POZ Q&A: Travis McCoy

The frontman for the alternative hip-hop/rock band Gym Class Heroes promotes HIV prevention to young people.

May 6, 2010 By LaToya Johnson

Famous for pop tunes such as “Clothes Off!” and “Cupid’s Chokehold,” Travis McCoy has embraced his role as an ambassador for MTV’s Staying Alive Foundation, which empowers young people around the world to get involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In 2009, McCoy became a Staying Alive ambassador and went to South Africa, India and the Philippines to visit youth-based HIV programs supported by the foundation.

Inspired by his trip, McCoy returned to the United States and recorded “One at a Time,” an AIDS awareness anthem released on iTunes on World AIDS Day 2009. Proceeds from the song benefit the foundation. World AIDS Day also marked the world premiere of *Travis McCoy’s Unbeaten Track*, a documentary of his global trek.

Why did you become a Staying Alive ambassador?
When I was younger someone very close to me died of AIDS. In the early ’90s there still wasn’t a lot of education [about HIV]. There was still—like there is today—a lot of stigma. I felt like, had people found out this person died from AIDS, I would have never heard the end of it. You know how cruel kids are. “Aw, Travis has AIDS! He was hanging around with so and so.”

I was so young when it happened. It was something we brushed under the rug, and a tremendous amount of guilt came along with that. In a sense, my involvement with Staying Alive is a way to give back and pay back for all those years I kind of hid.

I was asked to do red carpet interviews at MTV’s Video Music Awards [in 2008]. Afterward, I was like, there has to be more I can do than talk to celebrities, ask them if they’re having safe sex and how they feel about the AIDS epidemic. So I talked to [the people at] Staying Alive and said, “What else can I do?”

What did you learn from your journey last year?
There’s so much we can do that doesn’t involve a lot of work or a lot of effort. You don’t need to be a celebrity to make an impact.

How did you feel after returning from the trip?

I stopped taking the small things for granted. The simple fact I'm breathing may seem like a small thing, but it's huge at the end of the day. [People in] impoverished communities not only have to worry about where [their] next meal is coming from, but [they are] also stricken with [HIV], which is a whole other can of worms.

When I was in South Africa, I saw a group of kids playing soccer with a ball they had made out of wrapped-up bread bags, having the time of their lives. [Meanwhile] we have kids here throwing temper tantrums when their parents tell them they can't have their video games. Even in the hip-hop community, we have artists cashing in on or celebrating the fact they come from tough areas. [Compared with] the places I visited, where [they] come from is Disneyland.
I've been to some scary places in the United States, but none comes close to what I saw in the Philippines or South Africa. I hope this documentary makes people realize how good they have it.

How was recording "One at a Time" different from your past ?experiences?
[The big difference was] the pressure that was involved. I wasn't only speaking for myself, the teens I met [on my trip] or for Staying Alive [in general]—but for a generation. I made a promise to Staying Alive I'd raise $100,000. All the money made from the downloads goes right back to Staying Alive.

There's also the pressure of making a commercially palatable and viable song that is going to appeal to a wide variety of people without coming across too preachy [or] corny. This is my first time making a song for a charity. So all these things [came] into play. But at the end of the day, I'm proud of it.

I think it's going to do well. It's going to open people's eyes and hopefully, in turn, make people open up their wallets and give back to Staying Alive so we can keep funding these grantees so they can keep doing what they are doing in their communities.

You've done other charity work. Why focus on AIDS?
I've been approached by so many charities, and I've done things for Invisible Children. In North Uganda, they're sending 10- and 11-year-old kids off into the jungle with AK-47s. It's like, "Here, if you don't go and brutalize and terrorize these people, we're going to kill your family."

I've done stuff for Keep a Breast, which [raises money and awareness for] breast cancer…but [Staying Alive] struck a chord with me personally. This is the one I really want to throw myself into and really spend time helping.

Why is it important for musicians to care about issues like AIDS?
I think [part of] being a role model is knowing and accepting the fact you make an impression on kids and doing something positive with that.

If I could get a kid to go buy a pair of sneakers or wear a certain brand of clothes, I hope I could get that kid to go buy a box of condoms. Or get kids to think twice before they make a dumb decision when things are starting to heat up and they're getting intimate with their partners.

Are you committed long-term to being an AIDS advocate?
Of course. The [Staying Alive] grantees I met snatched such a big part of my heart that there's no way I'm going to ever forget about them or the foundation.

I didn't sign up for this for brownie points or to get a good look or to promote a record. We're still in the demo stages of our new record. This is in no way for promotional reasons or to say, "Look, I'm a celebrity" or "Hey look, I care." [HIV/AIDS] is something I feel needs to be put on the front burner.

What are you hoping to teach young people about HIV/AIDS in the song and documentary?
That they can do something, that this is not something that's going away or has gone away. HIV/AIDS hasn't gone anywhere. We just don't hear about it as much. We're so trained to think that once the media stop talking about it, it goes away. And it's gotten worse. I hope they educate themselves. After the smoke settles and people are on to the next thing, I'll still be here waving that Staying Alive banner—and maybe holding up a couple of these [*waves an issue of* POZ]!

Visit traviemccoy.bandcamp.com/ *to download "One at a Time."*

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/POZQA-TravisMcCoy-JUNE2010-18361-4636