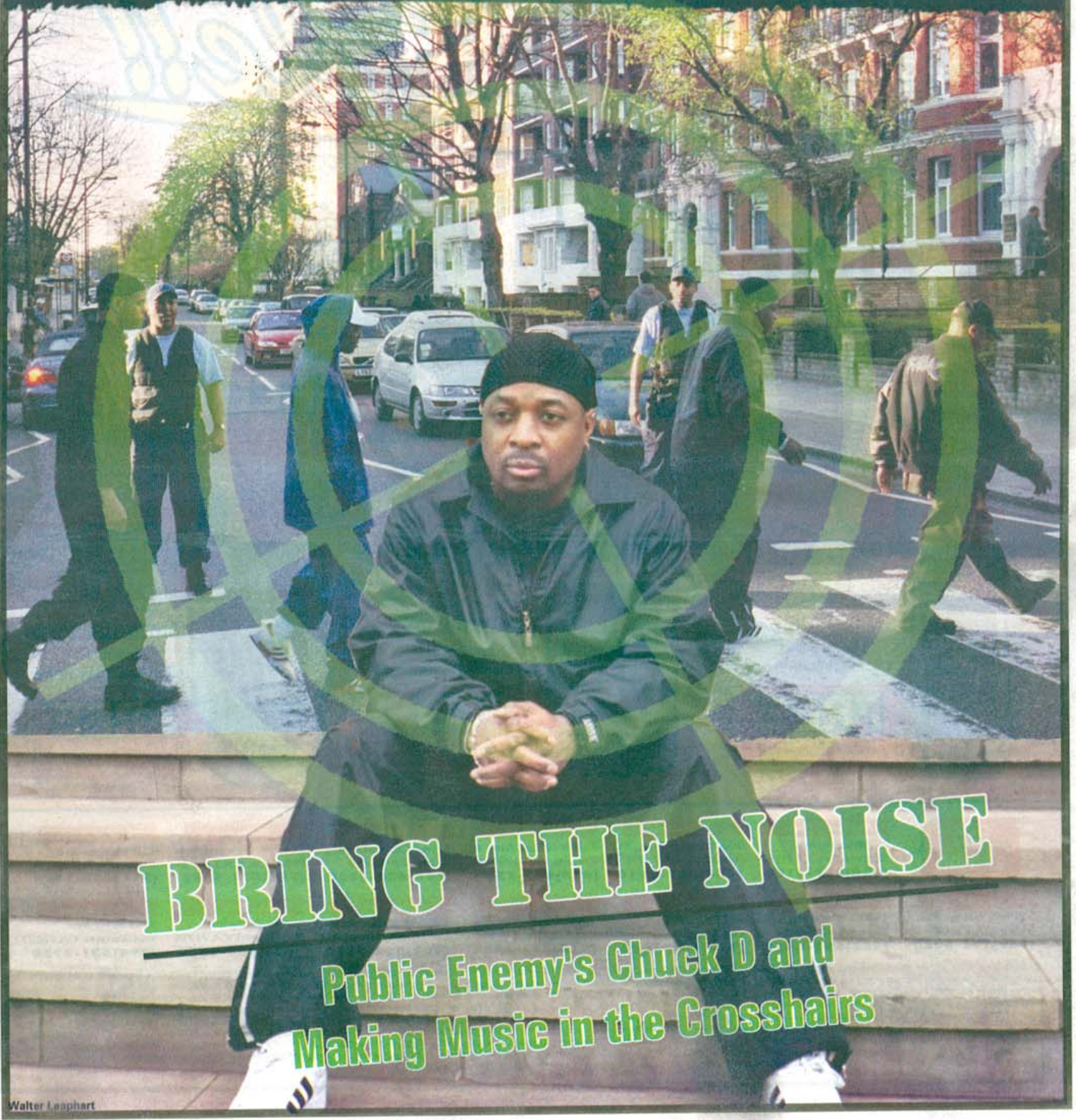


ENTERTAINMENT *Today*

Friday, April 15, 2005 • Vol. 37, No. 27



BRING THE NOISE

Public Enemy's Chuck D and
Making Music in the Crosshairs

Walter Leaphart

MUSIC

COVER: PUBLIC ENEMY

BRING THE NOISE

By Douglas Kearney

When I was growing up, there were three concert spectacles I heard rumors about, yet could never confirm with my own eyes. The first: Ozzy Osbourne bit bats' heads off in between tunes. The next, Prince performed in a bathtub, had sex on stage, had sex on stage in a bathtub and so on. Third, Public Enemy walked around with uzis and performed in cages. And not in that go-go dancer way, no. More in the "the-only-reason-we-haven't-kicked-your-skulls-in-is-because-we're-restrained" sort of way.

