The Passion of Nicki Minaj

The world's biggest female rap superstar has meticulously crafted her own image — and maintained it with uncompromising control.

By VANESSA GRIGORIADIS OCT. 7, 2015

Pop music is dominated almost exclusively by the female star — Beyoncé, Rihanna, Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus, Lady Gaga and, as always, Madonna. Engaging in a frantic, complex game — crossing over many genres to keep up with the current caldron of hip-hop, electronic music and R&B; signing sponsorship deals to make up for the lack of album sales; performing live everywhere from sheikhs' parties to worldwide arenas — these women *are* the pop business now, and they're not feeling particularly shy about telling us that. Their primary message has become one of being the woman you actually have to be behind the scenes to succeed today: powerful, outspoken and in control.

Nicki Minaj is the world's biggest female hip-hop star, a top pop star and the first woman to achieve success in both genres. Like Beyoncé, who performed recently in Central Park with the words "boss" and "hustler" flashing on screens behind her, along with a grainy video in which she smashed a vacuum and a sewing machine, Minaj has become expert at modeling the ways that women can wield power in the industry. But she has also drawn attention to the ways in which power can be embodied by a woman standing up for herself and speaking her own mind. Minaj's behavior isn't exclusive to her tracks; she also exhibits it in the national telenovela that she, like the rest of these women, to a greater or lesser degree, is running about herself, feeding the public information about her paramours, exparamours, peccadilloes and beefs, all of it delivered in social media's short, sharp bursts.

Perhaps you recall the three-act revenge drama that played out on various

screens last month, as Minaj faced off against two major powers: Swift, the 25-year-old golden girl who may be the richest woman in music, and who spends time wholesomely baking cookies at her TriBeCa spread with a rotating cast of B.F.F.s; and Cyrus, the ex-Disney star who, more than five years ago, was extolling the virtues of purity rings but is now America's pre-eminent "bad girl." She first recreated herself as a pornified star who wore gold grilles on her teeth and introduced the mainstream to "twerking," a dance originating in black circles in the South that involves shaking your buttocks, and more recently rebranded herself a "happy hippie" and "genderqueer," neither male nor female.

Pop stars today travel around with a small entourage, conducting their business from a mobile phone in the back of a climate-controlled luxury vehicle. And you can imagine these women in their cars when the nominations for MTV's Video Music Awards, which long ago stopped judging musical quality and moved on to assessing the size of empires, were announced earlier this summer. The list did not include a nod in the top award category for Minaj's wild video for "Anaconda," a song that samples Sir Mix-a-Lot's "Baby Got Back," from 1992. The video features Minaj flipping the script to be the baby who has back, refusing to let her co-star, Drake, touch her buttocks and, somewhat frighteningly (for men) cutting up a banana that's a clear metaphor for the snake in their pants.

You can picture Minaj in her Maybach as she considered this particular affront and then used it to make a larger point. "If I was a different 'kind' of artist, 'Anaconda' would be nominated," she tweeted, followed by "If your video celebrates women with very slim bodies, you will be nominated," and "I'm not always confident. Just tired. Black women influence pop culture so much but are rarely rewarded for it." (For the record, Beyoncé was nominated for the award in question, for a video in which she dances around in underwear and, inexplicably, a sweatshirt with the word "KALE.")

Swift, the good girl, herself nominated for a video featuring semiclad, slender women, jumped in next: "I've done nothing but love & support you. It's unlike you to pit women against each other. Maybe one of the men took your slot." (She quickly encountered media pushback and called Minaj to apologize.) But the free spirit Cyrus had something to say, too: A few weeks later, in this newspaper, she criticized Minaj's comments as lacking an "open heart" and "love," adding that she

didn't respect Minaj's statement "because of the anger that came with it," calling it "not very polite" and continuing, "Nicki Minaj is not too kind."

Soon, our characters gathered in the V.M.A. Thunderdome, where things that are not quite true are staged in a crude, middle-school-esque pageant, with players jockeying for time. And indeed, Swift and Minaj, having reached a truce, opened the show together. But later, as Minaj slinked onstage in a revealing dress that closely resembled gold filigree on a china cup to accept her award — for Best Hip-Hop Video, which is not as important as Video of the Year: "I saw [Cyrus] just looking at me, with her face screwed up, and I thought, What the!" she told me in mid-September, in the Trump hotel in Columbus Circle, while visiting New York for Fashion Week. Onstage, Minaj next did something exceedingly rare in the commercial music world. She addressed Cyrus with real venom — "This bitch that had a lot to say about me the other day in the press" — and pointed at her with a manicured finger: "Miley, what's good?" MTV cut Minaj's mike, but you could see her lips forming the words, "Don't play with me, bitch."

