

Living (and Dying) on the Down Low

Double Lives, AIDS, and the Black Homosexual Underground

In its upper stories, the Flex bathhouse in Cleveland feels like a squash club for backslapping businessmen. There's a large gym with free weights and exercise machines on the third floor. In the common area, on the main floor, men in towels lounge on couches and watch CNN on big-screen TV's.

In the basement, the mood is different: the TV's are tuned to porn, and the dimly lighted hallways buzz with sexual energy. A naked black man reclines on a sling in a room called "the dungeon play area." Along a hallway lined with lockers, black men eye each other as they walk by in towels. In small rooms nearby, some men are having sex. Others are napping.

There are two bathhouses in Cleveland. On the city's predominantly white West Side, Club Cleveland — which opened in 1965 and recently settled into a modern 15,000-square-foot space — attracts many white and openly gay men. Flex is on the East Side, and it serves a mostly black and Hispanic clientele, many of whom don't consider themselves gay. (Flex recently shut its doors temporarily while it seeks a new location.)

I go to Flex one night to meet Ricardo Wallace, an African-American outreach worker for the AIDS Task Force of Cleveland who comes here twice a month to test men for H.I.V. I eventually find him sitting alone on a twin-size bed in a small room on the main floor. Next to him on the bed are a dozen unopened condoms and several oral H.I.V.-testing kits.

Twenty years ago, Wallace came here for fun. He was 22 then, and AIDS seemed to kill only gay white men in San Francisco and New York. Wallace and the other black men who frequented Flex in the early 80's worried just about being spotted walking in the front door.

Today, while there are black men who are openly gay, the majority of those having sex with men still lead secret lives, products of a black culture that deems masculinity and fatherhood as a black man's primary responsibility — and homosexuality as a white man's perversion. And while Flex now offers baskets of condoms and lubricant, Wallace says that many of the club's patrons still don't use them. Wallace ticks off the grim statistics: blacks make up only 12 percent of the population in America, but they account for half of all new H.I.V. infections. While intravenous drug use is a large part of the problem, experts say that the leading cause of H.I.V. in black men is homosexual sex (some of which takes place in prison, where blacks disproportionately outnumber whites). According to the Centers for Disease Control, one-third of young urban black men who have sex with men in this country are H.I.V.-positive, and 90 percent of those are unaware of their infection.

We don't hear much about this aspect of the epidemic, mostly because the two communities most directly affected by it — the black and gay communities — have spent the better part of two decades eyeing each other through a haze of denial or studied disinterest. For African-Americans, facing and addressing the black AIDS crisis would require talking honestly and compassionately about homosexuality — and that has proved remarkably difficult, whether it be in black churches, in black organizations, or on inner-city playgrounds. The mainstream gay world, for its part, has spent 20 years largely

fighting the epidemic among white, openly gay men, showing little sustained interest in reaching minorities who have sex with men and who refuse to call themselves gay.

Rejecting a gay culture they perceive as white and effeminate, many black men have settled on a new identity, with its own vocabulary and customs, and its own name: Down Low. There have always been men — black and white — who have had secret sexual lives with men. But the creation of an organized, underground subculture largely made up of black men who otherwise live straight lives is a phenomenon of the last decade. Many of the men at Flex tonight — and many of the black men I met these past months in Cleveland, Atlanta, Florida, New York and Boston — are on the Down Low, or on the DL, as they more often call it. Most date or marry women and engage sexually with men they meet only in anonymous settings like bathhouses and parks or through the Internet. Many of these men are young and from the inner city, where they live in a hypermasculine “thug” culture. Other DL men form romantic relationships with men and may even be peripheral participants in mainstream gay culture, all unknown to their colleagues and families. Most DL men identify themselves not as gay or bisexual but first and foremost as black. To them, as to many blacks, that equates to being inherently masculine.

DL culture has grown, in recent years, out of the shadows and developed its own contemporary institutions, for those who know where to look: Web sites, Internet chat rooms, private parties and special nights at clubs. Over the same period, Down Low culture has come to the attention of alarmed public health officials, some of whom regard men on the DL as an infectious bridge spreading H.I.V. to unsuspecting wives and girlfriends. In 2001, almost two-thirds of women in the United States who found out they had AIDS were black.

With no wives or girlfriends around, Flex is a safe place for men on the DL to let down their guards. There aren't many white men here either (I'm one of them), and that's often the norm for DL parties and clubs. Some private DL events won't even let whites in the door. Others will let you in if you look “black enough,” which is code for looking masculine, tough and “straight.” That's not to say that DL guys are attracted only to men of color. “Some of the black boys here love white boys,” Wallace says.

