’Music is such a powerful tool and has been important with my movement and the HIV/AIDS movement.’

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Maria Davis portrait, courtesy Merck & Co.

Visual AIDS Artist+ Member Derek Jackson is a musical force to be reckoned with, as the front man of Portland, Maine-based art-punk band Hi Tiger. Below, Derek interviews hip-hop industry insider Maria Davis about HIV and the music industry.

Thank you on behalf of Visual AIDS for speaking with me today. My first question has to do with finding out you were diagnosed positive and how that was a catalyst for a change in your career. What did that look like from a temporal, professional and if you feel comfortable, personal or emotional perspective?
Absolutely. I was diagnosed in 1995. I found out through a life insurance policy. I had two children and I wanted a policy that was 100,000 but the requirement for the policy was that you had to take a HIV test, you couldn’t have any pre-existing illnesses like HIV / AIDS, cancer or anything. So I took the test.

Back then the messaging was that people who were HIV positive were all gay white men. Down the road we found out that it impacts the African-American community, both women and men, in the highest numbers. I was in the music industry and at the time I was diagnosed I had a popular showcase called Mad Wednesdays. I couldn’t tell anybody I was HIV positive because of the stigma. Back then we all knew about Eazy-E, who announced to the world that he lived with AIDS then a couple of days later passed away. And there was Magic Johnson, who’s still with us and doing some amazing incredible work. But I didn’t have anybody I could tell. I didn’t have any kind of outlet, really anyone to talk to...

Mad Wednesdays was still going on, but I was becoming sicker and sicker. At one point, I couldn’t do Mad Wednesday’s where I featured artists that are important in the music industry today like Jay Z, 50 cent, and Missy Elliot. But I would like to say that Mad Wednesdays was instrumental, as well as my stage family, in using what I learned, and applying the same formula to my work in the

community talking about HIV / AIDS. Lending my voice as I did in Mad Wednesdays, but now lending my voice to a different cause which was HIV / AIDS. So in that way, my career hasn't really changed. I was a model in the 80's and doing the showcase, and I'm still doing it today. Now my work around HIV awareness is incorporated into the Mad Wednesday showcase. My HIV is incorporated in my modeling and being the face, a beautiful face, a different kind of look for people who are living with HIV.

Did Mad Wednesdays remain the platform?
Yes and still is. As well as the opportunity to be included in a book called Souls Revealed: A Souls of My Sisters Book of Revelations and Tools for Healing Your Life, Soul, and Spirit that was about women being vocal about issues and concerns in their own personal lives. The two women who edited the book, Dawn Marie Daniels and Candace Sandy, asked me to speak about being a female promoter in a male dominated industry. By the time they asked me I had already been diagnosed with AIDS. I was very open and honest with them and told them I didn't even think I was going to live, I couldn't talk about being in the music industry because I was too confused and afraid to tell my story at that time. Then once I shared with them that I was living with AIDS, Candace called me and said "This will be so great why don't you tell your story about living with AIDS." I said, "Are you kidding me? Not when everyone is calling this disease a monster. No way." The stigma that was back then... there was no way.

So where did you get the tools to be able to talk about it? Did they come from your within, your family, your community?
From within. I always loved to talk. When I was a child my mother used to say "Oh my God! Could you please be quiet!!!", because I talked and talked. She would always have to come to school because the teachers always had on my report card, "She talks too much." So the speaking part has always been with me since I was a child. I was always confident in myself and what I wanted to speak for. I wanted to be a voice. This HIV advocacy that's happening now…20 years ago when I was diagnosed (I'm celebrating my anniversary)…I always cared about the community, I always took part in other organizations like Jack and Jill, going to my church and working with young people. I was always an advocate.

What have been some of your biggest challenges? You mentioned stigma in the hip-hop community…
Dating. Dating is a big challenge too. Absolutely. Me personally, when dating someone, that's the first thing I have to talk about, that I'm living with AIDS. Everybody's not that open minded about it or not educated about HIV and AIDS. It's not a death sentence. I have many friends (in relationships), where one may be HIV positive and one might be HIV negative. Especially for me, because I'm my own boss. Being so entrenched in the HIV / AIDS movement and being an activist…dating is very hard for me.

How do you negotiate that? How do you deal with it?
I have to change my mindset and not be so much of an activist all the time. Learning when to wear what hat. That is helpful for me.

Would you say that the activist hat isn't as compassionate towards someone who isn't educated and doesn't know some of the facts around transmission around stigma? What does that other hat look like that's not the activist hat?
It's crazy because education around HIV / AIDS, that's part of my entire conversation, everything I talk about…I can have other conversations but because of the numbers, the urgency, the importance and because people have forgotten how HIV first impacted us in the early '80s and '90s, I don't feel the urgency in the conversation because people don't care anymore. They're not seeing people dying, we're living longer. So it's important that I'm part of the "I Design" campaign, Merck's national HIV education campaign for people that are living with HIV to have open and honest conversations with their doctors…so it's hard for me to switch hats.

I feel you. You want to launch into this information, provide information, and be a resource but you don't want that to eclipse these other things which are your beauty as a woman.
Absolutely.

And not that those two things can't co-exist. You are representative of the fact that they can.
Absolutely. You said that very well. HIV doesn't define who I am. I like to have fun. I swim, take swimming lessons—learning to swim was on my bucket list. I like comedy. I like to do a lot of different things…

"I like long walks on the beach…"
Haha! Yes, I long walks on the beach, going on cruises and having a good time!

