



OUTREACH ON THE RUNWAY

IN LOS ANGELES, THE GAY BALLROOM SCENE SERVES AS FAMILY

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LOS ANGELES — Divine Chanel takes a drag on her cigarette and studies her profile in the mirror.

“This is me,” she announces to no one in particular. “I’m done.”

It is Saturday evening around 7:30 p.m., and she has just spent an hour powdering, puffing and stenciling her face. Later she will add black boots with 6-inch heels and a short black and white designer swing dress that is fitted above the waist and zips down the front.

For now, she wears a tank top, a tattoo with Chanel’s interlocking C logo visible on her right shoulder. On the wall behind her are photos of her two families: the one she was born into and the one she became a part of through the ballroom scene, a community of mostly black gay men and

her mother and herself — first as a young boy, then as an adult woman.



Divine Chanel puts on her makeup at home before the Ovahnness Ball 9. She served on the judge's panel at this year's ball. *(Click to enlarge images)*

At 37, Divine has been involved in ballroom for 16 years. She used to walk with others who stride and sashay down the runway and use dance moves known as vogue, made famous in Madonna's [1990 song and video](#). The documentary "Paris Is Burning," which chronicles the New York City ballroom scene, was released the same year.

Now, as mother of the West Coast chapter of the House of Chanel, one of more than 30 national ballroom houses, she serves as mentor to several dozen "children."

The house organization has been a fixture of ballroom since the community developed out of the drag ball scene in New York City in the late 1960s and early 1970s, says ballroom icon Michael Roberson. The family structure was a way for the underground community to take care of its members, many of whom were rejected by their families. Being part of a house didn't necessarily mean you lived with members of your ballroom family, just that there were parents who served as mentors and guides to those newer to the scene. Members typically take the last name of their house.

conduct outreach around HIV/AIDS and host balls. The annual Ovahness Ball, sponsored by **Realistic Education in Action Coalition to Foster Health (REACH) LA** is a prime example. Like other balls, Ovahness (from the term meaning “amazing” or “fantastic”) **involves a number of categories** in which people walk — strutting like a model, using dance moves or taking on another exaggerated persona — a runway in front of a panel of judges to compete for prizes. Contestants are judged on their costumes, attitude and “realness,” or ability to pass as a thug, executive or other member of society, depending on the category. The main attractions at most balls are runway — notable for its exotic and daring costumes — and vogue, which involves dancers twisting and turning their bodies while in costume. Admittance to Ovahness is \$40 — but proof of a free HIV test done by REACH will get you in.



Left: RJ Fegan, 21, meets REACH LA staffer Greg Wilson prior to filling out paperwork for a free HIV test and tickets to Ovahness Ball 9. Right: A dancer practices at the Ebony House dance rehearsal at the REACH LA studio. *(Click to enlarge images)*

The largest balls have changed over the years and now those thrown by agencies — like the Latex Ball, hosted by the New York City–based HIV/AIDS nonprofit Gay Men’s Health Crisis, which attracts several thousand people, and Ovahness, which attracts a more modest several hundred — are recognized by the community as some of the largest, says Roberson. In the days leading up to Ovahness, REACH LA is a busy place: dancers rehearsing in the agency’s studio, community members filling out paperwork to get tested, even a young man playing Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony on a keyboard in the corner.

The organization’s deputy director, Greg Wilson, says 177 people were tested in the 20 days before the Oct. 18 ball, seven of whom were newly positive. An additional 30, who already knew they were positive, went in for counseling and follow-up. HIV/AIDS has taken its toll on the community. But Roberson argues it has also been a sort of savior, not unlike ballroom itself, which from the beginning has both saved and destroyed.

Roberson, 47, still has the biceps of someone who used to walk body, a muscle-flexing masculine category. He has more “children” in the gay and ballroom community than he can count and lectures on the topic nationally and internationally. Relying on a suitcase filled with pamphlets and books, he outlined the history of the community in the Studio City kitchen of one of his “sons.” He has founded

include more Latino and black gay masculine males. For this minority group within a minority, AIDS proved both a killer and a way to talk about black gay men.

“So AIDS becomes the thing that winds up giving black gay men political, theological and economical voice,” says Roberson. “It becomes like a savior.”

An increasing number of community-based outreach organizations began to work with the ballroom community in the mid- to late 2000s, partly to access government HIV/AIDS funding linked to serving high-risk populations, says Roberson. Ballroom morphed from being an underground and impoverished community to becoming a means of employment, an opening into mainstream society. Today’s ballroom participants include Ph.D.s and masters tennis competitors. Evan Wilson Chanel, a delicate 28-year-old whose real-life dad works in aerospace and whose mother is an artist, walks runway.