While Wallace tests one man for H.I.V. (not all DL men ignore the health threat), I walk back downstairs to change into a towel — I've been warned twice by Flex employees that clothes aren't allowed in the club. By the lockers, I notice a tall black man in his late teens or early 20's staring at me from a dozen lockers down. Abruptly, he walks over to me and puts his right hand on my left shoulder.

“You wanna hook up?” he asks, smiling broadly.

His frankness takes me by surprise. Bathhouse courtship rituals usually involve a period of aggressive flirtation — often heavy and deliberate staring. “Are you gay?” I ask him.

“Nah, man,” he says. “I got a girl. You look like you would have a girl, too.”

I tell him that I don't have a girl. “Doesn't matter,” he says, stepping closer. I decline his advances, to which he seems genuinely perplexed. Before I go back upstairs, I ask him if he normally uses condoms here.

As a recurring announcement comes over the club's loudspeaker — “H.I.V. testing is available in Room 207. . . . H.I.V. testing in Room 207” — he shakes his head. “Nah, man,” he says. “I like it raw.”

[Break]

If Cleveland is the kind of city many gay people flee, Atlanta is a city they escape to. For young black men, Atlanta is the hub of the South, a city with unlimited possibilities, including a place in its vibrant DL scene.

I go to Atlanta to meet William, an attractive 35-year-old black man on the DL who asked to be identified by his middle name. I met him in the America Online chat room DLThugs, where he spends some time most days searching for what he calls “real” DL guys — as opposed to the “flaming queens who like to pretend they’re thugs and on the DL.” William says he likes his guys “to look like real guys,” and his Internet profile makes it clear what he isn’t looking for: no stupid questions, fats, whites, stalkers or queens.

I told him I was a writer, and he eventually agreed to meet me in Atlanta and take me around to a few clubs. With one condition: “You better dress cool,” he warned me. “Don’t dress, you know, white.”

William smiles as I climb into his silver Jeep Grand Cherokee, which I take as a good sign. Two of William’s best friends are in the car with him: Christopher, a thin, boyish 32-year-old with a shaved head, and Rakeem, an outgoing 31-year-old with dreadlocks who asked to be identified by his Muslim name. We drive toward the Palace, a downtown club popular with young guys on the DL.

William doesn’t date women anymore and likes guys younger than he is, although they’ve been known to get more attached than he would prefer. “Yeah, he’s always getting stalked,” Rakeem says enthusiastically. “The boys just won’t leave him alone. He’s got this weird power to make boys act really stupid.”

It’s easy to see why. William radiates confidence and control, which serve him well in his daytime role as an executive at a local corporation. He says his co-workers don’t know he likes men (“It’s none of their business,” he tells me several times), or that after work he changes personas completely, becoming a major player in the city’s DL scene, organizing parties and events.

Christopher, who sits in the back seat with me, is the only one of the three who is openly gay and not on the DL (although he won’t tell me his last name, for fear of embarrassing his parents). Christopher moved to Atlanta when he was 24 and was surprised when black men in the city couldn’t get enough of him. “They would hit on me at the grocery store, on the street, on the train, always in this sly, DL kind of way where you never actually talk about what you’re really doing,” he says. “That’s actually how I met my current boyfriend. He followed me off the train.”

Rakeem, a roommate of William’s, moved to Atlanta five years ago from Brooklyn. He says he’s “an urban black gay man on the DL,” which he says reflects his comfort with his sexuality but his unwillingness to “broadcast it.” People at work don’t know he’s gay. His family wouldn’t know, either, if a vindictive friend hadn’t told them. “I’m a guy’s guy, a totally masculine black gay man, and that’s just beyond my family’s comprehension,” he says.

While Rakeem and William proudly proclaim themselves on the Down Low, they wouldn’t have been considered on the DL when men first started claiming the label in the mid-90’s. Back then the culture was completely under the radar, and DL men lived ostensibly heterosexual lives (complete with wives and girlfriends) but also engaged in secret sexual relationships with men. Today, though, an increasing number of black men

who have sex only with men identify themselves as DL, further muddying an already complicated group identity. And as DL culture expands, it has become an open secret.

For many men on the Down Low, including William and Rakeem, the DL label is both an announcement of masculinity and a separation from white gay culture. To them, it is the safest identity available — they don't risk losing their ties to family, friends and black culture.

William parks the car in a secluded lot about a block from the Palace. As he breaks out some pot, I ask them if they heard about what happened recently at Morehouse College, where one black student beat another with a bat supposedly for looking at him the wrong way in a dormitory shower.

