

Word to the brother...

BY DEBORAH ODHIAMBO

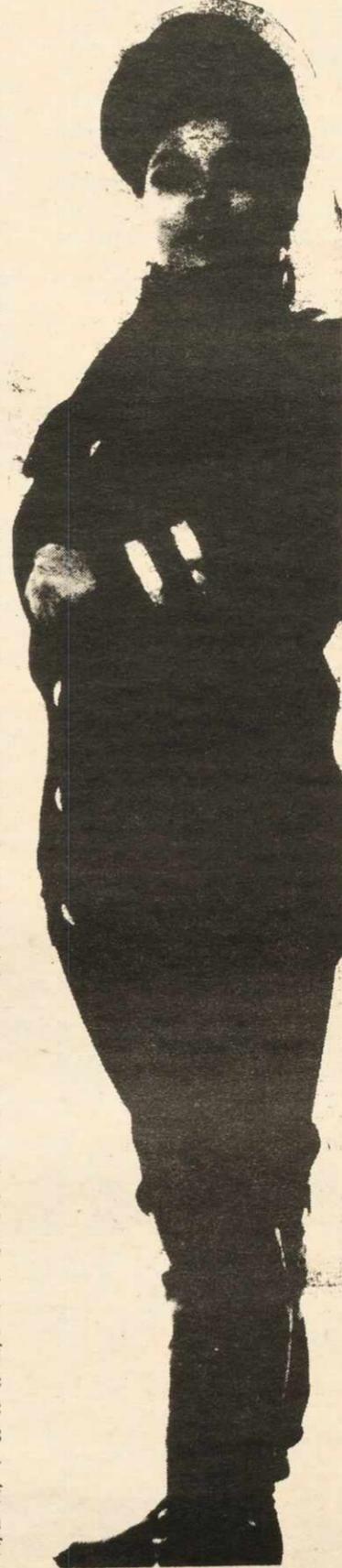
RAP MUSIC IS one of the most vital vocal forums for the silenced voice of the oppressed African-American. Armed with a fierce political consciousness, unparalleled in any other popular music form in North America today, it acts as a revolutionary tool challenging the status quo as it demands social and political justice. Taking their cue from important African-American leaders, influential writers and political activists, Rap musicians discuss many crucial issues, most of which stem from the deathly oppressive grip of white race su-

their rapping roster, lyrics depicting stereotyped images of women as lying, "gold digging", good for nothing "ho's" and "bitches". Most of these groups believe that it has nothing to do with women. It's all part and parcel of being a homeboy. You know, acting tough, talking tough, stroking inflated self-made egos, flouting some imagined male prowess. It's just boys being boys. But hey, this is a real problem. Men must no longer refuse to acknowledge and accept responsibility for their role in our oppression, as women.

Most artists believe that it's up to women to clear up the negativity and project the positive images

ritory. Like most other businesses, it is owned and controlled by men. Gaining any real access to this occupation on one's own terms, remains severely limited for many women. Those that speak out risk having the door shut in their faces. The few women that have actually muscled their way into the business, find that they have to rely strongly on their male counterparts for any artistic support. Men not only write, produce and advise female rappers, popular male rappers will often make guest appearances on women's records to help women boost record sales. Men will also feature female rappers on their albums and at their concerts, thereby "introducing the women to a larger audience." The ties that bind are strong. This is pretty much a posse system with the brothers "lending" their support to the sisters. But really, on a business level, this is not an egalitarian set up with each helping the other. In order for women to achieve any level of success they must depend solely on a group of men who could make or break their careers. Salt and Peppa, a female duo, received much of their initial success by way of male artistic support. Their first two albums were written and produced by men. Queen Latifah, a woman who I admire for her strength, independence, and commitment to cause, had to rely initially on support publicity generated from her posse and its members De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest and the J. Beez.

But, each posse has its own agenda. Roxanne Shante belongs to a posse that includes big Daddy Kane, Marley Marl and Biz Markie. If you know your rap, these guys are not exactly known for positive depictions of women. They uphold stereotyped images of objectified women. Since Roxanne Shante receives a lot of artistic support from them, her rap lyrics have tended to perpetuate and reinforce negative stereotypes of women. Queen Latifah's posse on the other hand, are very aware of the oppression African-American women face by virtue of their race and gender. The J. Beez have a women-positive tune called "Black Woman". Tribe Called Quest addresses violence against women in their rap "Description of a Fool". Because they hold more enlightened views on women, Queen Latifah and Monie Love have been able to keep to a Black Feminist agenda from the start of their careers. Roxanne Shante is now assuming creative control over her work and has come out with a women-positive song called "Independent Woman". To date, it's one of the best raps that urges young African-American women to gain self-knowledge, self-respect, and self-affirmation. Being as politically conscience as it is, rap is the perfect forum for young up and coming African-American



ture, that is), issues and opinions. Rap is under attack from the media, police and courts. All this external pressure makes it harder for women rappers to criticize blatant sexist groups such as 2 Live Crew. We'll defend their right to speak though we may not like it. By presenting a unified front, DiPrima believes that we prefer to deal with this problem in-house and behind the scenes.

