

SCHOOL'D BY FUNKMODE

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EMCEES IN THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME - PART 4 - PUBLIC ENEMY

As of the writing of this lesson, only a small handful of Hip Hop artists have been voted into the prestigious Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In this SCHOOL'd series, we will learn more about each of these legendary artists.

As popular and innovative as the previous Hall of Fame inductees were (Run DMC, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Beastie Boys), it is arguable that the subjects of today's lesson, Public Enemy (PE), made the most important music of them all. With songs like "Fight the Power", "Don't Believe the Hype", and "911 is a Joke", which each feature lyrics expressing their views on social, political and economic inequities and injustice, PE is known all around the world (they've toured in 84 countries) as Hip Hop's voice of change, personal empowerment and global awareness.

Like all great stories in Hip Hop, Public Enemy's origin can be traced back to a battle. In this case, we have to go back to 1982, when Carlton Douglas Ridenhour was a student at Adelphi University in Long Island, New York, studying graphic design. At the University, Ridenhour met fellow Hip Hop lover Hank Shocklee, who worked as a party promoter and DJ. Shocklee convinced Ridenhour to emcee the parties he was hosting, allowing him to focus on the deejaying. Together they started a group called Spectrum City and became known as one of the hottest DJ groups on Long Island. This notoriety got them recognized by Bill Stephney, the program director for WBAU radio, which worked out of Adelphi. Stephney asked Shocklee and Ridenhour to do a Hip Hop radio show for the station on Saturday nights, which they agreed to, calling it the Super Spectrum Mixx Show. Good news ... it was one of the first ever radio shows to feature Hip Hop Music. Bad news ... Hip Hop music was so new that it was hard to get enough songs together to fill the three hour time slot they were given for the show. However, in the true spirit of Hip Hop culture, Shocklee and Ridenhour (who started going by the on-air name "MC Chuckie D") decided to start recording their own music and putting it into rotation on the show. "The original Public Enemy sound was created on-air. We were sampling stuff, taking a beat, pausing it up and doing a rap over it. This was still at a time when most of the other rap records were using a lot of live instruments. When we got the choruses, there would be nothing but scratching ... absolutely no instruments ... none!", said Shocklee in a 1991 interview. Three years and hundreds of homemade songs later, the two started becoming really popular on the local scene. But, of course, popularity also brought out the challengers. Some tried to battle Chuckie D, disrespecting his rhyming skills. As a response, Shocklee and Chuckie D created what would become their break through song, "Public Enemy Number One". Shocklee remembers, "That record was the number one smash hit on WBAU for three months or so. Out of all the stuff we were playing, even the new records that were coming out, that was the number one song."

One day, Run DMC happened to be at the radio station when "Public Enemy Number One" was playing on André "Doctor Dré" Brown's (not the producer "Dr. Dre", the "Yo! MTV Raps" one) show called "The Operating Room". They helped get the song to a very impressed Rick Rubin (who you'll remember from previous lessons, was founding Def Jam Records at the time with Russell Simmons), who wanted to sign them to his new label. After pursuing him unsuccessfully for a while (At 26, Chuck thought he was too old to start being an entertainer and was also wary of being taken advantage of by record companies), Rubin finally convinced Chuck and Shocklee to sign a record deal.

To create his first album, Chuckie D, now going by Chuck D, needed a team. Shocklee started the process by bringing in members from Spectrum City to create a production team, which became known as The Bomb Squad. Chuck D had already started using a friend from school as a hype man on his tracks, and therefore William Drayton (aka Flavor Flav, from his graffiti name) was the next to be added to the crew. To round out the group, Chuck D brought in a local DJ, Norman Rogers (aka Terminator X), and finally Richard Griffin (aka Professor Griff), a security services provider, who turned his company "Unity Force" into a security/dance crew for Chuck, renaming themselves the S1W or "The Security of the First World". With their original radio station contact Bill Stephney now working for Def Jam and becoming their marketing agent, Chuck's new group was branded "Public Enemy" after Chuck's big hit song at Adelphi.

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While this is really just the beginning of their story, by contrast, the rest is well-known history. In 1987, Public Enemy released the album "Yo! Bum Rush the Show" which some critics celebrated as album of the year. Vibe magazine even called it one of the top three most influential Hip Hop albums of all time. Their next three albums produced hit after hit and propelled Public Enemy to superstardom. In fact, as critically acclaimed as it was, "Yo! Bum Rush the Show" was the only album to only be certified gold, as 1988's "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back", 1989's "Fear of a Black Planet" and 1991's "Apocalypse 91 ... The Enemy Strikes Black", all went platinum.

But more than origin stories and record sales, the most important and distinguishing characteristic of Public Enemy is their sound and lyrical content. The Bomb Squad, by using heavy amounts of sampling, including sounds not expected on an album like sirens and off-key yelling, created instrumentals which were completely distinct at the time. As the record industry cracked down heavily on sampling shortly after PE's success, it is unlikely that we will ever hear such a sound on a commercial album again. Beyond that, Chuck D's strong political views, African American pride and social commentary set PE's music light years apart from anything else in Hip Hop. In fact, knowing the power of PE's lyrics, fledgling director Spike Lee approached Chuck to do an anthem for his upcoming movie about racial and social tensions in the inner city called "Do the Right Thing". This move really propelled PE into the mainstream, as the movie was a huge success critically and financially. The theme song "Fight the Power" became PE's biggest hit and is said by many to be one of the greatest songs of all time. To give an example of the strength of PE's lyrical content, consider the following lines.

"I've been wonderin' why / People livin' in fear / Of my shade / Or my high-top fade / I'm not the one that's runnin' / But they got me one the run
/ Treat me like I have a gun / All I got is genes and chromosomes / Consider me Black to the bone / All I want is peace and love
/ On this planet / Ain't how that God planned it?" - Fear of a Black Planet

"Rolling Stones of the rap game, not bragging / Lips bigger than Jagger, not sagging / Spell it backwards, I'm a leave it at that
/ That ain't got nothing to do with rap / Check the facts, expose those cats / Who pose as heroes and take advantage of blacks
/ Your government's gangster, so cut the crap / A war going on, so where y'all at? / 'Fight the Power' comes great responsibility
/ 'F the Police' but who's stopping you from killing me?" - Harder Than You Think

Besides being social revolutionaries, PE has been revolutionary for many other reasons. For example, they were one of the first groups to release albums exclusively as MP3s. Before that, they were one of the first Hip Hop acts to develop an enormous international following. Chuck said, "I think the internet was the saving grace for Public Enemy. Before that, travelling the world saved Public Enemy." Where Run DMC innovated the field of "Rap Rock" and partnered with rock groups like Aerosmith, PE took it to another level and created "Rap Metal" by joining with metal groups like Anthrax. Add to all of this a longevity that has spanned four decades, and it is clear to see why Public Enemy not only deserves a spot in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but as one of the top groups of all time in any musical genre.

HIP HOP WORDS OF THE WEEK

Half-steppin: Being fake or not giving something your full energy and effort.

EX: "I can't afford to miss rehearsal. There ain't no half-steppin' on this dance. It's crazy hard and I'm tryin' to front-row represent."

Song reference: "Ain't No Half Steppin" by Big Daddy Kane

EXTRA LEARNING

- 1) Why did Terminator X leave Public Enemy and who took his place?
- 2) Who presented for Public Enemy at their induction ceremony into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?
- 3) What is the name of the most recent Public Enemy album and what is the meaning of the title?