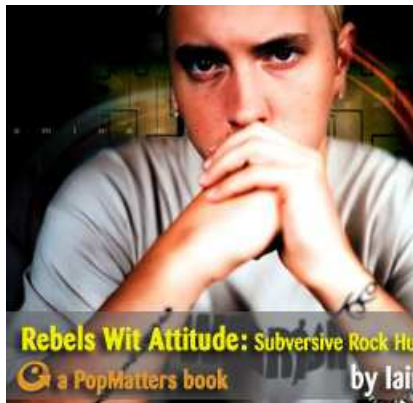




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Public Enemy
Revolverlution Tour Australia 2003 [DVD]
[Revolverlution Tour Australia 2003]
 (Charly / MVD)
 US release date: 20 January 2009

by [Kirby Fields](#)

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Whenever I pick up a contemporary book, the first thing I do is flip to the copyright page. I'm checking to see if the book was published before or after 2002, a date which, obviously, tells me if the book is pre- or post-9/11. I don't suppose I'm breaking any news by suggesting that, all things told, this is a pretty significant date and that the writer who sat down to start a new book on September 10th of that year probably did some extensive revisions on September 12th. As trite as it sounds (and as oft-repeated), this date changes everything that immediately precedes it.

Thus, for example, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (published September 1, 2001) maintains its relevance for exactly 10 days, Oprah or no Oprah. Don't get me wrong. The book is great. I enjoyed it immensely, and I've followed his career ever since. But *The Corrections* belongs to a world before.

Now before going forward, I should cop to the fact that I'm a 36-year-old white dude who has never fought for anything in his life, so I know full well that I may not be the world's foremost authority when it comes to a discussion of the cultural relevance of Barack Obama. Yet I can't help but think that, though only seven years removed from the last earth-shattering event, the election of Obama to the presidency of the United States also qualifies as a Before-and-After moment, particularly as it applies to certain conversations that involve oh, say, pop culture and race, which is why the most noteworthy aspects of the Public Enemy concert DVD, *Revolverlution Tour Australia 2003*, are the dates: a concert filmed in 2003 and copyrighted 2006. My first thought was, "Wow, this is *old*".



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Reagan-Bush-Bush is mitigated by the realization that, hey, at least we got some good tunes out of the deal. More than H.R., Rollins, or Ian MacKaye, Reagan himself was responsible for American hardcore, and who but George Dub could have inspired a group of Berkeley stoners to rally a nation of American idiots, a guy named "Billie Joe" now elevated to the status of one named "Bono".

But of all of the pop-cultural movements to emerge during these conservative periods, the most enduring was rap. With *Notorious* just out of the multiplex, 50 Cent starring in his own reality show, and Ice Cube helming family-friendly fare, I sometimes have to remind myself that the future of rap was once contested: In one corner, the gangsta rap of Ice T, the Geto Boys, and the NWA posse; in the other, the heirs apparent to Gil Scott-Heron and Grandmaster Flash, the more politically minded stylings of Boogie Down Productions and Public Enemy.

As evidenced by the Grammy performance that featured Jay Z, Kanye West, Lil' Wayne, TI, and MIA (collectively dubbed by Queen Latifah in her introduction as "the Rap Pack"), PE and its ilk lost, but their failure, if it can even be so called, is surely a result of the appropriation and subsequent commodification of the gangster lifestyle rather than anything even remotely related to the quality of the music, for, arguably, Public Enemy's body of work between 1987-1991 is rivaled in its sustained excellence only by Stevie Wonder's output from 1972-76. In fact, the work is so good that it continues to dominate their sets.

The *Revolverlution* DVD features approximately 21 songs (depending on how you view such breaks as DJ Lord's solo), 14 of which are from their first four albums. But they can hardly be blamed for drawing so heavily from their early work. "Welcome to the Terrordome", "Bring the Noise", "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos", "Don't Believe the Hype", "Fight the Power", "She Watch Channel Zero". Which would you cut? And, in any case, plenty of artists rely on their older material for their live shows. Have you seen Dylan recently? Or Neil Young? Or the Beastie Boys? Or, well, just about anyone.