“I'm surprised that kind of stuff doesn't happen more often,” William says. “The only reason it doesn't is because most black guys are sly enough about it that they aren't gonna get themselves beaten up. If you're masculine and a guy thinks you're checking him out, you can always say: ‘Whoa, chill, I ain't checking you out. Look at me. Do I look gay to you?’ ”

Masculinity is a surprisingly effective defense, because until recently the only popular representations of black gay men were what William calls “drag queens or sissies.” Rakeem takes a hit from the bowl. “We know there are black gay rappers, black gay athletes, but they're all on the DL,” Rakeem says. “If you're white, you can come out as an openly gay skier or actor or whatever. It might hurt you some, but it's not like if you're black and gay, because then it's like you've let down the whole black community, black women, black history, black pride. You don't hear black people say, ‘Oh yeah, he's gay, but he's still a real man, and he still takes care of all his responsibilities.’ What you hear is, ‘Look at that sissy faggot.’ ”

I ask them what the difference is between being on the DL and being in the closet. “Being on the DL is about having fun,” William tells me. “Being who you are, but keeping your business to yourself. The closet isn't fun. In the closet, you're lonely.”

“I don't know,” Christopher says. “In some ways I think DL is just a new, sexier way to say you're in the closet.”

Both have a point. As William says, DL culture does place a premium on pleasure. It is, DL guys insist, one big party. And there is a certain freedom in not playing by modern society's rules of self-identification, in not having to explain yourself, or your sexuality, to anyone. Like the black athletes and rappers they idolize, DL men convey a strong sense of masculine independence and power: I do what I want when I want with whom I want. Even the term Down Low — which was popularized in the 1990's by the singers TLC and R. Kelly, meaning “secret” — has a sexy ring to it, a hint that you're doing something wrong that feels right.

But for all their supposed freedom, many men on the DL are as trapped — or more trapped — than their white counterparts in the closet. While DL guys regard the closet as something alien (a sad, stifling place where fearful people hide), the closet can be temporary (many closeted men plan to someday “come out”). But black men on the DL typically say they're on the DL for life. Since they generally don't see themselves as gay, there is nothing to “come out” to, there is no next step. Sufficiently stoned, the guys decide to make an appearance at the Palace. More than anything, the place feels like a rundown loft where somebody stuck a bar and a dance floor and called it a club. Still, it's one of the most popular hangouts for young black men on the DL in Atlanta.

William surveys the crowd, which is made up mostly of DL “homo thugs,” black guys dressed like gangsters and rappers (baggy jeans, do-rags, and FUBU jackets). “So many people in here try so hard to look like they’re badasses,” he says. “Everyone wants to look like they’re on the DL.”

As I look out onto the dance floor, I can’t help doing the math. If the C.D.C. is right that nearly 1 in 3 young black men who have sex with men is H.I.V. positive, then about 50 of the young men on this dance floor are infected, and most of them don’t know it.

“You have no idea how many of the boys here tonight would let me” — have sex with them — “without a condom,” William tells me. “These young guys swear they know it all. They all want a black thug. They just want the black thug to do his thing.”

While William and many other DL men insist that they’re strictly “tops” — meaning they play the active, more stereotypically “masculine” role during sexual intercourse — other DL guys proudly advertise themselves as “masculine bottom brothas” on their Internet profiles. They may play the stereotypically passive role during sex, they say, but they’re just as much men, and just as aggressive, as DL tops. As one DL guy writes on his America Online profile, “Just ’cause I am a bottom, don’t take me for a bitch.”

Still, William says that many DL guys are in a never-ending search for the roughest, most masculine, “straightest looking” DL top. Both William and Chris, who lost friends to AIDS, say they always use condoms. But as William explains, “Part of the attraction to thugs is that they’re careless and carefree. Putting on a condom doesn’t fit in with that. A lot of DL guys aren’t going to put on a condom, because that ruins the fantasy.” It also shatters the denial — stopping to put on a condom forces guys on the DL to acknowledge, on some level, that they’re having sex with men.

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In 1992, E. Lynn Harris — then an unknown black writer — self-published “Invisible Life,” the fictional coming-of-age story of Raymond Tyler, a masculine young black man devoted to his girlfriend but consumed by his attraction to men. For Tyler, being black is hard enough; being black and gay seems a cruel and impossible proposition. Eventually picked up by a publisher, “Invisible Life” went on to sell nearly 500,000 copies, many purchased by black women shocked at the idea that black men who weren’t effeminate could be having sex with men.

“I was surprised by the reaction to my book,” Harris said. “People were in such denial that black men could be doing this. Well, they were doing it then, and they’re doing it now.”

