

LPs

Public Enemy is no longer 'leading the music'

Response to their latest LP shows how rap landscape has changed since 1988

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NO STRANGERS TO CONTROVERSY, Public Enemy and their leader Chuck D have faced some severe public relations challenges in their time, including the furor over anti-Semitic public statements by a former band member, accusations that their video for *By the Time I Get to Arizona* advocated violence against public officials, and well-publicized reports of Flavor Flav's battle with substance abuse. Other, more minor crises — including fallout from their embrace of radical political figures like Minister Louis Farrakhan and Dr. Frances Cress Welsing — happen too frequently to bother enumerating.

All of these trials pale next to Public Enemy's current strife: the disdain of music critics. Long critical darlings, Public Enemy is now in the unfamiliar position of defending themselves against some of their former champions in the media. Their new album, *Muse Sick N Hour Mess Age* (Def Jam), has been panned far and wide. Rolling Stone? Hated it. The Source? Loathed it. Details? Despised it. Longtime Public Enemy crony/supporter Nelson George writing in the *Village Voice* managed to praise the record, albeit tepidly. Even George, though, had to admit that *Muse Sick* is "a comedown for PE, but as many black music innovators have found out, from Ray Charles to Earth, Wind & Fire, the moment arrives when you're no longer leading the music."

The critical response to *Muse Sick* offers vivid testimony that the rap landscape of 1994 is much changed from 1988, the year of PE's breakthrough LP *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* (still arguably the finest rap album ever made). In 1988, rap was about breaking down doors and raising consciousness while getting paid. Hip-hop's vanguard was defined by New York artists like PE, the Jungle Brothers and Boogie Down Productions, who, while not exactly soft or sappy (let's not forget that PE's *My Uzi Weighs A Ton* and BDP's *9mm Goes Bang* presaged gangsta rap's gat-centric worldview), were committed to experimenting with lyrical abstraction and pushing open rap's sonic envelope.

Today, a genre that once prided itself on constant innovation remains stuck in gangsta mode. The antisocial lyrics and languid grooves of Dr. Dre and his musical brethren have taken over and calcified a once vibrant subculture. Despite wishful reports of its demise, gangsta rap is still very much alive and kicking (or should I say shooting?), as anyone who listens to the radio or watches MTV can attest. In hip-hop, the search for the new and different has long since been replaced by the demand for the "real," with reality extending no further than the wartorn ghetto territory staked out years ago by NWA.



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In this atmosphere, PE's commitment to political commentary sounds almost quaint. Once the epitome of rap style and attitude, the members of Public Enemy now find themselves the wrong age (thirtysomething), on the wrong coast (East), with the wrong sound (cluttered and sample-heavy).

Indeed, the entire publicity campaign for *Muse Sick* tacitly acknowledges PE's diminished stature in the rap game, announcing as it does that the new release is for all those who "doubted the world power of PE."

Still able to rile

As an effort to convince the doubters and reassert Public Enemy's relevance, *Muse Sick* is a mixed success. A large part of PE's greatness resides in their ability to rile — they have always been willing to take on topics no other artists would touch. On *Muse Sick*, principal lyricist Chuck D has lost none of his ability to shock and provoke. Relentlessly race-conscious, Chuck shares his thoughts on the absurdity of Columbus Day ("it's as crazy as Hitler Day"), black-on-black violence ("I don't want my ma on the street wearin' body armor"), and a variety of ills perpetrated by the white man and his "god complex."

For all his anger at the powers that be, Chuck saves some of his most bitter invective for his peers in the rap industry. Indeed, much of *Muse Sick* can be read as a response to gangsta rap. On *So Watcha Gone Do Now?* Chuck accuses gangsta rappers of being "slaves to the rhythm of the master" and compares them unfavorably with roaches and fashion models. Whether you agree with Chuck's perspective or not, you've got

to give him credit for denouncing the proponents of "rap, guns, drugs and money" when they're the ones selling platinum.

So, if Public Enemy remains as incendiary as ever, why isn't *Muse Sick* an unqualified success?

Where the album falters is with the music. On *Muse Sick*, PE ignores Duke Ellington's sage advice for would-be musical propagandists: it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing. Public Enemy's message can often be a bitter pill to swallow (for friend and foe alike), but it's a pill that has traditionally gone down a little bit smoother with the help of booming beats and inventive hooks, courtesy of PE's production team, the Bomb Squad.

Unfortunately, six years after they revolutionized the sound of hip-hop on *Nation of Millions*, the Bomb Squad seems to have run out of fresh ideas. On many occasions, *Muse Sick* is simply too dense for its own good. Oh, sure *Give it Up* — the latest in a long line of killer PE singles — is well nigh irresistible, but once you get past that, there's not much on *Muse Sick* capable of moving a crowd. Not all rap need be danceable of course, but it is *music* after all... it should cause a toe to tap or a head to nod every now and again.

Throughout *Muse Sick*, Public Enemy asks the listener to choose between "right vs. wrong," "good vs. evil," "god vs. the devil," and, implicitly, "us vs. them" — thoughtful, political hip-hop vs. reactionary gangsta rap. If the operative question of the album is "what side are you on?" the sad answer is that unless they produce music with a little more punch than *Muse Sick*, Public Enemy will find themselves standing alone against the gangsta hordes. And that would be bad news indeed for all fans of cutting edge hip-hop.