“We Wanted Our Coffee *Black*”: Public Enemy, Improvisation, and Noise

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Introduction

Outside of academic circles, “noise” often has pejorative connotations in the context of music, but what if it was a *preferred* aesthetic with respect to music making? In addition, what if the preferred noise aesthetic was a direct result of group improvisation? Caleb Kelly claims that “Subjective noise is the most common understanding of what noise is. Put simply, it is the sound of the complaint from a stereotypical mother screaming to her teenage son to ‘turn that noise off. To the parent, the aggravating noise is the sound of the music, while it is his mother’s voice that is noise to the teenager enjoying his music” (72-73). In *Music and Discourse*, Jean-Jacques Nattiez goes further to state that noise is not only subjective, its definition, and that of music itself, is culturally specific: “There is never a singular, culturally dominant conception of music; rather, we see a whole spectrum of conceptions, from those of the entire society to those of a single individual” (43). Nattiez quotes from René Chocholle’s *Le Bruit* to define “noise” as “any sound that we consider as having a disagreeable affective character”—making “the notion of noise [. . .] first and foremost a *subjective notion*” (45). Noise in this context is, therefore, most often positioned as the result of instrumental or lyrical/vocal sounds that run contrary to an established set of musical auditory expectations. However subjective the assessments of both the musical producer and listener, these rules or “these ‘criteria’ are always defined in relation to a threshold of acceptability encompassing bearable volume, the existence of fixed pitches, and a notion of order – which are only *arbitrarily* defined as norms” (45).¹ If the above criteria are arbitrary, then music might just as arbitrarily be redefined to valorize noise rather than eschew it, something true of hip-hop group Public Enemy and their musical aesthetic of noise. In this essay, I posit that the “noise” of saxophone squeals sampled in Public Enemy’s songs “Rebel Without a Pause” and “Night of the Living Baseheads” are aesthetic, political, and “anti-musical,” as well as bearers of long-standing traditions in African-American musical culture. Additionally, Public Enemy’s collective improvisational recording techniques generate a noise aesthetic, thus performing the above roles and affirming Public Enemy’s association with their signature sound.

Historical Context

Public Enemy’s landmark 1988 LP *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* incorporates high-pitched saxophone samples as essential ingredients to the music, most evident within “Bring the Noise,” “Don’t Believe the Hype,” “Terminator X to the Edge of Panic,” “Cold Lampin’ With Flavor,” “Show ‘Em Whatcha Got,” and “Rebel Without a Pause.” The whining saxophone samples act in tandem with the lyrics to form “an aggression against the code-structuring messages” found in popular music conventions and are utilized to recall musical practices common to previous generations of African-American artists (Attali 27). Doug Miller details early origins of this tradition: “with warm throaty groans, choked screams or spectacular falsetto yodels, the slaves evolved neo-African field hollers or ‘arhoolies’ of all kinds in the USA to communicate messages, make their presence known or simply express some emotion” (161). Miller explains further how transferring the vocalization to musical instruments “seemed to be a logical extension of this oral tradition[,]” making the saxophone a prime candidate for this transfer due to its textural qualities and its wide range of pitches (161).

Noise, as it may be conceived of today, may not have featured prominently in early twentieth-century African-American musical forms such as blues and jazz, but dissonance did. According to Ajay Heble, Duke Ellington used dissonant piano chords as a means to help describe the African-American struggle: “Oppression, after all, is itself a space of dissonance, for it means being out of tune with naturalized assumptions of social structures and categories” (20). John Pittman provides further background on the matter:

To an observation that his music was distinguished by its preoccupation with dissonance, [Ellington] gave an illustrated “lecture” on his theory of music. As the recording machine played one of his recent compositions, a combination of Cuban music and the unmistakable Ellington rhythm, he talked about dissonance. “That’s the Negro’s life,” he said. “Hear that chord!” he set the needle back to replay the chord – “That’s us. Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part.” (150)

Ellington’s comment speaks to an African-American musical tradition that utilizes dissonance as a metaphor for pain or struggle. Ellington, along with other jazz musicians, turned dissonance into a powerful audible experience (Heble 20). George Lewis offers bebop as a prime example of a challenge to dominant musical aesthetics. Lewis argues that bebop’s thematic resistance was built through “implicit and explicit challenges to Western notions of structure, form, and expression,” forcing the dominant Western culture to face African-American musical aesthetics head-on (218).