That behavior has public health implications. A few years ago, the epidemiological data started rolling in, showing increasing numbers of black women who weren’t IV drug users getting infected with H.I.V. While some were no doubt infected by men who were using drugs, experts say many were infected by men on the Down Low. Suddenly, says Chris Bell, a 29-year-old H.I.V.-positive black man from Chicago who often speaks at colleges about sexuality and AIDS, DL guys were being demonized. They became the “modern version of the highly sexually dangerous, irresponsible black man who doesn’t care about anyone and just wants to get off.” Bell and others say that while

black men had been dying of AIDS for years, it wasn't until "innocent" black women became infected that the black community bothered to notice.

For white people, Bell said, "DL life fit in perfectly with our society's simultaneous obsession and aversion to black male sexuality." But if the old stereotypes of black sexual aggression were resurrected, there was a significant shift: this time, white women were not cast as the innocent victims. Now it was black women and children. The resulting permutations confounded just about everyone, black and white, straight and gay.

How should guys on the DL be regarded? Whose responsibility are they? Are they gay, straight or bisexual? If they are gay, why don't they just tough it up, come out and move to a big-city gay neighborhood like so many other gay men and lesbians? If they are straight, what are they doing having sex with guys in parks and bathhouses? If they are bisexual, why not just say that? Why, as the C.D.C. reported, are black men who have sex with men more than twice as likely to keep their sexual practices a secret than whites? Most important to many, why can't these black men at least get tested for H.I.V.?

The easy answer to most of these questions is that the black community is simply too homophobic: from womanizing rappers to moralizing preachers, much of the black community views homosexuality as a curse against a race with too many strikes against it. The white community, the conventional wisdom goes, is more accepting of its sexual minorities, leading to fewer double lives, less shame and less unsafe sex. (AIDS researchers point to shame and stigma as two of the driving forces spreading AIDS in America.)

But some scholars have come to doubt the reading of black culture as intrinsically more homophobic than white culture. "I think it's unfair to categorize it that way today, and it is absolutely not the case historically," says George Chauncey, the noted professor of gay and lesbian history at University of Chicago. "Especially in the 1940's and 50's, when anti-gay attitudes were at their peak in white American society, black society was much more accepting. People usually expected their gay friends and relatives to remain discreet, but even so, it was better than in white society."

Glenn Ligon, a black visual artist who is openly gay, recalls that as a child coming of age in the 70's, he always felt there was a space in black culture for openly gay men. "It was a limited space, but it was there," he says. "After all, where else could we go? The white community wasn't that accepting of us. And the black community had to protect its own."

Ligon, whose artwork often deals with sexuality and race, thinks that the pressure to keep homosexuality on the DL does not come exclusively from other black people, but also from the social and economic realities particular to black men. "The reason that so many young black men aren't so cavalier about announcing their sexual orientation is because we need our families," he says. "We need our families because of economic reasons, because of racism, because of a million reasons. It's the idea that black people have to stick together, and if there's the slightest possibility that coming out could disrupt that, guys won't do it." (That may help explain why many of the black men who are openly gay tend to be more educated, have more money and generally have a greater sense of security.)

But to many men on the DL, sociological and financial considerations are beside the point: they say they wouldn't come out even if they felt they could. They see black men who do come out either as having chosen their sexuality over their skin color or as being so effeminate that they wouldn't have fooled anyone anyway. In a black world that

puts a premium on hypermasculinity, men who have sex with other men are particularly sensitive to not appearing soft in any way.

Maybe that's why many guys on the DL don't go to gay bars. "Most of the guys I've messed around with, I've actually met at straight clubs," says D., a 21-year-old college student on the DL whom I met on the Internet, and then in person in New York City. "Guys will come up to me and ask me some stupid thing like, 'Yo, you got a piece of gum?' I'll say, 'Nah, but what's up?' Some guys will look at me and say, 'What do you mean what's up?' but the ones on the DL will keep talking to me." Later he added: "It's easier for me to date guys on the DL. Gay guys get too clingy, and they can blow your cover. Real DL guys, they have something to lose, too. It's just safer to be with someone who has something to lose."

D. says he prefers sex with women, but he sometimes has sex with men because he "gets bored." But even the DL guys I spoke with who say they prefer sex with men are adamant that the nomenclature of white gay culture had no relevance for them. "I'm masculine," as one 18-year-old college student from Providence, R.I., who is on the DL told me over the phone. "There's no way I'm gay." I asked him what his definition of gay is. "Gays are the faggots who dress, talk and act like girls. That's not me."

