

WINNER OF THE  
**American Book Award**  
PICADOR

# Can't Stop Won't Stop

**Jeff Chang**  
Introduction by  
DJ Kool Here



A HISTORY OF THE  
HIP-HOP  
GENERATION



The making of the Enemy, 1988.

Photo © Michael Benabib/Retna LTD.

12.

## What We Got to Say

### Black Suburbia, Segregation and Utopia in the Late 1980s

*Ay uh we didn't get our forty acres and a mule but we did get you, C.C.*

—George Clinton

*Long Island, where I got 'em wild and  
That's the reason they're claiming that I'm violent*

—Chuck D

"Def Jam is the ultimate suburban record label," wrote music critic Frank Owen in one of the earliest articles on Public Enemy. He argued that Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin were creating "the first Black music that hasn't had to dress itself up in showbiz glamour and upwardly mobile mores in order to succeed." They were leading the battle "against the gentrification of black music."<sup>1</sup> Significantly, Simmons, Run DMC and LL Cool J were from home-owning Queens, and Rubin, Original Concept and Public Enemy were from "the well-to-do beach communities of Long Island."

Owen quoted Public Enemy's lead rapper, Chuck D, an intimidatingly articulate guy whose eyes always seemed hidden beneath the brim of his baseball cap. "Raps from the suburbs are a little more broad," Chuck said. "They don't have the closed-in focus like inner-city raps. In the suburbs you can rap about regular everyday life like going to the park and taking a swim. The rest of America can relate to that."

But Public Enemy's art would always belie easy sociology. Public Enemy's second single, "You're Gonna Get Yours," was Chuck's ode to his 98 Olds, "the ultimate homeboy car!"—a theme as American as The Beach Boys' "Little Deuce

Coupe." Yet the song was also about facing down racial profiling with Black posse power, an act of defiance set within the historical context of Robert Moses's expressway-fueled segregation and Levittown's racial covenants. Chuck himself would never rap about going to the park or taking a swim. The suburbs that birthed Def Jam's cultural vanguard were no white-bread New Frontier futurama.

### The Black Belt and the Resegregation of Long Island

After World War II, African Americans began moving to the suburbs of Queens. Soon what would become known as "the Black Belt" spilled past Queens's eastern borders into Long Island's Nassau and Suffolk Counties. By the 1970s, it stretched from Merrick and Freeport through Roosevelt to Hempstead.

"Long Island represented an outpost for many New Yorkers trying to escape what had become the ravages of urban America in the '60s," says Bill Stephney. "White ethnics—Italians, European Jews, Irish—were all moving out from their various sectors of New York City to escape Blacks and Latinos. The thing is the working to middle-class Black generation living in the Bed-Stuys and the Parkchesters, the Bronx and Harlem, also wanted the same thing. Raise their kids with backyards and birds. The quote unquote American dream."

The core of what would become Public Enemy—Carlton "Chuck D" Ridenhour, Bill Stephney, Hank "Shocklee" Boxley, William "Flavor Flav" Drayton, Richard "Professor Griff" Griffin and Harry "Allen" McGregor—were all born between 1958 to 1961, and had moved to the Black Belt by the early '70s. 1980 census data showed that over 40 percent of white New Yorkers lived in the suburbs, but only 8 percent of Black New Yorkers did.<sup>2</sup> In other words, they were part of the race's "talented tenth," the very embodiment of the brightest hopes of integrationists.

Bill's father, Ted Stephney, had been a Jackie Robinson of sorts, joining the staff of *Sports Illustrated* magazine in 1954 and eventually rising to become the magazine's first Black editor. In 1965, he moved his family from Harlem to Hempstead. The Stephneys were pioneers on their block, one of three Black families among about forty whites. More Black families moved in, but in practice, integration never worked the way that civil rights activists had hoped.

In 1966, integration orders were issued by New York State education offi-

cial for Freeport, Glen Cove, Roosevelt and Amityville. These communities suddenly looked more attractive to Black homebuyers. White real estate agents descended on white homeowners to encourage them to sell their homes and "upgrade" to new developments to the north and east. By skillfully exploiting fears, real-estate agents could double their sales in a practice known as "block-busting." For all practical purposes, racism and the market ensured that these neighborhoods were "integrated" only in passing.

When Chuck's family moved from the Queensbridge projects to Roosevelt in 1969, buying their piece of the dream for the relatively affordable price of \$20,000, the number of Blacks in the neighborhood had long passed the tipping point—that unspoken ratio somewhere between 10 and 20 percent that triggered white flight. "Two years prior it was about maybe 90 percent white. When we moved in it was about 50 percent. Two years later, about 90 percent Black," he says. The oldest of three children, Chuck grew up in virtually an all-Black suburb.

Although the 1968 Fair Housing Act had banned discrimination in selling and renting homes, Stephney says, "Black folks were shown Hempstead and Roosevelt and parts of Freeport, also New Cassel." Other Long Island towns, like Wyandanch, Brentwood and Amityville—homes to the rappers Rakim Allah, EPMD and De La Soul, respectively—also became largely Black. In between, places like East Meadow, Baldwin, Rockville Centre, the fading überburb of Levittown and the sparkling "edge cities" or exurbs encircling the Black Belt to the north and east remained mostly white.

By the early 1970s, Long Island's Black Belt was firmly established. Two decades later, *Newsday* would find that illegal steering practices were still commonplace and called Long Island housing patterns "apartheid-like."<sup>3</sup> While the victories of the civil rights and Black power movements had expanded the Black middle-class, that middle-class was now just as segregated as its "underclass" counterparts were.

### Always Between: The Black Middle Class

So yes, they had made it to Long Island. But no, this wasn't the promised land. Black suburbia was a safe island in a sea of whiteness, and incontrovertible evidence of white resistance to King's dream.

Newsday found that while many of Long Island's white students attended some of the best schools in the country,

[m]ore than half of the Island's 40,000 Black public school children attend 11 districts where academic programs and resources are measurably inferior to those in white schools: They are poorly equipped, their teachers are less experienced and underpaid. Test scores are low, the dropout rate is high, few students go on to college.<sup>4</sup>

In a Newsday poll, most Blacks rated race relations as "fair" or "poor."<sup>5</sup> Three-quarters wanted to live in integrated communities. By contrast, fully 55 percent of white Long Islanders preferred to live in mostly white neighborhoods, a rate high above the national average.

Some white youths apparently shared their parents' feelings. In 1985, a cineplex in Franklin Square, a white town edging against Hempstead, opened the Run DMC vehicle, *Krush Groove*, next to the Freddy Krueger bloody-white-picket-fence flick, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and fights between Black and white youths broke out. One white teenager complained that *Krush Groove* was "attracting a Black crowd to a white town. That means trouble, especially because they come out of the movie all psyched up."<sup>6</sup> The movie was a comedy. Critics hated the movie, but no one else had ever accused it of being provocative.

White cops seemed to treat the Black suburbs as an advancing border. Although Blacks made up only 9 percent of Long Island's population, they made up over 30 percent of the arrests in Nassau and Suffolk counties, and 43 percent of suspects shot at by police. Only 2 percent of the police force was Black.<sup>7</sup> The poll found that Blacks were four times more likely than whites to distrust police.

Sociologists had begun calling places like the Black Belt "inner-ring suburbs." The housing stock was aging, housing values had leveled off, education and social services were declining and crack dealers were beginning to appear. These suburban Blacks were caught between Black poverty and white flight. They were buffers between inner-city ghettos of color and the new New Frontier of white wealth in the exurbs.

To neoconservative and neoliberal pundits, the end of integration meant it

was time for the Black race's talented tenth to take responsibility to save the race. But as journalist Ellis Cose wrote in his book *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, "The irony in such arguments is that the 'decent Black people' who will save America from the underclass, those paragons of middle-class virtue who will rescue the ghetto from violence, are themselves in a state of either silent resentment or deeply repressed rage. Taken as a group, they are at least as disaffected and pessimistic as those struggling at society's periphery."<sup>8</sup>

Living in this borderland, where everything mixed and clashed, one might be freighted with a feeling of being in-between all the time—a Duboisian double-consciousness complicated by the burden of class. But being Black and middle class could also be liberating. The Newsday poll noted what it thought to be a conundrum: "[M]ost Blacks were optimistic about the future even while believing that segregation will stay the same or increase."<sup>9</sup>

A sacred tenet of the civil rights movement had been that allowing Black families into white neighborhoods or Black students into white classrooms would lift their expectations, eliminate their alleged pathologies, and brighten their life chances. Integration was presumed to be the economic and cultural ideal for Blacks, just as assimilation was for immigrants. But while most Long Island Blacks liked the idea of integration—indeed, much more than their white counterparts—they certainly did not feel that they needed integration to succeed.

To them, the Black Belt was also an idyll, the sort of place in which Marcus Garvey's son, a doctor named Julius, could open his heart surgery practice. Whites often came to Dr. Garvey's office, took one look at him, and never returned. But this Black-owned business was not suffering, nor were many others.<sup>10</sup>

The Black Belt was culturally rich. Chuck's mother, Judy Ridenhour, formed the Roosevelt Community Theater and ran it from 1971 to 1985, mentoring a number of young actors and actresses, such as Chuck's childhood buddy, Eddie Murphy. Chuck, Hank, Eddie and Richard Griffin, were sent to study blackness on white campuses. Between 1970 and 1972, they attended a summer program at Hofstra and Adelphi universities organized and taught by Black Panthers, Black Muslims and university students, called "The Afro-American Experience," the local manifestation of the national movement for ethnic studies and Afro-American studies. The program proved instrumental in convincing Chuck and Hank to attend those still largely white universities years later.