Paul Watkins adds another historical precedent by claiming that pianist Thelonious Monk used dissonance as a continuation of “a larger tradition of Black innovation within a continuum of resistance” that challenged Western traditions of melody and harmony (4). Monk received criticism when his piano playing fell outside the cultural and tonal norms of the day: “The more rupturing or polyphonically disruptive the effects of such productions are, the more often such productions have historically been interpreted, often by white critics and listeners, as noise” (2). Ellington and Monk stepped outside of the cultural assumptions of melody and harmony to create tension and dissonance in a manner similar to Public Enemy, particularly when the group used sampling technology to layer sounds and create texture through the low-bit grain of their samples. The low sampling bit-rates in the then-emergent sampling technology of the E-Mu SP-1200 and Mirage samplers added a gritty effect in sample playback. As Joseph Schloss notes in *Making Beats*, “this preference is not for the *act* of sampling, but for the *sound* of sampling: It is a matter of aesthetics” (78). The gritty sound produced by the samplers inspired producer Hank Shocklee, an integral member of Public Enemy’s production team, The Bomb Squad, to scuff his source vinyl in order to add additional dirt to the samples—a modern-day equivalent of an older tradition.

Clyde Taylor provides further precedents of African-American musicians altering the timbre of their instruments purely for aesthetic reasons rather than for clarity of sound (4). In Duke Ellington’s “The Mooche,” trumpeter Bubber Miley attained a “growl” effect with the help of a plunger mute over the bell of his instrument, an example of the “gritty timbres” that are “valued in many kinds of African-American music[. . .] from Blind Willie Johnson’s voice to Miles Davis’s Harmon mute” (Walser 197). Taylor adds that the jazz tenor saxophone came to represent “the ideal approximation of the human (and specifically the Black) voice,” an important fact given the prominence of the saxophone in later rhythm and blues records, the music of James Brown, and ultimately the saxophone samples Public Enemy used to construct their thunderous, discordant records (5). Leroi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) elaborates further by expressing that the saxophone’s “honking and screaming” expressed black musicians’ interest in distancing themselves from “white” popular music (172). If a person’s voice—the most obvious choice for expressing pain or displeasure—can be replicated through the growling timbre of a saxophone, then it is “this level of communication, the groans of torture, [and] cries of grief” that suggests a lineage from field hollers to the blues, to jazz, to r&b, and to hip-hop (Taylor 5).

“We Wanted Our Coffee *Black*”

Public Enemy’s production team, The Bomb Squad, comprised Chuck D, brothers Hank and Keith Shocklee, and Eric “Vietnam” Sadler—other members included secondary MC and hypeman Flavor Flav and DJ Terminator X.² As a production unit, the group utilized noise to significant effect on *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, most notably in “Rebel Without a Pause” and “Night of the Living Baseheads.” These two tracks are characterized by saxophone squeals and erratic drums, as well as countless scratches and vocal samples running in and out of their mixes. The album influenced subsequent “sample-happy” opuses such as De La Soul’s *Three Feet High and Rising* (1989), the Beastie Boys’ *Paul’s Boutique* (1989), and DJ Shadow’s *Endtroducing* (1996), among others. *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* stands today as a critically lauded and influential album that is often included on “best of” lists from *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and *Time* magazines (Nielson 123). Public Enemy recorded it at a time when sample-clearance laws were either lax or non-existent; therefore, it would be extremely difficult to release the LP in the twenty-first century without the laborious and expensive legal task of sample clearances. According to Hank Shocklee, the Bomb Squad’s production technique within the recording studio consisted of long improvisational sessions:

We deliberately did not use melodies. We deliberately made sure that things were out of tune. We deliberately made sure that certain things [were] out of *time*, because we want to create a feeling. We could easily have put melodies, timing, all that stuff in sync. It wouldn’t have had no potency. We wanted to make sure the music was strong. We wanted our coffee *black*.³ (qtd. in Upshal)

