



ALL SUBSTANCE, NO FLASH: MC Lyte was known for confronting hip-hop's pervasive sexism with her chart-topping rhymes.

A Man's World

These days, female rappers are less prominent than ever

EMCEES | In the testosterone-fueled rap world, women have always had a role — usually as the side-chick, the video vixen or the oversexed diva.

MC Lyte was one of the excep-

tions. A deft lyricist who rapped with a man's bluster and braggadocio, she gained a footing in the rap game in the late '80s and early '90s. Using skillful, clever rhymes, she delivered hits like "Cha Cha Cha," "Lyte as a Rock" and "I Cram to Understand U."

This month, MC Lyte will be honored as a pioneer during VH1's

annual Hip Hop Honors special — the lone woman in a sea of men. But her tribute underscores the declining role of women in rap, even as the genre enters its third decade.

Lil' Kim is the most successful female among today's rappers, but her last effort didn't even go platinum. Remy Ma had a hit this year with the single "Conceited," and

Shawna got attention for her raunchy ode "Gettin' Some ...," but neither of their albums made much impact on the charts. The maverick Missy Elliott's last two albums were commercial disappointments.

And some of the biggest female names have been absent from the trade. Foxy Brown's long-awaited comeback has been long postponed; Eve is now known more for acting and fashion than rapping; and Lauryn Hill, one of the most acclaimed and talented MCs, chose to disappear from the music map.

Most of today's females are defined by their sexuality rather than by their rhyming skills — for artists such as Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Trina and Khia, explicit sex talk and vampy clothes are the norm.

On the day of the VH1 Hip Hop Honors, MC Lyte had a softer, glamorous edge, unlike the tomboy, baggy look she rocked some 20 years ago.

"It was so male dominated, so it's, like, 'OK, how can I get in this and not make too much of a scene and but still be heard?'" she said. "I didn't really want you to look at me; I wanted you to pay attention to what I said."

But while women may be more free to speak their minds, MC Lyte says they need to put more focus on innovation and creativity. "What it boils down to is the talent," she said. "I think the more talent you have, the less you need to rely on other sources."

NEKESA MUMBI MOODY (AP)