

Village Voice, June 25 - July 1, 2003
36 Cooper Square, New York, NY 10003
(E-Mail: editor@villagevoice.com) (<http://www.villagevoice.com>)
<http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0326/king.php>

Remixing the Closet: The Down-Low Way of Knowledge
by Jason King

"Pride on THE DL." Those four words of colossal irony were printed across a flyer I was handed during the summer of 2001. It was an invitation to a hip-hop party for men of color, called Brooklyn Sensation. At the time, the media were in a feeding frenzy over black and Latino MSMs (men who have sex with men) living "on the down low." In refusing to disclose their homosexual adventures to their female partners, these guys were being blamed for skyrocketing HIV rates in communities of color. The homothug had become the new millennium's stealth bisexual, hiding his "true" identity behind a Sean John hoodie.

This panic has created a whole industry of "experts" dishing out advice to straight women who want the real deal on what their men are doing behind closed doors. J.L. King offers lectures like "The Five Personality Types of DL Men" for up to \$10,000 a pop. "Being on the DL is being in the closet about your sexual feelings for the same sex," King informed me in a recent interview. "When I hear the word 'closet,' I think it means to hide being gay and in the gay lifestyle." But the "PRIDE ON THE DL" party betrayed these assumptions. Why would undercover brothers want to openly celebrate being in the closet? The journalist in me couldn't resist hopping the 2 train to Brooklyn to find out.

Nobody let the dawgs out that night at Brooklyn Sensation. Instead, "PRIDE ON THE DL" brought out gaggles of flamboyant twentysomethings rocking the latest hip-hop gear, desperately trying to look tough. One petit guy sported a wifebeater that inched up his torso to disclose a pair of Hilfiger boxer shorts and a midriff Scorpion tattoo. The sweat on his powdered brow was held in check by a Fubu headband, and his mustard-colored oversize Timberlands weighed him down like a pair of gravity boots. With his swishy gait and lilting falsetto, this brother was a universe removed from the menacing homothug portrayed in the media.

"I call them thug princesses," says Lewis Nicholson, editor of Glemma magazine. "Even the voguing queens are now wearing their pants dropped off their ass, and they're claiming to be hard." Nicholson claims that such

surreal

scenes are becoming commonplace at DL parties and thug clubs across the country. A perusal of HX produced the following options for Gay Pride week: Thug

Passion (named for the drink), Thugs4thugs, Erotic Fight Club (featuring "muscle thugs, escorts, DL playas, hoodlums, and wrestling in oil . . . men of color only!") and those are just the sex parties.

On his self-distributed debut EP *The Notorious Homothug*, TruDawg raps about a day in the DL life over a house music beat. A self-proclaimed SGL (same gender loving) rapper who calls himself "out and proud," TruDawg (Anthony

Truly) has a day job as a fitness instructor, and he's bared it all in the gay porn rags. TruDawg uses the homothug label as a marketing tool, a way to get over. But open up the CD and you'll find an X-rated photo of TruDawg demonstrating the safest way to put on a condom. Rapping about homothugs is a way for him to save lives rather than sermonize.

If there's a DL community today, it's the result of this sort of brazen marketing. In the late 1980s, a group called A1BlackElite launched Bla-tino, a hugely popular series of sex parties thrown in secluded locations across the East Coast. Bla-tino's street-promo strategy targeted men who wouldn't otherwise fraternize at gay-identified clubs: "ruffnecks, barriboyboyz, thugs, popichulos, shortys, manchismos, brolic mutherfuckers, 'n your neighbor." The door policy rejected fats, femmes, and anyone sporting an "AIDS look." Implicit in this rhetoric was the fear of effeminacy, a terror that bubbles under the surface of epithets like faggot. This intense ambivalence about the visible signs of gayness is part and parcel of DL culture. Undercover guys strive to be unclockable: undetectable.

In the wake of parties like Courvoisier Urban Thug Night, this ambition has become more like an ironic pose. Guys who call themselves incognitos, playas, real nikkas, thug bottoms, and pretty thugs fill online chat rooms to maximum capacity. These men are advertising their DL status. Nicholson finds such a contradiction hard to swallow. "Once you start putting thugs' faces all over billboards, it's no longer down low," he says. "People in Atlanta have begun to refer to DL as Dick Lovers."

Living on the down low is not new. Working-class and poor MSMs of color have always had to be low-key about their sexual preference, since they haven't had the same access to the safety nets that exist for white and middle-class men. But calling yourself DL—a term popularized in the 1990s in the presumably heterosexual lyrics of performers like TLC and R. Kelly—has become a

way for some black men to admit they like guys without resorting to words like gay, bisexual, or queer.