It is clear that Shocklee and company set out to create a sound designed to oppose the traditional western expectations of melody and timing. The band likely made a conscious effort to create a sense of urgency in the music and an abrasiveness to accent the message of the lyrics. Acting as a unit, the Bomb Squad performed the producer’s role of kindling a specific vibe within the music (Théberge 192). Shocklee’s last comment is particularly interesting for its apparent double meaning: “black” in the sense of the pro-black lyrics, and “black” in the sense of upsetting Western musical tradition:

Chuck will be on one turntable, Eric would be on the drum machine hitting the little fills, I’ll be on a sampler, and Flav may have a sampler. So, now we’re all in the studio and everyone is just making[. . .] if you came in there, you would have thought we was making mess, [because] everyone was just [pause] doing whatever, and it was all everybody at the same time playing. And everything that came out the speakers was horrible, it was just noise. But, we would tape it all, and

there will be one point in that whole tape that we found the groove that was *crazy*, and that's what we would use to be the foundation of the song. (qtd. in Upshal)

This is the Bomb Squad's improvisational technique at work.⁴ With each member attending to his instrument, and without the constraints of melody and timing—the songs may be built around common (4/4) time, but there was room for imperfect loops and off-beat drumming—the group was able to construct the building blocks that would eventually become a song. Paul Watkins' use of the term "dissonance" as it relates to hip-hop music is particularly relevant to these circumstances. Watkins suggests that the definitions of "dissonance" and "discord," as explained by *Grove Music Online* and the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, do not adequately suit his discussion of Thelonious Monk's compositions. Furthermore, the dictionary's definitions fail to provide an accurate description of dissonance for sample-based music. Watkins suggests that the concept of dissonance

is undeniably somewhat different in Hip Hop music where a group of samples in different keys are layered together; nevertheless, the effect can still be jarring, while making perfect musical sense within the datums of that musical practice. I use dissonance not as a negative term to describe something sounding un-musical, so much as to highlight that dissonance, particularly as a metaphor, provides valuable musical nodes to rescripting standard Western notions of harmony and rhythm. (13)

The noise and dissonance of Public Enemy's music "can never be evaluated abstractly, apart from their purposes and meaning" (Walser 197), but it is central to transmitting the emotion of the fiery rap lyrics of Chuck D and Flavor Flav. Public Enemy's samples of squealing rhythm and blues saxophones, as well as the low sample-rate at which they are recorded to affect extra grittiness, reference James Brown's late 1960s to early 1970s catalogue. These recordings showcase Brown's most socially conscious period, including songs such as "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," "Public Enemy #1," and "King Heroin." Public Enemy's backing tracks quote these artistic works, carrying on the legacy of Brown and other Black singers (including Marvin Gaye, Sly and the Family Stone, Nina Simone, and The Last Poets, to name only a few), who spoke out against racism, drugs, and other societal ills. Deriving from the same complex set of musical, historical, and cultural influences, Public Enemy's layered loops and samples are both polytimbral and polymetric, an ideal that accentuates a diverse range of tone colours (Katz 153).

Public Enemy referred to and continued some popular music traditions, including common time, three-to-four minute song duration, and a verse/chorus structure, but the band also broke other expectations. Within the choruses and verses of "Rebel Without a Pause" and "Night of the Living Baseheads," melody is largely omitted and replaced with tripartite-layered sonic texture samples of saxophone screeches and vocal grunts, as well as scratching by Terminator X. These features affirm Nattiez's point that "noise" is noise only because it is thought to contradict the culturally and arbitrarily agreed upon norms of Western music, such as the primacy of melody.

"Fire and Brimstone"

It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back was not just about subversion of established musical norms; its multi-layered, dissonant "noise" beds, with their screeching horns and busy drum fills also created a sense of urgency and aggression necessary to complement Chuck D's anti-establishment lyrics. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali states,

Noise is the term for a signal that interferes with the reception of a message by a receiver, even if the interfering signal itself has a meaning for that receiver. Long before it was given this theoretical expression, noise had always been experienced as destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, *an aggression against the code-structuring messages*. (emphasis added, 27)

