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Ballroom and Fashion: from Harlem to Down Under

At the thunderous launch concert of World Pride in Sydney in February 2023 the Houses of Silky, Luna and Slé exploded over the stage, highlighting the cultural richness of Australian Ballroom and its deep connection with fashion. Although a young scene in the country, the performers left no crumbs, receiving a rapturous cheer from the audience. There was no doubt that Ballroom had become a vibrant part of queer culture in Australia. This may be surprising, as Ballroom's birthplace is on the other side of the planet in New York.

Though it has expanded culturally and geographically over half a century, Ballroom is Black culture first and foremost. In an oral history of Ballroom for the US edition of Vogue magazine, José Criales-Unzueta traces Ballroom's roots as far back as the Antebellum South (1812-61), where enslaved people would use dance to satirize their oppressive masters.

Ballroom broke away from drag pageants due to the racism experienced by Black queens. Just as Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and other Black and Latino trans women played a pivotal role in the LGBTQIA+ rights movement after the Stonewall riots, Black and Latino trans women were instrumental in shaping the foundations of contemporary Ballroom culture. Key figures such as Crystal LaBeija, Dorian Corey, Avis Pendavis, and Paris Dupree were at the forefront of this movement as the founders of the first houses of Ballroom.

Recent years have seen a resurgence in mainstream interest in ball culture due to shows like *Legendary*, *Pose* and even *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Although Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1990) is the best-known documentary film of Ballroom, films like *The Queen* (1968) and *P.S. Burn This Letter Please* (2020) help build some of the historical context for ball culture.

Ballroom and Music

Ballroom burst into both mainstream music and fashion in 1989, leaving an indelible mark on music and fashion. Johnny Dynell's track *Elements of Vogue* (1989) features David Ian Xtravaganza from the House of Xtravaganza, and the line "Strike a Pose" made famous by Madonna a year later. The video for Malcolm McLaren's *Deep in Vogue* (1989) features Willi Ninja, while the track acknowledges several prominent Houses like Omni, Ebony and Xtravaganza.

The following year Madonna's *Vogue* brought voguing to a global audience. A misconception sometimes persists that Madonna was a key player in the creation of voguing; she was not. While she undoubtedly made ball culture's signature dance globally known, Madonna gave no hint of the song's origin in Ballroom. Ricky Tucker, in his book "And the Category Is...", points out that the song's bridge references movie and sports stars like Jean Harlow, Marlon Brando, and Joe DiMaggio, who have no connection to vogue, Ballroom, or the Black and Latinx urban experience.

Later in the book Tucker rewrites the bridge honouring key creators and figures of ballroom. And it manifests: in 2022, a year after Tucker's book was published, Beyonce released *Break My Soul - the Queens Remix*, mashing her hit with *Vogue*. The bridge begins with Beyonce honouring Black singers, then transitioning to the houses of Ballroom, from Labeija to Aviance and many more. One could say that Beyonce graciously corrected Madonna's mistake. On her 2023 Renaissance tour, Beyonce paid further tribute to Ballroom, for example giving a solo voguing moment to Honey Balenciaga. In a viral moment Beyonce directly acknowledges Kevin Aviance in the audience; she had sampled his track *Cunty* for her track *Pure/Honey*. Aviance is visibly moved by the recognition.

Ballroom Houses and Fashion

Just as Ballroom showed up in music, it found its way into mainstream fashion in the late 1980s. Several members of the House of Xtravaganza appeared in a shoot in US Vogue in December 1988. Willi Ninja, a prominent figure in Ballroom culture, modelled for Thierry Mugler in Paris in 1989. Many Ballroom Houses have taken their names from fashion houses such as St Laurent, Balenciaga, Miyake, and Balmain. A Ballroom House embodies the notion of a chosen family, a common concept among LGBTQIA+ people. Growing up as a queer person can be isolating even in an accepting family because of a lack of understanding: only another queer person can understand the experience. A Ballroom house is led by a Mother and/or a Father. While the terms may seem rooted in a gender binary, since its inception Ballroom has embraced gender diversity. House Mothers and Fathers nurture, and provide guidance and protection to their Children, who are often some of society's most vulnerable. Statistics in the US and Australia show that the safety of trans people in both countries has worsened with increasingly hostile rhetoric directed at trans people by politicians and the media. Ballroom Houses have provided a haven for trans and queer youth of colour throughout Ballroom's existence.

That the defining dance of ballroom is voguing already suggests deep connections with fashion. The dance itself has rich cultural symbolism, and there's an interesting story about its origin. As the story goes, the legendary queen Paris Dupree, while throwing shade (playfully criticizing or mocking someone) with a number of other dancers on the dance floor at Footsteps, pulled out a copy of Vogue, opened up to a page, replicated the pose on beat of the music. She turned to another page, posed again on beat, and so forth. The other queens began doing the same. The traditional categories often directly refer to fashion, from Executive Realness to Runway. Executive Realness arose in the 1980s as an aspirational category: young men contestants aimed to pass for an actual business executive on the runway. Runway is judged on the contestant's ability to walk like a model.

