

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Icon Monique West
Interviewed by Mira Lion and Shireen Guru
April 12, 2020

Interviewee: Monique West (MW)

Interviewers: Mira Lion (ML) and Shireen Guru (SG)

Date: April 12, 2020

SG: Great. Okay. Hey! I think it should be recording!

MW: Okay. *[Laughter]*

ML: Okay, so, I'm just gonna do a little introduction. So, hi, my name is Mira Lion, and I'm here with Shireen Guru and Monique Carter. We are taking an oral history of Monique Carter on April 12th, 2020, and then would you mind introducing yourself and just telling us your house and the categories that you walked in ballroom.

MW: Hello, how are you? My name is the icon Monique West. I've been in ballroom for over—for over 20 years. I walked femme queen performance, femme queen sex siren, femme queen body, and femme queen realness. Thanks for having me.

ML: Thank you. So, could we maybe just start, like, with more of when you were growing up, like, when you were younger and just like what it was like growing up. You grew up in Baltimore, if I remember correctly, from *[Cross talk]*.

MW: Yes.

ML: And just, like, a little bit what Baltimore was like then and just what your life was like back then.

MW: Okay. Well, of course, you know, I'm transgender, so when I first came into ballroom, I hadn't felt my authentic self yet. So, a lot of me coming to ballroom, a lot with me coming to ballroom was me trying to kinda find myself. So, living in the city of Baltimore, you know, it being an urban city, I had to, like, undergroundly find people that were like myself that were relatable, and people that were—you know, going through the same things that I was going through mentally and physically as far as, you know, not fitting in with society and so on and so forth.

So, once I did find people that were like me, I noticed that the majority of them were in an underground scene called ballroom. And once I got introduced to that, you know, that's when I started finding out about the categories and so on and so forth that they

had in ballroom. And that kind of, like, intrigued me to stay and become a part.

SG: Yeah, and so you had kind of explained to Joey, like, that track where you met your mother and she kind of introduced you into ballroom. But kind of before that, can you kind of explain to us, like, what is ballroom and how you would explain it, and then maybe also explain to us a couple of the different categories and kind of what they mean and how they work—like, what is realness, what is vogue, and other things like that.

MW: Okay. Okay, well, ballroom, like I said earlier, ballroom is—was and still is to this day an underground thing, but it's becoming a little bit, a little more mainstream now. But the root of ballroom was for people to, you know, a safe space for people to bring their talent and be able to do things that we couldn't—couldn't necessarily do in public space. It was one safe underground space for us to do as such.

So, typically how it would go for anyone—and this is for someone that's in Baltimore, someone that's in Florida, someone that's in anywhere. It's always like a transgender or feminine person that's, you know, would come off as a mother and, you know, there would be someone that would probably come off as a father and, you know, it would be a bunch of children, like, newcomers. So, like, every state always has, like, people that has a little bit more experience than other people so they'll 9 times out of 10 be able to consider a parent and they're naturally nurturing and—you know, and vice versa for the father. So, it's always, like, newcomers coming and it's always someone to teach.

So, normally, when you first—you know, when you first meet these people, like, they have an eye for what they think you can, a category that they think you can walk.

So, I'll start with realness. Realness is the category that, like, most people come into the scene and they're able to walk it. Because realness means being able to—being able to pass and blend in with everyday society as either male or female. So, if you're a transgender woman and you walk realness, that means, 9 out of 10, you can pass as a heterosexual female without being—without being detected as being transgender. And for a guy, you know, if he's walking realness, it's the same way. He can walk as a heterosexual—he can navigate around as a heterosexual man without people knowing, you know, in fact that he is actually gay or bi or whatever it is that he goes by.

And, um, the vogue category is—is very interesting, if you ask me. Because the vogue category is, is like the art of expression. It's an attitude. It's kinda sorta like talking without—talking with your body and with your hands and with your hair. That's how—that's like the number one way I can explain it. So, I think that's kinda sorta something that most people that can dance, you know, can switch over to—could switch over to vogue if you have rhythm or if you have beat or if you have a lot of attitude or your, you know, precision or things of that nature.

