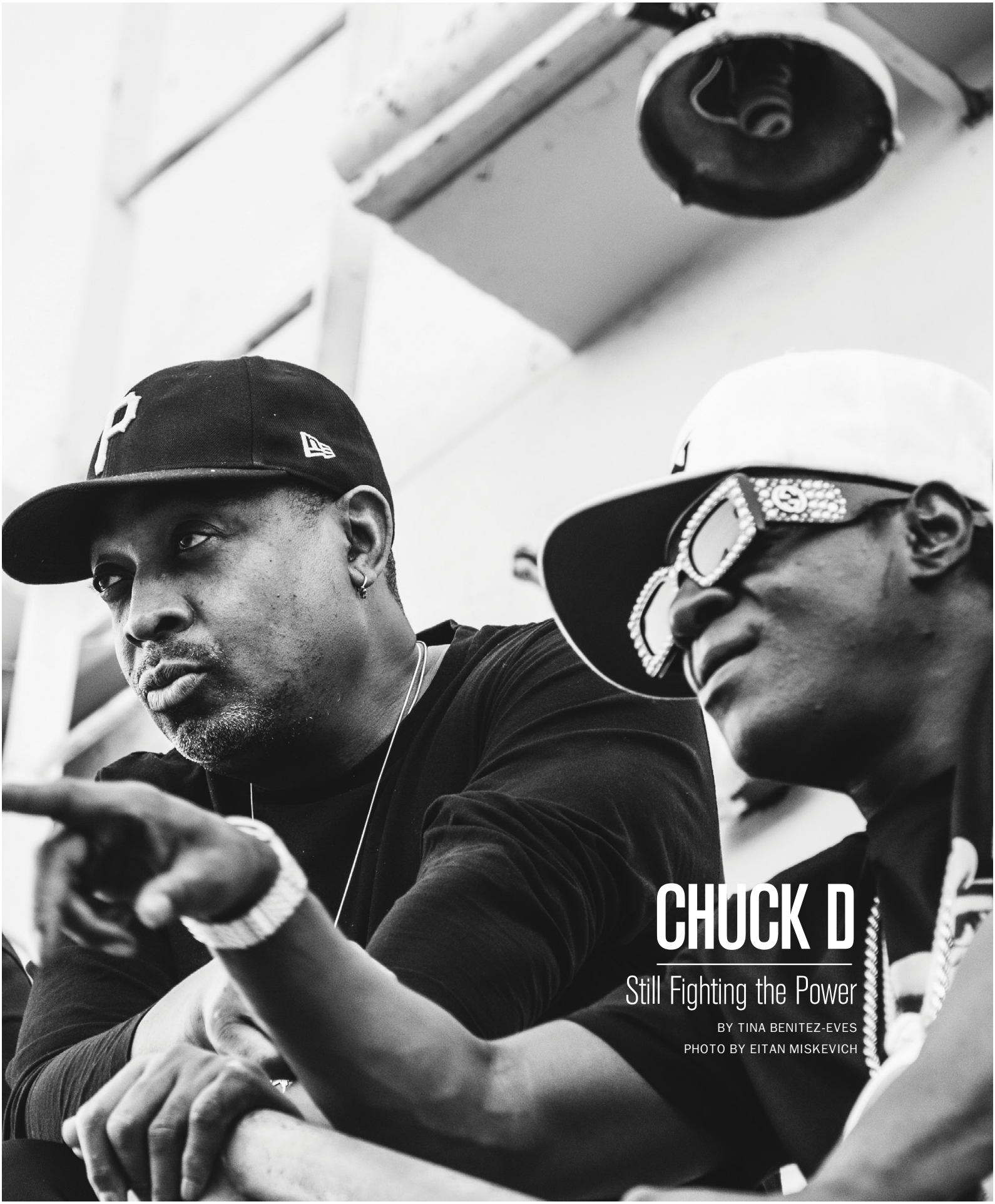

CHUCK D

Still Fighting the Power

BY TINA BENITEZ-EVES

PHOTO BY EITAN MISKEVICH

"WE'RE THE ROLL, SO ROLL WITH IT. IT'S ROCK 'N' ROLL."

Chuck D is not pontificating. He's simply breaking down rap, plain and simple. On the East Coast promoting Public Enemy's 15th album, *What You Gonna Do When the Grid Goes Down?*, a fierce narrative that resonates as potently as the rap group's third album, *Fear of a Black Planet*, did 30 years earlier. Unwavering in fighting the powers that be, D can't help but reflect on why rap still doesn't get the respect it deserves.

"A lot of times, we've been looked upon as the bastards of all music," D says, citing Public Enemy's induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2013, one of just six rap groups to receive the honor. "My whole idea in writing songs or even making statements is to just do my best to truncate. By truncate, I mean if you got naysayers mad at Public Enemy or rap artists asking, 'Why do you feel that rap should be in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame?' I say, 'Because we're the roll.'"