Left: Evan Wilson, a costume maker and performer, works on a piece at home before the ball. Right: Wilson modeling one of his costumes. *(Click to enlarge images)*

On the eve of the Ovahnness Ball, Wilson was holed up in his biological family’s garage in the hills of Los Angeles, using an industrial glue gun to fix google eyes to a dance leotard. A Beyoncé song played in the background, and spotlights shone on his worktable. Past “effects,” or runway costumes, were boxed nearby, and his current headpiece was in a plastic bag hanging off an old weight machine.

As a child, Wilson was a loner — with few friends, especially gay friends. Ballroom introduced him to a new world, one filled with black gays that offered an outlet for his creativity and interest in fashion. It helped him develop his career in image consulting and his own clothing line. Ballroom is about “being able to be something you’ve always wanted to be for one night just to escape,” he says.

Then, he added, you have “the dark side.”

Enyce Smith, also with the house of Chanel, knows that side well. He starts his story on Feb. 2, 1996, at 6:34 p.m., the time on the car clock when he was driven away from his mother and into

decade ago. On the runway he received the kind of attention he missed growing up. It was addictive, and soon he was traveling around the country to compete in balls, paying for everything by escorting. There were drugs — weed and then cocaine.

“The ballroom scene is evil, and I’ve experienced the evil side,” he says.

And yet he doesn’t regret any of it. He found the strength to get out of escorting with the help of his house mom, Divine. Now he tries to do the same for other young members. Ballroom remains his hustle: It gets him paid commentator gigs, vogue teaching jobs and occasional movie and video roles.

SLIDESHOW:



Performers prepare their costumes backstage at Ovahness Ball 9. [\(Click to enlarge images\)](#)



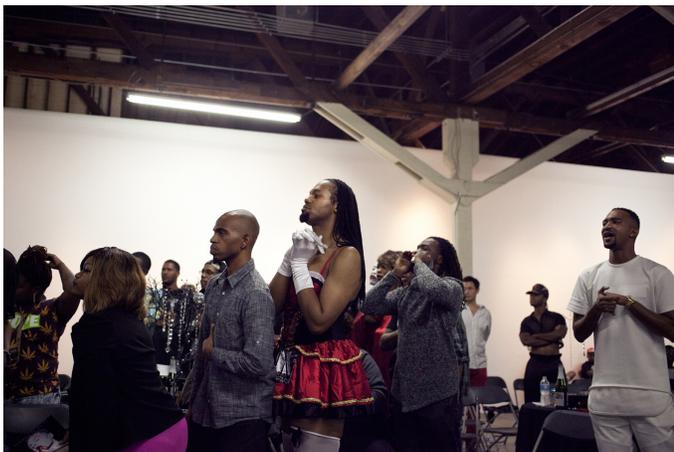
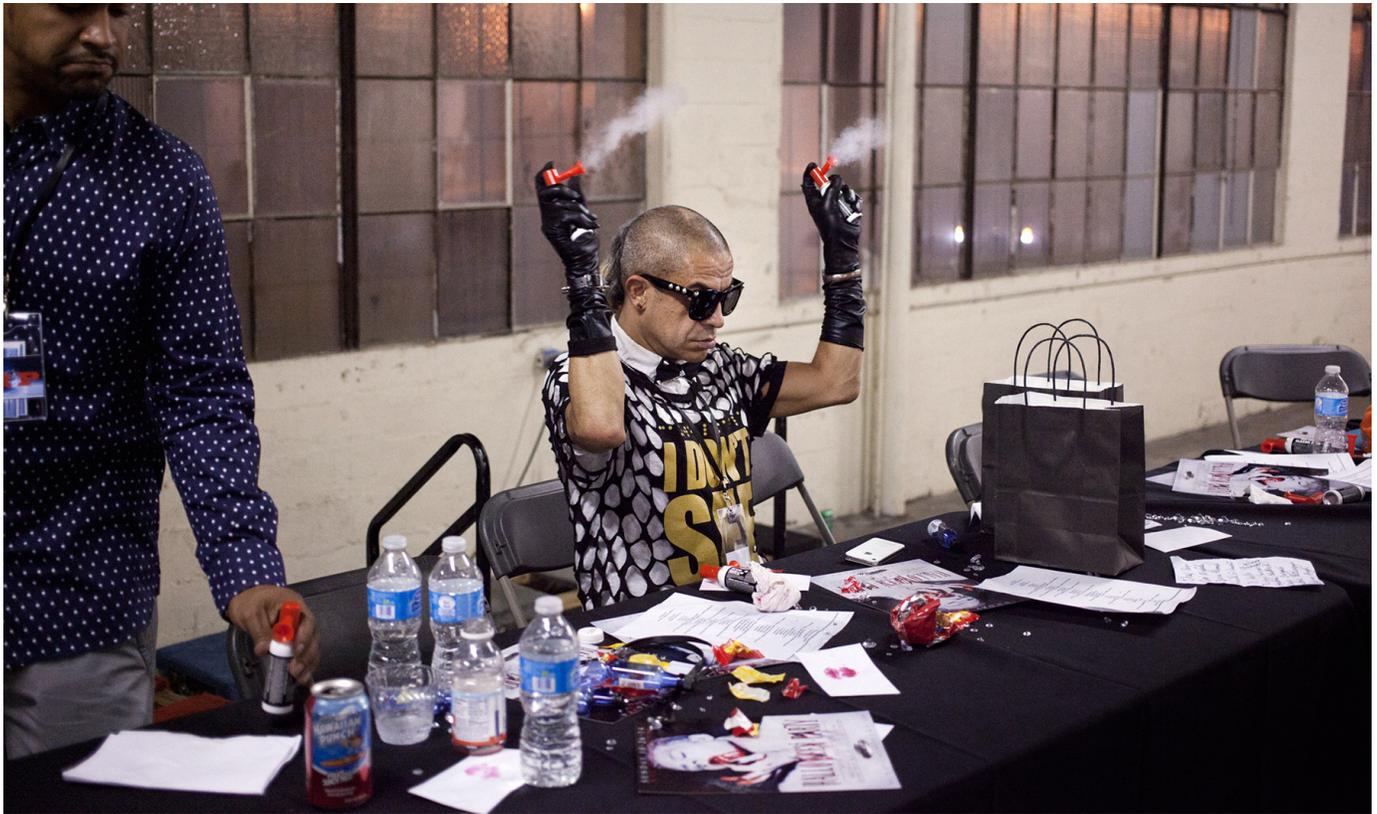
religious family roots in Virginia. Ballroom gave Twiggy, now 24 and a member of the House of Garçon, the courage to come out as gay and the confidence to walk runway, where he found his size to be an asset.

