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POP/JAZZ; A Hip-Hop Poet Looks Beyond Her Roots

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

IN "10 MEN," THE POET TRACIE MORRIS chronicled a young woman's sexual conquests. "Project Princess" was a paean to the b-girls she grew up with in East New York. "So What" was her rebuttal to a song by Me'Shell Ndege'Ocello about seducing another woman's man. ("By all means, teach the boy some things, so when he's ready I'll have a man.")

These days, Ms. Morris, who made her name in the early 1990's at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, the spoken-word mecca of New York, with sassy, hip-hop-inspired rhymes about sex and power, is moving into more experimental territory. She is singing sound poems, in which she riffs on a word or a phrase on subjects ranging from chain gangs to procrastination. She is also planning an Asian trip to study haiku along with finding ways to meld her lyrics with tabla beats.

Ms. Morris, who began performing in 1991 and won the cafe's 1993 grand slam championship, is the latest in a line of Nuyorican graduates to attract attention over the last few years as spoken word has crossed over from the finger-snapping, smoky coffeehouse scene into the mainstream. Maggie Estep has appeared on MTV and published books of poetry, and Reg E. Gaines was a co-writer of the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical "Bring In da Noise, Bring In da Funk."

Though Ms. Morris has toured nationally, appeared on several spoken-word albums and published a book of her work, she still performs often at the Nuyorican cafe on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and is the host of the Monday night poetry series at St. Mark's Church in the East Village.

In her most ambitious project to date, Ms. Morris wrote the abstract incantations that served as the lyrics for the choreographer Ralph Lemon's epic "Geography," an exploration into his identity as an African-American and the idea of race in America. It received critical acclaim during its run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last December. "In this heaven, in this heaven, like hell, we affirm an inverted God," she wrote for Mr. Lemon. "It is either a void or a blinding light. Either way, I see naught but blue."

She will give two performances this week at the Knitting Factory: on Wednesday with the blues guitarist Marvin Sewell and on Thursday with the Indian tabla player Badal Roy.

"Why can't I have a range?" she wondered aloud the other day, sitting in her fourth-floor walk-up overlooking the salt cranes at the Brooklyn Marine Terminal. Above her desk is a portrait of James Baldwin. A kora from Mali hangs on a wall. Candles light up the apartment even in midday. (She won't say why she has the candles, just as she won't reveal her age.) As if to answer her own question, she added, "The world is out there."

For his part, Mr. Lemon said he wanted to collaborate with Ms. Morris because he viewed her "urban" sensibilities as a counterbalance to his own, as he put it, "Eurocentric" tendencies. Ms. Morris's lyrics grew out of reading his journal entries as well as hours of conversation with the choreographer.

"She kept trying to pick me apart as a black person," Mr. Lemon recalled with a chuckle. "She was like: 'Wait a minute. You ate grits.' I was like, 'Yeah, but it was a long time ago.'"

The two found they shared much in common. "We are a lot alike in what we are investigating as artists -- how we as African-Americans are interested in cultures outside of ourselves," Mr. Lemon said.

Ms. Morris's musical influences range from Carmen McRae and Dizzy Gillespie to the artist formerly known as Prince. But hip-hop, because of its inventive language, the rhythm of its words and sounds and its bravado, has been the chief source for her work. Among her favorites are the rappers Rakim and L. L. Cool J. (a song of his about a "round the way" girl was the inspiration for "Project Princess").

But unlike rap, poetry -- even hip-hop poetry -- is not exactly a lucrative career. Yet Ms. Morris seems unfazed by the prospect. "You just hang around long enough, people get used to you," she said, laughing. "And you know, I can always eat at my mother's."