

# RHYME AND REASON

THREE MCS ON FEMINIST HIP HOP  
AND HIP HOP FEMINISM

BY KALIL COHEN

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Listening to the hip hop played on mainstream corporate radio these days, you might be forgiven for not knowing that the rap genre originally took shape as a megaphone for social change, or that many artists today retain the movement's radical politics—creating revolutionary, liberating messages written by and for marginalized peoples, as opposed to extended paeans to Cristal and Four Loko.

And while there have always been politically engaged women and gender-queer rappers working below the genre's ever more profit-driven radar, the term "hip hop feminism" has only been codified as such in recent years, first with Joan Morgan's 2000 book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* and later in works like Gwendolyn D. Pough's 2007 anthology *Home Girls Make Some Noise!* as well as



in the recent documentary *My Mic Sounds Nice*. While there's no universally agreed-upon definition of hip hop feminism or which artists embody it, it tends to comprise self-identified feminists of all genders who use hip hop music and culture as a means to raise consciousness about sex-based and gender oppression.

Juba Kalamka, Mélange Lavonne, and Caridad De La Luz (aka La Bruja) all identify as feminist hip hop artists. Oakland-based Kalamka is a bisexual artist/activist most recognized for his work as a founding member of Deep Dickollective (D/DC), a queer black hip hop crew that helped to launch the "homo hop" movement. Lavonne is a lesbian rapper whose songs tackle issues such as AIDS, electoral politics, global warming, and hip hop hypocrisy; her videos have aired on MTV LOGO's top-10 "Click List" regularly since 2007. New York-based La Bruja released her debut album, *Brujalicious*, in 2006 and has recorded with Fat Joe, Jadakiss, and Afrikaa Bambaataa, among others. As a spoken-word artist, she's performed at New York's famed Nuyorican Poet's Café, on HBO's



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*Def Poetry Jam*, and in her off-Broadway one-woman comedy show, *Boogie Rican Blvd.* All three of these artists consider themselves activists, using their work to encourage the next generation of hip hop fans to meaningful social engagement. Both Kalamka and La Bruja run their own labels (Sugartruck Recordings and De La Luz Records, respectively) in order to retain control of their own work; Kalamka is also a disability and sex-worker rights activist. Lavonne's video for the track "Domestic Violence" has helped spark conversation around the topic of same-sex partner abuse; another video, for "I've Got You," spotlights queer parents of color. And De La Luz leads writing workshops at schools and community-development centers nationwide: Her first, "How Can I Change the World?," was created for New York's East Harlem Tutorial Program; the latest is called *Latinas4Life*.

I recently spoke with De La Luz, Lavonne, and Kalamka about their experiences as politically engaged artists, the limitations of commercial music, and what a more progressive hip hop looks like.

#### **What does it mean to you to be a feminist hip hop artist?**

**DE LA LUZ:** It means that each song defends my right to write and recite, and that I continue to create my own unique message completely aware of the objectification of women. The name La Bruja—the Witch—pays homage to those women who lost their lives for being independent thinkers and refusing to conform. Women like me [have always been] called witches anyway, so why not claim it and own it?

**LAVONNE:** I suppose it means being able to be proud of being a woman, and being yourself at the same time, without creative control being

stripped away (as well as your dignity and independence). It means to not be intimidated by the music industry just because they've decided you don't fit in their box.

**KALAMKA:** It's really important to me to exemplify and express the importance of respect for people's humanity—respect for *life* as best I can. I want my son to know that being a good human, not just a good man, means always having to work on that...and [to not] disrespect or fear the feminine that's in and around him. I want my daughter to have some armor and safe space to deal with and understand the nature of the myriad and constant assaults of women and girl children in patriarchal culture. I can't have anything to do with a hip hop that doesn't at least encourage these dialogues.

#### **Is the experience of women and genderqueer people in the hip hop industry different from their experience in the music industry more generally?**

**KALAMKA:** I don't think it's really that different, in the sense that hip hop, as a space of cultural production, traffics in the same sexism, misogyny, transphobia, and gender policing as other musical genres. There's a way that those -isms are worn on the sleeve, so to speak, by a lot of male hip hop artists of color, both independent/underground and mainstream—because that's how they're most often allowed to exert influence or assert themselves in white supremacist overculture. Top-down oppression encourages lateral oppression(s).

**DE LA LUZ:** In this industry and in this world, if women have had it hard, genderqueer people have had it even harder. I have a tremendous respect and love for the LGBT community because it takes an immense amount of courage to live outside of the rules, to be beyond definition and to live in a world that for the most part does not practice compassion. Thankfully, I do see a new wave of freedom of expression regarding sexuality. It's becoming more commonplace than taboo—even in the music industry—to express artistically the truths surrounding genderqueer life.

**LAVONNE:** Homophobia is still very present in music, regardless of how many shot-callers behind the scenes are gay. It's up to us to be a voice and continue making music for people who can relate to us.

