

## Hip Hop's Still Invisible Women by Yvonne Bynoe

Written by Yvonne Bynoe ID3664  
Friday, 18 May 2007 03:51 -

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With all the talk about Hip Hop activism, I have to ask, "Where is women's activism within Hip Hop?" From my vantage point, what the recent Don Imus affair brought painfully to light is that generally, Black women within Hip Hop are to be ogled in music videos, insulted in the name of free speech and discussed by pundits, but rarely are they given access to the major media outlets that would allow them to accurately represent themselves, their images and ideas.

There are indeed Hip Hop generation women in our communities working to empower their sisters, however in the main there are no concerted efforts, locally or nationally, to address the issues of race, class and gender that create the environments that allows Black male rap artists and a White radio show host (both supported by large corporations) to call Black women ho's in our mainstream media. It is this lack of critical analysis that recently gave New York City police sergeants, at two different precincts license to call women ho's. At the 70th Precinct in Brooklyn three policewomen, two Black women and one Latina, were called "hos during roll call. Adding insult to injury, a fellow officer interjected that the correct term was "nappy, headed ho's." It should not be a surprise that this is the same precinct where the infamous assault of Abner Louima took place.

In a separate incident, a police sergeant threatened to call a Black police woman a "nappy headed ho" if she gave him lip. Should these policewomen assume that men who would denigrate them so callously and publicly can also be trusted to be fair in assessing their job performance and ability to advance in their careers? Within a wider context, is it realistic, given these men's actions to expect that on the streets they will justly apply the law regardless a person's race or gender? Women should be more vocal in denouncing sexism in rap music and in our society because our livelihood and our lives depend on it. Furthermore although it appears to be counterintuitive, sexism also threatens the lives and prospects of the Black men whom we love (even if they are perpetuating it). As the situation at the 70th precinct illustrates, wherever you find sexism, it is very likely that you will also find racism. In the words of Frederick Douglass, "Power concedes nothing without a demand---It never did and never will." Sexism and racism are both vehicles to wield and retain societal power.

Ten years ago, journalists along with average joes and janes were discussing whether or not "Hip Hop hates women," and regrettably today many within Hip Hop are still debating that same question. In a 1995 essay, current Vibe magazine Editor-in-Chief, Danyel Smith discussed how Hip Hop tended to mirror the biases of the greater society saying, "Women's versions of reality are somehow suspect; men's interpretations of women and their motives and ideas are considered more "real" than women's declarations." The title of her article "Ain't a Damn Thing Changed," about sums up contemporary women's status within Hip Hop. In the intervening years Hip Hop generation women have not become visible, insofar that they have not staked

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out spaces that allow their stories and complex realities to be heard by the masses. Whether it is fear or access to capital or some combination of the two, Hip Hop generation women have not created our version of the Lilith Fair to support female rap artists. Similarly, most female rap artists, like their male counterparts have not created independent record companies and touring apparatus that would allow them to control their messages and images; get those messages to the public; and make money in the process. Subsequently, male rap artists (aided by their corporate entertainment entities), rather than Black women themselves have largely shaped the image of Black women in the United States and in doing so have defined the contours of our public dialogue about Black women.

For years many Black women have had a tortured relationship with Hip Hop: loving its beats, its energy, but hating the misogyny and gratuitous violence. The thing that appears to have changed is that more young Black women, rather than critically examining their allegiance to the Hip Hop status quo are now helping to maintain it. Several years ago when women at Spelman College in Atlanta threatened to protest Nelly's appearance on campus because of his music video "Tip Drill," young Black women joined young Black men in attacking the Black female activists. Young Black women parroted the lines that in the past were used by Black men to rationalize misogyny in rap music such as "ho's do exist," "it's just entertainment" and "no one is forcing these women to be in these videos." While all of these statements may indeed be true, they miss the point. At core the argument is not about whether every rap song has to be deep or whether women have the right to shake their money-makers in a music video; it is about whether Black women gyrating on poles for dollars should be the sole portrayal of Black women in our society. In echoing the words of activist and author Barbara Smith, women's studies has flourished in academia and has opened the doors for talented scholars such as Gwendolyn Pough and Tracy Sharpley-Whiting to publish groundbreaking books on women in Hip Hop, but it has been less successful in educating, nurturing and raising the consciousness of young Black women, in and out of the "hood.

In our communities, we still refer to Black men as "endangered species." We are rightfully alarmed about the staggering number of Black men who are incarcerated each year and by the high number of young Black men who drop out of school, leaving themselves unqualified for the legal job market. Unfortunately, there is far less urgency about the increasing incidences of HIV/AIDs among Black women or the rise on young women of color going to jail or the plight of working, single mothers who cannot find safe, reliable and affordable childcare. Asserting that young Black women have needs and concerns that are particular to their gender, class and race in no way negates the important issues that are pertinent to young Black men. Moreover, mature, really progressive politics understands that the fight for equality does not exclude women. Young Black men and women seem to be making the same mistake that some of our elders did by pitting the ravages of racism against the tyranny of sexism and concluding that racism is more evil. As has been said by far more articulate people, even if racism ended tomorrow, gender discrimination would still exist.

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As Black women and Black men our ultimate strength will lie in our ability and our desire to jointly bring our distinct experiences, grievances and issues to the table and work in coalition toward manifesting an equitable and free society. What Hip Hop generation women have to realize is that standing by passively, in the name of comradeship, afraid to anger the brothers has garnered us neither respect nor equality (assuming that the two can be separated). As was the case in prior generations, young Black women need to step into the arena and forcefully speak their truths because: The Black men who really don't like us will always find solace in the arms of others and use our strength as their excuse; The Black men who merely like us will demand that we "play our position" so that they can gain power; and The Black men who genuinely love us will fight along side us for justice and will encourage us to fully express our hearts, minds and spirits.

The most political, first step that many women within Hip Hop can make is to create communities that nurture us: spaces where we can perform our own rhymes; spaces where we can share our own stories; and spaces where we can give each love and provide support. Author and activist, Rebecca Walker made a profound statement when she said that our life's journey is about understanding our own suffering and how the powerful societal stratifications of race, class, gender and sexuality impact us all negatively. Women therefore cannot change sexism within Hip Hop or in the broader society until we are willing to heal ourselves. When it is all said and done, railing against Imus or lobbying entertainment executives will not end sexism, no more than Robitussin will cure cancer. Black women in Hip Hop have to fight for power---be willing to love and respect ourselves enough to put the financial, intellectual and creative energy behind establishing our own blogs, website, podcasts, e-newsletters, record companies, music conferences, summits, publishing companies, magazines, radio shows and television programs that illuminate the many sides of beautiful Black womanhood. We also have to brave enough to collaborate with each other, with women of other races and with equality-seeking men to make these new entities the mainstream, rather than the alternative.

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