

All About Yves

by Jackie Goldsby

Vogueing is to house music what breakdancing was to rap: "a way of battling without fighting," observes poseur Willie Leake.

Where b-boys cock their baseball hats, zip up their fleece-lined bomber jackets and begin uncorking their joints on the bass-heavy beat of the latest rap jam, voguers aim for a more stylized effect: blending the sultry flair of an Iman working the runways in Europe with the butch cool of the GQ look, voguers sweep the dance floor striking picture perfect poses around/behind/alongside—but never strictly on top of—

the cross-rhythms of house music

For Leake, who has "walked" or performed three times and snagged as many first place trophies in competition, voguing ranks as more than a way to play the dozens with your body.

"As a dance, it's unorthodox. Kids use classical movements—some aerials, spins, and splits—but it looks untrained, natural. Vogueing shows that blacks and Latins can produce an art form that's our own."

New York's answer to Chicago's "jacking," voguers perform their magic at dance clubs like Tracks, the Tunnel, the World, and, in its heyday, the Paradise Garage. During summer's lazy, sweaty days, voguers truck down to the piers fronting the Hudson River near Christopher Street or to Washington Square Park and show out in public. Boom boxes or car stereos pitched loud, the posing—the stretching, dipping, tumbling, muscle flexing, and gliding—begins. "Vogueing's better on the street because you're doing it for yourself. It's fun to show out, to feel looser," says Leake.

That's because, like the magazine, voguing sets out to cultivate a standard of style. And when the fun moves indoors and under the auspices of the Harlem drag balls, the competition begins and it's fierce.

At the most prestigious, traditional event, "Paris is Burning," "there are categories for everything," Leake reports. Femme Queens, Butch Queens, and "Real Girls" (that is, biological women—straight and/or lesbian) compete in divisions such as "Best Dressed," "B-Boy Realness," "Femme Queen Real-

ness," and "Luscious Body." In the "Face" category, judges "look for ebony features. This makes it hard for folks who aren't black to crack in," observes Leake.

Voguers must toe the line set out by judges, who require them to perform compulsory moves—spins, dips, and pops—en masse, before allowing them to free-style solo routines for which the "Vogueing National Anthem," the 1971 re-mix of MFSB's "Love is the Message," serves as soundtrack.

The entry point into the world of voguing and the drag balls is through the cliques organized by the participants and modeled after *haute couture* corporations: the "House of Chanel," the "House of St. Laurent," and the "House of the Magnifiques," to name a few. At one point, Leake organized his own family unit, the House of Ninja.

"I chose the name *ninja* because of my Asian friends. The word means invisible assassin. My house would strike when you least expected. We'd show up at a ball, win our trophies, and leave."

But the "house" system, voguing, and the drag balls strike at tradition and subvert it. The rituals and organization deconstruct entrenched codes of bourgeois culture—family, fashion, and status.

Leake credited Ronald and Nancy Reagan (of all sources), with projecting a model of sophisticated elitism, the aristocratic sense with which the "house" system operates. But the First Family would never approve of the kinship structures of a given house: a (typi-

cally) all-gay male enclave where the "mother" and "father" supervise the training and activities of their "children." Similarly, the ball competitions convert every identity to a form of drag; nothing is fixed or essential—a particularly resonant critique of the heterosexism insisted upon in black political discourse, from reform to nationalism.

It's truly ironic, then, that the very bastions which voguing signifies upon are courting it like a hungry lover. New York boutique owner Patricia Fields has launched her own house, the "House of Fields," and recruited Leake to be its "mother." A power broker in New York fashion circles, Fields draws attention from the mainstream press: *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and no less than *Vogue* itself covered the ball she sponsored in Fall 1987.

Leake credits people like Fields and pop impresario Malcolm McLaren for putting the interests of the genre as an art form ahead of their own profit motives. "They understand where it [voguing] comes from," he insisted, referring to its gay roots. "Patricia Fields is known for getting people started." Such influence could be a tremendous boost to the talented dancers and designers ("kids who can stitch their butts off") who give the look to voguing's spread. Leake has landed stints as a visual choreographer for producers like McLaren and the infamous Jellybean Benitez, grooming their up and coming acts.

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moving to a new plateau," Leake remarked. "Everybody is grabbing onto it and loving it."

As the show moves downtown, though, its wider exposure threatens to blur voguing's origins.

Already, talk is circulating that voguing comes from "uptown"—a safe, generic reference to Harlem. Filmmaker Jenny Livingston has finished shooting a documentary on voguing and the drag balls; hopefully, the completed print will bear permanent witness to voguing's roots.

Still, Leake is concerned: "There are more money categories, people are getting away from trophies. Categories are being added that mask the racial and sexual roots. I just wish that no one forgets where voguing comes from—black and Hispanic cultures." ▼

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