

# 'LISTEN, AND YOU WILL HEAR ALL THE HOUSES THAT WALKED THERE BEFORE': A HISTORY OF DRAG BALLS, HOUSES AND THE CULTURE OF VOGUING

BY TIM LAWRENCE

Bursting into public consciousness between 1989 and 1991, the culture of drag balls and voguing can be traced back to the second half of the 19th century. Harlem's Hamilton Lodge staged its first queer masquerade ball in 1869, and some 20 years later a medical student stumbled into another ball that was taking place in Walhalla Hall on the Lower East Side. He witnessed 500 same-sex male and female couples 'waltzing sedately to the music of a good band'.<sup>1</sup> A rickety old building situated at 119 East 11th Street, Webster Hall played host to further events during the 1920s, and by the end of the decade, masquerade parties were being staged in conspicuous venues such as Madison Square Garden and the Astor Hotel, where they attracted crowds of up to 6,000. Invited to attend another ball at Hamilton Lodge by the entrepreneur and party host A'Lelia Walker, Harlem Renaissance social activist and writer Langston Hughes proclaimed the drag balls to be the 'strangest and gaudiest of all Harlem's spectacles in the 1920s' and described them as 'spectacles in colour'.<sup>2</sup> Noting the presence of 'distinguished white celebrities' during this period, Hughes concluded that 'Harlem was in vogue' and 'the negro was in vogue'.<sup>3</sup>

Held once a year, the balls came to feature a procession known as the 'parade of the fairies', which involved drag queen contestants sashaying through the auditorium in preparation for a costume competition. For the rest of the evening, dancers took to the floor in couples and formed partnerships that were superficially straight, with men (including lesbians dressed as men and gay men who favoured butch style) accompanying women (or men dressed as women, as well as straight femmes) while any number of straights watched on from the sidelines.

'About 12.30am we visited this place and found approximately 5,000 people, coloured and white, men attired in women's clothes, and vice versa,' reported a team of undercover investigators following an inspection of the Hamilton Lodge ball held in the Manhattan Casino in February 1928. 'The affair, we were informed, was a "Fag/Masquerade Ball"'.<sup>4</sup> Four years later, Broadway Brevities reported from another ball that men rivalled birds of paradise and peacocks, their plumed headdresses nodding and undulating from their 'shapely heads'.<sup>5</sup> Soon after, novelists Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler evoked the drag ball floor as 'a scene whose celestial flavour and cerulean colouring no angelic painter or nectarish poet has ever conceived'.<sup>6</sup>

With the balls gaining popularity, the New York state legislature had criminalised 'homosexual solicitation' in 1923 as part of a wider backlash around male-male sexual relations. But drag ball organisers found they could continue to stage events if a neighbourhood organisation applied for official police sponsorship on their behalf. The hiatus lasted until the autumn of 1931, when officers, reacting to the cultural experimentation of the Prohibition years and the onset of the Depression, began to clamp down on the city's queer community and targeted the balls.

'If the cops have their way,' reported Variety, 'the effeminate clan will hereafter confine its activities to the Village and Harlem.'<sup>7</sup> Yet the police struggled to contain the culture when, following the second world war, many gay men who had travelled through Manhattan on their way to the battlefield returned to the city. Officers responded by intensifying their regulation and cases of entrapment (whereby police officers would 'entrap' gay men through sexual solicitation before producing their badge) increased exponentially. Drag ball organisers, however, were bolstered by the wave of new arrivals. At one ball, reported Ebony in March 1953, more than 3,000 contestants and spectators gathered in Harlem's Rockland Palace 'to watch the men who like to dress in women's clothing parade before judges in the world's most unusual fashion shows'.<sup>8</sup>

By the early 1960s, drag ball culture had begun to fragment along racial lines. For although balls such as the one held at Rockland Palace boasted a remarkably even mix of black and white participants, with the dancefloor also notably integrated, black queens were expected to 'whiten up' their faces if they wanted to have a chance of winning the contests. Even then, their chances were slim, as they might have pondered further when the white-skinned Venice Lamont won first prize at the Rockland Palace event for looking 'most like a woman', her figure 'the envy of many of the women spectators'.<sup>9</sup> So black queens started to stage their own events, with Marcel Christian staging what might well have been the first black ball in 1962.<sup>10</sup>

If anything, dresses scaled new heights of extravagance and glamour. At one event, Cleopatra arrived on a ceremonial float flanked by six servants waving white, glittering palm leaves; and at another, a 2,000-watt incandescent lamp was lit just as a fashion model flung open her Mylar-lined feathered coat, leaving the front rows momentarily blind. 'It was Vegas comes to

Harlem,' commented Michael Cunningham in a 1995 article about ball culture. 'It was the queens' most baroque fantasies of glamour and stardom, all run on Singer sewing machines in tiny apartments.'<sup>11</sup>

