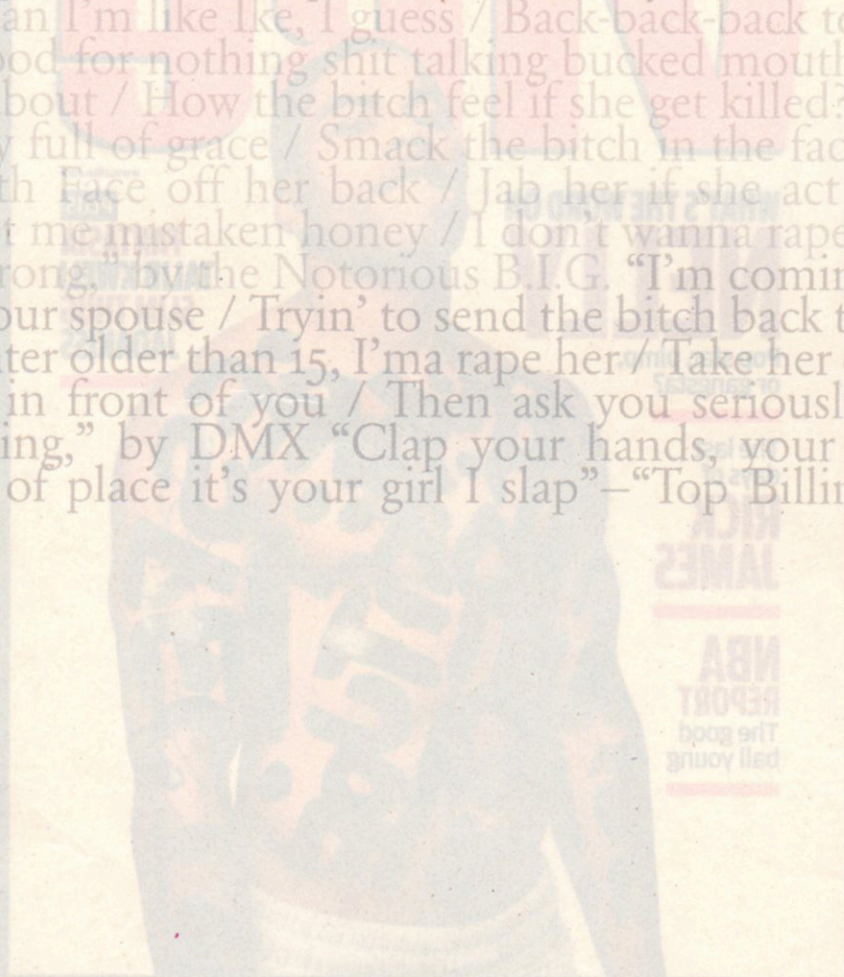


Ackrite bitch / When I see you in the spot, you just ackrite, younahmsayin / When I yank you by the fuckin' perm / Don't be lookin' at a nigga crazy / Just get with the digits and be the fuck out, younahmsayin?"—"Ackrite," by Dr. Dre, featuring Hittman "Gotcha! / Go ahead yell! / Here I'll scream with you / 'AH SOMEBODY HELP!' / Don't you get it bitch, no one can hear you. Now shut the fuck up and get what's comin' to you / You were supposed to love me / NOW BLEED! BITCH BLEED! / BLEED! BITCH BLEED BLEED!"—"Kim," by Eminem "And of course I'm slappin' hos / Smackin' ho / Up and down the fuckin' avenues...I'm so god damn bad / That I had to kick off in a ho's ass...And I know it'd catch up with her / Next day in the paper. Yeah the nigga raped her"—"Pimp of the Year," by Dru Down "I treat a bitch like Tina, that mean I'm like Ike, I guess / Back-back-back to reality you funk hood rat / You good for nothing shit talking bucked mouth / Want some real shit I give a fuck about / How the bitch feel if she get killed?"—"My Dirty Ho," by 213 "Hail Mary full of grace / Smack the bitch in the face / Take her Gucci bag and the North Face off her back / Jab her if she act / Funny with the money oh you got me mistaken honey / I don't wanna rape ya, I just want the paper"—"Dead Wrong," by the Notorious B.I.G. "I'm comin' in the house and I'm gunnin' for your spouse / Tryin' to send the bitch back to her maker / And if you got a daughter older than 15, I'ma rape her / Take her on the living room floor, right there in front of you / Then ask you seriously, whatchu wanna do?"—"X Is Coming," by DMX "Clap your hands, your hands you clap / If your girl's out of place it's your girl I slap"—"Top Billin'," by Audio Two



