

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

CHUCK D & ROSA CLEMENTE: HIP HOP'S UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

LAURA FLANDERS: Hip hop is huge, and this year is its 50th anniversary. There is much to celebrate. BBC series, now on public television, tells the story of how hip hop was born in the streets of the Bronx, the poorest, blackest borough in New York City, and spread to the West Coast, and then the world. Hip hop changed music, fashion, art, commerce, media, dance. It even changed politics, and who was in the White House. Today, some say hip hop is dead, or at least lost some of its collective fighting spirit. Others look at the uprisings against police killings, and the multi-billion dollar global music market as indications of its continuing success. So let's wade into the conversation today. I am honored to have two guests whose entire lives have been bound up with hip hop. Rosa Clemente is an award-winning organizer, journalist, and historian specializing in Afro Latinx identity, and black and Latinx liberation movements. In 2008, Clemente became the first Afro-Latina to run for vice president of these United States, alongside Cynthia McKinney on the Green Party ticket. Chuck D is the leader and co-founder of the legendary group Public Enemy, and the author and executive producer of that series, "Fight The Power: How Hip Hop Changed the World". Two of his albums have been named Rolling Stones 500 Greatest Albums of All Time, his songs the same. He's been awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Grammys, and he's about to launch a new app called Bring the Noise. After 50 years fighting the power, how is it going, and what does hip hop have to teach? Let's have at it, Chuck, Rosa, welcome to the program. I'm so glad and honored to have you with us. You start off this good series on PBS, BBC, by saying, Chuck, that hip hop has a lot of stories to tell, and a lot of lessons to teach. So off the bat, give us a lesson, give us a story, take your pick.

CHUCK D: The title says it all, Laura, "Fight the Power, How Hip Hop Changed the World". And the most important word in that narrative is world. It's been around the world for at least 40 years. What's been helped, I mean technology has helped it, you know, in the form of recordings. If it's started as a, sort of, like, a organic cultural art form coming out of the ashes of a place that was abandoned, and left to the side, and left for dead in 1973 to give it a start point, doesn't begin our culture as a people, but it's a start point at a particular time with a new way of looking at presenting music and art and culture. And so 1973 is the date, but it goes around the world when it becomes a recorded art form for vocals and music and the perception of making one DJ sound like a band in 1979. And so how it's changed the world, okay, that's the tunnels and the roads that came out of the art form. How it got filled with the content to be able to make somebody think differently is the story of the execution and the elocution of rappers, DJs, break dancers, graffiti artists, and activists

LAURA FLANDERS: Talking about activists, let's throw it to Rosa. I mean, your family has had a house in the Bronx, in the South Bronx for years. Talk a bit about the '70s. This almost before your time, but not quite.

ROSA CLEMENTE: I was born in the Bronx in 1972, and, you know, I remember two specific moments in the Bronx. So landlords were setting buildings on fire to get insurance. So that's where the "Bronx Is Burning, when Howard Cosell was hosting a big game at Yankee Stadium, you know, and what it was is like, is I remember holding my mom's hand, 'cause she was pregnant with my sister, and then we go outside and it's nuts. It's crazy, you know, because it was the biggest blackout you know, I just remember that. But then on this, I also remember all the times my cousins took me to jams, they took me to parties, they took me roller skating, you know, so then when our family moved to the suburbs in Westchester County, like, hip hop was always the soundtrack of my life.

LAURA FLANDERS: Talking about great soundtracks, the PBS series on the 50 years of hip hop has an excellent one of those. You can check it out on a station near you or online.

For the music heads out there, Chuck, what was it exactly that DJ Kool Herc did at that going-was it a back to school jam there in the Bronx that was so different, just at the level of the music itself?

CHUCK D: Yeah, it was a back to school jam and it, and as Rosa was saying that, it's funny that, you know, in the seventies you have a "Disco Inferno" by The Trammps that was ripping up and eating up the floors and clubs that, you know, black people couldn't get in like Studio 54. But up in the Bronx and other places, "Disco Inferno" meant another thing. It meant that disco was dead since it was appropriated, you know, by, you know, everybody else other than the core where it started from, of that "on and on to the break of dawn" music that Kool Herc says, "Well I'm go, I got two turntables instead of one, so I could keep the party going." That's a tip of the hat to Caribbean culture, Jamaican culture especially, and Kool Herc was a transplant from Jamaica.