Founded in 1972, the first house came into existence when Lottie, a Harlem drag queen who worked in the welfare office on 125th Street, asked Crystal LaBeija to co-promote a ball. One of the few black queens to be awarded a Queen of the Ball title at a white-organised ball, LaBeija had also become tired of the anti-black bias of the balls, as she made clear during *The Queen*, a documentary film directed by Frank Simon that tracked an Miss All-American Camp Beauty Pageant drag contest where contestants Rachel Harlow, LaBeija and others competed in front of a panel that included Larry Rivers and Andy Warhol. Convinced the result was a Caucasian fix, LaBeija flew into a rage when host Flawless Sabrina declared the winner to be Harlow, described by the *New York Times* as a 'frail, blonde, pouting young man, formerly Miss Philadelphia', and the experience prepared the way for LaBeija's collaboration with Lottie.<sup>12</sup> 'Crystal agreed to do it so long as she was a highlight of the ball,' notes Terrence Legend International. 'Lottie made the deal sweeter by convincing Crystal that they should start a group and name it the House of LaBeija, with Crystal's title as "mother". Crystal agreed. The event was titled Crystal & Lottie LaBeija presents the first annual House of Labeija Ball at Up the Downstairs Case on West 115th Street & 5th Avenue in Harlem, NY.'<sup>13</sup>

Referencing the glamorous fashion houses whose glamour and style they admired, other black drag queens started to form drag houses, or families that, headed by a mother and sometimes a father, would socialise, look after one another, and prepare for balls (including ones they would host and ones they would attend). Mother Dorian and Father Chipper founded the House of Corey in 1972, and two years later Father Jay set up the House of Dior, after which La Duchess Wong and Nicole Wong established the House of Wong, and Paris Dupree and Burger Dupree inaugurated the House of Dupree, all in 1975. The House of Christian and the House of Plenty augmented the total before Mother Avis and Father Kirk launched the House of Pendavis in 1979. Extending drag ball culture out of Harlem, three more houses—the House of Omni, the House of Ebony and the House of Chanel—sprung up in Brooklyn during 1979 and 1980.<sup>14</sup> Then, a couple of years later, Pepper LaBeija became the new mother of the House of LaBeija, having made her ball debut around 1972. From this point on, contestants battled to win trophies, with multiple entrants walking along an imaginary runway in costume and character for each category. At the end of each round, a group of scrupulous judges would cast their verdict, sometimes rewarding optimum realness—or the ability to pass as straight in the outside world—sometimes backing sheer outrageousness and opulence. 'It was our goal then to look like white women,' LaBeija told Cunningham as she reflected on the days before the black queens organised their own balls and initiated a very particular housing boom. 'They used to tell me, "You have negroid features," and I'd say, "That's all right, I have white eyes." That's how it was back then.'<sup>15</sup>

If the beginning of the black balls coincided with the intensification of the civil rights movement, the formation of the houses paralleled the increasing confidence of the gay liberation movement, which enjoyed its symbolic breakthrough when drag queens occupied the frontline during the Stonewall rebellion of June 1969. A black angel of history who could navigate the tempests and hurricanes of destiny with only an occasional change of outfit, Sylvia Ray Rivera was one of many queens who enjoyed hanging out at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar situated in the West Village that permitted dancing in its back room, and which police tolerated in return for regular, under-the-counter payments. When those payments were delayed, officers would raid the bar in order to remind the owners of their obligations, but during the bust that took place in June 1969, Rivera and her friends, already on edge following the funeral of Judy Garland, fought back. The ensuing blur of stiletto-kicks and handbag-swipes triggered days of rioting that have come to define the symbolic birth of Gay Liberation. Perhaps some quirk of collective historical memory played its part, for the rebellion also marked the 100th anniversary of the inaugural masquerade ball of the Hamilton Lodge. At the very least, the defiance involved in the act of dressing up as a member of the opposite sex doubled as a form of pre-training for Rivera and her co-rebels.

The establishment of the houses also paralleled the twists and turns of New York's gangs, which flourished between the mid-1940s and the mid-1960s as the city shifted from an industrial to a post-industrial base while dealing with the upheavals of urban renewal, slum clearances and ethnic migration. As historian Eric Schneider argues, gangs appealed to alienated adolescents who wanted to earn money as well as peer group prestige. They flourished until the mid-1960s, when Mayor John Lindsay introduced gang intervention programmes and placed a greater emphasis on community action, while political radicals and civil rights activists attempted to 'engage gangs in larger political struggles.'<sup>16</sup>

But the underlying conditions that led to the rise of the gangs in the first place didn't go away. Gangs started to multiply again in the early 1970s, especially in the South Bronx, where endemic poverty and an epidemic of arson attacks and heroin addiction overwhelmed the city's programmes. Meanwhile, black, gay, working-class drag queens found themselves estranged not only from their biological families, which were usually intolerant of their choices, but also the ruling cadre of black nationalist leaders, whose increasingly macho 'real man' discourse was popularised by the gangs that multiplied on neighbourhood streets. With nowhere else to turn, they formed their own self-supporting gangs, which they preferred to call houses.

