

# D E N E U V E

THE LESBIAN MAGAZINE



APRIL 1994 VOL 4 #2  
\$4.00 USA/\$6.00 CANADA

## me, shell

uncensored  
rappin'

**BEHIND THE SCREEN:**  
**CHRISTINE VACHON**  
**TWEAKS HOLLYWOOD**

**FAMILY IN CRISIS:**  
**SPERM DONORS SUE**

**OUR**  
**CRITICS' PICKS:**  
**THE YEAR'S BEST FILM,**  
**BOOKS & MUSIC**

**SPRING FASHION**

**TOURING TORONTO**



0 74470 80539 7

# me' shell

BY VAL C. PHOENIX

un-  
censored  
un-  
fettered



photos courtesy of Maverick

"In this war of the conscious mind I need some black-on-black love," growls Me'Shell NdegéOcello on her debut album, *Plantation Lullabies*. Indeed, NdegéOcello (or as the album's sticker helpfully puts it, "n-DAY-Gay-O-CHELLO") demands props not just as a talented musician but as an openly queer one at that.

"Call me whatcha like," she dares in one of her songs, and indeed Me'Shell (as she is known professionally) resists attempts to classify, boldly staking out her own territory and offering strong — if occasionally contradictory — opinions on everything from sexual identity to standards of beauty.

The first thing one notices about Me'Shell is her deep voice, which she says she gets from her grandmother. The voice, which on the record is so fearsome and butch, over the phone sounds kind of sweet and soft. Me'Shell politely demurs at the butch label. "If you met me, I'm like — whaddya call it? I'm, like, wussy butch. I'm the most fragile person you could ever imagine. Yeah, that's very important," she says laughing. "I'm far from butch, believe it or not. And not feminine, I guess. A femme in a butch body," she decides.

Me'Shell was living in New York when she was signed by Madonna's label, Maverick. Now, she and her 4-year-old son are settled in L.A., where she is collaborating with her idol Herbie Hancock and Chaka Khan. A multi-talented musician, Me'Shell played most of the instruments on the album, in addition to writing and co-producing the material. She also co-directed the snappy video for "If That's Your Boyfriend," the album's second single. "Jack of all trades. Master of none!" is how she describes her talents with a hearty laugh.

Her musical palette is filled with the complexity of jazz arrangements, the starkness of hip-hop, the dazzling wordplay of spoken word poetry and a drawling delivery all her own. Indeed, she likens herself to an X-man, a musical hybrid, and lists John

Coltrane, Ben Webster, Langston Hughes and Stevie Wonder among her influences. Among women rappers she admires MC Lyte, Queen Latifah and Yo Yo, whom she finds "quite attractive," as she admits with a giggle. But music has been just one influence on her artistry.

"I had a great English teacher. I come very much from a literary standpoint. I love books and stuff," says the 24-year-old. "The thing that I didn't like about rap music were the topics," she adds. "I just thought I'd do something that I could relate to."