And the Black Belt never felt far from the city. "Every weekend my family and most of our families would come back from Long Island and visit our grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins on the weekend in Harlem and in the Bronx," says Stephney. That's where the kids discovered the future culture.

"My grandmother lived in the projects in the northern Bronx where DJ Break-out basically was doing his thing in the Quadrangle," says Stephney. "I'm thirteen, fourteen. The noise that we heard my parents thought was *crime*," he laughs. Stephney was aware of the class gulf. These weekend trips offered a constant reminder of the way things *really* were, and even suggested an opportunity to be grabbed.

Stephney says, "We could sort of vicariously live out the life that our cousins were living. It was sort of like we were slumming. But then we could go back to Long Island and go to school and maybe get a couple of extra dollars from our parents to buy turntables, take some of the advantages that our cousins in Bronx River and Soundview Houses didn't have economic advantage to do."

They were products of the failure of the civil rights dream of integration, but the Black Belt youths also had access to different realities, and they had the time and space to think through and map out how to take their place in the new world.

### **The Big Street Beat Comes to Black Suburbia**

When Schoolly D's "P.S.K." hit the Black suburbs of Long Island, Harold McGregor and Hank Boxley were two clerks in dead-end entry-level jobs at a fading department store called TSS. They were bored, unhappy and underemployed. They stole time to discuss the hottest new rap single and dream of the future.

By night, Boxley was a famous DJ, the Afrika Bambaataa of Long Island. In 1974, he had started doing shows as a teenager at the Roosevelt Youth Center. Now his mobile DJ unit, Spectrum City, was one of the best-known sound systems in the Black Belt. But he had doubts about how far it could all go.

At one point, Spectrum City had been in the right place at the right time. In the mid-1970s, the teenagers of Queens's Black middle-class were building the biggest sound systems yet seen in the boroughs, putting scads of funk cover bands out of work. Long Island DJ crews followed soon after. Spectrum City and

its rivals, Pleasure, King Charles, and the Infinity Machine, rocked community centers, roller rinks, Elks Club and hotel ballrooms, and then moved to a bigger, more attractive base, the area's universities, including Adelphi, C. W. Post and Boxley's alma mater, Hofstra. Soon, folks came from as far away as the Queens neighborhoods of Jamaica and Hollis to check out the campus parties.

Carlton Ridenhour began writing rhymes after the blackout of 1977, inspired by cassettes he had encountered while working summer jobs in Manhattan. He and Hank both came of age just as the nascent Long Island scene hit a transition point in 1978 and 1979. While the hip-hop core in the city was growing up and moving away from the big street beat, a young Long Island hip-hop constituency was forming. Spectrum City was at the center of a new energy.

But their flyers were wack. Ridenhour was at Adelphi studying graphic design. He stepped up to Hank to offer to redesign their flyers. "Hank looked at me like I was crazy," he says, and nothing came of the request.

By September 1979, Boxley was convinced he needed a permanent MC to front Spectrum City. One night at the end of an open mic session at Adelphi's Thursday Night Throwdown, a booming voice turned Shocklee's head. Ridenhour, it seemed, had other talents.

In fact he had the kind of voice that cut through brick walls. He had patterned himself after DJ Hollywood, DJ Smalls and Eddie Cheeba, disco rap DJs whose greatest skill lay in moving their crowds. "To get the party crowd amped, to get them hyped?" says Stephney, "Chuck D was one of the greatest party MCs of all time."

"When they got to 'Love Is the Message' or especially when they got to 'Good Times,' you had people lining up on the mic trying to get down. And me, I would just get on the mic just to shut people up, because I just didn't want to hear nine million people on the mic," Ridenhour recalls. "And when he found it was me, the same guy with the flyers, he was like, 'What the fuck! You from Roosevelt! Why don't you get down with me?'"

As Ridenhour pondered the decision, "Rapper's Delight" came out. The decision was sealed. He took over flyer design duties and became the rapper "Chuckie D." He began wearing his Spectrum City jacket around campus. He landed a daily cartoon in the school paper and called the Pedro Bell-styled strip, "Tales of the Skind." In it, Spectrum City became a crew of superheroes

who regularly saved the world from Reagan the "King of the 666," and a host of lesser villains.

Harold McGregor wasn't much of a party-goer. His Jamaican parents were strivers who had moved to Costa Rica, then Brooklyn, and finally to Freeport. He had grown up a devout Seventh-Day Adventist and gone to a boarding school in upper Pennsylvania. At Adelphi, he came upon his future by accident. On the first day in an animation class, he sat next to a guy who was doodling. Struck dumb, he leaned over to tell Chuck he was a big fan of his work. ("I still am," he chuckles.) They teamed up to do an animated video set to Malcolm McLaren's "She's Looking Like a Hobo." In a few years, McGregor would be calling himself Harry Allen, Hip-Hop Activist and Media Assassin.

Bill Stephney came to Adelphi on an Urban League-sponsored communications scholarship that he had won by writing an essay on why more Blacks were needed in the media industry. Stephney had gone to Spectrum City parties as a youngster and now had a Monday night hip-hop show at the campus radio station, WBAU. The small Garden City liberal arts college was a predominantly white commuter campus. Most of the 10 percent of the student body that was African-American came from outside the area. So when Stephney spotted Chuck D sporting his Spectrum City jacket in the school cafeteria, he couldn't believe it. Stephney soon asked Chuck and Hank to join his radio show.

Stephney's scholarship had included a coveted internship at the trend-setting rock station, WLIR-FM. Armed with a wealth of radio tricks from WLIR and the famous Spectrum City crew, he began transforming a 300-watt station into a contender for rap-hungry ears on Strong Island. He became program director in 1982, and gave Chuck and Hank a Saturday night rap show, the "Super Spectrum Mix Hour." Harry was a frequent visitor.

It was the beginning of a long, some say fated, friendship. They did not fit in with the Black fraternity and sorority scene, full of bougie wannabes who looked down their noses on hip-hop. They mixed more easily with the white, mullet-haired Long Island freaks that hung around the radio station.

"We were the rebels," says Stephney, "and hip-hop was everything to us. Everything, all culture, all western civilization flowed through Bam, Herc, and Flash. We weren't trying to hear anything."

Many people remember their old homies by the adventures they shared. Chuck, Bill, Hank, and Harry talk about the intense debates they had. Every

topic—the aesthetics of Schoolly D, the comparative emotional qualities of various basslines, the taste of White Castle cheeseburgers, the Mets and the Yankees and Jets and the Giants and the Knicks, Vanessa Williams's Miss America fiasco, Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign—was up for grabs.

To Allen, hanging with the crew was an advanced rap seminar. To Stephney, it was a salon reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance. To the authorities, it was something else. One late night after a gig as they partied and argued in the parking lot of a White Castle, a police helicopter and a fleet of Nassau County cop cars swooped down and surrounded them. There were reports that a riot was going on.

### **Harder Intellect**

Rap crews popped up all over the area, and many found their way into the WBAU-Spectrum City nexus. Stephney added Adelphi classmate Andre "Dr. Dre" Brown and his man, T-Money, who had a crew called Original Concept, to the BAU roster. Dre later took over Stephney's show and his program director duties, and gave a show to a bizarre, classical piano-playing, jheri-curved, all-black-wearing character from Freeport named William "Rico" Drayton who called himself the MC DJ Flavor.

A friend from Roosevelt, Richard Griffin, director of a martial arts school and a Nation of Islam devotee, came in to handle Spectrum City's security with a team he called Unity Force. Chuck's 98 Posse, a group of hard-rocks and hustlers from around the way, rolled to the parties in their tricked-out Oldsmobiles. The two crews—one representing form and discipline, the other street wildness—had that Zulu/Gestapo dynamic going on. They didn't always get along, but they came together under Spectrum City.

Chuck and Hank's radio drops topped WBAU's request lists. Run DMC came down from Hollis to do their first New York radio interview and left huge fans of the Spectrum City crew. Tapes of the shows spread into New York City, and they compared favorably with Mr. Magic's Rap Attack on WBLS, Eddie Cheeba's WFUV show and the World Famous Supreme Team's show on WHBI. The Spectrum City empire expanded to TV when Bill hooked up a UHF show. Hank, placing a bet on the future, rented out a space on 510 South Franklin Street in Hempstead and set up a recording studio.

They had the crew, they had the skills, they certainly had the desire. But could

a hip-hop crew break out from Long Island? There was no road map. Then the rap-loving rebels found a mentor in a young African-American studies professor and jazz drummer named Andrei Strobert.

Born in 1950, Strobert grew up in Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant and became a drumming prodigy. By the time he was in his teens, Strobert was supporting himself with music gigs through Mayor Lindsay-funded youth programs like the Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, "Har-You" for short, where he recorded his first record with fourteen other teens, the great Latin jazz album, *Har-You Percussion Group*. At eighteen, he left to tour North America. He later played with jazz mavericks Makanda Ken McIntyre and South African exile Abdullah "Dollar Brand" Ibrahim, and finally devoted himself to teaching.

