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T-Boz Talks TLC's Legacy, Touring with Chilli and Beating the Odds

and her brand-new business endeavor.

The superstar spills the deets on her health, her 30-year career in the music industry



By Allison Kugel on January 6, 2020



TLC's Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins' life is one filled with overcoming insurmountable odds and finding blessings in unexpected places. Watkins was diagnosed with sickle cell disease at the age of 7 and spent much of her childhood in and out of hospitals due to episodes with the potentially fatal condition. She was told she wouldn't make it past early adulthood. Her family's move from Des Moines, Iowa, to Atlanta when Watkins was 9, and a chance meeting former singer and music executive Perri "Pebbles" Reid and her then-husband L.A. Reid would launch T-Boz, Lisa "Left Eye" Lopes and Rozonda "Chilli" Thomas into the stratosphere as the biggest-selling American girl group in music history; in addition, they earned four Grammy Awards and have sold 65 millions albums worldwide to date.

For all its success, TLC has endured a roller coaster of ups and downs over the past 30 years, the biggest blow being the loss of group member Left Eye in a 2002 car crash, which took away one-third of the lightning in a bottle that made them superstars. Resolute in their will to go on, T-Boz and Chilli have continued to record music and tour, most recently co-headlining a tour with Nelly and Flo Rida that continues through this summer.

These days, T-Boz, author of the 2017 memoir *A Sick Life*, is reveling in the most recent chapter of her life as mom to daughter Chase and son Chance and co-creator of her newly launched line of CBD-infused healthy and beauty products, aptly

called TLCBD.

Syndicated columnist Allison Kugel recently caught up with T-Boz, and their lengthy conversation ran the gamut with nothing left off the table.

Allison Kugel: Is there a prominent memory or flashback from your life, whether it's a really great memory that you love to revisit or even something that wasn't so great, that helped shape you?

Watkins: I always think about the first time I saw each of my kids. No matter what's going on in my life, that will give me a good feeling and a smile. Anytime I'm having a terrible time, I try to think about what the best thing in my life is, and that is my two kids. I think about the first time I ever saw them, and that's a feeling you can't really describe.

Kugel: At what age did you feel yourself make the transition from a girl into a woman? Was there a particular event, or did it just kind of hit you one day?

Watkins: You know when I think I felt like a woman? It was probably when we did the video for the song "Creep." Everybody thought we were so mature- looking in that video, and I didn't think of myself like that until grown men started trying to talk to us. Before that, there was always this stigma about us [looking] so young.

Kugel: Is that when you felt like a woman or when you felt like peoplesaw you that way?

T-Boz: I think that's when people saw me as a woman, but then that started making me feel like I was a woman, you know what I mean? And when you start seeing yourself as that, you start acting a little differently, like, "Oh, I got some grown and sexy going on now (*laughs*)." I used to be so skinny, and I would wear two pair of pants to look curvier. I was tired of guys saying, "She's cute." I was like, when are they going to say, "She's fine," and when am I going to get some grown-woman hips?

Kugel: Do you talk to Lisa "Left Eye" Lopes when you're alone? And has there ever been an unmistakable sign that she's around you?

T-Boz: No, I don't want to talk to anybody who's passed away, because that's spooky (*laughs*).

Kugel: That stuff doesn't spook me out; I think it's kind of cool to think we can communicate back and forth with those who have passed.

T-Boz: I don't talk to anyone that passed away in my family, but I think about them or I talk *about* them. That's my way. I'm one of those people [who doesn't] even like to go to gravesites because that's not a good memory for me, and I don't feel like they know I'm there. But I also feel like they know the love I have for them, and I always have psychics come up to me and tell me that Lisa is with me.

Kugel: Do they say something specific enough where you know they're for real? Because you guys are famous, do they give you something to let you know it's the real deal?

T-Boz: Yeah, absolutely, I know it's the real deal. They tell me that she watches over my kids, but the stuff they've told me there is no way they would know it! Only me and Lisa would know that stuff. At first, it creeped me out a little bit because I was like, "Wait a minute. Does that mean she's watching me all the time?" Then I got used to it, and it's not a bad thing because she's watching over us.

Kugel: I'm sure she's not watching you in the shower and that kind of thing, but who knows(*laughs*)?

Watkins: I hope not, but it's not like we haven't seen each other naked before. We were like family, so we did everything together.

Kugel: Were you happy with the way TLC's final album [the group's fifth, titled *TLC*, was released in 2017] turned out? Do you feel it was a good swan song?