That kind of logic infuriates many mainstream gay people. To them, life on the DL is an elaborately rationalized repudiation of everything the gay rights movement fought for — for the right to live without shame and without fear of reprisal. It's a step back into the dark days before liberation, before gay-bashing was considered a crime, before gay television characters were considered family entertainment and way, way before the Supreme Court recently ruled that gay people are "entitled to respect for their private lives."

Emil Wilbekin, the black and openly gay editor in chief of Vibe magazine, has little patience for men on the DL. "To me, it's a dangerous cop-out," he says. "I get that it's sexy. I get that it's hot to see some big burly hip-hop kid who looks straight but sleeps with guys, but the bottom line is that it's dishonest. I think you have to love who you are, you have to have respect for yourself and others, and to me most men on the DL have none of those qualities. There's nothing 'sexy' about getting H.I.V., or giving it to your male and female lovers. That's not what being a real black man is about."

Though the issues being debated have life-and-death implications, the tenor of the debate owes much to the overcharged identity politics of the last two decades. As Chauncey points out, the assumption that anyone has to name their sexual behavior at all is relatively recent. "A lot of people look at these DL guys and say they must really be gay, no matter what they say about themselves, but who's to know?" he says. "In the early 1900's, many men in immigrant and African-American working-class communities engaged in sex with other men without being stigmatized as queer. But it's hard for people to accept that something that seems so intimate and inborn to them as being gay or straight isn't universal."

Whatever the case, most guys on the DL are well aware of the contempt with which their choices are viewed by many out gay men. And if there are some DL guys willing to take the risk — to jeopardize their social and family standing by declaring their sexuality — that contempt doesn't do much to convince them they'd ever really be welcome in Manhattan's Chelsea or on Fire Island.

"Mainstream gay culture has created an alternative to mainstream culture," says John Peterson, a professor of psychology at Georgia State University who specializes in AIDS research among black men, "and many whites take advantage of that. They say, 'I

will leave Podunk and I will go to the gay barrios of San Francisco and other cities, and I will go live there, be who I really am, and be part of the mainstream.' Many African-Americans say, 'I can't go and face the racism I will see there, and I can't create a functioning alternative society because I don't have the resources.' They're stuck.'" As Peterson, who says that the majority of black men who have sex with men are on the DL, boils it down, "The choice becomes, do I want to be discriminated against at home for my sexuality, or do I want to move away and be discriminated against for my skin color?"

So increasing numbers of black men — and, lately, other men of color who claim the DL identity — split the difference. They've created a community of their own, a cultural "party" where whites aren't invited. "Labeling yourself as DL is a way to disassociate from everything white and upper class," says George Ayala, the director of education for AIDS Project Los Angeles. And that, he says, is a way for DL men to assert some power.

Still, for all the defiance that DL culture claims for itself, for all the forcefulness of the "never apologize, never explain" stance, a sense of shame can hover at the margins. It's the inevitable price of living a double life. Consider these last lines of a DL college student's online profile. "Lookin 4 cool ass brothers on tha down low. . . . You aint dl if you have a V.I.P. pass to tha gay spot. . . . You aint dl if you call ur dude 'gurl.' . . . Put some bass in ur voice yo and whats tha deal wit tha attitude? If I wanted a broad I would get one — we both know what we doin is wrong."

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The world headquarters of the Web site www.streethugz.com is a small, nondescript storefront next to a leather bar on Cleveland's West Side. The site's founder, Rick Dickson, invites me to watch one of its live Web casts, which he says feature "the most masculine DL brothers in the world doing what they do best."

Rick opens the door holding a cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other. Inside, a group of young black men sit in a thick haze of cigarette smoke as the song "Bitch Better Have My Money" plays from a nearby stereo. By the far wall, two men type frantically on computer keyboards, communicating with 30 chat-room conversations at once. Near the street-front window, which is covered by a red sheet, there are three more muscular black men in their early 20's.

Rick sits down and lights another cigarette. A part-time comic who goes by the stage name Slick Rick, he has a shaved head, piercing green eyes and a light-skinned face with a default setting on mean. Twice a week, Rick's thugs, as he calls them, perform a sex show for anyone who cares to log on. Although less than a year old, the site has developed a devoted following, thanks mostly to chat-room word of mouth. "We're going to be the next Bill Gates of the Internet industry," he assures me. "We got black DL thugs getting it on, and that's what people want to see!"

One of the site's most popular stars is a tall, strikingly handsome 23-year-old former Division 1 basketball player, who goes by the name Jigga. When I first meet Jigga about 10 minutes before the show, he's naked, stretching and doing pushups in an adjacent room as he peppers me with questions about journalism and sportswriting. "I want to be a sportswriter," he says. "Either that, or a lawyer. I love to argue."

