Blacks debating negative images of hip-hop
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ATLANTA - Watch hip-hop videos today and you'll probably be blown away by the amount of skin on display. Breasts bursting out of bikini tops. Bottoms "covered" by thongs.

Maybe it's caused by the success of crunk, the hard-core hip-hop sound from the South that's dominating the charts. Or could it be the effect of hip-hop's enduring obsession with pimp and stripper culture? Whatever the reason, the objectification of black women - both visually and lyrically - is all the rage.

You hear it in the Ying Yang Twins' controversial hit "Wait," a song so raunchy that only three lines of its uncensored version can be reproduced in this newspaper: "Switch the positions and ready to get down to business/So you can see what you've been missin'/You might had some but you never had none like this."

You see it in the latest videos released by 50 Cent in support of his best-selling sophomore CD, "The Massacre." The black-and-white "Disco Inferno" shows thong-clad backsides shaking at the camera; "Candy Shop" finds the rapper strolling through a mansion populated by women waiting to serve his sexual fantasies.

Now, as this years-old aesthetic reaches a crescendo, a rumble of complaint is emerging from black men and women. A letter to the editor in Vibe's March issue took the magazine to task for handing out a Vibe Award last year to the sexiest video vixen: "How can our black men, a lot of whom are influenced by magazines such as yours, learn to respect and honor their sisters?" Djenaba Kelly wrote. "How can a young lady learn to respect and honor herself when all the messages thrown at her by the media tell her that she must become an inanimate sexual object in order to get any recognition?"

Almost a year ago, students at Spelman College in Atlanta drew attention to the subject when they organized a protest of a campus fund-raiser by Nelly after getting a look at his "Tip Drill" video, which shows the rapper sweeping a credit card down a black woman's buttocks. Nelly promptly canceled the appearance.

In January, Essence began a "Take Back the Music" campaign that was initially scheduled to last a year, says editor-in-chief Diane Weathers, but it will now "go on until we see change." The magazine featured stories on the subject in its January and March issues, spearheaded a national weeklong campaign to write letters of complaint to programming directors at BET, MTV and Fuse, and last month held a packed town hall meeting at Spelman to discuss the subject with six panelists, including representatives of BET and of TVT Records, the Atlanta-based home of hit crunk acts the Ying Yang Twins and Lil Jon.

Next month the issue takes on a scholarly tone when the University of Chicago brings in more than 1,000 people to a three-day conference where professors, artists and activists will talk about feminism's place in hip-hop.

These are not indecency campaigns. It's not civil rights activist C. DeLores Tucker railing against the impropriety of rap lyrics. Michaela Angela Davis, an editor at Essence, prefers to think of the magazine's efforts as an intervention by loving family members. The people involved represent a generation that grew up with hip-hop and adore the music. They don't have a problem with Britney Spears rolling on the floor in her bra and panties in her recent video "Do Somethin'" or the parade of B-movie stars appearing on the cover of lad magazines in various states of undress.

"White women have these other images," says Davis, "If they're not cool with Britney, they can go to someone else. What's happened in hip-hop is we don't have all those choices anymore."

Industry executives and artists respond to such complaints by pointing out that there are, in fact, other hip-hop artists - Common, Kanye West, the Roots - who don't dabble in the hoochie aesthetic. These insiders say it's the responsibility of parents to deal with the images their children watch on TV and that sexism is
pervasive in society in general.

Those answers don't satisfy their critics.

"While there's sexism out there in society," says Cathy J. Cohen, director of the University of Chicago's Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture, which is organizing the Feminism and Hip Hop Conference taking place April 7-9, "we have to be especially concerned with media images of black women because, in fact, that's how most people understand and interact with black communities. We live in a segregated society. People generally don't interact. They may work with someone of a different race, but they don't socialize or go to church with people of a different race. So the way you get introduced to other racial groups is often through the media."

The hip-hop videos are troublesome, critics say, because they reinforce stereotypes about black women that have persisted for centuries. The potential political implications are huge. "Hypersexual deviance," says Tricia Rose, author of the seminal 2003 book on black women's sexuality "Longing to Tell" and a scheduled participant in the University of Chicago event, "has been associated with black women historically for a very long time. It's tied to the logic that cuts welfare policies for black women, right? The idea that they're promiscuous, they're irresponsible, or they're emasculating - all of those kinds of representations impact policies."

And the fallout does not just occur in the United States. Because of the artists' worldwide popularity, their messages affect minds globally. When Davis worked as editor of the now-defunct magazine Honey, one of her writers wrote about her experience as an exchange student in Spain where, Davis says, she was "solicited for sex just because she's a black American."

It wasn't always this way. When women appeared in hip-hop videos in the 1980s and early '90s, they were often clad in oversize pants and tops with some abs exposed here or some bare legs there to add some sexual heat. At that time, NWA, Ice-T and Public Enemy talked about police brutality and the limited horizons for young blacks living in the inner city.

"The politics of hip-hop during that time," said activist and former Vibe scribe Kevin Powell, at the Essence event in Atlanta, "terrified the white power structure."

So what happened? Another Essence panelist, MC Lyte, suggested that the shift began as hip-hop made the leap into the mainstream around 1992 or 1993. "There's some law," said Lyte, a respected female rapper from hip-hop's early years. "They say after 500,000 CDs, you're selling to a whole different realm. Now you are selling records to young white boys. I think once the corporations understood that, that was their time to come in and take control of it. Once the control was taken away, then came all of the nonsense."

Take the videos at their basic essence, and there's no question whom they're marketed to. "We know that men love skin and cars and gadgets," says Davis. "And that's what these videos have."

But the imagery takes the sexual element to such a degree that the plaintive question on one Spelman freshman's lips during the Essence event was "Why are y'all so mad? Why are we women vicious and all these things? What did we do?"

Panelist Bryan Leach, vice president of A&R at TVT Records, insisted that the cause isn't sexism. "There are a lot of artists who think this is just a song. I know Lil Jon, the Ying Yang Twins, a lot of these artists, personally, and they don't walk around every day thinking, 'I hate women.'"

Lyte responded, "So they're selling us out, but they're just putting on an act to sell a record." The crowd, predominantly female with a smattering of men, reacted to her comment by exploding into supportive applause.

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