

# Public Enemy's Chuck D on 25 Years, the Election & Music 'Slavery'

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To celebrate the hip-hop group's quarter century, its outspoken frontman sat down at San Francisco's [Treasure Island Music Festival](#) to discuss their legacy, Obama vs. Romney, race relations, and more.



[Public Enemy](#), the perspicacious, politically charged group that redefined hip-hop, has reached their 25th anniversary and their message of self-empowerment in the black community and the failings of the music industry couldn't be more relevant today.

(Clockwise from bottom left) Flavor Flav, Professor Griff, Terminator X, S1W and Chuck D of the rap group Public Enemy pose for a portrait in a studio, 1998. (Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images)

Comprised of frontman Chuck D, hype man [Flavor Flav](#), DJ Lord on the turntables, as well as Professor Griff and the S1W (Security of the First World), the Roosevelt, Long Island, natives released their first

album, *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* in 1987 to critical acclaim, and followed the next year with *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, regarded by many critics as the greatest rap album of all time. And in 1989, Spike Lee recruited the group to record the revolutionary anthem "Fight the Power" for his classic, *Do the Right Thing*. (Their 12th studio album, *The Evil Empire of Everything*, will be released on Nov. 6.)

After a thrilling performance at the 2012 Treasure Island Music Festival in San Francisco, Chuck D sat down with The Daily Beast to discuss the group's legacy, and sound off on the state of race relations in America, the presidential election, how the rap-music industry is tantamount to "slavery," and more.

### **How did Public Enemy form?**

We formed at WBAU and we were all a collective on the Adelphi campus but also in the Roosevelt, Long Island, area since we were all from there. We wanted to be able to present hip-hop in a manner that was comparable to what musicians were doing in other genres. We took it seriously; it wasn't just a couple of kids messing around with some turntables. I really loved that hip-hop was something that could rank alongside Van Halen at the time.

### **And how did the group get "discovered" by producer Rick Rubin?**

We played a promo for WBAU and Run DMC, who we interviewed first when we were kids, and Ad Roc and the Beastie Boys would take our music around the station on a tape.

### **The Licensed to Ill tour in '88, where you guys opened up for the Beastie Boys, will go down in history as one of the rowdiest ever, with riots, giant inflatable penises, girls dancing in cages, etc.**

The most mind-blowing performance was the date that we weren't on, which was Detroit at the Fox Theatre. I was blown away by the Beastie Boys' presentation. And that tour was the first time Flavor had ever been on a plane.

### **Beastie Boy Adam "MCA" Yauch passed away this year after losing his battle with cancer. How will you remember MCA?**

MCA was a dude who was having a great time with music and hip-hop and then became a dude who was having a great time with music and hip-hop from a more mature standpoint where he wanted to see it change the world. He gave his all.

Lupe Fiasco, Kanye West, and Common are all from Chicago, but couldn't be heard on their local radio stations until a major record label signed them. That's plantationism; that's slavery. So I plan in 2013 to have an "Occupy the Free Air" protest across the United States.

### **Public Enemy was really one of the first politically conscious rap groups.**

Coming in at the times of R&B, which was Reagan and Bush [Sr.], a lot of things were politically active, and we just happened to put it in a more succinct, understandable way. In the present, it seems like the Reagan

and Bush eras have been mimicked by urban radio and BET because they don't serve the community; they suck the community.

**Could you expand on that? What are your thoughts on the state of the rap-music industry in 2012?**

Rappers should just be able to perform what they create and satisfy the people that like and love them. Now, rappers perform and give a half-assed show, or don't even show up to all the areas that they're magnified. I hate the majors. I like Rick Ross as a person. I like Jay-Z and Kanye West as people. But I hate the companies that they record for. I hate the radio stations that play 100 percent national-sponsored hip-hop music. And I hate Viacom for being a fucking one-trick pony. They're the major, dominant TV company. BET is a part of Viacom. They think that just because they own BET, they can buy and sell black people at their whim. Put my HATE in capital letters.