A quite distinct phenomenon from the clusters of individuals and circles of friends who would head to the balls, houses began to operate as de facto orphanages for displaced kids. Some found themselves on the streets and many lived with families unable to come to terms with their choices. When Pepper LaBeija's mother discovered women's clothing in her child's closet, for instance, Pepper insisted they belonged to a friend, only for her secret to become uncontainable when she started to grow breasts. That prompted

her mother to burn Pepper's mink coat in the back yard. 'Devastated, I stood there and cried like a baby,' LaBeija recalled later, while her mother doggedly stuck to calling her by her birth name, William Jackson.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the work the houses carried out in between balls enabled them to incorporate children who might not have been interested in dressing up yet still wanted to hang out, have fun and enjoy the warmth of an extended community, and those who, in addition, wanted to help other members of the house prepare for the ball without walking themselves. 'A rich taxonomy of gender personas and identities flooded in: thugged-out hustlers who were "new" to gay culture, butch lesbians with erotic attachments to gay men, bootleg black designers and fashionistas eager to put their garments "to test" in a new, urban scene,' notes the black cultural critic Frank Leon Roberts in an article posted on Wiretap.<sup>18</sup>

Houses continued to multiply and diversify during the 1980s. Willi Ninja founded the House of Ninja in 1981 or 1982 and set out his intention to bring Asian aesthetics and philosophy into the ball world. Possibly founded by Father Hector in 1982, the House of Xtravaganza, the first Latin house, formally entered the drag ball scene when they attended the House of Omni ball in 1983. Carmen, David Ian, Danny and Raquel established themselves as the new house's most compelling representatives, and Angie became mother in 1984, after which 'impossible beauties' Angie and Carmen began to pick up prizes in 1984 and 1985.<sup>19</sup> (Hector never made it to the House of Omni event and died either before or soon after its staging.)

Then, in 1987, the boutique owner and fashion designer Pat Field established the House of Field as the first white downtown house to walk the uptown balls. 'We call ourselves House of Field now because that is what we have evolved into,' Myra Christopher, a salesclerk in the boutique, who encouraged Field to create the house, commented in 1988. 'We were always around, though, as Pat Field kids, and we'll evolve into something else eventually. Becoming a house was just officialising it for some other people's benefit, so we could compete on their terms.'<sup>20</sup> In the end, the members of the House of Field had to comfort themselves with the thought that it was the taking part that mattered. Inspired by new wave fashion and disdainful of the elegant look propagated by corporate labels, its contestants never threatened to dislodge the ruling sensibility of the uptown houses.

As the houses proliferated, so did the balls, because each house aspired to host its own ball, and during the 1980s they became monthly affairs, which was about as frequent as anyone could manage, preparation being an immense challenge for the event's participants, never mind its organisers. Beginning at 5am, when each house would join the grand march, the balls developed into marathon-like affairs that featured a wide range of competitive categories. 'Paris Dupree held her first Paris is Burning ball in 1981, and that's the first time the categories were really there,' says Kevin Ultra Omni, originally Kevin Omni, founder of the House of Omni. 'I remember having to watch all these categories.' Categories had always existed, but they played a comparatively minor role in earlier balls, so in the 1970s, for instance, contestants who wanted to dress up as men could only

compete in one category. 'It was called "Butch Mod Face" and what that meant was, you had to be butch, real masculine, not a punk or a sissy, and you had to be a model with model's looks, and you also had to have a nice-looking face. Then in the early 1980s, we separated the categories out, so there was a category called butch realness and another called models effect and another called face. Then we created all these other categories, like executive, town and country, ethnic, and they continued to develop through the eighties.' Other categories included best woman, best man, punk versus future, shopping through famous avenues, realness, performance, leather versus suede, executive hi fashion and Hollywood evening wear. Gone were the days when drag balls revolved around the act of men dressing up as women. Now, in an extended scene, men embraced a series of masculine alternatives. In keeping with the times, houses also became more competitive, with many deciding to only admit new members who had walked at a ball and won a prize.

Growing out of the drag queen ritual of throwing 'shade', or subtly insulting another queen, voguing emerged as a distinctive dance of first the houses and then, inevitably, the balls, where specific voguing categories were eventually introduced. 'It all started at an after hours club called Footsteps on 2nd Avenue and 14th Street,' says David DePino, an influential DJ for the voguing community. 'Paris Dupree was there and a bunch of these black queens were throwing shade at each other. Paris had a Vogue magazine in her bag, and while she was dancing she took it out, opened it up to a page where a model was posing and then stopped in that pose on the beat. Then she turned to the next page and stopped in the new pose, again on the beat.' The provocation was returned in kind. 'Another queen came up and did another pose in front of Paris, and then Paris went in front of her and did another pose,' adds DePino. 'This was all shade—they were trying to make a prettier pose than each other—and it soon caught on at the balls. At first they called it posing and then, because it started from Vogue magazine, they called it voguing.'<sup>21</sup> An alternative account has it that voguing was first practiced by the black gay inmates of Rikers Island, a New York City jail, who pursued the movement as a way of attracting the attention of boys and throwing shade. 'Maybe they didn't have a name for it, but that's what they were doing, or so it's said,' notes Kevin Ultra Omni. 'I know Paris was an early pioneer of voguing. But I believe that vogue existed in some other form through other people as well. I also think that a lot of voguing poses come from African art and Egyptian hieroglyphics.'

Voguing evolved into a contorted, jerky, slicing style of dance when drag queens incorporated kung fu aesthetics into their routines, having become familiar with the swift, angular movements of Bruce Lee and his co-stars while working trade inside Times Square's porn cinemas, or heading there after a night's work to get some rest. Also inspired by the precise, angled strokes of Egyptian hieroglyphics, voguers hailed from the same ethnic, working-class environments as the kids who pioneered breaking in the mid-1970s. And just like the breakers, they honed their skills through a mix of competitive instinct, athletic ability and, above all, a desire to be seen (rather than a desire to become part of the crowd, which motivated most club and party dancers). The rituals of throwing shade and (when they felt especially confrontational)

'reading' even found a parallel in the breaker convention of burning, or the technique of miming attacks and insults, while voguers and breakers were also committed to 'keeping it real'. However, their conceptions of realness couldn't have differed more markedly, and the societal status of the sexual preferences that underscored these differences led breakers to dance in public street settings, often in broad daylight, and voguers to head to the abandoned stretches of the West Side piers, where they would hang out and practice moves, or to the clandestine spaces of gay-driven dance venues such as Better Days, the Paradise Garage and Tracks. When there was no ball to attend, that is.