A month later, the episode was still bothering Minaj. Addressing Cyrus, she told me: "The fact that you feel upset about me speaking on something that affects black women makes me feel like you have some big balls. You're in videos with black men, and you're bringing out black women on your stages, but you don't want to know how black women feel about something that's so important? Come on, you can't want the good without the bad. If you want to enjoy our culture and our lifestyle, bond with us, dance with us, have fun with us, twerk with us, rap with us, then you should also want to know what affects us, what is bothering us, what we feel is unfair to us. You shouldn't *not* want to know that."

Minaj stands a bit over five feet tall, and as she padded around barefoot in her hotel suite, there was a tangle of shoes and outfits collected nearby that she had considered but rejected for Fashion Week. Outfits carefully sewn to the measurements of a six-foot-tall model with hipbones like handlebars don't fit a shapely-all-over woman, and Minaj, like Kim Kardashian, favors garments with spandex in them. In the last 24 hours, she had poured herself into a nude mesh Alexander Wang dress that the most party-hearty 19-year-old would choose only as a beach cover-up; changed to a fire-engine-red two-piece zip-up suit for Wang's after-party; danced at Jay-Z's 40/40 Club in the Flatiron district for hours; hit the

recording studio with her boyfriend, the Philadelphia rapper Meek Mill; then, finally, crawled into bed in the hotel on the Upper West Side at 7 a.m. She woke up at 3:30 p.m., changing into purple leggings and an oversize black T-shirt, though remnants of the night's ensembles remained — her hair swept up in a gun moll's bouffant, a smidge shorter than Amy Winehouse wore hers; several diamond stud earrings crawled up her right ear like a series of buttons on the back of a Victorian gown.

Minaj may have had a fair amount of influence over the fact that pop stars are constantly telling us they're bosses, or they're bitches, or they're "boss bitches," which seems like a contradiction, or redundant, but is said without a trace of irony. A unique figure who draws 10-year-old girls as fans with her Technicolor wigs, sophisticated mimicry and playful attitude, Minaj also assumes a persona as aggressive, dis-happy and vulgar as any man in hip-hop. She electrifies tracks merely by appearing on them, from Kanye West's "Monster" in 2010 ("First things first, I'll eat your brains," she explains) to the electronic dance music artist David Guetta's "Hey Mama," with a video featuring her gyrating in a desert scene resembling Burning Man. She's also the first woman to rise to the very top of the rap game not only as a star but also as a business entity. "My wrists look like I am a jewel thief/But that's just cuz I am a boss bitch/Now macaroni cheese and grill my swordfish," she says in a song entitled, appropriately enough, "Boss Ass Bitch."

There's nothing new about female artists struggling with issues of power and control, but we're far today from the 1990s, when Queen Latifah proclaimed "every time I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho/Trying to make a sister feel low/You know all that gots to go." "Bitch," in music, used to be an insult, a sneer, and it still can be. But female empowerment is a trend, and the word has been reclaimed — by Minaj, in many a track; by Rihanna, in "Bitch Better Have My Money"; and triumphantly by Madonna, in her recent track "Bitch, I'm Madonna." This is good for business and either good for women or not good for women at all.

In another era, Minaj's sexuality, expressed semi-parodically — pretending she's a Barbie doll; glorifying women dressed as prostitutes and set in red-light-district windows — might have given feminists pause. But in the 2010s, we have entered a different world in pop culture, one in which sexual repression is perceived as burdensome and perhaps even an inability to holistically integrate the

body and self. Young people are identifying and exploring formerly unknown, or at least unlabeled, frontiers of sexuality and gender. And the fact that Minaj is in charge of her own objectification (describing her vagina with more words than I thought existed, and then amplifying its power by rhyming those words), as well as her own monetization (overt product placement in videos is a hallmark) has led most feminist voices to applaud her. But the writer Bell Hooks remains unimpressed, saying of "Anaconda" at a New School panel titled "Whose Booty Is This?": "This [expletive] is boring. What does it mean? Is there something that I'm missing that's happening here?"

