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An Insider's Look Before They Were Hip-Hop Stars

By Carolina Gonzalez Nov. 18, 2014 4

The sharp features and bedroom eyes are eminently familiar. But the sun-dappled portrait of Snoop Dogg Lisa Leone took in 1993 surprises. The rapper appears not just young — this was just before the release of his first solo album — but soft.

“What you see in those photos is time,” said Ms. Leone, speaking from Miami. “His eye contact is so beautiful and vulnerable.”

Against the hard image that many in hip-hop have cultivated over the last two decades, the portraits of musicians, b-boys, graffiti writers and round-the-way scenesters that Ms. Leone photographed in the 1980s and 1990s shows an unguarded, proud, sometimes goofy side more easily revealed to a fellow traveler. Even when her subjects look into the camera, there is an informal feel to her photos, revealing process over pose, different from the glossy posturing we've become accustomed to in the camera-phone era.

The images in Ms. Leone's book “Here I Am,” and the selection on exhibit at the **Bronx Museum of the Arts** through January document music video and magazine shoots, recording sessions and the downtime in between. Many of her subjects are caught on the upswing to fame, like in one batch of photos documenting the recording sessions for Nas's debut album “Illmatic,” which has since become a classic. Or in moments when artistic expression is divorced from career concerns, like a profile of Carlos “Mare139” Rodriguez in some unknown lot, spray can in hand, showing the serious fun of graffiti writing.

Ms. Leone said she first got the photo bug from an uncle who often took her into a darkroom he

set up in his bathroom. “Watching the print come up in the developer got me hooked,” she said. “I did my first print when I was 10.”

That led her to the High School of Art and Design in the late 1980s, when it was a hotbed for kids from all over the city exploring hip-hop’s essential elements. She became the b-girl with the camera, photographing her friends who had yet to become famous, including the actress Debi Mazar and the break dancers Richard “Crazy Legs” Colón, Jorge “Fabel” Pabon and Steffan “Mr. Wiggles” Clemente. Shooting b-boys led to rappers and shows and music videos and even to trips abroad.

In an introductory essay to the book, Fab Five Freddy, who worked with Ms. Leone on several shoots, wrote: “Lisa always had a camera with her — not taking pictures constantly, but capturing the right shot at the right moment.”

She admitted that as a young woman learning her craft she often hesitated before shooting. “I’m not bum rushing and going in and taking a lot of photos,” she said. Plus, there was the economics of shooting on film. “I only had three rolls of film, so I had to be decisive.”

The thousands of negatives shot in that period, before her career as a cinematographer took off, had been put away in binders for more than 20 years. After seeing other photo shows of the early New York hip-hop scene, she printed and showed some photos in a small Los Angeles gallery. “My friends kept asking, ‘where are all these pictures?’” she said. But it was only with the prompting of a scanner-owning friend that she fully dug back in the crates of negatives and contact sheets.

At first, re-encountering the images was like looking at someone else’s work. “I didn’t even remember I was in the session of ‘Illmatic,’” she said. “That was my life, so it wasn’t like the one time I was in a recording studio.” But as she scanned through more, “it was like seeing old friends again.”

With the critical distance of time and experience, she said she was finally able to see the documentary and artistic value of what she had captured.

“A lot of the images I might have negated in the past became some of the strongest,” like the portrait of Snoop; or an under-the-tracks portrait of Isaac Hayes; or Wyclef Jean and Lauryn Hill on an East Harlem rooftop, in-between takes of their “Vocab” video.

We scan the scene photos for period details, for spot-the-celebrity. But the portraits are the

ones that hold the viewer: a pensive Treach high above the trees and basketball courts, Fabel with loose mane and Puerto Rican flag T-shirt, Mazar's China doll features peeking from a subway at the Coney Island terminal.

And portraits still draw Ms. Leone to photography. She is currently working on a series of portraits of women in Los Angeles she has met through her film work.

As for the photos in "Here I Am," Ms. Leone said she was glad to visit with old friends, and to let her old friends visit each other, to have a class reunion.

"I'm really, really happy that work was able to get it back out," she said. "I look at those pictures and it's about community."

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