Now, in all fairness, they stoked this rumor on their third album, *Fear of a Black Planet* with an interlude featuring an irate guy calling into a radio show debating the group's value. They also kept the rumor hot because, well, it's true.

At least the uzi part.

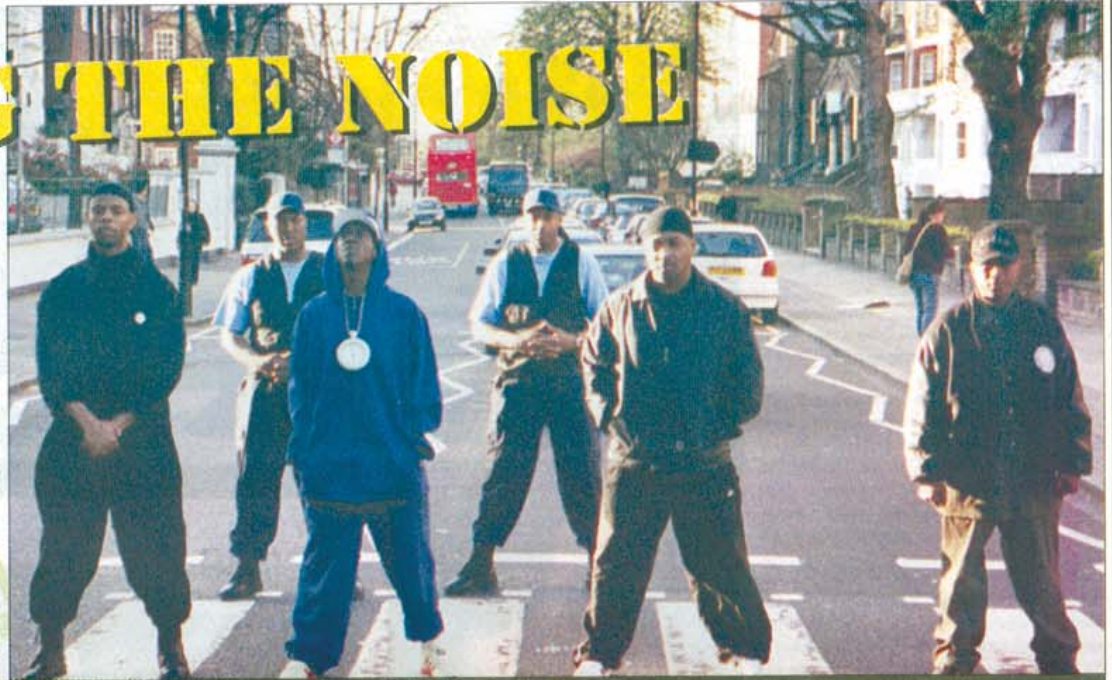
Documented in *It Takes A Nation: The First London Invasion Tour 1987*, the fine, new DVD of PE's third night in London on their first European tour presents a rap group fresh out of its rookie year and beginning to lay the foundation of their legendary live show. Filmed at the Hammersmith Odeon Theatre, the DVD is the first of a series of PE archive videos and offers complete footage of PE's set during the Def Jam tour in which they opened for label mates Eric B & Rakim as well as LL Cool J.

The concert, itself, is notable for its existence as an audio-visual artifact of early hip hop. Followers of Public Enemy's discography might recognize the opening as "Countdown to Armageddon," track one from their sophomore joint, *It Takes A Nation A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Already a gripping introduction to one of rap's most innovative albums, "Countdown" is even more striking, reunited with its visuals. The stage: an evacuated setting patrolled by the submachine gun-toting, camo-clad Security of the First World (S1Ws). Their paramilitary-step choreography: maneuvering in and out of the smoke and strafing spots. Professor Griff: watching, inspecting, commanding them and the audience with shouts over an air raid siren. Chilling stuff. All the more so when you consider the bulk of the concert-goers were probably there to see a pre-diesel LL Cool J strip off his sweat jacket.

In a telling moment of transition, Terminator X cuts the siren and drops a break. Griff transforms into a hype man, rallying the crowd as Chuck and Flavor Flav bail onto the stage, hurl PE 'T' shirts to the crowd and rock B-Boy stances. This sequence is perhaps a perfect condensation of PE's aesthetic strategy, to provide a "revolutionary party" in all senses of the words.

In a phone interview, Chuck D said, "Nobody's gonna be good their first year. Everybody's gotta carve their own niche with their live show" adding, "by the time we did London, we had worked out the kinks."

For PE, there were fairly unique kinks to work out. At the time, rap music had only been a nationally touring phenomenon for a few years with even less mileage racked up overseas. Still, groups gener-



PE's *It Takes a Nation: The First London Invasion Tour 1987* Releases on DVD

ally had straightforward roles on stages. The guys with mics were MCs. The guy behind the turntable was the DJ. If somebody was dancing on stage: dancer.