Whereas most of the dancers who congregated in downtown's network of private parties and public discotheques gravitated to the centre of the main floor, where space was at its most concentrated and the collective euphoria felt most strongly, voguers tended to head to the periphery, or even an alternative room, where they would find more room to practice their moves and, perhaps more importantly, enter into an economy of seeing and being seen. Better Days, for example, contained a main dancefloor along with a back room where dancers would head if they fancied a break or a spot of cruising or a chance to dance the hustle, or as Omni discovered when he started to go to the spot in 1975, to model in front of what might have been an imaginary mirror, styling and posing in time with the music, turning a hat sideways before bringing it back, and pivoting with grace, 'all to the beat'.<sup>22</sup> 'I met Paris in 1975,' says Omni, 'and I remember her in Better Days, posing on the back dancefloor and throwing shade.' It even transpired that some voguers—including Hector Xtravaganza, who headed to Peter Rabbits as well as Better Days—turned it out like nobody's business at the clubs, yet were unable to land any prizes at the balls.

The clubs nevertheless provided voguers with a more regular outlet to practice their moves than the ball circuit and the Ganzas, as the Xtravaganzas were nicknamed, became the first house to congregate at the Paradise Garage on King Street, where DJ Larry Levan, a one-time member of the House of Wong, selected records according to their emotional intensity. Beginning as a small cluster of friends who occupied the fringes of the venue, the Ganzas came to the attention of David DePino (Levan's best friend and trusted substitute spinner) when they clashed with some of the dancers connected with Pat Field. They consolidated their foothold in the spot when Danny Xtravaganza and DePino discovered they lived within a few blocks of each other on 14th Street. 'I got Danny, Ian [David Ian] and Eddie membership cards, and I would comp others like Angie, Coko, Luis and Michael,' says DePino, who was made an honorary Xtravaganza and DJ for the house's first ball, held at Elks Lodge. 'I also made them friends with everybody who thought they were shady kids. Then Pepper LaBeija and Duchess Wong and Willi Ninja started coming, just as themselves. And before you knew it, a lot of the ball kids were hanging out at the Garage. In one corner there'd be the LaBeijas, and in another there'd be the Duprees, and so on. Once a certain song came on they would start to out-vogue each other—because not all songs would want to make you vogue.'

When DePino started to play on Tuesdays at Tracks on 19th Street and the West Side Highway in 1985, voguers flocked to the club in a more concerted way than had ever been the case at the Garage. 'At the Paradise Garage there was voguing here and there. But at Tracks it was going on the whole time,' says DePino. 'There were constant battles. It was like a Yankees-Mets game. And if you were brave, you'd jump into the middle of it and make it a three-way battle.' Thanks to the size of the room, the battles didn't interfere with those who wanted to enjoy a more conventional club energy. Yet the sensibility of the voguers ruled the night. 'Tracks was very gay, very streetwise and rather hardcore. Not sissy but cunty [or a form of exaggerated, clever, powerful femininity],' says Adam Goldstone, who became a regular at the spot when he moved to New York. 'It was black and Latin gay, plus women, mostly dykes. David used to play a lot of the ballroom records for the girls in the houses, but he also played mellower, down-tempo songs. It was a real set. I thought he was a great DJ.' An estimated 2,500 to 3,000 dancers flocked to the club every Tuesday.

Drag ball culture and its voguing specialists edged further into the public domain when the dominatrix doorwoman, barwoman, performing artist and promoter Chi Chi Valenti published an article about New York's clubbing nations—or close-knit clubbing families—in *Details* in October 1988. Valenti included profiles of the Pyramid Nation (the Pyramid being a bar with a backroom dance floor/performance space where drag queens mingled with a diverse East Village crowd) and the Haringtons (or Keith Haring's close-knit group of friends and employees, who headed to the Garage with the artist and helped him stage his Party of Life events). She also introduced descriptions of the House of Field (who were looking to reinvent the drag balls in the format of a tightly packaged entertainment show) and the now 60-strong House of Xtravaganza (whose outsider years helped forge fierce pride). 'Modern balls, with their judging panels holding up numbered scorecards, petty jealousies among lifelong rivals, and partisan crowds booing their favourite's low scores, have all the flavour of great sporting events,' Valenti argued. 'Add to that dead-serious categories like realness: Rikers Island versus Sing Sing (butch queens only) and ferocious style presentations and it's little wonder that uptown balls—with a little help from House of Field, the first downtown house—became last season's sleeper entertainment hit.'<sup>23</sup> Valenti concluded her piece with the observation that the Xtravaganzas were hoping to take ball culture out of the ballrooms, although they weren't sure how to make that happen. 'Some dream of bigger runways and fashion careers,' she wrote. 'Some look only as far as their next category.'<sup>24</sup>

