Madonna’s Blond Ambition Dancer “Slam” Is Ready to Talk About His HIV—Just Don’t Ask Him to Vogue

April 14, 2016 By Trent Straube

Let’s start with some cultural history. Back in 1991, Madonna released the Truth or Dare documentary, which followed her Blond Ambition World Tour and shined the spotlight on her seven backup dancers—Carlton Wilborn, José Gutierez, Oliver Crumes, Luis Camacho, Kevin Stea, Gabriel Trupin and Salim (a.k.a. “Slam”) Gauwloos—who also starred in the iconic video for the song “Vogue.” These fellows were flamboyant, confident, sexy. They had style, they had grace…you know the rest. And only one of them was straight. Keep in mind, this is 1991. Before the Internet, before gay marriage, before Will & Grace, before the Kardashian-reality-TV takeover of the world and definitely before Grindr let you check out the junk of every dude in town. In short, Truth or Dare was some revelatory, groundbreaking shit. It changed lives.

So what a great idea for documentarians Ester Gould and Reijer Zwaan to catch up with the dancers. As we learn in the resulting film, Strike a Pose, now at the Tribeca Film Festival, Madonna’s babies got some secrets—and they’ve faced considerable hardships. If it weren’t for the sheer charm and resilience of the guys, the movie could be viewed as a sad cautionary tale. What surprised me was that three of the dancers were living with HIV during the Blond Ambition tour, in 1990, and none of them knew about each other. Gabriel died of AIDS-related illness in 1995, and Carlton Wilborn came out about his status several years ago in his autobiography, Front & Center (you can read my Carlton Q&A here).

The Belgian-born Slam, however, remained silent about his status until he chose Strike a Pose as a platform to disclose to the world. He and his very charming accent—he punctuates conversations with “Ja” for “Yes”—recently stopped by the POZ office to tell us more about his journey since Truth or Dare. During the conversation, Salim’s publicist called him to schedule an upcoming interview. “I can make it,” he told her, “but tell them I don’t want to dance. No vogueing. I’m finally ready to talk!”

“Strike a Pose” stars are, top row: Salim “Slam” Gauwloos, Oliver Crumes III, Carlton Wilborn, Kevin Stea; bottom row: Luis Camacho, Jose GutierezLInda Posnick

Let’s start with your HIV diagnosis, which happened years before the Blond Ambition tour, right?

Ja, in 1987. I just moved here [to New York] for six months, but something wasn’t right with my kidney. I had no insurance here, so went back to Belgium and did tests. Everything was good, but for some reason, I got a call to come back to the doctor. I thought, That’s odd. I went back and they told me, “We did an HIV test, and you are HIV positive.” And my mom was sitting there. I was uneducated about it, just a kid out of ballet school. I knew nothing about it. I never even gave them permission to do an HIV test.

So HIV was not on your mind?

No, and I had only had sex one time. Ja, it was my first sexual experience. I didn’t even get to be a slut! [Laughs.] And I remember, I made the choice—“No, don’t worry about it. Don’t use a condom.” I remember it vividly.

Never any sluttiness? Did you date or have sex afterward?

Nope. I just did drugs.

And you could have had any guy you wanted—if you were safe about it, of course.

I know. It's too messed up. The hardest for me was being diagnosed at a young age. I thought, I'm never going to find love. That was the hardest thing. I was like, I'm 18. I just finished ballet school, and now I have this HIV. And on your first sexual experience on top of it. So as far as sexual life, that died.

Judging from "Strike a Pose" it seems like you didn't tell anyone about your status until recently.

My mom knew, of course. I asked her to promise never [to] tell anybody. In those times, you didn't really share. She kept the secret for close to seven years, and then she told my brother because she couldn't hold it anymore. One brother and two sisters are from the same father; I'm from a different father. He was from Morocco, but he passed away. I told [the rest of my family] right before the Berlin [Film] Festival [which was earlier this year].

You told none of your friends—not even other dancers?

No. It was my secret. Nobody knew. Not even José—and we were [very close] on the tour.

