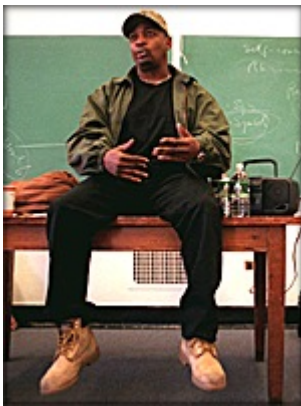


Rapping With Chuck D

Public Enemy Leader Looks Ahead to New World Tech Order

By Erica D. Rowell

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For a long time, Chuck D has been fighting the powers that be.

Since forming the politically toned rap group Public Enemy in 1986, the rapper (né Carlton Ridenhour) has been vocal about all sorts of issues — from empowering African-Americans through self-sufficiency ("Brothers Gonna Work It Out") to extolling black leaders like Malcolm X ("It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back").

Now, he's getting the message out about technology and the Internet, and what he feels is the future of music. And one thing Chuck D has proved being good at is being vocal.

The group's second album, **It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back**, was ranked as one of the best rap recordings ever by People magazine. The group wrote the politicized anthem "Fight the Power" for Spike Lee's acclaimed 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*. And in 1991 Rolling Stone rated Public Enemy as the best rap group.

After Chuck D went solo for several years the original crew got back together in 1998 for the soundtrack to Spike Lee's **He Got Game** (1998). Then in the fall of 1999, after publicly embracing file-sharing and the Internet, the rapper put his money where his mouth was and launched Rapstation.com, a Web site for the global hip hop community.

Chuck D spoke with ABCNEWS.com about the recent Napster injunction, file-sharing, the Internet, technology and the future of music.

Following is an edited transcript of the interview.

Q: If Metallica has become the voice of anti-Napster sentiment, can you be thought of as the pro-Napster voice?

Chuck D: I'm pro-file-sharing, and I think file-sharing is the process that Napster specializes in, and you have tons and tons of situations are going to join the process. We at Rapstation have Gnutella, and Gnutella does file-sharing as well. So my whole thing is the government is looking at file-sharing like they can stop it and they just can't. They're stopping one company, and I think that's shortsighted of the industry, but I don't really give credit to the industry for being too smart anyway.

Q: Why have you decided to become outspoken about file-sharing?

Chuck D: I take an outspoken role on everything I think is progressive for art. And I think this is progressive for the art because the industry and corporations have dominated and monopolized the outlets for the art whether it be radio, television or even the skewing of the price factor. Dominance of record companies dominating over retail and other outlets. Why should I care about that?

Q: In your New York Times editorial in April, you said we should think of the Internet as the radio of the future.

Chuck D: We should think of file-sharing as a new kind of radio. We should think of the Internet as a parallel

industry to the traditional one that is run by lawyers and accountants.

Q: What are your feelings about the judge temporarily shutting down Napster last night?

Chuck D: If Judge Patel was in the last century, we'd still be stuck and depending on horses and buggies and boats and trains to get around. People like that don't have the big picture.

Q: How can artists actually profit from things like Gnutella and Napster

Chuck D: Artists can profit more from the Internet, but at the same time they shouldn't have delusions of grandeur of creating their art for the standard industry price. Artists usually make their art because the industry dictates the standards for the amount they should make their art for. Therefore, a lot of the artists are in the position of trying to recoup what has already been spent on their behalf. And now as far as the Internet is concerned, it gives each artist the ability and the advantage to control every aspect of [their art].

Q: So you see the Internet as a way for artists to get out from under the thumb of record companies?

Chuck D: Of course. I think that's a big thumb, and what you see now is a third tier of music industry going to crop up, and a lot of people think it's a threat, but I think it's a service to the big tier. I think you have majors and independents. Now you have Internet, which I think is almost akin to high school sports to college and professional. So I think there'll be a great big talent pool, but you'll have a lot smarter musicians who have a better understanding of their terrain rather than being locked outside the musical game.