Runway is also a category that's in ballroom, and that's like a fashion show. Like, we would have to have—you know, we weren't really allowed into certain spaces back when ballroom first started. So, we had to kinda create our own fashion shows. So, with balls—so, runway would typically look like a typical, like, New York Fashion Week or Victoria's Secret Fashion Show type of thing, but it's just for all genders.

SG: Okay. And another thing that we kinda wanted to go into was, we know that you had asked, like, given Joey a couple of questions that you thought were really interesting, and so we wanted to ask you those since we had the opportunity to do that.

If you could describe your categories and kind of how you get ready for your categories and how that might resemble how other people get ready for the same categories or how it might differ depending on the person.

MW: Okay. Well, getting ready for my categories are, like *[Laughter]*—getting ready for my categories are, like, a week's worth of getting ready. Because you gotta start prepping—you have to start prepping for, you know, like, you have to start prepping for, like, skin regimens because you wanna look good by the weekend. You have to start, you know, picking out hair. You have to start picking out dresses.

You have to start picking out—first and foremost, you have to pick out what look you're gonna do. So, like, you're definitely prepping, I'd say, about a week early. *[Laughter]* Or maybe a month early, sometimes. Because sometimes, when a ball—when a ball flyer comes out, you start prepping, you immediately start prepping in your head. Like, “Oh”—because, you know, categories are normally descriptive, to bring... like, categories are normally, they normally ask you to come, to bring it a specific way. I'm trying to

talk in ways that you'll understand. But they want—categories are normally specified for you to come a certain way.

So, if I was to get a ball flyer and it's for July and it's asking me to bring it like a Victoria's Secret model, I'm already starting to—I've already started thinking months in advance what I need to do. So, the preparation can start anywhere from a month to three months to maybe even a year. Whenever you get the flyer, that's when the preparation mentally starts.

So, physically getting ready, the categories that I walk—like I said, I'm an icon in ballroom. I've been in ballroom over 20 years. So, the categories that I'm walking today at this current time, a lot of them are categories where you have to be, like, kinda well—you know, you have to be well put together, and you have to be looking decent and looking nice, so I'm getting nails done, hair done. I'm coloring my hair, I'm getting my makeup done, I'm doing skin treatments, skin regimens, I'm getting rest—all types of stuff, because I wanna look as close as I can look like, you know, as vibrant and as good as I can look for it.

ML: One thing I was just thinking of is, on average, I was wondering how many balls you typically participate in per year. And I know that might have changed a lot over, like, the past 20 years, but just some—

MW: Okay.

ML: - yeah. *[Laughter]*

MW: Okay. Anything else? Was there something else, did I cut you off?

ML: No, no.

MW: Okay. From—it used to be, like, about three balls, three major balls, because we have major balls and then we have, like mini balls that normally, the mini balls normally run in your city. The major balls are, you know, it could be anywhere—East Coast, West Coast, wherever.

So, I'd say mini balls were maybe, like, every other week. Major balls were three times a week—three times a month, I'm sorry. Three times a year—I'm sorry, I'm being tongue tied. Major balls are three times a year to now, a major ball is every week. We have a major ball—now, you have a major ball somewhere every week.

So, a ball walker has to kinda sorta pick and choose which ones they're gonna go to. But you could be, you could be going somewhere every—if you have that type of money and you can afford it or, you know, you work in a community where, you know, you work in...work, when ballroom and work is kinda sorta the same thing for you, you could be going to one every week.

But typically, I'll say I'll go to about...eh, I'll say I'll go to about, like, seven a year now.

ML: Yeah. And then I was also wondering, what have you noticed about the difference in ballroom, whether it's like the people or the balls themselves between the different cities that you've gone to for balls?

MW: I feel like different cities are—different cities are just like, different cities are, just like outside of ballroom, different cities are known for different things. Like, how Maryland is known for crabs and seafood and, you know, Chicago is known for—like, I feel like that's how it is in ballroom.