The Black Arts movement had creatively and literally fed Strobert. But after the riot season of 1968, the network that sustained him began to dry up. Radio marginalized jazz. Clubs and theaters closed. Many school music programs and nonprofit youth organizations ended when government money dried up. Strobert recognized that hip-hop had come out of a traumatic break between generations, and he was now in a position to take the rap rebels back to their roots.

For two semesters, Strobert offered a class called "Black Music and Musicians." African music, he taught, was the source. It had come first; it was *first* world music, not *third* world music. Unlike many of his age, Strobert was respectful of rap music. Fats Waller, he told them, was a rapper. Louis Armstrong was a rapper. The only thing different with your rap, he told them, was that it went over a different rhythm. But even the beat wasn't new; it came from lbo rhythms, through the pulse of the New Orleans second-line. Recognize the source, he said, return to the source. Bill, Harry, Andre, and Chuck—usually back-of-the-class kind of guys—were in the front row for all of Strobert's lectures.

After class, they peppered him with questions. Strobert gave them impromptu seminars. Control your image by developing your theme, he said. All the great artists—Mahalia Jackson, Dizzy Gillespie, James Brown—had a theme, and when the theme was over, they moved to a new one. Tell a story, he said. A rap means nothing if it tells no story. The students worried that critics were calling rap a passing fad and record companies might lose interest. Strobert laughed sagely.

"Don't believe the hype," he told them. Strobert now says, "I did not think they were really listening to me. I really didn't."

Understanding how they fit into the historical continuum gave Chuck, Harry, and Bill confidence, and reinforced their impatience with the state of hip-hop. Crack had ushered in an era of conspicuous wealth and raw violence, and even the slang reflected the change. It was all about getting ill, cold getting dumb. Chuck complained, "It's like being content with being stupid."<sup>11</sup>

When the media excoriated Run DMC for the gang violence at the 1986 Long Beach concert, Chuck got really angry. "Shit, if they ever come to me with that bullshit," he said, "I'll have some shit to say that they won't want to fuck with. I'll give them the exact reasons that bullshit like that happens."<sup>12</sup>

The times indeed called for someone new to flip "It's Like That" and "Proud to Be Black" the way those records had flipped "The Message" and "Planet Rock." But even more, the times required a harder kind of intellect.

Bill Stephney challenged Chuck, "Why don't you be the one?" Chuck wasn't so sure. But then he was writing as if he already had the freedom to say what folks couldn't: "I'm a MC protector, US defector, South African government wrecker. Panther power—you can feel it in my arm. Look out y'all, cause I'm a timebomb tickin'!"

### **False Start**

The tempos were slowing down, the style changing. Run DMC's "It's Like That" and "Sucker MCs" shifted the game again—harder beats with harder rhymes that gave no quarter to anyone not already down. Hollis, Queens, was in the house, and the Spectrum City crew hoped Long Island could be next.

Chuck and Hank had always wanted to make a record. When the World's Famous Supreme Team broke out of WHBI in 1982, they began thinking it was possible. Two years later, Chuck and Hank landed a single deal with the dance indie, Vanguard. Harry Allen says he was convinced that "as soon as the rest of the world heard this music, we were just gonna take over."

The Spectrum City single duplicated the split of "It's Like That"/"Sucker MCs." On the A-side, "Lies." Chuck and fellow Spectrum City rapper Butch Cassidy went topical. Opening with the notes of "Hail to the Chief," the song seemed to promise a vivid deconstruction of Reagan. Instead it was a generic

dis record, delivered over a beat derived from Arthur Baker, James Brown, and Larry Smith. Chuck's voice thundered like Melle Mel's second coming, but lyrically this was no "Message."

Instead, the B-side won. "Check Out the Radio" was based on one of Chuck's famous radio drops. Hank and his brother Keith assembled a beat based on a b-boy perennial, Juicy's "Catch a Groove," and took a risk by pitching it down. If the trend was to decrease the tempo and pump up the bass, the Shocklees wanted it slower and lower. In a year, as if tipping their baseball caps to them, Def Jam would drop two more B-side trunk crushers—Original Concept's "Pump That Bass/Live (Get a Little Stupid . . . HO!)" and the Beastie Boys' "Slow and Low."

The track hinted at Chuck's talent for deep signifying. He introduced Hank Boxley as Hank Shocklee, a very smart dis of the early-twentieth-century physi-cist and eugenicist William Shockley. But the crew still had not harnessed its strengths—Chuck's wordplay and presence, Hank and Keith's experimentalist drive, the crew's restless, race-conscious, collective intelligence. In December of that year, they found the prototype in a buzzsaw radio drop set to a loop of the intro to The JB's "Blow Your Head" and called, after James Brown's anti-heroin lament, "Public Enemy #1." But by then the single had stiffed. Chastened by the experience, the crew retreated to lick their wounds.

So now in the break room in the bowels of a dying department store in the middle of Still Nowhere, Hip-Hop America, Hank and Harry talked Schoolly D's "P.S.K."—repping Philly—with a mix of awe, envy and discouragement. "I think there was a lot of disappointment," says Harry. "It was like, we could be doing this the rest of our lives—working at TSS, handing out our fliers, having people come to our club, nothing really happening. And it would all just be a minor footnote somewhere."

Chuck graduated and helped land Flavor a job delivering furniture for his father's business. Then he moved on to work as a messenger for a photo company, scribbling raps on notepads on long drives into the city, letting WLIB's mix of Black-talk radio and booming beats fire his imagination.

The bills at their Spectrum City office in Hempstead were piling up. Their club and party audiences were maturing and moving on. The "Super Spectrum Mix Hour" was coming to an end.

In 1985, Original Concept signed to Def Jam. The label president Rick Rubin was calling Chuck's house to see if he would agree to be their rapper. "Mom!" Chuck would yell from his room, "Tell him I'm not home. Tell him I don't wanna make no stupid goddamn records!"<sup>13</sup> Once bitten, twice shy was the way he and Hank felt about record labels. They had already built a local empire by themselves. What next? At the end of long wearying days, they talked about starting their own indie record label.

Bill Stephney graduated and began working in the radio world, establishing a reputation in the record industry. Harry left for Brooklyn to finish his degree. Both of them were surrounded by the music, which seemed to be undergoing tectonic stylistic shifts every few weeks. The city seemed charged with importance—so many ideas, so much ferment. People were talking about things that mattered. Change was in the air. Something had to happen.

### **The Biggest Crossover**

At Def Jam and Rush Artists Management, Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin's crew had big dreams.

Bill Adler was one of Russell's first hires. When he signed on to work at Rush Management and Def Jam in 1984 at thirty-two years of age, he was older than everyone on the tiny staff, twice as old as LL Cool J. A third-generation Jewish American from the Detroit suburb of Southfield, Adler had arrived at the University of Michigan in the feverish fall of 1969 and met a local hero, a self-described "cultural radical" named John Sinclair.

Sinclair was part of a generation of post-World War II whites, including Allen Ginsberg, Norman Mailer and Bob Dylan, who wanted to root themselves in what they thought was the special authenticity of African-American culture. To Sinclair, Black musicians like James Brown, John Coltrane, and Sun Ra offered a model of liberation for young whites. After Black Panther cofounder Bobby Seale told Sinclair whites could not do anything for Black people but to fix their square parents, he was inspired to form the White Panthers and draft their ten-point program. The first point was a full endorsement of the Black Panthers' program. The second read, "Total assault on the culture by any means necessary, including rock 'n' roll, dope and fucking in the streets." For Adler, who had spent his teen nights under the covers listening to blues, Motown, and "freedom



jazz" on local radio, joining Sinclair's funkified guitar army of white radicals made perfect sense.

After Sinclair left Ann Arbor, so did Adler, moving first to Boston. Fired from his DJ job at WBCN for playing Joe Tex, bored with his pop music critic job at the *Boston Herald*, Adler left for New York City in 1980 with a box of brand new rap records under his arm. He met Russell Simmons while doing a story on rap for *People* magazine and they became fast friends. When Adler approached Simmons to try to sell him an anti-Reagan rap intended for Kurtis Blow, Simmons demurred but hired Adler to do publicity for his acts. Adler immediately understood what set Simmons apart from the Black-owned indie pioneers like Enjoy and Sugar Hill. "He was never gonna just be a guy who operated within the confines of Black cultural institutions," Adler says. "He was gonna take this Black culture and promote it everywhere."

Simmons was twenty-six, an extroverted, infectious son of civil rights activists, less concerned with political parties than with being the center of the party. Even during his brief stint as warlord of a Queens chapter of the Seven Immortals, his thing had been bumrushing school dances and concerts. No social crowd ever gathered that Simmons could not work his way into the middle of. He had a sixth sense for the popular.

When Simmons met Rick Rubin, a twenty-one-year-old, gnomish Jewish longhair with Bambaataa-sized tastes in music and a Sinclairian talent for fomenting white teen cultural rebellion, he found the perfect partner. Rubin had grown up on Long Island playing metal and punk, and became a rap devotee through the WBAU shows and Mr. Magic. When he moved to Manhattan to attend New York University, regular trips to Blue's "Wheels of Steel" night at Negril and The Roxy sealed his love for hip-hop.