Shocklee notes that the production style enabled the Bomb Squad to instill "fire and brimstone, as if the world was coming to an end" (qtd. in Buskin 2010). The power of this "anti-music" ethos (as Shocklee referred to it) gave Chuck D's message more force and arguably more authority than if it was heard over more conventional sounding musical backdrops or if it was expressed *a capella* or sung. Take for instance the slow, sparse, plodding rhythms of rapper Too Short's *Born to Mack* LP (1987). Given their slow tempos and minimal instrumentation, his bed tracks are well suited to his highly descriptive narratives of Oakland street life; however, the lack of intensity in the beats causes them to fail as vehicles for Chuck D's black power rhetoric, which encompass urgency, as connoted by the startling saxophone squeals. The high-pitched sounds within the angry, somber, and abrasive beats of "Rebel Without a Pause" and "Night of the Living Baseheads" imitate human cries, despite the cold logic of digital samplers. Many of the tracks on *It Takes a Nation...* feature repetitive squeal-like bursts of sax—the introduction to the LP, recorded live at a 1987 performance in London, even features an air-raid siren—a sure sign for the listener to brace for the impending aural assault. The siren in *Nation's* opening track warns listeners to prepare for a new sound in hip-hop

(McLeod and DiCola 23). The Bomb Squad's production intentionally foregrounds Chuck D's contrarian message with an aesthetic that is also oppositional to popular music preferences at the time.

Public Enemy's decision to reflect a deliberately noisier, busier, and more immediate sound also resulted from competition from other rappers. In 1987, the band released their debut album on New York's Def Jam Recordings, operated by Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin. The label had released landmark rap recordings such as LL Cool J's *Radio* (1985) and the Beastie Boys' *Licensed to Ill* (1986), which featured samples nicked from Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, and Black Sabbath and was the highest selling rap album at the time. Public Enemy's *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*'s sound was similar to others in the Def Jam stable: it was brash and edgy, with sparse samples and a hard rock influence. Rubin had produced the LL Cool J and Beastie Boys albums, as well as Run-DMC's *Raising Hell* (1986)—on Profile Records—with the same minimalist approach to the rap/rock sound. *Raising Hell* featured a collaboration with Aerosmith's Joe Perry and Steven Tyler, "Walk This Way," a song Aerosmith originally recorded and released on *Toys in the Attic* (1975). Rubin's rock-influenced sound helped define mid-1980s hip-hop and brought it into the mainstream. *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* was recorded in 1986, and by its release in 1987, the record sounded old in hip-hop's rapidly changing landscape. Public Enemy needed a new sound, not only to complement their increasingly political lyrics, but also to stay current with developing and sophisticated sampling techniques. Eric B. and Rakim led this new school of production techniques with *Paid in Full* (1987). The LP brimmed with James Brown samples and was credited with partial responsibility for inaugurating hip-hop's enduring interest in borrowing from The Godfather of Soul.

To eclipse them, the Bomb Squad was pressed to be at the forefront of a new sonic revolution. The second single released from *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, "You're Gonna Get Yours," featured a B-side track not featured on the LP, "Rebel Without a Pause"—signalling Public Enemy's future musical approach, thus launching them into the welcoming arms of new fans and critics. As noted above, *It Takes a Nation...* was largely inspired by growing competition in New York's hip-hop scene. *Paid in Full* and Boogie Down Productions' (BDP) *Criminal Minded* (1987) feature vocal styles, rhyme schemes, and production values that were quickly reducing the brash, rock-heavy, and shout-style rapping on Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys tracks to out-dated forms—an amazing feat considering the one-year gap between album releases. Most notable are the differences between the uses of James Brown samples in *Paid in Full* and *Criminal Minded* and their deployment in *It Takes a Nation to Hold Us Back*. Although the three albums each utilize several James Brown drums, guitar riffs, horns, and vocals, there are striking differences between Public Enemy's formula and those of Eric B. and Rakim, or BDP. The most notable track on *Paid in Full* to feature James Brown samples is "I Know You Got Soul," which liberally borrows from Bobby Byrd's song of the same name, a James Brown production that was released in 1971 on King Records. The duo looped a two-bar guitar and drum intro with Byrd's raspy-voiced chorus. The loop continues throughout the track while the chorus features Eric B. scratching Byrd: "I know you got soul, if you didn't, you wouldn't be here." In "I Ain't No Joke," Eric B. deftly scratches the saxophone melody from "Pass the Peas" by The JB's. "Eric B. is President" also captures a drum roll and brief vocal samples from Brown's "Funky President" and "Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved."