Over the years he has managed to fuse his regular life with ballroom so well that his biological mother now often talks with his ballroom father, Roberson, and they celebrate Thanksgiving together. He has seen people in the scene work as escorts, engage in crafting — a form of monetary cheating that includes credit card fraud, identity theft and writing bad checks — and do drugs he would rather not mention. He tries not to pass judgment. The key to helping the community does not lie in HIV/AIDS prevention or job training, he believes, but in helping members see their worth and value.

At Ovahness every body type and style is welcome, from busty women to skinny boys. Participants stride around in blue tutus and catsuits, mermaid costumes and floor-length fur-trimmed coats. The moves are different from other dance forms, with low bent-knee duck walks and exaggerated falls and hand movements. The body is on display for all its beauty and flaws. Contestants try to please judges, who have the power to give them 10s, which allow them to continue to battle their competitors, or chop them and send them home. About 300 people attend the event, in an industrial building that has been converted into an art space. It is scheduled for 9 p.m., early for a ball, but starts later. There is a sense of belonging and camaraderie, with competitors hugging after battles.

There is also rivalry. There are dozens of houses in ballroom, and members sit together and cheer on their own. Around 3 a.m. members of one house argue with a judge from another house. A fight breaks out in the audience and is quickly stopped by security. When the fight continues on the street outside, security again steps in and breaks it up. The judge whose call was questioned and others deemed at risk are quietly escorted from the scene, and the ball is shut down.

The next day, over pizza at REACH LA, the staff and community leaders talk about legendary ball brawls; there is mention of butcher knives, burning hotel rooms and hatchets. The butcher knives appeared at the first Ovahness Ball in 2006, soon after REACH LA started working with the community, says Martha Chono-Helsley, the group's executive director.



Top: A judge blows air horns in the final moments of the ball. Bottom: Competitors waited, and then celebrated, as the judges announced their decisions at the end of the ball. *(Click to enlarge images)*

After the knives were kicked aside and the ball shut down, Chono-Helsley says a member of the community pleaded with her not to give up and to continue to work with them. She stuck with it. But now she reminds them that REACH LA can only provide space; it does not set the rules. Although it employs members of the community like Greg Wilson and Sean Milan, one of the founders of the community on the West Coast and the producer of Ovahness, the organization does not set the standards. They simply provide resources and a platform for community members to utilize their talents and organize.

At the monthly alliance meetings held at REACH LA, house parents are encouraged to take responsibility for their kids' actions and establish structure and rules so fights and conflicts can be

“What a frickin’ night!” she says.

She comments on how girls from a particular house continually destroy functions and never host any and suggests banning them. Then she starts a discussion on attire and behavior that includes a comment about one competitor in the puss in boots category performing more as if she should be in the (nonexistent) ox and cocks category. This leads to the suggestion of charm school and invitation-only balls. Others in attendance add criticism, most of it good-natured.

“We have a whole community of talented, gifted people, people that are beautiful, flawless people that can do amazing stuff,” Greg Wilson says in an earlier conversation. “But the reality is they’ve been broken so much that they don’t realize that they can be put back together and made whole.”

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