Unlike some of the other streethugz stars who dropped out of school and hustle for money, Jigga says he comes from a close middle-class family and always did well

academically. Considering all that, I ask him how he came to find himself here. “It’s some extra cash,” he says. “But mostly, it’s ’cause I like the attention. What can I say? I’m vain.” Jigga says he has sex with both men and women, but he doesn’t label himself as bisexual. “I’m just freaky,” he says with a smile.

Like many guys on the DL, Jigga first connected to other DL men through phone personal lines, which still have certain advantages over Internet chat rooms. “You can tell a lot right away by a voice,” he says later. “There are guys who naturally sound masculine, and then there’s guys who are obviously trying to hide the fact that they’re big girls.”

At 10:07 p.m., seven minutes behind schedule, Rick announces, “It’s show time at the Apollo.” He unfolds a burgundy carpet that serves as the stage, and Jigga and two thugs take their places. The phone won’t stop ringing as viewers call to make requests (“Can I talk to Jigga when he’s done?”), and Rick answers each call with an enthusiastic reference to the caller’s location. “Hey, we got Detroit in the house! Say wuzzup to Detroit!”

The show temporarily goes “off air” when Chi, a 32-year-old promoter for the site, trips over the MegaCam’s power cord. While someone else plugs it back in, he takes a seat on the sidelines. Thin and deceptively strong, Chi looks younger than his age. He has a tattoo on his left arm, which he tells me is a reminder of his gang days. Back then, he says, before he moved to Cleveland, his life was a disaster: he had three kids with three women and spent most of his 20’s in jail for drug trafficking.

Chi says he doesn’t deal drugs anymore — not since his mother, a heroin addict, died with a needle in her arm. Today he works at a fast-food joint in a shopping-mall food court and is a talent scout for Rick, which means that if he spots a young black man with “the look” (tough, masculine and preferably with a wild streak), he’ll ask them if they’d like to take some pictures for money — or, better yet, act in one of the site’s live sex shows. Chi has a fiancée he has been with for four years. She doesn’t know that he’s also casually dating a man.

When Rick has seen enough foreplay, he throws condoms at the boys. Rick has been making a big deal to me about how his site promotes safe sex, which he insists is a moral obligation at a time when so many young black men in America are dying of AIDS. But previous viewers of the show told me they didn’t see condoms being used, and the site boasts of keeping everything “raw.” I ask Rick about the discrepancy. “It’s just an expression, man,” he says, and explains that the sex is simulated.

The actors seem somewhat bored, but the point, I gather, is not what they do on camera, but how they look. And these guys look straight — in fact, they look as if they might rather be having sex with women. That, Rick knows, is the ultimate turn-on in much of the DL world, where the sexual icon is the tough unemotional gangster thug.

“Do these guys ever kiss?” I ask Rick.

“Well,” he explains, “thugs don’t really kiss. Sometimes they stick their tongues in each other’s mouths, but it’s not really kissing. Gay people kiss. DL thugs don’t kiss.”

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In May 1986, Sandra Singleton McDonald showed up at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, eager to begin her research into diseases affecting blacks in the South.

“Well,” said a young research assistant there, “then you’ll want to look into AIDS.”

McDonald laughed. “Baby, you must have misunderstood my question,” she said in her loving, motherly voice. “I’m talking about African-American diseases.”

“Yes, I know,” the man said. “Like I said, you’ll want to look into AIDS.” McDonald did, and what she learned floored her. “This wasn’t just a gay, white man’s disease like we had all been told from the beginning,” recalls McDonald, the founder of Outreach Inc., an Atlanta-based nonprofit organization providing services to those affected by AIDS and substance abuse in the city’s black communities. “I went out and told the leaders in the black community that we needed to start dealing with this now, and they looked at me like I was crazy. People were outraged that I was even bringing this up. They said, ‘Oh, be quiet, that’s a white problem.’ But why would we think that a sexually transmitted disease would stay within one racial group, or within one geographic area? It made no sense. Looking back, the public health community made a lot of mistakes and gave out a lot of wrong information. Once we became aware of the impact of the disease, we did a lot of blaming and shaming so that we could feel O.K. and say, ‘This isn’t about us.’ ”

Five years later, that fiction ceased to be viable when Magic Johnson told a national television audience that he was H.I.V.-positive. AIDS organizations were flooded with calls from panicked black men and women wanting to know more about the disease. Meanwhile, Magic dismissed the rumors that he’d slept with men during his N.B.A. career, insisting he didn’t get infected through homosexual sex, but rather through unprotected sex with a woman. Young black men on inner-city basketball courts weren’t so sure. They wondered if maybe Magic had men on the side.

