



DIRTY DANCING

In part two of our Take Back the Music series, we go behind the scenes with video girls. As pimp culture goes mainstream, are we getting paid or played?

They're what male fantasies are made of: One brown-skinned sister, wearing painted-on jeans and four-inch stilettos, is as tall as a runway model but with an ample booty and sleepy almond-shaped eyes. Another woman is baby-doll petite with olive skin, long bleached-blond curls and super-size cleavage bursting out of the tiny piece of fabric that is her top. A third is wearing a gold cutout bodysuit, heels and a micromini so short that she has to hold down its hem as she walks across the room. These girls, along with four other equally arresting women, are taking a break, lounging in the makeshift makeup area of a cavernous warehouse in a seedy part of Los Angeles, around the corner from adult-video stores and stripper joints. They've been at this video shoot, starring rapper Fabolous, since eight in the morning. It's now 12 hours later, and the video's nowhere near done. The girls have had their hair straightened and curled, their makeup painted and repainted, and some of them have changed clothes three different times to suit the taste of Lil X, the director. The lensman behind countless Usher, Kanye West and Sean Paul videos, Lil X is a slight, unassuming man in his late twenties. To see him walk around the set filled with ▶

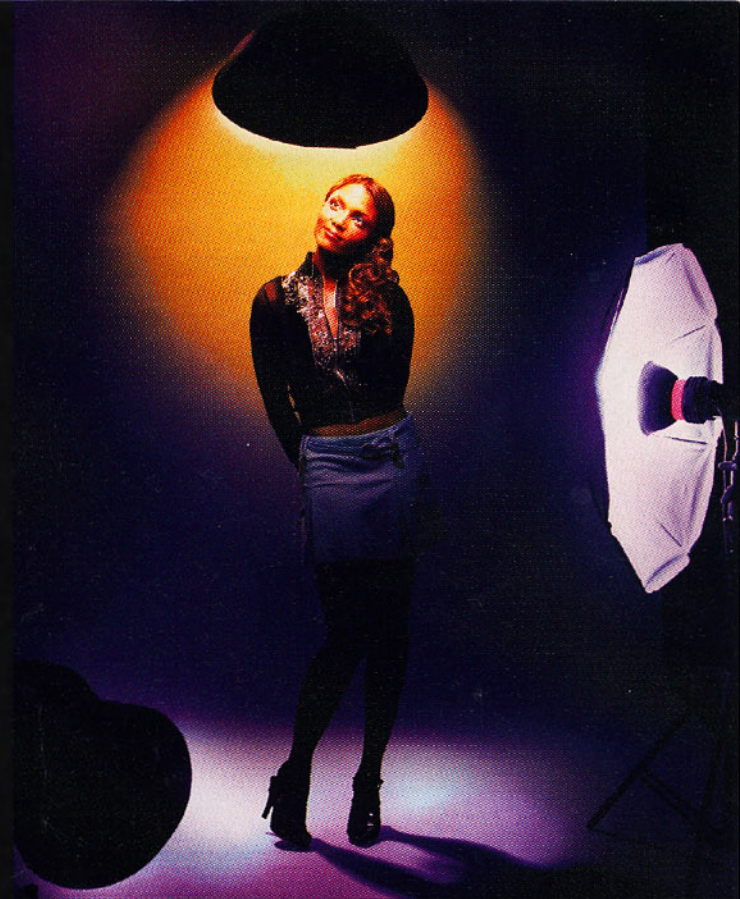
BY JEANNINE AMBER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BUTCH BELAIR

name. Most dancers are just working their hustle, trying to get to the next level of fame. Besides, Tawny says, there's a glaring double standard: Artists like Janet and Beyoncé are allowed to parade in bikini tops and booty shorts and nobody says anything. But when aspiring actresses like Tawny dance in a skimpy outfit, everyone gets up in arms. "If video girls are being exploited, then every female artist who is out there being sexy should be blamed too. To me, it's all bulls---."

Tawny knows sex sells and as a general rule she doesn't mind showing her body as part of her job requirement. But, she admits, sometimes the director goes too far. "If it's lie by the pool in a bikini, fine," she says. "If it's wear a bikini and shake my ass in front of the artist while he sits in his car, then no. I won't do it." Some girls are not so discerning.

Porn for Beginners

At three o'clock in the morning, BET, the premier cable channel for airing hip-hop videos, broadcasts *BET UnCut*. The program features music videos in which many of the girls are wearing lingerie and doing the sorts of acrobatics usually reserved for bachelor parties. There's a bikini-clad woman shaking her booty and grinning wildly while holding one leg high in the air in Nelly's *Tip Drill*. Another woman, standing on her head, provides the backdrop to Ludacris's rhyming, with his head between her naked, open thighs



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while she flexes her buttocks in *Pussy Poppin'*. There are women on all fours, women writhing on the ground, women grabbing their ankles, all poppin' to the beat. These aren't run-of-the-mill sexy and suggestive dancers. These women are clearly professionals with masterful control of the muscles of their hips and thighs and buttocks. When they lift one leg in the air and pop, pop, pop their thang, it's enough to leave an average woman speechless.

