

Getting lippy

WORSHIPPED *by fans* for her authenticity and audacity as much as her talent, Rihanna now lends her star power to M.A.C's latest charitable *VIVA GLAM lipstick campaign*.

WORDS: SIGOURNEY CANTELO

It's sunset and I'm dancing on a beach in Barbados with Rihanna. Well, that's if you could call it dancing. "Riri", as she's known to her fans, myself and a handful of journalists from around the world, are stumbling through a complicated, impromptu routine led by 12 kids from Dance4Life, an organisation that uses music and dance to educate young people about AIDS. After a quick lesson it's show time, and suddenly we find ourselves step-touching and waving in time to a catchy chant, "HIV-and-AIDS-we-can-beat-it, take-re-spons-ib-il-it-y!" We clap it out and crash into each other awkwardly, under the stunned gaze of several holidaymakers who were sadly not so slow in whipping out their iPhones to film the debacle. I can take comfort in the fact that Rihanna was as unprepared as I was.

"I didn't know I was going to have to learn a dance today!" she says, laughing, when we seek refuge from the soupy weather in an air-conditioned suite at chic Barbadian hotel Sandy Lane. "I'm so serious ... I thought I was just going to watch and then they were like: 'You have to dance.' I would never have worn this to dance on the beach! But it was fun. It was harder than I thought it would be," she says conspiratorially, smoothing down her Lanvin black tie-waisted jacket and pencil skirt. It's a decidedly more demure choice than usual, paired with elegant 40s finger-waved hair that is shorn on one side, the perfect homage to her wild-child aesthetic. On her lips is red lipstick – but not just any old lipstick. This velvet-finish, blue-based scarlet lipstick that pops so gloriously against her burnished complexion is going to save lives.

Rihanna is the newest face of the M.A.C Viva Glam campaign. And we are here in her hometown of Barbados for the launch to kick off her involvement. Rihanna joins a long line of dazzling Viva Glam divas, including Pamela Anderson, Nicki Minaj

and Lady Gaga, whose job it is to be loud and proud about the safe sex message and to help sell a lot of lipsticks for a very good cause. Now in its 20th year, the campaign sees 100 per cent of the sale price of its Viva Glam lipstick and lipglass donated to the M.A.C AIDS Fund (MAF). A foundation that, over the years, has raised a whopping \$300 million to help support charities (like Dance4Life, who received a grant today) to help combat the epidemic and improve the lives of people with HIV/AIDS.

"YOU WANT TO ENCOURAGE YOUNG PEOPLE TO PROTECT THEMSELVES"

"I want to encourage young people to have fun but still be responsible, especially with sex," she says passionately. "The HIV and AIDS epidemic has been around for as long as I've been alive, which really puts it into perspective, with half of the new infections being in people who are 24 years and under; and the majority being female; and the Caribbean being the number two highest rate; it's something that was imperative for me to do," she says with barely a breath between her well-learned statistics.

It's a sobering truth. What was once considered a scourge of the gay community is now affecting more women than men, especially young women, with poorer areas such as the Caribbean and South Africa among the hardest hit.

Astonishingly, many companies have stopped donating to the cause. The last Funders Concerned About AIDS report showed that 30 per cent of the private money previously going to HIV and AIDS had dried up, making MAF the second largest corporate giver to AIDS after Bill Gates. There seems to be an attitude that

with the current medications available, the pandemic is cured. While it's true that the medications can delay HIV developing into AIDS and help reduce the risk of sufferers passing it to their partners, for every 10 people under the age of 24 living with HIV, only around three have access to the medication. And most people don't even know their status (in the US nearly one in five people with HIV don't know they have it) with many avoiding tests as they don't want to know. It's this message about taking responsibility for your health and sexuality that Rihanna is keen to spread.

"It's so easy for people to be, I don't want to say submissive, but weak-minded. [With] young people everything is brand-new, you want to encourage them when it comes to protecting themselves and let them know how real HIV and AIDS is."

There's no denying it, Rihanna spruiking the safe-sex message is a lot, well, sexier, than a school teacher droning on in physical education and a lot more uplifting than the grim-reaper TV campaigns of the 80s.

Nancy Mahon, global executive director of MAF, says this is why M.A.C chooses celebrities to promote these truths.

"People listen to rock stars in a way they don't listen to mothers or health officials ... We want to help girls with empowerment through the voices of people like Rihanna or Nicki Minaj, strong icons who they admire, to encourage them to have higher self-esteem and to negotiate better in their own sexual relationships," Mahon says when we sit down later, along with John Demsey, MAF chairman and group president of M.A.C parent company Estée Lauder.

She is an icon. Robyn "Rihanna" Fenty was discovered at 16 (Jay-Z famously told her she couldn't leave the building before she had signed with him). Her first hit *Pon de Replay* peaked at number two on the US charts, but she drew constant comparisons to Beyoncé and didn't gain that much traction. It wasn't until she cut her hair ►

TERRY TSIOUS

and dirtied up her image that her career really skyrocketed. For her third album *Good Girl Gone Bad*, her music clips got edgier as she drew on her tumultuous childhood growing up with a father who was addicted to crack. Her hair got shorter, her nails got pointier, and she got a bunch of tattoos. Her style was rebooted – it was all thigh-high slits for the red carpet, leather and rebellious slogan tees for play. Girls everywhere got the “Rihanna” haircut. Now, she changes her 'do as often as she changes her lipstick. A fashion renegade and beauty chameleon, pursuing her goal of wanting to be the “black Madonna”.

