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Liner Notes for Hip-Hop Junkies

Introduction by Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson

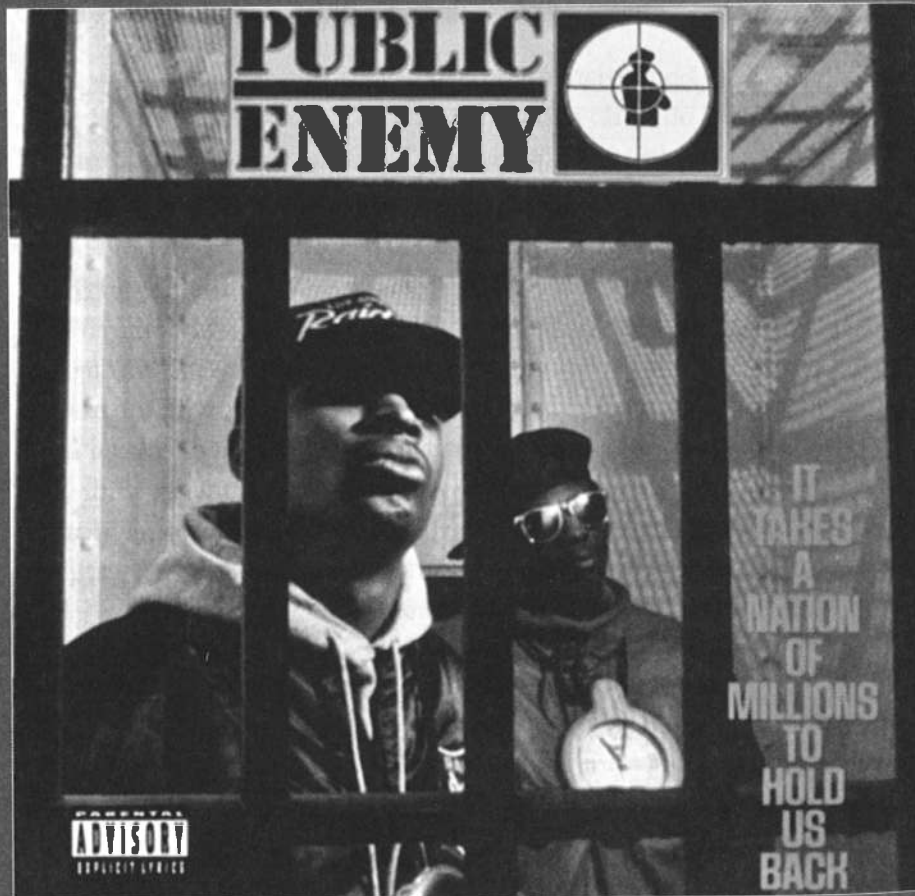
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BRIAN COLEMAN

PUBLIC ENEMY

It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back

(Def Jam, 1988)



Mine and Hank's goal, originally, was to destroy music," says Public Enemy's Chuck D (Carlton Ridenhour) about how he and "antimusician" Hank Shocklee approached hip-hop. Provocative words, but in reality what Public Enemy destroyed was the hip-hop status quo, changing everything that came after them. Public Enemy hit the rap scene of the mid-eighties like a black nationalist Noah's ark, preserving the essence of artists like Run-DMC, Melle Mel, and Schoolly D and leaving the rest in their wake. Repercussions and shock waves were felt not only in hip-hop but all music, making people reconsider the power of music and lyrics in a way that arguably hadn't been done since Bob Dylan brought real issues to real music more than two decades earlier.

The extended Public Enemy family that the world came to know—William "Flavor Flav" Drayton, DJ Norman "Terminator X" Rogers, Richard "Professor Griff" Griffin, musical patriarch Hank Shocklee (born Boxley), Hank's brother Keith Shocklee, producer-musician Eric "Vietnam" Sadler, and conceptual and musical overseer Bill Stephney—came together in Hempstead and Roosevelt, Long Island, long before Public Enemy began their musical assault on wax. Shocklee started his Spectrum City mobile DJ crew in 1975, with brother Keith helping by 1978 or so. "Hank was always a legend in Roosevelt, and he always had Spectrum City," says Chuck.