LOVE HURTS

From the VIP section to the block, women of color are experiencing alarming rates of violence at the hands of men. How much is hip hop culture—often criticized as misogynistic—to blame? **ELIZABETH MÉNDEZ BERRY** looks for answers. // Illustration by Mirko Ilic



BEFORE GOING TO SLEEP, many little girls pray for a new Barbie, an Xbox game, or a trip to Disney World. At age 7, Vanessa Rios asked only that “Papi would stop hitting Mami.”

It was May 1999, and Vanessa was staying with her aunt, Penelope Rios Santiago, in Miami. After Santiago overheard her niece’s bedtime prayer, she confronted her brother, Christopher Rios. His reaction? It wasn’t true, he said.

Though he had much in common with other abusers, Christopher Rios was also different: He was Big Pun, a famous rap star. He first hit his wife, Liza, when she was 16, and over the course of their 10-year relationship, she claims he sent her to the hospital three times and prevented her from seeking needed medical attention on many other occasions. “One time he told me to change the batteries in his beeper,” says Liza Rios, now 31. “I totally forgot about it, and he took this lead pipe and started swinging on me. I had my daughter in my arms, and I told Cuban [Link, who was there] to take the baby. After he finished beating me, my elbow was twisted out of place. I was limping for two months.”

Each time Rios got up the courage to leave, Pun tracked her down and convinced her to come back to him. “After we got married and he had that paper, it was like he had bought me,” she says. Still, though she was financially reliant on him, Rios began to loathe his extravagant displays. “I didn’t even enjoy the jewelry, because it was, like, I got the extra bracelet because you punched me extra hard,” she says.

Rios did leave Pun twice, but returned both times, and she was with him when he died of a heart attack in 2000. Backed by footage of Pun pistol-whipping her, she and other witnesses described his beatings in the 2002 documentary *Big Pun: Still Not a Player*, which she coproduced. Many criticized her for going public, among them Fat Joe, who argued that if there was abuse, Pun must’ve been justified. Others wondered why Rios waited until he died to tell her story.

For some women, speaking out while their abuser is alive is not an option. Murder at the hands of a romantic partner is a leading cause of death among African-American women between the ages of 15 and 24, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. The

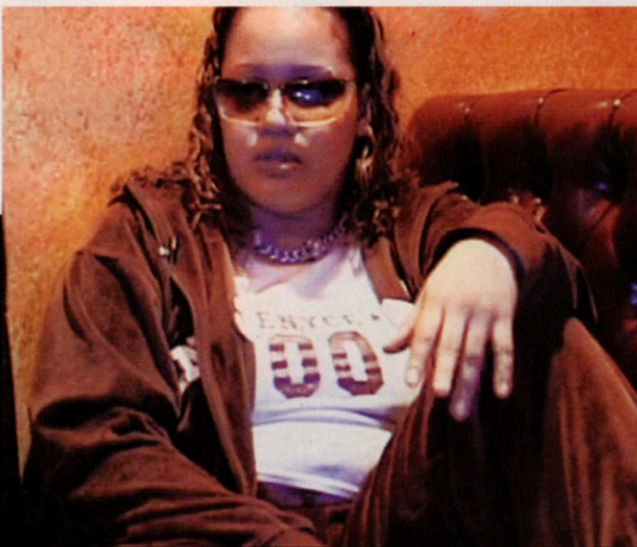
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that intimate-partner violence in the United States leads to two million injuries annually and nearly 1,300 murders. “I tried to use my life as a testimony. I hope that somebody can learn from this story,” Rios says during a phone interview.

