

The Sampling Network of Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise"

Presented by Amanda Sewell

UCLA Echo Conference, 20 October 2012

Since its release in 1987, Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise" has been sampled over one hundred times by more than sixty different hip-hop artists. The resulting tangle of artists, producers, sampled material, and sampling techniques from the past twenty-five years creates a complex network of sampling practices and traditions surrounding "Bring the Noise." These sampling practices include producers sampling the same select phrases over and over, certain producers sampling each other repeatedly, and producers' preference for placing specific samples into new tracks in specific ways. Through twenty-five years of samples, "Bring the Noise" begins to take on a life and a history richer than just the track itself. Although sampling fell off in frequency after 1991, both the specific passages producers sampled and the ways producers added that sampled material to new tracks has remained relatively consistent over the last twenty-five years. In this paper, I focus on one specific aspect of "Bring the Noise" and its sampling network, namely, the few phrases of text that producers chose to sample over and over.

"Bring the Noise" was first released in November 1987 on the soundtrack of the Marek Kaniowska film *Less Than Zero*. Public Enemy also included the track on their second album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, released in April 1988. As Chuck D recalls, "Bring the Noise" was directed toward those who found rap noisy and obnoxious: "It was common to hear, 'Cut that noise off, it's irritating, it has no melody.' We [Public Enemy and the Bomb Squad] were like, 'If you're calling that noise, we have some noise for your ass. This will throttle you to the edge.'"¹ Similarly, producer Hank Shocklee of the Bomb Squad has said of his music,

¹ Chuck D and Yusuf Jah, *Lyrics of a Rap Revolutionary: Times, Rhymes, and Mind of Chuck D* (Beverly Hills, CA: Off Da Books), 50.

“Noise? You want to hear some noise? I wanted to be music’s worst nightmare.”² “Bring the Noise” thus became Public Enemy’s rejoinder to criticism about the “noisiness” of rap.

The “noise” its practitioners intended to be so irritating actually helped propel Public Enemy’s and the Bomb Squad’s popularity. “Bring the Noise” is one of the earliest tracks to feature the sample-based musical style of production team the Bomb Squad, a musical style that came to characterize Public Enemy’s sound in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The rapped lyrics of “Bring the Noise” address issues such as racial bias, the universality of music, and the difficulties in obtaining radio airplay for music with controversial lyrics. A transcription of all the lyrics in “Bring the Noise” appears in Appendix A. For example, Chuck D addresses the perceived danger of a powerful pro-black musical message (“now they got me in a cell / ’cause my records they sell”) while simultaneously challenging black radio stations to play this record (“radio stations, I question their blackness / they call themselves black, but we’ll see if they play this”). In a later verse (2:08-2:21), both Flavor Flav and Chuck D stress the universality of music (“beat”) in general and hip-hop in particular, mentioning multiple artists in their assessment:

Chuck D: Whatcha gonna do? Rap is not afraid of you.
Beat is for Sonny Bono.

Flavor Flav: Beat is for Yoko Ono.

Chuck D: Run-D.M.C. first said a DJ could be a band.
Stand on its feet, get you out your seat.
Beat is for Eric B. and LL [Cool J] as well, hell.

Flavor Flav: Was is for Anthrax.

Chuck D: Still it can rock bells.

² Hank Shocklee, interviewed in Alan Light, “Public Enemy #1,” *Rolling Stone* 622 (23 January 1992): 34.

In their assertion that beat (music) is universal, Chuck D and Flavor Flav acknowledge a variety of musicians from several genres, not just other hip-hop artists. According to Chuck D, “We’re all in the music business. Don’t just give props to R&B and not give props to rap, because we’re legitimate too, and Anthrax was a rock group that I felt should have gotten more props.”³ By “giving props to” and acknowledging musicians as diverse as Fluxus artist Yoko Ono, thrash metal band Anthrax, pioneering hip-hop DJ Eric B., and pop-rock singer Sonny Bono, Chuck D and Flavor Flav advocate a broad acceptance of musical styles and implicitly request the same acceptance for their own music. In fact, thrash metal band Anthrax was so flattered by their inclusion in the track that they invited Public Enemy to record a second version of “Bring the Noise” with them. This version, whose title is usually styled “Bring tha Noize,” appeared on Anthrax’s album *Attack of the Killer B’s* and on Public Enemy’s album *Apocalypse ’91... The Enemy Strikes Black*.⁴

Eighty-four tracks released between 1987 and 2011 contain at least one sample from “Bring the Noise.” Most of the sampling artists are hip-hop, although a few pop, rock, and R&B artists also released tracks that sample “Bring the Noise.” These 84 sampling tracks contain a total of 103 samples from “Bring the Noise” because 14 of those 84 tracks include at least two separate samples from the source track.