Rubin had a hardcore aesthetic. "I think Rick helped radicalize Russell's rhetoric," says Adler. "He used to say, 'We're gonna pull the mainstream in our direction simply on the basis of the integrity of the records themselves. We are going to win with no compromise.'"

Radio had long calcified into racialized formats—Album-Oriented Rock for whites, Urban Contemporary for Blacks. Rap was the most exciting new music to come along in years, but there was no room for it in either. MTV had burst onto the scene by championing rock and new wave, and all but excluding Black

artists. Only after Columbia reportedly threatened to boycott the young network in 1983 did MTV begin airing Michael Jackson videos. Winning meant desegregating radio and music video.

Not long after the ink dried on Def Jam's contract with Columbia in 1985, Rubin hired Bill Stephney as the label's first full-time staffer. Rubin was a Spectrum City fan. But perhaps more important was the fact that Stephney played guitar, was from Long Island, and dug AC/DC the way Rubin did Schoolly D. After graduating from Adelphi, Bill Stephney had done a short, influential stint at the College Music Journal, launching its "Beat Box" urban chart and mapping what would become a powerful network of rap radio shows. Stephney had also maintained his old white rock radio contacts, which later proved crucial to Def Jam's success.

Russell was a Black executive able to bridge Black and white tastes like no one since Berry Gordy. He hired Adler. Rick was a Jewish music producer who understood how profoundly Herc, Bam, and Flash's insights could reshape all of pop music. He hired Stephney. The staff for Rush and Def Jam was uniquely suited and highly motivated to pull off a racial crossover of historic proportions.

Bill Stephney convinced his friends at rock radio to stay on Run DMC's cover of Aerosmith's "Walk This Way," even when the call-out research showed racist, "get the niggers off the air" feedback. He then succeeded in propelling the Beastie Boys onto rap radio, a feat no less difficult. By the end of 1986, their strategy had been perfectly executed. The Black group crossed over to white audiences with *Raising Hell*, then the white group crossed over to Black audiences with *Licensed to Ill*.

Forget busing, Adler thought. Hip-hop was offering a much more radical, much more successful voluntary desegregation plan. It was bleeding-edge music with vast social implications. "Rap reintegrated American culture," Adler declared. Not only was hip-hop *not* a passing novelty, the ex-Sinclairite told journalists, it was culturally monumental, and Run DMC and the Beastie Boys were the new revolutionaries. "Young, smart, fast, hard," he called them. "Lean and winning."

Def Jam's epochal feat of pop integration unleashed a rap signing blitz. Majors realized that rap music was not a fad, and they were far behind the curve. Their Black music departments had become calcified, geared toward promoting

expensive R&B acts that appealed to an upwardly mobile audience quickly losing its trend-setting power. By the end of 1986, and continuing for the better part of a decade, majors moved in the other direction, trying to sign every rap act they could. It was one of those rare moments in pop music history where major-label disorientation left the door open for any visionary to walk through and do something radical.

At the same time, the teens weaned on Herc and Bam and Flash were growing up, and they felt they had something to say. They simply needed to figure out what that something was.

### **Becoming the Enemy**

When Stephney left CMJ, he had written in his last column that he hoped to develop a group that was equal parts Run DMC and The Clash. He wanted to be a part of making the rap *Sandinista!* Back in Hempstead, at 510 South Franklin, he, Hank, and Chuck were at a crossroads. If they were going to do something, Hank says, "We had to create our own myth for ourselves."

But while their homies from Hollis were taking over the world, Spectrum City had run out of steam. Chuck was about to turn twenty-six and had little intention of remaining a rapper. Rick Rubin was still pestering Chuck's mother with phone calls. Chuck was thinking, "Yo I need to make some radical moves. And that's not radical enough." He wanted to get a job as a commercial radio personality.

Rubin joked that if Stephney couldn't get his best friend signed to Def Jam, he would have to be fired. So Bill offered Chuck and Hank a meeting with Rubin. The two brought in a four-song demo which included "Public Enemy #1," "The Return of Public Enemy" (which would become "Miuzi Weighs a Ton"), "Sophisticated Bitch," and "You're Gonna Get Yours." Rubin immediately offered Chuck an album deal. "I was like, well I'm not going to go in there by myself," Chuck says. After he negotiated to include Flavor Flav and Hank, the deal was done, and he set about finding a place for the entire crew.

As he had done with "Tales of the Skind," he created alter-egos for each of them. Richard Griffin took the name "Professor Griff" and the title that Eldridge Cleaver had held in the Black Panthers, "Minister of Information." Unity Force, the Spectrum City's security team run by Griffin, were renamed the Security of the First World (S1Ws). Hank assembled the musical team, starting with his

brother Keith, also known as "Wizard K-Jee." Army fatigue-wearing Eric "Vietnam" Sadler—like Stephney and Flavor Flav—was a veteran of the Long Island funk cover-band scene and was learning to program drums and synthesizers. Spectrum City DJ Norman Rogers became "Terminator X." Paul Shabazz and the DJ for the Kings of Pressure, Johnny "Juice" Rosado, also made key contributions. Hank's team became known as the Bomb Squad.

Most important, Chuck, Hank and Bill had to come up with a concept for the crew. Spectrum City was done. But they had yet to come up with a new name and concept.

Bill's dream was for the group to make the cover of the *Rolling Stone*. "Let's make every track political," he said. "Statements, manifestoes, the whole nine." Hank worried that kind of approach might lose them credibility with their core audience. He says, "Everyone making Hip-Hop wasn't a thug, everybody wasn't about being stupid." But, he adds, "we found that people were really against the political aspects of the music. That wasn't a slam dunk."

Characteristically, Chuck was somewhere in between. He wanted to write rhymes that were more explicit, but he says, "It was impossible to put that type of shit in your rhymes. It was like, you better rock the fucking crowd. You could throw in one line or two, like 'Reagan is bullshit.' Motherfuckers be like, 'Yeah, okay.'"

Then there was the crazy DJ MC Flavor, whom Hank had renamed Flavor Flav. Both Hank and Chuck wanted Flav to round out the crew, be the MC yin to Chuck's yang. Bill objected. "I wanted the group to be so serious, I didn't want Flavor in the group. Flavor was like a comic cut-up, so my thing was, 'Here we are trying to do some serious shit, how are we gonna fit this guy in?'" he says. "They were completely right. With Chuck being serious, with the stentorian tones, you needed a break, you needed someone to balance that or else it would have been too much."

One night while they were recording *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, Bill returned from the Def Jam offices to 510 South Franklin. On a bulletin board, Hank had written the crew's new name: "Public Enemy." Stephney smiled. The name perfectly fit their underdog love and their developing politics. He recalls thinking, "Okay, I can spin this. We're all public enemies. Howard Beach. Bernhard Goetz. Michael Stewart. The Black man is definitely the public enemy."

**Representing New Black Militancy**

A generation after COINTELPRO, Black radicalism had gone underground. Chuck's striking logo for Public Enemy—a silhouette of a young black man in a gunsight—suggested exactly why. But Public Enemy and the other crew that most represented the bumrush aesthetic, Boogie Down Productions, used their album covers to depict the return of the black radical.

P.E.'s cover for *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* and B.D.P.'s cover for *Criminal Minded* depicted the crews in dim-palled basements, readying themselves to bring black militancy back into the high noon of the Reagan day. Scott La Rock and KRS-1 were bunkered down in the Bronx with handguns, ammo belt, grenade, and brick cell phone. Whether or not they intended to, they recalled southern revolutionary Robert F. Williams's bracing 1962 Black power manifesto, *Negroes with Guns*.

In 1959, Williams, an integrationist who supported armed self-defense, was thrown out of the NAACP. But his ideas helped theorize the shift from Civil Rights nonviolence to Black Power confrontation. In 1967, Huey Newton set Williams's concept in motion, using a California law that allowed individuals to carry loaded firearms in public. His Black Panther Party began brandishing rifles at rallies in the parks and streets of Oakland. When a white legislator tried to overturn the law, the Panthers stormed into the California State Capitol and national consciousness.

Those days had been long since eclipsed by counterrevolution and crack. But Public Enemy tapped back into that urgent theatricality when they called themselves "the Black Panthers of rap." On the shadowy basement shot for the cover of *Yo! Bum rush The Show*, Chuck D was the rightstarter/"riot starter," the only one bathed in Muslim white. Professor Griff looked in from the right in a red beret. Flavor Flav leaned his hand forward as if out of DONDI's *Children of the Grave* burner to consecrate the wax. Another black hand reached down from the corner to press the turntable's Start button to begin the revolution. Across the bottom ran the punchline, perfectly pitched and in repetition: THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSIBLE . . . THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSIBLE . . . THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSIBLE . . .

Old school rappers—and most of the new schoolers, for that matter—invited comparison with entertainers like Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, Rufus

Thomas, Slim Gaillard. But Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions pointed back to the voices of Black radicalism, heard on the albums of the Watts Prophets, the Last Poets, H. Rap Brown, and Gil Scott-Heron. While the new political radicals were out in the streets and on the campuses fighting apartheid and racism, Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions repped the new cultural radical vanguard. Preparing to emerge from the darkness, they demanded to be heard as the expression of a new generation's definition of blackness.

