

Women. Hip Hop. Life.

SAY MY NAME

A film By Mamamess



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Synopsis

In a hip hop and R'n'B world dominated by men and noted for misogyny, the unstoppable female lyricists of Say My Name speak candidly about class, race, and gender in pursuing their passions as female MCs. This worldwide documentary takes viewers on vibrant tour of urban culture and musical movement: from hip hop's birthplace in the Bronx, to grime on London's Eastside.

Featuring interviews from a diverse cast of women including Remy Ma, Rah Digga, Jean Grae, Erykah Badu, Estelle and newcomers Chocolate Thai, Invincible and Miz Korona, this powerful documentary delves into the amazing personal stories of women balancing professional dreams with the stark realities of poor urban communities, race, sexism, and motherhood. The more than 18 artists featured in Say My Name battle for a place in a society that creates few chances for women. From emerging artists filled with new creativity, to true pioneers like MC Lyte, Roxanne Shante, and Monie Love, these are women turning adversity into art.



Photos by Mamamess

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Director's Statement

Say My Name began in 2003 as a documentary film project about Hip Hop's leading female MCs. I began my research intent on following up on the women who'd inspired me, the ones whose albums line my shelves. It became a portrayal of up-and-coming women in the USA and London, UK. Now, It's about women and Hip Hop. Spot the switch? Now the women lead.

It's taken 4 years to produce this first documentary. The film that started it all may be just about to take its first steps in public, but it's already had babies.

The central focus of the wider project is still female lyricists, but the music styles vary. The women I've met have led us down the backstreets of Hip Hop and showed us newer forms of lyricism like English Grime or older ones like spoken word poetry.

As with the documentary Say My Name, we never really left Hip Hop, but Hip Hop became an attitude, a way of living, a generation - it transcended its status as a music genre and became something else, something more.

Diversity was key when we began and still is. Countless women, numerous role models, more than just the vixens, who seem to take all the attention. I would meet one woman and she'd say, "Oh yeah, you gotta meet this girl." We did and our journey went off the map.

Some of these women re-enforced my belief that Hip Hop is about community - not color; not money. Anyone can claim Hip Hop! Many see it as a way to make money and get themselves - and their families - out of the ghetto.

The women in this documentary film live in the true spirit of Hip Hop: devoting their skills day-in and day-out, they command respect for their desire to rhyme. They rhyme because they want to express themselves. Because they found out they could. They want a voice.

Say My Name celebrates all these perspectives - all the stories, lessons and strengths of women in the face of adversity. These women share stories ranging from violence, to extreme poverty; from the battle to succeed in cultures dominated by male traditions to motherhood, education, identity, and more. Although their cultures may differ, all of them are standing strong.

This film has changed is my definition of stardom and 'success'. Yes, the Hip Hop divas and vixens inspire millions of girls; but behind every diva there is a slew of girls working hard to get somewhere. They're not celebrated for it. They may not even be seen. Yes, the women have it harder but that's true of their lives as much as their musical careers. But they keep on going. They are every woman. They are the stars in my film, and stars in their own right.

This film may not change lives, but it can put the spotlight on these women. I can make you say their name, ... Say My Name.

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Director Bio

Nirit Peled (Israel, 1973) has been working in Amsterdam as an audio-visual artist for the last eight years. She is a community based, cultural artist and film director, as well as co-founder of Mamamess, a production company she runs with her partner Dave Hemmingway. Her work can be broadly categorized within video and interactive projects. Recently Peled has been focusing more on directing short films, animation and documentaries. She has also worked on numerous political, cultural projects with inner city youth, both in the Netherlands and abroad.

For her recent project and debut documentary, SAY MY NAME, Peled traveled around the world documenting female vocalists, MCs, and spoken-word artists in urban environments. The sequel SAY MY NAME IN AFRICA is still in production. Other recent projects include POETRY IN MOTION, three beautifully animated poems by the Jamaican poet Staceyann Chin, and the documentaries REDNOSE GOES TO CUBA (about two DJs collaborating with Cuban musicians in Havana), and THE BATTLE (about Arab-Israeli rappers).



Photos by Mamamess

Subject Bios

Chocolate Thai (NYC)

'If the chick is gonna be true herself, then the next chick, and the next chick is gonna show you different versions of hip hop - that is gonna look bananas!'

Chocolate Thai grew up in Harlem, New York City. She became known for her appearances on Showtime's battle MC reality TV show, The Next Episode. She displayed some fierce abilities and made it to the final round, but one of the highlights of the show for her was that she got to meet MC Lyte, one of her role models. When I followed her in NYC she was struggling to raise her kid alone (but with some support from her family), making the most of free studio time to record tracks for her new mix tape and trying to get gigs to pay the bills. She's an inspiring woman, always full of energy and determined to keep on fighting. Chocolate Thai loves the mic, she's all hip hop.