Four passages in “Bring the Noise” have been quite popular for producers since 1987. Twenty-six tracks sampled Flavor Flav’s “yeah, boy,” 16 tracks sampled Chuck D’s “bass,” 11 tracks sampled Chuck D’s “once again back is the incredible,” and nine tracks sampled Chuck

³ Chuck D, *Lyrics of a Rap Revolutionary*, 51.

⁴ While “Bring tha Noize” indicates a crucial intersection between rap and metal, its place in the present study is limited because it does not sample the original “Bring the Noise.” The 1987 “Bring the Noise” contained many samples, but the 1991 “Bring tha Noize” is newly-performed by the members of Anthrax. Even the Funky Drummer break that figured so prominently in “Bring the Noise” is replayed by Anthrax drummer Charlie Benante. See Jeffrey Ressler, “Thrashers pay tribute to rap,” *Rolling Stone* 610, 8 August 1991, 21.

D's "here we go again." In other words, of the 103 total samples of "Bring the Noise," well over half of those samples (62) were of one of these four passages. Why are these four passages so appealing to producers?

Flavor Flav's "yeah, boy" has been sampled a total of 26 times: 12 samples of "yeah, boy," 12 samples of "yeah" only, and two samples of "boy" only. "Yeah, boy" is Flavor Flav's signature phrase, and he utters it frequently both live and in recordings. In his role as Public Enemy's "hype man," Flavor Flav balances the seriousness of Chuck D's lyrics with a more puckish attitude. As Joseph "Run" Simmons of Run-D.M.C. has said, "Flav's the hype man and Chuck's the rapper—they help each other out. I don't know if the message would be as powerful if Flav was hyping around alone or Chuck was rapping alone."⁵ This phrase encapsulates Flavor Flav's role. Flavor Flav's "yeah, boy" is uniquely positioned both because it is both Flavor Flav's signature phrase, and because its text can serve any number of variety of grammatical and semantic functions.

Another popular passage for sampling artists is the single word "bass" uttered by Chuck D, which is, in fact, the first word of the first verse of "Bring the Noise." This word is popular among sampling artists for several reasons. First, the word "bass" is often employed as a homophone for "base," a slang term for crack cocaine.⁶ For example, Melle Mel and the Furious Five's "White Lines Part II (Don't Do It)" juxtaposes "bass" (base) against the word "blow"—a sample from Melle Mel's own "White Lines (Don't Do It)," released six years earlier—in the choruses of the new track. In Public Enemy's own anti-crack anthem "Night of the Living

⁵ Joseph "Run" Simmons, quoted in Mariel Concepcion, "'Public Enemy: Our Black Planet,'" *Billboard* 122, issue 11 (20 March 2010): 42. Curiously, Def Jam hesitated about signing Flavor Flav until the other members of Public Enemy were able to convince them that he played an important role in the group. According to Hank Shocklee, "You gotta have Flavor, because Chuck might be too serious, so you need a balance there." See Russell Myrie, *Don't Rhyme for the Sake of Riddlin': The Authorized Story of Public Enemy* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), chapter 9, "The Birth of Public Enemy," especially pp. 55-56.

⁶ On the role of crack in hip-hop and black culture in the 1980s, see Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip-Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2007), 83-85.

Baseheads,” DJ Terminator X scratches the sampled word “bass” (base) throughout the choruses of the new track. Jealous J also plays on the homophone in “Work that Body,” including the sampled word “bass” as a lyric substitution in the first verse (0:23-0:24): “It’s for all you *bass* junkies.” Jealous J’s lyric substitution has two meanings: a bass junkie, meaning one who enjoys low-pitched resonant music, and a base junkie, meaning a crack cocaine addict.

Second, producers frequently use this sample to create new words or phrases. MC Connection’s “Ridiculous Bass,” for example, juxtaposes two samples to create the choruses: “bass” from “Bring the Noise,” and “pump up the,” sampled from Eric B and Rakim’s “I Know You Got Soul.” MC Connection thus creates the grammatically intact phrase “pump up the bass” in the choruses by placing two lyric samples in rapid succession. Similarly, by juxtaposing the sampled fragments “bass” from “Bring the Noise” and “-tronic” from Mantronik’s “Do You Like Mantronik,” the Unknown DJ creates a brand new word, the track’s title, and the choruses of his own “Basstronic.” Thus, Chuck D’s single word “bass” is a popular choice for sampling musicians due to its brevity, versatility, and potential for use as a homophone.