**The New Vanguard**

The key issue of the '80s was representation. The political radicals saw overwhelming whiteness in institutions of power and fought for multiculturalism and diversity. The cultural radicals saw an ocean of negative images and tried to reverse the tide with their own visions.

From Fort Greene, a filmmaker named Spike Lee crashed through the gates of the movie industry with independently produced box-office hits, *She's Gotta Have It* and *School Daze*, unapologetic slices of Black life that refused to cater to *Superfly* blaxploitation cliches or Eddie Murphy crossover expectations. During the '70s, after the success of Melvin Van Peebles's breakthrough, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Hollywood had co-opted and finally crushed Black indie filmmaking sensibilities. In the '80s, communities of color boycotted Hollywood for the "cultural insensitivity" of films like *Fort Apache: The Bronx* and *Year of the Dragon*. But with Lee's success, Black filmmakers—including Robert Townsend, Keenen Ivory Wayans, Charles Burnett, John Singleton, Warrington and Reginald Hudlin and Allen and Albert Hughes—again received cautious studio backing.

Like Spike Lee, Chuck and his crew were ready to storm the citadel. He says, "We were all gonna bumrush the business from a bunch of different angles, be it radio, journalism, records." Chuck and Harry Allen, who had begun writing for the *Brooklyn City Sun* and *The Village Voice*, regarded mass media as inherently hostile to Black people. Allen, the "media assassin," coined the term "hip-hop activism" to describe how they could turn their culture into a weapon of ~~resistance~~.

For the hip-hop generation, popular culture became the new frontline of the struggle. While the political radicals fought a rear-guard defense against right-

wing attacks on the victories of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the cultural radicals stormed the machines of mythmaking. Their intention was not only to take their message into the media, but take over the media with their message. Pop music, rap radio, indie film, cultural journalism—these could all be staging areas for guerilla strikes.

### **Suckas Never Play Me**

After Public Enemy finished *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, Chuck came down to reconnect with Harry. Chuck was angry that, while white critics were excoriating him for his pro-Black nationalism, Black radio had remained indifferent to Public Enemy's music and message.

Black radio was a medium that survived on a paradox: integration had made it both obsolete and more necessary than ever. Before the '60s, Black radio had been a crucial space for marginalized Black voices. As the 1970s proceeded, it began to reflect the desires of a professional class trying to make good in the white world. The reactionary 1980s demanded an outlet for a resurgent rage against racism that united the middle class and the so-called underclass. But, caught up in the crossover, black radio was now afraid of being "too black." Chuck found this state of affairs maddening.

He and Harry sat down to plot an attack. The result was an article in the February 1988 issue of *Black Radio Exclusive*, an industry magazine targeted at Black music executives. In the interview, Chuck unleashed his 2,000-pound Uzi on the Black bourgeoisie. He said, "R&B teaches you to shuffle your feet, be laid back, don't be offensive, don't make no waves because, look at us! We're fitting in as well as we can!"<sup>14</sup>

Picking up a copy of *BRE*, he read it aloud: "'Favorite Car: Mercedes Sports. Favorite vacation spot: Brazil . . . Look at them! They're going for Mercedes, Audis and BMWs . . . And this is what all these boot-lickin', handkerchief-head, materialistic niggers want!"

Harry, playing the straight man, protested, "But Chuck, *BRE* is a music trade journal, not a mass circulation newspaper or magazine."

"But even so, Black radio has its responsibilities. The question they ought to be answering is, 'How we gonna make our listeners, the Black nation, rise?'" Chuck said, alluding to a never-aired rap classic by Brother D and The Collec-

tive Effort. "The juggernaut of white media never stops. We have to build a system that consistently combats and purifies that info that Black America gets through the media. Instead, Black radio is pushing a format that promises 'More Music, Less Talk,' which is the worst thing.

"The point is that there's no hard information in any of these formats. Where's the news about our lives in this country? Whether or not radio plays us, millions of people listen to rap because rap is America's TV station. Rap gives you the news on all phases of life, good and bad, pretty and ugly: drugs, sex, education, love, money, war, peace—you name it."<sup>15</sup>

In time, this idea would harden into Chuck's most famous soundbite, that rap was Black America's CNN, an alternative, youth-controlled media network that could pull a race fragmented by integration back together again. Here was the meaning of the media bumrush: to force media—Black or white—inimical to the interests of young Blacks to expose itself, and to break open a space for these voiceless to represent themselves more truthfully.

At the end of the article, in bold, read this disclaimer: "The interview with Chuck D in no way reflects the views of Columbia Records."

### **Never Walk Alone**

And so the Trojan horse rolled through the gates. Bill Adler and indie publicist Leyla Turkkkan pitched Chuck D to rock editors and writers as "the new Bob Dylan." In a year, Chuck D had probably done more interviews than any other rapper to that point. "Our interviews," Chuck says, "were better than most people's shows."

Chuck treated his mostly white interrogators as adversaries. He often mau-maued them, as if to extract a toll for every patronizing indignity and every highway robbery ever suffered by an old-schooler. He had never forgotten how the media treated Run DMC, and this antagonistic stance remained a constant for Public Enemy's first decade. When Harry Allen later became the crew's publicist, he added the additional honorific of "Director of Enemy Relations."

The British tabloid music press found this package irresistible, and with a strange mixture of fanboy irony, Frankfurt School skepticism and thinly disguised racial fear, they began calling Public Enemy the world's most dangerous band. Their music was so good it was scary. Their idea that rap should advance the

radicalism of the Black Panthers and the Black Muslims—and that the white media's role was simply to transmit these messages—was even scarier.

In fact, Public Enemy was still trying to figure out what it was about. Stephney watched from the Def Jam offices as Chuck went out on the road and had an epiphany. Chuck told a reporter, "When kids have no father image, who fulfills that role? The drug dealer in the neighborhood? Motherfucking Michael Jordan? Rappers come along and say, 'This is everything you want to be. You want to be like me, I'm your peer, and I talk to you every day.' So the kid is being raised by LL Cool J, because LL Cool J is talking to the kid more directly than his parents ever did."<sup>16</sup>

Public Enemy's worldview began with a scathing generational critique of Black America. In a 1987 interview with Simon Reynolds, Chuck laid out his view of history:

There was a complacency in the '70s after the civil rights victories of the '60s. Plus some of our leaders were killed off, others sold out or fled. There was propaganda by the state to make it seem like things had changed, a policy of tokenism elevating a few Blacks to positions of prominence, on TV shows and stuff, while the rest was held down. Blacks couldn't understand how they'd suddenly got these advantages, and so they forgot, they got lazy, they failed to teach their young what they had been taught in the '60s about our history and culture, about how *tight* we should be. And so there was a loss of *identity*—we began to think we were accepted as Americans, when in fact we *still* face a double-standard every minute of our lives.<sup>17</sup>

Public Enemy's theme was Black collectivity, the one thing that had been lost in the post-Civil Rights bourgeois individualist goldrush. Over the years, rap groups had shrunk down to duos, but Public Enemy brought the crew back. They rolled deep, because Black people always overcame through strength in numbers. The S1Ws epitomized the crew's values: strength, unity, self-defense and survival skills. They carried plastic Uzis as props to show that they were not slaves. They were in control because they were armed with knowledge. Violence became their primary, and most often misunderstood, metaphor.

Stephney says, "In dealing with the apparent day-to-day, minute-by-minute cultural power that Chuck saw Public Enemy wield, I think he truly and legitimately believed that you could create a generation of young people who had a drive and ambition to make serious change and reform within the community."

He adds, "Was it something that was mapped out by all of us at 510 South Franklin—a ten-point Panther-like plan on how we were going to take over the media? No." As the crew moved out into the world and encountered resistance from white journalists who took their symbolism on its face, they began freestyling their message. Stephney chuckles, "A good portion of Public Enemy was jazz improvisation."

### **Doing Contradiction Right**

Like Bambaataa, Chuck had been raised within his mother's embrace of Black Panther-styled revolutionary nationalism and anticolonial Pan-Africanism. On his first presidential election ballot, he voted for Gus Hall and Angela Davis, the Communist Party ticket. In rhyme, he boasted that he was "rejected and accepted as a communist." He told a writer from the glossy teen zine *Right On!*: "We are talking about bringing back the Black Panther movement and Communism. That's dead serious. That's going a little too deep, but that's our edge."<sup>18</sup>

Yet he had also been raised on James Brown's "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)," and "I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing (Open the Door, I'll Get It Myself)," anthems that seemed not only to speak to the Black Panther's Sacramento takeover, but to the rise of the Booker T. Washington-like Black conservative movement that would push for economic self-sufficiency and the end of civil-rights programs like affirmative action. When Public Enemy was opening for the Beastie Boys, Professor Griff played cassettes of Farrakhan and Khallid Abdul Muhammad on the tour bus. Chuck listened closely. Here were the ultimate public enemies.

So Public Enemy's worldview did not adhere to traditional politics. Stephney, for instance, worked closely with civil rights organizations, and closely watched mainstream politics, but refused to join any political party. As Minister of Information, Griff told reporters Public Enemy was drawing on the thinking of Malcolm X, Mao Zedong, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Moammar Khaddafi, Winnie and Nelson Mandela and Minister Farrakhan.<sup>19</sup> As for Chuck, a self-declared

communist captivated by Farrakhan, he says now, "I don't know what I was. I definitely wasn't a capitalist. And I definitely wasn't American."