Another factor motivated Rios: Chris’s assaults have had a huge and lasting impact on their children. “My son was smacking my girls up for any little thing,” says Rios. “Even though they love Chris, my kids have a lot of anger, too. They still have nightmares, but my son has calmed down a lot. He hasn’t hit his sisters in a long time.”

RIOS’S REVELATION STRUCK a nerve in the community that turned the phrase “smack my bitch up” into a catchy chorus (on the Ultramagnetic MC’s 1988 song “Give the Drummer Some,” later sampled by the UK rave act Prodigy). Many argue that mainstream rap’s verbal violence against women is just entertainment, but there’s evidence to the contrary. For example: Dr. Dre, in a 1991 *Rolling Stone* article, admitted to attacking TV host Dee Barnes in a nightclub, and in 2002, radio personality Steph Lova charged DJ Funkmaster Flex with hitting and choking her over a perceived slight. Barnes and Dr. Dre settled their suit in 1993; Lova and Flex settled in 2003. If prominent industry figures feel comfortable attacking women publicly, what are they doing in private? When you get paid big money to call every woman a ho, at what point do you start believing you’re a pimp?

In fact, a number of high-profile personalities have been accused of violence against women; most can’t be named in print because the victims are unwilling to go on the record with their stories. But legal records and interviews corroborate a tragic pattern of brutality and denial. Ten years ago, Mystikal condemned the violent murder of his sister. In January 2004, Mystikal himself pleaded guilty to sexual battery after sexually assaulting a woman, an incident that was captured on videotape.

He’s far from the only hip hop figure to have faced serious allegations. Hip hop mogul Damon Dash is the object of a \$15 million civil lawsuit in New York, filed by a woman who says he raped her after a party in Brazil in 2003, a claim he heatedly denies. Dash



PUNISH ME: “It was, like, I got the extra bracelet because you punched me extra hard,” says Rios.

**WHEN YOU GET PAID
BIG MONEY TO CALL EVERY
WOMAN A HO, AT WHAT POINT
DO YOU START BELIEVING
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has been accused of violence against women on several occasions. The *Washington Post* recently reported that when Dash was 16, a 14-year-old girl at his upstate New York summer camp accused him of raping her. Dash says he was never accused of rape, just “sexual misconduct,” and that he was vindicated when a lawsuit and a related arrest warrant in the case never went anywhere.

Between 1990 and 1996, cops were called on multiple occasions to quell “domestic disturbances” at the Long Island home Dash shared with Linda Williams, the mother of his eldest child, Damon II. Dash was arrested multiple times, at least one order of protection was granted, and police records indicate that Williams reported that she was injured; a caseworker who interviewed their then 6-year-old son noted that the boy said “he had seen his father hit his mother in the stomach,” and that “he was afraid his father was going to kill his mother.” Dash also refutes these charges, noting that he was awarded custody of the child after a bitter fight. Still, to many there seems to be a disturbing pattern to these accusations.

Like Dash, Busta Rhymes has also had to fend off accusations. In January 2004, a woman claiming to be the mother of his children appeared on *The Wendy Williams Experience* on WBLS radio in New York, saying Rhymes was chronically abusive and had thrown her down the stairs while she was pregnant. Also, court records show that a woman who had children by him was granted a restraining order against him in 1999. Rhymes declined to comment for this story, and attempts to reach the woman were unsuccessful. But according to Williams, after that interview, Rhymes saw to it that the woman did not speak out again. “He threw her a few dollars, and a few threats,” says Williams. “She’s no longer doing interviews. She buckled.”