"The frequency that Nicki works on is not the easiest frequency for us to wrestle with, because it's about autonomy, and who has it, and whether we can actually tell the difference between self-objectification and self-gratification," says Treva B. Lindsey, an assistant professor of women's, gender and sexuality studies at the Ohio State University, continuing: "Do we even know what an autonomous female looks like in pop culture? What does control even mean in such a corporatized mass-media space?"

On hip-hop radio shows, the dominant journalistic genre for the art form, Minaj speaks with a Queens accent, sometimes injecting it with Caribbean flair. But there was no evidence of that at the hotel, where she spoke in a night-after whisper that sounded like the hiss of a record before a song begins to play. "I never was political or preachy, but I'd stop my show and do two minutes of talking to my girls, boosting them up," Minaj said, sitting in a small, straight-backed chair upholstered in the light gray fabric ubiquitous in luxury hotels, Columbus Circle's billboards pulsing in the background as dusk fell. "They'd go home feeling, 'Can't nobody tell me [expletive]." And as her career went on, she realized she had more to say. "We got so many girls right now having children and don't even know the first thing to say to a child, but you're having a child because 'I want to keep this dude,' or it just happened," she explains on her second album. "Why are we never in control? Why are we stuck with a baby? Why are we always stuck on the welfare line? Why are we always stuck having to beg, borrow and steal to provide for our children? Why do we think it's something wrong for waiting to have a baby, waiting until you're 35 or 36 to have children? Technology has changed — you can wait! Have something to offer them."

Minaj has a shockingly beautiful and complex face, with a wide, high forehead, dark, almond-shaped eyes and deep dimples on both sides of her cheeks that materialize when she smiles. But when asked if she felt confident in her looks as a kid, she said, "Hell, no!" She paused. "Now, I want to take steps to become more aware of who I am, what I like or dislike about my body — why is that?" she said. She mentioned how insecure she felt on Instagram, "where everyone is freaking drop-dead gorgeous." Don't get her wrong, she said: Like most celebrities, she approves the pictures that appear on her Instagram and other social-media accounts. "I get that people put filters on their pictures — I definitely use filters — but I didn't know people *retouched*," she says, excitedly talking about being in a nightclub the other day, taking pictures with a friend, and how the friend "cleaned all the sweat off our face" before she posted the photo. "We're in a club! We can have a moist, dewy-looking face."

She laughs for the first time in our conversation, dimples popping everywhere, sun radiating through the room. "People" — famous people, she means — "are posting pictures of working out, and then there's a change in their body" most likely from plastic surgery, "and they say it's because they were working out! *Ah-hahahaha*." Then she turns serious again. "Back in the day, in hip-hop, the thick girl was glorified. Now the rappers are dating skinny white women. So it's almost like, 'Wait a minute, who's going to tell the thick black girls that they're sexy and fly, too?"

One of Minaj's most fascinating stylistic tricks as a performer has been incorporating alter egos, not only the Barbie doll (which she calls Harajuku Barbie) but Roman, an outspoken gay boy who lives inside of her. These alter egos, which have extensively detailed identities, seem exemplary of the way that women are forced to assume different personae to get through the day. But when I asked why she hadn't called on them much on her last album, she gave me a vague answer about how they were only "funny" and were still around somewhere. Early in her career, she also adopted Lady Gaga's method of saturating the media with outrageous costumes, but now, when I asked if Gaga influenced her, she shot back, with a look of such intense disapproval my hair curled: "I don't even want to discuss that. That's so old to me."

Minaj, tough in general, is known to be particularly tough with the press, like

you," she said, in a soft-focus MTV documentary on her life, explaining that she walks out of photo shoots when there's "a \$50 clothes budget and some sliced pickles." She's also guarded about her past, and much of her present. Born Onika Maraj in Trinidad in 1982, she moved to the United States several years later (her parents spent two years in the States before she arrived, trying to get settled). Minaj has long emphasized her difficult upbringing — speaking openly about crack cocaine use in her home, in Jamaica, Queens, as well as domestic abuse and an episode when she says her father tried to burn down her house. But it's difficult to reconcile those stories with the recent announcement that she's developing a show about her youth for ABC Family. When I asked if her father abused her, she said: "No. He was just abusive." She continued: "I would always hear him yelling and cursing, always. And it made me feel it was the way to interact, because that's how I saw him interacting." She said her parents' marriage wasn't a happy one. "When I was younger," she explained, "I thought that the only reason my mother didn't leave my father was for financial reasons." She went on: "From early on in my life, I looked at a woman not having her money as the biggest curse," and then added, "Now that I'm an adult, I realize that women stay whether a man's rich or poor. It's just a weakness."