In all of the crew's frequent discussions of politics, Stephney says, ideology had never come into question. Stephney admits, "In retrospect, I wish we had legitimate discourse about economic systems and what made sense and what didn't." In his autobiography, Chuck did not describe his core philosophy in terms of ideology but instead something close to fraternal responsibility.

What Flavor believes and what Griff believes may be two different things, but they were both a part of Public Enemy. What Drew believes and what James Allen believes may be two different things. It's my job to bring it to a center point and say what's true for all of us. "We're Black, we fight for our people and we respect our fellow human beings." Once you start getting into tit-for-tat rhetoric, then you fall into a sea full of contradiction.<sup>20</sup>

Stephney says, "Chuck sees much of what he does through the lens of sports. Teams. Teamwork. Working together as much as you possibly can until it may become too difficult on certain issues." The concept of the public enemy brought together Huey Newton and Elijah Muhammad, Assata Shakur and Sister Ava Muhammad. Teamwork—an NBA-era take on Black collectivity—was a manifestation of Black love.

But white and Black critics alike began to bait Chuck and Griff, especially on questions of racial separatism, homosexuality and militarism. Griff and Chuck often responded with lines straight from Farrakhan's and Khallid Abdul Muhammad's speeches. It was agit-prop, theater, call and response. It got the desired rise out of journalists.

They read the crew's militaristic symbolism, Chuck's aggressive approach, Griff's sometimes bizarre pronouncements and Public Enemy's encompassing embrace of Black Marxism and Black Islam as revealing of undercurrents of violent fascism. After interviewing Chuck and Griff, Simon Reynolds wrote:

Ahem. What can I say? Rectitude in the face of chaos. An admiration for Colonel Khadaffi ("Blacks in America didn't know who to side with"). Harmonious totality. No faggots. Uniform and drill. It all sounds quite logical

and needed, the way they tell it. And it's all very very dodgy indeed.

If there's one thing more scary than a survivalist, it's a whole bunch of survivalists organised into a regiment . . . Fortunately, Public Enemy and Security of The First World are sufficiently powerless ("52 and growing") to remain fascinating to us pop swots, rather than disturbing . . . Let's hope it stays that way.<sup>21</sup>

Despite abhorring the crew's politics, the British music press took Public Enemy seriously enough to declare *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* one of the best albums of the year. Back home it was another story.

One key critic, John Leland, who wrote for *SPIN* and *The Village Voice*, set the tone early, ducking the group's politics entirely when he confessed that he found Chuck boring. "I like a good time," he wrote, "and when Flavor Flav says he's got girls on his jock like ants on candy, or threatens to scatter suckers' brains from here to White Plains . . . yo that's when I'm hooked."<sup>22</sup>

Stung by the criticism, Chuck told a British reporter he had gone looking for Leland at an industry reception to "fuck him up bad."<sup>23</sup> Later Chuck wrote "Don't Believe the Hype" and "Bring the Noise," dumping his critics in the same wastebin as racist cops, corrupt conservatives and Black radio programmers. It was the first shot in what would become an increasingly vituperative relationship with the American press.

But the group also agreed to play a National Writer's Union benefit with Sonic Youth to support the freelancers' bitter fight for recognition against *The Village Voice's* management. "They do contradiction right," wrote *Voice* columnist R. J. Smith, "like publicly dissing music crits for what they've said about Public Enemy and then coming off by far the most militant in their solidarity with writers. Like quoting Malcolm X and saying Blacks deserve \$250 billion in reparations and playing a benefit on the 18th for Jesse."<sup>24</sup>

### **The New School Rises**

None of this press stuff would matter much if they didn't sell records. And at that point, the album had barely sold 100,000 copies. Against the Def Jam/Rush roster—with Run DMC, Whodini, LL Cool J and the Beastie Boys all pushing platinum-plus—it was a huge disappointment.

The record did decently in the south and the midwest, but New York City

wasn't feeling the group. Melle Mel heckled the crew at their first show at the Latin Quarter. Mr. Magic played "Public Enemy #1" only once, making a point of saying that he hated it. And in Queens, Magic's DJ, Marlon "Marley Marl" Williams was making them look played-out with his sonic innovations.

Marley had been a studio apprentice to Arthur Baker, watching him struggle with the early, prohibitively expensive Fairlight sampler. In 1983, Marley launched his own producing career with a classic single, "Sucker DJs (I Will Survive)," featuring his smooth-rapping then-girlfriend, Dimples D. On his early dance records, like Aleem's 1984 club hit, "Release Yourself," he used a sampler to repeat and pitch up and down vocal snippets: "Release yourself! Re-rerererer-rererere-release yourself! Yo-yo-yo-yourself!" While trying to sample a voice for another song on his affordable new E-mu Emulator, he caught a snare snap. Punching it a few times, he suddenly realized the machine's latent rhythmic capabilities.

On the 1986 hit "The Bridge" by MC Shan, he revealed the fruits of his discovery, with a booming loop of The Honeydrippers' "Impeach the President" drum break. No more tinny, programmed DMX or Linn drums, which stiffened the beat and reduced most rappers to sing-songy rhyming. On top, Marl kept his vocalists bathed in billowing Rubinesque arena echoes, but on the bottom, the groove suddenly felt slippery. Inevitably, his rappers responded with more intricate rhymes.

By contrast, Hank, Eric and Keith had made "Public Enemy #1" the old-fashioned way—with Eric banging out the drums in real time, and a long two-inch tape loop of "Blow Your Head" that stretched across the room and around a microphone stand. Marl's sampler breakthrough forever altered rap production techniques. It wasn't clear Public Enemy could stay competitive.

The Black Belt had bred a new school, and these artists—Biz Markie, De La Soul, JVC Force, Craig Mack (then known as MC EZ) and EPMD, even their homies, Son of Bazerk, Serious Lee Fine, True Mathematics and Kings of Pressure—were breathing down P.E.'s necks. And then there was Marley Marl's roommate, a DJ from the Black 'burbs of Queens named Eric Barrier, and his rapper, a Five Percenter from Wyandanch, Long Island, named William Griffin, Jr. (no relation to Professor Griff) who called himself Rakim Allah.

### Can't Hold It Back

Rakim was about to graduate from high school, where he was the star quarterback, when a mutual friend introduced him to Eric B. The two hit it off, and Barrier asked Marl about recording something in their studio. They headed into Marl's studio and cut Rakim's demo, "Check Out My Melody." MC Shan sat in.

Rakim obviously had lyrics, battle rhymes funneled through Five Percenter millenarian poetics. He didn't just slay MCs, he took them out in three sets of seven. "My unusual style will confuse you a while," he rhymed. "If I was water, I'd flow in the Nile."

Shan and Marl weren't sure they understood this guy. At the time Shan's excitable high-pitched style ruled New York City. But Rakim refused to raise his voice. "Me and Marley would look at each other like, 'What kind of rap style is that? That shit is wack,'" Shan recalled.<sup>25</sup> "More energy, man!" he yelled at Rakim.<sup>26</sup>

Figuring "My Melody" was too sluggish, they gave Rakim another beat that was almost ten beats-per-minute faster. Based on Fonda Rae's "Over Like a Fat Rat" and James Brown's "Funky President" and alluding to Marl's by-now famous jacking of "Impeach the President," the concept became "Eric B. Is President." Marl and Shan listened to Rakim's intro in amazement:

I came in the door I said it before  
I never let the mic magnetize me no more

In the lyric, Rakim described the act of rhyming as if it were a pit bull on a long leash, an undertow pulling into a deep ocean of words—above all, a dangerous habit from which there was no return:

But it's biting me, fighting me, inviting me to rhyme  
I can't hold it back  
I'm looking for the line

Rakim rocked a weird mix of braggadocio and self-consciousness, a metarhyme—encompassing the paralysis of stage-fright and the release of the moment of first utterance, all delivered with an uncanny sense of how to use si-

lence and syncopation, lines spilling through bars, syllables catching off-beats, it made them believers. Rap had found its Coltrane.

Rakim came from a musical family. His mother was a jazz and opera singer. His aunt was R&B legend Ruth Brown. His brothers were session musicians who had worked on early rap records. He was a gifted saxophonist and had participated in statewide student competitions. He switched from tenor to baritone sax because he preferred the deeper tone.

The Griffins had left Brooklyn to come to Wyandanch, an unincorporated town of seven thousand, one of the oldest in the Black Belt and deteriorating into one of the most troubled. Blacks began moving there during the 1950s, expanding southward toward the wealthy white beach community of Babylon. By the end of the decade whites in Babylon rezoned its northern border from residential to industrial. From there, Wyandanch went downhill.

William was a smart student with a lean athleticism and a nose for trouble that kept him close to the streets. By his teens, he was a graffiti writer turned stick-up kid, getting high, staying paid, holding down corners in Wyandanch and spinning drunkenly out of the projects in Fort Greene, before he became righteous, took the name Ra King Islam Master Allah, recircled Strong Island and Brooklyn to build from cipher to cipher.

The graf burners on his bedroom wall were covered over by primer. Photos of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X and Minister Louis Farrakhan went up. He met Eric, Marl and Shan, cut the record, abandoned a football scholarship to the State University at Stony Brook, signed with Rush Management, and became a rap legend.