The breakthrough came about when voguers started to walk the runways a year later, first for Thierry Mugler's show in Paris, then for the Design Industries Foundation for Aids Love Ball event at the Roseland Ballroom, which was staged by club promoter Susanne Bartsch and *Details* editor Annie Flanders. 'The evening had all the elements that make New York City nightlife remarkable: beauty, pageantry, celebrity and gender confusion,'

reported the New York Times. 'Leading figures from the fashion industry were on hand to sponsor, perform or judge in perhaps the biggest public display to date of "voguing", a campy, stylised version of runway modelling that has flourished for decades in Harlem and more recently in downtown nightclubs.'<sup>25</sup>

Beneath the jubilant tone, however, the corporate sponsors of the event made a point of handpicking the houses that attended (LaBeija, Omni and Xtravaganza), and systematically excluded those that, by dint of their names, were deemed to have encroached in an unacceptable manner on the proprietary interests of major-player fashion emporiums (such as the Houses of Chanel, Dior and Lauren). 'In the end the House of Chanel had to add "International" to their name and spell it differently otherwise they were going to be sued,' recalls Kevin Ultra Omni. Appearing at the event as the master of ceremonies, David Ian Xtravaganza said: 'I never thought I'd see the day when we'd be doing this downtown.'<sup>26</sup> Reporters from Time magazine noted the mainstreaming impact of the Love Ball event as well as the circles that were forming around the House of Xtravaganza at Tracks. 'Forget breakdancing,' they declared hyperbolically. 'So long to hip-hop. At the hottest clubs in Manhattan, on MTV and at Paris fashion shows, the ultra-hip are into voguing.'<sup>27</sup>

Voguers also started to make inroads into the recording studio in 1989 when Willi Ninja appeared on Malcolm McLaren and the Bootzilla Orchestra's *Deep in Vogue* as well as the accompanying video, the first of its kind.<sup>28</sup> Widely known for his high-profile adoption of punk and hip-hop, McLaren found out about voguing when Johnny Dynell, a Tunnel DJ, member of the House of Xtravaganza and husband of Chi Chi Valenti, sent him a tape of an unfinished movie by Jennie Livingston in the hope that it would help the director raise money to wrap up her project. 'I told Malcolm about the ball house scene because I thought it was perfect for him,' recalls Dynell, who encountered voguers and ball kids on the West Side piers before they started to head to the Tunnel, and who was asked to DJ at the Love Ball. 'Of course, he immediately put sound bites from the movie on his record. What the hell was I thinking?' Totally relaxed about drawing on other people's work while purportedly spreading its visibility, McLaren also reproduced the last lines of Valenti's article about club nations, which ran: 'Sometimes on a legendary night / Like the closing of the Garage / When the crowd is calling down the spirits / Listen, and you will hear all the houses that walked there before.' ('She sued and won credit,' says Dynell.) As with hip-hop, McLaren promoted the voguing scene as a subcultural trend that harnessed working-class energy into music and dance. 'It is to do with everyday life,' the impresario told the *New Musical Express*. 'It's amazing, so many of the shows here, you've got all these bimbos who walk without passion. The great thing about Voguing is you walk with passion.'<sup>29</sup>

Also released in 1989, *Elements of Vogue* featured David Ian Xtravaganza talking over a backing track that sampled the drums and horn stabs from the Salsoul Orchestra's *Ooh I Love It (Love Break)*, a ball favourite that

contained a pre-rap rap by the Salsoul Hustlers. Co-produced by David DePino and Johnny Dynell, the idea for the record was hatched on the Tracks dance floor. 'David Ian and I threw a ball at Tracks,' remembers DePino. 'At this ball was a guy from England. He was inspired by the voguing and Johnny brought him to the booth to meet me, and he asked if Johnny and I would like to make a vogue record. We all went to England; Johnny, David Ian, Chi and myself. This was late 1988.' David Ian delivered the rhymes: 'Vogue the latest dance obsession / A form of total self-expression / With no regard to your profession / Elements of vogue / Make a banjee or a femme impression / Striking poses in succession / Get ready for your first real session / Of vogue.'

Drag ball and voguing culture made its screen breakthrough in 1990 when Livingston's movie, titled *Paris Is Burning* after the 1986 ball staged by Paris Dupree and the House of Dupree, began to pick up awards at film festivals. Shot between 1986 and 1989, the documentary provided a rich cultural insight into the previously clandestine culture of black and Latin drag balls through its mix of ballroom footage, everyday-life material shot at the piers, and interviews with Pepper LaBeija, Dorian Corey, Angie Xtravaganza and others. At one point in the film, one protagonist turns to another and says, 'You have three strikes against you; you're black, gay and a drag queen.' Later, as the joyous, sublime and often hilarious scenes of the ball fade from view, the narrative turns to the day-to-day reality of life on the street as Venus Xtravaganza, a member of the House of Xtravaganza since 1983, describes her plan to save money for sex reassignment surgery while working as a prostitute, hoping that one day she might live as a 'spoiled, rich, white girl living in the suburbs'. Venus was subsequently found murdered in a New York hotel room, her body shoved under a bed, with Angie left to recount the heartrending tale of her daughter's death to Livingston.