Chuck joined the crew in 1979 after enrolling at Garden City's Adelphi University (he studied graphic design, graduating in 1984). "I rapped back in 1978 and '79, and I was vicious," Chuck brags. "I had a Satchel Paige story by the time I got to records. I had the strongest voice of anybody around me and that was key, because most sound systems were cheap. You had to be able to cut across a cheap system. Guys like DJ Hollywood and Melle Mel had no problems with something like that. Back at that time Hank heard me on the mic and I spanked everyone else, so he figured I would be the final component to what he had going. Me and Flavor was blessed with having voices on two different ends of the spectrum, and they could both cut through any live situation very easily. Flavor has bass in his treble and I have treble in my bass."

In 1982 the Spectrum City crew made it to Adelphi's radio station, WBAU, encouraged and guided by program director Bill Stephney. Flavor

Flav also had a show on the station. "Flav was the greatest of all time on the air," Chuck laughs. "He was just the same as he was on our records. Sometimes he would play like six tracks of his own stuff a night. He was the Uncle Floyd of hip-hop radio! Flav's early ad-libs would come from him mimicking this guy who lived around his way named Youngster or something like that. It was a weird thing, but I think the better he mimicked that guy, the more he found an identity for himself."

The ninety-minute "Super Spectrum City Mix Show" was a popular attraction on the station, and Hank and Chuck quickly embraced the power of radio. The two made preshow tapes at their homebase/clubhouse/studio: 510 South Franklin Street in Hempstead. The studio, in use by Spectrum City since 1981, became an important breeding ground for local Strong Island rap talent. "We would host ten or twenty local rap groups from the area," Chuck recalls. "We'd record 'em up at our spot and put 'em out on the radio."

At 510 South Franklin they also met an important future component to the PE sound: Eric "Vietnam" Sadler, a local musician who had a studio in the same building. Vietnam soon became part of the Spectrum City mix. "We called him Vietnam because he'd always wear these old army jackets and these shades that made him look like he was a paratrooper," laughs Chuck. "He had a studio downstairs at 510, and we went down there and asked him to come up and start making music. He was a good guy and he worked well in our mix."

"Initially, Spectrum City never put out anything on wax," Chuck notes. "We just made tapes and put 'em straight on the radio. People always thought we had stuff on wax, but we only made songs to promote the radio station. I would do a song every once in a while to fill the void of not having enough records for our airtime. We was only interested in being radio jocks back then—we even tried to get a syndicated radio deal back in the day. Records just didn't hold much interest for us. I had interviewed so many people with nightmare stories about the record business that I just wasn't interested in being involved with that."

Hank and Chuck grew ever better at recording, eventually acquiescing to record a single (as Spectrum City) on the Vanguard label in 1984 called "Lies." "We recorded the song 'Check Out the Radio' with the extra time we had on the session," Chuck recalls of the other song on the single. "It was a

severe B-side [laughs] and was damn near fallin' off the record. The only reason we did that cut was to have more people know us as DJs and radio jocks. But that whole [recording] situation wasn't good, and it kept me from recording for a while." Even so, he says, "'Check Out the Radio' was a very influential cut for artists like Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys, who listened to the radio station religiously. It was a slower track, and it definitely influenced DMC and Run to write 'Slow and Low' for the Beastie Boys."

Despite the single, in the end it was a 1984 radio-only cut, "Public Enemy #1," that gave Spectrum City its eventual new name and its future record label as well. Def Jam co-founder Rick Rubin pursued Chuck for two years after he heard it on WBAU. "I put that song together on two tape decks and a Roland 8000 drum machine," Chuck says. "I pause-buttoned it together, did a vocal, and overdubbed it on another tape deck. Flavor just happened to be in the other room, so that's how he got on it. 'Blow Your Head' [by the JB's, the main sample on the track] was a favorite of mine, but you could never find anyone who could DJ it and put it together quick enough, so that's why I had to use the tape decks."