That it took Johnson’s announcement to introduce the reality of AIDS to the black community goes to the depth of the denial around the disease. By 1991, 35,990 African-American men had been reported with AIDS (roughly half having contracted it through sexual intercourse), accounting for about a quarter of all AIDS cases in America. But while white gay men quickly mobilized around AIDS in the early 80’s, there was no similar movement among black men with AIDS, black leaders, politicians, clergy or civil rights organizations. “There was a real sense in black communities that you had to put your best face forward in order to prove that you deserve equal rights and equal status, and that face didn’t include gays and IV drug users with AIDS,” says Cathy Cohen, author of “The Boundaries of Blackness — AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics.” “It’s been a very slow process for the black leadership in America to own up to this disease. Not acknowledge it in passing, but own it.”

Black churches, which are the heart of many African-American communities, were particularly slow to respond to the crisis, and many still haven’t, even despite the disease’s ravages within their parishes. In 1999, after female congregants of Cleveland’s Antioch Baptist Church told their pastor that they were H.I.V.-positive, the church started an AIDS ministry that has been applauded for its courage and effectiveness. Still, the black church — like many in white America — is careful not to condone homosexual behavior. “Some gays want a flat-out, standing-on-the-tower affirmation from the church that the gay lifestyle, or the lifestyle of whoring around with men, is acceptable,” says Kelvin Berry, the director of the Antioch program. “And that’s not going to happen.”

Combating AIDS in these communities also means confronting popular conspiracy theories that claim that H.I.V. was created by the U.S. government to kill black people. One study by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference found that 54 percent of blacks thought H.I.V. testing was a trick to infect them with AIDS. In the early 90’s, the rapper Kool Moe Dee and Spike Lee expressed concern that H.I.V. was a part of

a calculated campaign intended to rid the world of gay men and minorities, and as recently as 1999, Will Smith told Vanity Fair that “possibly AIDS was created as a result of biological-warfare testing.”

Pernessa Seele, founder and C.E.O. of the Balm in Gilead, an international AIDS organization that works with black churches, explained, “For the most part, we don’t want to get tested, and we don’t want to get treatment, because we really believe that the system is designed to kill us.” She continued, “And our history allows us, or helps us, believe that. We have documented history where these kinds of diseases have been perpetuated on us. And that’s why it’s so important for the church to get involved. Black people trust the church. We don’t trust health care. We don’t trust doctors and nurses, but we trust the church. So when the church says, ‘Get tested,’ when the church says, ‘Take your medicine,’ people will do it.”

Other black AIDS organizations are focused on prevention. In some cases, the strategies are straightforward: push condoms, distribute clean needles. But reaching men on the DL is difficult. James L. King, a publishing executive, spoke about his former DL life at a National Conference on African-Americans and AIDS. “I sleep with men, but I am not bisexual, and I am certainly not gay,” King said. “I am not going to your clinics, I am not going to read your brochures, I am not going to get tested. I assure you that none of the brothers on the Down Low are paying the least bit of attention to what you say.”

Earl Pike, executive director of the AIDS Task Force of Cleveland, agrees that many of the prevention messages aimed at black men have been unsuccessful. “Up to this point, we’ve failed to make a convincing case to young black men about why they should listen to us when we tell them to put on a condom, mostly because we’ve had the wrong people delivering the wrong kind of message,” he says. “The usual prevention message for all these years can be interpreted as saying: ‘Gee, we’re sorry about racism. We’re sorry about homophobia in your homes and churches. We’re sorry that urban schools are crappy. We’re sorry that you can’t find a good job. We’re sorry about lack of literacy. We’re sorry about all these things, but you really need to start using condoms, because if you don’t, you could get infected tomorrow, or next year, or some point during the next decade, and if you do get infected, at some point, you could get sick and die.’ ”

Many AIDS organizations now say that frank, sexy prevention messages that use the masculine imagery of hip-hop culture are the only way to reach men on the DL. In St. Louis, for example, a \$64,000 federal grant financed a billboard campaign — depicting two muscular, shirtless black men embracing — aimed at raising AIDS awareness. But Mayor Francis Slay called the billboards inappropriate and ordered them taken down.

[break]

“I need a beer,” Chi says as we drive through downtown Cleveland on a Saturday night, looking for something to do. It’s been three months since I last saw him at the streetthugz.com filming. As we stop at a red light, he turns to get a better look at a young Hispanic woman in the car next to us. “That girl is beautiful,” he says. “But she needs to lose the car. What a shame — a beautiful woman driving a Neon!”