SEVERAL WOMEN WHO HAVE HAD relationships with well-known abusers declined to speak on the record for this piece and said they feared reprisal. The ex-girlfriend of a famed MC mentions a chart-topping rapper who attacked his wife (and mother of his children) with a champagne bottle; a multiplatinum producer tells VIBE matter-of-factly that he has seen many physical fights between artists and their romantic partners over the years. Neither witness cares to elaborate. Says Nzingha Gumbs, a prominent makeup artist, “Peo-

ple are unwilling to come forward and talk about what’s going on. They’re scared that they’ll lose their jobs.”

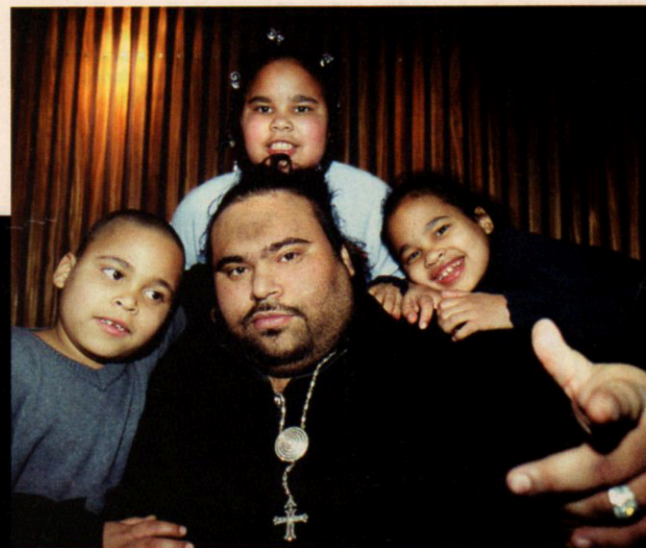
Rapper Charli Baltimore experienced similar complacency when there was much less money involved: As a teenager, she says she endured four brutal years with the father of her eldest daughter. Her boyfriend was a big guy—6’3”, and she was a skinny 5’7”. She says he attacked her regularly from the age of 14, even while she was pregnant with their daughter. “I remember one time he had the door shut, and I was supposed to knock but I didn’t. I walked in and he and three guys were playing a dice game,” she recalls. “I walked out with a black eye. His friends didn’t say anything. They were probably laughing.”

At 17, Baltimore finally escaped her abuser, but many young women today are trapped in the same situation. And attitudes among young men may be hardening. According to the market research firm Motivational Educational Entertainment (MEE) Productions, which surveyed thousands of low-income African-American youths for a 2003 study, acceptance of abuse is on the rise. Many felt there were plenty of situations in which violence against a woman is justified.

THE NOTORIOUS B.I.G. SET THAT mentality to music. On the track “Me & My Bitch,” he raps to his beloved, “You talk slick, I beat you right.” Apparently, he was keeping it real: Since Big’s death, his widow, Faith Evans, has taken a public stand against domestic violence. She sang the chorus on Eve’s indictment of abusers, “Love Is Blind” (remix), and appeared in Eve Ensler’s V Day event in Harlem, opposing violence against women. Evans declined to comment for this article, but according to two people who worked closely with her, her face was bruised throughout her marriage to Biggie and didn’t stop being black-and-blue until after he died.

“Biggie treated women like a pimp with his hos,” says a childhood buddy, who also noticed Evans’s bruises. “He would talk about hitting them. He’d say things like, ‘She was out of pocket, so I had to put that bitch back in line.’” Baltimore, who dated Big for two years, acknowledges that he was physically violent with her during their relationship, and in the VH1 episode of *Driven* that focused on Lil’ Kim, numerous friends of hers allege that he was vicious. Apparently, she wore the giant Jackie O. sunglasses to shield black eyes.

ALL IN THE FAMILY: “My son was smacking my girls up for any little thing,” says Rios, Pun’s widow.



“PEOPLE ARE UNWILLING TO COME FORWARD. THEY’RE SCARED THEY’LL LOSE THEIR JOBS.”