Estelle (London, UK)

'All I need is one mic and one micstand alone.'

Estelle is a British UK-based artist, though her parents are from Africa. I've known her ever since she was a young, independent hip hop MC in London. Her debut album '1980' surprised for although it contained rhyming, it also featured a lot of singing. When we met in London to do an interview for Say My Name, she'd already made a name for herself in the UK, and was just beginning to record and work more in NYC. Estelle's hit single 'American Boy' featuring Kanye West has sparked much attention worldwide. From her beginnings as a London underground artist, she's well on her way to international stardom.

Monie Love (New York, NY)

'Moving to the States was important. I had to throw myself in the lion's den and be amongst the best of the best in order to be the best.'

An old-school MC, Monie Love moved from London to the US as a young woman. She'd already achieved commercial success in London and she went on to achieve international fame after performing 'Ladies first' with Queen Latifa. She then went on to release the acclaimed 'Monie in the middle'. Now, she has three children and is a radio personality in the States. She's an open, strong and opinionated woman. We met early on during my research and she's been a great and genuine supporter of Say My Name ever since.

Roxanne Shante (New York, NY)

Roxanne Shante is a pioneering female MC from Queens, NYC. Known as one of the first female MCs, she was just 14 when she recorded her first track 'Roxanne's revenge'. Not many people know that in that same year she also had her first child. Having been so successful at such a young age, she 'retired' from hip hop to complete her studies in her early twenties. Currently, she works as a psychologist and is something of an entrepreneur. She's no longer active as an MC.

MC Lyte (New York, NY)

'Hip hop is the backdrop of my life.'

MC Lyte was the first female hip hop artist to receive a gold record, certifying over 500,000 units sold. We met early on in my research, and I had the pleasure of seeing her a couple more times over the years it took to make this film. She's always been a role model and source of inspiration to me. The first time I met her alone with my video camera I asked her to give me a free style. She looked at me as if I came from a green planet and said: 'This lady behind the camera is asking for a free style, I don't do anything for free, anymore!'. With that she gave me one of my first lessons in the art of interviewing hip hop legends.

Jean Grae (New York, NY)

'I know I'm on the right path, To who I'm gonna be at last. Don't rush me.'

Born in South Africa and raised in the infamous Chelsea Hotel in NYC, Jean Grae always had a strong voice on New York's underground hip hop scene. Known for her signature voice and FIERCE lyrics, she used to be known as 'What? What?', but changed her name to Jean Grae. A couple of years ago she was endorsed by Talib Quali and signed to Black Smith hoping to achieve commercial success and 'get that Grammy.' I've followed Jean over the last few years, and she's been maturing as an artist. Extremely active online, she puts her thoughts and life into words that are iconic to me.

Invincible (Detroit, MI)

Hip Hop activist.

'Hip hop to me, you know, is like the Ambassador Bridge, it becomes like a message in a bottle.'

Invincible moved to Detroit when she was young. She has strong political views, she's a fierce lyricist and she's an activist.

Earlier in her career she was a part of the 'Anomolies', an all girl group from NYC. Labels that wanted to turn her into the female Eminem showed an interest but she went her own way. Now, she's busy with all sorts of community work projects and she's becoming something of an Icon in Detroit's underground scene.

She works closely with Detroit Summer, a multi-racial collective that aims to build a sense of community amongst artists and activists to shape a positive vision for social change.

Sparky Dee

'We express it through our MUSIC, how we feel. It gives us a chance to talk out, to speak out.'

Sparky Dee is an old school MC. Born and raised in Brooklyn, she was known for her work with Spider D – her partner at the time and the father of her children.

She was also known for her rivalry with Roxanne Shante, which was detailed on vinyl. She made name in the late 70s and then disappeared. When we met her for an interview we discovered that it was drugs that took her down: she confesses to having been a junky and homeless.

Now she's living in Atlanta, has found God and her way back to life, and she wants to go back to music.

Georgia Girls / GA Girls (Atlanta, GA)

"What's special about a Georgia Girl? I mean we are prime time women. Some people think it's trashy...Who cares...we feel good about ourselves, nice bodies; we get it out there, you know what I mean?"

The Georgia Girls are an all-girl group from Atlanta; put together by Big Manda a young, local MC. The members have changed since its inception but they're still going strong. They came to prominence with the song 'nothing like a GA girl', featuring Princess, who is now a member of the hip hop / crunk group Crime Mob. Although the song was never officially released, it leaked onto radio and became a huge anthem for the girls of Atlanta. Following them in Atlanta gave me a glimpse into the life of a southern woman. They take pride at being from the sassy south, and in the typically slower beats that create the distinctive hip hop sounds that come from there.