Eric B. & Rakim helped pioneer the use of James Brown samples in hip-hop; however, their usage was considerably different from Public Enemy's. I contend that there are two primary reasons for this discrepancy. First, Rakim's slower delivery and intricate rhyming style would have been buried under Public Enemy's "noise." The sparseness of "I Ain't No Joke" and "Eric B. is President" allowed Rakim's multiple-syllabic lyricism, "delivered with an uncanny sense of how to use silence and syncopation" (Chang 258), to flow freely in the open spaces within the tracks. Secondly, the Bomb Squad's improvisational approach of several members contributing at once was necessary for creating a hailstorm of saxophone squeals, yelps, scratching, sampled drums, and drum machines. It is *within* this improvisational process that the noise aesthetic could more easily thrive. A hip-hop producer working in isolation would be hard pressed to form the chaotic "band" that existed in Public Enemy's studio sessions.

In 1988, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* continued the noise aesthetic of "Rebel" and expanded it across the entire album, creating a dense, cacophonous, multi-layered, and sample-heavy backdrop against which Chuck D and Flavor Flav rapped their politically charged lyrics. "Rebel Without a Pause" represents a stylistic link between Public Enemy's first and second albums and was subsequently included on *Nation*. Shocklee said that he "wanted to prove that rock & roll could be made with any instruments, just so long as they're loud and abrasive" (Buskin). The "anti-music" aesthetic resulted in an album "frontloaded with sirens, squeals, and squawks[. . .] and repetitious, abrasive bursts of noise" (Kimbrew and DiCola 22-23). To achieve this, the Bomb Squad was true to hip-hop's original intent by recycling musical grooves and values from African-American musics and preserving them in song (Taylor 3). This intentional sampling is "intricately connected to an African American/African diasporic aesthetic that carefully selects available media, texts, and contexts for performative use" (Bartlett 643). In Paul Gilroy's seminal work on Blackness and transnationalism, *The Black Atlantic*, he quotes novelist Toni Morrison's sentiment on the Afrological⁵ aesthetic of recycling available media and re-contextualizing them into new forms: "The major things black art has to have are these: it must have the ability to use found objects, the appearance of using found things,

and it must look effortless" (78). The Bomb Squad's work ethic falls neatly into Morrison's criteria. The myriad of found sounds, samples, and scratches are generated from the band's vast record collection. In (or through) the use of James Brown (in addition to Kool and the Gang, Isaac Hayes, Ohio Players, Run DMC, and other predecessors), Public Enemy is openly referencing in their music generations of black musicians and musical tradition. Perhaps the necessity of "looking effortless" is not as clear as the former criteria; however, I would argue that the listener is only privy to the end result, rather than the process—especially in the 1980s, when recording studios were far more exclusive than today and recording studio "magic" was hidden from the public.

The Bomb Squad's sampling was a "high-tech and highly selective archiving" process that combined different pieces of music that shared a "connectedness in historical relation" to the past (Bartlett 643). For example, blues songs are traditionally based on the repetition of three basic chords, and jazz artists frequently interpolate previous melodies and interpret them in new ways. Both forms "use repetition, reproduction, and improvisation to transform[. . .] the shape and meaning of somebody else's originals" (Kun 125). Tricia Rose asserts that these methods of repetition and re-contextualization are "consistently recognized features of African-American musical practices" and are resuscitated in hip-hop with the break-beat and sampler (67), adding that "the distinctive, systematic use of rhythm and sound, especially the use of repetition and musical breaks, are part of a rich history of New World black traditions and practices" (64). Rose's contention is that hip-hop's methodical borrowing of sounds, just as the use of dissonance, is embedded in music across the African diaspora. The Bomb Squad—like their predecessors in the blues, jazz, rock, and funk worlds—drew from a vast body of "communal knowledge" (Bartlett 647). In doing so, they created multi-dimensional works by manipulating technology in ways never intended by its manufacturers (DiCola and McLeod 25).

