

“Don’t Go Chasing Waterfalls”: Music, Black Women, and HIV/AIDS

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No popular musical response to HIV/AIDS is more popular than TLC’s 1994 hit “Waterfalls.” This song made it to number one in the Top 40 and stayed there for almost two months. In Joel Whitburn’s book *Top 1000 Singles, 1955-2000* “Waterfalls” is thirty-eight. It sold more than a million copies making it certifiably platinum. The “Waterfalls” video won four MTV Video Music Awards in 1995, including “Best Video of the Year.” When I have conducted surveys and talked with people about AIDS and music, this is the song that most people know and associate with AIDS.

It was the most popular American music response to the most devastating disease of the time. It exemplified society’s uneasiness with the topic of HIV/AIDS because TLC never mentioned the virus in the text. The text of the song highlighted the connection between AIDS and sex. It reminded us that if we did not protect ourselves from this disease, we could die. More importantly, it was sung by three black woman at a time when AIDS was understood as a disease of gay white men – at a time when AIDS was the leading cause of death among black women, aged 25-44 years. For all these reasons, this song deserves our attention, our respect, and our careful study. But because of the stigmas associated with AIDS, scholars have completely ignored this song.

“Waterfalls” tells two stories. The first story concerns a mother who loses her son to gang violence. The second verse of “Waterfalls” concerns HIV/AIDS, and the text reflects society’s uneasiness and confusion with AIDS.

[Play second verse of “Waterfalls”]

Little precious has a natural obsession
 For temptation but he just can't see
 She gives him loving that his body can't handle
 But all he can say is baby it's good to me
 One day he goes and takes a glimpse in the mirror
 But he doesn't recognize his own face
 His health is fading and he doesn't know why
 Three letters took him to his final resting place
 Ya'll don't hear me

The line “three letters took him to his final resting place” is especially revealing.

Presumably the three letters are H-I-V, but the letters are not sung. The theme of “seen vs. unseen” pervades this text: the man in the video “can't see” and he “doesn't recognize.” Other lines are more suggestive. “She gives him loving that his body can't handle” could have a number of meanings, but in this context we are supposed to understand that the woman's body is contaminated with HIV. The phrase “one day he goes and takes a glimpse in the mirror” indicates that some time had passed before he noticed any changes to his body, consistent with the fact that about half of the people with HIV develop AIDS within ten years of becoming infected. “His health is fading” strongly indicates that the man's body has become infected as a result of his contact with the woman.

To put these lines into context, consider this. In 1998 the physician Robert E. Gould published an article in *Cosmopolitan* telling his readers that “there is almost no danger of contracting AIDS through *ordinary sexual intercourse*” and that a “healthy vagina” offers sufficient protection against contracting HIV infection.¹ In the early 1990s,

¹ Robert E. Gould, “Reassuring News About AIDS: A Doctor Tells Why You May Not Be at Risk,” *Cosmopolitan*, January 1988, 146.

the connection between AIDS and gay men was so strong that nearly half the population believed that two HIV-negative gay men could acquire the AIDS virus merely by having sex with each other.² Although the message had improved somewhat by the time “Waterfalls” was released in 1994 AIDS was mostly understood as a “male disease,” a “gay disease.” Thus, it is significant that the woman gives the man “loving that his body can’t handle” and that the voices telling the story are women.

Let me return to those “three letters.” If they are not H-I-V, what could they be? Keep in mind that HIV does not kill; AIDS is what kills. HIV is the virus that causes AIDS, and AIDS has four letters. In my many conversations regarding this piece, both online and in person, I have heard a number of fascinating interpretations, including S-E-X, G-U-N, G-O-D, L-S-D, and the especially peculiar A-I-D. We can be certain that this verse does indeed concern HIV/AIDS by reading interviews with TLC. Reviews often mention that the members of TLC were known AIDS activists who sported condoms on their clothes at concerts to encourage women to protect themselves. When asked about the song, they were deliberate: for example, in a *Rolling Stone* interview, Lisa Lopes says explicitly that “Waterfalls” is about “personal hardships” and that they “talk about an AIDS situation where a couple has been careless. That’s their waterfall. Anything that is

² Between 1990 and 1992, Gregory Herek asked a question about two HIV-negative men having sex with each other. 19.1 percent of the respondents “believed that at least one of the men was almost sure to get infected or had a fairly strong chance of doing so – even if they used condoms. If the condoms were not used, 47.5 percent of the respondents believed that infection was likely.” Gregory M. Herek, “The HIV Epidemic and Public Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men,” in *In Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*, ed. Martin P. Levine, Peter M. Nardi, and John H. Gagnon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 206.

going to hold you back in life is a waterfall.”³ What interests me is not simply that the song is ambiguous, but that interviews are not. That this song is about AIDS without ever mentioning AIDS indicates that popular music is not a place to mention AIDS – unless the language is coded.

