

## **Yemi Bamiro, Yemisi Brookes, and Shianne Brown. *Fight the Power: How Hip Hop Changed the World*. PBS, 2023. 4 episodes.**

Over the last five decades, hip hop artists have found ways to fearlessly provoke the powerful while inspiring those who feel powerless. With music, performance, and fashion they've embodied the spirit of protest. No surprise that they've also earned enemies: the police, politicians, and even members of their own communities. Still, in the face of fierce criticism, these artists sought change. They responded to social and economic injustices, called out the police for abuse, and championed free speech. They fought to protect Black lives and the rights of the underserved while also subverting mythologies about gender and sexuality. And they insisted on taking space and being seen. It's this expansive history that "Fight the Power: How Hip Hop Changed the World," a new series now streaming on PBS, seeks to narrate.

Leading viewers through this four-part documentary is Chuck D, front man for Public Enemy and author of the famously defiant rap song for which the series is named. He's joined by an impressive lineup of rap artists representing various generations and perspectives -- including Grandmaster Caz, Roxanne Shanté, Fat Joe, Warren G, and Killer Mike -- along with culture writers and scholars, like renowned hip hop journalist Danyel Smith and Leah Wright Rigueur, an associate professor of history at John Hopkins. Built around interviews, archival video and news footage, "Fight the Power" carefully pieces together the social, cultural, political, economic, and ideological contexts within which hip hop bloomed and bristled.

What we first get is a clear demonstration of why hip hop emerges when it does, and, importantly, that this story begins long before that legendary Bronx house party in 1973. Indeed, viewers learn in Episode 1, "Foundations," that the 1960s are critical to this history. This is the decade when the first hip hop artists were still small children collecting formative memories about state violence, political crisis, and Black revolution. Melle Mel recalls watching his father cry in response to news of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Chuck D remembers footage of the war in Vietnam and, relatedly, his mother explaining to him the concept of conscientious objection. Others reflect on early exposure to celebrations of Black Power in the music of Curtis Mayfield, the Chi-Lites, and Stevie Wonder.

Similarly, in Episodes 2 and 3, which center on the 1980s and 1990s, artists and scholars explain the intimate connection between cultural expression and the lived realities of systemic racism and militarized police power. This is an especially useful framework for understanding not only the rise of gangster rap artists like Ice-T and N.W.A., but also the broader anti-state turn that hip hop takes by the 1990s, exemplified by artists such as 2Pac, KRS-One, Ice Cube, and Dead Prez.

The final episode, titled "Still Fighting," begins powerfully, in 1999, with the police murder of Amadou Diallo and the protests following the acquittal of the NYPD officers involved. Rapper and producer Jon Forté reflects, "You felt the gravity of the moment and our responsibility as emerging artists to use our platforms." It's a poignant start to an episode that ultimately suffers from being rushed and disjointed. "Still Fighting" leaps from event to event: 9/11, Eminem's reflections on White privilege, the explosive success of hip hop moguls, Hurricane Katrina, Obama's election, Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012, Black Lives Matter, Trump's election. Teachers using the series may find their students left wondering how these crises and developments fit together, and why, or if, these moments represent inflection points in the contemporary history of hip hop music.

In this way, the series would have benefitted from a fifth, and perhaps even a sixth, episode to allow breathing room to explore the contours of each of these more recent topics. For instance, greater care could have been taken to provide context for the impact of Hurricane Katrina on Black southerners along the Gulf Coast, including a segment detailing how the region's unique concerns and cultural expressions are tied to southern rap. Instead, we only get brief mention of southern hip hop artists and their efforts, alongside rap celebrities like Puffy and Jay-Z, to raise money for disaster relief. Similarly, an opportunity was missed in the segment on 21<sup>st</sup> century fights against police killings; the national scope of hip hop activism would have been better represented had the filmmakers touched on local hip hop cultures outside of New York and Los Angeles. For instance, the protests that

followed the police killing of Oscar Grant in 2009 would have provided an important historical lens for examining Bay Area hyphy culture and the radical leadership of Oakland rap artists like Mistah F.A.B. and Boots Riley in the years prior to the rise of Black Lives Matter.

In addition, for a documentary that purports to show us how hip hop “has chronicled the emotions, experiences and expressions of Black and Brown communities,” this one does not give us much hip hop music. We get some familiar clips from Queen Latifah’s “Ladies First,” Ice-T’s “6 in the Mornin’,” and Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright.” Of course, Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” is a centerpiece. We hear Young Jeezy’s “My President is Black.” Curiously, we get a deep dive into “Where Is the Love,” an anthem from the Black Eyed Peas that is arguably a dance-pop production, not hip hop. Yet, we don’t hear the music made by the myriad hip hop artists, including those shown and interviewed, who confronted structures of oppression -- Boogie Down Productions and KRS-One, MC Lyte, David Banner, Lil Kim, and the Fugees, to name a few. Notably, we also hear no music from 2Pac’s catalog, even as narrator Chuck D makes the case that “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” “Keep Ya Head Up,” and “Dear Mama” are some of the greatest rap records of all time for how they critiqued institutional racism. Perhaps music licensing posed a challenge here, but even on-screen text of the written lyrics or descriptions of the music would illustrate the profound importance of the sonic element of this history. Teachers choosing to use the documentary might want to compile a hip hop playlist as an accompaniment.

That said, to its great credit, the narrative arc of the four episodes of “Fight the Power” does allow for a wide range of hip hop artists from various eras, regions, and subgenres to define their own approach to resistance. Viewers learn that with the release of “The Message” in 1982, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five became a beacon for other MCs who wanted to use their music to inform and educate. Darryl “DMC” McDaniels reveals how his group’s activist impulses intersected with Run-DMC’s desire for crossover success. Ice-T compares his own street raps to the music of his politically outspoken contemporaries who, he says, were “more about the world. And I was more about the neighborhood.” Women rappers, including Roxanne Shanté, Monie Love, and MC Lyte, speak about the struggle within the culture of hip hop to be seen, heard, and respected. We see the biggest hip hop stars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century stumping for Barack Obama and using the power of celebrity to get out the vote. The documentary even confronts the murky relationship between the pursuit of wealth and the goals of resistance.

“Fight the Power” is compelling documentary TV. Hip hop fans, casual viewers, teachers, and students alike will find it thoroughly informative and entertaining – a wonderful backdrop for understanding the record of hip hop as an insurgent art form.

Felicia Angeja Viator  
San Francisco State University

Teaching History 48(1)

DOI: 10.33043/TH.48.1.157-158

© 2023 Felicia Angeja Viator

Distributed with CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 License.