Ballroom and Fashion in Australia

The dancer Bhenji Ra is credited as bringing Ballroom to Australia, founding the House of Slé in 2015. House Father Xander Khoury and Mother Mirasia founded the House of Silky in 2019. In addition to Slé, the only other active house at the time was the House of Luna, founded by Karlee Luna. There were a lot of 007s – free agents, or Ballroom members without a House – and the time was right for a third House. The scene has grown quickly since: most Australian states and territories now have at least one active House. Notably the House of Silky members are primarily from western Sydney, the lands of the Dharug people, the traditional owners of the land. Greater Western Sydney is one of the most culturally diverse places on earth, with about a third of the population having been born outside of Australia and many more being first generation Australians. In a country and a city that too often still exhibits deep-seated trans-, homo- and xenophobia, and echoing Ballroom's origin as a response to racism experienced by Black and Latina trans women, Ballroom in western Sydney is a safe space for trans and queer people of colour. To further honour the area, Khoury and Jamaica Moana founded the West Ball to celebrate western Sydney as the heartland of Ballroom.

As the subculture has found its footing in Australia, it has also become a definitive presence in Australian fashion. From Wackie Ju to Alix Higgins to Nicol & Ford, the work of many designers can be seen on the runways at balls. Iordanes Spyrios Gogos' show at the 2022 Afterpay Australian Fashion Week (AAFW) was cast mostly from Ballroom, as was Nicol & Ford's show. Following an AAFW collaboration between Gogos and House of Silky in 2021, in 2022 Silky's Basjia Almaan was the casting director for Gogos, while Jack Silky (Jack Huang) cast Erik Yvon's show.

While praising the deep interconnections between Australian fashion and Ballroom, Khoury pays respect to two designers in particular: Megan Hanson, the first designer that the House of Silky worked with, and Wackie Ju, a trans, queer fashion designer and a migrant from China based in Melbourne/Naarm. Hanson's ethereal, opulent looks for House of Silky at the 2020 Sissy Ball constitute a noteworthy capsule collection. In Wackie Ju's poetic debut show at the 2023 AAFW, a connection to Ballroom is evocatively evident. In contrast to most fashion shows, the models in Ju's show are as important to the fashion performance as the delicate garments. Each character tells a story within arm's reach of the audience: the intimacy echoes Ballroom where the distance between the contestant and the spectator often completely melts away.

The close link between Ballroom and young, queer fashion designers makes Sydney Ballroom stand out globally. While Ballroom has an inherent connection with fashion with its runway and its looks, the collaborations between designers and Houses in Sydney are mutually shaping each: Ballroom's presence has been palpable at AAFW for a few years, while dancers on Sydney ball runways regularly showcase local fashion designers. As well as working closely with designers, many members have creative backgrounds and are attracted to the inherently creative space of Ballroom. Within the House of Silky, Jack Silky has a fashion design background, Bribri Silky crochets handbags, and Basjia creates many of her own looks. As Khoury notes, fashion is deeply embedded in the DNA of the House, whether in modelling, curating or otherwise creating.

The category of Area Realness is unique to Sydney, referring to the area of Western Sydney. Khoury reflects with great love and pride: "People from Western Sydney exude a certain energy. There's a certain accent and twang to how we speak there. There's a certain style and a certain way of holding yourself." Khoury recalls a ball where a category required contestants to come as something that could be found in Western Sydney Parklands. Someone turned up as a "bin chicken", a term of endearment for the Australian white ibis, a wetland bird that has reinvented itself as a noisy, messy urban resident, often to the chagrin of its human neighbours. Khoury chuckles at the memory of a figure in white, with a long, curved beak, coming down the runway.

Respecting Ballroom

The success of RuPaul's Drag Race since a humble beginning 15 years ago, has brought drag, as well as elements of Ballroom, to a global audience. The format of the show, with a runway finale in front of a panel of judges, bears some resemblance to Ballroom runways.

In the 2023 US season of the show, a contestant named Anetra showcased a dance move called the "duckwalk." Some other competitors imitated this move in subsequent episodes, which stirred some controversy within the Ballroom community. Notably, Aja and Leiomy Maldonado, the head judge of the show "Legendary," expressed concerns about cultural appropriation and referenced "nogueing," - voguing performed by individuals who aren't familiar with its traditional roots. Maldonado further distinguished "virgin voguing" as the practice of learning voguing with guidance from experienced Ballroom members.

With more than a half century of global evolution and expansion, and a cherished place within many LGBTQIA+ communities, Ballroom will continue to grow, adapt and flourish. It will continue to provide a safe home for the vulnerable. Both the fashion and the LGBTQIA+ communities should continue to learn about ball culture, give it respect and empower it. Appropriation in fashion remains widespread: the industry's mining and extraction is not limited to Ballroom. As Khoury succinctly puts it: "Please do not appropriate." There are ways in which a culture can be engaged in exchange and compensated appropriately. We ought to do that, while we honour Ballroom as a triumph over adversity, and as a celebration of beauty, creativity and chosen family.