Rappers like Biggie figure prominently in young lives. The participants in the MEE survey listened to the radio and watched TV for an average of three hours each per day—76 percent called BET their favorite station. Like Big Pun, who grew up in an abusive household, these youths are learning by example. According to the MEE surveys, both young men and women used almost exclusively negative words to describe the females they knew—they were either hos, sluts, or bitches—and many young males boasted about “running trains,” groups of men having sex with and sometimes raping one woman.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN CROSSES class and racial lines, but it affects certain groups disproportionately, including police officers, among whom domestic violence is two to four times more common than the U.S. average, according to the National Center for Women & Policing. Another academic study indicates that partner abuse against Latino women is 50 percent higher than among white women. Minorities are less likely to talk about it, however. “Communities find it easier to focus on oppression that comes from outside than on what we do to ourselves,” says Dr. Oliver Williams, executive director of the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community.

The complex legacy of racism has given gender dynamics a particular twist in communities of color, according to Marcus Flowers, 28, a community educator and trainer at Atlanta’s Men Stopping Violence. “Because of socioeconomic factors, African-American men have a harder time fulfilling the protector and provider roles, so they overcompensate in other areas,” says Flowers. “They focus on wielding power where they can—in their own communities and in their intimate relationships.” Author and activist Kevin Powell has called this “bootleg masculinity”—and hip hop’s studio pimps and gangstas are its poster children. “Of course, hip hop didn’t create violence against women, but it can endorse and accelerate it,” says Powell, who admits that he has himself been violent toward women in the past. “If you listened to mainstream hip hop over the last 10 years, you would think that we men of color hate women.”

Flowers uses the strip club-themed video “P-Poppin’,” by Ludacris, to make a point when he’s talking with teenagers. “The way that the



LONG KISS GOODNIGHT: Baltimore acknowledges that Big was physically violent with her during their relationship.

FATAL ATTRACTION

Women who strike back against their abusers are trying to get a fair shake in the justice system.

Flozelle Woodmore killed her longtime boyfriend, Clifton Morrow, in self-defense in 1986. For four years, she says, he had repeatedly beaten her in public and behind closed doors, even when she was pregnant. On this day, Morrow had not only attacked Woodmore, but threatened to kill her son and had slammed the 2-year-old against a wall. “I started screaming at him,” Woodmore says, “he knocked me down, and I went and got my purse.” In it she had hidden a gun belonging to her violent stepfather, and she used it to shoot Morrow fatally in the chest.



PAYING THE PRICE: Flozelle Woodmore photographed in a California prison.

Though she had acted to save herself and her son, the justice system offered Woodmore little recourse. She pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and was sentenced to 15 years to life. Now 36, she is still incarcerated in Central California Women’s Facility in Chowchilla.

Many such killings are acts of desperation. An analysis conducted by the *University of Pennsylvania Law*

Review found that 70 percent of “battered woman homicides,” as they are termed, occurred while the man was assaulting the woman or presenting a serious threat of death or injury. The study also found, however, that courts convict these women at the same 75 to 80 percent rate as other homicide defendants. Anne Coughlin, a law professor at the University of Virginia, points to a history of double standards. “Women who struck back at their husbands in the past were punished severely,” Coughlin says. “The law viewed these acts as forms of treason; the husband was considered the head of the household and the wife his subject, and so the wife wasn’t given a break at all.”

After the feminist movement of the 1960s and ’70s, however, women’s claims of self-defense began to gain legal legitimacy. In recent years, state governments have taken steps to protect domestic-abuse victims against charges of murder and assault, for example, by recognizing battered woman syndrome, a theory of “learned helplessness” in which women, trapped in a cycle of abuse, may see drastic measures as the only means of escape.

In October 2002, Marva Wallace, an abused woman imprisoned for shooting her husband in 1984, became the first female in California to be released, pending a new trial, under a new battered women’s defense law. In January 2003, the state announced that Wallace would not be retried for murder after pleading guilty to voluntary manslaughter, and was free to go based on time already served. Many women who qualify for release under the new laws, however, are still imprisoned. The long march to justice is only beginning.

