Bum Rush the Locker Room

By Evelyn McDonnell

OU ALL NEED TO STAY OUT OF MY dressing room," an exasperated Yo-Yo (Yolanda Whitaker) says, shutting the door on Ice Cube DJ Sir Jinx. Backstage at the Chicago stop of the Holiday Rapfest tour, the guys from the Lench Mob-lee Cube's posse-keep dropping in on Yo-Yo, a black 19-year-old woman with blond braids and yellow-green eyes that sparkle across a crowded room. Never mind that Jinx and Cube produced Yo-Yo's slamming debut album, Make Way for the Motherlode-Yo-Yo wants to hang with the ladies right now. "It's kind of hard to blend in with the Lench Mob," she explains. "I love to kick with them, and Ice Cube, that's my dude. But just hanging out with 'em, after a while it gets on your nerves."

Nikki D remembers the day she finally got through to Def Jam Records head Russell Simmons. With L.L. Cool J, Public Enemy and the Beastie Boys in its roster, Def Jam was rap's leading label. Nikki (née Nichele Strong) had moved to New York from West L.A. in hopes of joining the lineup. Her friends in the L.A. Posse had given Simmons Nikki's demo tape, and one day they found a message on their answering machine. "That bitch," Nikki recalls Simmons' voice saying. "The tape of the bitch you gave me, she's dope, I want her. Sign her up."

Nikki D was the first woman Simmons signed to Def Jam. "He's real shaky about female rappers," Nikki says. "I found that out later. He told me, 'That's the only reason I got you is I finally heard a voice that I want. You got the voice to whine. It's like you demand something."

Women rappers frequently find themselves in strange relations with men. Rap, after all, is traditionally a form by which young black males—the group Ice Cube calls an "endangered species"—have asserted their identity and carved an economic niche for themselves. After "Rappers' Delight" brought rap out of the urban underground, it took six years for a woman, Roxanne Shante, to get a rap hit. Perhaps it

was inevitable that such high concentrations of testosterone would lead to the locker-room lore of 2 Live Crew, or the bitchdissing of Ice Cube. Even when male

rappers try to be gender-sensitive, they end up sticking women in male-nurturing roles, like Public Enemy proselytizing, "It takes a woman to make a stronger man."

Public Enemy's black nationalism has spurred a consciousness-conscious stream of Afrocentric hip-hop acts, from the Jungle Bros. to Boogie Down Productions. Women have expanded this in a rediscovery of their own need for gender identity and liberation. In 1990, woman rappers turned the turnta-

bles on sexism. In 1991, they're taking the struggle to the streets. In "Gotta Up the Ante for the Panties," Nikki D raps: "Flash your drug money, watch me take it and run/I

don't mean pay me for my sexual pleasures/ But if you want to give it to me make me feel that it's better/Than any other stunt that I



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Yo-Yo and Nikki D both started rapping because they saw it as a way of gaining power females didn't have. "I was only a tomboy 'cause I liked to do what the guys did and that was rap," Yo-Yo says. "I was definitely a tomboy," Nikki D says. "When all the little boys on the block were hopping on their bikes I'd get my bike and be rollin' with 'em. I just wanted to be able to do everything everyone else could do."

Yo-Yo was named the most popular girl in her South-Central Los Angeles high school,

she says, because she always won the school's talent contests with her raps. Her reputation reached Ice Cube, who had split with N.W.A. and was looking to start his own action. Yo-Yo made her debut on *Ameri-KKKa's Most Wanted*, the Ice Cube album notorious for the number of times Cube used the word "bitch." On "It's a Man's World," Yo-Yo cuts in on Cube and takes him to the mat: "Without us your hand'd be your best friend/ So give us credit like you know you should/If I don't look good you don't look good."

Although Yo-Yo admires her female col-

leagues, she wrote the songs on Make Way for the Motherlode with Ice Cube and his ken in mind. "I listen to guys' lyrics and I just disagree on so much, it makes me want to write something back," she says. "Girl, Don't Be No Fool" has a moral; it's the kind of speaking-to-the-sisters rap that Yo uses when she speaks to high school students. "I try not to forget where I come from," Yo-Yo says. "I'm not going to say you're stupid for getting pregnant. I'm going to try to talk to them. Not you're a fool but don't be no fool."

Nikki D also directs messages to the ladies, but she does it in a more street style. Where Yo-Yo cautions women to "Put a Lid on It," Nikki doesn't mince words with songs like "Wasted Pussy." "If I said 'Wasted Body,' the street doesn't want to hear that. If I put it bluntly, you're more apt to listen," Nikki explains.

"A rapper and a songwriter are two different things," she continues. "Rappers can write rhymes all day long, but if you don't have a concept or a storyline, it's not really a song—until it has a beginning, a middle and an end." Her first single "Letting Off Steam" wasn't too much of a concept song, "but it did have a small concept in the fact that I was on Def Jam for three years watching all these other females come out. I was basically letting everybody know here I come."

Both Nikki D and Yo-Yo recognize the need for female solidarity. "Sisters don't have much love for one another," Yo-Yo says. "There could be a room of guys and another guy will come in and slap everybody's hand and everyone will slap his hand. And a girl will come in and stand in the corner and the other girls will sit there and talk about her," Nikki complains. "It's stupid that way." Yet Nikki and Yo-Yo both have raps about competing with other women for men. They're also willing to excuse their male colleagues for trashing ho's and bitches. "I don't have a problem with being called bitches," Nikki says. "At first I was offended by the five-letter words," Yo-Yo says. "But if you go on the road with me and see how many girls hang out, you'll say girl that's a shame. That's why we're disrespected."

Yo-Yo has started an organization called the Intelligent Black Woman's Coalition to raise women's self-esteem and grapple with issues like teenage pregnancy. "This groupie kept running after Cube," Yo-Yo says. "I said, 'Didn't you hear "A Man's World"? He's the one who be calling us bitches and whores.' I said it wouldn't be nothing without a woman's touch. You need to be getting my autograph, not Cube's."

