Rage Against The Machine- Know Your Enemy, An Argument

Released in 1992 on the band’s self titled album, “Rage Against The Machine,” the track “Know Your Enemy,” is a powerful and aggressive song that seems to push anti-American society views upon the listener. For anyone familiar with the band, they will know that songs such as this are common, as most, if not all of Rage Against The Machine’s tracks have political or societal influence. These songs are usually protesting or expressing what may be socialistic or even communistic views and beliefs. The song “Know Your Enemy” in particular, is rather straight forward in conveying opinions which may be speculated as protesting against American police, values, and society in general. Lead vocalist Zack de la Rocha expresses views that may argue the United States is not a free place. This can easily be seen by the line “What? The land of the free? Whoever told you that is your enemy.”

After listening to the metal/hip-hop song, a listener most certainly feels “pumped up.” However, a critic undoubtedly would reason that there is no argument. What gives this band the authority to be heard on their radical views? Many bands all over the world sing on similar “anti-authoritarian” views. What makes Rage Against the Machine’s argument any different? A look at the history of the politically active band members may support the band’s reasoning.

The lead singer for Rage Against the Machine, Zack de la Rocha, grew up in Irvine, California. Zack described Irvine as "one of the most racist cities imaginable. If you were a Mexican in Irvine, you were there because you had a broom or a hammer in your hand." Zack, being of Mexican descent, was a victim of this. Also, Zack had an artistic father who, because of nervous breakdowns, took his ideology and religious beliefs to extremes by destroying his own
artwork. This provoked Zack to become involved with music and politics and followed the politically charged punk movement of the time.

As with Zack, the lead guitarist for Rage, Tom Morello, got his early political and musical influences from up and coming punk bands. However, Morello, having been interested in politics since his early years in school, is a Harvard graduate with a Political Science degree. Obviously, these types of facts cannot be worded in the *Rage Against the Machine*’s songs but many of the close following fans of the band would certainly know this. The band not voicing their credentials is acceptable as it is hard to convey one’s authority in a song without coming off as completely egotistic and awkward.

With these strong backgrounds in politics, what would provoke the band to voice such a loud opinion in a time like the early 1990’s? It is presumed that de la Rocha and Morello were fed up with the conservative Bush administration’s actions such as continued war in the Middle East. The group beautifully orchestrated the anger they felt, and this is where *Rage Against the Machine*’s argument really hits home, with it’s emotional factor. “Know Your Enemy” is full of powerful riffs, crunchy chords, and driving bass lines. The music makes one want to stand up and act right then. And that is not even factoring in Zack’s unforgettable voice and stimulating lyrics. The band did a wonderful job of involving the listener emotionally for the entire song, first note, to last. I feel that no matter what the listener’s opinions are, the song makes him/her want to get out and do *something*. Using nu-metal music and hip-hop like vocals really seems to push on the listener how serious, aggressive, and angry the band is and how angry you should be as well.

Although, “Know Your Enemy” really gets inside the listener and shakes up many feelings, it really falls on it’s face when presenting facts and logic to the listener. There are times
in the song where Zack voices ideas that are completely against that of many Americans. One such case is at the end of the track where he sings “compromise, conformity, assimilation, submission, ignorance, hypocrisy, brutality, the elite, all of which are American dreams, all of which are American dreams…” as if he is mocking our values as a nation. This really hurts the band’s argument because one, we know this is not true, and two, I, as a listener, feel this is disrespectful to our country, and its citizens and leaders. Additionally, Rage Against the Machine really presents no hard facts or undisputed truths throughout the song that back the assumed goal of the track.

Nevertheless, “Know Your Enemy” finds it’s way into the hearts and thoughts of many listeners, and I am sure it has, from the band’s point of view, succeeded somewhat in arousing the American public to get active and fight for “freedom.” Some more real life facts and less ideological mocking would certainly give the argument a backbone to compliment the extraordinary job the group did with emotionally attaching the listener to the song. Comparatively speaking, Rage Against the Machine wrote a song that reached and conveyed an opinion to many listeners far better than other groups had done previously, especially from similar genres of music. Overall, this powerful track set the stage for Rage Against the Machine to develop into one the most politically active and boisterous bands to record and perform during the 1990’s and early 2000’s.