Chuck and Hank left WBAU in 1986. (Stephney had bailed two years previous.) "Hank and I left to run a club full-time and, at Bill's insistence, to move into recording," he explains. And move they did. After Rick Rubin's championing of the group, a deal was eventually signed and the group was making a record for his quickly growing Def Jam empire, which he ran with partner Russell Simmons.

Public Enemy's 1987 debut, *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, was one of the more powerful albums of the era, comprising intense battle rhymes like "Miuuzi Weighs a Ton" and "Public Enemy #1" and pointed social-political fare seen on the anticrack manifesto "Megablast" and the talkin'-loud, saying-nothing update "Rightstarter (Message to a Black Man)." Most of the album's preproduction work was done at 510 South Franklin. "Everything on that album was prerecorded, and then we would enhance upon it at regular studios like INS in New York," Chuck recalls. "We knew exactly what we was gonna do before we even went into the real studios. We wanted to execute quickly because we didn't want to pay somebody else's bills."

Musically, the album was complicated and dark, with highly musical 808 drum programs, righteous funk samples, and funky live wah-wah guitar (by Vernon Reid and co-producer Bill Stephney). And, of course, there

was Chuck's booming voice, which grabbed you by the lapels and spit knowledge at you. In the background, edgy court jester Flavor Flav did the honors, getting his own solo shot on "Too Much Posse." It pushed forward, but it also stood on the shoulders of giants.

"The first album was something presented off the heels of *Raising Hell* [by Run-DMC], which I would call my favorite record of all time," Chuck says. "We came at things differently than other people back then. The fact that I rapped about a car [on "You're Gonna Get Yours"] on the first album was different than most rappers. I was older and had a different point of view. I was twenty-six years old in 1986, so of course I wouldn't rap about no high school shit. I was rapping from a grown man's viewpoint."

Despite the greatness of the album, PE didn't enjoy its growing popularity for long. "On the day that *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* was released [in the spring of 1987], we was already in the trenches recording *Nation of Millions*," Chuck states. Hank and Eric didn't tour with Public Enemy—they stayed behind to work on cuts in the lab, so that the vocalists could hit the ground running whenever they returned.

"The first record should have come out October of '86," says Chuck. "When it actually came out it was past the timely point. [CBS labelmate Bruce] Springsteen pushed back the Beastie Boys, which pushed back our shit. *Yo!* was outdated to us. By the time it came out, Eric B. & Rakim and BDP had come out and changed the terrain of how you can rap. Our records were all recorded at the same time as theirs, but those guys came out first, so they were thought of as more innovative. Either way, they changed the phrasing of rap, which allowed you to be able to rhyme on a faster tempo, a faster groove."

The Bomb Squad, as PE's production team was now calling itself, had an intense work ethic, and they knew all too well that they were on to something big. The duties shared by the trio of Shocklee, Sadler, and Chuck himself (credited in the album's liners as Carl Ryder, a pseudonym dating back to sports reporting he did at WBAU) had become much clearer as they began their epic sophomore album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. "Eric was the musician, Hank was the antimusician," Chuck explains. "Eric did a lot of the [drum] programming, [Hank's brother] Keith was the guy who would bring in the feel. And me, I would scour for vocal samples all over the Earth. I would name a song, tag it, and get the vocal

samples. The friction between Hank and Eric worked very well. Hank would put a twist on Eric's musicianship and Eric's musicianship would put a twist on Hank.

"Hank would come up with the final mix because he was the sound master," emphasizes Chuck. "I wouldn't even fuck with the mix. Hank is the Phil Spector of hip-hop. He was way ahead of his time, because he dared to challenge the odds in sound. Once hip-hop became corporate, they took the daredevil out of the artistry. But being a daredevil was what Hank brought to the table."

Crucial cuts "Rebel Without a Pause," "Bring the Noise," and "Don't Believe the Hype" were recorded at various times between tours in '87, but the bulk of the record was laid down during eight intense weeks in early 1988 for a modest fifty-two thousand dollars. (Chuck says that *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* cost seventeen thousand.) "From January to the end of February, we just rapped," Chuck recalls. Originally using the working title *Countdown to Armageddon*, the group decided to call it *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* in the end, which was a line from *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*'s "Raise the Roof."