Historically, says D, things fragmented to form the rock, and the roll was made up of different musical parts. Dance, soul — all those things formed out of the roll part. "So when they say, 'You guys are not rock,' I say, 'We're the roll,'" says D. "It stops them dead in their tracks. They say they've never heard that before. Well, welcome to a conversation with me, because I'm a fan of it all."

When Public Enemy released their third album in 1990, *Fear of a Black Planet*, strike by strike, it was D and Flavor Flav resolutely protesting racial polarization and the incessant division of black and white. Led by politically and culturally charged lyrics, Public Enemy fixed themselves as the forefathers and freedom fighters of hip-hop, fueled by the march of their anthemic "Fight the Power." That timeless *Fear* chant is still relevant today, 30 years later, as the United States is caught up in one of the most divisive eras in its history. It's in the midst of this socio-political plight of America, fueled by police violence against black people, shattered systems and a society dictated by technology that Public Enemy released *What You Gonna Do When the Grid Goes Down?*

It's a question. It's an action. It's art with incendiary lyrics fixated on time and place — one that still needs to change. On *Grid*, Public Enemy also confronts the need for more human contact — not just the digitized kind — and the ability to conquer technology and use it as a tool, not a toy.

"Prince told me in 1999, 'Listen, we have to learn to master these gadgets, or they'll master us,'" remembers D. "It's a tool to me, but it's a toy to the generations that are growing older by the day, and that's the biggest challenge between somebody going from child to teen to adult — managing these gadgets. There's a digital coldness across the board, a digital freeze, and it's a tough tackle if you're raising kids in the middle of it."

It's something he recognizes in his nine-year-old daughter, who is growing up surrounded by devices as a way of life. He knows that even if he weans her off this tech overload, her friends are still inebriated by it. Still, there's a fine line between submitting to technology and using it to your advantage.

"Artificial intelligence is not going to get dumber," says D. "It's only getting better, quicker and smarter, and humans are becoming servants to the artificial GPS of everything, so you gotta keep your head above water."

Even when it comes to listening to a song, D says that if you don't use your imagination and subjugate it to things you have to see, you're not going to feel the words the same way. "Growing up in the '60s and '70s, words meant everything," he says. "You were only listening, so your imagination immediately goes into gear."

"I truly believe a rap song can change the earth in thought, in soul and in its use and meaning"

He says people today listen mostly with their eyes. "With a song or a song title, you have to grab people immediately," says D. "What I wanted to do with the entire album (*Grid*) is just use the platform of music, or recording, or releasing an album to ask the question."

With an all-star supergroup of collaborators in tow — Parrish J. Smith (PMD) and Ice-T; hip-hop producer, historian and Stetsasonic founder Daddy-O; Cypress Hill's B-Real and Sen Dong; Run-D.M.C.; the Beastie Boys' Ad-Rock and Mike D; and George Clinton, who magnetizes the title track, "Grid"— PE also remixes "Fight the Power," featuring Nas, Rapsody, Black Thought, Questlove, TG and Jahi.

Grid also saw Public Enemy's return to Def Jam Recordings, their label through their fifth album, *Muse Sick-n-Hour Mess Age*, released in 1994. "It was a landing point," says D. "The reason we left the major system before is because they couldn't do what we did, and that's reach a demographic that we had. At the time, our music wanted to reach out further, but the company couldn't reach those areas. It was soft and couldn't carry us then, but we've come full circle, and the systems have been established, making us reach those areas that we've been trying to capture for years."

Thinking about Public Enemy's place today, Chuck D says it's a new generation and an entirely different dynamic, from art to dissecting societal and political issues.

"The biggest difference between 1989 and 2020 is that people have come and people have gone," says D. "People have been born and people have died. You don't have the same mixture of people as you had in 1990 as you do in 2020. We can't go around saying, 'Man, haven't we gone through that before?' That's why reading is fundamental, because you can read about the other sensibilities of another era and you can feel the dynamics in order not to repeat them. We didn't need to be in 1931 Berlin in order to feel some of the hatred of that time."

When it comes to art, the entire dynamic has also shifted along this paradigm, but PE can still try to show other artists the way.

"You don't lead, but you're there for advice, counsel, direction," says D. "Public Enemy says, 'Hey, you can still keep making records into your 40s and 50s, and you don't need to make records like you made when you were in high school or early college.' You might know what it was like to be a 20-year-old when you recorded, but when you became a 45-year-old, you obviously have a point of view that you can push out in music and in words."