LAURA FLANDERS: Rosa, you said, you know, that hip hop became the soundtrack to your life, and your life was, has been and is still a life of activism. When you think of the music, what music do you think of, and what role did it play in that activism of yours, which was about an array of things, if you wanna talk about some of them.

ROSA CLEMENTE: Yeah, even when I was going to college as an undergrad at SUNY Albany, you know, hip hop was obviously, it was always there, but there, me being in school, I didn't think, you know, that 10 years or 15 years later there would be something called hip hop activism, you know, 'cause even though I had learned about hip hop, the fifth element, knowledge culture and politics, is where I reside in, someone like a Dream Hampton, Asha

Bandele, Joan Morgan, Bakari Kitwana. I mean, it was an incredible moment when I graduated from college because I have, you know, I'm meeting these people that I'm kind of reading about. So, you know, and it was also tied to, I went to college a few years after, particularly college students were rising up against apartheid, you know? And then I do remember that crystallizing moment when I watched "Do The Right Thing", and Public Enemy and Chuck and, like, seeing that video, our politic, it just, I was like, why we always focusing on negative stuff, right? Like, you know, and so I was young, so I would've never thought there would be hip hop activism, a hip hop political agenda, or anything in that regard.

LAURA FLANDERS: And that's how the two of you connected. We'll get to that in just a minute, but before we do, let's talk about "Fight The Power". 1989, 1990, the film of Spike Lee, by Spike Lee that brought you and Public Enemy to that incredible stage. The power, I mean, just to give people a sense, this is a moment where Americans have been sold a sort of culture of individualism. If you've got a problem, it's your own private problem. If you've got a victory, it's your own private victory. If you haven't picked yourself up by your bootstraps, it's your own private fault. You are saying power, fight the power, got people to think about power in a different kind of way. But you must have had a zillion people that said, what power?

CHUCK D: There was a three year period from '74, '75 well really '73, '74, '75, where the whole country was on skates. And the Isley Brothers countered that with "Fight the Power", all this BS going down. This is the first record I ever heard a curse word in in a popular radio song, especially in black music, which always tried to be like, please play our records, and begging and forgiving and all that stuff. But the Isley brothers came out defiant. And so when Spike Lee asked for an anthem, I had no idea he was gonna put the, thread the movie into- I mean, thread the movie with the song 500 time. I mean, who does that, right?

LAURA FLANDERS: But just to push a little bit about this question of power, I mean, in the '70s coming out of the civil rights movement, you've had a lot of people talking about power. By the time you get to the eighties, power is very, pretty obscured for a lot of folks.

CHUCK D: Yeah, that, it's scattered, it's decimated. And the whole, we call it the R&B movement, and the R&B movement, which is Reagan and Bush, that was very clear and evident as they tried to make America great again. And we were at the bottom of that totem pole, black and brown people were just like ashes at the bottom of that totem pole left to like, and you know, all of a sudden, you know, you had things that were infiltrated and later on got pointed back to government and the CIA, the infiltration of hard drugs and guns. So it, what with the hypocrisy and the dichotomy of, you know, an actor who's a president saying, you know, like, this is the War on Drugs. Like what the F are you talking about? You guys had something to do with planting the seed that this fruit of poison is falling on us, and you're talking about stop it, when you guys are the cause root. And we have no particular level of media clap back to make people

understand how foul you are. Hence rap music, hence hip hop. It's like a jungle, sometimes, it make me wonder why I keep from going under. Ha ha ha ha ha.

ROSA CLEMENTE: We had the eighties, here come the nineties, you know, I think three things happened. You know, one was we were beginning to understand police violence and containment in our communities. My generation just came out of seeing the Central Park five incarcerated, right? Like, you know, my dad would always bring El Diario, the Daily News and the Post, you know, and when Donald Trump came and put up these billboards to bring the execution back to New York State because of the Central Park five. Then we are going into the nineties, and the diversity of the music, right? Like it wasn't that every person in, at the beginning that hip hop was always saying, quote what we would think political things are, you know, so that was important too. And then we also begin to see SWAT teams being created in South Central LA, and I think that's what led to, particularly people on the West Coast, like, yo, we're gonna rhyme about it, rap about it, we're gonna have our parties and things like that. And lastly, just roller skating. Like people don't understand what it meant to go the roller skating rink as a black and brown person. It was a safe space. People are who they are, no one was judging. You're on your skates and you out, you know, and then you're going to the club later tonight to see one of the, you know, the rap artists. But I, think it did begin to also, after Bush and Clinton is elected, we already knew what they were about to do. But when Clinton, you know, and they got the Juvenile Justice Act passed, then we began to see our communities really, really locked down, being tried to contain. But at the same time, continuing to create, and continuing to create things that were political. And one important moment is the song "Self-Destruction," where you see all the rappers that you're, like, looking at like, oh my God, they do politics, KRS, Chuck D, Monie Love, Queen Latifa. You know, you see it, "You're heading for self destruction, you're heading for-" like that in itself, kind of, started people's mindset around, wait, there's political music.

