



JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

DJ Karen Nimblett, from left, DJ Jasmine Courneya and Sabra Ripley, a b-girl with breakdance group DeCypher Cru will host Ladies in the House tonight at Babylon Night Club.

Sisters feel the beat

Women DJs, b-girls combat sexism
by showcasing their skills

BY DAYANTI KARUNARATNE

On the dance floor, amid the sweaty bodies and flashing coloured lights, there's only one thing louder than the scream of sexuality — and that's the music. The vibe of a club revolves around it, literally, as the ebb and flow of a crowd is shaped by the beats streaming from the DJ booth.

It's a position of power, and it's still mostly men who call the shots. But the female sector of this underground society is growing, becoming more vocal, and uniting to defy stereotypes.

This International Women's Day, a few women who regularly navigate this special place in Ottawa's nightlife have lined up an all-female crew to show the depth and range of their talent, and are stepping out from behind their turntables to talk about their unique struggles and achievements in the city's urban arts scene.

Jasmine Courneya, a.k.a. DJ Jas Nasty, and Karen Nimblett, a.k.a. DJ Karyen, have teamed up with Sabra Ripley of breakdance group DeCypher Cru to host Ladies in the House, an International Women's Day

(IWD) celebration tonight at Babylon Night Club. The show will raise funds for Harmony House, a local women's shelter, and feature female DJs, MCs, visual artists, and breakdancers (or b-girls, as they prefer to be called).

For the organizers, who were brought together by events like the Governor General's Urban Arts Forum last fall, IWD presented an opportunity to celebrate the fact that they are women. Most of the time, because they work in a male-dominated scene that puts sexuality front and centre, they have to be wary of being used as simply marketing tools or novelty objects.

"I'm very vocal about how I'm represented," says Nimblett, a 31-year-old mother and web designer, explaining that she checks her event promo material carefully to make sure they don't showcase her gender over her tunes.

As Courneya says, "it's hard to get away from being examined on a more physical level."

Ripley, 31, says she has similar experiences on the dance floor.

"I recognize that I have a quality in my dance that is definitely feminine. But I don't want my physical body as a

woman to be the reason that people are bringing me out to things," Ripley says.

Also at play are the women who use their marketing prowess to the max — like spinning topless.

"But how far can you go to distance yourself from that? It's not that we're totally against femininity," Courneya says.

Similarly, Ripley explains that people unfamiliar with urban arts compare b-girls to hip-hop dancers.

"Hip-hop dance is very closely associated with video dance, and videos tend to dress people in these very short shorts and there's a lot of sexualization, whereas b-girling is all about your creative style. There's a lot of emphasis on strength — both physical and emotional strength of character," Ripley says, her eloquent — she calls it geeky — voice raised slightly.

For female artists looking to get ahead and stay true to themselves, the gender gap can be tricky.

These three women have found the best way to combat the stereotypes is simply to stick with it and show their skills.

"For all that we say novelty gets us somewhere, if we don't have something to back us up, that fizzles pretty fast," says Ripley, who has been active in the Ottawa b-girl community since 2000.

Nimblett has a unique accomplish-

ment behind her: raising a son while climbing the ladder as a DJ.

"He thinks it's pretty cool. He actually started getting into it a little bit, but now at (13) he's into his own things. And if he wants music he can just ask me, because I got everything," says Nimblett, who insists it was only last year, through acting classes, that she overcame her extreme shyness.

"She sets an amazing example for her son," Ripley says. "He's going to be looking at women as people who get involved in things and who are stepping up and who are proactive."

This 'you go girl' attitude reverberates throughout the Ladies in the House promotions, as they aim to celebrate womanhood and show off the rich talent pool of female artists in Ottawa.

"For 364 days of the year we are DJs, b-girls," Ripley says. "But on one day of the year we're really focusing on the fact that we're women."

This one-off event has already had a trickle-down effect, as the organizers have been offered a regular Thursday night mixed-media gig at Helsinki Disco and Lounge in the ByWard Market.

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