#### **Do you feel like a part of a feminist hip hop community or movement? How would you describe it?**

**DE LA LUZ:** I have been part of an annual celebration called Momma's Hip Hop Kitchen, [which is] a concert by women speaking out against the injustices women continue to face. There is no exploitation allowed, only positive messages expressed through the elements of DJing, MCing, B-Girl/Breaking, graffiti and aerosol art, beatboxing, and education. [The philosophy is] "each one teach one."

**KALAMKA:** I'd say 99 percent of the students and activists who have booked Deep Dickollective or me as a solo artist would explicitly identify as feminist. At the same time, I've seen a tremendous amount of reticence among some female artists I've known—both queer and straight—to ostensibly identify as feminist because of the way it compromises their economic viability in a mainstream music industry. I hate to see people buying into that, but I understand the pressures they face. I have my struggles, but there's tons of privileges I have [that they don't] in the way I navigate my career.

#### **What's your take on misogyny in mainstream hip hop, and how has it affected you? We often hear the art form itself blamed**



for this phenomenon, while I think racism in collaboration with capitalism is the primary cause.

**LAVONNE:** You're right, money talks, and when you degrade women and show them in a disrespectful manner it sells more records, unfortunately.

**DE LA LUZ:** Women are just as responsible for our continued mistreatment, because instead of seeing each day as an opportunity to elevate our roles in hip hop and in society, many [of us] live into limited expectations. I've been confronted with ultimatums, disrespect, and even violence for lack of conformity, and for taking a stand.

**KALAMKA:** There's also a glaring lack of accountability from within communities, and with African-American artists in particular, around addressing these issues. Independent, "underground," and so-called "conscious" hip hop traffics in the same behavior—it's just more obliquely expressed. Much of the "homo hop" subculture, which I helped develop, is stridently misogynist and transphobic. It was an issue at times within D/DC. I've dealt with some surprise at my naiveté and had some disappointment. I just charge it to the game, though, and use it to continue [the] conversation.

### Have you struggled to find a balance between being a community activist and an artist?

**DE LA LUZ:** [That] balance was a constant struggle until I realized that I would always be one and the same. And I believe in the power of art as a catalyst for positive change—I've seen the results. [I participated in] the Stop the Bombs! campaign, where together with other artists we created a song and took a stand against the U.S. military's use of the little island of Vieques, in Puerto Rico, for bombing practice, [a use which had] polluted the land and the ocean with toxic chemicals. The campaign helped to eventually shut the military base down completely.

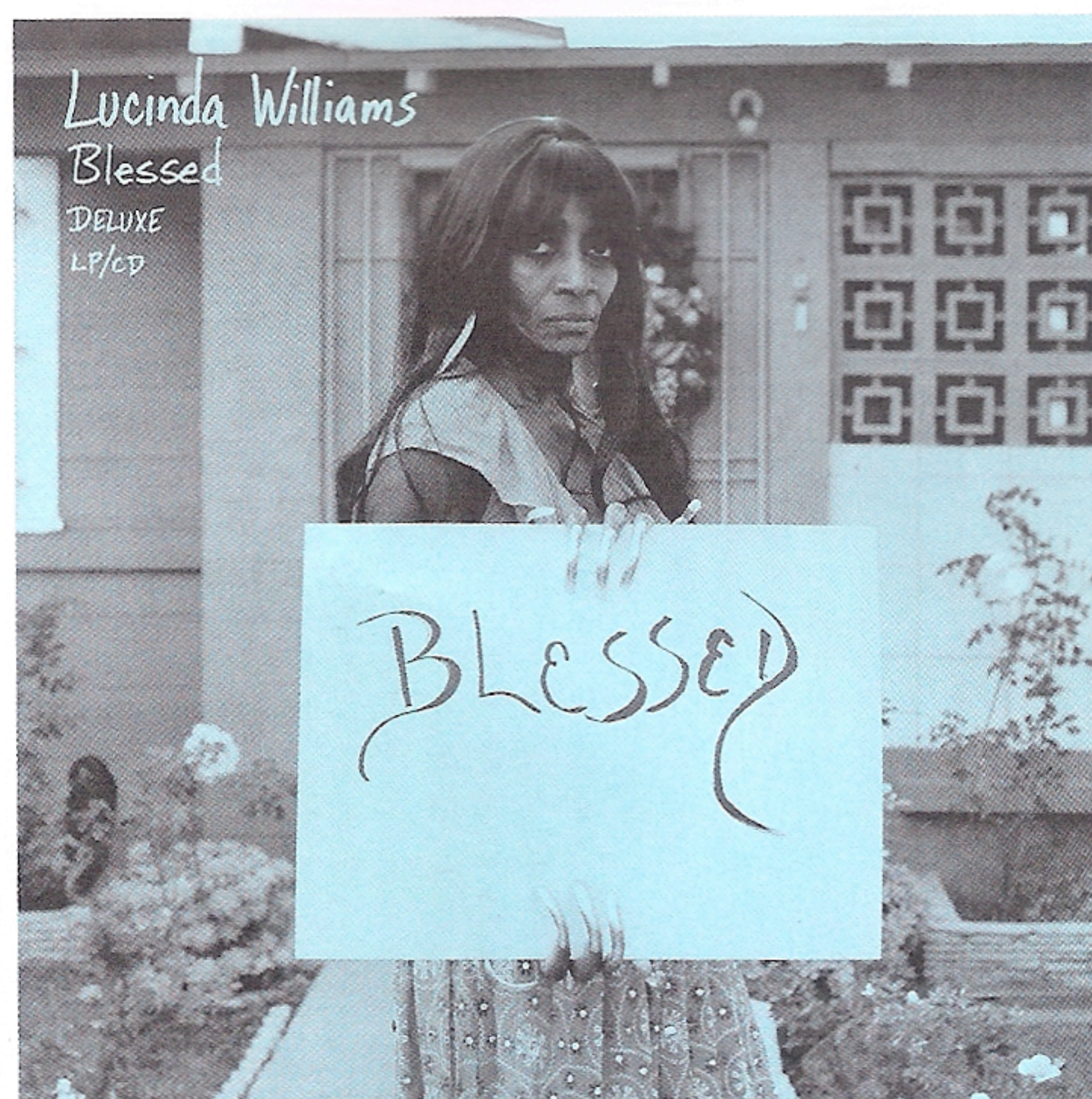
**KALAMKA:** Being an effective community activist is being an artist. They are one and the same, and it bothers me sometimes when I see people get limited by either being spelled with a capital "A." Quality public service is an art: You're onstage and you're juggling responsibilities; you're trying to move the crowd and take people to the next phase. Artmaking represents possibility. [And] successful community activism requires the belief that X can be done [even though] people have been told it cannot.