Before *BET UnCut*, a seminaked Black woman lying on her back with her legs hoisted over her shoulders was something only paying customers in a strip club might see. Now it's mainstream. Teenage girls are perfecting hypersexual stripper moves like booty clapping, dropping and poppin' and showing them off at middle-school dances. "These are dances young girls didn't used to know about," says Pamela Weddington, vice-president of communications at Motivational Educational Entertainment Productions (MEE), a communications company that specializes in urban markets. "Now it's something that they aspire to. Even if they are not staying up until three in the morning to watch *BET UnCut*, everyone can set up a VCR."

While BET reps insist the show is for adult viewers only, the fact is many teenagers are indeed tuning in. "*BET Uncut*? Everyone's seen it," says Morgan. "I remember some of the boys in class were like, 'Did you see the uncut Ludacris video? Or the uncut Chingy?' This was when we were like 14. Now it's the younger kids who are watching it, the boys who are 12 and 13."

While exposing young boys to images of near-naked strippers will likely encourage them to sexually objectify women, for girls the effects are more subtle. "My sense is that over time young Black girls are beginning to internalize what they see in the media," says Weddington. "And we see it in their behavior."

Weddington's company surveyed thousands of low-income African-American teens between the ages of 16 and 20 in ten cities across the country, including Los Angeles, New Orleans, Chicago and New York, and asked them about sex, sexuality and the media, particularly music videos. "The message young women are getting is that if they can't get something they want through their talent or ability, then they have something else that they can use, and that's their bodies," says Weddington. "They are learning that what's important about a woman is her body, not her mind. So that means, 'I am a commodity, therefore I'm going to use that commodity to get what I want.'" Weddington suggests that when girls use their bodies as barter, they are more likely to engage in risky behavior like unsafe sex, sex with multiple partners or sex with men many years their senior.

At least one study suggests Weddington is right. In 2003, in Alabama, 522 African-American girls in rural and poor neighborhoods were asked about their consumption of hip-hop videos, then their behavior was tracked for a year. Even after the researchers adjusted their data to accom-

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TAKE BACK THE MUSIC

moderate for differences such as family income, and whether the teenagers were from one- or two-parent families, results were startling. "We divided the group into girls who watched fewer than 21 hours a week of music videos and girls who watched more," explains Ralph DiClemente, Ph.D., associate director of the Center for AIDS Research at Emory University and one of the lead investigators in the study. "We found that girls who watched more videos were 60 percent more likely to have contracted an STD during the year, twice as likely to have multiple sex partners and 60 percent more likely to use alcohol and drugs.

"It's clear that when you look at rap music videos, you see a certain scenario: one male artist surrounded by scantily clad females, and their job is to please him," adds DiClemente. "There are many theories that suggest that if a person looks at a lot of videos and doesn't have information to the contrary, she begins to believe that this is reality, that this is the way the world works." According to DiClemente, teenagers seem to be influenced by the images in videos because they don't have the life experience to counter what they are seeing. "They can't say what they're watching isn't true because they don't know. They're just kids."

Hip-hop's Side Hustle

For as long as teenagers have listened to music, there have been people angered by its content. In 1984 Tipper Gore, wife of the former vice-president Al Gore, appalled by lyrics she heard on a Prince album she had purchased for her 11-year-old daughter, led a campaign that resulted in parental-advisory warning stickers being placed on CDs with explicit content. More recently, several students of Spelman College called Nelly on the mat for his video *Tip Drill*. "We put up posters calling him Misogynist of the Month," says Moya Bailey, president of the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance (FMLA), the group that launched the campaign last March. Bailey says that while many of the women on campus understood why her group was upset by the video, there was also a backlash. Some students felt the FMLA's questioning of Nelly was poorly timed: The rapper was scheduled to appear on campus to support a bone-marrow registration drive when the group's posters went up.

But the ambivalence about the group's protest seemed to go further than that. "Some women saw it as Black women yelling at Black men," says Bailey. "A lot of women feel that if we say Black men have adopted these misogynistic ideas, then we're attacking them and not being supportive as Black women. That makes it hard for Black women to step up and say something." Bailey points

out that at the same time, White women are also reluctant to take on the cause of misogyny in hip-hop. "White feminists don't know how to deal with it," she observes. "There are so many issues of race tied into it that they just sort of let the Black women handle it."

Lara Mahaney, director of corporate and entertainment affairs at Parents Television Council, says her organization is considering forming a coalition of interested groups, both Black and White, to launch a "campaign of shame and financial consequences" such as



boycotts aimed at industries and retailers who make and distribute offensive material. "It's going to take a large group of people talking about this to bring some kind of change," says Mahaney. "If we don't speak out, things will only get worse."