Unification within any political movement for social change is essential. African-American men and women both agree that dealing with white race supremacy and its inherent policy of political, economic and social injustice is an important issue on the Black agenda. African-American women, in addition to suffering oppression, discrimination, and exclusion by virtue of race, also suffer these under male dominance. For us, it is not a question of deciding which of the two oppressions is more important. Some politically conscience male rap groups such as Public Enemy, B.D.P. and the X-Clan seem to believe that women of African descent that speak out against gender oppression somehow forget to speak out against their own race oppression. Recently a London-based magazine reported that the X-clan had held a conference at London's Africa Centre. When they called the sisters back to the fold many were upset by the insinuation and countered that "women had never left any mythical fold in the first place, and if anyone needed to find their way home, it sure wasn't the sisters!" In fact, in the United States, a group of young African-American women affiliated with the Revolutionary Communist Party has been working on making young male rappers more aware of how their lyrics simply glorify "the naked and cruel power over women". In pointing out existing inconsistencies in rap lyrics that run rampant with references to "bitches" and "ho's", they ask

"Hey, bitch come here!"

premac. (Let's call it what it is. The term racism on its own allows the dominant white culture to continue to refuse to acknowledge and accept responsibility for white supremacy, there can be no real effort for conscientious action, needed for change and eventual progress. Now remember this; No acknowledgement, no responsibility. No responsibility, no action. No action, no progress. Got that? Good.) Now back to the P.G.

Brothers, I turn to you. Because Rap holds such a firm commitment to the struggle for equality and freedom from oppression that I hold it, or rather the men in control of it, accountable for an existing inconsistency. Sexism. More directly, male oppression. Sexism is not a problem confined solely to the rap world although that's what mainstream media (if that's all you're exposed to) wants you to think. Sexism and violence against women is a major problem in our North American society. Mass media thrives on the exploitation of social inequalities that exist between men and women. In presenting stereotypical images of men as subject and women as object, all forms of pop culture continue to denigrate women while perpetuating and upholding the myth of women as subordinate beings. Don't believe me? Check out a few beer ads. Pay attention to some of those lyrics on your favorite AC/DC or Led Zeppelin album. It's all the rage in comedy. Hey, Andrew Dice Clay, what's so funny? 2 Live Crew? I'm not laughing!

Over the last four to five years, I have watched rap move towards a tendency to depict women as less than equal. This phenomenon has mushroomed to the point where groups like 2 Live Crew, NWA, Digital Underground, Third Base, Mellow Man Ace, Bell Biv DeVoe, and rappers Big Daddy Kane, Ice-Cube, and Schooly D believe it deriguer to include on

that they demand. However, there remain many obstacles. Most women refuse to acknowledge their oppression. Many in fact internalize it and work in effect to perpetuate their own subordination. Opportunities for individual or collective resistance are often neglected. In a recent article in Mother Jones, M.C. Lyte, a dynamic female rapper, addressed this issue. Lisa Kennedy asked her to comment on male rap lyrics and their use of the term bitch. M.C. Lyte responded;

When they say, "Hey bitch come here," and all of the girls run to the stage, then that's who they're talking to. You teach people how to treat you. If you allow someone to call you a bitch and you answer, then that's exactly what you're saying - you're saying, it's okay to call me a bitch, and you can continue to call me that. So it's a matter of women taking a stand and telling them they're not going for it. Women are buying these albums and the tickets to these shows, which tell N.W.A. and Too Short it's okay to be like that because we're going to support you. Now if they wouldn't buy their records or go to their show...then we wouldn't be stuck with the word."

We as women of African descent must first recognize and identify the ways in which we are oppressed and then begin to organize around that oppression and activate motions toward change. By voicing our discontent with the way things stand, we can begin to inform others of the way things should be. African-American men (most notably rappers) must acknowledge the ways in which they uphold and perpetuate the oppression of their sisters. Once they acknowledge this and admit responsibility, then there can be some viable action, and progress.

There remains another obstacle to change. Since it's inception the rap industry has existed almost exclusively as staked out male ter-

"One tribe, One quest, One destiny"

women rappers to challenge their male peers to change their negative depiction of women. Strong, independent, dynamic women such as Monie Love, Isis, and M.C. Lyte present alternative, positive images for girls and young women out there in the listening audience.

Despite the fact that women rappers are beginning to take it upon themselves to project women positive images, there still remains a cloak of silence. Dominique DiPrima states that African-American men and women are tired of being polarized by other people's (the dominant white cul-

"How are we gonna unite all of those who hate the system when the music puts down half the frontline fighters?" My question exactly. Come on, get it together, we've all got to keep collectively on the footpath to freedom. As Queen Latifah's Afrocentric community-based philosophy states, quest for One Tribe, One Destiny. Simple as that. So, remember this. No acknowledgement, no responsibility. No responsibility, no action. No action, no progress. "If you're dissing the sisters, you ain't fighting the power."

PEACE SALAAM ALAIKUM