"Rebel Without a Pause"

"Rebel" begins with a vocal sample of Reverend Jesse Jackson introducing the musical act The Soul Children at the Los Angeles Wattstax concert in 1973. Jackson emphatically addresses the audience, "Brothers and sisters, I don't know what this world is coming to," and is the name of the song The Soul Children perform. Public Enemy's use of the sample is a precursor to two short horn blasts from James Brown's "Get Up Offa that Thing" and four short scratches. The primary rhythmic backdrop is launched with Chuck D's vocals in sync with the first beat, or in funk parlance, "the one." The brief introduction is followed by the mysterious squeal of the "tea kettle" sax—a one-bar sample of the first three seconds of The JB's 1970 single "The Grunt." The original recording begins with a two-bar saxophone glissando before the whole band joins in. The Bomb Squad nicked the first bar and paired it with another James Brown loop—the oft-sampled track "Funky Drummer"—more precisely, Clyde Stubblefield's drum solo near the end of the original 45's B-side. Strategically placed to flesh out the beat is a programmed hi-hat on the sixteenth note of each bar, as well as booming kick drums courtesy of the Roland TR 808 drum machine (a staple in hip-hop production to this day). This cacophonous barrage of sound accompanies Chuck D's fire-breathing raps for four minutes and seventeen seconds, save for the occasional two-bar breakdowns when Public Enemy's colourful sideman Flavor Flav cheers Chuck on. DJ Terminator X adds scratching in the chorus as the horn squeal returns.

Scratching, in itself, is a resistant act that defies the original intent of the turntable. The purpose of scratching in the chorus, therefore, is twofold. The abrasive sound of rhythmically pulling a record back and letting it go while manipulating the mixer's crossfader (a scratch technique referred to in DJ parlance as "transforming") adds to the Bomb Squad's desired "noise" aesthetic. The result defies both aural expectations of melody and the intended use of the turntable as a recorded medium.

"Night of the Living Baseheads"

"Night of the Living Baseheads" also begins with a vocal sample drawn from Khalid Muhammad, a one-time disciple of the Nation of Islam, who bellows the following: "Have you forgotten that once we were brought here, we were robbed of our name, robbed of our language. We lost our religion, our culture, our God[. . .] and many of us, by the way we act, we even lost our minds." The sample is similar to the introduction of "Rebel" insofar as it is voiced by a political, Black leader. Although Muhammad was not as well known as Reverend Jackson, the sample acts as a bold introduction to the recording. The listener is drawn in by the powerful voice and the words before Chuck D enters the fray. Tricia Rose calls "Baseheads" "a multi-layered critique of several primary social narratives and institutions[. . .] a narrative bricolage that offers critical commentary on the police, drug dealers, drug addicts, the black middle-class, the federal government, media discourse, and music censorship groups" (115). Chuck D's "multi-layered critique," as described by Rose, complements the multi-layered, chaotic tracks over which he raps. A stripped-down drum track would not suffice here, so a relentless saxophone squawk is the focal point of the record, blasting on the second and fourth beats, along with a snare drum. The sample does not sound like a siren, but an alarm.

The primary saxophone sample in "Night of the Living Baseheads" that forms the backbone of the rhythm track is also lifted from The JB's "The Grunt." First released as a single and then as part of The JB's debut album *Food For*

Thought in 1972, the track is based on The Isley Brothers's "Keep On Doin'," released in 1970. At times, the Isleys also tackled social commentary in their music, recording "Fight the Power" in 1975. Public Enemy would record with the same title the theme song for director Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and would mine the "The Grunt" several times, using saxophonist Robert "Chopper" McCullough's horn riffs as the main sample in three tracks of *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (the third being "Terminator X to the Edge of Panic," in which the "tea kettle" whistling sax from "Rebel" is looped backwards throughout). In addition to Maceo Parker and St. Clair Pinckney, McCullough was often called upon by Brown to perform blistering saxophone solos as demonstrated on "Super Bad," released just six months after "The Grunt." Although Public Enemy did not sample "Super Bad" on "Rebel Without a Pause" or "Night of the Living Baseheads," McCullough's squealing solo on "Super Bad" is consistent with other saxophone solos on James Brown's political recordings of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The two-bar introduction of "The Grunt" may not classify as a solo; however, it highlights McCullough's squealing saxophone, imitative of many James Brown songs that open with the singer's trademark scream, including "Hot Pants," "I Can't Stand It '76," and "Get Up Offa That Thing." Furthermore, Brown commands McCullough to "blow me some 'Trane, brother," and the saxophonist responds with a "whining, squealing, tipsy, atonal solo that sounds absolutely nothing like [John] Coltrane [but] does sound like any number of avant-garde players who followed in Coltrane's wake" (Weinstein). Whether McCullough's solo sounds like Coltrane is not the point; Brown names Coltrane as a musician who perhaps embodies the textural rather than tonal feel that Brown was after, thereby drawing a link between improvisation (McCullough's solo and overall squealing aesthetic) and the saxophone as a substitution of the human voice. Brown could easily have kept singing in his signature rasp, but McCullough's wailing sax gave the bandleader a break and provided a reasonable facsimile of Brown's voice.

