Positive Bling

M.C. Mars hits the West Coast rap scene—at age 53

July 1, 2006 By M.C. Mars

In July 1988, I boarded a plane to San Francisco after spending five days in New York City unsuccessfully trying to get signed to a hip-hop label. That night, after landing, I visited a free clinic and received the positive result of an HIV test I had taken two weeks before. In a single night, a lifelong dream ended and a nightmare of illness began. After a decade of pioneering in the trenches of a new, transitioning genre and collaborating with artists who became Grammy nominees and MTV stars, I gave up the pursuit of a career in music to deal with HIV. But I kept rapping on my own—to process and cope. Hip-hop is in the DNA of my saga with AIDS. And, unlike its representation in the media as a virus of violence, hip-hop has helped me to heal.

Two years ago, as I sped thru San Francisco in my cab spitting freestyle rap to some cool passengers, one of the dudes in the back invited me to a club where he spun hip-hop on Sunday nights. When I walked in, I felt like Father Time. At 53, I was 30 years older than the oldest rapper in the room. In deference to my Paleolithic age, they called me Sir. As in: Excuse me, Sir, but what the hell are you doing up here trying to rap! His point was well taken. I got on the microphone anyway. The back-and-forth between the MCs and the energy in the club were electric. A fresh musical community was building a following and momentum, much like communities I had known before my diagnosis. These hungry young rappers and their hot band provided me with the showcase I had been missing writing lyrics solo all these years.

I returned regularly. There was a synergy in the increasingly close-knit group. Passing the mike became an act of respect. One day, I noticed they were referring to me either as the O.G. (Old Guy) or Uncle instead of Sir. Eventually, they started calling me just Mars. One of our stars, a young black kid from Detroit, said that what brought him back to the club was that there was this old white dude in there rapping and his flow was sick!

A good MC radiates the truth of who he is, but I needed to divulge my HIV to my peers before I could start rapping about it. I told one fellow MC in the car as he drove me home one night, another in the street outside the club. The others, I coerced into buying my autobiographical book, Don’t Take Me the Long Way, making them discover the news of my HIV positive status in print. Everyone—the MCs, the DJ, the band, the club owner and the regulars—leveled me with their kind sincerity, which I processed through deep emotion and thought into my freestyle. I found a kind of redemption in their vigorous, uncontrived support. I learned that when you make yourself

vulnerable, you give others permission to take risks too. Our communal sharing created a sense of openness in the group and led to the freedom to experiment, which helped each of us grow individually and as artists. Also, I don’t think any of these rappers will have unsafe sex without thinking of me. Currently, I’m composing a hip-hop play about AIDS with a 28-year-old MC, who is also a virtuoso beatboxer. I hope to perform with him for young people in clubs and put out our stuff on CD.

Last week, this kid who tried to intimidate me in the beginning, gave me a spontaneous kiss on the cheek. “I love this guy,” he said. “He inspires me.” I said that, no, he inspired me. And then we started to rap.

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