(story continued below)

> Some of the best times in our lives on stage with @Madonna ❤❤❤ Strike a Pose next month in NYC #Tribeca2016 #Love pic.twitter.com/82tqNsHfMF
>
> — Salim Gauwloos (@Salim_Gauwloos) March 21, 2016

"Strike a Pose" does a great job of contrasting that secret life with the concert's message of self-expression and safe sex. Madonna even stops the show to talk about her friend Keith Haring, saying something like, "The truth is he was gay. The truth is he had AIDS. In his memory, let's tell the truth."

That was "Get Into the Groove." That was when she, you know, says, "Put a condom on your willy," and it's us [with HIV] on stage, and none of us knew about each other.

How did you feel during those numbers?

The dancing was OK because you can take yourself someplace else. But that speech about Keith Haring, oh, it was the worst! I would just like die inside. Because they told me in '87, "You only have, like, five years."

Did you consider telling anyone, even Madonna?

I thought about it. But if I would have told anyone at that time, I would have been a Debbie Downer. And it was such a great moment, and I needed that moment to escape and survive. Probably Carlton and Gabriel did too.

Did keeping it a secret take any toll on your health or psyche?

No. I mean, well, I didn't talk about it for almost 10 years, but then I ended up in the hospital in '97 with PCP [a pneumonia common among people with AIDS]. I had a T-cell count of 12, and my viral load was like in the hundred thousands.

At this point, you hadn't been taking any HIV meds?

No. I was in complete denial. But doing a lot of drugs. I went on a drug rampage—cocaine, everything.

In "Strike a Pose," you mention drugs and homelessness. How did you get to that point?

On the tour, Madonna got me a work visa, but it was for a limited time. Afterward, I got a work visa here and there but always very short. At one point, I was like, Fuck it. So I let everything go and became illegal [an undocumented alien]. I didn't have a place to live because I was not working, and I was illegal and doing a lot of drugs. So I would go to clubs, and hopefully, I'd know somebody there, a friend or something, who would let me crash.

How long did that go on?

A couple years. From like '92 to '97. Ja, a long time. Also, working with Madonna was great, but at the same time, we had a lot of backlash, too, from other artists or companies who had a problem with her or us. Then at other times, it was a blessing. But I was illegal—I couldn't work, and I had HIV. Sometimes I didn't feel good, and I lost weight. People would tell me, "You're so skinny, are you OK?" I was like, "Of course." I was thinking, If I go to the hospital or doctor, they'll call immigration, so that's another reason for not going.

So I ended up in the hospital in October 1997. In Flushing [Queens] somewhere. I was staying with a friend, and I couldn't breathe but still wouldn't go—I'm a double Sagittarius; I'm so stubborn—[and] she brought me to the hospital. And she was HIV positive. I knew her status but never told her my status until the end.

I was there for two to three weeks. I really thought I was going to die. This was in 1997, so they had started the new [HIV] cocktails. After I was released, I got into care. But the insurance that pulled me together was ADAP [AIDS Drug Assistance Program]. I didn't even know about it. And my doctor, Carlos Vaamonde, and my social worker, Peter Sultan, at CSS [Center for Special Studies, specializing in HIV/AIDS treatment at] New York-Presbyterian—I couldn't feel in better hands and care.

So I started taking the medications, ja. I had to take 12 or 13, like 24, pills a day. But it didn't

matter to me. And being a drug addict, popping pills was no problem. [Laughs]

How did you handle the meds?

No side effects, and my T-cell count went up, and my viral load down. But my lungs took a couple weeks to get back. It was bad. You feel like you're going to die, ja.

Do you consider yourself a drug addict? I couldn't tell if you were kidding when you said that.

[Shakes his head no] I mean, right now, I'm a big pot smoker. Even in the movie, I smoke. I'm a big advocate. When I'm not hungry, it helps. It's great for HIV- and AIDS-related issues. For me, it has done wonders. But I think I was an addict but never looked for professional help. Ja, I did it all myself.

How did you get clean?

