

WOMEN
SHOP

How Black Women In Hip-Hop Changed The Way We Talk About AIDS

TAYLOR CRUMPTON

LAST UPDATED JUNE 15, 2023, 4:04 PM

Discover

R29'S TOP SERIALS & FILMS

PHOTO: STEVE EICHNER/WWD/PENSKE MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES.

Hip-hop has had a [relationship with HIV/AIDS](#) since Reagan created the crack epidemic in the 1980s. The genre, born out of necessity and fight, never shied away from depicting the continuous plight of Black Americans. Interwoven in the messages of gangsta rap from the East and West Coast was the grotesque characterization of the dope fiend, the crackhead, the sex

worker — identities [used to mischaracterize Black women](#) and LGBTQ folks as harbingers of an invisible virus. Thankfully, [Black women in hip-hop](#) have addressed the misinformation in the only way they knew how: through the music. The same vehicle that their male peers used to dismiss them became the tool to mass distribute youth-centered, culturally relevant, and women-led information to the world.

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

From [Salt-N-Pepa's 1992 hit "Let's Talk About Aids"](#) to TLC's "Waterfalls" (1994) to Janet Jackson's "Together Again" (1997), Black women in hip-hop made it their mission to prove that AIDS was an intersectional issue. Lisa "Left Eye" Lopes went as far to don a condom eye patch as a way to raise awareness about safe sex practices to young fans and listeners. While groups like Public Enemy embraced the misogynistic ideals about the virus in their 1990 hit "Meet the G That Killed Me," Black women in music were using radio-friendly, mass-marketed songs to combat societal held beliefs and assumptions about it.

As society progressed into the new millennium, so did Black women and LGBTQ folks' advocacy around the topic of sexual health. In 2000, Lil' Kim and Mary J. Blige [collaborated with MAC cosmetics](#) to raise millions for AIDS research. Mykki Blanco [works to combat the stigma around folks living with HIV](#) through public speaking engagements at health conferences and digital advocacy work with amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research. Lil Nas X [raised half a million dollars to HIV/AIDS organizations](#) in the South. Clearly, the mission to educate our community about HIV/AIDS isn't slowing down, and Black women and queer people are still doing the work.

"As a Black gay man, my liberation is rooted in the liberation of Black women," says Kahlib Barton-Garçon, a Texan who serves as the Chief Program Officer of [True Colors United](#), a national organization that works to address youth homelessness. Prior to his tenure at True Colors United, he worked as a community health worker at [Us Helping Us](#), a Washington, DC-based nonprofit that provides services and programs to people living with HIV.

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

Unbothered spoke to Barton-Garçon about hip-hop's relationship with HIV/AIDS, the involvement of Black women in early efforts to combat the epidemic, and ways hip-hop's thinking around the virus have shifted today.

Unbothered: When we think about the 1990s, especially what it meant to be Black in the 1990s, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the presidential administrations of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan in the 1970s and 1980s. Two administrations that introduced a series of legislations that contributed to mass incarceration and unsafe drug and health practices in the Black community. Could you summarize what was going on in the 1990s for us?

Kahlib Barton: In the 1990s, Black communities were struggling with the brunt of the crack epidemic. A lot of us were navigating experiences of poverty, living in overpoliced communities and food deserts. In response, a bevy of poverty-centered programming focused towards Black and brown communities, especially Black communities arose. It was a lot of lip service to ensure the people who were continuously being elected would stay in those positions.

What strikes me about those three time periods is the War On Drugs, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, and the 1994 crime bill. The hallmarks of the Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton administrations. The unspoken impact of these legislations, which significantly increased mass incarceration, created an imbalance of women to men in the Black community, coupled with the lack of programming for people to re-enter society after being incarcerated. Do you feel these impacts along with the societal norm of silence around HIV/AIDS created overwhelming conditions for Black Americans? Just the thought of going to get tested for HIV/AIDS was too much.

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

KB: Even trying to get folks to take the step and get tested was difficult. In the beginning, HIV/AIDS was shopped around as GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency), a gay disease, something that was not targeting Black communities. Back then, our community did not know how to talk about Black LGBTQ people. It was very taboo, especially since the majority of us were raised in the church. It was easier to say “No, those people don’t exist.” Therefore forcing a lot of older LGBTQ folks into the closet which did nothing but perpetuate the AIDS epidemic in the 1990s.