“She is a global phenomenon and I’ve never seen anyone that crosses over to so many different types and ethnicities and ages in terms of wanting to understand her look,” says Demsey, who has worked with her since signing her to be their first “creative collaborator”, inviting her to co-create four wildly popular Riri make-up ranges (her first lipstick, *RiRi Woo*, sold out within three hours in the US).

It’s also a numbers game. In this age of digital distraction, short attention spans and social media saturation, Rihanna certainly has the means to be pushing this message. At time of print her social media presence is staggering, with 80 million Facebook fans, 32 million followers on Twitter and 10 million on Instagram. She has brand reach that marketing dreams are made of. Her dedicated fans are privy to the technicolour and titillating ride that is her life. And it’s not G-rated. Her twitter is littered with “phucks” and her Instagram account “@badgalriri” overflows with pictures of her: semi-naked and wrapped in snakes or smoking dubious-looking cigarettes with Snoop Dog. Her love of pot is no secret. She’s admitted to smoking many times and often posts pictures of marijuana leaves. Does it scare a major cosmetics company when their shining star is so brazen?

“Most of the people have been associated with M.A.C have had a little degree of controversy around them and we think that builds character,” says Dempsey. “It’s unapologetic. ‘[This is] who I am, love me or not’, and that’s what we love,” Mahon adds: “Also, none of our customers feel perfect, so it’s refreshing that we’re using people who aren’t pretending to be perfect.”

“Life is messy,” agrees Dempsey. Life is messy – particularly when it comes to



M.A.C Viva Glam
Rihanna Lipstick, \$36,
and Lipglass, \$35.

Rihanna shooting the Viva
Glam campaign and, below,
learning the routine with
the Dance4Life kids.

“YOU DON’T WANT TO JUST EXIST. YOU WANT TO LIVE, HAVE FUN, BE FREE”

relationships played out in the public eye, like Rihanna’s controversial entanglement with R&B singer Chris Brown. He pleaded guilty to assaulting the star back in 2009 and was hit with a restraining order. By 2012 they were on again. Rihanna teamed up with Brown to release a remix of her track *Birthday Cake*, then in an interview with Oprah in August 2012, claimed Brown was the love of her life.

Back in Barbados, locals are divided about Rihanna. “She’s a jackass! Her and Chris Brown are unbelievable,” chimes in Kay, my taxi driver, an ebullient woman with a shock of carefully coiffed dreadlocks. “No man that hit me, I not getting back with him! And then when she’s performing she’s half naked as ass!” Hamilton, the hotel’s tour guide is a little more understanding. “She’s normal. Rihanna is, we say, down to earth,” he explains gently.

Perhaps that’s part of her appeal – her uncensored outpourings give people the feeling that they know her intimately and can give her a little motherly advice. Her fellow countryfolk’s criticism doesn’t surprise her.

“I know that sometimes they might come off a little aggressive when it comes to certain things that I do or decisions that I make, but I understand it, you know, I’m one of them, so it doesn’t matter! I love them and they love me too, even if they don’t say it,” she says, laughing.

And she is down to earth. When she’s in town she drives around in her little black Suzuki Jimny and eats at local Chefette, the fast-food joint which serves her favourite chicken curry wrapped in roti bread.

“Yes, the roti!” her eyes light up when I mention it. “There’s this drink here called Mauby you should try, but you probably would hate it, it’s really bitter but it’s got a sweetness to it. You’re going to hate it, but you should just try it because you’re here,” she says, as if we’re pals. With all this fast food, what gives? Her body is insane. I have to ask about her exercise routine.

“I do not exercise! I don’t want to be skinny; I want to put on some weight. I want a butt, I want my legs to be thick, I’m serious! So I’m going to start working out for that, but health is important,” she says. “The M.A.C brand is very big on raising awareness on health, and I think this is going to be my contribution to health, Viva Glam! Because I don’t really like vegetables, so I can’t run that,” she laughs again.

The girl is warm. Yes, she’s raw and she’s naughty, but she’s also completely authentic. You get the sense that she’s making it up as she goes along. Maybe that’s why she has a tattoo that reads “never a failure, always a lesson” on her collarbone. It’s this sense of *carpe diem* that seems to inform all she does now, from dancing on a beach in Barbados for AIDS to her outspoken outpourings on social media.

“You come to a place where you want to actually live. You don’t want to just exist. You want to live, you want to have fun, you want to be free, and you want to know that you did it the way you wanted, so that years from now you can look back on memories of things that made you happy. That’s what’s important,” she smiles simply, her scarlet lips curling into an endearing grin.

It’s declarations like those that keep us listening. That will ensure she gets the safe-sex message across the line, in all her crotch-grabbing, spliff-smoking, snake-wearing glory. And that will translate to the lipstick sales that save lives. M.A.C couldn’t hope for much more than that. ■