

# we shouldn't overlook uk women in hip hop

Female artists from the UK have long been an integral part of the global hip hop scene. So why don't they get their props? A new documentary hopes to remedy that by refocusing the lens back on the British women who helped push things forward...



When it comes to early stars of British hip hop, the same name always crops up: Ricky 'Slick Rick' Walters. The *Children's Story* rapper born in Mitcham is considered one of the genre's greatest lyricists, and was certainly an integral part of pushing the British rap narrative. But the Bronx based Rick made all of his music with American producers while living in the U.S. It's a shame then that the vehemently British contributions of the Rodney P led London Posse are overlooked, but the words "hip hop artist" are rarely, if ever, associated with British women.

from the USA, that the UK's pioneering female artists are often overlooked. A documentary is screening this week, hoping to re-route the hip hop narrative and document the rich contribution of an often overlooked group of artists.

Watching the trailer to *Through the Lens of Hip Hop: UK Women*, showing at the London Feminist film Festival, we see not only female MCs and singers, but women skillfully spinning and scratching records, b-girls tearing it up at break battles, and female graffiti artists. These women speak frankly and emphatically about what the genre means to them; musically and culturally, but also in terms of feminism and politics.

And this is no new-wave trend: British women have been a part of the scene since (almost) the word go. If we take hip hop - as we know it - as a genre borne out of the South Bronx, NYC in the late 1970s, then it only took a few years for two young women in South London to pick up the baton and sprint across the Atlantic.

Cookie Crew - made up of MC Remedee/Cookie and Susie Q - formed in Clapham in 1983. They were soon hitting the charts with their own brand of hip hop, rapping about their "British dialect" and featuring symbols of London in their videos - on one they dance in front of a giant Underground sign, saying "Clapham South".

"Hip hop has always been creatively dominated by men," says Cookie. "But it's never bothered me or hindered my progress. It is what it is; it's all about overriding. The statement, 'Oh she's good for a girl', which I've heard so many times, is just incentive to be better, right ladies?"

She remembers a UK hip hop scene in the 80s and early 90s in which women were contributing in many ways: "Not only MC's, but dancers, beat-boxers, breakers and poppers. It was a healthy and compact scene. The UK, particularly London, was buzzing. It was a Mecca."

Samantha Calliste, co-director of *Through the Lens*, agrees that while the mainstream was dominated by men, at street level women were contributing just as much as their male counterparts: "Women and girls were participating in all things

associated with the culture, making beats, writing rhymes, break dancing, wearing the fashion and more.

"We were influenced by females in hip hop already, from Americans like MC Lyte, Queen Latifah and Roxanne Shanté, to those here in the UK like Cookie Crew, the Wee Papa Girl Rappers and Neneh Cherry... and others who were letting us know we were dope too!

"Women were a strong part of the hip hop scene, it's just they were outnumbered and had to work harder to access the space, and to be considered as contenders among their male peers."

The Crew sang confidently about the "mics we're burnin', cash we're earnin", just like their male peers, shot into the singles charts, and had success with advertising and TV appearances. They began a tradition of substance over sexualised style; wearing cool, comfortable outfits - baggy and oozing street attitude - rather than bending to pressure to sexualise their image.

"I believe women in UK hip hop have been a positive influence, in the UK and globally," says Cookie. "The accent, musical influences, and fashion all play a part."

The Crew's single, *Rok Da House*, is said to be the first ever **hip house track**: the pair from Clapham were true hip hop pioneers.

Nearby, in Battersea, a rapper called Monie Love was rising to prominence in the Jus Bad crew, soon taking 'Brit Hop' across the pond and recording with massive artists, notably rapping ground-breaking feminist lyrics on Queen Latifah's *Ladies' First*.

On this track, Love is a peer to Latifah, not a side-kick or an add-on; in fact the Queen refers to Monie as her "European partner".

