Just Another Day Livin’ in the ’Hood

April 1, 1996 By Erik Meers

His songs offer support for young fathers, salute his children, and warn about the perils of AIDS. No, these aren’t the subjects of the latest Christian rock singles but the work of gangsta rapper Coolio, whose family values message might warm even Dan Quayle’s heart.

Coolio, 32, has been riding high since the release of his hit single, “Gangsta’s Paradise,” a soulful lament (sampling a riff of Stevie Wonder’s classic “Pastime Paradise”) about gang life included on the soundtrack of Michelle Pfeiffer’s movie *Dangerous Minds*. The record was the number one song of 1995. His follow-up, “Too Hot” (revamping the chorus from Kool & the Gang’s of the same name), is another cautionary tale: This time it’s AIDS and it’s personal. The song’s $300,000 video, aimed at black and Latino heterosexuals, focuses on the dangers of HIV transmission by showing several different scenarios in which straight couples in the throws of passion decide against using condoms. When the characters choose unsafe sex, they are instantly reduced to a pile of ashes. At the end of the video, after one such encounter, Coolio’s bed erupts into flames. As the camera recedes, the door of a crematory oven slams shut. The video and its stark message dominated the *MTV Jams* countdown for most of January.

If Coolio’s rap rings true, it’s because he writes from his own experience of growing up in LA’s now-notorious South Central neighborhood. Coolio, whose real name is Artis Ivey, Jr., lived the life of a crack-smoking gang member in his early twenties, a legacy that he managed to escape by doing a stint as a mountain firefighter. Returning to South Central, he found that a new tidal wave was flooding his community: AIDS. Many of his peers were stricken, including the late former NWA rapper Eric “Eazy-E” Wright, who died last year. Since he hit the big time, Coolio has taken the high road, confronting the ravages of ghetto life while eschewing the gun-toting nihilism of fellow gangsta rappers like 2Pac Shakur and Snoop Doggy Dogg. Coolio’s bravado derives from his cool message: Personal responsibility.

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