Some men on the DL are true hardcore thugs who might rob you or do whatever it is that real thugs are supposed to do. But DL parties suggest that that many hip-hop-identified MSMs, even the most flaming ones or those who don't sleep with women, are rejecting classic identities in favor of simply coming out as "undercover" despite the ambivalence and irony that underlie that strategy.

In the narrative of the closet that's dominated the gay movement since the late 1960s, men are supposed to be full of self-loathing about their secret sexuality until they emerge into the public like fluttering butterflies or strutting peacocks. But DL offers a new-school remix of the old-school closet, an improvisation on the coming-out narrative that imagines a low-key way of being in the world.

For some DL men, there is no "gay" essence to reveal, or a bisexual or straight one, for that matter. They may oscillate between male and female partners, but it would be a mistake to call such a brother a closeted bisexual, since it would imply that underneath the veil he's settled on a stable gender identity. DL is not an identity but a performance. It may even be working toward that elusive phenomenon hip-hop heads call "flow." Flow is when the MC locks his rapping into a groove, bringing the performance to a rhythmic, surging sense of balance.

Bernard Jones, owner of FreakDawg Productions, a black gay adult-entertainment company, notes that he's "seeing more people who just completely defy any category of sexuality. One of the models I work with is not hard, he's not soft, he's not effeminate, he's not thuggish. He likes men, he likes women, he's about to have a daughter, loves to be fucked, and plays with dildos. He's clearly someone who flows across a spectrum of sexuality and gender."

Kelvin, a middle-class friend of mine, has always had a penchant for hip-hop. He's been openly gay to his family and co-workers for some time. But several years ago he discovered that he could disguise his identity and meet self-professed thugs in online chat rooms. So he began the process of coming out for a second time, as DL. Kelvin would lose the suit and tie and don Rocawear lounge suits, and he began to grow cornrows. He'd break into ebonics and deepen his voice into a Barry White basso profundo when chatting on the phone with other "thugs." In arguments, Kelvin called me "bourgie" while insisting he was keeping it "ghetto." He stopped hanging out in queer-identified

spaces and events, and opted for more anonymous venues popular among the DL crowd:

sex parties, subway platforms, parks, and darkened clubs.

Unlike the traditional closet narrative, where men are in isolation, DL brothers tend to be relatively open about their sexuality "if only to each

other" but under the radar. Creeping is not the same as being invisible.

Creeping on the down low, besides being rough on the knees, is high-maintenance work. But it often has a social end. For Kelvin, being on the DL

became an elaborate drag show to "get in the door," to meet and hook up with other hip-hop-identified guys he wouldn't likely encounter otherwise. Weeks into developing a relationship with a fellow "thug," Kelvin would drop the thug

patina and become "himself," shedding the hip-hop gear and phony accent around his new friend. In most cases, the revelation seemed to cause no harm to the relationship.

Dressing up in campy thug gear would seem to deflate the original impulse to be undercover. But it's a strategy that often makes sense for MSMs trying to carve out space in hip-hop culture. There are few opportunities for such brothers to meet. At a time when homo-panic crimes like the recent beating

of a gay man at Morehouse College are all too common, playing at being a thug may also be an important way for some MSMs of color to simply stay alive.

José Esteban Muñoz, author of *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and*

the Performance of Politics, notes, "We are so used to white masculinity setting the standard for the closet. Now when we talk about it in relation to communities of color, it's not so much about the single man on a subway; it's about a network of men who recognize each other as DL, and they have this new concept or word to describe it that isn't the closet. It's a way of projecting

out a bunch of likes and dislikes, a code of the way you experience the world in

relationship to desire and sexuality."

By equating extreme visibility with power, the gay movement manufactured a one-size-fits-all model for coming out. This tribal identity may have

suitied the politics of its time, but it left little room for folks to improvise

and personalize. Hip-hop offers a new model, based on the recognition that a song can be rified into many recombinant possibilities. DL's immense popularity suggests that a new generation is remixing the pride agenda.

Whether they pass as playas, blend into the skateboard scene, or live by critic Mark Simpson's concept of the "metrosexual" a low-key, urban gent

more likely to identify as a shopaholic than a gay man" young people of every race and class are responding to something in the air. It may seem like a retrenchment" and in some ways, it is" but their demand for self-determination extends a core value in gay liberation. Will the movement acknowledge the rap at the door?