No, the problem is not leaning on past greatness. The problem is that, at the time of the DVD's release, the band hadn't been great since the elder Bush's administration, which only highlights one of the dangers of a band predicating its success, in part, on its topicality: when that about which the band is topical passes, this strength becomes, if not exactly a weakness, then at least a limitation.

Granted, the songs from Bush I do play well during Bush II, and it's no accident that one of the more recent songs that Public Enemy showcases on the DVD is "Son of a Bush", a song with a wicked hook and a self-explanatory title. But what to do when they're both out of office and Jed is still at least a term away?

The DVD crystallizes this point when Chuck leads the crowd in a call-and-response of "Fuck George Bush" ("Fuck George Bush!"), "Fuck Tony Blair" ("Fuck Tony Blair!"), and "Fuck John Howard" ("Fuck John Howard!"). At one point, this probably felt like a healthy dose of subversion, but on account of all three of these leaders now being deposed, the defiance feels empty. Sure, the argument can be made that this kind of passion in 2003 is why none of them (or their representatives) are still in office today; however, the problem remains that, as I watch in 2009, a new regime is in place. The world has moved on.

To put it another way: Does "By the Time I Get to Arizona" lose its clout after Arizona recognizes Martin Luther King's birthday as a holiday? Remember, in that very song, Chuck claims, "Neither party is mine / Not the jackass or the elephant". Is that still true? Can it be? Now that Barack Obama is president, "Fight the Power" has to mean something different. Doesn't it?

None of this is to denigrate the DVD itself in any way. I've seen Public Enemy twice—once on the "Fear of a Black Planet" tour at Kemper Arena in Kansas City and once only 14 months ago when they celebrated the end of their 20th year together at Irving Plaza in New York. On the one hand, that a one-time arena band now headlines what are essentially club gigs is a shame, as the band certainly deserves the increased exposure (and gate); however, on the other hand, most bands benefit from playing smaller venues, and Public Enemy is no exception.

The DVD's liner notes inform us that Public Enemy was once known as "the

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Black Sex Pistols" (Chuck, never shy about self-mythologizing, co-wrote said notes), and the comparison with a band that embodies '70s punk at its most virile and provocative is apt. I've long lamented not being old enough to have experienced originally that first-generation punk scene (on both sides of the Atlantic), but as I was sweating with Chuck and Co. up close in December of '07, I did for the first time think, "Well, at least I'm here, now".

Impressively, the disc effectively captures the kinetic nature of these shows: Chuck in a muscle shirt, shorts, and sneakers, dressed more for the gym than a night out, joined by a full band, a DJ, Professor Griff, and, of course, Flavor. The show looks like it was cheaply filmed, which only contributes to its DIY feel. At least one crane helps capture the overhead shots of the crowd, but, for the most part, hand-helds seem to have been the weapon of choice. They're most successful when they spy Chuck limbering up backstage or shoot the band from the gutter between the stage and the audience, which literally provides a front-row view.

The set list—highlights of which are mentioned above—gains points for being hit-heavy but loses points for being overly inclusive. One advantage of releasing a recording of a live show is that doing so allows the band to trim away parts of the concert that may have dragged. With this release, the band failed to seize this opportunity. As far as I can tell (and remember), this is an unedited version of the live experience, which means that Flavor's solo set appears here in full, as does a 15-minute performance by a Griff-led band called "7th Octave".

