

WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

Entertainment insiders, thinkers and consumers candidly discuss hip-hop's outlook on Black women's sexuality

Moya Bailey, senior, Spelman College; campus activist who participated in a student protest against Nelly

Black women are often depicted as hypersexualized, and music videos exacerbate the problem—and that becomes people's perception of Black women everywhere. I know people who've been on exchange programs to another country, say South Africa or Brazil, and they've had experiences in which people have approached them, thinking that they were prostitutes or that they were sexually open just because of the images that they have of American Black women. People don't have access to other images of us because videos are really what go out to the rest of the world. There aren't really pictures of us in school textbooks or things that counter the images that are seen in music videos. With White people, you have a wider range of depictions. You might have *Roseanne*, which represents a low-income White family, but then you also have *Frasier and Friends*, which represent wealthier White people; so there's a range. For Black women especially, there are not as many choices out there to counteract video images. I think it's deliberate. The media does an excellent job of keeping those more positive images about us away from people.

Melyssa Ford, former video model and cohost of new show *BET Style*

When I started doing videos, it was to help pay my tuition. It wasn't a way to meet rappers. That was the farthest thing from my mind. We've become trophies. We're like the equivalent of a platinum chain and a pendant. It's one of the reasons why I took control of how I was seen. People were trying to exploit me, but I decided to exploit myself and make all the money from my images, including those on my calendar and DVD. People may see it as a contradiction, but I don't. I'm eye candy, and that's as far as it goes.

Jay "Icepick" Jackson, senior vice-president of A&R, Ruff Ryders Records

I have a 7-year-old daughter, and she can't listen to my music. She can't listen to it in the car, not in the room, and she can't watch videos. Right now she loves Usher. His music is good, but the lyrics are a bit much for her—especially once she starts to understand what he's saying about adult relationships. So I went and bought her the *Hip-Hop Bears* CD, and we listened to it together, and she loves it. I gave Usher's CD to her mother.

Talib Kweli, hip-hop artist

Videos can be art, but the video didn't start out as art. It started out as a promotional tool to get an artist seen without having to fly him around the country. So what's the easiest way to sell something? When you drive down the street you see titties selling you all types of things, from clothes to cars to alcohol to everything. So why not use ass and titty to sell music? It makes perfect sense. Whether it's right or not, I feel that as a man, when I see it, I'm going to look. It's going to catch my attention. I believe an artist's responsibility is not to uphold the morals of society. An artist's responsibility is to speak honestly about what's going on and what people are going through.

Debra Lee, president and COO, BET Holdings, Inc.

BET gets beat up for playing what is selling in stores and getting played in constant rotation on the radio. Many times the sexual aspect is gratuitous. You can't have women hardly dressed and men fully clothed and say it's not one-sided or problematic. It is an issue BET has to deal with. Years ago the concern was violence. Now it's sexuality, and some artists go too far. I hope this is a phase, and we do have to work with artists on it. But if more people are asking for it and like it, who's to say that's wrong? If artists put out videos like this, and people don't like it, they should vote at the record store. Our *Uncut* show enables us to offer the industry an outlet. If something is adult-oriented, we can say it is going to *Uncut*.

Ludacris, hip-hop artist

In my videos I try to be versatile: Sometimes I have women dancing, and then, for example, in my *Stand Up* video, there are no naked women. I don't mean to depict women in a certain way. The ones who want to shake what their mama gave them are

going to do that whether they're in videos or not. As artists, we explore our creativity through videos. Who sees those videos on BET, or whatever music channel is showing it, is not always up to us.

Nelly, artist

Part of the reason rap artists come under fire more than any other group is because people don't respect what we do as art. When actress Halle Berry appears in *Monster's Ball*, people separate the character from the real person, and she wins an Oscar! A rapper couldn't use a line describing what she did in the movie, let alone film it in a video, without getting heat for it. So I accept my role and my freedom as an artist. I respect women and I'm not a misogynist. I'm an artist. Hip-hop videos are art and entertainment. Videos tell stories; some are violent, some are sexy, some are fun, some are serious. As for how women are shown in the videos, I don't have a problem with it because it is entertainment, whether it's *Dilemma* or *Tip Drill*, Mos Def or Terror Squad. Women are in the videos by choice. No one knows what a particular woman's situation is, what her goals are. Being in that video may help her further those goals. Several women who have been in my videos have gone on to do TV appearances and movies. No one can dictate other people's choices and situations.

Kevin Powell, activist and author

Black women, dating back to slavery, have always been depicted by this society as sexually loose, as whores, as objects to be used, then discarded. What is new about this mind-set is that there seems to be no boundaries, no coded language in the way men--Black men--rap or sing about and relate to Black women nowadays. Factor in music videos running all day every day depicting Black women in compromising positions, and you have the double insult of the visuals reinforcing what have essentially become a reckless disregard and, in some instances, hatred, for the lives and psyches of Black girls and women. In my work as an activist and a speaker, I ask Black boys and Black men this question all the time: What other men on the planet are allowed, or even encouraged--for the sake of keeping it real or making a profit for their record labels and themselves--to refer to the females in their lives as bitches, hos, chickenheads, skeezers, sluts or what have you; have it put on CD; have it depicted in their music videos in the most pornographic ways possible; and have all those horrific sentiments shipped all over the globe? No one but us.