rappers tend to be. "You have to be like a beast — that's the only way they respect

Like Lady Gaga, who starred in plays while attending the Upper East Side's Convent of the Sacred Heart, Minaj has drama-school chops. She studied theater at the Upper West Side's LaGuardia High School — the school from "Fame" — working on her freestyle rap skills in the lunchroom. After graduation, she waitressed at Red Lobster to make money and sang choruses on low-level rappers' tracks. One day in a recording studio, she asked a local artist if she could write a rap. "I wrote eight bars while he was in the booth, and he asked to hear it, but I was too shy. I said, 'Can I just go spit it?' "Minaj was in her neighborhood when she heard the song booming out of his car. "He was playing it proudly, and that was my first indication — maybe I'm good." She began locking herself in her room for hours and hours with her beat CDs, she says. "Eventually my mother would come in to check if I was alive."

Minaj's darkest period may have started when she tried to make it in the men's world of hip-hop, in about 2002. But when I asked for details, she said, "I'm not

approving or confirming anything you said." A sketch for this time, then, begins when producers placed her in a group called the Hoodstars with three men, including Safaree Samuels, who would become her boyfriend of a decade; failing to secure a recording contract, Minaj began to rebuild herself as a solo act. In 2006, another producer, Big Fendi, christened her Nicki Minaj ("Fendi flipped [my name] when he met me because I had such a nasty flow! I eat bitches!" she said, in an early interview). He reimagined her as the new Lil' Kim. Kim, the Biggie Smalls protégée, wore wigs, pretended to be a black Barbie and not only rapped about her genitalia but called attention to it in photo shoots that Minaj recreated. (At some point, Minaj also sold her mixtapes out of her white BMW 323i, a car she says she scrimped and saved to buy. I'm not sure when that was, because after I asked about it twice, she told me it was a dumb question.)

Enticing big-name rappers to add a couple of bars to your tracks, or securing a guest spot on one of those rappers' songs, is the way to build fame in hip-hop, and Minaj proved herself to be adept. She garnered guest verses from hip-hop royalty, including Lil Wayne. But her manager at the time, Debra Antney, who was born in Jamaica, Queens, before becoming an Atlanta hip-hop matriarch (and also the rapper Waka Flocka Flame's mother), says, "Nicki was the timidest little girl you'd ever want to see in your life — she was so broken up, but she was so determined, all in one breath." Timid? "I used to have to scream at her: 'You're not going to sit here and cry, you're not going to let nobody shut you down, that's what you're *not* going to do,'" she says.

Minaj knew with whom she preferred to be aligned, though he didn't sign her until 2009: Lil Wayne, whose label, Young Money, is part of Cash Money, cofounded by Bryan Williams, known as Birdman. Wayne is "a master of psychology. This guy has studied words. This guy is a poet," she told Dazed magazine. She was marketed as a multigenre artist from the beginning, writing her own raps but also using the assembly-line process of pop. "Nicki, with her theater background and ability to take on a range of accents, is extremely well suited to the way that pop music is made today, when the artist is a vocal actor not asked to say something that's profound but rather play a role in a song that someone else has written," says John Seabrook, author of "The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory." But building her as a brand, long a part of the culture of hip-hop, was "the furthest

thing from breezy," says her manager, the Maverick management group cofounder Gee Roberson. Securing a fragrance deal, a Glu mobile game, an alcoholic drink — all of that requires entering executive suites "dominated by men."