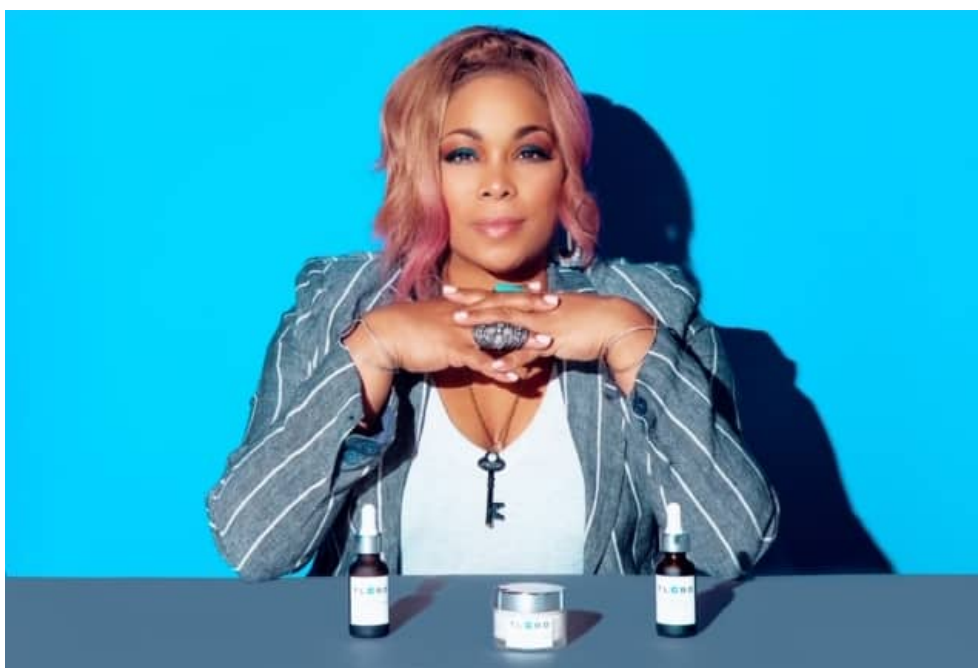
Watkins: No, I don't. I feel like it wasn't worked good enough. I don't even like the song "Hater s"; I'm going to be honest. I think that was a terrible choice as our second single. I believe there were better songs we should've gone with that were deeper. We have a song called "American Gold." It was right before Trump came into office, and there was all this uproar

[about] Black men who were dying and being abused and killed by the cops, including my cousin who was murdered by cops and shot 18 times with an AR15 and was mentally ill. The reason that song is so important because we hit on all of that, and you know how you bleed and die for your American gold? Just being American is tough these days, especially when you're Black. That song would have really hit home in a lot of places, kind of the way "Waterfalls" did, if the right visuals had been put to it.

Kugel: You think the music video for "Waterfalls" was a key element for people getting the song?

Watkins: Some people didn't get "Waterfalls" . . . until the visuals [the music video] came and brought that song to life. If visuals were put to "American Gold," it could have been a big song. It could have been deep for certain people, especially for people who fought for our country. At the end, the album was too rushed and I felt forced to not finish some of the songs that I could have finished.

Kugel: Let's get into your CBD line, which you've named TLCBD. Over the years, you've had a rough time recording music and touring while dealing with flare-ups and hospitalizations from your sickle cell anemia. On this current TLC tour [co-headlining with Flo Rida and Nelly], you've said that using CBD has kept you healthier.



Watkins with products from her new cannabis-infused TLCBD health and beauty line/ photo courtesy of MAV

Watkins: Oh, absolutely! Before I started taking CBD—you can go back through our history—they would tell you, "T-Boz is sick, T-Boz has ruined another tour." It's not a cure, but since being on it, I don't get sick as often. I'm way stronger and, when I do get sick, it's not as bad or for as long. On this last tour, I broke my rib and was able to still perform with a broken rib. A long time ago, that would have sent me into a sickle cell crisis. Because I was on CBD, I was able to go to the hospital for one day, get fluids for the pain and some lidocaine patches and take some CBD cream, bomb and tincture, and I made it through. I didn't ruin the tour. This is the third tour I've been on that I haven't gotten sick or had to cancel.

Kugel: That's awesome. How did you figure out that CBD could ease your symptoms?

Watkins: The medicines that the doctors give you keep you in a weakened state. If you're weak, it's easier to get sick because the sickle cell attacks the weakest part of your body. If you stay weak, you're going to stay sick, so I was sick every three months and going into hospitals. Someone suggested CBD, and I tried it. At first, I didn't feel any different, then I started noticing that I was feeling stronger. I wasn't getting as sick as often, and I don't even have a good working spleen. Your spleen is what helps you fight off colds and diseases. I lost my spleen, but I grew two accessory spleens, which is totally crazy. I didn't know you can grow an organ back. God has been looking out for me! Anytime someone around me had a cold, I would always catch the cold to the 10th power, but now [I'm not] even catching cooties (*laughs*).

Kugel: For systemic issues you ingest it, and for injuries you use it topically ...

Watkins: Yeah. We have a balm, which is kind of the consistency of shea butter for our line, TLCBD, and then our CBD tincture is what you drop on your tongue. We have beauty oils for wrinkles and keeping your face together. It's moisturizing,

and after wearing all that makeup and being in different climates every other day, it really moisturizes my skin.

Kugel: Was Chilli cool with you naming your CBD line TLCBD, or was she wanting a cut because you're using the TLC name?

Watkins: It's just a play on words. At first, it was called Cure Holistic, but there is a Cure CBD. One of my partners came up with TLCBD—usually I hate using anything TLC-related—but it was cute. I said that at first, too, but when I talked to all my people, they said that it's just a play on words, it's not a TLC product. I don't get mad if she goes somewhere and says, "Chilli with TLC," so no, she wasn't mad. But if it was a TLC product and it just said "TLC," then yeah, I would owe her a cut.

