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Rap Duo Salt-N-Pepa Back Together, Still Pushin' It

Pop Stars Play Highline Ballroom on Friday

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

June 3, 2014 10:26 p.m. ET



Salt-N-Pepa—Sandra 'Pepa' Denton, left, and Cheryl 'Salt' James—rap last fall for an audience at Sydney's State Theatre on their Australian tour. *WireImage/Getty Images*

They became pop stars as the rap duo Salt-N-Pepa, but it was a job at Sears more than 30 years ago that brought together Cheryl "Salt" James and Sandra "Pepa" Denton.

"It was a really boring job, so instead of calling customers, we would call each other," Ms. James said of their work as telephone solicitors. "That's where we really bonded."

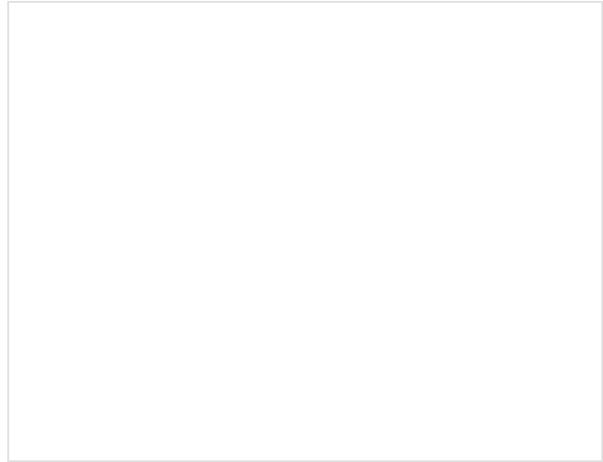
On Friday, when the women play at the Highline Ballroom, it won't be far from where they now live: Ms. James in Melville on Long Island and Ms. Denton in Sparta, N.J.

The two have seen their fame rise and fall over the years, starting in 1985 when their first single, "The Showstopper" (released under their original name Super Nature), found air time on the radio.

"At that time it was just hip-hop for two hours on the weekend. That's all we had," said Ms. James, now 48 years old. "If you got played in those two hours, you made it."

In those days, hip-hop was still finding its way.

"We would try to go to every park jam in every neighborhood and try to get home in time before you get in trouble," said Ms. Denton, 44. "It was amazing to be a part of."



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Their big break came with "Push It," a 1987 single that was recorded in an unlikely setting provided by a friend, Fresh Gordon.

"We did it in his tiny bathroom in Brooklyn," Ms. Denton said. "It wasn't cool to be crossover and pop, even though that is everybody's dream now. Back then, it was underground and grimy music that supposedly defined hip-hop."



From left, DJ Spinderella, Ms. James and Ms. Denton, in 1988. *Getty Images*

Other hits followed—some, such as "Let's Talk About Sex," gave voice to progressive messages that Ms. James finds lacking in rap today.

"I literally only listen to gospel music," she said. "Music has to have a positive vibe for me, and a lot of hip-hop, I'm sorry to say, has such a negative message that my spirit cannot take."

Ms. Denton keeps up with hip-hop and likes some of what she hears.

"It's funny how the tables have turned," she said, "with a lot of songs by guys now talking about how women are not loyal."

Their legacy as a forthright female hip-hop act remains significant, maybe even more so today.

"I loved the girl power they represented, always empowering females to not settle," said Tiffany Foxx, a rising younger rapper whose debut mixtape was titled "HERstory."

"Hip-hop is such a boys' club, and the few females they let through, they only let one or two at a time," Ms. Foxx said. "But I remember when Salt-N-Pepa were doing their thing with MC Lyte, Queen Latifah. They were doing their own thing when it wasn't so restrictive like it is right now."

Ms. Denton attributed Salt-N-Pepa's staying power to her enduring bond with Ms. James as well as DJ Spinderella, an early group member who will perform with them Friday.

"We are all very strong minds as well as gutsy chicks from the hood, with attitude," she said.

Ms. James agreed.

"Your legacy is something you're always going to be attached to," she said. "You can leave your marriage. But we're always going to be Salt-N-Pepa, so we have to make it work and figure it out."

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