"With us it was less clear. With us, we had one MC, right? One DJ. These guys doing this whole military thing and Griff leading them. And then

you had this one crazy guy, Flavor Flav," Chuck added.

The dynamic seems to work on film—PE slams through incendiary tracks from their first album, *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* and what would become *It Takes A Nation...* including the anthemic "Bring the Noise," the BPM-ticking "Right Starter"

and an urgent performance of "Rebel Without A Pause."

Much has been said about Public Enemy's music. It's a collage of anachronism, riot and funk. Shrill guitar lines stab the bedrock of James Brown rhythm sections like flags driven into new territory. Pitched-down soul calls become field hollers in burning cities as Terminator X makes the music stutter at its own dissonance. Flavor Flav's trickster couplets and catch phrases rise out the rock. And Chuck D shouts over the shelling with preacher intonation pushed to outrage. Their first three albums were each constructed by the Bomb Squad: Hank Shocklee, Eric "Vietnam" Sadler and Chuck, himself—confessed musicologists that dug into vinyl finding just the right kick, this open hi-hat, that sax lick, not to mention the musique concrète that transformed beats into landscapes.

Equally fascinating, especially when it comes to a DVD of a concert, is PE's use of image. Before PE, Chuck studied Design and Communication at Adelphi University, writing and illustrating political cartoons. Along with visual art, he worked at WBAU, the college radio station where, one could say, Public Enemy was born doing promos and battle records.

In fact, while production teams have changed over the course of PE's extensive discography, the foundation of their image, the PE logo, has remained unchanged. Chuck D designed the logo: a B-Boy silhouette, arms folded, defiant in a set of crosshairs.

That image served to symbolize the range of Black men the group itself represents visually. Professor Griff's disciplined bearing and crisp fatigues contrasting with Flav's twitchy theatrics, oversized clock medallion and thick frame shades. And, right between them, Chuck D, the active wear-sporting every man.

"We have a lack of controlled areas where we can be diverse," said Chuck in reference to visual representations of Black people. Public Enemy offers that diversity to its viewers, and what's more



Photos by Walter Leight



Continued on page 22

KNITTING FACTORY 7021 HOLLYWOOD BLVD * ALL SHOWS ALL AGES
 FOR TICKETS CALL (323) 463-0204 OR VISIT WWW.KNITTINGFACTORY.COM

WEDNESDAY APRIL 20 8:00 PM **AMON TOBIN**
 kspc radio 88.7FM
 5.1 SURROUND SOUND DJ SET

FRIDAY APRIL 29 **ULRICH SCHNAUSS**
 plus very special guests

FRIDAY APRIL 8 **BIRD**
 SKY PARADE fielding THE DISTORTIONS
 PLUS A SPECIAL MIDNIGHT PERFORMANCE OF JACOB LUTRELL

SUNDAY APRIL 10 **ASSEMBLAGE 23**
 backandtotheleft

MONDAY APRIL 11 **NEVEA TEARS**
 BEFORE TODAY UNDERMINED THE SILENCE LUX

WEDNESDAY APRIL 13 **THE NEW YEAR SILKWORM**
 w/ DORIS HENSON

TUESDAY APRIL 12 **UGLY DUCKLING**
 THE PROCUSSIONS HALFWAY HOUSE BROTHER READE NOBLE HOPS

FRIDAY APRIL 15 **CROOKED FINGERS**
 w/ DELOREAN

SUNDAY APRIL 17 **SKAMANIA!**
 LA RESISTENCIA MATAMOSKA RONCOVACOCO CONCEPT JBL ONK

TUESDAY APRIL 19 **DESMOND DEKKER**

THURSDAY APRIL 21 **the album leaf**
 ASPECTS OF PHYSICS MANUOK

FRIDAY APRIL 22 **VINYL**
 NIKHIL KORULA BAND

SATURDAY APRIL 23 **LEAP OF FAITH: ROBERT LAMM AND FRIENDS**

SUNDAY MAY 8 **Liam Howe OF sneaker PIMPS**

TUESDAY APRIL 26 **FREE! the return of THOR**

TUESDAY APRIL 26 **LOUQUE DUCT**

WEDNESDAY APRIL 27 **LOS CALZONES**
 FROM ARGENTINA
 w/ LA PESTILENCIA FROM COLUMBIA

SATURDAY APRIL 30 **over the rhine**

TUESDAY MAY 3 **DAMIEN JURADO**
 TWO GALLANTS

ALL AGES! FREE FOR 21+ EVERY WEDNESDAY NIGHT!
DIVEBOMB
 HOSTED BY AARON NORTH AND TRAVIS KELLER
 THIS WED 4/1! www.divebombnight.com

