



Public Enemy

Fear of a Black Planet

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Def Jam Recordings

Fear of a Black Planet

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I was eleven years old when I heard Public Enemy for the first time. My family and I were driving from Honolulu to my Uncle's apartment on the North Shore, cruising past rows of pineapples and sugarcane. I was absentmindedly staring out the window, rolling the radio dial back and forth on my black plastic walkman trying to catch a station worth listening to when "Welcome to the Terrordome" by Public Enemy suddenly burst through the static.

Music wasn't totally new to me; one of my earliest memories was of my brother and I dancing in my parent's living room to a vinyl copy of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. I remember when New Kids on the Block mania descended on my elementary school and I wondered what it was about them that made all the girls lose their minds. To a kid growing up in the late 80s, pop music ruled the airwaves: Milli Vanilli, Madonna, Wham!, Debbie Gibson, Michael Jackson. The hair was big, the outfits loud, and everything sparkled.

I knew within seconds that "Welcome to the Terrordome" was completely different. There was nothing fun or catchy about it. The music was brutal, uncompromising: a massive wall of synthesized noise. It was the sonic equivalent to an electric shock.

*I got so much trouble on my mind
Refuse to lose
Here's the ticket
Hear the drummer get wicked'*

Chuck D's voice boomed, seething with anger and righteous indignation. Instead of saccharine lyrics about love or broken hearts, his lyrics were angry and intensely political; one bar highlighted the death of a 16-year old boy named Yusef Hawkins who was killed by a group of white men in Brooklyn.

*'First, nothing's worse
Than a mother's pain
Of a son slain in Bensonhurst'*

Other lyrics explored the assassinations of Huey Newton and Malcolm X and Chuck D's metaphorical crucifixion by the media.

When I got back to California, I biked to a nearby record store and used my allowance money to buy *Fear of a Black Planet*. It was my first album and it was revelation. The Bomb Squad's production created an impossibly tense, paranoid landscape - full of ruthless, pounding drums, layers of distorted samples, heavy metal guitars, and air-raided sirens. But what struck me the most was the lyrics. Chuck D and Flava Flav wrote about issues that affected them in real life: the police ignoring the black community ('911 is a Joke'), racist stereotypes in movies ('Burn Hollywood Burn'), and the need for unity and revolution in order to overthrow the established social order ('Fight the Power', 'Power to the People').

Everything about them was designed to shock: their logo, which depicted a black man in the crosshairs of a gun; their stage outfits, military garb that echoed the Black Panthers; and even their names (i.e.: their DJ, Terminator X). I began hearing about them on the

news. They were dangerous. White people were afraid of them. Chuck D was interviewed on CNN, and people were calling him a prophet.

I'd never directly thought about issues of race and identity before, but Chuck D's lyrics opened up something dormant in my mind. I grew up surrounded by Latino, black, and Asian students in Oxnard, California. I never had white friends until 8th grade when I moved to a wealthier town nearby. Growing up, I vaguely understood that I was mixed race (white and Japanese) and that I was brown - but so was everyone else I grew with. I didn't fully understand and appreciate how different my friends and I were. It wasn't until I heard that album that I started to think about what it meant to be a person of color in America.

I began noticing things around me in a new light: the gang of teenage skinheads who used to circle my neighborhood looking for someone to attack; the difference between the poor, Latino barrio that surrounded my elementary school and the pristine, palatial houses by the beach; the hunched rows of migrant workers picking strawberries in the fields by my house.

After that album, I got more into early 90s hip-hop: Tribe, Wu-Tang, Cube, Pac, Biggie. I'd stay up way too late on Friday nights listening to 'Friday Nite Flava with the Baka Boyz' on Power 106 - one of the few radio shows devoted to underground hip-hop. I moved to Ventura for 8th grade and started interacting with white people for the first time. I was the only kid in school who listened to rap which made me a pariah. One kid on my basketball team was forbidden by his family to hang out with me once they found out that I listened to 'black music'.

Public Enemy's music exposed the hidden structures of the world around me, the assumptions about class and race that allowed some people to advance and kept other people in the shadows. Their songs were like a scalpel that allowed me to peer beneath empty slogans about peace, equality, and fairness, and glimpse our society's rotten heart. I never saw the world the same way again. Those songs shaped my reaction to all of the things that I have lived through since: Rodney King and the LA Riots, 9/11, the Wall St. financial collapse, the 99% movement, DACA, Black Lives Matter, everything. I don't know if I would've become a different person had I not heard that song, but I'm glad that it happened. Public Enemy changed my life.