Hip Hope

How can the industry fight HIV when its music seems to fuel it?

September 5, 2008 By Kellee Terrell

In February, rapper Common announced his “A Minute” contest, which invited young people ages 13 to 25 to create lyrics expressing the importance of getting tested for HIV. “I had an uncle who passed away from AIDS. We need to raise awareness and take control of our lives.”

Such initiatives are not uncommon for major players in the hip-hop game: Ludacris, Lil’ Wayne and even Missy Elliott have played spokesperson and raised money to address the growing epidemic. Think: If *bling* can find its way into Webster’s dictionary, then imagine the influence these stars could have on black youth. But for some, these campaigns seem a bit hypocritical: How can teens take safer-sex messages and cries for empowerment seriously when the music peddles the exact opposite?

With the exceptions of a few artists like Kanye West and Lupe Fiasco, mainstream hip-hop seems to be saturated with scantily dressed women and hypermasculine thugs spitting rhymes about hustling, violence and sex. Remember Fat Joe and Lil’ Wayne’s video “Make It Rain”?

While many artists defend their art as mere entertainment, the music does have a negative effect. Studies show that children who listen to degrading lyrics and see disparaging images are more likely to have riskier sex.

But rappers aren’t the only ones who benefit financially from the music. “If [networks] or the heads of these record labels really had a problem with the message, none of it would ever get made,” says Kwamé Holland, a producer and former rap artist. So if hip-hop is truly about the “Benjamins,” is using it for prevention a waste of time? Not necessarily. “Hip-hop is a global phenomenon born out of a climate where young blacks were treated like outcasts from factors such as welfare and a rise in incarceration,” says Bakari Kitwana, author of *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture*. “We would be missing out on the big picture if we didn’t use it.”

Plenty of organizations around the country agree with Kitwana. New York–based HipHop4Life uses rap music to address the multitude of issues that teens face. “We want to use hip-hop to help them and to let them know that what they see on television is not real,” says Tamekia Flowers, the organization’s founder. Carla Stokes, founder of the Atlanta-based HOTGIRLS, agrees. Her

organization uses workshop discussions to analyze media images, fight street harassment and promote comprehensive sex education.

But let’s be real: Racism, poverty, homophobia and sexism would continue to fuel the epidemic even without the music. But that doesn’t give the industry a pass. “A lot of artists out there preach positivity, but they’re not well-known,” Holland says. “People are getting tired of these [more popular] artists. Maybe this is why sales are down. Hopefully, there will be a shift.” Word.

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