Game, The Down Low and AIDS

September 13, 2011 By POZ Staff

By Lauren Tuck (Editorial Assistant, POZ)

An old boyfriend of mine loved hip-hop. Driving in his car or hanging out at home, he would always blast the bass and rap along with the fast-paced lyrics. He educated me on the classics from Tupac and Notorious B.I.G. to modern-day marvels such as 50 Cent and Lil Wayne. Although I have abandoned my studies since our breakup, I still occasionally like to listen to Eminem and catch up on the culture.

So recently, among my biannual Google search on the world of rappers, I saw that Game (formerly known as The Game and a Grammy Award-winning artist) said that AIDS is spread by closeted gay men having sex with women. Rap I may not know much about, despite my efforts, but HIV/AIDS I definitely do.

Game---also known as Charles Louboutin, Chuck Taylor, Hurricane Game and his birth name Jayceon Terrell Taylor---has been known to tweet homophobic 140 character thoughts. In an effort to connect with the LGBT community he often hates on, Game recently went on VLADtv.com, an entertainment gossip site focused on hip-hop culture, to set things straight.

Watch the interview:

According to him, he doesn't have a problem with gay people. In fact, he believes that Beyoncé's new hit single should have said, "Who run the world? Gays!" What he does have a problem with, he explained, is men who pretend to not be gay---those who have sex with women but sneak around with men on the side. In other words, men on the "down low" (DL).

He says:

"...The No. 1 issue with [being on the down low] is that you can be foolin' somebody, and you can give them AIDS, and they can die. That in-the-closet shit is real scary...It's just not fair to other people, and then that shit spreads because that girl that you might be foolin'

might leave you and go find another dude that ain't gay and give him the disease and he goes and cheats on her, so it's an ongoing thing. So it ain't cool to be in the closet. So if you gay, just say you gay man. Be gay and be proud."

Just as my ex-boyfriend taught me about an unfamiliar way of life, I hope to inform Mr. Taylor (and hopefully others) about the flaws and misinformation of his beliefs.

It is a myth that black men on the DL are responsible for the rising rates of HIV among black women.

Although AIDS is the leading cause of death for Africa-American women ages 25 to 34, other factors are fueling the spread of HIV among this demographic (and among the black community and impoverished communities as a whole). Such factors include poverty, untreated sexually transmitted infections (STI), homelessness, high rates of incarceration, sexual violence and lack of health care.

When researchers interviewed more than 1,100 black men who have sex with men, they found that 59 percent of those who self-describe as being on the DL and 59 percent of those who are openly bisexual reported unprotected sex with women, and both groups had similar HIV rates (44 percent of DL men had the virus compared with 56 percent of those not on the DL).

What's more, according to lead researcher Lisa Bond, PhD, "not all black men on the so-called down low are having sex with women, and some men who don't identify with the term down low do have sex with women---and these two findings really underscore the limited utility of using a label like down low for targeting HIV prevention efforts."

So what is useful in lowering the high HIV rates? How about doing something about the high rates of unprotected sex, which seems to be common across the board.

All of this research is supported by Kevin Fenton, MD, director of the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD and TB Prevention, which is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). He says, "[T]he reality is that bisexual black men account for a very, very small proportion of the overall black male population in the United States. Our research suggests that about 2 percent of black men will report being bisexually active."

Charles Louboutin may have intended to make amends with the gay community, or just cover his butt, but even just using the "down low" term could potentially harm HIV prevention for black men.

The best outcome from all this coverage is that the conversation has been started all across the web. Perhaps with a little more knowledge about the intricacies of the DL and HIV rates in the black

community, Game could improve his advocacy game.

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