

Hip-hop forum stresses female empowerment

By Marcus A. Williams
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — The message at Howard University's Third Annual Hip-Hop and Higher Ed Symposium was that it's time for young women to be more responsible for their sexual choices and their role in the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Hip-hop artists, athletes, activists and media personalities all came out to raise awareness and preach prevention of the HIV/AIDS virus, which has been a scourge in the Black community and especially among heterosexual women.

"This is a cause that is close to my heart," said model, actress, television personality and budding philanthropist, Melyssa Ford. "With AIDS being the preventable disease that it is, there is no reason that it is infecting our community at the rate that it is — especially the young women."

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Another panelist, music producer, public speaker, activist and AIDS survivor, Maria Davis says the hip-hop community should wield its influence on young people to staunch the spread of the disease.

"Hip-hop is a very big influence in our culture amongst young people, not

just Black Americans, but all cultures in every country," Davis said. "The numbers of those infected in the age group of 13 to 25 are very high and hip-hop is in the forefront of this age group. The voice of the hip-hop artists can be heard louder than those who have been talking about it for so long."

The panel's exchange started with questions about the hip-hop community's effect on the perception and promiscuity of Black women.

Panelists argued over whether the media and culture effects the public's beliefs about sexuality and whether young women should be held accountable for their decisions.

Platinum selling rapper, co-CEO of Diplomat Records, and advocate of youth outreach programs, Jim Jones has lost a father and several uncles to the HIV/AIDS virus and believes the education about this illness and self respect should start at home.

"I think it starts in the home," Jones said. "If parents taught their children the right things about sex and drugs then what we [hip-hop artists] wouldn't matter."

But other panelists said that the messages hip-hop artists disseminate greatly affect the public.

"We as 'celebrities' or 'personalities' — whatever you want to label us as—

need to take responsibility for those who are watching our careers," Ford said. "We are largely responsible."

But long before hip-hop penetrated the stereotypes of the urban community, the church was the biggest influence on Black culture.

The panel addressed the concern that the church is becoming less visible in today's communities, especially when it comes to addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

"We have been doing educational programs on homo-

sexuality and prevention for the community members," said the Metropolitan Baptist Church minister, Rev. Melvin Maxwell.

Washington Redskin's starting running back, Clinton Portis said, however, that church may not be the answer and that individuals should bear the blame and responsibility of their sexual choices. He used himself as an example.

"I am not even right with God yet so how can a female possibly expect me to be

right for her?" he said.

One panelist says that sex among young Blacks is already a pervasive reality, so instead of "pointing the finger" the focus should be on educating the ignorant.

"I think that with enough people behind the cause and looking for different ways to distribute the right information to the people who need it then we will be able to get a handle on it," Ford said.

Platinum selling neo-soul artist, Lyfe Jennings wanted to encourage everyone to be

smart about their choice to have sex and to be strong for anyone who does contract the HIV/AIDS virus.

"Everything is good as long as it's done with reasonable consumptions," said Jennings. "God takes you through things to make sure you are able to help others when the time comes."

If anyone's words touched the hearts and consciences of those in attendance, it was the words of Maria Davis, who told the crowd that she has (See Symposium, Page 15)

Marsalis

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lowed the lead of those who enslaved us ... and were taught to really hate ourselves and our music," said Butts. "But now we've come to understand ... that this is truly the only real American music and it's beautiful music."

Marsalis says Louis Armstrong helped change attitudes when he recorded the first jazz version of a spiritual in 1938, "When the Saints Go Marching In," and many other jazz musicians drew inspiration from Black church music, including Duke Ellington, Horace Silver and John Coltrane.

Butts says the Abyssinian Church has its own links to the jazz tradition. Nat "King" Cole was married there, and the church held memorial services for Count Basie and Art Blakey.

In the early '90s, Marsalis performed his only other major religious work at the Harlem church — "In This House, On This Morning," a suite the trumpeter wrote and recorded with his septet. Marsalis' adviser on that project: Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who preached a sermon on the trumpeter's album "The Majesty of the Blues."

Butts says the recent controversy surrounding Wright, Barack Obama's former pastor, has resulted in "a little bit of the maligning of the Black church."

"I'm hoping that people will come away with a better understanding of the importance of our religious experience and what it's meaning truly has been for America and the world," Butts said.

"I want this expression of jazz music and the African-American religious and sermon tradition to serve as a foundation for unity among all people.

"That's the height of our religious expression in America ever since we were enslaved people. We've been trying to make sense out of the madness, and reconciliation, unity, peace, prayer, this is what we hope for."



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