I just got sick of it. Everybody around you gets sick of it, and at the end, you are by yourself. And ending up in the hospital was a big wake-up call for me, like, Oh God, I'm gonna die here. But in 2000, I met the love of my life, and we got married. He got my life together like a guardian angel.

(story continued below)

Salim Gauwloos photographed by his husband Facundo Gabba.

What?! That's not in the documentary! That's such a happy turn of events. What's his story?

He’s from Argentina. [His name is] Facundo Gabba. He used to be a model and is now a casting director and photographer.

How’d you guys meet?

We met through a mutual friend at a dance school here in the city. I was still illegal, and he was like, “Let’s try to make you legal. Bring me your newspaper clips, everything.” I was like, “I don’t have anything—not even a picture with Madonna. Nothing.” When you apply, you have to submit photos, no video. So we played videos on the TV and took pictures of the screen. Our lawyer said there’s a 99 percent chance you’ll get turned down because of HIV. But we just went for it. And I got my green card. I felt really lucky. That was in maybe 2003 or 2004.

And now he’s your husband.

Ja, ja. Husband—it’s so weird. The word feels so old. Ugh. Boyfriend sounds younger! [Laughs]

How did you tell him about your HIV status?

It was scary. Ja. I was crying. He thought I was going to tell him that I had—What’s the word for it? That I was in another relationship?—but I was like, “No, I’m HIV positive.” But it didn’t matter to him.

Update us on your career since getting your green card.

In 2003, I did Aida on Broadway with Toni Braxton for two years. I teach a lot at Broadway Dance Center, on a regular basis. I do fashion jobs—they still come in because I worked with Madonna. It’s amazing.

Do you still hear from your fans?

Ja, I get a lot of emails. [He grabs his phone and starts scrolling through it.] For example, I just got this one. I thought it was really beautiful:

> Hi Slam, I just wanted to tell you that I grew up in very terrifying household as a child where religion was used to justify terrible torture and abuse. I’m 36 now and I still have issues with it to this day. However, I’ve grown up to become a successful gay men. Without you being my first crush on camera for obvious reasons (LOL), I wouldn’t have been able to get through the things I was experiencing as a child. I just want to say thank you for giving me an outlet as a kid with no mentor to show me it was OK to be myself no matter what the rest of the world thought. You are iconic, and I’m forever grateful and a fan, and I love you Slam.

How does that make you feel?

It’s so touching, ja. And I never knew I’d be a role model. [Truth or Dare] has been such an inspiration to people. And the kiss! I mean, the kiss [the controversial kiss between Slam and Gabriel]! People say how much the movie helped them, how they felt out of place when they were little, and because they saw us being so comfortable in our skin, it helped them.

Maybe “Strike a Pose” can bring up the topic of HIV the way “Truth or Dare” brought attention to gayness.

You don’t really hear about HIV anymore. And now I’m sitting on the subway and see an ad for PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis, the daily pill to reduce your risk of getting HIV], and I’m like, What’s that? Young kids think they can go to a crystal meth party and just take PrEP. They might look at me and see that I’m 47 and had HIV almost 30 years, and they might think, “He’s fine.” I’m supposed to be dead. But I take my medication now, and I live healthy. Not everybody survives or can be on the pills such a long time, and some people do have side effects. Young people, you gotta be careful. That’s what I want to make clear.

One last question. Despite all the hardships you and the other dancers have faced, you remain so likable in the new film. I felt like I was catching up with old friends. What’s it like for you to reconnect with them?

It’s great. We are still the same people. It’s just that life happens—25 years is a big chunk. But here we are, going through all this stuff. I hope that we get to inspire people the same way we did 25 years ago.

For my other Strike a Pose Q&A, read “How Madonna Dancer Carlton Wilborn Broke Free of HIV Shame.”

Strike A Pose family by getty images ❤

@strikeaposefilm #belgiumstress #madonna #Tribeca2016 pic.twitter.com/Cvj0qF5lQt

— Salim Gauwloos (@Salim_Gauwloos) March 31, 2016

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.