Leading queer theorist Judith Butler responded to the film by asking whether the depicted drag queens undermine dominant values around gender and sexuality, showing them to be based on performance rather than some form of essential identity, or whether they effectively reinforce them by placing a high value on the lifestyle and material values of dominant white culture. 'Venus, and *Paris Is Burning* more generally, calls into question whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them,' argues Butler. 'When Venus speaks her desire to become a whole woman, to find a man and have a house in the suburbs with a washing machine, we may well question whether the denaturalisation of gender and sexuality that she performs, and performs well, culminates in a reworking of the normative framework of heterosexuality.'<sup>30</sup> In another response, the black intellectual bell hooks argued that Livingston was only able to make the film in the first place because she was white, educated and therefore more powerful than the drag queens she represented. Developing her attack, hooks added that 'the whiteness celebrated in *Paris Is Burning* is not just any old brand of whiteness, but rather that brutal imperial ruling-class capitalist patriarchal whiteness that presents itself—its way of life—as

the only meaningful life there is'.<sup>31</sup> Hooks also critiqued the wider media for assuming that Livingston 'somehow did this marginalised black gay subculture a favour by bringing their experience to a wider public', giving 'these "poor black souls" a way to realise their dreams' while masking her own gains.<sup>32</sup> By the time hooks' critique appeared in her book *Black Looks*, the documentary had shared the Grand Jury Prize at the 1991 Sundance film festival and went on to gross \$4m at the box office.

Madonna also latched onto the drag ball and voguing scene, and working to a much tighter turnaround and with a good deal more capital than Livingston, came out with the single and accompanying video of *Vogue* in March 1990. Co-produced by Shep Pettibone, the remixer behind *Ooh I Love It*, the track reproduced the drum patterns and synth stabs of *Elements of Vogue*, introduced the bass line from *Love is the Message* plus a snatch of another melodic line from the same record, and featured Madonna's lyrics, which instructed listeners to 'strike a pose' and 'vogue to the music'. Madonna also listed a series of Hollywood stars before adding 'Ladies with an attitude / Fellows that were in the mood / Don't just stand there, let's get to it / Strike a pose, there's nothing to it'. Drawing on art deco aesthetics and the Golden Age of Hollywood, the highly stylised black-and-white video featured Luis and Jose Xtravaganza voguing with Madonna in between shots of the singer posing in the manner of some of the name-checked movie icons. *Vogue* became the best-selling single of 1990.

Madonna parachuted into the voguing scene in order to build her single and piece together a cast for the video. 'Madonna's friend Debbie M always came to Tracks and was a friend of mine and two other Xtravaganzas, Luis and Michael, who was a hairdresser and did Debbie M's hair,' notes DePino. 'They set up a meeting with me and Madonna, who came to Tracks when the club was closed to meet and watch some voguers. I had a group of kids there to vogue for her, including some kids from other houses. She picked out who she liked for the video.' Madonna also started to head to the Sound Factory, where Xtravaganzas were beginning to dance on a Saturday night thanks in part to DJ Junior Vasquez's 1989 production *Just Like A Queen* by Ellis D (a play on LSD). 'The first time she came to the club she called ahead,' says Vasquez. 'She came into the booth and then sat on the speaker in front of me. After that she came periodically for about three months.' When Jose and Luis were hired as backing dancers for Madonna's critically acclaimed *Blond Ambition* tour, which ran from April to August 1990, they took voguing around the world, and they loomed even larger when they featured as the unofficial co-stars of Madonna's behind-the-scenes documentary of the tour, *In Bed with Madonna* (titled *Truth or Dare* in the US). In the movie Madonna could barely resist their lithe bodies, emotional exuberance and sly sense of humour.

Although they reaped very different rewards, both Madonna and Livingston were accused of ransacking drag ball culture for their own ends, and for benefiting from their engagements with ball culture and voguing in a much more explicit way than the participants they maintained they had helped. 'Madonna never came back to the Sound Factory after the tour,' says Vasquez. 'She was over vogue.' Meanwhile, the queens and voguers who had co-operated with Livingston saw no reason to assume an uncharacteristically meek guise when asked for their views. 'When Jennie first came, we were at a ball, in our fantasy, and she threw papers at us,' says Pepper LaBeija. 'We didn't read them, because we wanted the attention. We loved being filmed. Later, when she did the interviews, she gave us a couple hundred dollars. But she told us that when the film came out we would be all right. There would be more coming. And that made me think I would have enough money for a car and a nice apartment and for my kids' education. Because a number of years ago, to please my mother, I took a little break from being a 24-hour drag queen, and so I have a daughter, 15, and a son ready for college. But then the film came out and—nothing. They all got rich, and we got nothing.'<sup>33</sup>

Then again, LaBeija also declared her approval of the broader project and its knock-on effects. 'I love the movie, I watch it more than often, and I don't agree that it exploits us,' she commented in 1993. 'It brought me international fame. I do love that. Walking down the street, people stop me all the time. Which was one of my dreams doing the drags in the first place.'<sup>34</sup> Adding that a payment of just \$10,000 would have been enough to help her realise her main ambition—to move out of her mother's house—LaBeija's response indicated that while *Paris Is Burning* suggested that drag queens aspired to a life of fame, money, designer clothing and the high life, their ambitions were in fact extremely modest. For sure, they were drawn to an idea of glamour, an idea that long preceded the rise of the supermodel and the global pop icon, but in pursuing that end they developed a unique mode of expression that was always consciously aware of its working-class and ethnic rootedness. Back in 1989, the *New York Times* had added to its report of the *Love Ball* that 'Voguers employ fluttery hand movements, gymnastic contortions and freeze-frame poses. They also chew gum. They do not look like Vogue models'.<sup>35</sup> Nor, it could be deduced, did they aspire to look like Vogue models.