Q: So this third tier you refer to is a more open tier?

Chuck D: A more open tier that doesn't exclude artists from getting to the top tier. It just gives the artists a better vision of what they're dealing with instead of being the gullible artist that doesn't know [expletive] and relies on the major industry to let them know about [expletive]. So now you have the artist situation who are putting together their own teams, who are down with whatever the Internet has to offer. They know how to navigate through some of the areas that might be problematic for the major situations who think everything is problematic except for the process they invented or the process that they've dominated over. The bottom line is that the major industries can't host a million artists and a million labels. There's not enough room for them. It's not feasible. With the Internet it's possible. Digital distribution is now looking at being a parallel-sized industry to the offline industry, and the offline industry which is run by lawyers and accountants, of course they're going to view it as being a parasitic industry. In a way it is. But then so did the train industry when they looked at airplanes coming out; they tried to fight tooth and nail to keep them out.

Q: Who would take up the mantle of the good things record companies do? Like finding the better artists out there?

Chuck D: I thought art was subjective. What do you mean by better? You can't tell me that Britney Spears is better than every 17-year-old girl singing out there. It's just that she's marketed and promoted and financed. Before financing an artist might have cost 600, 700 thousand dollars now it costs 10 million dollars. So these corporations have found a way. It's not even art any more.

Q: What about the independent film analogy? The Independent Feature Film Market that is held annually here in New York has become so overcrowded, largely due to the success of indie films and the advent of digital filmmaking, that it's difficult to find your way through some terrible films people are making.

Chuck D: But what might be a good film to you might be a terrible film to me.

Q: So you think the broadest landscape of artists is best?

Chuck D: I think the cream rises to the top as opposed to being selected. I don't think record labels have ever done a great selecting process. Whoever went ooh, ooh, ooh, or raised their hand the highest and kept raising their hand, you know, eventually became signed. And you had this guy that divvied out the selection process like he was some kind of king. Oh, you are the one that's chosen. That's ridiculous. Now technology has afforded a lot of people to make music, so you'll see talent come from all kinds of areas. So yeah in the Internet realm, yeah, you'll see a lot of artists and a lot of labels. And independents you'll see the majors and the independents swoop into that marketplace to see who will be able to go up to that next level.

Now's the time that the Internet will allow you to do your own solo albums without it being of great cost to you or somebody of an independent label having to finance you. You can actually get that first step on your own as opposed to waiting for somebody to call you for a session.

Q: How has file-sharing helped with your own music?

Chuck D: It's a form to be a new radio. Definitely exposure. People will go up and look at Public Enemy and see a lot of songs and by them taking a lot of songs then they'll go to the store and being exposed to a lot of different things. Might have seen an album but not heard it. It's just led them into saying I didn't know this [expletive] was on the album. I kind of dig it. And they would go get the hard copy anyway. So for me, it's new radio. Make your own radio station.

Q: Does at any point that sharing ever cross the line of copyright infringement?

Chuck D: I think the copyright laws that were created in the last century, they're definitely going to have to go through a revision period. And what applied last century doesn't apply in this century. No. But I think copyright will be reformed to mean a whole other thing. I think the Internet might be more like a situation where BMI or ASCAP increases the performance situation and almost ignores the mechanical.

Q: So does that mean live performance will become a larger revenue stream for the artists?

Chuck D: I'm also talking about performance fee, whether it be a penny or whatever, through the process of file-sharing. That might come into the equation, where, for example, when you sing with BMI, your record gets played on the radio, you have a performance royalty coming your way, as little as it might be, but it's something. The areas of exposure for music right now in the traditional realm are either financially controlled by corporations which keep the start-up entrepreneurs out and the new artists out. There's just no room. And so a new equation has to come out as with any technology. It comes in because there's a need for it. If there wasn't a need for it, we wouldn't be talking about it. If it didn't have the attitude and the excitement of the public, it would be a moot point.

The genie's out of the bottle and the bottle is crushed to a thousand pieces.

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