A few related examples, mostly from the same decade, will help illustrate this tendency to avoid AIDS in the text. Salt-N-Pepa’s “Let’s Talk about Sex” (1992), includes a reference to “a three-letter word I heard was a curse.” Prince’s “Sing O’ the Times” (1987) refers to “a big disease with a little name.” Liz Phair (daughter of a world-class medical authority on HIV) mentions “positive T-cell regeneration” in her song “Ride” (1998). And Elton John (founder of the Elton John AIDS foundation) sings lyrics like “Today I weigh less than a shadow on the wall” in his “The Last Song” (1992). One of my favorite examples is Janet Jackson’s “Together Again” (1997) [SLIDE: “Together Again” liner notes] – the text does not mention HIV/AIDS or have any coded references to “three letter,” but in the liner notes, next the words “Together Again,” there is a small red AIDS ribbon. These are just a few examples and they all say the same thing: don’t mention HIV/AIDS in popular music. “Waterfalls” and these the other popular American musical responses to HIV/AIDS are united by their omission of specific references to the pandemic, yet each song is clearly connected to the crisis.

This brings us to what I find to be an even more fascinating issue: is there anything in the music that links “Waterfalls” to HIV/AIDS? “Waterfalls” is not a

³ Janice Dunn, “Waterfalls,” *Rolling Stone*, 9 July 1998.

complex musical work and it does not feature many musical ideas. Harmonically, the song is made up of only four chords [E-flat > B-flat > D-flat maj7 > A-flat] that are repeated endlessly throughout the song. The chords change in the same place every time. One might argue that this highly repetitive construction is consistent with the message of the text, which encourages us to stick to the safety of our daily routines (symbolized by rivers and lakes) and not to do anything too crazy (like chase waterfalls). The repetition is safe and familiar.

However, when we *hear* the vocal line – the part of the music that speaks most powerfully to listeners, according to scholars like David Brackett and Simon Frith⁴ – a different pattern emerges. The melody emphasizes the notes E-flat > D > D-flat > C, a descending chromatic tetrachord. Numerous musicologists have commented on the impact and symbolism of the descending tetrachord. According to Ellen Rosand, “the most significant, potentially affective, feature of the pattern is its strong harmonic direction, reinforced by stepwise melody, steady unarticulated rhythm, and brevity.”⁵ The descending tetrachord is a kind of word painting that signals sadness. In Rosand’s influential 1979 essay, “The Descending Tetrachord: An Emblem of Lament,” she describes the tetrachord ostinato in Monteverdi’s well-known *Lamento della Ninfa* (1608). [SLIDE: highlighting the bass line from *Lamento della Ninfa*] Rosand writes, “in

⁴ See, for example, David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 2 and Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock ‘N’ Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 34-8.

⁵ Ellen Rosand, “The Descending Tetrachord: An Emblem of Lament,” *Musical Quarterly* 55 (1979): 349.

its unremitting descent, its gravity, the pattern offers an analogue of obsession, perceptive as an expression of hopeless suffering.”⁶ Likewise, in *Feminine Endings* Susan McClary comments on the “obsessive” quality of the descending tetrachord. McClary writes, “This obsessive quality is created musically through an unvarying cycle of four bass notes that seem to progress rationally through the A-minor tetrachord only to double back inevitably to starting position.”⁷ For Rosand, McClary, and many others, the very sound of the tetrachord signifies torment, sadness, and obsession. It seems quite appropriate then, that a work concerning HIV/AIDS would employ this melodic structure.

Before I move to my next point, let me state plainly that I do not know and I do not really care if the people who wrote “Waterfalls” knew anything about the history of the descending tetrachord or if they had Monteverdi’s lament in mind when they wrote “Waterfalls.”⁸ I bring Rosand’s and McClary’s essays concerning Monteverdi’s lament into this discussion because of how they talk about this particular musical gesture on which “Waterfalls” is built. But that is just the beginning.

In her 1979 essay, Rosand determines that “Lament of the Nymph” was one of two works (the other was Monteverdi’s lament of Arianna) that was significant to the development of the lament. As Susanne Cusick has pointed out, Rosand’s essay “began an implicit scholarly tradition that has tended to perceive operatic laments as a gendered

⁶ Rosand, “Descending Tetrachord,” 350.