The two other most-sampled phrases from “Bring the Noise” are “once again back is the incredible” and “here we go again.” Both phrases contain the word “again,” and both sampled phrases are heard, almost without exception, to articulate some type of return. These “returns” can encompass a variety of meanings. First, the return can be that of a specific artist. For example, multiple artists have used one of these two samples in tracks on their non-debut albums, thus suggesting with the sampled material that they as an artist are returning to the music scene. Kanye West’s “Everything I Am” was a track on his third album, Fat Joe’s “Safe 2 Say (The Incredible)” was a track on his fourth album, and De La Soul’s “Much More” was a track on their seventh album.

Second, the return can be that of a specific genre or style. For example, ASAP Productions' "The Track" and DJ Jimmie Jam's "Jimmie's Jam" are both DJ tracks that appear on albums in the *Return of the DJ* series (ASAP Productions is on volume 1, and DJ Jimmie Jam is on volume 2).⁷ Thus, the samples from "Bring the Noise" that contain the word "again" suggest the return not of an artist but of a genre, namely that of the hip-hop DJ.

Finally, the return can be a return within the form of the track. Sonic Solutions' "Don't Speak" and Mind Over Matter's "Rappers in Wonderland" use the sampled material in the same way. Both tracks are a verse-chorus form, and the sampled "here we go again" is heard at the end of each chorus. In other words, "here we go again" is heard before all verses except the first verse, thus suggesting that the return is that of the verse within the form of the track.

Sampling one of these four phrases from "Bring the Noise" represents two separate but related traditions of musical borrowing. First, producers established a tradition by sampling the same material year after year. In fact, the greatest diversity of sampling occurred in first two or three years after the release of "Bring the Noise." Between 1987 and 1991, producers sampled twenty-two different phrases of text from "Bring the Noise," but in the 2000s, they only sampled seven different phrases. All seven of these phrases, which include the four discussed earlier, have been sampled regularly since 1987. These few select phrases have solidified into a tradition of sampling. Artists sampled the same phrases over and over because they were influenced not only by Public Enemy but also by other groups who sampled these same passages. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Next to the originator of a good sentence is the first quoter of it."⁸

⁷ On the *Return of the DJ* series of albums, see Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 142-43. According to Katz, the *Return of the DJ* series "became a galvanizing force for turntablism, helping form and then enlarge the turntablist community."

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Quotation and Originality," in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1 (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1913), 470.

The second musical borrowing tradition represented by this network of samples from “Bring the Noise” is the samples’ accumulation of meaning over time. Because they have been sampled so many times, these four passages take on associations independent of the source track. The samples are informed by their new musical contexts. For example, when Franz Liszt quoted the melody of the *Dies irae* sequence in both his *Totentanz* piano concerto and the first movement of his *Dante* symphony, was he following Berlioz’s lead or quoting the plainchant from its source? If a musical idea is borrowed repeatedly, it begins to take on associations of its new contexts as well as of its original context. In 1953, Robin Gregory argued:

In its original form *Dies irae* had a grave and religious connotation; it was part of one of the most solemn rites of the Church and it was intended to call to mind awe-inspiring events, but it had no associations with anything evil. The parodies by Berlioz, Liszt and others . . . intentionally gave the melody a baleful significance. Repeated use in this manner has tended to debase its real character so that now it is almost taken for granted that its use is cynical in intention.⁹

As Gregory observed of the *Dies irae*, if borrowed musical material is used in a similar manner over and over again, it begins to take on meanings associated as with the composers’ borrowings. Composers who borrow the *Dies irae* melody not only borrow that melody but also the associations it carries from the other borrowings that came before it. Over time, the borrowed material represents its early borrowings as much as, if not more than, its original source.

In an interview with hip-hop producer 9th Wonder, he described how a lyric sample can accumulate meaning over time.¹⁰ 9th Wonder was preparing to produce a track for rapper Lil B, who is also known as the Based God. When he was preparing to produce this track, 9th Wonder had two criteria for a sample: first, he wanted to include a lyric sample that contained the word “bass,” since Lil B is the Based God. Second, he wanted to sample a classic hip-hop line in order to legitimate Lil B and his music. As 9th Wonder explained, “What can I take to make this guy

⁹ Robin Gregory, “*Dies irae*,” *Music & Letters* 34, no. 2 (April 1953): 138.

