

Women's eNews

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Hip Hop Women Recount Abuse at Their Own Risk

By Carla Thompson, WeNews Correspondent

A few women who have survived abusive relationships with rap stars are breaking the silence about domestic violence. But a "no snitch" rule is still widely observed in the hip hop music world.



Dr. Angie Colette Beatty

(WOMENSENEWS) – Big Pun – born Christopher Rios on Nov. 10, 1971 in the Bronx, N.Y.—was a 697-pound platinum-selling solo rap artist who died in 2000 at the age of 28 from a heart attack.

After his death, his widow, Liza Rios, chronicled their stormy relationship and the physical abuse that began when she was 16 years old in the 2002 documentary, "Big Pun: Still Not a Player," which she co-produced and which included footage of Pun pistol-whipping her.

The documentary did not earn Rios many friends in the hip hop community. When she tried to recruit hip hop stars to perform in a fundraising tour to benefit programs to fight domestic violence, her calls went unanswered, according to various reports in hip hop publications.

The documentary did, however, turn journalist Elizabeth Mendez Berry into a Rios fan.

"I think Liza is a hero," says Berry. "She could have been a tragic first lady of hip hop but she decided not to be . . . She could have been sort of 'a first widow,' a woman who gets sympathy galore because of her fallen (husband) and who doesn't rock the boat."

Instead, Berry found that Rios, unlike many hip hop women, was willing to break an unwritten rule about "not snitching" on the domestic violence in the personal lives of rap stars.

After some initial difficulty reaching Rios, Berry interviewed her for an article about domestic violence in the March 2005 issue of VIBE, the New York-based hip hop magazine.

'Rap's Black Eye'

Berry's article ran under the headline, "Love Hurts: Rap's Black Eye."

Aside from Rios, Berry got very few women to allow her to use their names in the story.

Among others, Berry also approached hip hop rhythm and blues singer Faith Evans, the former wife of the late rapper Notorious B.I.G. but Evans, who has sung about the violent death of a young woman at the hands of her boyfriend, was unwilling to talk on the record about her experiences.

She found that many of the women she interviewed – who only agreed to talk to her off the record for fear of reprisal from influential members of the hip hop community – did not think about their experience in terms of “domestic violence.” Instead they talked about having “fights.”

“They are 5 feet 2 inches and are having ‘fights’ with guys 6 feet 4 inches,” says Berry. “If you ask them if they were abused, they would say ‘no.’ If you ask them if things ever got physical, they would say, ‘Oh yeah, we had ‘fights.’ The women don’t think of themselves as victims because they fought back or initiated the conflict.”

One other female artist willing to go on the record with Berry about her abuse was Charli Baltimore, a rapper once signed to the New York City-based Murder, Inc. Records.

Both Rios and Baltimore said they knew enough about the hip hop world to expect repercussions for coming forward, but Berry was unprepared.

“A lot of people were calling me out on the Internet . . . several anonymous writers made negative comments and-or threats about me,” says Berry. “People were saying they were worried about me. A period after the article was published, I was advised by colleagues not to go out at night.”

How Hazardous is Hip Hop?

Rios’s experience, the unwillingness of women to talk openly about domestic violence and the aftermath Berry suffered for writing her article raise questions about how hazardous the hip hop music world is for the health of women associated with it.

Dr. Angie Colette Beatty, assistant professor of communication and African American studies at St. Louis University, says the music is pretty clearly detrimental to the image of black women.

“We see black men being abusive to black women and we see black women not being offended,” said Beatty, referring to hip hop videos. “These globally transported images leave the impression that we (black women) are doing it to ourselves and that if we cover up and respect ourselves, the problem would go away.”

Beatty says women in hip hop have to “walk a ridiculous line. They have to be hard-core but can’t be too masculine.” As an example Beatty points to Lil’ Kim, the hip hop star who got in legal trouble in 2005 for committing perjury. Beatty says that now she is being celebrated by some in the hip hop community as the first woman to do jail time.

Putting Up With Something Else

Dr. Suraiya Baluch, the director of sexual violence prevention programs at Barnard College and Columbia University in New York, agrees. “The mandate is to be a superwoman,” she says. “People have been putting up with cruel and unacceptable behavior and the perception is that this is yet another something that you have to deal with.”

Tempering his criticism of hip hop, Mark Anthony Neal, associate professor in the black popular culture program in African and African-American Studies at Duke University in Durham, N.C., notes that the art form expresses social ills and doesn’t create them.

“Because hip hop is an easy whipping boy, there is a tendency to attribute the worst gender and sexual politics to castigate hip hop in lieu of having real conversations about domestic violence and other issues more broadly and individual artists within hip hop,” says Neal. “We are critical of artists and of the channels, but are never really critical of corporate interests that are producing and distributing it.”

Neal also points out that hip hop is not the first musical genre to spawn stories of domestic violence.

“You can talk about James Brown who had a history of domestic abuse as recently as his 70th birthday,” says Neal. “And Patti LaBelle talks about Jackie Wilson attempting to rape her in her autobiography. We live in a culturally fundamentally patriarchal society that says men are and should be more powerful than women and violence is the way it is effectively manifested in society.”

Berry agrees it is too easy to blame hip hop for domestic violence. “It’s not that simple,” she says. “But it does contribute to the climate of disrespect. When women are systematically disrespected, people are more likely not going to care what they think. They become comfortable with seeing women objectified, more comfortable seeing them controlled.”

Carla Thompson, a New York-based freelance journalist, is author of a memoir, “Bearing Witness: Not So Crazy in Alabama” (August Press) and producer of an award-winning documentary about black women and hair, “The Root of It All” (National Film Network).

For More Information

Arte Sana: <http://www.arte-sana.com/about.htm>

Third Wave Foundation: <http://www.thirdwavefoundation.org/>

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence: <http://www.incite-national.org/>

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