Flavor's set is understandable, as the guy has become an institution of his own. My own feelings are mixed. I recognize that his buffoonery functions as the spoonful of sugar that helps Chuck's medicine go down, but he's such a clown—especially outfitted like a cuckold in that Viking helmet—that he doesn't always serve as the band's best ambassador. (If you think they've lost any of their fighting spirit, just consider this lyric by Paris on their shared 2006 release, *Rebirth of a Nation*: "No love for the Enemy with video play / But they give Flav a show to take the focus away".) Listening to Flavor bust out a "Yeeeeeaaahhhh, booooooooyyyyyy" is cool in the same way that I'd like to hear that guy say, "Let's get ready to rummm-bbbllleee", but otherwise, the "track skip" button on your remote will be put to good use.

The 7th Octave set is less forgivable. They get to plug their Web site (I'll give you three guesses, and the first two don't count), and their brand of nü metal is better than most, but opening bands should open the show, not the first encore.

Perhaps Flavor's full set and the 7th Octave portion of the concert could have been reassigned to the already bloated "Special Features" section. Public Enemy has always been fan-friendly—their split with Def Jam was, in part, because of the band advocating for a greater online access of their music—but the amount of extras on these discs suggests that you can get too much of a good thing (or at least that a good thing shouldn't always be enjoyed in one sitting). The packaging boasts that, in sum, the discs include over four hour of material, which would test the attention of span of all but the most voyeuristic viewers.

The 13-minute "Behind the Scenes" feature wisely spends most of its time with the musicians who flesh out the sound on the tour. I got to know them well enough that I almost feel bad for dismissing 7th Octave above (almost). And the "Private Video", despite its Pam-and-Tommy sounding name, tastefully reveals a playful side of the band: Chuck uncharacteristically rolling on the floor with laughter at the sight of Flavor's less-than-hulking pecs, Griff pulling off an impersonation of the Crocodile Hunter that is Horatian enough to still be funny.

But the extras need not include a slide show, an electronic version of the liner notes, and an additional hour-long "Tour Diary" (that can, in fairness, be watched in segments). There is nothing wrong, per se, with any of these additions. Just that they are not created for the casual viewer (and even the most interested parties—myself included—might still struggle through to the end).

I feel a little guilty leveling this criticism at a band that we clearly need more of rather than less, but at some point it becomes a matter of quantity over quality. By my count, this is the third concert video that PE has released that pretty much draws from the same body of work for the bulk of its substance (and this Australia show may very well be a repackaging of

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a Manchester show that was released a couple of years ago, which would explain the 2006 copyright and the 2009 release date). They have released three solid albums since *Revolverlution*, and, OK, maybe *New Whirl Odor*, *Rebirth of a Nation*, and *How You Sell Soul to a Soulless People Who Sold Their Soul?* may not achieve the iconic status of *Bum Rush* or *Nation of Millions*, but there's a solid 90 minutes of live material there ("Superman's Black in the Building" is a worthy 12 minutes all by itself).

Let's see a show of PE 2.0. They could start with "MKLVFKWR (Make Love, Fuck War)", the Moby-produced track that hearkens back to the Bomb Squad days with downright eerie accuracy. The abbreviation is splashed across the DVD's cover. The sentiment is repeatedly echoed throughout the show. But, inexplicably, the song is AWOL.

I was originally going to conclude this review/essay back where I started with a line something like "All concert videos are historical documents but this one more than most"; however, the deeper I got in, the more I realized that such a pithy conclusion might provide a satisfactory button but that it does so at the expense of being fair. The truth is that it's more complicated than that. "I Have a Dream" is an historical document too, and, though Chuck's birthday will never be recognized as a national holiday, for a generation of blacks and whites, he and his band eagerly carried the baton, and they carried it well.

By all means, celebrate those songs. Celebrate them as often and as loudly as you want. But were I bold to enough to suggest such a thing, I would tell Chuck that, as rich as their past is, they should not revisit it to such a degree that they relegate all that follows to the status of an also-ran. We are, potentially, on the cusp of a new age, a new age that Public Enemy, in part, helped inspire.

And I, for one, can't wait to hear what they have to say.



Public Enemy: Revolverlution Tour

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