¹⁰ 9th Wonder (Patrick Douthit), telephone interview with the author, 8 August 2012.

who the music industry people tend to hate and make him feel authentic? Let's go to a record which is arguably the number one hip-hop album ever made, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. It's easy." With these criteria, 9th Wonder then narrowed his choices to three possible lyric samples: Chuck D's "bass, how low can you go?" from "Bring the Noise"; Flavor Flav's "bass for your face, London!" from Public Enemy's "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos"; or the character Gee Money's spoken phrase "they came back for the base" from the 1991 film *New Jack City*.

"Bring the Noise" and "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos" both appear on the classic Public Enemy album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, which 9th Wonder and many other hip-hop artists regard as one of, if not the, most important hip-hop album ever made. But what is the significance of Gee Money's spoken line from *New Jack City*? In 9th Wonder's estimation, the spoken line from *New Jack City* was not only about base (crack cocaine) but also about Public Enemy: "I knew that when [the character] Gee Money says that [phrase] in the movie, he was talking about Public Enemy himself. Like, 'it came back BASE' like that. It all got it together." By placing strong emphasis on the word "base," Gee Money, portrayed by Allen Payne, simultaneously plays on the homophone and also invokes Chuck D's delivery of the word "bass" from "Bring the Noise."

Ultimately, 9th Wonder selected Flavor Flav's "bass for your face" for Lil B's new track, which ended up being titled, not surprisingly, "Base for Your Face." 9th Wonder chose the sample of Flavor Flav instead of Chuck D's "bass, how low can you go?" or Gee Money's "they came back for the base," but not without carefully considering several different samples and the associations each of those samples would carry for the listener. Had 9th Wonder sampled the line

from *New Jack City*, he knew that he would have been sampling both that spoken line and that spoken line's invocation of Chuck D's lyric delivery from "Bring the Noise."

Interestingly, even though 9th Wonder did not end up sampling the phrase from *New Jack City*, the rapper Phonte, who is a guest rapper in "Base for Your Face," actually quotes Gee Money's line in his verse. Thus, Phonte reperforms Gee Money's invocation of Chuck D's phrase. Although sampling and reperforming are two different sonic processes, ultimately, "Base for Your Face" evokes Public Enemy on a variety of levels.

This transmission of "Bring the Noise" through samples and the attendant formation of musical borrowing traditions is closely connected to how traditions in African American literature are established. In his study of African American literary theory, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes that the basis of a tradition in African American literature "must be shared patterns of language use. By this I mean the shared, discrete uses of literary language in texts that bear some sort of relation to each other."¹¹ For Gates, traditions in African American literature are possible only via formal literary revision. He argues further that the blackness of black American literature is established by "specific uses of literary language that are shared, repeated, critiqued, and revised."¹² Revision, in this instance, does not refer to correction but to reinvention: "The revising text is written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter."¹³ As Gates demonstrates in his readings of texts by authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Sterling A. Brown, many

¹¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 121.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 124.

African American writers define themselves rhetorically by imitating and critiquing the works of other African American writers.¹⁴

Gates's assessment of African American literary identity and tradition is apt for considering the relationship between "Bring the Noise" and the tracks that sample it, because later hip-hop artists engage in specific uses of musical language by imitating, repeating, and revising specific phrases from "Bring the Noise." By sampling one of a few key phrases from "Bring the Noise," a hip-hop producer engages with a specific tradition within sample-based hip-hop. The discrete uses of samples and the practice of sharing, repeating and revising the same source is a corollary to Gates's view of how traditions in African American literature are established.

Samples are not just sounds; they capture both specific moments and also large swaths of historical and artistic significance for sampling artists. Certain passages from "Bring the Noise" have proven especially popular with sampling artists—such as Flavor Flav's catchphrase and grammatically or rhetorically flexible words such as "bass," "yeah," and "again"—and sampling artists borrow more than just words or sounds from the source track. An artist could sample certain words from virtually any recording; surely Bob Dylan, MC Hammer, or Diana Ross uttered the words "yeah" or "bass" at some point in their recordings. But a sample of Chuck D's words is not just a sample of the words—it is a sample of the artist himself and everything that artist represents. A sample of Chuck D's words is the words, Chuck D, Public Enemy, and an awareness of hip-hop. Certainly, some artists do sample simply for the text, but most are sampling a sound, an artist, and a history. And what exactly is Public Enemy's place in hip-hop's history? According to Chuck D, "Defiance, pride, attitude, nationalism, a little bit of rhetoric,

¹⁴ Ibid., 122.

who we have as our heroes, and who we are as a people, and giving them a top-notch place in our history.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Chuck D, *Lyrics of a Rap Revolutionary*, 167.