For many, the years that followed the release of *Paris Is Burning* and *Vogue* were markedly anticlimactic. The most notably successful voguer of his generation, Ninja pieced together a career that included dance appearances, club promotion, occasional recording studio work and, most pointedly, tutoring sessions for women on how to behave like a woman. Appearing under their given names as they pursued careers, Luis Camacho and Jose Gutierrez teamed up with Vasquez to record *The Queen's English* under the name of Jose & Luis for Sire in 1993, after which Luis pursued a modestly successful career as dancer-

choreographer. But few others managed to find work from the national spotlight that shone briefly on drag culture. A somewhat humiliating case in point, Angie Xtravaganza was invited to perform and pose with her children in a shop window at Barney's as part of the store tribute to the visiting Duchess of York, and that was that. Meanwhile, the intensification of the Aids epidemic in the immediate aftermath of voguing's media breakthrough appeared to threaten the very molecular structure of the drag balls and their associated houses.

First identified in 1981, Aids took eight years to claim its first 100,000 lives, and another three years to claim its next 100,000 lives, after which another 300,000 passed in the four years that ran to 1995, the year the disease peaked. Angie Xtravaganza died on 6 April 1993 aged 27. 'She died of complications from Aids, but she also had chronic liver trouble, probably brought on by the hormones she'd been taking since the age of 15 to soften her skin and give her breasts and hips,' Michael Cunningham wrote in his elegiac enquiry into her life. 'She'd lived for over 10 years as her own creation, a ferocious maternal force who turned tricks in hotel rooms over a bar called the Cock Ring and who made chicken soup for the gaggle of friends she called her kids after they came home from a long night on the town.'<sup>36</sup> Reporting from the Sound Factory Bar memorial party, Jesse Green of the New York Times noted the outpouring of grief. 'It's not just her, it's all of them,' commented Hector Xtravaganza. 'My entire gay childhood is disintegrating before my eyes.'

Green added that drag ball culture had become a victim of its fleeting success, noting that once the mainstream had started to copy the subculture that was copying it, 'the subculture itself was no longer of interest to a wider audience, and whatever new opportunities existed for the principals dried up.'<sup>37</sup> That left the cast of *Paris Is Burning* minus Dorian Corey and Willi Ninja determined to pursue Livingston for additional payments and in 1991, the director agreed to pay out a total of \$55,000 (a figure she says she was always committed to) to the 13 performers based on the length of time they appeared on screen. 'The Bette Davis money just wasn't there,' Dorian Corey told Green. 'But I didn't do it for money anyway - I did it for fun. Always have.'<sup>38</sup> Corey proceeded to express her fears for younger drag queens who had taken to 'turning tricks' to earn a living. 'And today it's so risky, with the almighty shadow opening the door,' she said. 'Even I have to worry. I've had such a torrid past.'<sup>39</sup> A little over four months later, Corey died of Aids complications on 29 August, aged 55.

Since then Avis Pendavis (1995), David Ian Xtravaganza (circa 2001), Pepper LaBeija (2003), Willi Ninja (2006), Octavia St Laurent (2009) and Paris Dupree (2011) have all died, most of them from Aids complications, some from unspecified causes. The cumulative culling of the last remaining mothers and fathers from the pioneering house scene has generated the impression that, as Green put in the New York Times, 'Paris is no longer burning. It has burned.'<sup>40</sup> Yet the fateful narrative of Aids =

Queer Death should not be allowed to obscure the fact that as terrible as the consequences of the disease have been for the drag ball community, the demonstrative and courageous underpinnings of ball culture also went on to infuse the political and aesthetic radicalism of Act-Up, the campaign that applied dramatic public pressure on the US government to act more decisively around Aids, with drag queens a prominent, declarative presence on the organisation's high-octane marches.

The ball scene also flourished in the period that followed the expectation-raising interventions of Livingston and Madonna. Before *Paris Is Burning* came out, there were 27 active houses in New York, Christian Marcel LaBeija, grandfather of the House of LaBeija, told *Gay City News* in 2003. A year later, there were 70. Meanwhile, says community health specialist Ivan Monforte, the Gay Men's Health Crisis founded the House of Latex in 1990 in order to address HIV/Aids through dance and the staging of an annual ball at the Roseland Ballroom. 'Known simply as the Latex Ball, it has been attended by as many as 5,000 people, functioning as something akin to the Academy Awards for the House and Ball community,' says Monforte. 'Awards are given to members of the community for their contributions to the scene and for their efforts to deal with the prevalence of HIV/Aids within the House and Ball community.'<sup>41</sup> Voguing remains a difficult dance, and its take-up has been less marked than the equally difficult practice of breaking, whose proponents have never had to overcome the stigma of queerness when promoting their style. Yet voguing lives on in dance clubs, drag balls and houses, oblivious to those who assumed that the early 1990s combination of over-exposure, commercialisation and Aids would leave it for dead.