"We made [*Nation of Millions*] like it was just for cassettes," Chuck says. "We wanted to have an album that was equal on the first side and the second side. We didn't want to have any room at the end of a side. There would be no dead time. We worked really hard to equal those sides, through the interludes and also the timing of different songs. Because of the interludes, the album was also the first rap record that didn't go cut to cut—it had stuff in between songs to make it all stick together, like glue."

Some of the interstitial material was live crowd noise from a show in London, recorded on November 3, 1987. "We used that live stuff for two reasons," Chuck explains. "First, to build on our importance overseas, since we were having lots of success over in Europe and no rap group had ever done that. But we also wanted to show people in America that we had it goin' on, with 'em or without 'em [*laughs*]."

A little-known fact: The album's two sides were originally the other way around, the album starting with the song "Show Em Watcha Got" and going into "She Watch Channel Zero?!" (which is side two, the "Black Side"). Shocklee decided to flip them at the last second, just before mastering. "Of course the change worked!" Chuck laughs.

Bolstered by *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*'s acclaim, no small part of which came from overseas, Chuck, Shocklee, and Sadler knew that the work they were doing for *Nation of Millions* was going to be big. "Nation was just pure confidence," Chuck boasts. "We were like, 'Nobody's doing this shit here.' We wanted to build on the concept of faster tempos. We wanted to take a lot of shit over 107, 109 beats per minute. We knew our music would be faster paced than anything out there. We knew that we could handle the speed and do it strong. Nobody out there could perform live on our level. That record was so intense that these young cats couldn't even keep up with us. We were all jocks and into martial arts, so we could go for an hour in a frenzy. It was like Mike Tyson at his peak. Because the material was so strong and because we could kill on the stage, we knew for a fact that the album would be a big hit. We made our records to tour, and we toured to make our records."

From the provocative cover by photographer Glen E. Friedman—shot at the city jail at Thirty-second Street—to every last one of the dozens of samples buried in the mix, the legend of *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* is one of the most storied in hip-hop. The album still stands to this day as, in this writer's opinion, the best and most influential rap platter ever made.

"Sometimes on the outside looking in I say, 'Damn, did I really have anything to do with that record?' " Chuck muses. But he most certainly did, and hip-hop is better because of it. "*Nation of Millions* made [N.W.A.'s] *Straight Outta Compton* possible later that year," says Chuck. "The first two copies that I had of *Nation* actually went to Dr. Dre and Eazy-E. We were in Vegas and they were on tour with us, and I had just got the vinyl in. That's what this is all about. Because Run-DMC and LL Cool J gave me energy. And if our energy happened to be transferred to N.W.A., then that's what this whole thing is for. Schoolly D influenced me on the first album as much as Run-DMC and I found out later that Ice Cube was influenced by how I broke shit down. Schoolly told me that he was influenced by Melle Mel. And that's just how the cycle goes."

TRACKS

BRING THE NOISE

That came out first on the *Less Than Zero* soundtrack, before our album. We recorded that in late September of 1987, after we did "Don't Believe the Hype." The original name of that song was "Countdown to Armageddon." I got the music to it while I was on the Def Jam tour with LL and I tried to tackle it all summer long in '87. I wrote three different verses for it and it just didn't pan out for me. I just could not nail it. Then Hank came at me with the suggestion that I attack the song with three different verse styles. We were doing a show in Atlanta and Harry Allen came down, and he had a mix of it from Hank. I listened to it on headphones and got so mad at it that I threw it across the room and damn near out the window. I was like, "We fucking failed!" I came back from tour in September to record that at Sabella Studios here in Long Island and I still could not nail it. All of us plus Terminator were there at the time. Eric and Hank did all the drum programs. I brought in the top stuff, those samples. We were seventy-five percent of the way through it and I hit a creative wall, but then I pulled through in the end. At five thirty in the morning Terminator came over to scratch, and we all thought what he did was kinda wack until we took the bass out during the mix. I love that scratch to this day, now! We learned that you can pull the bass out during the mix and there can still be some great topping. We went overseas the second week in November and me and Griff told Terminator to put the track on, because we had an acetate. We did it and the crowd went berzerk. So it was meant to be. Flavor's comments on there, and on all tracks, were always ad-libbed. I don't think he ever wrote anything down. We would guide him on which ad-lib to use, but that was about it.

DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE

When I was coming off a tour in '87 I was given some crazy terrain by Hank and Eric, like "Bring the Noise" and "Don't Believe the Hype." "Hype" came up before the tour and we recorded it right after "Rebel Without a Pause," although it didn't come out until '88, as the first single off of *Nation of Millions*. We recorded that in September of '87. It didn't have a video. We said, "Why the fuck should we? We ain't gonna see it nowhere." A video was actually put together over in London because of our massive following over there. We refused to do one in the U.S. because there was no guaranteed national exposure. When *Yo! MTV Raps* came about, PE did the pilot show, in the summer of '88. That was the green light to say that our second single should have a video. We actually originally were going to use "Don't Believe the Hype" for the *Less Than Zero* soundtrack, but we wanted the jam to be turbulent, not funky. "Don't Believe" was more regular than something like "Bring the Noise," so we just put it in the can and forgot about it. It got the eventual nod of approval because Hank went to this spot on the Lower East Side and heard DMC play the shit in his car, and it renewed his interest. The comments about writers were pointed at guys like John Leland [from *Spin* and the *Voice*] who just didn't get it. When I say, "It's a sequel," we meant that it was the sequel to "Rebel Without a Pause." That song was a really big hit in Atlanta first, thanks to Ray Boyd at B103. I got him tickets for our show and the next week it was added. To this day "Don't Believe" is played as one of the classics in the ATL.

COLD LAMPIN' WITH FLAVOR

Initially we wanted to bring Flavor through into the recording contract, and Rick [Rubin] and Russell [Simmons] pretty much detested the idea. They were like, "You gotta sign a vocalist, and what the fuck does he do?" And me and Hank said, "Well, we can't really explain what he does, but he brings flavor to the situation. You'll see." I said I wouldn't sign with Def Jam unless they signed Flavor. We knew he was an integral part. We were big fans of James Brown and Bobby Byrd, and that was the kind of stage relationship it was, in a weird way. "Cold Lampin'" was bringing

more Flavor flavor to the equation. On the third album he really came forward because "911" was our first single.

TERMINATOR X TO THE EDGE OF PANIC

The music to that is "Rebel Without a Pause" backwards [laughs]. We was rockin' that freestyle out, around '87. We had the track backwards, and we wanted Terminator's name to shine more. We put some Farrakhan speeches on it and we had something out of nothing. It was one of those things that was put together at the last minute. Griff gave me that album with the Farrakhan quote at the end. It was the Minister from the 1980 Jack the Rapper convention, telling black radio that they had a responsibility to inform the people.

LOUDER THAN A BOMB

With that Kool and the Gang "Who's Gonna Take the Weight" sample, we just found the sound that fit the ideal. I don't remember who brought that one into the mix. Spectrum City [the studio at 510 South Franklin] was just two rooms full of records. That song was simply about the fact that the FBI was tapping my phone. My phone would go dead between one and two o'clock every night, even when I got the phone people to fix it. I was saying, "I'm not keeping any secrets because everything I'm saying, I'm saying it on record." It was one of our favorite records, but we never performed it in concert. We designed our show around peaks and valleys. That song would start on any other team, but not on this bench.

CAUGHT, CAN WE GET A WITNESS?

That record was dead and damn near out the window. It was a good topic, talkin' about samplin' beats, but we couldn't build upon that groove until the last minute. The topic made it come through in the end, we put some Bar-Kays on it. We got sued religiously a lot after the fact, but not at that

time [when we made the song]. The song itself was just challenging the situation that other artists were in when they had that happen to them.

SHE WATCH CHANNEL ZERO?!

