Chaka Treatment

HIV can’t stop the music

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When Steve Grissom tested HIV positive in 1995, he didn’t buy a self-help book or join a support group-he took a tip on survival from Chaka Khan. As the funky diva’s former publicist and manager, Grissom rubbed elbows with pop’s hot list-Madonna, Quincy Jones, Natalie Cole-and during those unforgettable years he took to heart Khan’s iron will to never let anyone or anything push her around. “C.K.’s a tough cookie. She had more balls than half the men I knew,” Grissom says.

After moving from Toledo to Los Angeles two decades ago, Grissom gravitated to the glitter-strewn fast lane of disco balls and smoky VIP rooms. “I got involved in the club scene very early-as a participant on the dance floor,” he says with a wry grin. “I was part of that late ’70s Studio 54 thing...Grace Jones, Sylvester, Sharon Redd. Time slips away, though, and the next thing you know you’re doing Peggy Lee, ”Is that all there is?"

But for Grissom, there was more. He found a profitable way to tape his nightclub-loving soul by managing the career of his live-in girlfriend, Taka Bloom-Khan’s sister. “I was like the brother-in-law,” Grissom says about his limo-riding, backstage days as part of Khan’s entourage. “We always wanted to be around big sis, but who knew I’d be involved in steering the very career that I was watching?”

His late-’80s turn at the wheel filled Grissom with “horror stories, laughter stories,” and tales about Khan’s pranks, including stealing the nameplate off a rival diva’s dressing room door. "It was the *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* school of music, but it worked because I knew the woman so well," says Grissom, 48.

His HIV diagnosis came six months after he and Khan split. Ignoring his doctor’s advice to take AZT, Grissom relocated to a yoga retreat, where herbs and antioxidants gave his CD4 cells a quick boost. After a close business associate died of AIDS, Grissom funneled his publicity savvy into a new diva: AIDS activist Aileen Getty (*POZ* May 1996 cover). But the two parted when Grissom-a self-described “AIDS dissident”-clashed with Getty over treatment philosophies.

Nowadays, Grissom’s CD4 count is flying high at around 800, his viral load a meager 9,000, as he grooves to his own drummed by avoiding protease inhibitors and other antivirals. In fact, he’s in

the early plannin stages of a new project that combines his music background with his holistic beliefs: A London concert starring British pop star Seal to raise funds for studies about alternative therapies.

Grissom may have swapped the dance floor for a room at the Los Angeles Buddhist meditation center, but he still finds inspiration in soul and funk. “I consider myself a very spiritual man, and I love that aspect of Chaka’s songs. When I hear ’Ain’t Nobody,’ I still get goose bumps and think of God.”

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