EVERY 2nd SATURDAY OF THE MONTH THIS SAT! APRIL 9th!
21+ nightLIFE
 hosted by CHALI 2NA of JURASSIC 5 RAKAA of DILATED PEOPLES

ALTERKNIT LOUNGE:
 4.7 BUZZPLAY.COM PRESENTS: THE STRANGER SIX, COLOR WALL, THE EVERGREENS, YARDLEY, FLOOD THE VOID
 4.8 CARRICK MOORE GERETY (of EVERYBODY ELSE) w/ FRIENDS FROM THE VACATION, ARMYNAVY, EVERYBODY ELSE, and ROONEY
 4.9 WE ARE LIONS, VAS DEFERENS, STASERA KIT KINETIC, THE GOLDEN SPIRAL
 4.10 THE MAMMALS 2 SETS!!!
 early show: 7:30pm! THE BRADBURY PRESS
 4.12 late show: 9pm! BLUEBEAT LOUNGE
 weekly ska and reggae night feat: CHRIS MURRAY COMBO AND FRIENDS
 4.14 CONTROLLING THE FAMOUS, THE VALLEY ARENA THE OUTLINE, MAKESHIFT LOVE AFFAIR
 4.15 THE ACTUAL + GAZZ

5.5 JEDI MIND TRICKS
5.7+8 STEEL TRAIN
5.11 HELLA
5.12 SHARON JONES & the DAP-KINGS
5.17 BOREDOMS
5.18 SAW DOCTORS
5.20 THE BOOKS + MIA DOI TODD
5.21+22 PREFUSE 73 **5.23 KAKI KING**
5.25 TYPICAL CATS **5.26 CAT EMPIRE**
5.27 ANTIBALAS AFROBEAT ORCHESTRA
5.28 STEREO TOTAL + THE GOSSIP

TICKETWEB **Meyer Sound** **peace** **Vestax** **AUDIX**

BRING THE NOISE

Continued from page 15

important, shows these disparate archetypes in collaborative pursuit of a common goal.

These days PE has harnessed the Internet as a means of distributing music on their own terms. Their label, Slam Jamz, delivers a broad range of artists directly to the public, including the soul music of Kyle Jason, the boom bap of Dirty North, rap rock of the 7th Octave (which features Griff) and even a collective of online fans that collaborate with PE (The Impossibulls). All of this, plus more of their own music and the continuing series of archival DVDs.

It Takes A Nation also includes a film that splices concert footage with behind-the-scenes sequences of the group backstage. These bits range from a tense argument over live vocals between PE's then DJ Terminator X and Flavor Flav; an interview with Chuck that investigates his politics of race and gender in the final days of Reagan's America; and a surreal, damn-near disturbing exchange between Chuck, Flav and a woman the *Strangeflow* star calls "one of the biggest Public Enemy fans in London." It's worthwhile - just watch the concert in its entirety first as much of the movie re-uses the footage.

If *It Takes A Nation* has a weakness, it's the initial jarring surprise that in this concert, the group performs over vocal tracks, perhaps because there were no instrumentals or maybe as a means of backing-up Chuck's voice. This is more noticeable at the show's beginning, before either the soundman makes adjustments or Chuck gets hype enough to begin to overwhelm his album vocals.

By the concert's end, the pre-recorded verses might as well be back-up singers as the MC powers over them. The sound seems less electric, especially when compared to the DVD's footage of a recent PE show in Australia. Performing with a live band, PE rips through "She Watch Channel Zero" and "Can't Truss It" with a sonic ferocity more akin to the intensity of their albums.

Perhaps the best feature of the DVD is the audio commentary. And it is excellent. Chuck D gets historical as the film runs, bridging the visuals with an engaging narrative of group lore, technical insights and a first-hand account of rap music's beginnings as a global presence. And it is here that the value of PE's legacy as pioneers of rap's "Golden Age" meets their value to the music's future.

Accepting the role of musicologists, Public Enemy preserves the culture from within. As Chuck D says, "You have to build your own turf." Not only did Public Enemy build it, they'll continue to care for and inform it long after hit-it-and-quit-it rappers sell their last CD.

ET/dk

Chuck D continues to be a high-demand speaker on the college circuit. You can hear Chuck D's Worldwide Hip Hop Countdown weekly on AOL radio by visiting www.rapstation.com.

Public Enemy is currently working on a new record to be released later this year. Stay informed at www.publicenemy.com. The It Takes A Nation: The First London Invasion Tour 1987 DVD may be purchased at www.dvdnote.com.

Writer Douglas Kearney teaches at California Institute of the Arts. His poetry collection "Fear, some" will be out this winter.