That's a Slayer loop there ["Angel of Death"]. We already had that record. We had Rick Rubin's blessing [Rubin produced Slayer] but he didn't spend any time in the studio with us, except some of the mixes on the rock songs that we'd bring him in on. We were the group that Rick gave total confidence and total blessing to do our thing. People said that it was an anti-female song, but my answer to that is that you're not looking at the self-criticism in other songs on the album. We attacked everything. I didn't think it was misogynist. I said, "Hey, fuck those soap operas." And I say it to this day. Jerry Springer and all of that. I'd say the same to a guy if he's just sittin' in front of the football game with a beer, talking shit. I mean, you couldn't say, "He/She Watch Channel Zero." You make a song and you make a statement.

NIGHT OF THE LIVING BASEHEADS

That's a Khalid Muhammad speech at the beginning. A lot of those speeches came from Griff and the S1Ws, and I would figure out where they would fit. Most of them were off of tapes. "Baseheads" was the second single off the album and the first video that we made, which we did by committee. We knew we had to make it as cutting-edge as our music because we were coming out late in the [video-making] game. We filmed it outside of the Audubon Ballroom [where Malcolm X was murdered] and other locations. I think we did that video for about forty thousand dollars. It got played like crazy, because *Yo! MTV Raps* had come out, which forced BET to come out with their own show, *Rap City*. For the track itself I wanted to write a song about how much crack was affecting us. It was all the way around us, 360 degrees.

BLACK STEEL IN THE HOUR OF CHAOS

Back when I was seven years old I saw my uncle come to my grandmother's house to get his draft papers for Vietnam. Of course as a kid you're trying to see what's going on. I saw their faces drop. I thought about the whole draft policy—it just stuck with me. I was like, "If I have to go to jail for not fighting in a war, then breaking out is righteous."

REBEL WITHOUT A PAUSE

By the time we actually came out with *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, Hank and I began putting together "Rebel Without a Pause." It came out first on the B-side of "You're Gonna Get Yours" [from *Yo!*]. Hank and I came up with the track and then I locked myself in the house for two days, trying to nail it. There was so much aggression in it because we were trying to prove a point—that we knew what the fuck we were doing. Hank got a partial writing credit on the lyrics, it was a Lennon/McCartney thing. It took about two weeks to get that right. I did it the first day and wasn't happy with it and I went home mad. Then I came back three or four days later and nailed it. I can't recall ever nailing anything on the first take, at least not anything that I was satisfied with. I remember when me and [Ice] Cube and [Big Daddy] Kane were recording "Burn Hollywood Burn" [which came out on the next album, *Fear of a Black Planet*] and I was amazed how they could actually nail a cut in one or two takes. But they had different vocal delivery styles. I could never rely on just sittin' back, relaxing, and letting the studio make me sound good.

PROPHETS OF RAGE

That was a late-addition cut. I was going through a whole bunch of old tapes that happened to be sitting in the studio, something that Eric and Hank had concocted. I was sittin' in traffic and I was so impressed by it that I actually wrote to it right there. To this day I still love it—it's one of my

favorites. That was a big live song, especially with Griff. When he left the group we stopped doing it, and when he rejoined a couple of years later we brought it back into the set. You have to be really physically fit to handle that song [*laughs*]. It's breakneck speed. The title came from an article I saw in *Life* magazine that had that caption about Malcolm X. It said, "What ever happened to the prophets of rage?" I like to make the title to a song first because it helps me write the rest of the song. I operate from the title on down. That track was done later in the recording process. I think, vocally, I stretched the limits on that one. I was just never satisfied with my takes. I was known as the Hundred-Take Man [*laughs*].

PARTY FOR YOUR RIGHT TO FIGHT

With flipping the Beasties like that it was like, "Together we're on Def Jam, but we're not them" [*laughs*]. It wasn't a dis, it was just saying we were the opposite of what you think the Beastie Boys are. The Black Panthers were the party we were talking about, of course. The track itself was so quirky that it definitely fit inside the concept of the album, and we knew that we had enough muscle bangers on the album that we could afford to do something that was totally left-field. It became a performance cut because of the difference. It was a contrast that set a stronger record up.