**So what can be done?**

I believe that, artistically and culturally, the free radio air should be able to support local artists of whatever genre. Play 40 percent of your local artists, don't suck up to major labels to the point where you neglect your own locale. It's easier to do global than local. It's easier to figure out how to be respected in your 'hood than be a national artist, which only major corporations, radio stations, and record companies perpetuate. They endorse that somebody becomes national, but if you're national without being local, then you're fake. For example, Lupe Fiasco, Kanye West, and Common are all from Chicago, but they couldn't be heard on their local radio stations until a major record label signed them. That's plantation; that's slavery. So I plan in 2013 to have an 'Occupy the Free Air' protest across the United States.

**What are your thoughts on the whole Chief Keef controversy?**

That's just a small microcosm of what's really been the problem in Chicago. It's not even on the world radar; it just mirrors the confusion. [Lupe Fiasco](#) is a favorite of mine because I like his direction in his music. But I think most rap artists are steered to just say some crazy shit. With rap music, the artists that [the music industry] projects 99 percent of the time are black. People are so confused about race and hip-hop that people didn't even consider the Beastie Boys one of the greatest rap groups of all time because they were white. There's a lot of racism here in what's "urban" and what's "rap" and what's not, so young people in the last 15 years have seen this confusion and started to mimic it. "Bad news is the only news, so if I act a fool I'll be praised, and if I try to do the right thing, the community won't help me anyway.

It also reflects why Lupe says he doesn't want to vote, because he basically says it's been a fuckin' lie. I'm not co-signing that. I think voting is positive, but what's been eradicated is the necessity of understanding your local. If your local doesn't give a fuck about you, then you get turned off it. You can no longer sell nationalism to people of color—including black people—without finding a way to have them being supported and understanding their communities at the same time.

**What are your thoughts on the presidential election?**

[Deep sigh] I've always liked Obama the man, but he's made to respond to how the New World Order wants him to respond. Romney's no different. Obama can't serve the black community; he can only serve the needs of people who are disenfranchised, and there's a lot of black people who are, but he's gotta serve a lot of other communities, too. The president could really be more destructive than anything, so just having a president be not as destructive as some of the rhetorics of the past is helpful. George W. Bush

was running roughshod all over the rest of the world.

**So what would your advice to young people be?**

Young people need to understand how to vote for their local representatives before even thinking about voting for president. The majority is having a hard time holding on to a lot of things. A lot of the information in this election is out there, but people are having a hard time navigating it all. That's another battle in and of itself.

***It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* is still so thematically relevant today, especially the song "Don't Believe the Hype." We're sort of living in the "Overhype Era," if you will.**

In the '80s, you had the beginnings of cable. I had five stations. Now, you have 500 channels and the Internet, which gives you everything at once. There's a lot of hype going on and hype is usually the thing that's used to carry the "sell." People just need to be literate and know what's coming at them. Schools taught people how to be literate in the simple sense of reading and writing and arithmetic, but now you need people to be literate regarding the media blitz—people coming at you constantly trying to get in your pocket and spin something on you. There's a lot of hype goin' on.

**Your third album, *Fear of a Black Planet*, seems pretty prescient considering that we now have a president who is half African American.**

The notion that "race" exists is silly; it's the human race. Judging people by what they look like and where they came from is primitive, caveman shit. It might matter to a second grader when he or she wants to bully somebody, but you see policies and countries built off "this is the rule, that's the exception," and race factors into that. With *Fear of a Black Planet*, it already is a planet of color. But do all colors get accepted equally? Probably not in a lot of places.

**And the track "Fight the Power" off that album still resonates so strongly today.**

You got to fight for your voice. We've gotten totally lopsided with the notion that "I'm striving to make a killing as opposed to make a living." If you have a few making a killing then people can't make a living. That's what the 99 percent vs. the 1 percent is about. People say, "This is capitalism. It's the American way." But even the "winner" in capitalism needs to say, "I'm going to give back and provide. If I'm top dog, I'm going to provide a service and give at least some of the store away." You can't just take and take and take.

**What's the state of Public Enemy in 2012?**

We're an international group that deals in 84 countries. Friends in high places in the United States have never supported us, so we continue to do our due. We're loved globally and continue to act globally without the powers that be. And me and Flavor are the Rolling Stones of the rap game. Either I'm Keith and he's Mick or I'm Mick and he's Keith. We flip it around. I don't do what he does and he doesn't do what I do and we've never been cut from the same cookie-cutter mold. And he's to be respected as someone who's brought the art form to a higher level.

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