Rakim never smiled. Draped in African gold, inside Dapper-Dan customized faux-Gucci suits, he stood tall in a way that assured he was in supreme control of his body. He was, as he put it, "serious as cancer." He asked rhetorical questions like, "Who can keep the average dancer hyper as a heart attack?" Chuck D and Rakim had come from similar circumstances and had similar aspirations for themselves and the race, but they had different ways of seeking their utopias. As Greg Tate wrote, "Chuck D's forte is the overview, Rakim's is the innerview."

Rakim had joined the Nation of Gods and Earths, better known as the Five Percenter, in 1985, the year that Supreme Mathematics signified as: "*Build Power*." Founded in Harlem (renamed Mecca) in 1963 by a charismatic former student minister of the Nation of Islam, Clarence 13X, their core belief was

taken from Lost-Found Lesson Number 2. Eighty-five percent of the people were uncivilized, mentally deaf, dumb and blind slaves; 10 percent were bloodsuckers of the poor; and 5 percent were the poor righteous teachers with knowledge of self, enlightened teachers of freedom, justice and equality, destined to civilize the uncivilized.

Like Bambaataa, Rakim was now on a lifetime mission to lift the word from the street into the spiritual. Whether he could escape the social prisons represented by Fort Greene and Wyandanch was immaterial. Rakim told a journalist, "You're dealing with heaven while you're walking through hell. When I say heaven, I don't mean up in the clouds, because heaven is no higher than your head, and hell is no lower than your feet."<sup>27</sup>

"It's 120 degrees of lessons," he told Harry Allen, "and you gotta complete it by Knowledge, which is 120, Wisdom, another 120, and Understanding, which is 360 degrees. That's what I'm saying. 360 degrees I revolve. And 360 degrees is a complete circle—a cipher. So you must complete it."<sup>28</sup>

### **Closing the Circle**

In rhyme, Chuck compared himself to Coltrane, but he had more in common with Miles Davis, whose earthy middle-class rage always boiled beneath the mask of blue minimalist cool. The streetwise mystic Rakim was closer to Coltrane, and "I Know You Got Soul" was Rakim's "Giant Steps," a marvel of rhythmic precision and indelible imagery, a masterful declaration of transcendent black identity and a certifiable crowd-pleaser.

Based on the Bobby Byrd song of the same name and featuring a monstrous Funkadelic drumroll by Ben Powers, Jr., "Soul" began with unusual flattery to its audience—an apology for keeping them waiting. It described writing as a difficult sacrament, but a necessary rite to uplift the race. In the end, the performance of the words—like a triumphant Ali title bout—became an act of deliverance.

"I Know You Got Soul" dropped only weeks after *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*. When Chuck and Hank heard it, they realized that hip-hop's aesthetic and political development had suddenly accelerated. Envious and yet confident that the game had somehow shifted decidedly in their direction, they retreated to 510 South Franklin to close the circle that Eric B. & Rakim had begun.



"We knew we had to make something that was aggressive," Hank says. "Chuck's voice is so powerful and his tone is so rich that you can't put him on smooth, silky, melodic music. It's only fitting to put a hailstorm around him, a tornado behind him, so that when his vocals come across, the two complement each other."

Unlike Marley Marl's method—which flowed with the possibilities of the new technology, privileging sampling and mixing over arranging—the Bomb Squad mapped out the samples in the song's key and structure, piled them atop each other, then played them by hand as if they were a band. A Bomb Squad composition mounted tension against all-too-brief release.

Their musical method mirrored their worldview. "We were timing freaks," Hank says. "[W]e might push the drum sample to make it a little bit out of time, to make you feel uneasy. We're used to a perfect world, to seeing everything revolve in a circle. When that circle is off by a little bit, that's weird . . . It's not predictable."<sup>29</sup> Public Enemy was never about elevating to perfect mathematics or merging with sleek machines, it was about wrestling with the messy contradictions of truth. "It's tightrope music," Chuck said, "in confrontation with itself."<sup>60</sup>

Hank and Chuck pulled out James Brown's "Funky Drummer," the not-yet-famous Clyde Stubblefield break, and the JB's' 1970 single, "The Grunt, Part 1," which had an elemental, squawking intro reminiscent of "Blow Your Head." On their Ensoniq Mirage sampler, they grabbed two seconds of Catfish Collins's guitar, Bobby Byrd's piano and, most important, Robert McCollough's sax squeal, sampled it at a low rate to grit it up, and then pounded it into ambulance claustrophobia. Underneath, Flavor Flav made the Akai drum machine boom and stutter. The only release came in a break that layered a live go-go groove, funky guitar, a horn-section blast and the drums from Jefferson Starship's "Rock Music." When Terminator X transformed Chubb Rock's shout, "Rock and roll!", "Rebel" staked a claim to more than soul. The effect was hypnotic and relentless.

From an intro as memorable as Rakim's through an ending that declared it was "my time," Chuck brought pure boxing-ring drama, with Rakim as muse and opponent. Chuck offered props where they were due—"I got soul too"—but reserved for himself the title of "the voice of power." Rakim had rapped, "It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at," an epigram not at all unlike "Who feels

it, knows it." Chuck flipped that into an explicit call for Black solidarity: "No matter what the name, we're all the same—pieces in one big chess game." His lines encapsulated P.E.'s game-face competitiveness, anti-authoritarian howl and gleefully punning, polycultural, signifying trashing of Standard English:

Impeach the president  
 Pulling out the raygun (Reagan)  
 Zap the next one  
 I could be ya shogun!

"Man, you got to slow down," Flavor yelled over the break. "Man, you're losing 'em!"

Titled "Rebel Without a Pause," it was the perfect balance to "I Know You Got Soul." "Soul" moved the crowd in divine, timeless ritual. "Rebel" was a Black riot. Stephney took the record to club DJs at the Latin Quarter and the Rooftop, places that had dissed P.E., and watched from the booths as the fader slid over to "Rebel" and the room hit the boiling point like a kettle. It was John Brown playing "Soul Power," Kool Herc spinning Mandrill's "Fencewalk" or Grandmaster Flash dropping Baby Huey's "Listen to Me" all over again. "Just to see kids go crazy," Stephney remembers. "In many instances, fights started."

"Rebel," and its follow-up, "Bring the Noise"—in which Chuck ripped crack-peddling, Black incarceration and the death penalty, and then compared critics' condemnation of his support for Farrakhan to being shot by cops, all in just the first verse—captured the tensions of the time and externalized them. The records stormed the airwaves, boomboxes and car stereos that summer and fall. They became unavoidable. Public Enemy sounded like the new definition of black power—smarter, harder, faster, leaner and winning.

and filling it with cultural icons like Muhammad Ali, Richard Pryor and Aretha Franklin was no longer a joke—it was what folks actually seemed to be asking for. But to call yourself a Black Panther of rap was one thing, to replace the Party was another.

"I'm not a politician, I'm a dispatcher of information," Chuck D complained to John Leland. "People are always looking to catch me in fucking doubletalk and loopholes. They're looking to say, 'Damn, in this interview he said that, and in this interview he said that.' They treat me like I'm Jesse Jackson."<sup>21</sup>

Chuck fashioned a new soundbite, describing a role he felt more capable of fulfilling. "In five years," he would say, "we intend to have cultivated five thousand Black leaders. Maybe another Marley or a Jesse Jackson, a Marcus Garvey or another Louis Farrakhan."<sup>22</sup> And if that seemed to some to be a political retreat, it still ranked as one of the most ambitious claims ever advanced on behalf of art.

### **Do the Right Thing**

In the summer of 1988, thirty-one-year-old Spike Lee began filming *Do the Right Thing* in Bed-Stuy. Lee wrote and directed the movie, and it had been already rejected by one studio that found the ending too controversial. Angered at the white liberal platitudes of Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* and Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning*, inspired by the Howard Beach incident and buoyed by the rising tide of cultural activism, Lee wanted to capture life on one racially tense Brooklyn block on the hottest day of the year. The movie would become a polarizing force in an already us-or-them kind of time.

He inserted himself in the lead as Mookie, an around-the-way Brooklyn guy in a Jackie Robinson jersey delivering pizzas for Sal's Famous Pizzeria. Mookie was, in film critic Ed Guerrero's words, a "b-boy survivalist," less aquaboogieing than treading water, committed to nothing but making ends.<sup>23</sup> His employers were an Italian-American family that drove daily from their Bensonhurst home to their commercial establishment in Bed-Stuy. Sal embodied nostalgia for the good old days of the Dodgers, when Black meant underdog, not majority. His eldest son, Pino, was hardened before his time, struggling with the fact that his father chose not to sell the pizzeria even as Bed-Stuy became unrecognizable. The youngest, Vito, was sweet, liberal and, in Pino's mind, hopelessly naive.

Their chief antagonist, Buggin' Out, played by half-Italian, half-Black actor Giancarlo Esposito, was a beetle-eyed political rad with attitude, issuing demands for Black faces on the Pizzeria's Wall of Fame—a comic play on Lee's own battle for representation. Radio Raheem was the strong, silent cultural rad, his face flickering minutely between menace and mask, letting his heroes, Public Enemy, project his anger from his omnipresent boombox. In his worldview, self-hatred and self-love were at constant war beneath his skin.