LAURA FLANDERS: Talk a bit about that, you know, "Self-Destruction" project, Chuck, and why you felt it was so urgent and what you were trying to accomplish, and, I don't know, do you feel like you succeeded?

CHUCK D: What the conversations that people are having today about school violence were happening at just crazy amounts in the black neighborhoods in the 1980s. And it even came and floated up to the point where violence affected one of our great, you know, leaders of hip Hop, KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions with the murder of DJ Scott La Rock. And people just thought that was inconceivable that somebody in hip hop, which was a party thing that got us out of the gangs, that brought us all together, got us away from, you know, those things that were set to destroy us. That all of a sudden that somebody who is quote unquote a rap artist, and famous for doing it is now, you know, murdered and now it's now it's real life now. And with that, on top of all the things that were going on, a project was also was planned to speak against this violence that now, like, spilled over now into culture. And that was the Stop the Violence Movement.

KRS-One, Nelson George, Ann Carli who, executive at Jive Records, which was the record label that Boogie Down Productions had just signed to KRS-One artist on that label, Hank Shockley and others, Daddy-O from Stetsasonic and a cache of artists from Public Enemy to Heavy D, to MC Lyte spoke out against what was already happening for the past 10 years, when it got and culminated into a momentum that needed to be addressed. And why not use the widespread broadcasting ability of a record to speak against it? Cause we knew that that wasn't- that was gonna permeate society more than CNN was going to give us an interview on it.

LAURA FLANDERS: Rosa, 19, the 1990s, the late 1990s, I think it was '98, also saw Lauryn Hill come out with "Miseducation of Lauryn Hill," kind of calling out sexism and machismo and describing the, you know, what life was like for single moms and others. You were in the thick of things at that point. And I think we have to say, you know, when we talk about fight the power that the struggle to fight male power was facing an uphill battle.

ROSA CLEMENTE: You know, Lauryn has a record, that was 25 years ago, classic, you know, but she made a big move to saying I'm not gonna stay within this crew of the Fugees anymore. And she disappeared, you know, because the sexism, so many things, I think, you know, you see Lauryn Hill, like she could have gone one way, especially as it relates her actual body. She did not go that way and she refused. So for me, Lauryn Hill was, you know, led me to then Joan Morgan, who had just come out with her book "When Chicken Heads Come Home To Roost."

LAURA FLANDERS: Feminist music critic.

ROSA CLEMENTE: Right, and made what I still think to this day should be the sixth element of hip hop, hiphop feminism. The thing was, we were also fighting in New York state against the Rockefeller Drug laws. So when we're organizing, we also have to be respectful of the artists may not know everything. We as activists don't know everything. So when I joined the Malcolm X grassroots movement, you know, that became the space where we would work with artists, like, we're not shaming you. Y'all ain't shaming us. How do we come together?

LAURA FLANDERS: Just to take a step back for a second, you know, this is so fun to hear all of you, and I'm just gonna play a little role of interlocutor and point out what people are hearing. You know, maybe this isn't your story folks out there, but you're hearing how to make something outta nothing. How to be heard when you don't have the media, you're hearing how to call people out without canceling them, without erasing them, how to participate in a critique that isn't based on shaming. Where do you think the power is today, that needs to be fought?

CHUCK D: The power is information, the power is connectivity. But you know, yeah, coming out any day now with the "Bring the Noise" app, and it's cultural media. We feel that cultural media is greater than social media. Cause it's just a lot of everything. It's a ocean of everything.

And then we're more like a lake that's figured out where, you know, where you'll dock your boat. It deals, you know, with the FAM. You know, Filmmakers, Artists and Musicians. And throughout that ability to be in that setting, there's some truth to the power of creativity. So is it a social media app that's gonna be out there to reflect and then dictate and lead society? No, by no means necessary. It deals with culture, and also the education about culture. Because if you lead society to lead culture, that's like government being in control of culture, and culture is a thing that brings us human beings together for our similarities and knocks the differences to the side. And it's that real verb, it's that real vibe. It's that pulse that human beings have, and it's best, you know, transferrable through culture.

