

Music

The Sound And The Fury

CHUCK D. REVOLUTIONIZED MUSIC WITH PUBLIC ENEMY, AND THE ROOSEVELT RAPPER IS STILL BRINGING THE NOISE

BY JESSE SERWER

In the late '80s, Public Enemy mouth-piece Chuck D. famously called hip-hop "black people's CNN." While today's crop of fantasy-driven rap stars may not be living up to his once-accurate maxim, Chuck has become hip-hop's senior conscience, bringing the hip-hop point of view to mainstream media coverage on CNN, ABC's *Nightline* and even the FOX News Network, where he briefly worked during the station's pre-right-wing infancy. Earlier this year, Chuck brought his booming baritone to the fledgling liberal radio network Air America, where he co-hosts *Unfiltered* with Rachel Maddow and comedian Lizz Winstead, in the 9 a.m.-to-noon slot, and *Bring the Noise*, a Saturday night music show with fellow Roosevelt native Kyle Jason. No newcomer to radio, Roosevelt's Carlton Ridenhour first gained notoriety as Chucky D. on Adelphi University's now-defunct WBAU, the birthplace of what would become Public Enemy.

After four months of commuting from Roosevelt via the LIRR, Chuck is taking a step back from Air America, contributing to *Unfiltered* from outside the studio while getting back to the business of being Chuck D.: managing his network of web businesses (online record label SlamJamz, news site Rap Station and streaming station Bring the Noise); traveling the world on the lecture circuit; establishing a new hip-hop book imprint; and completing two new Public Enemy albums set for release early next year. Of course, that didn't stop him from spending the last week in Boston, reporting live from the Democratic National Convention for Air America, and when the Republican Convention rolls into

Manhattan later this month, he'll be back in town doing the same. Recently, the *Long Island Press* caught up with the lifelong Mets fan at a stopover in L.A. as he spent some much-needed downtime watching baseball.

Long Island Press: After Public Enemy took off, did you ever think you would be back doing radio again?

Chuck D.: Yeah—why not? I always thought radio was done crappy. When you're handling music, you need it to be simple. People don't want a radio jock to be

AIR AMERICA IS SETTING RECORDS IN TERMS OF STREAMING. ONE MILLION PEOPLE FOLLOWING A STREAM CAST IS THE SAME AS A MILLION PEOPLE FOLLOWING AN AM BROADCAST.

just like an artist—they want to know who made the song. The Drake format took the freedom from radio jocks, and took away things that liberated them. All that weather and traffic time stuff that every station has, a guy named Bill Drake instituted that so stations could be formulated to pick up more sponsors.

LIP: Do you have fond memories of your days as a jock at Adelphi?

CD: Mm-hmm. I was going to school at Adelphi, and I was a mobile jock with Spectrum City [the Roosevelt-based DJ and MC collective founded by Hank Shocklee that spawned Public Enemy]. Bill Stepney [behind-the-scenes PE member who later became the president of Def Jam Records]



Chuck D. fighting the power behind Air America's microphone.

ran the station, recognized me on the bus going to Roosevelt, and recruited me. Spectrum agreed it was way better than mix tapes, which is what we had been doing at the time. Why spend for tapes when you can just press play and record? From '84 to '86 it was a local phenomenon. Sadly, BAU has gone the way of the tape deck.

LIP: Did doing radio help you adjust to PE's immediate success?

CD: The elevation from BAU to Public Enemy was actually buffered by the fact that we gave [fellow Def Jam artists] Run-

DMC and the Fat Boys some of their original interviews. Doctor Dre from *Yo! MTV Raps* was a WBAU DJ, too. His group, Original Concept, signed to Def Jam around then. Rick Rubin initially wanted me to rap with Original Concept but the Beastie Boys came through one day and they heard Dre play a promo of [original PE track] "Public Enemy No. 1." From there, the transition to the stage was a reluctant one but we did it anyway. In '87 the music was changing. I wanted to do radio and I wanted to do records. If we had gone to commercial radio back in the day, we would have been dominant because we knew how to do radio like no other. We listened to "Mr. Magic's Rap Attack" on WBLS and [DJ] Red Alert's show—we dug their shows, but we were able to come up with a combi-

nation of music and informational think tank that was unique. We were looking to do syndicated radio back in '85 and '86, when that didn't really exist. Rush Entertainment and Russell Simmons brought some credible names to the table—Sprite, Swatch, Adidas. I thought it could have been—but you had to be stable. If you were out on the road touring, how could you do a radio show? They've just created that technology recently.

LIP: So you're in L.A. You're now a part-time host of your show?

CD: Half the time I am out of the country and half the time I am travelling around it, visiting other stations. I am a team member, but I am not going to be in one seat every day. I never promised no one that.

LIP: What did you make of the city's black leaders criticizing Air America for taking over the signal of [black talk station] WLIB?

CD: All people had to do is look and see [Air America] didn't take over the frequency—they leased it. Inner City Broadcasting still owns the frequency. What is kind of wild is if you look over the sales staffs in the racist business of radio, they only want white folks selling whatever it is to white businesses—they refuse to buy from black folks. But I had a conversation with Rev. Al Sharpton, and if you criticize, you have to be accurate with the facts. But there is a need for black talk radio, either on air or through new technology. Maybe Inner City could get involved with one before Clear Channel finds out [satellite

radio] is worthwhile. I grew up on black talk radio—[WLIB hosts] Imhotep Gary Byrd on *Global Black Experience* and Mark Riley on *Morning Sedition*. Air America takes a cross section of forward thinkers and tries to leave a big area open, as opposed to the other side, which says the same things over and over.