When Sal refused Buggin' Out's demands and forced Raheem to turn off his radio, the two teamed for an impromptu protest in the pizzeria. The result was a battered, silenced boombox, a do-or-die struggle between Sal and Raheem and a chain of events that would lead to Raheem's death, Michael Stewart-style, at the hands of NYPD. Only then would Mookie finally take a stand, tossing a garbage can through his employer's window. A riot ensued, culminating with Smiley, the neighborhood idiot who never smiled, striking the match as the block chanted, "Howard Beach! Howard Beach!" In this climax, Lee brought together newsreel images of the northern Black power riots of Harlem and Newark and the southern civil rights demonstrations of Birmingham and Montgomery in the context of the fraught new era of brutality and reaction.

Stuttering Smiley, whose very speech seemed paralyzed by the grandiloquent inquiries of Martin and Malcolm ("The ballot or the bullet?" "Where do we go from here?"), stepped through the flames to pin a postcard of them on the Wall of Fame, depicting the two unredeemed martyrs laughing and shaking hands in their only historic meeting. Then he allowed himself a private, inscrutable Sly Stone smile. The movie closed with opposing quotes from King and X on the question of violence as protest. Lee had offered no solutions. The power of Lee's statement lay in its dead-end generational rage and confusion.

Through no fault of Lee's, the movie opened on June 30, just two months after the sensational Central Park rape case, in which a group of Black male teenagers from Harlem were accused of a "wilding" rampage through the park culminating in a gang rape of a white female investment banker. (Years later, DNA evidence led a judge to overturn the five convictions, after each of the boys had become men, serving between seven and thirteen years in prison.) *Do the Right Thing* was greeted by a spasm of panic. Jack Kroll wrote in

Newsweek, "To put it bluntly: in this long hot summer, how will young urban audiences—Black and white—react to the film's climactic explosion of interracial violence?"<sup>24</sup>

Lee's film turned mild-mannered film critics into political prognosticators. *New York* magazine's David Denby wrote, "[I]f Spike Lee is a commercial opportunist, he's also playing with dynamite in an urban playground. The response to the movie could get away from him."<sup>25</sup> Political pundits turned film critics, too. In a famous column, *New York* magazine political writer Joe Klein argued, "His film . . . is more trendoid than tragic, reflecting the latest riffs in hip Black separatism rather than taking an intellectually honest look at the problems he's nibbling around."<sup>26</sup>

Klein wrote that white liberals would passionately debate what Lee meant to say. "Black kids," he wrote, "won't find it so hard, though. For them, the message is clear from the opening credits, which roll to the tune of "Fight the Power," performed by Public Enemy, a virulently anti-Semitic rap group: *The police are your enemy . . . White people are your enemy . . .*"<sup>27</sup>

But objections to Lee's film were not just racial, they were generational, too. In *The Village Voice*, Stanley Crouch compared Lee to Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl, and wrote, "*Do the Right Thing*, for all its wit, is the sort of rancid fairy tale one expects of the racist, whether or not Lee actually is one."<sup>28</sup> If Chuck D had pointed the finger at Crouch's generation for selling the race down the river, Crouch pointed the finger back. He wrote:

Intellectual cowardice, opportunism and the itch for riches by almost any means necessary define the demons within the Black community. The demons are presently symbolized by those Black college teachers so intimidated by career threats that they don't protest students bringing Louis Farrakhan on campus, by men like Vernon Mason who sold out a good reputation in a cynical bid for political power by pimping real victims of racism in order to smoke-screen Tawana Brawley's lies, by the crack dealers who have wrought unprecedented horrors and by Afro-fascist race baiters like Public Enemy who perform on the soundtrack to *Do the Right Thing*.<sup>29</sup>

The further critics got from the theater, the more the question hardened: come on, Spike, just exactly what is the right thing? In these upside-down times, political pundits and cultural critics wanted what they had little right to expect. Pundits snorted at platforms and proposals; instead, they turned politicians like Jesse Jackson into tragedies, and forced them to beg for redemption. Critics wanted from Spike Lee and Public Enemy the bland precision of diplomacy; instead, they got messy, plexus-pounding, fire-starting art.

Lee himself presented a strange mix of unblinking sincerity and brusque impenetrability that made him a seductive mainstream media subject. Suddenly Lee seemed more in demand as a race man than even Congressional Black Caucus head Ron Dellums. Once again, the questions haunted: Who speaks for young Black America? Were Black artists the new Black leaders? If they were, what did they really have to say?

### Representing New Black Militancy (1989 Version)

Lee had commissioned Public Enemy to do the title track, for which Chuck, Keith and Eric put together "Fight the Power." His idea for the video was to stage a "Young People's March to End Racial Violence." Ads went out on urban radio to drum up turnout for the event.

On the day of the march, "Fight the Power" T-shirts were handed out to the youths, as well as placards featuring images of Angela Davis, Jesse Jackson, Paul Robeson, Frederick Douglass, Medgar Evers, Thurgood Marshall, Marcus Garvey, Muhammad Ali and the Public Enemy logo. Pickets reading "Brooklyn," "Montgomery," "Selma," "Philadelphia," "Wash. D.C.," "Miami" and "Watts," as well as "S1Ws," "Flavor Flav" and "Terminator X," were distributed into the crowd. Then they marched a mile up from the Eastern Parkway to the block where the movie had been shot.

There the group performed the song on a red, black and green stage framed by a large photo of Malcolm X, as the crowd danced and mugged for the cameras. The presentation was street demonstration, Black pride march and rap concert, as if the 1972 National Black Political Assembly had been transformed into a millennial Brooklyn block party.

Lee opened the video with historic footage of the 1963 March on Washington. Chuck broke in, "Young Black America, we rolling up with seminars, press

conferences and straight-up rallies. Am I right? We gonna get what we got to get coming to us. We ain't going out like that '63 nonsense." Then it began with Chuck proclaiming, "1989! The number, another summer," marking the moment for history.

It was just a seven-minute short to promote a record, a group, a brand. But the video also seemed to firmly establish Chuck's cultural authority. Public Enemy's first video, for "Night of the Living Baseheads," was amateurish, almost a parody of Chuck's rap-as-CNN idea. But on "Fight the Power," Lee placed Chuck in the streets amidst the likenesses of Black power fighters, one new Black icon anointing another.

Chuck was reluctant to be seen as his generation's Malcolm X or Paul Robeson. He wanted to provoke, not to lead. But after this video, the question would be out of his hands. Public Enemy had gone, as Bill Stephney says, "from a rap group playing the Latin Quarter with Biz and Shan and Run and Whodini to now being the saviors of the Black community." Soon they would be forced to confront a crisis that would test both Chuck's leadership of the group and the group's leadership within the community.

### **The Enemy Implodes**

As the summer of 1989 opened, Chuck was ready for controversy. He says, "I remember specifically when I did 'Fuck him and John Wayne.' I was totally prepared to handle all that shit." Then Professor Griff gave an interview to David Mills of the *Washington Times*.

Chuck recalls, "It was almost like I'm going in to make a tackle and I get cross-body-blocked by a 500-pounder like out of nowhere, man, knocking me entirely out of the play. I was ready to go after John Wayne and Elvis with a vengeance, and then all of a sudden—blaaaau! Now I'm fucking getting chased. I'm scrambling in the pocket, man. I'm like, what the fuck? I can't throw this shit out of bounds!"

In fact, by the time they shot the "Fight the Power" video, Public Enemy was beginning to unravel. *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* had gone platinum and raised the industry's expectations for the group. But the original decision-making core of Chuck, Hank and Bill was coming apart.

Hank was in demand because of a run of number-one singles through his

Bomb Squad production work for Vanessa Williams and Bell Biv DeVoe. Bill was consumed by his duties as vice president of Def Jam, which itself was melting down. Rick and Russell were in the process of splitting, the Beastie Boys were suing the label for unpaid royalties (while trying to hire Stephney away) and the label's artists were accusing Stephney of playing favorites with Public Enemy. The solution was for Hank, Bill and Chuck to set up their own label.

When word got out that they were plotting to leave Def Jam a number of offers came in, the most serious a multimillion-dollar proposal from MCA Records, a company that had just purchased Motown—Chuck's personal ideal of Black business. In the late spring of 1989, Bill quit Def Jam, and he and Hank formalized the deal. Then they worked on setting up the new label, called "SOUL: The Sound of Urban Listeners," and waited for Chuck to return from tour. These new label duties took them further from the daily activities of the group. As Public Enemy fulfilled a heavy schedule of touring and appearances, Chuck had become the *de facto* leader of the crew.

Public Enemy was carefully balanced on a set of dualities, with Chuck at the center of each. Chuck and Hank constituted the musical axis. Chuck and Flav were the focal sonic and visual points of the group. Chuck and Griff confronted the media. In 1988, Chuck had described his role in the group to *New Music Express*:

I'm like the mediator in all this. Flavor is what America would like to see in a Black man—sad to say, but true—whereas Griff is very much what America would not like to see. And there's no acting here—sometimes I can't put Flavor and Griff in the same room.

I'm in the middle. When Griff says something too much, I come to the rescue of white people; when Flavor does something, I come to the defense of Black people. I do constrain them, but not much, because Public Enemy are the only Black group making noises *outside* of their records.<sup>30</sup>

In their Hempstead studio, these tensions worked together to create magnificent art. But the day-in, day-out stresses of the road made these same tensions crippling.