In the beginning of the 1990s, Public Enemy released ‘Meet the G That Killed Me,’ a song that reinforced stereotypes within the Black community that HIV/AIDS was a disease for sex workers and drug users. In 2010, Chuck D of Public Enemy described the song as the group’s response to the rampant transmission of disease, that at the time, they believed was “man-made.” Do you believe this song reflected the perception of HIV/AIDS in the Black community around the early 1990s?

KB: Obviously, it was telling of the times. Unfortunately, I do believe that we have [shifted.] There is a larger school of thought and shift in consciousness around HIV and the AIDS epidemic in the Black community. There are still a lot of people who resonate with that message, especially in the Black community, who believe HIV/AIDS is reserved for people who

are more promiscuous than others, who assume these people are not careful and do not care about their health. That it's their fault. That they are somehow lesser than you.

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

In 1992, Salt-N-Pepa were asked by journalist Peter Jennings to remix “Let’s Talk About Sex” to “Let’s Talk About AIDS” for his ABC News special. They were one of the first musicians to address the epidemic, combat misinformation, and inform their listeners about safe sex practices. At the time, sex education was predominantly abstinence-only. Discussions around birth control and contraceptives were minimal. A time where Black women, similarly to today, were criticized for openly talking about sex. How impactful was it for Salt-N-Pepa, Black women, to talk about HIV/AIDS on the national stage when so many of our voices were silenced in the national consciousness?

KB: The messaging of that time was a white gay man talking about HIV. When you see that as a Black person, especially a Black cisgender heterosexual who attends church on a regular basis, you believe those messages do not apply to you. Some efforts were made to reach out to our folks. The biggest way to reach Black women was to go to Black colleges and churches. Those efforts made sure initiatives were being held on college campuses around HIV that were not just focused on abstinence only, but condoms for people with penises, insertive condoms, and dental dams. That shifted the game.

All those different conversations were not happening. The majority of education was targeted towards folks with penises to be able to protect themselves, which unfortunately placed a lot of blame, responsibility, and shame on Black women. There was a lack of conversation about children who were born with HIV. There was a lack of conversation around medication and safety to make sure children did not acquire HIV in utero, a lot of the blame went towards the mother.

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

In 1995, Eazy-E’s death changed pop culture for Black cisgender heterosexual men, the passing of the gangsta rap legend hit home. Prior to his death, the majority of HIV/AIDS advocacy in the Black community was done by women and LGBTQ folks. Months after his passing, Heavy D, The Notorious B.I.G., Method Man, and Warren G performed at the Urban Aid for Life benefit concert in New York City. This concert was one of the first times we saw Black cisgender

heterosexual men use the language of hip-hop as a vehicle for public health advocacy.

KB: I will not assume those artists were asked prior to say something about the issue. Would they have gotten involved with Salt-N-Pepa? A lot of those artists were resistant. “Nah, I don’t wanna talk about that.” I assume it was not “gangsta” to talk about it. At that point, sexual health was not viewed as something that impacted their communities. Being gay is not hip-hop. We are just now getting to the point where the conversation is starting to shift. We are starting to see more gay rappers make their way in the game.

For so long, it was very clear that hip-hop was very homophobic. HIV being closely related to gay communities wasn’t a thing they wanted to talk about. Eazy-E’s death shifted the conversation, because rappers were interfacing and interacting with Eazy-E. A lot of folks, due to archaic and stigmatic beliefs of “Oh, you catch HIV from a hug or from giving someone a kiss,” had them thinking about their own life, their own morbidity, and if it could impact them since they were in the same social circles as Eazy-E.

I think it resonated with those individuals who were not living with HIV or were not personally impacted by this issue. It was great to see that shift happen, even after something tragic happens, folks may not feel inclined to speak up or get involved. It was great to see action coming from diverse Black communities. At this point, we see rappers talking about sexual health, even if it is not always forward thinking. We see more conversation. I think people are more aware that we can not talk about sex without talking about sexual health and safety.

HOW BLACK WOMEN IN HIP-HOP SHIFTED THE AIDS NARRATIVE
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON [JUNE 15, 2023, 12:04 PM](#)

[UNBOTHERED](#) • [CULTURE](#) • [ENTERTAINMENT](#) • [MUSIC](#)

[WRITTEN BY](#)
[TAYLOR](#)
[CRUMPTON](#)

PHOTO: STEVE EICHNER/WWD/PENSKE MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES.

