

Their Time Is Now

By Raoul Juneja

What do Michie Mee, Tara Chase, and most recently, Nelly Furtado all have in common? Well, besides their unforgettable beauty and gifted vocal abilities, each of these Canadian divas have also been heavily involved with PhemPhat Productions' Honey Jams since they first entered our music industry. And with 'graduates' like these, it's not surprising that a multicultural crowd of over 700 eager guys and girls helped fill Toronto's Reverb NightClub to capacity on June's first Sunday to see who Honey Jam had in store for us next.

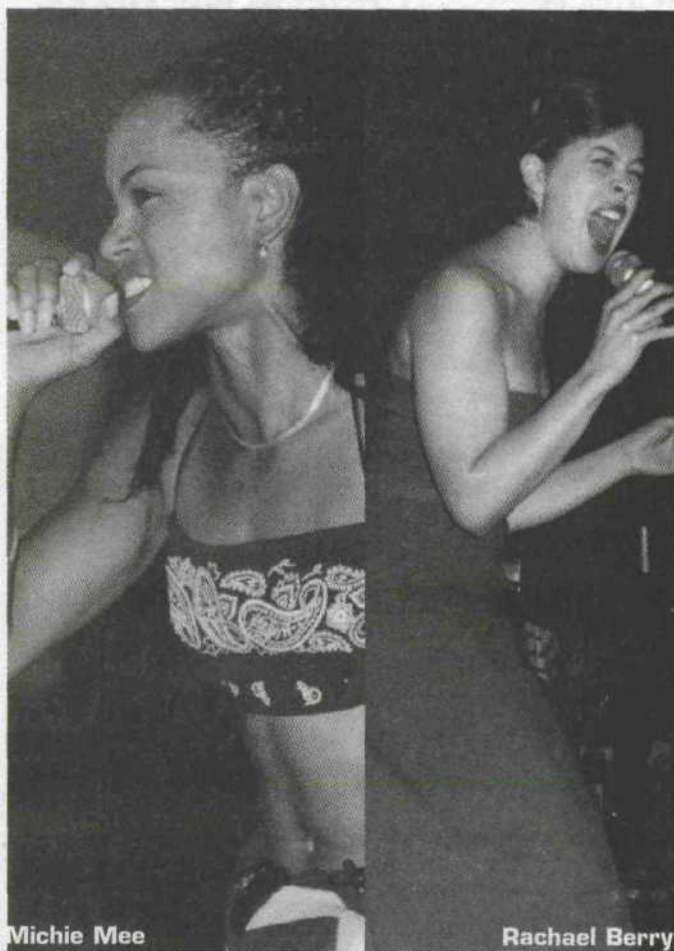
"Most of the performers are usually from Toronto, though each year we get more from other areas of the country and indeed the world," explains PhemPhat Productions founder Ebonnie Rowe, who started the company and its all-female showcases in 1995 to help promote and educate women wanting to make it in the urban industry. "We're seen as a great place to find amazing talent, and this reputation has spread to many other places such as New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and even Jamaica and The Bahamas!"

Ebonnie has a point - besides increasing Michie Mee's exposure through her charismatic performances as host of eight previous Honey Jams, this yearly event has also helped create some serious industry networking that eventually resulted in Tara Chase becoming the sole female MC in Chocclair's Circle crew, and Nelly Furtado releasing her Dreamworks/ Universal Whoa, Nelly! masterpiece courtesy of The Philosopher Kings' Gerald Eaton and Brian West.

"Having Michie be involved with PhemPhat was like putting butter on bread - it was just natural and inevitable," exclaims Ebonnie about her history with Canada's First Lady of Hip-Hop, who dropped the strong yet sexy *The First Cut Is The Deepest* album on Koch International late last year. "She was our first and only choice as a host and has been with us from day one, because she believes in what we're doing and in the talent of the young women who perform." So what about the Portuguese-Canadian songstress whose career highlights after appearing on Honey Jam '97 include a double-platinum plaque and four recent Juno Awards?

"She was one of the first non-black performers to participate in a Honey Jam, but this was part of the vision - to eventually present a variety of genres of music as well as cultural diversity in the performers," describes Ebonnie when asked about the young yet brilliant Nelly Furtado, whose India-inspired "Get Ur Freak On" remix recently appeared on Elektra/Warner's *Tomb Raider Soundtrack*. "We're very proud of her and hope that while the spotlight is shining so brightly on her internationally, she will also open doors and create opportunities for a lot of other Canadian artists as well."

And judging from the African-Canadian, West Indian, Latin, and Asian nationalities of the 25+ female artists who took part in Honey Jam 2001 through R&B, poetry, hip-hop, opera, and reggae music, it seems like Ebonnie's vision for genre and cultural diversity has expanded even further. In fact, independent vocalist Rachael Berry, whose funky mix of soul and jazz drew a head-bopping crowd response similar to how peeps react to Erykah Badu, came to the showcase representing all the way from Sydney, Australia. So how did she feel about our urban 'discovery channel' in comparison to the music industry down under?



Michie Mee

Rachael Berry

"In Australia, there's nothing like a Honey Jam at all, and for young, struggling female singers, I think it's a brilliant idea," Rachael says excitedly. "It's inspiring and a great learning experience that allows you to meet many like-minded people in the field - it also provides everyone in the industry here with fresh talent, so it's beneficial for everybody."

Future Canadian diva Anjuli (who seems blessed with both the sexiness of Janet and the class of India.Arie) also shared Rachael's sentiment, and found the huge crowd response she received from her Guyanese blend of calypso dance moves and R&B melodies extremely motivating as well.

"I think the Honey Jams are amazing events, and I'd love to do more events like it where I could try and bring back the hype of a live show," Anjuli exclaims. "Ebonnie Rowe, along with PhemPhat Productions, is largely accountable for the promotion of young female talent in this city, because there aren't a lot of other opportunities for artists to really showcase their talent like it."

And it doesn't seem like Ebonnie has plans of stopping anytime soon - in addition to her company's yearly fundraising for community organizations like Big Sisters of Toronto, the Immigrant Women's Job Placement Centre, and most recently, Voices of Positive Women, PhemPhat is also holding things down on the 'edutainment' side of things, with annual urban seminars, female DJ showcases, and a spoken-word event that goes by the name of Brown Girls In Da Ring. As Ebonnie said close to the end of Honey Jam 2001, "With all this going on, maybe we'll have to hold next year's Honey Jam at SkyDome."