'People don't understand the continuing importance of the houses,' Andre Collins, DJ at the Warehouse in the Bronx, a hub for voguing from the late 1990s onwards, told the *Village Voice* in 2000. 'They think it all ended with *Paris Is Burning*. Those legends—Paris and Pepper and Dorian—are important, but what nobody realises is that the concept has transferred from one generation to another.'<sup>42</sup> Stretching back to the late 19th century, drag queens have sought out non-conformist means of dressing and dancing as a basic freedom, and that wasn't about to stop because a film failed to bring fame to a handful of drag queens, or because Aids terrorised the houses for a 15-year period. 'You have to realise,' added Collins, 'that, from the onset, there has been a need for gay people to have a unity. Being a homosexual, a lot of these kids have been ostracised, beat up by their families, thrown out of their homes. It's no different now than when I was a kid. Some of these kids are homeless and struggling. They don't know how much talent and ability they have going on. So, if they join a house, they can belong somewhere. They can be part of a team.'<sup>43</sup>

In 2006 Kevin Ultra Omni co-directed *How Do I Look*, a community-driven documentary that aimed to (in the words of Omni) 'iron out some of the discrepancies of *Paris Is Burning*'. 'Jennie Livingston only showed the

drag queens going on about having nose jobs and snatching burgers, and she never even addressed HIV or Aids,' adds Omni. 'Our film shows the femme queens who actually went to college. It shows one of them who works now in Washington DC and who just reopened the House of Christian. She's a registered nurse and is going for her PhD.'

And what if the queens knew that society would always exclude them from assuming power? Did that mean that they had to stop dressing up on a Saturday night? Critics didn't necessarily take care to think through the powerful impetus that underpinned house ball culture, which was not to become so proficiently real that they could actually pass for the thing they were imitating, because the queens knew they barely stood a

chance and shared few illusions about their prospects in the fashion world. No, the shared impetus was to socialise, have fun and survive, because this was the only life they had in front of them and they might as well live it. That didn't mean the media spotlight of 1990-91 had no effect, and since then drag ball culture has never been able (nor felt a great need) to see itself as being subcultural and underground. Omni maintains that at today's balls men outnumber drag queens three-to-one, in part because many ex-queens have had operations and, as women, no longer want to take part in drag categories. New legends are forging their reputations, even if the pioneering legends remain an inspiration to all. As Valenti put it, 'Listen, and you will hear all the houses that walked there before'.

#### NOTES

1. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 293. The quote "Listen, and you will hear all the houses that walked there before" is drawn from Chi Chi Valenti's article "Nations", *Details*, October 1988, 158-74.
2. Hughes, *Big Sea*, 273.
3. Hughes, 227-28.
4. Quoted in Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 130.
5. *Broadway Brevities*, 14 March 1932, 12. Quoted in Chauncey, 297.
6. Ford and Tyler, *Young and the Evil*, 152.
7. Quoted in Chauncey, "Campaign Against Homosexuality", 296.
8. "Female Impersonators: Men Who Like to Dress Like Women Combine Fantastic Fashion Shows with Gay Masquerade Balls in New York and Chicago", *Ebony*, March 1953, 64.
9. *Ibid.*, 64-65.
10. From the "Timeline... The History of the Ballroom Scene" discussion on the Walk 4 Me Wednesdays Shade Board, <http://walk4mewednesdays.com/nsb9/viewtopic.php?f=8&t=60&start=15>.
11. Michael Cunningham, "The Slap of Love", *Open City*, 6, 175-96.
12. Renata Adler, "Movie Review: The Queen", *New York Times*, 18 June 1968. Crystal La-Beija's response can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcMdNLe5xzo>
13. Posted by TheGreatestBallOnEarth! (Terrence Legend International) at <http://www.walk4mewednesdays.com/nsb9/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=21572> on 16 May 2008.
14. The dates are drawn from the "Timeline... The History of the Ballroom Scene" discussion on the "Walk 4 Me Wednesdays Shade Board", posted at <http://www.walk4mewednesdays.com/nsb9/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=21572>. They are the most reliable available.
15. Cunningham, "The Slap of Love".
16. Eric Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons and Egyptian Kings*, 217.
17. Spoken in Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*, 1990.
18. Frank Leon Roberts, "There's No Place Like Home: A History of House Ball Culture," *Wiretap*, 6 June 2007.
19. Valenti, "Nations".
20. J.D. Reed "They're Puttin' on the Vogue", *Time*, 22.5.1989.
21. Interview with the author. Ensuing interviews are conducted with the author unless otherwise stated.
22. Kevin Ultra Omni, "The Beginning", *Rock Star Magazine*, April 2005.
23. Valenti, "Nations", 160.
24. *Ibid.*, 170.
25. Woody Hochswender, "Vogueing Against AIDS: A Quest for 'Overness'," *New York Times*, 12 May 1989.
26. J.D. Reed and Janice C. Simpson, "Living: They're Puttin' on the Vogue", *Time*, May 22, 1989.
27. *Ibid.*
28. The video can be viewed at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9KdMjQjS\\_0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9KdMjQjS_0).
29. Jim Shelley, "Vogue this Way", *New Musical Express*, 15 April 1989, 13.
30. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 125, 133.
31. hooks, *Black Looks*, 149.
32. *Ibid.*, 153.
33. Jesse Green, "Paris Has Burned", *New York Times*, 18 April 1993.
34. Green, "Paris Has Burned".
35. Hochswender, "Vogueing Against AIDS".
36. Cunningham, "The Slap of Love".
37. Green, "Paris Has Burned".
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. Ivan Monforte, "House and Ball Culture Goes Wide",
42. Guy Trebay, "Legends of the Ball", *Village Voice*, 11 January 2000.
43. Trebay, "Legends of the Ball".

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