D says the liability comes when somebody thinks they have to create something for an audience that never moves forward. "That's totally what art is not about," says D. "Most people that get into music, they get into music not understanding that it's art. Art is your muse, and art is your right."

He adds, "If you're in front of an audience,

you are subservient to the audience that comes to see you display and perform your art. You have to always give your best to display your art, but your audience shouldn't dictate what art you should do."

And when it comes to art, there's no space for fear. "You can have fear in a lot of other places, but when it comes down to art, art is supposed to be fearless," says D. "I've taken stretches all my career, and trust me, I have swung hard and missed, but I'm like, 'OK, I missed for now, but the catcher might drop the pitch, and it's a passed ball.' As an artist, you should have the right to do what you please. When you make it art, you should be unforgiving and not be worried about how it's weighed or judged."

A natural erudite, Chuck D is a self-professed historian of music, culture and politics — even sports — all evident in his manner of speech, his lyrics and his art. Always tapped into the visual art side of things, D, who received his B.F.A. from Adelphi University on Long Island, continues to meld his illustrations into music and vice versa in his own solo receptions. He recently illustrated the stark cover art abstractly depicting the death of George Floyd for *Grid*'s "State of the Union (STFU)," signaling the injustices surrounding the former presidential administration. But it's reading — a lot — that D says is at the core of how his songs come to be.

"Scholars read all the ugly stuff," says D. "They read the stuff they really don't want to read. We read stuff we like to read, so most of my collection in my libraries is music, art and some sport. I read them thoroughly, and I consider myself a historian of sorts."

D adds, "I do more listening and more watching than I do talking. That's very key. Because if I'm listening, I'm able to pick up on something and be informed to actually take it somewhere."

Referencing his musical elders, D also has a great respect and constantly reverts to music's past and songwriters like Jackson Browne and Carole King for inspiration. D is specifically locked into 1964 through 1974, a period he says was solidly bookended by the Rolling Stones and James Brown.

"That's my favorite musical era," admits D. "It was the best collision of musicians, engineers and experiments, and making the most out of what little that they had. It was sheer innovation in that period."

There's only so much an artist or a song can do, but it can do a lot, as long as there's a rhyme and reason.

Photo by Travis Shinn Small

"At the end of the day, you gotta do something with your life," says D. "I could go and do a painting in the corner, but what does it mean except that I love to do it. And it goes down to writing a song. Are you making a song because you have to deliver the album?"

In constant motion through his New York, Atlanta and Los Angeles bases, the three areas keeping D's juices flowing are his SpitSlam label, which he co-runs with longtime collaborator and Public Enemy producer David "C-Doc" Snyder, his international collective of illustrators and artists at mADurgency, who are spread worldwide from Australia to the UK, and RAPstation, which curates rap and hip-hop from all over the world.

"We kind of play record company, but we are a record company," jokes D about his musical trifecta. "We dress up as record company and radio station kind of like 'WKRP in Cincinnati.'"

Odd, bizarre and a little different is how D describes the label. Branching into a comedy album with Cory "Zooman" Miller and films streamed through Amazon and Hulu as well as other television and cable outlets, SpitSlam continues contracting beyond hip-hop. "Our thing is diversity," says D. "It's not just a hip-hop label. If you don't make it interesting, to me, I don't think it's worth somebody's time."

Still, everything still comes back to D's roots —rap — which came a long way in its evolution by virtue of its forebears fighting for its recognition. On Public Enemy's "Terminator X to the Edge of Panic," off 1988's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us*, the punching line "Who gives a fuck about a goddamn Grammy" was not "dissing" the awards show per se, says D, but addressing the absence of a rap category.

"It was a protest," says D. "We all protested — myself, Flavor, Salt-N-Pepa, Ice-T, DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince, Kool Moe Dee — and that first year, when Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince won, a lot of people thought we were slighted. I was like, 'No, they're our champions.' We fought for a rap category, and we're all connected, so if they got a win, their win was our win."

Rap was never considered an official vocal, but it eventually established itself from the singing vernacular and the talking vernacular into a legitimate vocal and one that you can lay any music underneath, because it adapts to the rhythm of whatever that music is. "The reason why rap music won't go away is because it's one of the few vocals ever used for recording music," says D. "It started as an overdub of instrumental on records and microphone vocals on top of the instrumental and developed out of that mix-remix culture. So all the other categories — folk, country, soul, reggae — all these musics with the seven notes have their terms, but the vocal is what makes rap music because it's the rap on top of the music."

From the moment hip-hop grasped D in 1979, he's continued his journey with Public Enemy and SpitSlam in his protest, art and the continuous fight, all in the name of rap.

"Rap has a vast use of words," says D. "It's songs and beats and notes that are reminders of the past and reminders of the present and the future. I truly believe a rap song can change the earth in thought, in soul and in its use and meaning." ★