Chi loves women. He also likes men, although, like many guys on the DL, he doesn’t verbalize his attraction to them, even when he’s with like-minded people. When I ask him about this, he’s stumped to explain why. “I don’t know,” he says. “Maybe it’s because being black, you just learn to keep that to yourself.” Anyway, he always had a girlfriend. “Guys were there for sex.”

Unlike many other DL guys, who never tell anyone about their private lives, Chi opens up with little prompting. He says that he loves his fiancée but that he doesn't consider the sex he has with men to be cheating. "Guys are a totally different thing."

Unbeknown to his fiancée, he has been casually dating his male roommate for several months. "I told her that he's gay and makes passes at me," he says, "but she doesn't know we have sex." On some level, Chi says he feels bad about the deception. Right now, though, he isn't feeling guilty. His fiancée just called to tell him that she's going out tonight — and that he needs to come over to pick up their feisty 1-year-old son. "She just wants to go out and shake her groove thing with her friends instead of taking care of him like she said she would," Chi says. "Man, she's selfish sometimes. I love her, but sometimes I hate her, you know what I'm saying?"

We pull up to Chi's apartment, where his fiancée and two of her friends are waiting for him in the driveway. Inside the apartment, they argue about whose turn it is to take care of their son, while I sit in the dining room and watch him fearlessly attack the four house cats. In the dark living room, Chi's roommate, who is white, lounges on the couch in blue boxers, chain-smoking as he half-watches television.

Chi's fiancée eventually leaves, after which Chi changes out of his work shirt and mixes a drink for the road. "We've been on shaky ground," Chi tells me, referring to his roommate. "He loves me, but I'm committed to someone else. I think he has problems dealing with that. Like I tell him, 'I care about you, but I can't be that guy you want.'" What Chi means, I think, is that he can't be gay.

Chi puts his son in the back seat of the car and we drive toward Dominos, a black gay bar where we're supposed to meet Jigga. Chi spends most of the ride complaining about his fiancée. His son finally starts crying and kicks the back of Chi's seat. "Yeah, defend yo mama!" Chi says, laughing.

They wait in the car as I walk into Dominos looking for Jigga. The long, rectangular-shaped bar is packed with regulars tonight, mostly middle-aged black men — some openly gay, others on the DL — and a few tough-looking younger guys. Jigga spots me first and waves me over to the bar. He tells me a lot has changed since the first time I met him. He's in law school now and has put aside the sportswriter idea. And while he is still on the DL (his co-workers and most of his straight friends don't know he likes guys), he has a serious boyfriend who is also on the DL.

Four months ago, having a serious boyfriend would have been inconceivable to him. "I think I love this dude," he tells me as we walk to the car. "He's got a lot of attitude, but I kind of like that. We have fistfights all the time, and we don't stop until somebody has blood. Then we have sex." Jigga laughs as he opens the car door. "But I must really love him, because I never got in fistfights with any of my exes." I'm about to question his definition of love when Chi interjects. "I still need a beer," he says, pointing the way toward a nearby gas station. We pull into a tight parking spot, careful to avoid the young black man with a sideways baseball cap who leans into the car next to us, blocking Chi's passenger-side door. "Move your ass," Chi says, knocking the kid out of the way with the car door. The boy laughs it off, avoiding a possible confrontation.

"I think I hooked up with him," Jigga says, craning his neck from the back seat to get a better look at the kid. "Actually, nah, that's not him. Looks like him, though." Recently, Jigga told his parents that he's interested in both guys and girls. "I was drunk when I told them," he says. "But I'm glad I did. They've been really cool about it." It takes me a few seconds to process the words. Really cool about it? In six months of

talking to young black gay and DL men, I found that Jigga is one of the few who told his parents, and the only one who reported unconditional acceptance. “I’m blessed,” he says. “I realize that. Black parents don’t accept their gay kids. Black culture doesn’t accept gay people. Why do you think so many people are on the DL?”

Jigga is proof that being on the DL isn’t necessarily a lifelong identity. He seems considerably more comfortable with his sexuality than he was the first time I met him, and I suspect that soon enough, he may be openly gay in all facets of his life without losing his much-coveted masculinity. I tell him what I’m thinking. “Who knows, man?” he says. “Two years ago, I wouldn’t have believed that I’d be having sex with guys.”

Chi opens the car door, cradling a six-pack of beer. “I love beer,” he says, smiling. As we drive away, he checks out a young woman stepping out of a nearby Honda Civic. “Damn, that girl is fine!”

--Benoit Denizet-Lewis is a writer living in Boston. He last wrote for the magazine about a biological girl living as a boy.