

Blowing the Lid Off the DL

By GayWebMonkey.com

Down-low (slang term) - Originally used to mean something that is secret, the term is primarily used in the Black community to refer to men who are married or in heterosexual relationships but having relationships with men on the side.

It's lunch time, and the cast and crew of *The DL Chronicles*, all dressed up (and admittedly some of them undressed) for a day of photos, piles onto the patio of the Bel Air estate where they're shooting to chat, relax and cut loose over tacos and salad. The talk, inevitably, turns to what it means to be gay in the world today—a fitting topic given the show's subject matter.

One actor remembers managing the 24 Hour Fitness on Santa Monica Blvd. in West Hollywood—"the gay gym" for anyone who's never been there. He tells the table that many of his friends often wondered how he could work around all those gay guys and asked if he ever went in there to whoop some ass.

He'd usually laugh and tell his friends, 'Long gone are the days when a straight guy can expect to whoop a gay guys ass,'—the stereotype that gay men are weak or less than couldn't be more wrong, he adds.

Another of the guys talks about a friend in high-school (jock, buff, looked like Bull on *Night Court*, he says) who killed himself when his friends found out he was gay.

'That must have made it even harder for him', another of the actors chimes in.

More actors share similar experiences, talking of friends both past and present who have come to terms with (and in some cases, failed to come to terms with) being gay. It's a candid discussion between a group of straight actors and their gay directors... one that suggests the tide of acceptance in the African-American community is shifting.

Talk turns to **Oprah** (doesn't it always) and her now famous 'DL' episode. The talk show host addressed the issue of men living on the down low and the risk to women (transmission of HIV and other STD's). But the *DL Chronicles*' creators, Quincy LeNear and Deondray Gossett (right), say Oprah's show only told one side of the story—no one ever asked what about society caused these men to feel they should have to live life on the down low.

So they set out to tell his story—and the stories of so many other men like him.

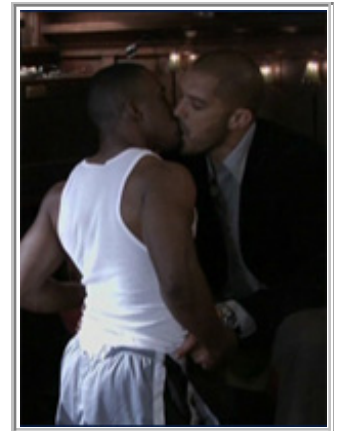
"That show was so completely one sided—it didn't represent the 'DL' phenomenon at all," Le Near, who himself experienced previous success with a clothing line and a string of Burger King ads. "Nobody talked about the whys."

One of the problems LeNear and Gossett have with the *Oprah* episode is that it perpetuated a stereotype that men on the down low have AIDS and spread AIDS... an issue, both admit, but certainly not a definer of what it means to be on the down low.

"The black man has become the scapegoat for AIDS in America," LeNear explains. "When they find out we're gay, the first thing people want to know is, 'You got AIDS?'"

Gossett says that sort of attitude does a huge disservice to the black community.

"It's a denial," he says. "People just don't want to deal with it. Now, it's almost as if, as long as your man's not on the 'DL'—if your man is healthy looking and straight, you're safe."



Both men come across as passionate, well-read, even expert when the topic turns to the association of being on the 'DL' and AIDS—its one of many issues they've read up on while creating the series. But when they initially embarked on this adventure, their basic frustration stemmed from the lack of roles available for Black actors in Hollywood.

Both performers themselves, LeNear and Gossett's dreams to create their own projects were born out of dissatisfaction—Hollywood wasn't creating the type of work they longed to do.

So the couple of 11 years raided their local video store and poured through hours of LGBT filmmaking for inspiration—where once again they found almost no representation of people of color. The *Oprah* episode premiered at around the same time and the idea for *The DL Chronicles* was born—a Red Show Diaries style anthology of men's stories, and not just the 'my man stepped out on me with another man and now I have AIDS' variety. From a man stuck in a loveless marriage who turns to his wife's brother for comfort to a businessman who lives on the down low for fear of disappointing his daughter, the stories are rich and textured.

They're also very real, delving into how societal pressure can keep a man from living his life openly. From religion to the image of masculinity as perceived by their culture, both creators admit the Black community has had a tough time coming around to the idea of homosexuality.

"Most oppressed cultures tend to be very religious based and gravitate toward a belief system, and our culture is no different," Gossett says. "We adhere so strongly to our religious base, not to mention, now, suddenly, the black man is the epitome of masculinity, with the influx of hip-hop culture. So anything that comes along and threatens that status has to be eradicated."

LeNear and Gossett say they too felt that pressure for a time—they lived on the down low as a couple, albeit a different definition of down low than is commonly used today. They lived together and their families and close friends knew. But at school, both said they felt compelled to keep up the façade, pretending to be roommates, always coming up with a cover story.

"We always had some story as to why some imaginary girl didn't work out," LeNear laughs as he remembers. "We found ourselves always lying, and at some point, I wondered, 'What the hell am I doing? Why am I lying to a bunch of classmates?'"

Back when they were in school, Gossett says down low didn't mean a guy had a wife he was cheating on or an entire family who was completely in the dark—it simply meant keeping a secret—letting people go on and assume you were straight.

Time have changed, and now, LeNear says, guys who are completely aware they're gay keep it a secret simply so they don't have to risk being associated with the stereotype of what it is to be queer—images like rainbow flags, chaps, parades... things commonly associated with being gay but more a fetish or a preference than a way of life.

"You have men and women in the gay community who are passing so they can reap the benefits of the status quo, and not be stigmatized due to their sexuality," he says. "What is scary about that to the straight community, they like to know something's easily identifiable—to be able to put things in their appropriate boxes. And the 'DL' crosses these barriers where you can no longer identify these people. They're your neighbors, teachers, they go to your church."

In other words, gay men are no longer the family secret, and that, they say, is what scares the straight community.

"We've always existed," LeNear says. "Gay, black people didn't drop out of the sky last year. The DL didn't drop out of the sky. It's just that, at this point in time in our history, gay people are much more vocal about who they are. When you were the gay cousin or gay uncle in the neighborhood 20 years ago, it was a shameful little secret. Now that we're much more vocal, that there's nothing wrong with us, there's that threat... because it's new."

But with shows like *The DL Chronicles* and increased media discussion on the subject of homosexuality, the boys say the community is getting better everyday in its acceptance. And at the end of the day, that is the biggest reward.

"That's what we wanted to do, precisely the point," Gossett says. "To tell different stories. The DL brought a lot of attention to the fact that we exist, but it tarnished the image of the African American community. There are so many different stories to tell—one is not the same as the next."

For more information on *The DL Chronicles*, airing now on here!, visit www.heretv.com.