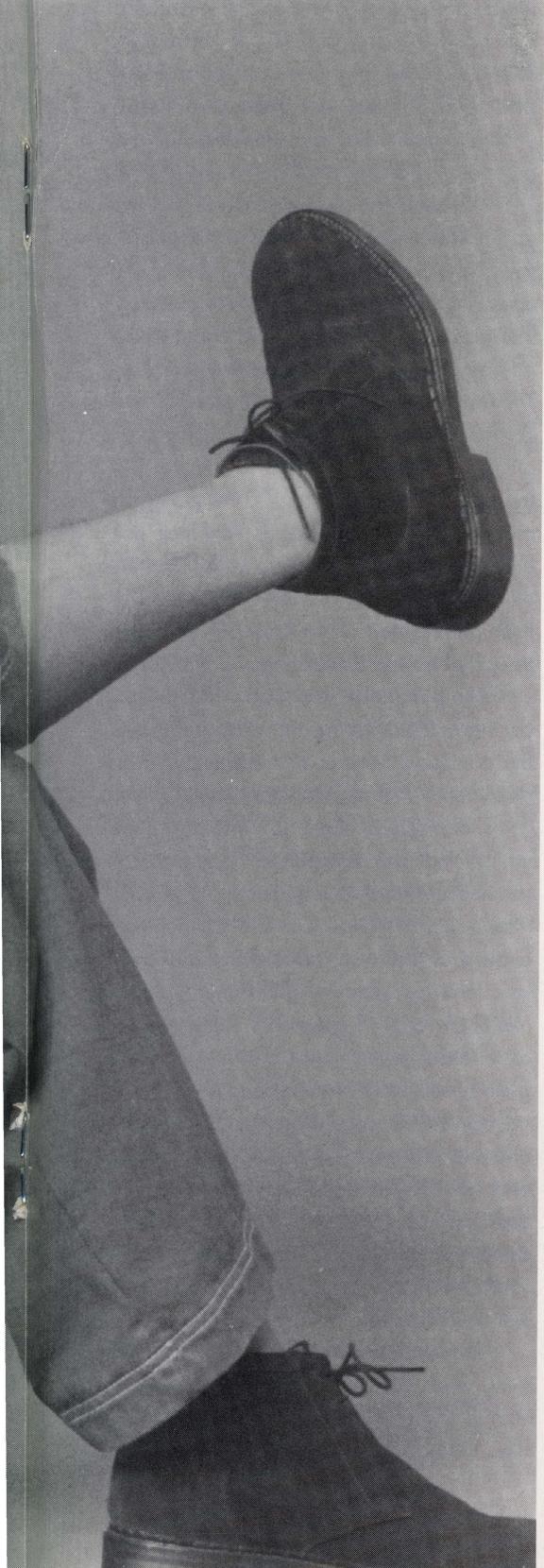
The subject matter on *Plantation Lullabies* breaks down roughly into social criticism and sex. One of the most striking songs is "Shoot'n Up and Get'n High," which burns with anger at society: "Revolution against this racist institution . . . Dehumanize me, set aside and criticize. I'm livin' in the midst of genocide," declares Me'Shell, demanding, "Would you die for your rights?"

In contrast to that song's rousing indictment, Me'Shell's voice turns soft in discussing it, specifically the bit about "the capitalistic hand around my throat." She explains, "'Cause I remember there was a point in my life I thought money would solve everything. I looked at everybody and everybody was judged by what they had. We just live in a capitalistic society where you have to make money. So, that's where that, I guess, stems from."

Yet, she is also at home on sex songs like "Dred Loc," the album's first single, and the steamy "Sweet Love," which finds Me'Shell emitting a breathily climactic "Yes" in grand Donna Summer style. This from a woman who admits with a sigh, "I can't buy a date."

Social reality meets the search for love in "Two Lonely Hearts (On the Subway)," in which Me'Shell spots a kindred spirit whom she seeks out, asking, "Is it the everyday racism? Or a pain from deep within? I just want to get to know you. So, you headin' my way?"

As the title suggests, *Plantation Lullabies*



up  
front

# Her preferred “I am a female homo sapien” identity?”

is very much steeped in black experience and identity, the product of an outsider on several counts. “The black community in general — they’re pretty homophobic,” Me’Shell says. “When I walk in a room, the first thing you see is that I’m black, nothing else, so those are, like, my main focuses. Being comfortable with who I am is the main focus of what I try to do, because I realize I can only be an example. So I just try to be comfortable with myself and with the matters at hand, ‘cause that’s just the struggle of life.”

Me’Shell says her first sexual attractions at 15 were toward girls, and she came out when she was 16. “I would see a woman and I would be like, ‘Whoo!’ And that kind of continued ‘til I was like 18. I mean I was like, ‘Women are just what I’m sexually attracted to.’ I met a guy that I emotionally liked. Like, emotionally I loved his mind — and, I mean, I had his child,” she laughs.

“But it’s like then the sex came because I wanted to show him how I felt about him. Then I realized that sex or making love together is a way of expressing yourself. It’s not how I define myself.” She confides, “But I think my preference — I would prefer to date women rather than men.”

Her preferred identity then? “Homo sapien,” she laughs. “That’s what I am. I am a female Homo sapien.” She continues, “OK, if you want to discuss my sexuality then the blatant thing to say is I’m sexually functional with both sexes.” With a burst of laughter she declares, “That makes no sense to me.”

The identity question has caused some

friction with gays and straights alike. “‘Cause people think you’re confused,” she says. “I’m like, ‘No, but I enjoy sex with both.’ I don’t have two relationships going on at the same time or anything like that. I’m just human and I can have emotional attractions toward the same sex. But then I get mad at the gay community, ‘cause they rag me ‘cause I had emotional connections with males! It’s just, like, I get confused, so I gave up,” she concludes with a sigh.

