



AIDS: A Pop Culture History

VH1 Music Studio
Cable in the Classroom

BACKGROUND / GETTING STARTED

Note to Teachers: The programs viewed in conjunction with these educational materials may include references, consistent with the eras portrayed, to substance abuse, violent acts, and topics of a sexual and/or political nature. Because this may be considered inappropriate for classroom use in some communities, you are encouraged to review the programs before presenting them to your students, and if necessary, choose those sections that enhance your lesson and are acceptable for use in your classroom.

Background / Getting Started

This section should help you and other viewers prepare for watching *AIDS: A Pop Culture History*. There is a thorough synopsis of the documentary, divided into sections that mirror its organization. (There are no time stamps for the sections because you may have taped either a commercial-free version or the version with commercials.) Additionally, there are a handful of previewing suggestions to help engage viewers in the documentary and many of the issues it raises.

AIDS: A Pop Culture History Synopsis

When AIDS was first revealed as a major health crisis in the early 1980s, Hollywood was just as fearful as the rest of America. Actors like Rock Hudson and singers like Liberace hid their afflictions. Hard rockers and rappers lashed out against homosexuals while other moralists and government officials said the disease was an appropriate consequence of promiscuity.

But as the disease spread among celebrities, filmmakers, musicians, actors, and sports stars (just like it had across the rest of America), silence was slowly turned into action. Charities that were fronted by increasing numbers of activist-minded celebrities began to raise money and spread awareness about the disease. Attitudes

began to change. Once ostracized by NBA players after he announced he was HIV-positive, Magic Johnson later played with little fanfare in the NBA All-Star game and the Olympics. Tom Hanks was called courageous for portraying an AIDS victim in the movie *Philadelphia*, and homosexual characters began to appear more frequently on television. And in a nod to safe sex, producers of the James Bond movies had the superspy bed only one woman per picture.

In this documentary, VH1 News examines the history of AIDS as seen through the prism of media and culture. Reviewing how AIDS was reflected in entertainment reveals a greater understanding of how the virus affected the nation's psyche. The documentary shows how Hollywood first contributed to the panic, then later redefined AIDS as a public health crisis. It also explores the limits of pop culture's reach, as AIDS seems all but forgotten among many of today's entertainers. What role could pop culture play in helping stem AIDS now, especially as it spreads around the world?

The story of AIDS in late 20th century America has been a burst of activism surrounded by years of silence.

ACT ONE: SILENCE (1980 - 1985)

On July 3, 1981, *The New York Times* reported a disturbing number of deaths attributed to a rare cancer and pneumonia among homosexual men. Shortly after, doctors noted that IV drug users' immune systems were similarly deteriorating. The disease that would become known as Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) and later AIDS was sending up red flags around the medical community, but few took notice. Pat Buchanan summed up the new Reagan conservatives' view by commenting that "the poor homosexuals; they have declared war on nature and now nature is exacting an awful retribution." From crass AIDS jokes by Eddie Murphy to denial within the straight community, this disease was looked at as something that happened to "other" people, people who somehow deserved to be punished for their lifestyle. Meanwhile, Arthur Ashe was receiving a transfusion of tainted blood, and the obituary of AIDS victim Ricky Wilson of the B-52's listed lymph cancer as the official cause of death.

ACT TWO: FEAR (1985 - 1990)

On Oct. 2, 1985, a bombshell dropped on Hollywood. Rock Hudson died of AIDS, and now the deadly disease had a face. The fear of this yet-to-be-understood killer could be seen everywhere. The Screen Actors Guild announced that open-mouth kissing was "a possible health hazard." Sebastian Bach of the heavy metal band Skid Row wore a shirt that asserted "AIDS Kills Fags Dead." Perennial third party candidate, Lyndon LaRouche sponsored a California ballot initiative calling for AIDS quarantines. *Fatal Attraction*, a film that screamed "screw around, and it will come back to kill you," was a box office hit. Fear was woven into the subtext of American pop culture. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop's call to action recommending that sex education begin at the earliest grade possible backfired and outraged his conservative base. "It is time to put self-defeating attitudes aside and recognize that we are fighting a disease, not people," he stated as the first government official to tackle the problem. But many were not ready to face this reality head on. It took fearless leaders such as Elton John and Elizabeth Taylor using their celebrity to get out important messages such as, "You can't get it from kissing." The purveyors of pop culture were beginning to understand that where policy failed, powerful messages in the media could succeed.