During her rise, Minaj didn't publicly announce that she had a boyfriend — she introduced Samuels to the world only as a valued producer, continuing the long tradition of sex symbols appearing sexually available to their fans. She has since changed her attitude about that, and has not been shy about being in love with her current boyfriend, Meek Mill, pointing toward the bedroom whenever his name came up tonight. He recently had his own beef, with Drake, Minaj's labelmate, during which — this is an abridged version — Meek attacked Drake for using a ghostwriter, and Drake struck back with what seemed like an endless series of dis tracks, one of which asks, "Is that a world tour or your girl's tour?" That Minaj managed to stay above this is significant. "Historically in hip-hop, female rappers have always had to stand next to a male rapper in order to maintain relevance, or keep their spark," says Charlamagne Tha God, the outspoken host of the radio station Power 105.1's program "The Breakfast Club." "What happened with Drake and Meek won't have any effect on Nicki at all, and in fact I think Nicki is so strong that she's one of the reasons people haven't completely said Meek is done."

Minaj talked a bit about dealing with men and work. "Since I was 15, I came out of one relationship and went into another relationship," she told me. "In my relationships, I've been told, 'You don't have to work that much.' But I can't stop working, because it's bigger than work to me. It's having a purpose outside any man."

Meek's beef with Drake was different from Minaj's beefs with the pop queens. It was an old fight, about authenticity — the oldest dust-up there is in hiphop. Minaj is fighting newer battles. While discussing the state of women in the music business, I asked about the ethics of "Straight Outta Compton," the N.W.A. biopic that does not include a reference to Dr. Dre's history of abusing women. "I don't know anything about that," she said. Then I asked about the dramatic goings-on at her label: Wayne is suing Birdman for \$51 million for withholding fees, and Wayne's tour bus was riddled with bullets in Georgia earlier this year. A federal indictment claims that individuals connected to another Cash Money rapper, Young Thug, may be responsible.

This was not the game Minaj was here to play — interviews in the social-media era are about being adored, not interrogated. It was getting dark outside when I asked about Drake, Meek, Wayne and Williams. Minaj hadn't turned on lights, so she was in shadow. "They're men, grown-ass men," she said. "It's between them." How does it make you feel, I ask? "I hate it," she said. "It doesn't make me feel good. You don't ever want to choose sides between people you love. It's ridiculous. I just want it to be over."

"Is there a part of you that thrives on drama, or is it no, just pain and unpleasantness—"

The room went quiet, but only for an instant.

"That's disrespectful," Minaj said, drawing herself up in the chair. "Why would a grown-ass woman thrive off drama?"

As soon as I said the words, I wished I could dissolve them on my tongue. In pop-culture idiom, "drama" is the province of Real Housewives with nothing better to do than stick their noses where they don't belong. I was more interested in a different kind of drama — the kind worthy of an HBO series, in which your labelmate is releasing endless dis tracks against your boyfriend and your mentor is suing your label president for a king's ransom. But the phrase I used was offensive, and even as I tried to apologize, I only made matters worse.

"What do the four men you just named have to do with me thriving off drama?" she asked. "Why would you even say that? That's so peculiar. Four grownass men are having issues between themselves, and you're asking me do I thrive off drama?"

She pointed my way, her extended arm all I could see other than the diamonds glinting in her ears. This wasn't over yet. "That's the typical thing that women do. What did you putting me down right there do for you?" she asked. "Women blame women for things that have nothing to do with them. I really want to know why — as a matter of fact, I don't. Can we move on, do you have anything else to ask?" she continued. "To put down a woman for something that men do, as if they're children and I'm responsible, has nothing to do with you asking stupid questions, because you know that's not just a stupid question. That's a premeditated thing you just

did." She called me "rude" and "a troublemaker," said "Do not speak to me like I'm stupid or beneath you in any way" and, at last, declared, "I don't care to speak to you anymore."

I found myself back in the lobby, with its Trumpian brass fixtures and huge chandeliers, with the black bikes stamped "Trump Hotel" tied up in front, and the men in their blue suits coming down the steps jingling change in their pockets, and the regular Upper West Side scene — bankers walking their dogs, tourists on Citibikes going the wrong way, the sound of an express train coming up through the subway grates. Minaj's actions made sense, in some ways: Even though I had no intention of putting her down as a small-minded or silly woman, she was right to call me out. She had the mike and used it to her advantage, hitting the notes that we want stars like her to address right now, particularly those of misogyny and standing up for yourself, even if it involves standing up for yourself against another woman. I didn't know how much of it Minaj really felt, and how much it was a convenient way of maintaining control. I only knew that, in that moment, she was a boss bitch.

Vanessa Grigoriadis is a contributing writer for the magazine. She has profiled many pop stars, including Katy Perry, Taylor Swift and Madonna. This is her first article for the magazine.

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