Miz Korona

"I'm determined To make a permanent place in the ground"

Born and raised in Detroit, Miz Korona made a name for herself freestyling and winning battles in the city's nightclubs. She found herself in the right place at the right time, and she was a good performer. She even got to play a small part in the film *8 Mile High*, which gave her 'some shine' – some exposure.

Now she's a veteran of the battle scene but feels like she's grown out of it and wants to become 'more' than a battle MC. when we meet she was working hard to record her debut album and develop herself into a fully-fledged artist.

Shanika (London, UK)

'hip hop is more slow, it's like a groovin' thing, but grime is strictly war'

Shanika is a young British Grime MC. We met at an open mic night, held at a youth center in the rough East end of London. We ended up spending a few days together. She allowed us a glimpse into her teenage life - fighting with her boyfriend, running to and from home – and we quickly became close.

Her mom is a Jamaican immigrant. With two other young children to manage, she can't keep up with Shanika. Instead, Shanika's found comfort in the open mic nights – on stage she has a voice and she managed to make a local name for herself as a young Grime MC. For a while, we hooked up every time we were in London but we've lost touch with her the last couple of years. We simply couldn't track her down. We plan to keep trying....

Trinie (New York, NY)

"Females in the industry, they go through a lot of stuff...with the men...[but] they don't want to come out and say a n****r smacked the shit out of them. Or... they getting really fucked in the industry, because they don't want anybody to look at them like they soft."

Trinie grew up in Trinidad against a backdrop of drugs. After the death of her father, her family escaped the island and moved to Brooklyn. Discovered by Wyclef, she became his prodigy; and when we met she was busy recording her first tracks at his studios in Manhattan.

Her tragic life story has left its mark on her: in complete contrast to her sweet appearance, her lyrics are rough and raw. She's young and she's a newcomer to hip hop. She's excited about her ability to rhyme, and she harbors hopes that fame will lead to money, and a way out of the ghetto for her family.

Remy Ma (New York, NY)

"Never mind what I'm rappin' about, look at my life...a broken home. My mom wasn't really there. My dad wasn't there at all...I never finished school, I smoked drugs, I sold drugs...how do you expect me to be the perfect role model for your kid?"

Born and raised in the Bronx, Remy Ma had a tough childhood. Many remember her as the She made a name for herself being a member of Fat Joe's Terror Squad. My first memory of Remy? She ventured into commercial hip hop and later, she signed with Universal. When we met her she was struggling with the majors, trying to get her album out, and she'd just won the BET award for 'Best Female Hip Hop Artist' of the year 2005. She was raw and very honest. We saw her take the stage at various panels, where she rejected all accusations about the state of commercial hip hop, especially when it came to women.

Mystic (Los Angeles, CA)

'...it looks really pretty, and it looks very together, and we look really successful...
What they may not see, is the story of, of our lives.'

Mystic is a conscious rapper from the San Francisco bay area. When she came out her rhyming and singing lead to comparisons with Lauren Hill. Unfortunately, her record deals fell victim to disputes between majors and smaller, independent labels. Her commercial success was short-lived and she'd soon had enough of 'industry bullshit'. Despite all that, she's been an inspiring icon in the hip hop world: she's stood up for grassroots hip hop, demanding that the scene take responsibility for its community, and its young women in particular. When we met in LA she was studying to become a teacher. She's planning to continue rhyming and open up her own school.

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WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT SAY MY NAME

**"A compelling documentary on women in hip-hop...
rarely didactic and never plodding or obvious...a joy to watch."**

Leonard Pierce
A.V. Club

"Heartbreaking and exhilarating"

Cindy Widner
The Austin Chronicle

"I thought I had died and gone to heaven"

Michael Tully
Hammer to Nail Ambitious Film



Film: Day Four, Or, From Remy To Rogen

By Leonard Pierce

March 17, 2009

Most of the week, I have what passes for a life in San Antonio to attend to, but does that mean I'll leave you, the loyal AV Club reader attentive enough to notice the South By Southwest sidebar, hanging? Hell no, it does not mean that. It does not mean even a little that. I will jet up to Austin when I can, and when I can't, well, that's why God created screeners. My living room may not have the energy or the bill of fare of the Alamo Drafthouse, but it has a better selection of liquor, and the chances of Harry Knowles showing up are practically nil. So let's get on to today's viewing.

