

Attack the rap

By Diane Taylor, Monday March 8, 2004

Sick of being called ho's and bitches, a group of young women in Boston has set up a new radio station to fight rap's misogyny.

In the poor Boston neighbourhood where 18-year-old Stephanie Alves grew up, words such as bitch and ho are part of everyday male conversation. This slang is not used to pass judgment on a woman engaged in a particular activity but to describe any female.

Rap has been criticised for its negative portrayal of women right from the start. Artists such as Snoop Doggy Dogg and Ja Rule have attracted particular criticism - both were charged for use of indecent language back in 2001 at the SunFest festival in Jamaica. Lyrics such as "Game is the topic/ And what's between your legs is the product/ Use it properly/ And you'll make dollars bitch," from Ja Rule's Bitch Betta Have My Money, continue to incense women.

As Alves puts it, some rap music has tapped into feelings of male powerlessness as a result of poverty, racism and fractured families and made it not only fashionable but also empowering for young men to demean women in this way. "At school guys go around saying things like, 'She gave it up to me in two weeks, she's a ho'," says Alves. "They disrespect women; all that matters to them are the guns and sex and money that feature in so much rap music."

Scantly clad 24/7 sexual availability is the gold standard for womanhood. And yet this is the same quality that earns women the derogatory labels, viewed at worst as lowlife sluts and at best as fashion accessories. "Things got so bad that even the girls were going around calling each other bitch and ho," says Alves.

So Alves got together with a group of like-minded girls and young women in Dorchester, a Boston suburb with high levels of crime and deprivation, with the idea of setting up the first radio station dedicated to countering the negative way women are portrayed in rap. They approached a local headteacher, Larry Mayes, who recalls, "They came to me and said: 'We have a serious problem, we're tired of being referred to as bitches and ho's and we want to do something about it.'"

"The criticism of the way rap music portrays women is nothing new," says Alves. But instead of just talking about the problem we decided to take positive action."

The mayor of Boston loved the idea. "When we went to him he jumped out of his chair he was so enthusiastic," says Mayes. "He promised to get the most powerful women working in media in Boston to be advisers to the girls - and he did."

Private funding was secured and a couple of weeks ago, broadcasting from a women's centre in Dorchester, the radio station hit the airwaves. A sign pinned to the studio door reads: "Only positive attitudes beyond this point."

For now, the station, called Radio Log, is on air on weekday afternoons in the Dorchester area but Alves hopes that both the amount of time the station is on air and the area it covers will expand. Eight teenage girls between the ages of 13 and 18 are involved. Over the next few months more will be recruited and trained. The girls are African-American and Hispanic and they hope to get white and Asian girls involved too.

To promote an alternative, positive image of young American womanhood, they play a range of carefully vetted music - rap, hip-hop, reggae, soul and country - along with interviews and phone-ins open to both sexes to discuss music, relationships and burning issues of the day.

"We don't ban particular artists but select music on the basis of the lyrics," says Alves. "For example someone like Ashanti has some music that reflects women positively and some that reflects women negatively. We don't play the negative stuff." Artists who have so far made it on to the playlist include Mary Mary, Alicia Keyes, Faith Evans, Usher, Boyz-II-Men and B2K. Banned are certain songs by artists including Snoop Doggy Dogg, Lil Kim, Juvenile and Tupac Shakur.

Choosing which music is on the playlist and which is off can lead to animated discussions. "There are lots of grey areas," says Alves. "We like to play love songs but so many of them have derogatory references to women when sex is mentioned so we have to be careful."

Female African-American rapper Ife Oshun is sympathetic to their cause. "What sort of personal values do little girls in our hip-hop nation develop when they are constantly bombarded with images of their future selves as little more than rump shakers? What do our little boys learn when a disproportionate number of rap videos portray their sisters, mothers, future wives and future daughters as little more than eye candy?" says Oshun.

In the UK, young women are feeling just as bruised by the fantasy world of their male peers and are now looking to emulate their American peers. Gemma Gibson, 22, from west London, is trying to get funding to set up a similar radio station here. She is involved with Yes Studios, a music charity that gives socially-excluded young people hands-on experience in all aspects of music production.

"I've always loved singing and I think it's time to show young people there is another perspective out there. Gun culture in London is so big at the moment and I'm tired of guys calling us just a piece of ass. Music is so influential and it's made this stuff very fashionable, but now it's time for a different fashion."

Back in Boston, Radio Log has so far received nothing but praise. "I haven't had any negative comments from guys about it but they know better than to speak in a disrespectful way around me," says Alves. While there are no plans to take on the offensive male rappers directly, Alves hopes that word will reach them via the radio station of the errors of their ways.

She is optimistic that the rap that has led popular culture for the past 25 years is going to change. "We've been hearing about sex and drugs and money for so long. How much more is there to say? Surely now is the time for something new and positive to take over."



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