

Bring Sexy Back

By Johnathon Briggs (Letter to the Editor)

I was on a nostalgic stroll down Hip-Hop Memory Lane when a question popped into my head: When is the last time a song about safe sex topped the Billboard charts?

The journey was triggered by "Ruzzian Roulette," a music-fueled docudrama about the perils of unprotected sex featuring the St. Louis-based hip-hop crew, the Apostlez. The film was screened recently by the Chicago Westside Branch NAACP in commemoration of National Black HIV/AIDS Day, which is observed Feb. 7.

The in-your-face film is meant as a wake-up call to the hip-hop generation about HIV/AIDS. Its message is direct: engaging in risky sexual behavior is akin to playing Russian roulette with your life. It only takes one bullet.

As I left the Gene Siskel Film Center, I recalled the days when the desire to spread messages about responsible sexual behavior did not rest solely in the hands of independent filmmakers or starving artists.

When I was a teenager, a myriad of MTV rappers bragged about their sexual exploits and capped it off with a bit of safe sex advice.

MCs rhymed about "jimmy hats," or condoms. Rap trio TLC—T-Boz, Left Eye and Chili—donned condoms on their overalls and even their eyeglasses.

And who could forget Salt-N-Pepa's 1991 hit "Let's Talk About Sex"?

Though controversial at the time, the song peaked at No. 13 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and encouraged America to "talk about all the good things and the bad things that may be." An alternative version entitled "Let's Talk About AIDS" was included as a b-side on singles for the song.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, as fear of HIV/AIDS gripped the nation, there were so many rap hits with safe sex lyrics that a Berkeley, Calif., radio station launched a "Condom Countdown" featuring such songs as "Go See the Doctor" by Kool Moe Dee, "Condom Sense" by Magnetic Force and "Double Bag It" by Papa Lindley.

The AIDS crisis is not over. According to the federal Centers for Disease and Control Prevention, African Americans represent nearly half of all new HIV cases in the United States. It is estimated that nearly half of all black men who have sex with men are already infected with HIV. For black women ages 25 to 34 HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death.

Here in Illinois, new HIV/AIDS cases among youth ages 20 to 24—a key hip-hop demographic—were up 76 percent between 2000 and 2005, state health officials report.

AFC in the News

Who raps to them about wrapping it up?

Artists such as Common and Ludacris promote HIV/AIDS prevention through their non-profit foundations. But judging from the plethora of booty-shaking music videos in heavy rotation today, it seems far easier for most rap artists to promote sex than sexual responsibility.

True, the hip-hop of my youth has long been usurped by rabid commercialism and radio-friendly anthems that celebrate mayhem, misogyny and materialism.

This Black AIDS Day, however, I urge hip-hop culture to bring sexy back.

Safe sexy.

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