“I came up with this saying: ‘I’d fuck your brother but I’d marry your sister,’” she offers. “You know, I like men. I think they’re interesting, but I don’t take them seriously. I don’t understand them. The dynamic that’s created between men and women I don’t get, because I have a tendency — and maybe it’s ‘cause of my parents — to become really passive with men, and I just don’t like it.”

Still, Me’Shell holds out the possibility of creating her own alternative family structure. “I kinda want like a wife and a husband, but all of us to be married, all of us to have love for one another,” she declares, envisioning a communal arrangement. “I guess that I’m still back on the coast-of-Africa way of living sort of thing, where everybody just take care of everybody. So that’s the kind of family I would like.” As of now, she says, “Yes, I am seeing somebody, and they’re quite wonderful.”

Her experience in the gay community has been forged by conflict. She pauses and emits a small laugh. “I’ve been beat up in the street like four times — gay-bashed, you know. I feel really part of the community, I’m sorry. I mean I’m very much a part of it, and I wanna do as much as I can to get it out in public to see that it’s really no different and there’s nothing to fear. But, I’m sorry. I’m not that k.d. lang who thinks it’s chic or who thinks it’s like a fad or anything. I’m just really not into that.”

Being on a major label gives Me’Shell a platform of sorts, and she’s still adjusting to being a public figure whose opinions are solicited, when she feels there are so many others better qualified. “I’m really not the flag waver,” she says. Nevertheless, she intends to make the most of her position. “I would like to talk to young people. Because I had a lot of friends who committed suicide because they were gay and who have died of AIDS ‘cause they were just so closeted and so didn’t protect themselves. And young people who had animosity toward gay people I’d love to talk to, too.”

She offers her own experience growing up in Washington, D.C., as an example. “See, what’s funny is my parents were totally upset, wanted to throw me into a psychological institution, when they found out I was gay. And then after that, once they realized? They treated me just like any other child,” she says. “Like when I wanted to go out on a date with my friend Lisa to the movies, they would pick her up and drive me to the movies. Just like other kids do with their parents! That normalcy gave me pride. And I’m thinking if kids can somehow get that, or their parents can allow that, that they give the gift of having a healthy gay adult.”

Being a healthy black gay adult is doubly hard, considering the propaganda to the contrary. Several of Me’Shell’s songs decry the “white standard of beauty” which gives top value to blond hair and blue eyes. In “Untitled” she states, “Her beauty cannot be measured with the standards of a colonized mind.” “Soul On Ice” is the most explicit in this vein, criticizing black men who fetishize white or light-skinned women. Me’Shell says, “I guess it’s somehow my experience, yeah. I think a lot of people in general see beauty in one certain way.”

Given the prevailing standards, then, and the importance of image in marketing, one wonders at the possibility of Me’Shell becoming a sex symbol. “It’d be hysterical,” she says quietly. “I’m sorry,” she guffaws. “Have you ever seen me? I don’t think so. It will never happen.”

She explains, “See, sex symbol is that thing when you see the poster and you just start to salivate. Like, I see k.d. lang and I’m like, ‘Whoo!’ You know?” She giggles.

"She's a sex symbol. She crawls through that barrier. I'm not a sex symbol. That's not me. I would bore people to death. I prefer to talk, you know. I prefer to talk about sex than do it."

However, Me'Shell does recall a sex symbol-type incident in Canada that surprised her. "I was in Montreal. And I was really shocked to see how many women were very open about their attraction to me from the audience. So, I mean, that's really strange. I've never experienced that," she says, considering. "A gay sex symbol? I don't know. It would be interesting."

Maverick, she says, hasn't given her any trouble about being out. "They don't really care," she laughs. "I mean sometimes they're a little shocked about the things I say, but not necessarily about my sexuality. They're just like, 'Be careful,' 'cause I'm the one who has to deal with it. They thought it would alienate the black community, but I just said, 'You know, this is how I am. I'm not gonna lie.' They were like, 'Fine.'"