⁷ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 87.

⁸ The words and music of “Waterfalls” are credited to Marqueze Etheridge, Lisa Nicole Lopes, Rico R. Wade, Pat Brown, and Ramon Murray.

genre, overwhelmingly uttered in the voices of women.”⁹ Like those operatic laments, “Waterfalls” is uttered in the voices of women. What is more, “Waterfalls” concerns a HIV-positive woman. So it is significant that all of these works are connected not just to women, but also to the same musical motive. Intentional or not, “Waterfalls” is part of a genre that began with Monteverdi, a genre symbolized by the descending tetrachord, a genre associated with women.

The “Waterfalls” music video adds other important dimensions to “Waterfalls” the song. The most frequent image in the video is of the three attractive women of TLC standing in water and singing, much like water nymphs themselves. The members of TLC are black. Curiously, the “careless couple” they sing about is white. From the video we learn that the couple had sex, but we inferred when we listened to the song. But the video shows us something that the song never mentions: before the couple had sex, the woman took and discarded a condom from the man’s hand, indicating that the condom was not used. Further, there is a hinged picture frame with the woman on one side and the man on the other, but the male faces in the picture rapidly change in a sequence that represents the woman’s previous multiple sexual partners. And there is a scene with the man looking in the mirror, very white and with what look to be lesions on his face.

[Show clip of “Waterfalls” video]

⁹ Suzanne G. Cusick, “Re-Voicing Arianna (and Laments): Two Women Respond,” *Early Music* 27, no. 3 (1999): 437.

This video is rife with significance and raises a number of new questions. Why is the couple white? Why is it the woman who discards the condom and not the man? If we are to assume that the man acquired AIDS from the woman, why do we only see the effects of AIDS on the man? Is the song meant to suggest that the woman is somehow immune from the effects of AIDS?

I return again to the seventeenth century because of the fascinating parallels between “Waterfalls” and Monteverdi’s “Lament of the Nymph.” Once more I owe my understanding of “Waterfalls,” in part, to Susan McClary’s discussion of Monteverdi’s piece. Let me briefly summarize Monteverdi’s lament and some of McClary’s key positions. In Monteverdi’s piece, three men tell the story of a nymph who has lost her lover. The three men begin the story, end the story, and provide commentary during the story. Nevertheless, the main portion of the work is the nymph’s lament. McClary believes that the lament signifies “self-pity, anger, grief, erotic longing, hopelessness, etc.”¹⁰ For McClary, the nymph is a public exhibit, an object of the male gaze. But she is terrifying. She is, quite simply, a madwoman. McClary understands the “Lament of the Nymph” as a precursor to later operatic scenes that depict female madness. We, the audience, are permitted voyeuristic access and we feel safe because men tell the story. The male voices are a “deliberate detriment of verisimilitude.”¹¹

In “Waterfalls” we have no such “detriment” because it is three women who tell the story. The woman in the video is very real, described by other women. Importantly,

¹⁰ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 87.

¹¹ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 89.

she is no longer only the subject of the male gaze. Men and women gaze upon the power of the woman and of AIDS. We do not ever hear her voice. But like Monteverdi's work, it is outsiders who tell the woman's story. Like Monteverdi's nymph, "On her pale face, grief could be seen." The woman in "Waterfalls" becomes terrifying because we are permitted voyeuristic access to her act of discarding the condom. McClary's description of the nymph is especially relevant: "We the spectators are curious to know about her (in order to accumulate possible human experiences, in order to control), but we do not want to be endangered by a creature who is beyond reason and who man inflict unmotivated injury or spread her disease."¹² The woman in the video may be understood as mad. But more importantly, we understand her to be HIV-positive. She is dangerous.

So when we look more closely at one of the most popular songs of that previous century, a number of issues become apparent. While it is the woman in the video that discards the condom, it shows us that both men and women have the power to protect themselves. "Waterfalls" shows us what happens when we discard the condom. In the text, we hear that HIV infects popular music, but only surreptitiously. This song demonstrates to us that the imagery and power of the descending tetrachord continues to affect listeners – at least I would like to think that musical motives still affect a songs reception. Most importantly, though, "Waterfalls" demonstrates that AIDS affects men and women, black and white. It interferes with one of the most powerful and deadly myths of our time: that AIDS affects only gay white men.

¹² McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 89.

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