Kevin Wong

If you are in an abusive relationship, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE.

women are paraded in front of fully clothed customers, their bodies for sale, reminds me of how half-naked slaves were exhibited to white buyers at auctions, as if they were animals," he says. "Now it's not the whip—it's the dollar bill. We black men have become slave masters in our own community."

And it's not just men who buy into this tough-guy myth. "Some young women define jealousy, controlling behavior, and abuse as expressions of interest, caring, and love," says Dr. Williams. "When there's emotional abuse, some women start believing that they deserve the violence," adds Tara Borelli, a staff attorney with Break the Cycle, a nonprofit that provides free legal services. "For men, partly, it's the importance of looking tough," says Dr. Williams. "Partly, it's a lack of problem-solving skills. Young people see violence as the primary approach to conflict."

Laci Peterson's case may have made it to Court TV, but thousands of women have suffered similar fates out of the limelight. After two neighborhood girls were killed in Brooklyn, a community youth organization called Sista II Sista turned its energies to addressing the dilemma. "Young women deal with violence daily, from drama at home with family to getting harassed walking down the street," says Adjoa Jones de Almeida, 31, a Sista II Sista staff member. "Just the other day, we saw this girl getting dragged down the street by her hair by her boyfriend. It's everywhere, but we are taught to see it as normal, until somebody dies."

In interviews for this article, many men preferred to discuss male victims, though they represent just one in nine cases. Both men and women used euphemistic language like "the situation" to describe assaults—a common trap people fall into when discussing domestic violence. Many blamed a woman for what she said or did, instead of holding the man accountable for his decision to react violently. Several men also tended to minimize their attacks; one said "it wasn't no black eyes," another, "I never sent her to the hospital." Few recognized that most relationships that end in murder start with something much more minor. According to Liza Rios, the first time Pun slapped her, when they were in high school, he apologized and said it would never happen again.

AS A TEENAGER, JUELZ SANTANA, 21, was arrested after attacking his longtime girlfriend, and subsequently wrote a song called "My Problem (Jealousy)." The assault occurred after he heard gossip that she was unfaithful. "I was 19 at the time, my career was popping off," says Santana. "I was like, I'm the dude, I can't be hearing this about my girl! People gonna be looking at me bad." They had an argument, and it escalated. "She hit me in the back of the head," he says, "and I hit her on the arms, grabbed her up, controlled her. She was crying."

That incident led the couple to re-evaluate their relationship, and since then, he says, he hasn't hit her. "I found other ways to resolve things," he says. "Fighting proves nothing. I had to realize that in order to love her, I had to trust her."

THOUGH SANTANA'S CANDOR and self-awareness—both in conversation and on record—are impressive, hip hop attitudes in general may be even less supportive of women today than they were when many rushed to Dee Barnes's side after Dre attacked her in 1991. In 2002, few in the community spoke out on Steph Lova's behalf. Although a settlement was reached quietly, it didn't seem to scare away any of Funkmaster Flex's endorsements. When Liza Rios's story emerged, she got little support or coverage. One person told VIBE that a major rap publication pulled a story about her for fear of offending Pun's camp. It wasn't just the media that turned a blind eye. Plenty of people repeated rumors that she had been unfaithful, and, therefore, deserved to be beaten.

Called hos or called housewives, too many women in relationships with men in the hip hop community find that they get treated like prostitutes—wham, bam, and bam some more. Those who don't stick to the script—or take the hush money—face isolation. Liza Rios attempted to do a tribute tour in Pun's honor to raise funds for a foundation for battered women and children that she had created. But after the DVD came out, people stopped returning her calls.

"The industry closed a lot of doors to me, I guess it made them uncomfortable," says Rios. "Maybe it's too close to home." ▣

ERINIE PANICCIOLI



THINGS DONE CHANGED: Since Big's death, Faith Evans has taken a public stance against domestic violence.

"WE BLACK MEN HAVE BECOME SLAVE MASTERS IN OUR OWN COMMUNITY."