Alex from Visual AIDS paired us together because I'm a musician. I have a band called Hi Tiger and we started out a guitar driven post-punk outfit. As a gay black man, I think a lot of people latched onto my identity and how weird it was in their minds that a black man would be doing this kind of music. I spent my youth in NYC listening to deep house and clubbing at places like the Sound Factory so Hi Tiger has evolved into more of those influences and combining hip-hop–beat driven instrumentation. So I'm wondering what's hot for you right now musically? What are you excited about? What are some of your influences?
Well you know Freddie Jackson, Mahalia Jackson, Jimmy Hendrix, I love all kinds of music. I try to also teach my younger audience that you can't just be a one-track mind. If you love hip-hop and you're trying to be a global artist, you're trying reach everyone, you have to think different. Hip-hop is not just on your corner or in your projects, hip-hop is all over the place - what other messages can you give about what's going on in our community…the youth movement, even the message of safe-sex, abstinence…how can you incorporate that in the music to empower someone? Not just always talking about take your clothes off and shake your booty. Music is such a powerful tool and has been so important with my movement and the movement of HIV and AIDS.

I tell people, come here, I'm going to set you up in a club / restaurant called The Shrine in Harlem with a live band setting. I'm able to lure them in. They think they're just coming to perform in front of an audience—they do get to do that, but they also get information and educated while they're in there. I do HIV testing too. With the partnership of The Shrine, project I Design, my faith family…all of these things together is what makes Maria Davis important and powerful in this

movement.

There's an artist, Mykki Blanco, who recently came out as diagnosed positive. I don't know of many folks in the music industry who have or where the conversation is happening.
No it's not happening. The stigma is still playing an important part of people being open and honest with their diagnosis. People still whispering around the corner. I meet women and men every day who say, "Thank you for being the activist that you are. I'm HIV positive but I can't do what you do."

Yes you can. You just have to get comfortable in your skin and not be afraid. But, this job is not for everybody because sometimes this is a lonely road. Sometimes I say, why me? Why did I have to be picked for this mission?

What are some of the successes in terms of the response from the community? Have you seen lives change? And if so, how do you measure that?
We've come a long way but there's still a lot of work to be done. HIV is a preventable disease. As African Americans, why are we still getting infected in 2015? I personally believe mental health has a lot to do with it. Also people not accepting others for who they are, whether they're heterosexual or whether they're gay. People should feel comfortable enough to be open and honest to speak to who they are. This in turn will help them get what they need. But if you're afraid of speaking about who you are then how is it you'll be able to tell people what you need?

So the success is in the ability to have that conversation so that where there are failures they can be identified and strategies can be built to address them.
Absolutely. In the HIV community, I Design had a survey that revealed that people who are having open and honest conversations are also living with at least one other health issue. They found out that people are living longer and the conversation has shifted towards the other health issues besides HIV. We're still concerned with HIV but those other health issues are now on the forefront of our minds because now we're aging.

That is a huge success. Thank you so much, Maria, for sharing with me today. Is there anything you'd like to say in closing?
Yes—www.projectidesign.com is a website with a lot of tools for people that may be HIV positive to help guide them with how to have open and honest conversations. There are tools like the conversation checkbook that you can take into the doctor's office. You know, sometimes I get busy and there's a question I want to ask but I forget…writing it down is so important. Be confident that you can address your doctors and have the tools to empower yourself. I feel that way, we'll be able to bring HIV and AIDS to zero.

Derek Jackson is a visual artist and front man of the Portland, Maine-based art-punk band Hi Tiger. Recent performances include Brooklyn Academy of Music for NYC Pride's EVERYBOOTY; Spectrum: OVA the Rainbow; and Portland Pride MainStage (Portland, Maine.). Visual AIDS has presented Hi Tiger as part of Not Over: 25 years of Visual AIDS, an exhibition at LaMaMa La Galleria curated by

Kris Nuzzi and Sur Rodney Sur (2013); Aternate Endings,a traveling video program and panel discussion (2014); and Radiant Presence, a slideshow video that was projected onto the facades of Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the former site of St. Vincent's Hospital in New York City, and the de Young Museum and Castro Theatre in San Francisco. Hi Tiger music is available on the web.

Music industry insider Maria Davis was diagnosed with HIV in 1995 after unknowingly contracting the virus from the man whom she was planning to marry, and has since become a devoted advocate for HIV awareness and education. Since her diagnosis, Maria has been very vocal about living with HIV to lend a voice to women impacted by the epidemic. She has dedicated her life to educating women, men and children about HIV, especially in the New York City area where she was raised.

Maria has leveraged her position in the entertainment industry to educate the community about HIV by partnering with organizations such as Life Beat: Music Industry Fights HIV and BET Rap it Up Community Service, as well as serving as a key note speaker for the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS, Inc. Maria also regularly volunteers her time in the community, speaking to educators, health care providers, and other members of the community regarding the importance of HIV/AIDS awareness.

This passion and dedication to HIV education drove Maria to collaborate with Merck on I Design, a national HIV education campaign aimed at helping to empower people with the disease to play an active role in designing their treatment plan with their doctors. Through I Design, Maria shares her experience living with HIV and encourages others living with the disease to "vocalize" how their treatment is working for them in discussions with their healthcare team.

In addition to being known for her HIV advocacy work, Maria has become known as one of New York's premiere promoters. She produced, directed and promoted her newly created, legendary music showcases known as "Mad Wednesdays," which provide venues for signed and unsigned R&B and hip-hop artists and comedians who have had no other performance options. Through this work, Maria has created an outlet for young people to express themselves artistically.

More information on I Design is available at www.ProjectIDesign.com.

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