Public Enemy and late 1980s Context

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Late 1980s Political/ cultural context

- Black community push-back to Reaganism
- Jesse Jackson presidential run
- Community devastation from crack; community response
- Resurgence of Black Nationalist thinking/Afrocentrism
- Vacuum of organizational leadership
- Rising racial tensions: NYC and nationally
- Tensions over control of public space
- Criminalization of Black & Brown male youth
1980s New York context

• April 1989: “Central Park jogger” case
• August 1989: Yusuf Hawkins shot in Bensonhurst, BK
• Nov. 1989: David Dinkins elected 1st Black NYC mayor
• Summer 1989: Spike Lee’s Do The Right Thing Released
• 1991: Crown Heights (BK) Riot
Public Enemy’s rise

• Successfully appropriates movement imagery
  • See “Fight the Power” video remix ’63 March on Washington
• Position themselves as the people’s voice of protest
  • Chuck D: Rap is “the Black CNN …”
  • *Hip Hop positions itself as the institutional voice of Black America*
• Artistic tension between Chuck D and Flavor Flav
  • Conscious vs. party/ Flav as “wise fool”?
• Complex, sophisticated production
  • The “Bomb Squad” and DJ Terminator X’s tapestry of sound
• Media-savvy promotion
  • “Fight the Power”’s Key *sonic* role in Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing*
Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing*

Radio Raheem represents urban youth; contests urban space
“Central Park Jogger” case/ Central Park Five

Criminalization of Black and Latin@ youth (particularly male) and struggle over public space.
Animalistic imagery used to demonize Black and Latin@ youth and – by extension– hip hop as the de-facto soundtrack.
BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY.
BRING BACK OUR POLICE!
1987

Album:

- #125 Billboard Top LPs
- #28 Billboard Black Albums
1988

Album:
• #42 Billboard Top LPs
• #1 Billboard Black Albums
• Platinum

“Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos”
• #11 Billboard Rap Singles
1989

Album:
- #10 Billboard Pop Albums
- #3 Billboard Black Albums

“Fight the Power”
- #1 Billboard Rap Singles

“Welcome to the Terrordome”
- #3 Billboard Rap Singles

“911 is a Joke”
- #1 Billboard Rap Singles

“Can’t Do Nuttin For Ya’ Man”
- #11 Billboard Rap Singles
On Public Enemy’s *sonic* innovations

"When we put together our music, we try to put together layers that complement each other, and then the voice tries to complement that, and the theme tries to complement that, and then the song itself tries to complement the album as a whole, fitting into the overall context."

-*Chuck D on Fear of a Black Planet*

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