That may already be happening. In a trend that has gone virtually unmentioned upon by activists, some rap stars have decided to lend their name and talents to productions even more explicit than their uncut videos. Rappers are now appearing in hard-core porn. In 2001 and 2003 the best-selling adult videos of the year were Snoop Dogg's *Doggystyle* and *Hustlaz: Diary of a Pimp*, respectively; both were hosted by the *Billboard*-topping rapper. Snoop, recently applauded for his work with the Rowland Heights Raiders, a junior all-American football team of 8-to-10-year-old boys, acts as tour guide in the graphic DVDs, featuring naked adult-film stars engaging in among other things, anal and group sex. According to Sean Carney, the [CONTINUED ON PAGE 203]

TAKE BACK THE MUSIC WEEK: FEBRUARY 21-25

We asked for your feedback on our Take Back the Music initiative and, girl, did you tell us! We received hundreds of thought-provoking E-mails, making our campaign kickoff the most responded-to story in our Web site's history. But talking among ourselves is not enough. We have to make sure our voices are heard by the people who can make a change—programming executives at cable networks, radio

stations and record companies. This week, let's bombard the cable music networks with calls, letters and E-mails that tell them just how you feel about the music they're pumping out daily. Whether it makes you cringe or makes you bounce, give 'em an earful. Send your thoughts about how Black women are portrayed to programming executives at BET, tvviewerscomments@bet.com; MTV,

mtvfeedback@mtvn.com; FUSE TV, fuse-info@fuse.tv. You can also call MTV's 24-hour Viewer Services Hotline, (212) 258-8700; BET's Viewer Comments Line (800) 711-1630, and FUSE TV's offices, (212) 324-3400. Or you can log on to essence.com/takebackthemusic for a letter you can send to all three networks with just one click. We have the power. Let's use it.

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research director at Hustler Video, the company that distributes Snoop's films, *Doggystyle* sold 45,000 units and *Diary of a Pimp*, 50,000—more than four times what's considered a top seller in the porn world. Snoop, who endorses T-Mobile and AOL, and was once asked to appear on Jim Henson's *It's a Very Merry Muppet Christmas*, has been hailed as "totally embodying the hustler lifestyle" by Carney. "This has been a fantastic partnership," says Carney enthusiastically, noting that "Snoop has brought some hip-hop fans to adult videos for the first time."

Over the past several years, other top-selling rappers like 50 Cent, Lil' John and even old-schooler Ice-T, who currently stars on NBC's *Law & Order:SVU*, have hosted adult videos. Ice-T's top-selling project, *Pimpin' 101*, shows the rapper "schooling viewers on the different types of girls who work the streets," says Dan Miller, features editor for *Adult Video News*, a porn-industry publication. (Last January the magazine held its annual AVN Awards—the porn industry's Oscars—and 50 Cent's protégé, Lloyd Banks, won two, Best Interactive DVD and Best Music.) Porn actresses play the hos, and a fully clothed Ice-T narrates the film and introduces the sex scenes. "Making porn is a sign you've made it," says Carney. "If you are a hip-hop star and you come out with your own triple-X video, it's a sign you've arrived." And so it continues—the exaltation of Black women as sexual acrobats by the very artists so many of us support.

NOT MY DAUGHTER

In some corners there are rumblings of discontent. "My dad doesn't like seeing half-naked girls in videos," says Morgan, the 16-year-old from New Jersey. "When I was 12, he complained because Mya was wearing a midriff shirt and this really tiny skirt, and she was dancing, which is not a good mix. He was like, 'She's already got all eyes on her; why does she have to have only half her clothes on?' I didn't understand it at the time, but I do now. He doesn't want me to be like that, so he doesn't want me to watch that."

Many experts feel that the best way to arm young girls against the bombardment of images that promote Black women as sex objects is to do what Morgan's father did: talk with them about what they are seeing. "We live in a sexualized society," says Cydelle Berlin, who runs a theater-based education program for teenage girls out of St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital in Harlem. "But you can't say to a teenager, 'Turn off the television,' because that's not going to work." Instead, says Berlin, "we need to watch these images with our children and use it as a teachable moment. Ask what the video is about, what is the woman representing, how is that similar to how girls at school act and dress? And talk about how the video makes you feel so you can discuss your value system." Most of all, says Berlin, we need to help young girls see that there are other messages of what it means to be a Black woman. There is so much more Black women do than just bounce to the beat.

But if hip-hop has demonstrated anything about us, it's this: No matter what Black men do, there will always be Black women who stand by their side. We will be their ride-or-die bitch, the Bonnie to their Clyde, the played to their player. So maybe it's no surprise that so many rappers swaggered confidently into the realm of pimp, expecting all the pretty girls just to fall in line. But what happens if we don't? In a world where women aren't willing to accept being cast as bitches and hos, there won't be anything left for wannabe pimps to do but find some other fantasy. □

Jeannine Amber writes frequently for ESSENCE.