

MUSIC

Race relations: Rappers Chuck D and Maestro Fresh Wes on the U.S. election



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Rapper Chuck D of Public Enemy.

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With voters set to decide the next president of the United States Tuesday, Chuck D, leader of Public Enemy, is hoping for a Barack Obama victory, but warning that even if the current POTUS is re-elected, there will remain a division that cuts beyond red and blue states. Following the election of the first black president, the musician says his country is still very much split along colour lines of a different sort.

“When America has a recession, there’s a depression in black America,” says Chuck D, 52 and based in Atlanta, where he worked alongside Flavor Flav on this year’s two new Public Enemy discs.

“Everybody talks about the country as ‘post-racial,’ but America’s as black and white as an old TV set. Obama didn’t even blow away John McCain and Sarah Palin — and he’s not going to win on the strength of black people. White America’s densely populated in places like Tennessee, Wyoming and Texas — and Romney has a damn good shot.”

Joining Chuck D for this interview is Canadian hip hop star Maestro Fresh Wes, who released his first record in 1989 and took the stage with Public Enemy this past September at their Toronto show. According to Wes, strides have been made for racial equality up north, too, but there’s still distrust based on appearances.

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“Me being a black man and being involved in hip hop, I’m perceived as ignorant,” says Wes, who, as a result of these biases has worked hard to invoke politics in his new songs. “Why would I want to make music perpetuating that? At this point, it’s not even about making records, it’s about making history.”

Public Enemy’s history is long and storied, with the group releasing the seminal album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* in 1988. Chuck D, born Carlton Douglas Ridenhour in Long Island, N.Y., started out as a rapper, but by the time he made his first album, 1987’s *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, he was 27, working as a radio DJ and promoting hip hop as a new art form.

“My goal wasn’t to do records — at the station, we had two rooms of records already — but one day me and Flavor were delivering furniture for my pop and he told me that someone at his brother’s barber shop wanted to battle,” says Chuck D, who authored *Fight the Power* for the 1989 Spike Lee film *Do the Right Thing*.

“I was like Satchel Paige: ‘You should’ve caught me when I was striking people out back in the Negro League.’ But if it was going to be a gun fight, I was going to be the last man standing — that’s when I made Public Enemy No. 1.”

The two new Public Enemy albums — *Most of My Heroes Still Don’t Appear on No Stamp* and *The Evil Empire of Everything* — and *Black Tuxedo*, the new Wes EP, don’t take pains to imitate today’s young stars. As Wes says: “Bryan Adams isn’t trying to sound like Justin Bieber and Fred Sanford should leave Lamont’s closet alone.”

Instead, the old friends say they’re neither trying to relive their early ’90s heyday or exhaust themselves in pursuit of new trends.

“When someone asks me about [up-and-coming rappers] Chief Keef or 2 Chainz, it’s like asking me about Mastodon — I honestly have no idea,” Chuck D says. “I hope they earn their place where we can have a relationship, but right now I want to spend time with my peers.”

Right now, of course, everyone’s mind is on the U.S. election and Chuck D, who once said, “Rap is CNN for black people,” believes Obama has earned a second term, even if a Democrat victory won’t necessarily change “Black America” overnight.

“Black folks know that voting for Obama doesn’t bring us any kind of Jesus saviour result,” he says. “But what it does do is buy us time because you don’t have someone in office coming after you particularly, and that’s why we have to get our s—t together collectively because if not, individually, we’re all going down.”

Most of My Heroes Still Don’t Appear on No Stamp and *The Evil Empire of Everything* are available at publicenemy.com. For *Maestro Fresh Wes* news, follow his Twitter feed: [@MaestroFreshWes](https://twitter.com/MaestroFreshWes).

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