Appendix A. Transcription of lyrics in Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise"

Adapted from Chuck D and Yusuf Jah, *Lyrics of a Rap Revolutionary: Times, Rhymes, and Mind of Chuck D* (Beverly Hills, CA: Off Da Books), 46-48.

Sampled: Too black, too strong; too black, too strong

Flavor Flav (spoken): Yo Chuck, these [indecipherable] are still frontin' on us. Show them that we can do this, 'cause we always knew this. Haha. Yeah, boy.

Verse 1

Chuck D: Bass, how low can you go?

Death row, what a brother know.

Once again, back is the incredible

The rhyme animal

The incredible

Others: D

Chuck D: Public Enemy number one.

Five-oh said

Others: "Freeze,"

Chuck D: and I got numb,

Can I tell 'em that I really never had a gun?

But it's the wax that the Terminator X spun.

Now they got me in a cell 'cause my records they sell,

'Cause a brother like me said, "Well,

Farrakhan's a prophet, and I think you ought to listen to

What he can say to you, what you ought to do."

Follow for now, power of the people, say,

"Make a miracle,

Others: D

Chuck D: pump the lyrical."

Black is back, all in, we're gonna win.

Check it out

Flavor Flav: Yeah y'all, come on

Chuck D: Here we go again.

Chorus

Chuck D: Bring the noise.

Sample: Turn it up.

Flavor Flav (spoken): Hey, yo Chuck, they sayin' we too black, man. Yo, I don't understand what they're sayin', but little do they know they could get us smacked for that.

Verse 2

Chuck D: Never badder than bad 'cause the brother is madder than mad

At the fact that's corrupt like a senator.

Soul on a roll but you treat it like soap on a rope

'Cause the beats in the lines are so dope.

Listen for lessons I'm saying inside music
 That the critics are blasting me for.
 They'll never care for the
Sample and Chuck D: brothers and sisters
Chuck D: Now across the country has us up for the war
 We got to demonstrate,
 Flavor Flav and Chuck D: Come on
Chuck D: They're gonna have to wait
Flavor Flav and Chuck D: 'til we get it right.
Chuck D: Radio stations I question their blackness
 They call themselves black, but we'll see if they'll play this.

Chorus

Chuck D: Bring the noise.

Sample: Turn it up.

Flavor Flav (spoken): Hey, yo, Chuck, they illin'. We chillin'. Yo, PE in the house. Yo Chuck, show them what you do, boy.

Verse 3

Chuck D: Get from in front of me, the crowd runs to me.
 My DJ is warm, he's X, I call him Norm, you know.
 He can cut a record from side to side
 So what, the ride, the glide should be much safer than a suicide.
 Soul control, beat is the lather of your rock and roll.
 Music for whatcha, for whichin', you call a band, man
 Makin' a music, abuse it, but you can't do it, you know.
 You call 'em demos
Flavor Flav: But we ride limos, too.
Chuck D: Whatcha gonna do? Rap is not afraid of you.
 Beat is for Sonny Bono
Flavor Flav: Beat is for Yoko Ono
Chuck D: Run-D. M. C. first said a DJ could be a band.
 Stand on its feet, get you out your seat.
 Beat is for Eric B. and L. L. as well, hell.
Flavor Flav: Was is for Anthrax,
Chuck D: still it can rock bells
 Ever forever, universal, it will sell,
 Time for me to exit
Flavor Flav and Chuck D: Terminator X-it.

Chorus

Chuck D: Bring the noise.

Sample: Turn it up.

Flavor Flav (spoken): Yo, they should know by now that they can't stop this bum rush. Word up, man. They keep telling me to turn it down, but yo, Flavor Flav ain't going out like that.

Verse 4

Chuck D: From coast to coast,

So you stop being like a comatose.

'stand, my man? The beat's the same with a boast toast

Rock with some pizzazz, it will last. Why you ask?

Roll with the rock stars

Flavor Flav and Chuck D: still never get accepted as

Chuck D: We got to plead the Fifth, you can investigate

Don't need to wait, get the record straight

Others: Hey

Chuck D: Posse's in effect, got the Flavor,

Terminator X to sign checks

Flavor Flav and Chuck D: Play to get paid

Chuck D: We got to check it out down on the avenue

A magazine or two is dissing me and dissing you

Yeah, I'm telling you

Flavor Flav (spoken): Hey, yo Griff, get the S1W, we got to handle this. We ain't going out like that, yo man, straight up on the Colombo tip. We can do this like Brutus, 'cause we always knew this, you know what I'm saying? There's just one thing that puzzles me, my brother: what's wrong with all these people around here, man? Is there clocking? Is there rocking? Is there shocking? (fade)