LAURA FLANDERS: It does seem there's an awful lot that we could, as a big white society, be learning from hip hop, that has often been kind of buried. And perhaps even in our 50th anniversary, we could be doing more to look at what are the actual outcomes and experiments here.

CHUCK D: The whole key is can you keep the currency of attention from one generation to the next generation, and then two generations further. The currency is attention right about now. And what Rosa was doing in the years of 2004 to 2009, right? Just, I'm just taking a five year period, was, is not to be forgotten. So this whole thing of burying is just, it's laziness. It's oxygen loss and making light of scholarship.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, Rosa, you're a scholar, and I should point out that you teach and speak all over the country. Could things have been different, do you think? And do you think the critique that you and others brought to the movement is getting adequately reflected in this 50th anniversary?

ROSA CLEMENTE: No, not in this year. I mean, the continue erasure of hundreds of women, you know. In fact I'm not doing a lot of interviews for that reason. I can't, you know, like everything for almost 15 years of our lives in this political at the moment in hip hop was also watching our backs. What rapper, who's a man gonna come and say we don't belong? Or somebody wrote a critique about your album. So then you have men literally running up on you. And I remember calling Chuck one day, like, this dude is not hip hop, you know like he's making his clothes in sweat shops. But what I did begin to see is really the rap industrial complex, as I call it, and money. Because one thing the pioneers all taught us is none of them would have ever thought I can make millions of dollars. And most of them still don't as a pioneers, right? Like, we don't have a healthcare union, there's no pension or retirement for hip hop. But these are things that we did fight for.

LAURA FLANDERS: I wanna ask each of you to close with the question that I ask all of my guests, really, which is what is the story you think the future will tell of now? What is the story you think the future, I don't know, 20, 35 years, hence will tell of this moment.

ROSA CLEMENTE: I for sure know that there would be no Black Lives Matter movement, there would be Puerto Ricans fighting for independence, all of that comes to hip hop culture. And with is with, with all that is good and that's bad as well, that's the story that needs to be told. But if women continue to be erased, if trans people continue, if LGBTQ people need- continue to be a erased, and I'm not talk- like, I think there's an unfair amount where hip hop is critiqued solely as the place where these things happen. No, they're happening from the White House all over the world. Like we didn't create white supremacy, you know, and part of this conversation is also, like, we'll have people tell us you're dealing too much with identity politics. And I'm like, Trump is literally running on a white supremacist politic. And how don't people see that? And how at this moment are people not understanding what can happen again? So to me, me, that's what hip hop, I- young people will decide, but the culture will never be dead, absolutely no.

LAURA FLANDERS: Chuck, the story the future will tell of now, it'll probably be a song.

CHUCK D: Future is not a accident. And the future ticks. It's not a thing where we could say 10 years later, 20 years later, 5 years later, even maybe not even 3 years later, the future is at every tick. So work on it.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tick, tick. Chuck D, Rosa Clemente what a pleasure to spend the time with you, it's really been a joy.

I once heard culture defined as 'the way we do things around here'. And I well remember the way that white commercial culture vilified hip hop and rap in the 1990s. Instead of actually listening to the lyrics, or considering the music and its changes, the headline writers started using the word superpredator, and terrifying articles ginning up white fears were running in papers from coast to coast. The statistics on crime never bore out that racist trope, juvenile arrests for serious crimes like homicide had been on the decline for years before 2000. And yet, while a few politicians like Hillary Clinton had to apologize for her use of the word superpredator, at last, the mainstream media never have. Today, the price for all that terror baiting continues to be paid in black life. A young 16 year old African American man, Ralph Yarl, currently lies in hospital shot in the head in Kansas City by a elderly white man, who instead of seeing an asset on his doorstep, saw a threat solely because of that young man's race. Can we create a different culture? People like Chuck D and Rosa Clemente help, but white America, we need to do more. Listen more carefully, pay more attention. So how about it, if you wanna listen to the full conversation that I had with Chuck D and Rosa Clemente, you can by subscribing to our podcast. In the

meantime, stay kind, stay curious, and join me next time for more of the Laura Flanders Show. For the show, I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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