ACT THREE: ACTIVISM (1990 - 1994)

By 1990, 120,000 Americans had died of AIDS-related causes, and the low rumble had become a giant roar. When AIDS poster boy Ryan White, an 18-year-old hemophiliac, died that same year, the fact that no one was safe could no longer be ignored. Celebrities jumped on the bandwagon and formed AIDS charities and foundations, staged benefit concerts, and organized AIDS Awareness rallies and marches. Ordinary people put together

quilt patches forming the largest piece of art ever created, and countless celebrities recorded Public Service Announcements. The death of Freddie Mercury was seen as a cultural tragedy, and in 1992, Democratic Presidential nominee Bill Clinton promised government action to address this growing epidemic. Magic Johnson was declared a brave hero for publicly disclosing his infection, and red AIDS ribbons were a staple at all award shows. The word was getting out, and AIDS was the “cause celebre.” Still, the number of deaths continued to climb, and many more, like Olympic Gold medalist Greg Louganis suffered in silence.

ACT FOUR: MAINSTREAMING (1994 - 1997)

The wave had crested, and the once-underground disease had now become mainstream. Most Americans were talking about condoms and safe sex without embarrassment. *TIME Magazine's* Man of the Year for 1996 was Dr. David Ho, who pioneered a treatment for HIV infection. Homosexual and HIV-positive characters in film and television were now applauded, not shunned, as demonstrated by Tom Hanks' 1994 Oscar win for his role in *Philadelphia*. On MTV, sex-fueled hair metal was out, and dark sexless grunge was in. Meanwhile, “The Real World” brought AIDS patient Pedro Zamora into every 15-year-old's living room. The word was out, and people were listening; for the first time since the disease was identified, the number of Americans dying from AIDS decreased, by a drop of 23%.

ACT FIVE: COMPLACENCY (1997- 2004)

Like all pop culture trends, by the late 90s, AIDS had run its course. The 16-year-old of today is too young to remember names like Eazy-E and Keith Haring. Gen-Y and others have been having unprotected sex as the American public has turned its attention to other concerns. Is the war on terror to blame for the end of the AIDS movement? With pharmaceutical cocktails readily available and Magic Johnson looking fit and healthy, is AIDS no longer the threat it once was? Is it an “us and them” issue again ... something that now affects only people in Africa? As Nelly urges kids to take off all their clothes and Spring Break reality television glorifies the return to promiscuity, where does AIDS fit into pop culture of the 21st century?

Previewing Suggestions

Generally speaking, it is a good idea to try to link previewing activities with what you plan to do after watching the documentary, so identify what you plan to do afterwards. For instance, do you want to focus more on the social science element? The history? The health? The science? The art? Hopefully, at least one of the recommended previewing activities described below will tie into what you have in mind. Overall, each of the suggestions should help viewers tap into some of their prior knowledge regarding HIV/AIDS.

- Have people identify what they think is an HIV/AIDS fact and what they think is an HIV/AIDS myth. Share the “facts” and “myths” and see if some people list some of the same things, perhaps in opposite categories. You may want to dispel some of the myths that people say are “fact” prior to viewing the documentary; you can wait until watching the film (particularly if it is dispelled in it); or you can wait until after viewing the film, AS LONG AS PEOPLE LEARN THAT WHAT THEY THINK IS A FACT, IS NOT, IN “FACT” TRUE!
- Pose questions that gauge prior knowledge of the people spotlighted in the documentary. For example: Who is Ryan White? Is Magic Johnson cured? Why has Bono been taking trips to countries in sub-Saharan Africa? Or pose questions that tap into pre-conceived notions. For example: What comes to mind when you hear “HIV-positive”? Is AIDS strictly a gay disease? How many young people in the U.S. are infected with HIV every day? (The answer is 48 or 2 every hour, but a question of this type can help assess how prevalent people think the disease is.)

- Survey to find out people’s opinions. Ask questions such as: Should people worry about HIV/AIDS? Is HIV/AIDS talked about much? Is sex talked about much? Is safe sex talked about much? Why do people take risks/ do things that they know that they should not?
- Ask people to list their five greatest fears and to examine each one to see what (if anything) would minimize that fear for them. Have people share some of their fears and some of the ways in which those fears could be lessened. If HIV/AIDS comes up, use that as a way to introduce the documentary. If HIV/AIDS does not come up, ask the group if HIV/AIDS is a fear. (Accept answers or simply have them think about it.)
- As a way to establish a mood, play the soundtrack from Philadelphia and/or Salt-n-Pepa’s “Let’s Talk About AIDS.” Additionally (or in lieu of), have some of the works of art featured at this link [Link to HIV/AIDS-Inspired Arts page] on display. Solicit reactions to the artwork prior to showing the documentary.
- Have everyone individually identify an issue that they feel they understand better than their peers because it is an issue that has directly affected them or people they know. Examples might be dyslexia or depression. (It is okay if HIV/AIDS is not among the issues that they choose.) Share some of the issues and then explore why it sometimes takes being directly affected by an issue in order to learn and care about the issue.



These materials are provided through a partnership with Cable Positive. This curriculum was created in collaboration with Cable Positive, Cable in the Classroom and Topics Education.