### How do you react when someone—a blogger, a music critic, even a hip hop artist—proclaims that hip hop is dead?

**LAVONNE:** I would think hip hop was dead too if I heard the same 10 songs on the radio 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There are millions of artists, but they don't have the same opportunities as the artist whose major label [is] paying radio stations to keep that artist in rotation. Hip hop is far from dead. You just need money to be [considered] alive.

**KALAMKA:** Most of what I hear are men of color grouching that their particular narrow, masculinist performativity [doesn't] have the same currency it did 20 years ago. They're complaining about loss of privilege, as opposed to having issues with institutionalized sexism or misogynist violence, or the inevitable changes in aesthetics, culture, economics and various community politics over time. Spouting "hip hop is dead" is cynical and emotionally manipulative—see Nas's album of that title—at worst, and shortsighted at best. Hip hop might be zombified in some senses, but it ain't never gonna die.

**Kalil Cohen** is a writer, filmmaker, and rapper who performs politically conscious hip hop as his alter ego, Metahuman. His music video for the song "So Pomo" will be released in September 2011.



## BLESSED

Lucinda Williams  
{LOST HIGHWAY}

Lucinda Williams is the Helen Mirren of country rock: a grande dame in her field, whose arch dignity remains even as the artistic face she shows us changes. And a change has come with *Blessed*, her 10th studio album, albeit one that's been sneaking toward us, in fits and starts, with each release of hers since 1998's *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*. After that apotheosis of catchy melodies and choruses, sung in her trademark fun yet wistful vein, Williams has increasingly favored mood over salient musical handholds. Now she's reached a new high-water mark, with this collection of songs that is more about a single, beautifully cohesive ocean of sound than the individual calm and rough waves that comprise it.

So, strangely, we're closer to Bruce Springsteen's *The Ghost of Tom Joad* here, or the more ambient parts of U2's oeuvre, than to Williams classics such as "Jackson." As with that Springsteen album, many of *Blessed*'s songs reveal their richness only after several listens, and, as with the latter example, they envelope

the listener organically, rather than with discrete edges, like a series of linked weather systems. It's not all quiet, though—in fact, on "Seeing Black," one of several death-themed songs, guest guitarist Elvis Costello goes on a Neil Young and Crazy Horse bender midway through. That buildup-to-a-downpour is mirrored later, on "Convince Me," when Matthew Sweet adds backing vocals to a mantra-like imprecation. Even the album's few duds are redeemed this way: The lyrics of "Soldier's Song" and the title track suffer from forced parallelism (e.g., "We were blessed by the teacher who didn't have a degree/ We were blessed by the prisoner who knew how to be free"), but instrumentally, they wash every cliché clean. At her best, Williams evokes others (k.d. lang on "Sweet Love," John Lee Hooker on "Born to Be Loved"), but her weathered voice is an archetype unto itself, the element at the heart of this album's atmosphere.

—JIM BURLINGAME

**COVERS ALBUM:** *Blessed* features a whopping eight different cover images—all of them gorgeous.