

How Many Mics Do We Rip on the Daily?

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Abstract

On Monday August 30th, BET premiered *My Mic Sounds Nice: A Truth About Women in Hip Hop*, a documentary that traces the rise of female MCs within hip hop and that strives to challenge the view that hip hop is a “man’s game.” Although the rappers interviewed—for example Medusa, Salt N Pepa, Trina, Eve—all agreed that men are a strong presence in hip hop, they are proof that they are not living in the shadow of male rappers (perhaps in the

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A woman's voice to this game right now is so extremely necessary in order to save it.—MC Lyte, My Mic Sounds Nice: A Truth About Women in Hip-Hop

On Monday August 30th, BET premiered [My Mic Sounds Nice: A Truth About Women in Hip Hop](#), a documentary that traces the rise of female MCs within hip hop and that strives to challenge the view that hip hop is a “man’s game.” Although the rappers interviewed—for example Medusa, Salt N Pepa, Trina, Eve—all agreed that men are a strong presence in hip hop, they are proof that they are not living in the shadow of male rappers (perhaps in the shadow of Lauryn Hill? Yes? No? Maybe?). The documentary helped bring me back to questions I had about women and hip hop, questions that arose while doing my research on hip hop and representations of urban space.

I come to hip hop not just as a music fan, but as a cultural studies critic. I like hip hop, but I really started paying attention when I saw the connections between the music I was bopping my head to and the stuff I was reading and thinking about. It started with Kanye West, one of my favorite rappers, and his song “My Way Home” (from *Late Registration*). At the time I was taking a course on African American realist fiction and the City, and thinking through what the idea of home meant for all of the migrants who had come from the South to the North. Chicago weighed heavily on my mind as I drove up from New York City back to Upstate NY one weekend, and listened to *Late Registration* along the way. The opening sample, from Gil-Scott Heron’s “Home Is Where The Hatred Is,” came on, and I had one of those serendipitous moments researchers dream of: “Chicago is home for Kanye. Chicago is the place where many of these characters live. But is it home for them? Can this city ever be a home?”

My questions led me to revisit my iTunes and my boyfriend’s CDs (we’re both big music fans, and one of the bonuses of moving in together was that our music collections became one big collection) in search of other songs about cities. I started building a playlist for my paper and buying songs like no one’s business. I was drawing connections between the African American fiction I was reading and the songs I was listening to. They both underscored the importance of urban spaces in the development of a post-migration identity—a very urban one at that. And hip hop is an inherently urban genre. However, amidst Kanye and Mos Def, Jay-Z and Gil-Scott Heron, Murs and Ice Cube, I noticed a big, dark, deep hole: where were the female MCs? It had been easy to find plenty of songs about cities by male rappers, but songs by female rappers? Not so much.

After I got over my initial embarrassment that I had gone so long without noticing this lack in my iTunes playlist, I started to search for female MCs rapping about the city. I collected names and songs. I looked up obscure remixes online, and downloaded songs by female rappers I’d never heard of before. (My favorite from that search? “[Philly Philly](#)” by Eve. Once I start humming, I can’t get it out of my head.) But there was less of a variety, and they talked about urban space differently. Whereas many male rappers put the grit, the violence, and the dangerous streets of the city front and center in their music, this was not so for the female rappers I looked at. A good example of this is Lauryn Hill’s “Every Ghetto, Every City” where she reminisces about her childhood in Jersey, but says that “every ghetto, every city” brings her back to the streets where she grew up. I used to think that I didn’t have enough of a sample to say what was the tone of

female MCs toward urban space; now I wonder if the sample issue had anything to do with the lack of female MCs nowadays.

However, the documentary ends on a positive note: after calling into question whether Nicki Minaj's popularity is helping or hurting rap (see adurhamtamu's [post](#) on *The Crunk Feminist Collective* for a more thoughtful look at Nicki Minaj's performances), we have Glenisha Morgan from *The Fembassy*, who argues that if you want to listen to female MCs all you have to do is look for them. She provides viewers a long list of female rappers out there, albeit underground: Medusa, Jean Grae, Tiye Phoenix...Maybe my problem wasn't that I couldn't find female rappers rapping about cities, but that I was looking in all the wrong places. I am looking forward to checking out these female rappers and seeing what they have to say about their relationship to urban space through their music. Thanks, BET, for caring.

