

Bass of Power



By Rob Hooper, *University Times*, California State U., Los Angeles

Queen Latifah seems to be sitting on top of the world. At 23, she has accomplished more than most artists hope to in a lifetime.

Her list of achievements includes her own record label, management company, video store, platinum albums and a feature film role in last fall's *My Life*. Now the Queen says she is glad to take on yet another challenge in a long list of career goals — television.

"I've always been into a million different things at one time," she says. "This is no more difficult than being in high school, running through the streets of New York and playing on a basketball team. That took the same amount of time, but now I'm just focused on different things."

One of the main things she's focused on these days is her role in the Fox TV sitcom, *Living Single*. In the show, Latifah plays magazine editor Khadijah, a tough, outspoken entrepreneur who shares a Brooklyn brownstone with two other successful women.

These characters, along with Khadijah's best friend from college, offer each other advice on work, friendship and, most importantly, the opposite sex. The result is a stylish blend of humor and sincerity that appeals to both teenage and adult audiences. Latifah sees many of her character's personality traits in herself. "Khadijah and I do

have a lot in common," she says. "We're both successful. We're also both homegirls from around the way but straight-up professionals at work."

Even when playing a part, Latifah's down-to-earth attitude comes through in her performance. "My own integrity flows through my character," she says, "so I won't do anything I don't agree with on TV. I made that clear [to the producers] before there was even a pilot."

Latifah says her character's no-nonsense approach to life appeals to her own sensibilities, but the show has not met with equal praise among critics. Although *Living Single* has garnered high ratings in its first season, some television writers have accused the show of male-bashing.

"People are watching the show," Latifah says defensively, "so obviously they're not upset. It started by some guy writing an article, and he was basically nit-picking. He wasn't looking at any of the good things we do on the show — the humor in it or the camaraderie between the characters. He picked out one line in the pilot to write about. And so what? If a guy does something wrong, then we'll talk about his ass."

Latifah, whose real name is Dana Owens, has never been afraid to speak her mind about men, especially in her music. Her first two Grammy-nominated albums, *All Hail the Queen* and

With music, TV and film success at 23, Queen Latifah has a lot to say — and people are listening.

Nature of a Sista (Tommy Boy), both contain raps that speak out against the abuse of women. Her latest release, *Black Reign* (Motown), is no exception.

In "U.N.I.T.Y.," the album's first single, Latifah issues her own call to arms for women to band together to overcome oppression. During the song's forceful chorus, she sings, "Who u callin' a bitch?/U.N.I.T.Y./You got to let 'em know/You ain't a bitch or a ho."

"I wrote 'U.N.I.T.Y.' because I was sick of what I was seeing," she says. "I was at a Greek picnic at a college in Philadelphia a couple of years ago with some friends. We were sitting on our cars watching people go by, and some guys from a fraternity were sitting across the street from us.

"Every time a girl walked by them, they'd pick her up off the ground and all the guys would be feelin' her up. If she cursed them out, they'd say 'F**k you, bitch,' like she was in the wrong. Some of the girls were actually kicking and punching on the guys to leave them alone.

"It made me wonder where their heads were at," she says. "They claimed they were supposed to be in a fraternity. I wanted them to tell me exactly what they were trying to represent. I was just waiting for them to try that s**t on me and give me a reason to fight back. I'd like to see these brothers in the Greek system try to uphold what they're supposed to be upholding."

Like many females in rap music today, Latifah says she uses her rhymes as a tool to raise consciousness about women's issues. "I'm sick of watching guys look at what these other knuckleheads are doing and supporting them like we some kinda bitch or ho," she says.

"Every girl is not like that. And I think it's a lame excuse for a lot of these rappers to say they only call girls bitches or hos because they act like that. It doesn't make them right."

Although Latifah says she does not want to be labeled as an issue-oriented artist, many of the songs on *Black Reign* deal with the problems of racism, violence and misogyny that she has encountered in her community.

"Music can be a great teaching tool," she says. "I just address what I see. A lot of artists don't open their eyes to see what's going on out there. I just want people to respect one another and show each other some common courtesy."

Although she considers herself simply a "common sensist," many of Latifah's fans have identified her as the matriarch for the rap and hip-hop scene, a title she says she is willing to brush aside for now. "I'm too young for that image because I still don't know what to do all the time. I'm still growing up myself."

For the moment, though, Latifah says she is looking forward to a concert tour after *Living Single* finishes filming for the season. "I love the challenge of winning over a crowd," she says. "Say you make \$15,000 in a night. If you have to bust your ass a little harder to get the audience on your team, then payment [is] due. You've earned your money."

When asked which she would choose if she had to pick one career — acting or singing — she takes a long pause.

"Neither," she says finally with a big grin. "Little kids see me and don't know whether to call me Dana, Latifah or Khadijah. I like that. So far I've learned to follow through with my own instincts. If I succeed, well then hey, thank you." □

IN REVIEW

★★★★ about using the words "bitch" or "ho."

Queen Latifah hits hard on her third album, *Black Reign*. While her rapping skills are top-notch, her agenda has never been more apparent than on this release. "U.N.I.T.Y.," the album's crowning glory, expresses her disgust for men who treat women like pieces of meat. Blending rap and hip-hop, the song's punchy chorus will make any man think twice

"Just America," which contains a harsh critique of violent neighborhoods, goes to the heart of Latifah's music. She tells us that a desire to overcome hardship is the first step to fulfilling dreams. From themes covering safer sex to anti-violence to self-respect, the Queen's reign is sure to be long-lasting. ■ Rob Hooper