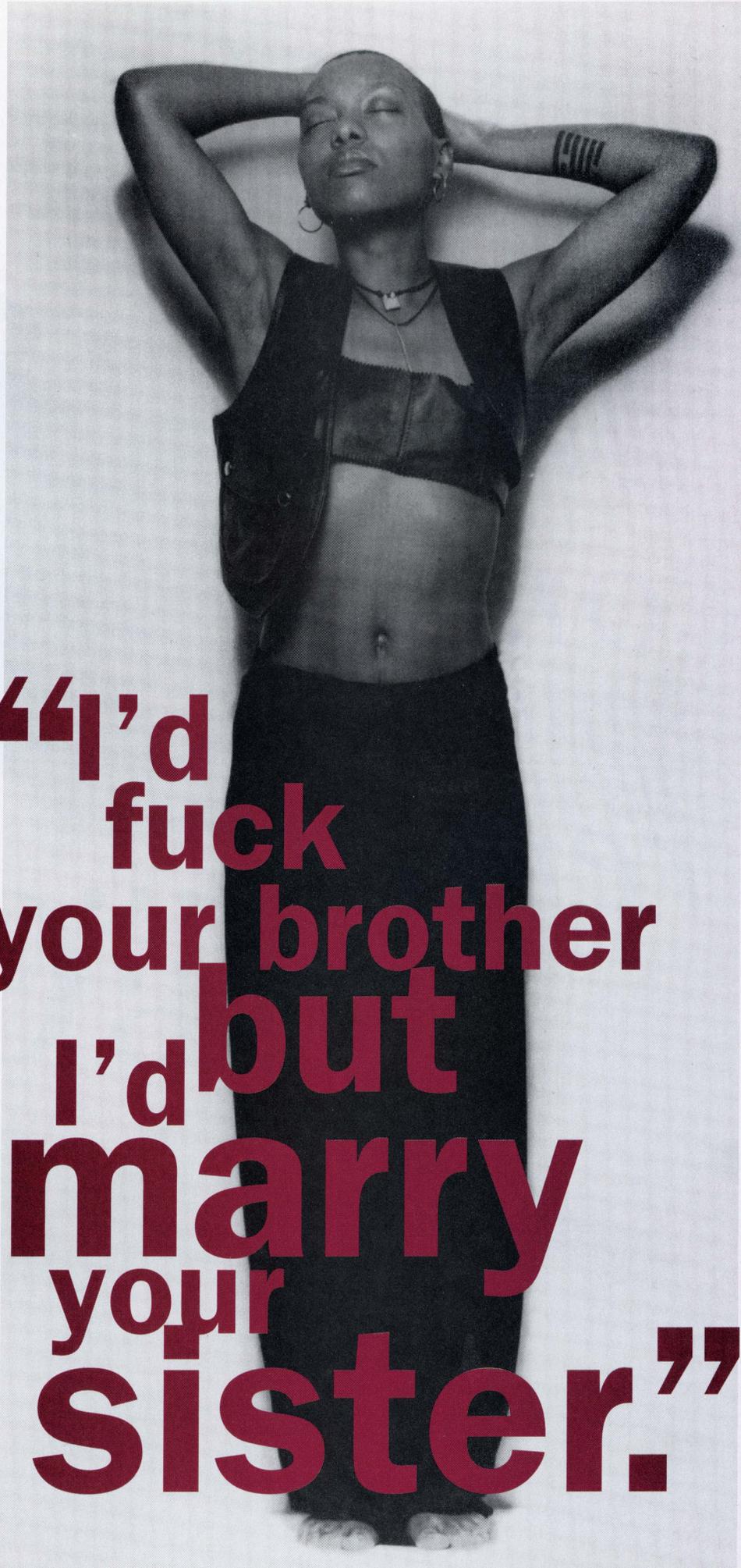
Me'Shell's been criticized within the queer community for the lack of gay material on *Plantation Lullabies*. In fact, Me'Shell responds, there is some material on the album that is about women, though she won't specify. "I guess if people don't hear the right pronouns, no one really listens," she harrumphs.

"You know, maybe I'm patient. Maybe I'm dealing with my own homophobia," she says quietly. "This record was inspired by one period in my life. You know, that's it. I've only dated like five people in my whole life. You know, forgive me," she laughs. "Maybe the next album."

That next album she foresees as quite different. For one, she's thinking it'll be acoustic. And two, "It's gonna be about God. Actually, sex and God. Our relationships with God. And sin. So, I'm sure in the back of my mind, what a homosexual person has to deal with in reference to sin — like, how they must feel to feel that their whole life is perhaps wrong — it'll probably have a lot to do with that." An acoustic album about sex and God and sin? "Yeah," says Me'Shell. "It's really kind of cool, right?"

---

Val C. Phoenix is one *Homo sapien* who's never been mistaken for a sex symbol.



**“I’d  
fuck  
your brother  
but  
I’d  
marry  
your  
sister.”**