"Let me take it from here, Queen," Monie says, before launching into a rhyme of self-love and sisterhood: "Pleased with all the beats and rhymes my sisters have employed / Slick and smooth throwing down the sound totally a yes / Let me state the position: Ladies first, yes?"

"When it's time for loving it's the woman that gets some / Strong, stepping, strutting, moving on / Rhyming, cutting, and not forgetting / We are the ones that give birth / To the new generation of prophets because it's Ladies First."

Love - who recorded solo from the 80s to 2000s - was a pioneer of Brit Hop, claiming rap as a genre for acts from the

record featured Grammy-nominated singles, including *Monie in the Middle* - rapping about a teen girl's prerogative to have high expectations of her relationships.

She was also a prominent part of the movement to make hip hop a catalyst for positive social change: becoming a member of the Native Tongues, a positive-minded hip-hop collective with De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, the Jungle Brothers, and of course - Queen Latifah.

Wee Papa Girl Rappers, two sisters, took the name of their rap duo from the Saint Lucia French Creole expression "Oui Papa", which they heard their Caribbean dad use. This influence seeped into their music, inspired by dancehall and reggae, especially with track *Wee Rule*, rapping about swearing in French, riding in taxis (a distinctly British word) and the dance hall, interspersed with an upbeat, dance hall chorus.

The Wee Papa girls paved the way for artists like Rihanna and Sean Paul (even, dare I say it, Shaggy) by making dancehall mainstream.

The all-girl rap trio, She Rockers, impressed Public Enemy's Professor Griff so much (when they **performed a rap** for him outside a Shepherd's Bush McDonalds) that he produced their debut single, and were signed to (then legendary for signing hip hop acts) Jive Records, further bringing British female MCs into the mainstream fold in the early 90s.

These British women of earlier hip hop opened the door for the artists of today, and a scene which is increasingly diverse (both musically and in terms of ethnicity), and globally recognised: Lady Sovereign rapping about drinking beer, eating shepherd's pie, wearing baggy tees and having hairy armpits, in a distinctly London accent; the MOBO and Brit winning Ms Dynamite and her platinum, Mercury Prize-winning album, *A Little Deeper*.

"Suddenly you heard a personal narrative articulated by a female artist who was thinking about your reality, because it was hers too," says Samantha. "But more specifically with the garage and dancehall fusion she included, she put a very British spin, or expression, on the map gaining wide international interest by owning our voice."

Without the earlier female MCs, it's hard to see how we'd have Kate Tempest (who started out at rap battles) - an openly gay, and white, woman, which in the 80s would have seemed unthinkable on the scene - bringing poetry, sexuality and social conscience into the spotlight, with her south east London twang; or M.I.A painting an intensely vibrant musical soundscape, drawing on a huge range of influence from the 70s punk of her native west London (most notably The Clash), to producer Timbaland, Pixies, Asian folk music and Boney M's disco.

The UK female hip hop tradition is being continued by the likes of i-D favourite, the fiercely independent Little Simz, who will release her new album *A Curious Tale of Trials + Persons* via her own label Age 101: Music.

"The scope of diversity [in the current scene] is a beautiful thing," says Silhouette Bushay, co-director of *Through the Lens*. "Gender, race, class, sexuality, you name it. Also, there are women out there taking charge, creating their own hip hop events, some of which are women-centric and owning it - not all women seek male validation."

And maybe that's at the centre of the issue - British women have been too busy getting on with their art than forcing themselves front and centre, unlike their male, or American peers. Maybe *Through the Lens* could change all that.

*Through The Lens of Hip Hop: UK Women* is being shown this

more [here](#).

## Credits

---

Text Emma Finamore

Connect to i-D's world! Like us on [Facebook](#), follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

Topics: [music](#), [hip hop](#), [through the lens of hip hop](#), [london feminist film festival](#), [queen latifah](#), [cookie crew](#), [think pieces](#), [wee papa girl rappers](#), [feminism](#), [film](#)