Fantasy Island

Leroy Whitfield gets his groove back in Jamaica-until he gives tongue

April 1, 2003 By LeRoy Whitfield

My mama ain't raise no fools: If you're invited on an all-expenses-paid trip to Jamaica, you run for the plane and sweat the details later.

That intrepid wisdom and a journalistic sense of adventure recently landed me in the city of Ocho Rios, where I would speak at a tourism conference, having been tapped by the Caribbean Hotel Association for my coverage of AIDS in the African-American community—but not for my HIV positive status, of which they were unaware. Regional hoteliers, I would discover, were anxious to fend off a growing perception that their collective Temptation Islands are awash in AIDS. There's certainly reason for concern: According to the Trinidad and Tobago–based Caribbean Epidemiological Centre, the region has the world's second-highest HIV infection rate—2.3 percent—right behind sub-Saharan Africa.

Although I'm always eager to lend some insight about the blackening and browning of the AIDS epidemic, I admit to having had my own agenda in accepting this invitation: a vacation in paradise. But almost as soon as I stepped off the plane, another agenda item presented itself.

En route to the resort from the airport, I felt my skin undulating sensuously like waves at high tide, my pores opening to the breeze. The exuberant feeling was reinforced by a roadside Rasta who had locks longer and thicker than my own. In a surreal moment at a pit stop, the rawboned brotha ambled toward me, carefully studying my hands and face, and told me that I was beautiful—a few genuine words that felt like velvet instead of velveteen, 100 percent pure. Maybe I'm just too easy, too vain or too needy, but I wanted to wrap myself in his warmth and never let go. I saw my reflection in him and recalled the magnificence of self-love. And suddenly, I wondered if on the same island where Stella got her groove back, I might reclaim some of my own, which had gradually declined over my 13 years as an HIV positive poster child.

Ever since I was diagnosed at age 19—my sexual peak—I have felt increasingly desexualized. Instead of having unlimited, raw, impulsive, HIV-closeted sex, I opted for public disclosure and self-empowerment. That decision has plagued my long-term relationships with sexual dysfunction: Fearful playmates and their tepid foreplay are mood-killers. So I was thrilled to realize I was traveling HIV-incognito. I could ditch my positive persona and run wild among the fabled blue water, white sand and green palm trees.

By the time I arrived at the conference hotel I was beaming, uninhibited after years of libidinal dormancy. I wanted passersby to rub against my electricity. Some folks quietly acknowledged me with sidelong glances or smiles. Others were more overt: On three separate occasions employees offered me complimentary services that I'm certain are well beyond their official job descriptions.

At the next afternoon's panel, during a discussion about HIV prevention, one faction from the host city disputed a researcher's claim that locals commingling with tourists were partly to blame for Caribbean HIV statistics. I mentioned that within hours of my arrival, I had been propositioned but refused the pun any three times. Because no condoms were immediately available, each encounter would have been unprotected. One audience member chimed in that if tourists can't engage in a little reckless abandon, what was the point of coming to the fantasy islands? Another heckled that I had hoarded the booty calls. The discussion dissolved into jeers.

I was in a quandary. I wanted to bring some gravity back to the dialogue. Unfortunately, some of the folks I had flirted with were sitting before me—and I hated to end my fun by dropping the H-bomb. It would mean peeling off my newfound sexy outer layer to expose my raw reality.

But, with a mic in my hand and a lump in my throat, I went for full disclosure, stunning myself, my fellow panelists and everyone else. Their eyes widened; their mouths hung open. I could hear their silent screaming, then a wave of actual grumbling, as members of the audience quickly came to terms with the magnitude of the problem: an HIVer in their midst! The moment was sobering for me, too. My temporary inebriation vanished.

But all was not lost. Back home in New York, I was able to recognize that for the first time since I can remember, I hadn't felt completely defined by the disease. In fact, I was even able to inhabit feelings of magnetism and splendor while in paradise. I knew I couldn't escape life with HIV forever. Unless a miracle occurs, it will always be with me. But in that corner of the world I learned that I can always retreat, even if only to a place within me that is more affirming.

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