There are three key ingredients to making a party happen: the place, the performers and the people present. The long-awaited return of the Black Lily Film and Music Festival came correct on all counts. Philadelphia’s state-of-the-art World Cafe Live provided the place for over 30 women performers, from those who have made it, like Jill Scott, to those who are in the process of making it, like Amanda Diva, to flow over The Roots rhythm section. Backstage, something stronger was happening among the people: a sense of camaraderie that came close to overshadowing the show itself. Chasers Will Page tag-teams with lens men Jati Lindsay and Jeffrey Andrews-Wright to triangulate the ingredients capturing what might have been one of the most important events of the year.

THE PLACE
WORLD CAFE LIVE

In an era where companies like Live Nation are being accused of monopolizing the market for live performance in America, people need to take heed of those rare visionaries like Hal Rea, owner of Philadelphia’s World Cafe Live (WCL). When the Black Lily organisers Maori Karnaet-Holmes, Mercedes Martinez and Tracey More approached Hal about bringing the Lily back to life within the WCL walls he was thrilled: “Celebrating women’s contribution to film and music is a wonderful cause to support in itself, let alone while honouring the legacy of such an important series.”

The WCL is not in this game to make a fast buck and it was no surprise to hear that Hal has a long term vision: “We have already secured dates (2-4 May) for the 2008 Film & Music Festival. We plan on hosting a monthly event here that will continue the Black Lily legacy and if the organisers eventually tour with the concept we will be behind them 100%.”

THE PEOPLE

“I think it was an awesome event... well-needed... and I am so glad that they had the nerve and persistence to make it happen. Positive/ powerful women’s voices are rarely truly heard in music today... especially black women’s voices... unless they’re spewing shit about Versace and overflowing cups of Hennessy or whatever. The entire weekend was planned and executed with professionalism and diversity... and by diversity I mean artistically... different genres, mediums, principles, walks of life!”
- Ursula Rucker, Philadelphia

“There are a lot of people who don’t get the exposure they need or deserve over here in the UK, it can actually be quite a closed market. But the whole concept of the Lily is so much more supportive. Everyone knows The Roots, so that in itself provides a natural platform of popularity for new artists to get exposure they wouldn’t have received otherwise. Now the Lily is back, I think it should go on tour in the same way as the Red Bull Academy – it’s a great opportunity to meet other like-minded people. In terms of highlights, the surprise for me was the performance of Imari Uzuri; spiritual in her personality but really strong and deep in her presence. She reminded me a lot of Grace Jones as she had a stature on stage that was hard to forget!”
- Alice Rossetti, Brighton, UK

“The Lily has not lost any of its magic. The magic comes from the sense of community that is shared by the women that participate in the festival/series. At the core of the ‘Lily Experience’ is the womanist peer group and the validation one receives from its contextualizing aesthetic as witnessed by an audience. The reward is in the journey. It’s an individual journey that every participant takes. But, there are a number of individuals experiencing their separate journeys in the same temporal framework. So the whole thing takes on this ritualistic overlay and becomes a communion of sorts. Art at its core has to be based in the formation of an individual/ group identity. A scene has to validate that identity, that voice. There are many such voices in one genre let alone the myriad genres/ sub-genres that one may find exhibited in a city like Philadelphia. I think that the Lily could help integrate these disparate voices, fostering a healthier and more nuanced musical community.”
- Richard Nicholls, Manager of The Roots

“In terms of which performances stood out, I’d say James Poyser, Questlove and the band stole the show for me when they learned Amy Winehouse’s tunes on the spot so well she forgot her own words... or was that the tequila that did that?”
- Rich Medina, Poet, DJ and Producer

“I wanted to have a film festival that did for women directors what the Black Lily: Women in Music Series had done for women musicians. We definitely succeeded. We brought together a diverse group of makers, curators and producers in a room together and I think some amazing connections were made. The films that stood out the most to me were ‘Gum & Tea’ by E.E. Miller, Summer of Serpent by Kimi Takesue, and Mohawk Girls by Tracey Deer. The repertory screening of Michelle Parkerson’s A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde was a sellout and had an amazing impact. It screened on PBS in the 1990s, but the 90-minute version hasn’t been screened very widely, so that was a brilliant moment for us. I was impressed by the openness of all the attendees’ minds. People saw and heard things for the first time and they were incredibly receptive. That was really quite beautiful”
- Maori Karnaet-Holmes, Executive Director Black Lily Film & Music Festival

The Black Lily ‘Woman in Music’ series commenced in July 2007 and takes place every second Sunday thereafter at World Cafe Live. The Film and Music festival will return on May 2-4, 2008. Follow the next movement at: www.blacklily.com

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Combining the influences of poets like Ntozake Shange, Nikki Giovanni and Gil Scott Heron with a love of Lauryn Hill, Amanda Diva's performance at the Black Lily in May had the hallmarks of an actress whose passion for the stage will always outshine the attraction of the silver screen. Take a back line of Questlove, James Poyser et al, add it to Amanda's innate ability to interact with every member of the audience and you had a performance guaranteed to make this hard core gathering stop and listen.

"Back then, when the Black Lily was taking off, I was breaking it in the New York poetry scene, so I wasn't fully aware of what was going down in Philly. Then Jill Scott blew up — that's when I realised that I needed to do this!" declares Amanda.

"The Black Lily is all about seeing-is-believing. I mean, Questlove has been my homie for time, but it's when people finally see me on stage with him they finally take note."

Amanda's fire comes with two fronts: rapping and singing. Yet, there is another side to Amanda which adds further conviction: awareness. Conversing with her about hip hop today she talks with a sense of reality that's rarely heard.

"We're moving away from 'how much more money can we make with this art' and towards a mentality that's more like 'how much more art can we make with this art'. For me, personally, I look at the game right now — album sales ain't gonna do it for you. Performance is what brought hip-hop out of the underground, so if that's where hip-hop is going back again, that's what you gotta work on."

Amanda's got a game plan just like any other, but you can't help but feel she's positioned herself for a tipping point to occur.

"Nine times out of ten, black music comes out of a state of emergency," she insists. "The majority of folks don't feel that need right now, they don't feel that sense of urgency to create, and they don't have that pressure on their back yet. But I promise you, when they do, it will be responded to."

Strong words. But based on her intervention at the Black Lily there is every indication that the next movement is about to arrive.

"I'm dropping the EP, 'Filling the Void', in October, with Q-Tip making a guest appearance and Dave West on production. It's all a tee up for the album dropping the top of 2008 and I want a Grammy by 2010!" WILLIAM PAGE

Check Amanda Diva's awesome performance of 'A Change Gon' Come' at the Lily, along with the Forty Emcees video at: www.myspace.com/amandadiva