



A Look Back: Eazy-E's Death and a 1995 Hip-Hop Concert for HIV Causes

For Black History Month, music insider Fred T. Jackson told Men's Health about the historic benefit concert and life as a Black gay man in the '90s.

February 24, 2023 By [Trent Straube](#)

When West Coast rapper Eazy-E died of AIDS-related causes in 1995, the shocking loss forced the [hip-hop](#) community to face the reality that [HIV](#) wasn't just a gay white man's disease. The music industry responded with a benefit concert at Madison Square Garden called Urban AID 4 Lifebeat. The five-hour show featured major hip-hop and R&B headliners—the Notorious B.I.G., Salt-N-Pepa, Faith Evans and more—and it educated concertgoers about safer sex and HIV.

You can watch parts of the concert below and [on YouTube](#):

As Black History Month comes to a close, [Men's Health interviewed Fred T. Jackson](#), a former Elektra Records manager who worked at the concert, about the groundbreaking 1995 event and his own experiences as a Black [gay man](#) working in the homophobic world of hip-hop.

"It wasn't easy," Jackson recalled to Men's Health. "I felt I had to find a path. Many times I felt this [homophobia] wasn't happening to anyone else but me, even though I knew it was happening to others and people were sort of walking through it in their own way...."

"Hip-hop was still growing," Jackson continued. "It was getting into its 20s. Almost like a person itself, it was figuring out who it was and what its voice was, what it wanted to stand for, and what it was open to. At the time, hip-hop was not in a place of acceptance. As hip-hop found itself beyond its neighborhoods and streets, learning about different cultures, seeing different people, and seeing the world, I think there became a realization that there are a lot of people out there living a lot of different lives. It grew up. For some, they were pretty set in their way of thinking and point of view and weren't necessarily open to different lifestyles."

For more context, recall that before the death of Eazy-E (aka Eric Wright) in March 1995 at age 31, only a small number of Black men were open about their HIV status, notably Magic Johnson, [who in November 1991 disclosed that he was living with HIV and retired from the NBA](#).

Watch Magic Johnson's historic 1991 announcement:

In 1995, HIV was still considered a death sentence (lifesaving antiretrovirals first became available in 1996, though many people didn't have access to the meds). Being gay was also taboo to most Americans—there were no recurring gay characters on TV, and same-sex marriage wouldn't be legalized nationwide for another 20 years.

Eazy-E's death changed the conversation around HIV and hip-hop. "We wanted to figure out what support we could build to ensure this does not overwhelm our industry as we saw with other entertainment industries," Jackson said. "We realized we had work to do to educate. We had to find a way to use our outlet, our voices in this industry, to educate. When Lifebeat came about, they looked to the record labels for volunteers to help with everything from mailings to relationships with artists or any resources that could be helpful."

To raise HIV awareness, Salt N Peppa reworked their 1991 hit "Let's Talk About Sex" into "Let's Talk About AIDS." Here's the video:

At the concert, Jackson recalled, "We were giving out condoms, giving out literature, answering questions, and doing whatever we could to touch every person who came there that night. We didn't want people to just have a great show, we wanted them to really feel as though they walked out of that venue with a better understanding of HIV/AIDS and the resources available to them.... We made sure when promoting the concert that we let outlets and people know HIV and AIDS don't end with Eazy-E. For every Eazy-E, there are thousands of other young Black men who are living with HIV or AIDS, or don't even know because they're not being tested. We didn't want to talk softly about it. This was an epidemic."

Today, the HIV epidemic persists, and it disproportionately affects people of color. For example, Black Americans represent 42% of new HIV cases but only 14% of the U.S. population. For a collection of HIV-related articles on this topic, click [#African American](#). You'll find headlines such as

["Better Engagement in HIV Care Could Reduce Disparities for Black Gay Men,"](#)

["Watch Grammy GOAT Beyoncé Thank Her Gay Uncle Lost to AIDS,"](#)

["Black Faith and HIV" Aims to End the Epidemic by Engaging Religious Leaders,"](#)

["\\$8M Awarded to 17 Community Groups Boosting HIV Prevention for Black Women"](#) and

["Black Communities Are Disproportionately Affected by HIV and AIDS."](#)