

# Essay on hip hops pioneering women

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When hip hop first broke onto the music scene in the early 1970s, it was dominated by a collection of predominately African American men based in New York City. Hip hop music combined rhythmic music with a consistent beat and rapid chanting, now referred to as rapping. It was almost fifteen years before women began to take an active part in the production of hip hop music. All considered to be among hip hop's pioneering women artists, three women—Yolanda Whitaker, Lana Michele Moorer, and Dana Elaine Owens—have each had successful careers as hip hop artists, actresses, and activists. However, among the three, Dana Elaine Owens has proven to be the most successful and her career and accomplishments have overshadowed the other two women on the national stage and established her as the Queen of Hip Hop.

All three women were born in the early 1970s and began rapping a young age. Yolanda Whitaker, known by her hip hop name of Yo-Yo, was born in August of 1971 in the Compton area of Los Angeles (Ramirez). She began rapping at age 16, and at age 19 she was signed by well-known rap artist Ice Cube. Lana Michele Moorer, otherwise known as MC Lyte, was born in Brooklyn in October of 1970 and began rapping at the age of 12 (Cain-Jackson). Dana Elaine Owens, known as Queen Latifah, was born in New Jersey in March of 1970 and began her rapping career in high school (“About Queen Latifah”). She released her first single in 1988 and her first full album in 1989. All three women, about the same age, broke into the hip hop industry about the same time and soon began collaborating. They collectively became three of the most influential women pioneers in hip hop. However, their lyrics and methods differed from each other and gave them

each a unique style.

Whitaker's hip hop style was considered in the genre of gangster rap and she frequently rapped about women's issues like the misogynistic treatment of women in the hip hop industry and in the lyrics of rap artists (Ramirez). Like Whitaker, Moorer often rapped about the sexism in hip hop and is considered feminist rapper for her lyrics that deride the misogyny in the industry.

However Moorer's lyrics focus more on empowering women rather than railing against sexism. For example, in her single "Roar," the first line of the chorus is "I am woman, hear me roar," which demonstrates her message of equality and power for women through their achievements. In "Roar," Moorer also applauds her own accomplishments in the hip hop industry, saying, "when I grab the mic it's never a bore." This type of self-congratulations was common for male artists but few women had ever displayed the same kind of confidence. Owens exhibits this type of confidence in her lyrics as well. In her single "Ladies First," Owens raps "The ladies will kick it the rhyme that is wicked," and "a woman can bear you break you take you" ("Queen Latifah's Lyrical Contribution"). These lyrics, along with her other work, show the evolving consciousness of women in hip hop that they had valuable talents to contribute to the industry that for the most part had objectified them.

All three women have also ventured into areas other than music with varying degrees of success. While Whitaker is most well-known for her collaborations with Ice Cube and other female artists like Brandy and has received a Grammy nomination for her single "Stomp," she has also worked as an actress in mostly urban and ethnic oriented film and television shows.

Moorer is an accomplished businesswoman who has opened an accessories boutique in Los Angeles as well as a global entertainment firm that focuses on creative services such as artist management and music production. After a successful start to her music career, Owens soon began dabbling in other areas like producing, managing, and acting. In addition to her status as a hip hop icon for which she has won a Grammy and been nominated for six more, she has also become a well-known actress and has received numerous acting awards (“ About Queen Latifah”).

Perhaps the most lasting legacy of all three women is their participation in activism work. Whitaker is the most successful of the three in the arena of activism. She is involved in mentoring and community work and founded the I. B. W. C. (Intelligent Black Women’s Coalition) which mentors troubled teens in Los Angeles (Ramirez). She has also taken her feminist message to colleges and universities and has spoken out for the empowerment of women and minorities. Moorer holds the distinguishing title of being the first African American, male or female, to serve as the President of the Los Angeles Chapter of the Recording Academy which is a Grammy organization (Cain-Jackson). Despite her success in other areas, Owens is least well-known for her activism. Although she continues to spread her message of female empowerment and equality through various mediums such as her talk-show and speeches, she has not organized in the same way that Whitaker and Moorer have.

All three women have enjoyed successful music careers and brought awareness to women’s issues in their music. Each woman is successful and all are considered to be among hip hop’s pioneering women. The differences

between these women are the degree of success and notoriety that they enjoy. Most fans of hip hop, especially early hip hop, are familiar with Yo-Yo, MC Lyte, and Queen Latifah's bodies of work. They understand the influence these three women had on successive female hip hop artists like Lil' Kim and Da Brat (Ramirez). However the status of hip hop pioneer is where the recognition for Yo-Yo and MC Lyte stops. This is not true of Queen Latifah. She enjoys continued success in all areas of her career and more people are familiar with her body of acting work and her music production, making her Hip Hop's reigning Queen.

## **Works Cited**

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