

Beyond the Down-Low: The East Bay's Gay Black Club Scene Provides A Safe Space for All

by Frank Leon Roberts

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It's been less than three minutes since I've hopped off the Oakland 19th BART station, and already I'm in the middle of a conversation with a cute young, athletic looking, African-American man named Khalil who wants to know where I'm from and what I'm "doing around here so late." When I tell him that I'm from New York visiting and that I'm on my way to a nearby Gay club named Cabel's Reef, he seems eager to offer further information about himself: "Oh, word, you're headed to Cabel's? That place is kinda hot, but I'm actually on my way over to this safe sex party up on 30th street, you can do your thing there and also meet all the heads on the low, wanna come?"

"Actually, I'll pass."

"Oh, yeah, it's all good. I mean, it's not like I'm gay or anything bro, I'm just on-the-low, know what I mean? I have a girl back home, but I'm just out doing me on the D.L. I'm just trying to live."

African-American men who are on the D.L. "down-low," have been a source of controversy in the Black community. D.L. brothers have sex with men unbeknownst to their girlfriends and family and don't identify as gay and commonly listen to hip hop.

The image of the D.L. brother is inextricably linked to the archetype of the urban homo-thug, the "bangee" boy and the hyper-masculinized black queen (a construction itself laden with irony) and is a recently prevalent figure in pop culture.

A recent episode of E.R. featured a HIV positive D.L. brother who had "risked" infecting his girlfriend. Black Entertainment Television ran an entire special on the "growing" presence of D.L.'s in the black community complete with "how-to-know" guides for black women questioning their man's sexuality. The literary world is rife with D.L. characters, subplots and sensibilities. James Earl Hardy's B Boy and The Day Eazy-E Died got things started, followed by E. Lynn Harris' still insanely popular series featuring Invisible Life, Just as I am and Any Way the Wind Blows.

But the hysteria over the down low (what I call the "D.L. discourse") has been oscillated between two erroneous discussions regarding the D.L. brother as the primary reason for the spread of AIDS in the "mainstream" black community and an insistency that such men "come out of the closet" so that they can stop hiding and learn how great it is to be "out and proud." But as the brother in front of the BART station told me, he was out, just in a new kind of way. Moreover, he was going to get his groove-on at the sex-party, safely.

Contrary to popular belief, being on the down-low doesn't mean that one is in the closet. It means that the very efficacy of the closet is called into question. D.L. brothers are often no more insecure about their sexuality than anyone else, instead they've embraced a more low-key, mellow style of life which allows them to admit that they have same sex desires without necessarily coming out in the traditional sense. They "come out" as D.L.

Too often the D.L. brother is constructed as a vessel of contagion; as the key figure behind the spread of dis/ease in the black community. Behind this disturbingly common belief there lies a heterosexist assumption that AIDS is born and bred in gay communities then somehow venomously spread to pure, sterile black communities. Much of the anti-D.L. rhetoric from the black press and pop culture seems to serve as means of diverting attention away from the painful fact that many absolutely-straight black people, including young black women, are HIV positive and spreading the disease among themselves without any help from "evil" gay black men.

D.L. is also about performing a new identity and embracing a hip-hop sensibility. And no where are these sensibilities more clearly manifested than in the East Bay's small yet vibrant gay black scene. Here's a place where D.L. brothers, homo-thugs and out-lesbians and gays mix and mingle interchangeably. Here's a place of possibility.

The contemporary East Bay gay black club scene is centered almost exclusively on two popular night clubs in Oakland and Hayward. The first of the two is Cabel's Reef, which is sandwiched ambiguously between a Korean Restaurant and a Beauty Salon on Telegraph between 22nd and 23rd streets. The second, "Rimshot" at Club Rumors is placed neatly in between two appliance stores in downtown Hayward, just two blocks away from the BART station.

Unlike New York's gender-and-type specific gay black scene, at Cabel's and Rimshot, things don't seem to be demarcated according to who's a queen, lesbian, or d.l. brother- folks just tend to come together as a community, getting their groove on under the D.J.'s various hip hop and R&B beats. Another difference between Oakland's scene and New York's is that people actually dance in Oakland as opposed to just standing around staring at each other, waiting for the next available piece. There's something special about the way that black bodies, rhythms and sounds fill these West Coast spaces that says something powerful about people whose identities are under-siege can come together to catch the spirit of the club.

Cabel's Reef enjoys the distinction of being the East Bay's only predominately black, gay club in operation seven nights a week. With it's thirty year history Cabel's Reef will receive its own chapter as the longest consistently black, same-gender loving venue in the Bay Area.

Friday's at Cabel's is by far the hottest night. D.J. Mike spins the beats to a crowd that is almost completely hip-hop oriented, sporting the urban fashions of Sean Jean, FUBU, Mecca and Ecco, among others. The homo-thugs, D.L. bois, and roughnecks like to come out to bounce to the sounds of Ludacris, Bone Crusher and 50 Cent.

It's not too uncommon to find many of the men partying all night at Cabel's or Rimshot on Saturday, in church on Sunday morning. That's not surprising when one considers how often they might feel like they're actually in a black church (with a twist of course) on Saturday night. At Cabel's on Saturday, one performer, Candice, serves the crowd her fiercest gospel renditions to a packed room of queens who re-configure the traditional black church experience. Far from being sacrilegious, Shirley Caesar's "God Made Me Who I am," never seemed so appropriate until it was sung by a Christian black drag-queen.

The club, like any Black church, is filled with beautiful, burdened, and buked black bodies in various stages of "praise." While you're you might just find yourself catching the holy-ghost to the rhythms of Junior Vasquez or Frankie Knuckles.

And at that moment, it makes little difference whether or not you're a D.L.homo thug, a lipstick lesbian or a weave-wearing drag queen, or a journalist. At that moment it's about you getting your groove on, sweating it out to the beat, and learning how to "catch the spirit": a spirit of community, sexual-fluidity, and self-respect, initiated by gay, black, hip-hop culture that is living, as we are, in this devastating age of AIDS.