Mary MAC’d

For Leroy Whitfield, there’s something about Mary J. Blige. But is she using her star power for the people?

April 1, 2001 By LeRoy Whitfield

I was recently flipping through my favorite hip hop monthly, which is thick with glossy pages hawking ultrafresh urban delights, when I peeped a sultry ad featuring Queen Bee, a.k.a. raunchy rapper Lil’ Kim, and Mary J. Blige, the Queen of Hip Hop Soul -- the new spokesroyalty for trendy MAC cosmetics. Pooched for the camera, Mary looks every part the ghettopatch Barbie, her weave-a-licious blond tresses flowing over a shimmering gold slip-skirt, her lips smeared with MAC’s latest shade of Viva Glam, the product whose entire $13.50 sticker price goes straight to AIDS charities. The only flaw in this vision of love was that I’m not the rose tattoo wrapped around her thigh. But Mary’s beauty didn’t interrupt her message: The Queen has raised her voice against AIDS.

Mary’s always been there for me, an HIV positive hip hop head -- way before she belted verses about a child living with AIDS in “Lean on Me” with Kirk Franklin’s Nu Nation Project. In fact, there are times in my AIDS existence when nothing eases my blues better than a song from her. Whenever my anxieties get to be too much, I rely on *My Life*’s “You Gotta Believe” and “Be Happy.” Somewhere between the Jeep-heavy bass and Mary’s raspy vocals, I lose my problems for a while; some nights, Mary, you sing me to sleep. Mary croons redemption songs for positive colored folks like me who considered suicide when the rainbow wasn’t enuf.

Some of my life’s most painful scenes have played out with Mary’s music as a soundtrack. While some chick trios sang that “going downtown” was the only way to win their love, Mary lifted this brother up, showing me that love can be unconditional. Even as I dealt with immune-system dramas and fights with my would-be baby’s mamas, Mary’s songs made me consider that maybe -- even if I couldn’t imagine I’d survive that long -- I should trade in my bitterness at being infected for a second chance at love.

So the MAC ad should have made my day. But however thrilled I was to see these two influential African-American sisters take a stand against AIDS, I wondered how well MAC was channeling their royal talent. Was even a dime of black women’s Viva Glam cash being returned to our community? David Geffen practically built AIDS Project Los Angeles with his $3.5 million donation. But the closest the black AIDS community has come to netting such celebs was back in 1996 when the New York City-based Balm in Gilead harnessed two divas -- opera star Jessye Norman and HIV positive dancer Bill T. Jones -- and raised $500,000 at a single performance. Sure enough, when I

scanned MAC's list of 150 beneficiary AIDS organizations in the U.S. to see how many black groups would receive Viva Glam grants, they were, like my viral load, undetectable.

With my spider senses tingling, I got on the horn to some of the AIDS beneficiaries. Then I set up a meeting with MAC's prez John Dempsey and veep Michelle Fenney, where I ran through the results of my fact-finding mission: None of the nine AIDS service organizations (ASOs) that Mary handed MAC checks to during her vastly black-attended Mary Tour (or the 10 others that benefited from this round of MAC largesse) had black executive directors. Although most of these 19 total groups were quick to tout that more than half of their caseload -- one as high as 90 percent -- was black, all had only token black board membership and few blacks in key management positions.

I wanted to know how exactly MAC had made its choices. Dempsey explained that the payola was returned to the zip codes where it was raised -- in other words, until you can buy MAC at a Bloomies in da 'hood, black ASOs are out of luck. I guess that's why BABAA, Blacks Assisting Blacks Against AIDS -- the only black-run ASO in the state of Missouri -- was bypassed for one of the state's many white-run ASOs, Food Outreach.

So I requested the court of the Queen herself. I hit her cell phone (cuz, you know, I got it like that) to ask her about the lack of MAC money going to black AIDS groups. She answered by pointing out the limitations of her stardom. "Celebrities and athletes do things like this to get people to listen," she said. "I just want people to see that I do know that AIDS exists and I'm trying to help do something about it." Point taken, my queen. But at a time when the HIV rate among blacks is climbing nearly as fast as your albums do on *Billboard*, we need more than red-ribbonism. Truth is, while MAC had the opportunity to employ black star power to empower black ASOs, it simply never occurred to them. But you're from a different 'hood, Mary. So why don't you represent?

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