In *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament*, Anne Danielsen uses James Brown's "The Payback" to illustrate how the one-bar funk groove heard throughout the song emphasizes Brown's vocals by way of remaining "out of focus" (161). Danielsen uses Daniel Lidov's analysis of "textural repetition" to explain how the funk groove "cancels out its own claim on our attention and, thereby, refers our focus elsewhere (to an another voice or changing aspect)" (21). In "Rebel Without a Pause" and "Night of the Living Baseheads," Public Enemy's sampled sax loops articulate a striking sense of urgency at the outset of each track: as the recording plays on, however, they become embedded in the rhythm track, transforming through their ubiquity and omnipresence into ambient sound, thus redirecting the listener's attention to Chuck D's vocals. The "noise" produced by the raucous saxophones first attracts the listener to the track, and once embedded in the music, redirects the listener to the powerful lyrical message.

Conclusion

The concept of noise is culturally situated and, in terms of music, can be used for positive reasons, as evidenced by African-American musical styles. Field hollers, blues, jazz, bebop, funk, and hip-hop all utilize various formations of dissonance and discord as means of expression. Referring to these expressions as "noise" falls into the trap that Eurocentric musical conventions create. Such a designation fails to take into account alternate concepts that consider musical tension as a positive element of song and instead regards the event as disorder that requires resolution.

On the surface, Public Enemy's "Rebel Without a Pause" and "Night of the Living Baseheads" represent a stylistic call-to-arms. The Bomb Squad's chaotic, thunderous, and seemingly lawless production techniques shaped an aural backdrop that called attention to the music, but ultimately drew the listener to the powerful rhetoric of black pride and self-preservation. In addition, the beats symbolized a stylistic salvo aimed squarely at both hip-hop production standards and popular music conventions of the time. Competition from Public Enemy's contemporaries sparked the band to play catch-up in hip-hop's ever-evolving sonic terrain, ultimately leading to unique improvisational production techniques that resulted in the band's effective "noisy" aesthetic (of which Public Enemy is associated with to this day). The squealing saxophone samples within "Rebel Without a Pause" and "Night of the Living Baseheads" (and *It Takes a Nation*, in general) represent discordant cries of the past re-purposed into a much more militant stance. By sampling Robert McCullough's saxophone squeals from The JB's recording "The Grunt" and re-contextualizing them within their music, Public Enemy recalls a rich lineage of multiple Afro-logical practices while accomplishing the group's desire to bring the noise and keep their coffee black.

Notes

¹ Paul Hegarty argues that clear precedents of noise/music exist in the works of Luigi Russolo, John Cage, Edgard Varèse, synthesizers, *musique concrète*, Karlheinz Stockhausen, free jazz, industrial, Japanese noise, and various digital forms (contemporary forms such as heavy metal, death metal, and grindcore could also be added to the list). However, a canon of works, such as those established in Western art music, cannot be identified because, as Hegarty asserts, "noise" is "defined in opposition to something else" (13).

² It is worth noting the involvement of DJ Johnny "Juice" Rosado, who performed many in-studio DJ skills in place of Terminator X, the group's sole live DJ at the time.

³ Shocklee's analogy is possibly indebted to Malcolm X, who in 1963's "A Message to the Grass Roots" speech makes a similar analogy: "you've got some coffee that's too black, which means it's too strong." The band sampled the line and removed all the words except for "too black" and "too strong" to introduce "Bring the Noise."

⁴ While the common "trial and error" technique that hip-hop producers use to combine or layer samples may be viewed as improvisational, it differs significantly from Public Enemy, as their method was closer to a band "jamming" than a lone practitioner working a sampler.

⁵ Term coined by George E. Lewis to differentiate between musical systems (Eurological as the other) that are historically emergent rather than ethnically essential and to refer to a particular musical "logic" based on social and cultural location (217).

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