

## Leigh Blake

For more than 30 years, Leigh Blake has been an advocate, harbinger and creator of the arts – from music and film, to fashion and the visual arts.

As a child growing up in England, Leigh's first glimpse of the Beatles changed her life forever. "I remember a day when I was about 11 and playing on the floor with my dolls and I saw the Beatles on TV," says Blake. "I took one look at Paul McCartney, put those dolls down and never played with them again. My focus became to meet them and be involved in that world. Plus, music was the way for a working class cockney like me to be a somebody in the England I grew up in. Of course I did meet them and there began my rock and roll life."

In her 20's, Blake befriended the Talking Heads on one of their tours of the U.K. As a fan and friend, Blake helped market the band in England, and eventually in 1976, moved to America to continue to stump for the band and to satiate a fascination with Warhol, the Kennedys and the great American moviemakers of the 70's.

In 1986, her film career started in earnest as a producer on a short film on the legendary highway Route 66, directed by cinematographer Ed Lachman, and made for Lindsay Law's PBS series "Imagining America." The film was very well reviewed and Leigh returned to England flush with experience to head up the music video division at the legendary Palace Pictures, working with Nik Powell, Stephen Woolley and Joanne Sellar. Many of the video directors Leigh discovered there have gone on to make feature films including Mark Pellington, among others. Many years later and back in America, Leigh would go on to co-develop Larry Clark's controversial first feature "Kids" with Gus van Sant.

While her creative career was thriving, a surging epidemic was starting to gravely affect Leigh's peers in the arts. The epidemic was AIDS and Leigh would not sit by. She turned her creative prowess to making a difference and co-founded the Red Hot Organization, the seminal music industry initiative that raised funds for HIV/AIDS research and education by bringing together top artists such as David Byrne, Madonna, U2, k.d. lang, Jim Jarmusch, Wim Wenders, Jonathan Demme, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and many others to collaborate on music and television productions. Leigh produced the first Red Hot projects "Red Hot + Blue" and "Red Hot + Dance" from Palace Pictures in London. "Red Hot + Blue" was a triumph as the first AIDS benefit produced through the music industry. It was seen in more than 60 countries, raised over \$6 million and was nominated for an Emmy. "Red Hot + Dance" was an award-winning critical and commercial success as well, and both projects woke up the world. In fact, to this day, fans come up to Leigh to say "Red Hot + Blue' saved my life."

In 1991 Leigh became more involved with Africa both personally and professionally. She married music video and commercials director Earle Sebastian, a native South African from Durban. Her experience with the Red Hot organization and her travels in Africa, led Leigh to create, and serve as Executive Director of, Artists Against AIDS Worldwide (AAAW), an organization dedicated to the eradication of AIDS in Africa. In 2000, for AAAW's first project, Leigh conceived a campaign that featured a star-studded remake of Marvin Gaye's classic song "What's Going On" at its cornerstone. Urged on by her Co-Executive Producer and dear friend Bono, more than 40 artists including Destiny's Child, Fred Durst, Nona Gaye, Alicia Keys, Ja Rule, Jennifer Lopez, Nelly, Nelly Furtado, Nas,

Diddy, ?uestlove, Britney Spears, Staind, Wyclef Jean, Eve, Lil Kim and Christina Aguilera signed on for the remake of the song, as well as participate in a "making of" documentary of the project made in conjunction with Executive Producers Gary Goetzman and Tom Hanks and their company, Playtone. AAW and "What's Goin On" were hugely influential in bringing global awareness to the AIDS epidemic in Africa and the timing of the song's release had an ancillary benefit as a comfort to the victims of the 9/11 attacks, as the powerful, emotional lyrics resonated with victim's loved ones the world over.

"Although I had been an active member of the anti-apartheid movement in Britain, I thought after the abolition of apartheid that South Africa would be free of its ills. But along came AIDS to that country and indeed the whole continent, and I realized how much more work was still to be done. South Africa was the epicenter of the epidemic in Africa and seeing the pain of the people struggling to cope with the ravages of AIDS spurred me on," remarks Blake.

In 2001, with money she garnered from her work with Red Hot + Blue, Leigh began the building of a clinic in Kenya, which, under the guidance of Dr. Shaffiq Essajee at New York University Medical Centre, is a model for many Leigh wants to build all over Africa.

One day in the clinic a woman named Anne brought her child Brine, for medical care. He was extremely sick and clearly was not going to survive. Anne refused to leave the clinic until she received the "drugs that you have in America for your children." This was a eureka moment for Leigh and the day that she would recognize her calling. Leigh told Anne to go home, that she would pay for the drugs, knowing that if it happened to her son, she would have done the same. The idea for her next initiative, Keep A Child Alive, was born at that moment but it took a while to get it realized.

In 2003 Leigh officially founded Keep A Child Alive, (KCA) which provides vitally needed anti retroviral medicine to children and families with AIDS in the developing world. ([www.keepachildalive.org](http://www.keepachildalive.org)) She created Keep A Child Alive as the Ipod of charity, reinventing and modernizing the old fashioned model of charitable organizations to create a new movement to save lives in emergency mode. "I learned from my time at Red Hot that you have to stay true to your style," says Blake. "As Red Hot got bigger, it got diluted and didn't have the edge that it once had. That is why Keep A Child Alive remains a modern version of the charitable response to AIDS and will always feel in your face, irreverent and ever changing."

Since its inception KCA has worked with the amazing nine-time Grammy winner, Alicia Keys, who is a co creator of the organization. KCA also counts Iman as a Global Ambassador for the organization. Iman is spearheading a new awareness campaign "I Am African" which will be unveiled in Fall 2006 and includes David Bowie, Sting, Gwyneth Paltrow, Sarah Jessica Parker, Liv Tyler, Lucy Liu, Richard Gere and many others as participants.

To date, Keep A Child Alive has helped more than 3,000 adults and children obtain life saving HIV/AIDS medication or regular, ongoing HIV care and testing. Keep A Child Alive also provides pediatric expertise and nutritional grants to affected areas. KCA is also in the process of building an Orphanage and a major continuum of care clinic in South Africa, having scaled up many others in Africa.

"My short term goal for the organization is to provide treatment to as many people with AIDS as possible and to build more support for what we do. But long term, I hope that there will cease to be a need for our services, because the promises of universal access to AIDS treatment will be met by the G8, the United Nations, and others. Until such time, we will continue our work with vigor, passion and compassion 24/7," says Blake.

Leigh Blake currently resides in New York City with her old son. She considers humanitarian service "the best Prozac in the world!"