SAY MY NAME is first in line, and it's one I've been looking forward to for quite some time. Hip-hop is all grown up now -- it's got a good thirty years of action under its belt, and that means the ladies should have their say by now. But the rap world is still widely perceived as a man's man's world, with rampant misogyny in both the lyrics and the life. The bitch-and-ho paradigm still largely holds sway, and pimp and player anthems still dominate the charts. The ladies are largely expected to be in the club to peel for the gents, not to grab the mic and represent. SAY MY NAME is a compelling documentary on women in hip-hop by the Dutch multimedia artist and filmmaker Nirit Peled, in which a diverse array of female rappers, DJs and R&B performers -- hailing from the Bronx, Britain, and Europe -- frankly discuss the expectations, tribulations and experiences of gender, sexuality, and race in a musical genre where machismo is the cheapest available fuel.

Peled gets props right off the bat for the sheer weight of diversity at play in her film; there are interviews with everyone from big stars (Jean Grae and Erykah Badu) to veteran performers (Estelle and Remy Ma) to brash newcomers (Invincible and Choc Thai). European, British, and American voices are heard; issues like lesbianism, sexism, abuse, and unequal opportunity are all given a chance to be examined, as are rarely-discussed aspects of the scene like the influence of white fans and performers, and the bizarrely taboo subject of class. But while there's no question this film is driven by a cause and a easily detectable sociopolitical stance, it's very rarely didactic and never plodding or obvious. Part of the reason for this is that, Peled's skill as a director and interviewer aside, she has such a terrific cast of characters to work with. No one who steps in front of her camera is shy about speaking to the realities of being a female rapper, from the threat of violence to the shadow of sexual abuse to the simple economic realities of having to hustle twice as hard to make half as much money. But what really illuminates the film, and makes it a joy to watch in its best moments, is the pure enthusiasm and energy these women have for performing. They know they have a hard road ahead of them, and many of them have precious few illusions about where that road will eventually take them, but everyone in SAY MY NAME straight-up loves what they do, and any time they're shown performing, there are no doubts about why they stay in the game. Thankfully, Peled gives plenty of screen time to performances, and the soundtrack is stone solid.

Grade: B+

Hammer to Nail

Ambitious Film

By Michael Tully

March 31, 2009

Say My Name — When the footage of Roxanne Shante performing “Roxanne’s Revenge” back in the mid-1980s came on early in Nirit Peled’s doc about females in hip-hop, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. But as she jumped around to more modern MCs, the old-school hip-hop nerd in me became distracted by all the omissions (Salt-N-Pepa, Sweet Tee, Heather B, Ladybug, even JJ Fad). Gradually, though, I was able to squash my urge to watch the movie Peled hadn’t made and instead appreciate the one she had made. Say My Name really picks up momentum in the latter half, when heated topics such as sexuality in hip-hop, motherhood, and rape fuel the discussion. I saw this with a small crowd of elderly Caucazoids—i.e., not hip-hop heads—and everyone seemed engaged throughout. (Final note: Erykah Badu is, hands down, the most alluring and intriguing woman in music.)



SXSW FILM

DAILY REVIEWS AND INTERVIEWS

By Cindy Widner

Documentary Feature, Documentary Competition

D: Nirit Peled; with MC Lyte, Chocolate Thai, Monie Love, Roxanne Shante, Erykah Badu, Estelle, Georgia Girls, Sparky Dee

"Female MCs' names have always been larger than their record deals," says MC Lyte in this beautifully constructed document of women hip-hop artists. That might even be stretching it: The names themselves have tended to fade toward "obscure" rather than "old-school." Instead of highlighting the few breakout exceptions, Dutch director Peled bores into the history and embraces the breadth of female-driven hip-hop, from way-back upstarts Sparky Dee and Roxanne Shante (age 14 when she hit) to current phenoms Georgia Girls and Estelle. They are stories that start and often end in obscurity but that also encompass the robust lives of talented women, full of good and bad: drug abuse, motherhood, domestic violence, rape, career success. Shot over five years and honed from footage of more than 250 artists, Say My Name avoids the survivor-syndrome trap, instead focusing on drop-dead skills, nonstop style, and at times a ferocity far more terrifying than mere gangsta rap thuggery. It's a lyric both heartbreaking and exhilarating.

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INFO

2009, 73 MINUTES, COLOR
UK/USA
ENGLISH

Credits

DIRECTOR/PRODUCER
Nirit Peled

PRODUCER
Dave Hemmingway/Mamamess

WRITER
Nirit Peled

CINEMATOGRAPHER
Dave Hemmingway
Nirit Peled

EDITORS
Chris Scheer
Christopher Hillswright

MUSIC/SOUND
Ronen Sabo
Dave Hemmingway

Cast

Aaries
Big Manda
Chocolate Thai
Dr. Roxanne Shante
Eryka Badu
Estelle
Georgia Girls
GTA Crew
Invincible
Jean Grae
MC Lyte
Miz korona
Monie Love
Mystic
Princess and Diamond
Remy Ma
Rah Digga
Sparky Dee
Shanika
Trinie

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