Kugel: What is the wisest advice you've ever been given, and how has it impacted your life?

Watkins: My mama told me if I kept my morals, my integrity and my character intact, she would support anything I did. That's what's gotten me through. She also said to always be the best in anything you choose to do. She said, "I don't care if you choose to be a garbage truck driver; make sure you pick up that garbage good, girl." At the end of the day, it's about respecting myself. Nobody else will respect me if I don't respect myself, and it starts with me.

Kugel: Good advice.

Watkins: That's the best advice I could have been given, especially in this industry at 19 years old, with a whole bunch of nasty men trying to just prowl and take advantage of young girls. That never bothered me because I always had my self-respect, self-esteem and self-worth.

Kugel: What do you have faith in?

Watkins: God! That's pretty much it. Period.

Kugel: How do you define God for yourself?

Watkins: I've never been asked that before. I know I have a relationship with God, and I know that God exists for me. I don't push my beliefs on anybody else, but I know when people—even doctors—walk out of the room and can't explain why I'm still here, I know there's something up there higher than me that made it possible. When your doctor comes out and says, "I don't even know how she's doing this, because I didn't do it ..."

Kugel: This is something that I ask everybody, and it's really something to meditate on if you've never thought about it before: What do you believe you are here on this earth, as Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins, to learn? What do you think your soul came here to learn in this lifetime?

Watkins: I used to always wonder why I got through things, like why I lived and why my cousin died, and why we had the same disease. I used to wonder why I'm here and what my purpose was. Then, not so long ago, maybe the last seven to eight years, I figured my purpose here was to help people, whether it's through music or through sharing my testimony and being a ray of hope for someone. I've also learned to push past my fears. I used to hate speaking in front to people. I've learned to face my fears, and I've learned that I'm an open book. And I like to learn... about people, about things... it just makes me more of a people person so that I can better help someone else.

Kugel: That falls in line with what the late Dr. Maya Angelou said, "When you learn, teach. At our best, we are all teachers."

Watkins: Yes! When I talk to the kids that I speak to, I try to help them from the inside out. When it comes to health-related issues, for example, if you have cancer, lupus, sickle cell, AIDS or even if you are 100-percent healthy but you're continually stressed out, you can die. So if you already have an ailment and your boyfriend is cheating on you, or you're getting beat up at home, or your child's on drugs or whatever the stress may be, you have to try to control the stuff that you can control and get as much stress out of your life as possible, because it will kill you. But it's especially true if you're already dealing with an illness. I've just learned to be a better person; the best version of me. I'm working toward that every day so I can do what I'm here to do and live whatever my purpose is meant to be on this earth. I truly believe that's to help people.

Kugel: I was going to ask you what you're here to teach, but I think you just covered that!

Watkins: *(Laughs)* That was a good question, though. I like your questions.

Kugel: Thank you. Let's get to some fun stuff. When you're on tour in your 40s, are there tour shenanigans with the other artists, or are you in bed under the covers by 10:00 p.m. at this stage of the game?

Watkins: *(Laughs)* I'm not in bed, but I am boring. I like to watch movies, but I'm up all night. I'm a night owl, and I go to bed at like 3:00, 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning. But they always say my bus is the crunk bus, and Chilli's bus is the grandma bus *(laughs)*. They call her "Grandma," and they call me "Auntie," so my bus is the loud one. It's music and fun, but we used to get wild when Lisa was alive. We used to have this thing we would do called "penis on the bus." Anytime a guy would come on the bus, we would be like, "Penis on the bus!" and we would try to act like we were going to pull their pants down. It was funny because we would always know who had a little penis or who had a big one because the people would just lay there, like, "Go ahead." And the ones that had little penises would almost, like, kill us before we could pull their pants down. So we were like, "Dang, we just playing! Don't kill me. We weren't really gonna pull your penis out." Hello!

Kugel: And they say only the male artists are bad on tour.

Watkins: Yeah, we were really bad, but penis on the bus was fun.

Kugel: That's funny. How are you feeling about your upcoming 50th birthday in April?

Watkins: I want to do something special; usually, I just go to a Mexican restaurant to eat for my birthday. I don't really do much because I'm kind of a homebody. But for my 50th, I think I should celebrate all year long because I never go on vacation. My plan is to go to Bora Bora, Tahiti, Thailand. I've always wanted to stay in one of those huts in the ocean or the big bungalows with the pool. I'm going to one of those countries, if not all three. I canceled a tour that we had around my birthday. They wanted me to work on my birthday; that ain't gonna happen, especially my 50th! That's a big celebration. They were going to try to do a big sickle cell telethon-type thing. I don't know if that's going to happen because it might take too long to put together, and my birthday will pass by then. Celebrating 50, for me, is a super blessing being that I was told I wouldn't live past 30.

Kugel: Wow!

Watkins: I'm like, "YEAHHHHH!"

Kugel: That's amazing!

Watkins: That's a celebration within itself. Yeah, it's a blessing and I love it.

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