LIP: Do you think it still fills a need if John Kerry gets elected?

CD: I am not someone who goes into predicting where projects I'm involved in are going to end up. On my mind right now is November 2004. The most important need for the station might be after Kerry is elected.

LIP: Isn't the network having trouble? It lost two affiliates.

CD: The majority of people are not coming to us through a radio signal but through satellite and online streaming. That is throwing a different dynamic to critics, who really don't know everything. If they are going to criticize they should know the full deal. Air America is setting records in terms of streaming. One million people following a stream cast is the same as a million people following an AM broadcast. People are judging by old criteria. The new technology is making what should be a new judgment point.

LIP: Do you think there will actually be an energized minority vote this time around?

CD: There better be. It's really wack if a person doesn't realize how important it is to get out there and protect themselves.

LIP: Would you ever go back on FOX News with what it's become?

CD: I need to pay a visit to Bill O'Reilly. We have had some good conversations—some good talks about Long Island.

LIP: What would you say to our president if you got a chance to talk to him?

CD: I don't even know, I don't think I could utter a word. People who never meet each other but know each other through media, when they do meet it is a whole different thing. Everybody at that level has some kind of charm. I would ask him pertinent questions on the treatment of the earth.

LIP: So, you're working on two new PE albums at once?

CD: One is a world discussion. It's called *New Whirl Odor*. The other is a soul album with live musicians: *How Do You Sell Soul to A Soulless People Who Sold Their Soul*. We have Gene Barge, an arranger, producer and saxophone player from the Chess legacy, and some other names. We're only halfway there right now. We are instituting an archive series through Universal, who we gave control of our masters to. Throughout the next few years, new albums with remastered configurations of old albums will be coming out periodically through

Hip-Hop, You Don't Stop

BRIAN MAFFIE, AKA CL, JUST RELEASED HIS DEBUT CD AND IS PLAYING THE WARPED TOUR, BUT HE HASN'T QUIT HIS DAY JOB
BY KENYON HOPKIN

Brian Maffie is standing at the Central Islip train station while evening rush hour comes to an end, wearing an outfit that includes a vintage white Adidas bucket hat and white Adidas shoes, taking time out of his busy lifestyle to chat.

"I had enough of the daily grind," says Maffie. "But I'm smart enough to know that dreams are dreams. It's cool to have them, but there's also a side of reality you gotta deal with."

Aside from his job as a business analyst, the Long Island hip-hop phenom had a special reality earlier in the day: taking his 9-year-old son to his first football practice. "He made the travel team and was pushing guys on their ass. He's a good boy. That's my man."

This summer, even with priorities like this to juggle, Maffie's work as rapper CL (formerly Chaotic Lynk) is blossoming. His first full-length record has finally seen the light of day and he'll be playing the hip-hop stage at the New York date for Warped Tour, an all-day festival known for its line-up of punk bands. An unusual gig? Maybe. Actually, Maffie calls himself a rapper with a rock-band mentality.

"I used to get caught in the position where I wasn't hip-hop enough for the rap

[Universal archive] Hip-O on PE's own imprint, leading all the way up to a box set. In the fall, we are releasing *Power to the People and the Beats*, which is in essence a greatest hits, and *Power to the People and the Videos* on DVD.

LIP: How did your anti-war song with Moby get on the soundtrack for the Olympics?

CD: It was an EMI project that proposed the pairing of two acts of extremes....PE chose Moby and Moby chose PE, as we were looking to work with each other for a few years. Traveling abroad as I do, I was able to detect an anti-American vibe last year, and thought "MKLVFKWR" [pronounced "Make Love F**k War"] said it all. ●



Brian Maffie, CL's latest hip-hop rising star

groups and not rock enough for the rock groups," explains Maffie. "I like playing in front of crowds who aren't into rap 'cause I love winning people over. Live is where it's at, that's where I get down."

The gig is just one more step up for Maffie, as he's already opened for big names such as A Tribe Called Quest and Arrested Development. Along the way, he has been in talks with several labels, especially after the release of his urban pop single "Status Quo," a tongue-in-cheek song about the music industry. He got tired of waiting around, however, so he put out his debut full-length, *Welcome to Life*, himself. Aside from a few dashes of light-heartedness, it's mostly an album about growing up without financial advantages and remaining positive in the face of adversity. Being white, however, he receives expected comparisons to Eminem and, more importantly, questions about his credibility.

"I always preach in a lot of music to just do you, don't try to do the next man," says Maffie, who has found additional discipline from boxing and weight training. "If you don't have the background in rap, don't perpetrate, cause you're gonna get called on it. I don't get mad at other people's ignorance, I just do my thing."

He's been doing his own thing since he was 9, when he started rhyming after hearing pioneering hip-hop acts like Run-DMC, Whodini and Grandmaster Flash.

"White kids would just stay away from hip-hop. I loved it," Maffie remembers. "I only knew rap. I thought I was the wrong color growing up."

White or black, Maffie just wants to make music. And whether his brand of hip-hop is upbeat enough for pop fans or credible enough for the hip-hop circuit, he's just as interested in encouraging others to succeed.

"You can grow up in a rough neighborhood and not have all the opportunities as a kid from a better town, but it doesn't mean you gotta end up ass-backwards," he says. "You can still persevere and do your thing. I'm trying to be proof of that." ●

CL plays the Hip-Hop Stage at the Vans Warped Tour, Saturday Aug. 7, at Randall's Island, NYC. Call 212-307-7171 for more information.

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