

How Viva Glam Harnessed the Star Power of Two Hip-Hop Legends to Fund Support for People Living With HIV

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When Mary J. Blige and Lil' Kim partnered with MAC Cosmetics for its Viva Glam campaign to raise funds for the MAC AIDS Fund in 2000, the celebrity duo raised **\$4 million** to support people living with HIV/AIDS. Within one year, sales from the campaign established a record-breaking number for the fund. The collective star power of Mary J. Blige and Lil' Kim helped the AIDS Fund reach a six-year total of \$20 million in fundraising.

At the time of their campaign, HIV/AIDS in the Black community was characterized as a weapon created by the government to eradicate the community. In comparison to their peers in hip-hop,

many of whom championed this ideology in songs, Mary J. Blige and Lil' Kim elected to dispel stigma through philanthropy. Their approach, rooted in genuine compassion and understanding, utilized the industries of beauty, fashion, and pop culture to change societal assumptions and beliefs about HIV.

MAC Cosmetics revolutionized beauty campaigns with their choice of RuPaul as the face of the Viva Glam campaign launch in 1994. The selection of RuPaul—a bold, loud drag queen—to debut their line of colorful lipsticks and lip glosses was emblematic of the brand's morals and heart. The goal of the campaign, the child of co-founders Frank Angelo and Frank Toskan, was to raise funds for their peers and friends in the fashion and beauty industry, who were disproportionately impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In lieu of traditional charitable efforts, the partners decided to use their artistry and industry to solicit funds for HIV/AIDS research.

Donald Robertson, a friend of Angelo and Toskan, found RuPaul at Wigstock, the New York City drag festival. Gregory Arlt, senior artist for MAC Cosmetics, spoke about the brand's connection to drag and the LGBTQ community in an interview with *The Zoe Report*. "At that time of the Viva Glam launch, drag was such a subculture," he said. "But we've always had drag queens and transgender people work with us. We even had the infamous Lady Bunny bounce our [first] store on Christopher Street in 1990."

Hip-Hop Infiltrates Pop Culture

In the 1990s, hip-hop had crossed over to popular culture. "Yo! MTV Raps" had brought rap into America's homes. The hip-hop/R&B genre took over the Billboard Hot 100 charts. *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* introduced Will Smith and Jazzy Jeff, the first musicians to win a Grammy for hip-hop, to TVs in homes across America. Rappers had been granted the privileges of celebrity.

While mainstream culture and beauty brands were slow to adjust to changes in pop culture, MAC Cosmetics sought to immerse themselves in the burgeoning cultural zeitgeist. The brand, seen in fashion weeks across the world and worn by celebrities on editorial covers, wanted to take a chance on hip-hop.

"In 1999, we embraced hip-hop culture at that time, with Mary J. Blige and Lil' Kim. That was the very first time that a fashion brand, let alone a beauty brand, tapped into the seismic quake that was taking place all over the world," said John Demsey, former executive group president of Estée Lauder Companies, to *Coveteur* in 2019. "That's what got it started. In 1999, in the number one song from TLC called 'Unpretty,' there was a lyric in the song that went 'It doesn't matter how much M.A.C. you wear.' It had seeped into the popular culture. That was my lightning rod." (Demsey was terminated from his position at Estée Lauder after he shared a racially offensive meme on Instagram in 2022.)

During his tenure at MAC Cosmetics, Demsey evolved the beauty brand from a niche business into a top contender in the global beauty industry. His first campaign was Mary J. Blige and Lil' Kim for Viva Glam. In the late 1990s, [the Congressional Black Caucus and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had begun to launch joint HIV prevention efforts](#). The launch of MAC's Viva Glam campaign in 2000 ushered in a new era and approach toward HIV in the Black community.

How Women in Hip-Hop Raised Awareness and Support for People Living With HIV

As the campaign continued to gain prominence, [more Black celebrities began to lend their star power toward fundraising efforts](#). In 2004, Missy Elliott participated in the 10th anniversary campaign of Viva Glam. Two years later, Eve was featured in the Viva Glam VI campaign. In 2012, Nicki Minaj released her Viva Glam Nicki, a light pink lipstick. The following year, Viva Glam Nicki 2 was available for purchase. Her campaign was done in collaboration with RuPaul, who relaunched the original Viva Glam in both lipstick and lip gloss.

However, the brand and pop culture was not prepared for [Rihanna](#). When the global beauty brand partnered with the pop singer in 2014, her campaign raised more than \$50 million for the MAC AIDS Fund. Since its inception, the AIDS Fund has raised over \$500 million for those living with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

Twenty-nine years after its launch, women in hip-hop have raised hundreds of millions of dollars in funding for HIV/AIDS programs through the Viva Glam campaign. The iconic campaigns of Mary J. Blige and Lil' Kim and Rihanna laid the foundation for celebrity-led beauty campaigns and introduced a new form of philanthropic advocacy to pop culture. Now commonplace in the advertising and beauty industries, MAC Cosmetics was the first to harness the star power of women in hip-hop to change the stigma around HIV/AIDS in pop culture.

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