Fatima Robinson, video director and choreographer

Videos have to come out of the strip club. Someone needs to start being honest about it. Black people often tiptoe around what is really going on. We see girls shaking their ass 50 million times in every video. As African women we love to shake our tailfeathers, it's a part of our culture. I love to dance and drop it like it's hot as much as the next girl, but there has to be a balance. The fact that every video is based on that is ridiculous. The reason they're putting it out there is because folks are playing it, and it's selling. If it were not being played and not selling, artists would not be making this music. There are so many artists out there who are not getting their proper due because of what's going on. And that's it plain and simple. As a music-video director, I have problems all the time getting work, because I refuse to write the treatments that record companies want--hot girls, cars, palm trees and so on. At some point you have to give in and do something, and try and do it in a stylized way, so it doesn't depict us as even crazier than what's out there. After getting the songs and listening to them over and over and over, I just say, "No, thank you."

THERE IS NO QUESTION

IF A WHITE SEXISM IN THE HIP-HOP WORLD IS A
THE QUESTION OF HOW SEXISM EXISTS IN OUR ENTIRE
WORLD TO DAY

-RUSSELL SIMMONS

Jill Scott, poet, songwriter and singer

The focus on women in most videos is on being a certain kind of attractive. And as far as our sexuality is concerned, it seems that it's more nasty than it's sexy. Sexuality, in my opinion, is not so obvious. It's coy. It's sly. It's sweet. And we're not doing that right now; we're just like, "Look at my ass." Life is about choices, but I do think that women have to make a decision about how we're seen by the world. You have to teach your daughters. You have to be responsible not just for your child, but also for the other girls around you. So let them know, "That skirt is inappropriate." "You're not wearing that," you know. Say "No, honey, your breasts don't need to be exposed like that."

Russell Simmons, cofounder of Def Jam Records and now chairman of Hip-hop Summit Action Network

We live in a very sexist society. Popular culture exaggerates everything, including this kind of sexism, for profit. That's the nature of capitalist society and entertainment. There is no question that the sexism that's in our hip-hop videos is a reflection of how sexist men are

in the world today. It's just that in the past things weren't so obvious. Men were holding doors for women, but then they'd do things privately that kept women from being equal citizens. Now when you watch videos and you see the girls dancing, it's a more raw expression of the same sexism. Although these records and videos are offensive, young girls can learn a lot about the mind-set of the young guys they're going to school with. Now that the truth is out there more, young girls can learn how to deal with guys.

Danyel Smith, author, and a former editor-in-chief of *Vibe*

Now that I'm not editor-in-chief of a magazine or a full-time music journalist, I'm more of an average viewer of videos. I used to watch with a business mind-set. How much money did they take to make this? Who is the director? Is it going to help sell the album? Now I think, *Do I like this? Is it fun for me?* When I watch it, my reaction to the video depends on how I'm feeling about myself. If I'm having an insecure day, I'll probably feel angry at this narrow idea of women that is being shown over and over on the screen. But if I'm not feeling insecure and watch videos, I'll probably just be bored. Sex sells, there's no other way to say it. It's the journalism equivalent of "If it bleeds, it leads." For rhyming, it could be something like, "If it's not naked, it's not a hit record." When I was an editor, I was trying to sell magazines. When I put women on the cover, it was always my goal to make it interesting. With women the easy thing is to put someone in a sexual pose or in an outfit that shows off her body. I would have to do what I had to do sometimes and find my balance somewhere else. There's nothing wrong with showing off a Black woman's body, but we need the balance; we need other images as well. It's bad when there's only one thing or when sex is the constant focus. We're beautiful.

Jessy Terrero, video and motion-picture director

I had an experience at the end of a video shoot. The record label brought strippers in at the last minute because they wanted to shoot two scenes with them. It was the label's marketing department's decision, they wanted a version they could service to BET's *Uncut* and places where people play raunchier stuff. In that situation, it wasn't my doing. I was hired to deliver a certain product to the label, and they're like, "You're going to shoot these two girls in this scene," and it was what it was.

Datwon Thomas, editor-in-chief of *King* magazine

In the hip-hop industry, we get so competitive and do what will win and what will sell and go to any ends to make that happen. You get so caught up in competing that you may drop your guard and do something crazy. For example, if *Smooth* or *Maxim* has a hot girl that we featured or wanted to and they get her in a swimsuit, I think I want to show her topless in a thong. Or they photographed her with body paint, I have to put a vanilla water over her chest. I don't want to get locked into that. Eventually you'll have a butt naked woman just standing there. I've been able to not let it engulf me. I've been a victim but haven't been engulfed. I have two daughters and a wife, I can't just give in to this.

Touré, pop culture correspondent for CNN and author

Hip-hop is primarily a male preserve, a world where men talk about what they've done with or to other men. The massive success of a White man like Eminem shows that White males are more accepted within hip-hop than Black females. Black women in hip-hop are portrayed, in songs or videos, as either silent, willing strippers or complaining, troublesome meddlers. Female rappers are either boy toys (Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown) or tomboys (MC Lyte, the Lady of Rage), both of which are personalities constructed around a masculine norm rather than a female norm. This means the women are defining themselves in reaction to what men want, rather than what they want. This is obviously the wrong message to send to young women and young men who will have to create relationships that become the families of the next generation.

Carolyn West, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology, University of Washington, Tacoma

Many adults are quite ignorant about what's out there. We can't afford to pretend it doesn't exist. We live in America, and people have a right to produce those images, so I'm not talking about censorship. But even if artists won't be responsible, the community has to hold them accountable. My fear is that girls don't even see their own victimization anymore. They say, "I'm a bitch, I'm a ho, I'm a tip drill." As porn moves more into the mainstream, it only normalizes the behavior and how we deal with sexual assault and violence. I get concerned when I see girls mimic the X-rated clothing that Lil' Kim wears or the X-rated lyrics of songs like Kelis's "Milkshake." It puts young girls in positions that they can't handle once the attention is drawn to them.

Ayana Byrd and Akiba Solomon have written for *Vibe* and *The Source* and are the editors of *Naked: Black Women Bare All About Skin, Hair, Hips, Lips and Other Parts*, due this summer.