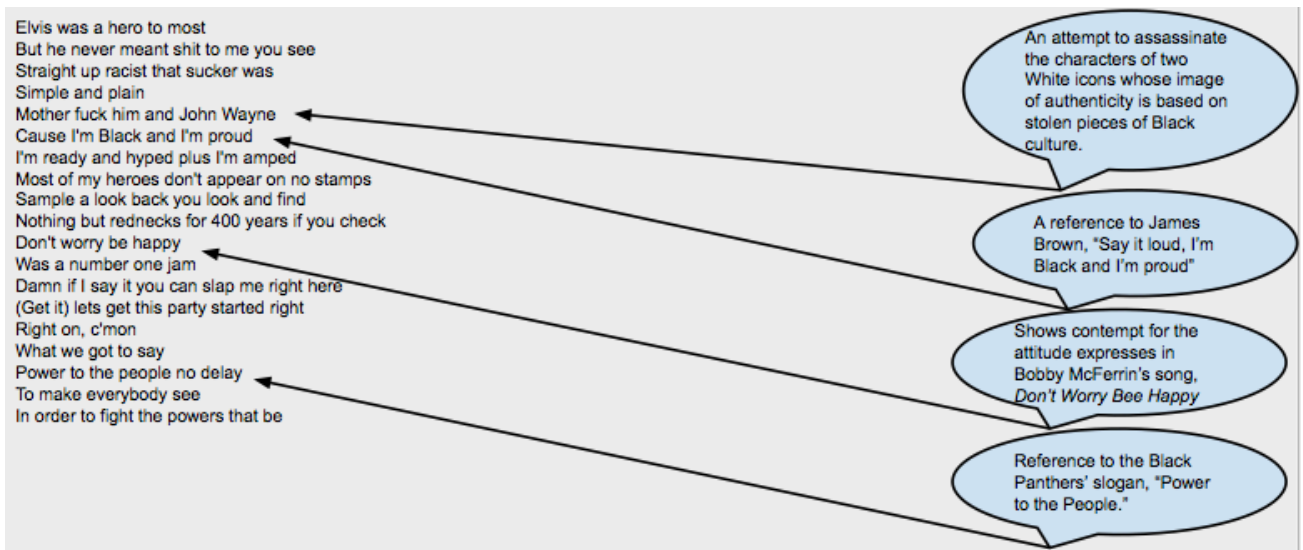


Figure 3

Fight the Power, and by extension all of Public Enemy's work, is a pivotal piece of hip-hop that expanded the world of popular music technologically, in its innovative use of sampling machines and sound processing, lyrically, in its blatant call to revolution while dethroning undeserving White historical icons, and aesthetically in its militant style of rapping and choreography (in the music video). The work of this band is incredibly important in the movement of Black artists and activists to be able to speak out with strength without needing to appear gentle or subservient to a White authority.

¹⁵ Chuck D, quoted in: Grow, Kory. "Riot on the Set: How Public Enemy Crafted The Anthem 'Fight the Power.'" *Rolling Strong Magazine*, June 30, 2014.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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