

Arena (UK) November 2000

LADIES' KNIGHT

The evil feminist genius behind man-bashing hits like 'No Scrubs' and 'Bills, Bills, Bills' is..... a man?

Last summer, a man couldn't turn on mainstream radio or watch music videos without some soprano strumpet taking him to task for being lazy, cheap, unfaithful and so forth all to an undulating bass beat.

Oddly, most of these R&B songs came out of Atlanta. Yet when one thinks of America's feminist bastions, Atlanta hardly comes to mind. Nor has R&B been much concerned with gender politics, leaving the lyrical activism to the likes of Sinead O'Connor, Courtney Love and Lil' Kim.

Perhaps most paradoxically, the producer behind these hits is a man: Kevin 'She'kspere' Briggs, a star horse in the music stable of R&B legend Antonio 'LA' Reid, recently appointed head of Arista Records.

Working with songwriter Kandi Burruss, a former Xscape member whose solo album Hey Kandi debuted in September, She'kspere's breakthrough was TLC's hit 'No Scrubs', which warned: 'If you don't have a car and you're walking/If Von live at home wit' your momma/If you have a shorty but you don't show love/Wanna get with me with, no money/Oh, no - no I don't want no scrub.'

Then came Destiny's Child, with the even harsher 'Bills, Bills, Bills' slamming parasitic boyfriends with a chorus that ran: 'Can you pay my bills?/Can you pay my telephone bills?/Can you pay my automom' bills?/If you did then maybe we could chill/I don't think you do/So, you and me are through.' Later She'kspere would go on to produce a slew of songs by Pink, whom you might recognise from the 'There You Go' video, in which she launches a motorcycle through the window of her ex-boyfriend's sky-high loft, spewing glass all over the decor and the poor sod's new girlfriend.

Around that point, no doubt due to his pro-women hitmaking, She'kspere was asked to produce two tracks on the newest album from O'Connor, hardly a woman known for her R&B skew. 'The label as sceptical about me and Sinead,' She'kspere concedes. 'But then we hung out and worked together fine. She loved Atlanta so much that she even bought a house down here.'

A native of Long Beach, California, Briggs got his nickname from fellow musicians there, who considered his lyrics particularly poetic. And no, despite having borne the nickname for seven years, She'kspere's never read so much as a stanza of Shakespeare. 'To be honest, all I know is that he's considered one of the best in his craft,' says She'kspere. 'Other people gave me the name. After a while I just took it on for myself.'

When TLC, Destiny's Child and Pink scored their hits, some critics hailed their success as feminism finally manifesting itself in pop music. There's no arguing that the songs found a wide and receptive audience. Yet She'kspere makes no

bones about his own motivations: 'We wanted hits, regardless of the topic, and radio was ready for a different concept. We caught on to a niche and it was working, so we kept working it, making more songs, like adding episodes to a soap opera.'

The formula worked fantastically, earning She'kspere enough cash to fuel his Prada fetish, but like all formulas, it may have run its course. 'There are too many people trying to do that style of song now,' says Kandi. 'So I plan to change things up, though I do have a song on my new album about a guy who I thought was going to be all-that in bed and... just... wasn't.'

Today, She'kspere confesses that he first envisioned 'Bills, Bills, Bills' as a song for a male singer. But the ladies in She'kspere's circle of advisors nixed the idea, saying misogyny had run its course as a hitmaking formula. 'So we just flipped the concept around and gave it to Destiny's Child,' She'kspere recalls, nonchalantly. 'But I do have to agree with people who say that's reverse sexism. Women hate those songs when it's talking about them. Like if you had a song where a man said, "You gained weight and you don't cook for me anymore," women would be angry. But men don't take it so personally. They just go, "Well, that's not me the song is talking about."'

One could be forgiven for thinking that R&B's recent gender wars have all the sincerity of those verbal dust-ups that ignite at boxing weigh-ins. For instance She'kspere recently produced a song for crooners Boyz II Men, in which the Philadelphia quartet essentially complained, 'I tried to be good to you, but you called me a scrub.'

'Without a doubt, I'm riding both sides of the fence,' he says. Yet even outside the industry, he has escaped being slammed as a gender traitor. 'I'm a producer and songwriter, so I'm not at the forefront,' he says. 'And, the truth is, most people don't know it's me behind those songs. And the few guys who figured it out didn't harass me about it. Mostly, they just come up to and ask whether I can get them dates with the girls from TLC and Destiny's Child.'

Marc Spiegler