Like, I feel like different categories are stronger in different cities. Like, I do go to—like, Atlanta is, like, a really glammified city. Like, they have access to all the good hair and all the good wigs and all the good designers and stuff. So, if you go to Atlanta, Atlanta is gonna be a city that has, like, a bunch of beautiful—a bunch of beautiful men and women and people that are really glammed out compared to Baltimore. Where Baltimore is kinda sorta a city, again, like, an urban city where you're gonna find more people trying to just blend in with society just because it's kinda sorta like, that's kinda sorta the way people are trying to live here as an LGBT community.

And so, I feel like the different categories are represented toward what region or city you're in.

SG: Okay, great. And something that we kind of—so, we learned a little bit about your timeline in ballroom and kind of how you've gone from different houses. And so, I just wanted to ask you a little bit about kind of like, within each house, how you understood kind of the history of your houses.

So, like, when you were in the House of Dior, who was your mother and how, did you know kind of the story of how your mother became the mother of that house? How, kind of, do these historic ties, and these understanding the history of a house, exist

when you join a house? Do you kind of learn your history? Is that something that's so long that it doesn't necessarily get told, or how exactly does that history work within the houses?

MW:

Okay, when I—with my first house that I ever joined, I just so happened to join the house when it started, luckily. So, you know, I was a part of history with that house, because again, you know, I was a part of the house when it first started. I was, like, one of the first, I was one of the original members of that house. And again, it was started from a gay family that had a gay mother and a gay father who decided that they just wanted to start their own actual ballroom house. It was like—you know, well, we're all a gay family, so let's just...let's just start a house type of thing.

So, it stemmed from a lady named Sandy, and you know, she was all about mothers. And she had already been in ballroom, and she was in another house. So, in order for her to start her own house, she had to leave that house and start her own—you know, start her own house.

So, it's like, you know, when you come into it—like, when you're there when it first starts, it's a lot easier than coming into a well-established house that's been around forever, for a long time. Like, you have some houses like Mizrahi, Revlon, Ebony, Khan—like, a lot of those houses have been around for 20-something years, so it would be kinda hard for a new person that's just coming into the scene in 2020 to get their full history. But the good things about—the good thing about it is, you know, there are still people around that can give you insight, but there's also YouTube. So, you can find—you can go on YouTube and also Google things and find out things about, you know, find categories that people were walking. Or you can also just Google balls from 1980 and 1985 and 1990 and you can get a—you can get a better feel of it.

But all houses come from another house. Every house—like, pretty much every house comes from another house. Like, someone is in a house and they feel like, “Okay, well, I have my own family now. So, let me branch off.” So, whatever house they were in before they decided to branch off of, you know, it'll still be kinda sorta a link to that house that you came from, because that's originally where you originally started. So, it's kinda sorta like, that's how the family tends to—that's how the family aspect tends to linger over to the next house.

Because it's like—like, Sandy, when she started the House of Dior, she came from Mizrahi. So, she still had Mizrahi in her blood,

because that's where she came from, but she started her own house. And then, you know, if somebody was in her house and decided to start their own house, that's where—like, if I was to ever start my own house, my blood would still, would come from here, because that's where I started. So, in some kinda way, it's still—everybody still links together with, with their background, if that makes sense.

SG: And so, then, you went to the House of Ebony. Can you—like, so, in that house, obviously, you just mentioned it as a house that's kind of like a little longer lasting. When you joined that house, were you kind of like a part of the group that learned a lot of that earlier history, or who was your mother in Ebony and kind of what sense of the history of Ebony did you get when you joined?

MW: Okay. So, when I went to—when I went to Ebony, Sandy, I left Sandy's house, which was Dior, but she was still considered my mother. Because when I went to—because when I went to Ebony, I was still in the learning myself process. So, that house was known for—that house was known for realness, and that was the category that I was walking at that time.

So, I kinda sorta went to that house just because they were known for the category that I walked. Like, I didn't really—excuse me, I didn't really join it for the family aspect of it. That particular house wasn't really, like, a good house for me, because again, like I said, it was—like, I went through a few houses before I actually found where I really wanted to be.

So, I kept the same parents that I had from the previous house that I was in. I was just walking under a different name. So, like, as far as the family aspect, I would still go to Sandy's, her home, and, you know, have dinner with them and hang out with them and sleep over and party. I would still do that with them, but I was walking under a different house. So, it was like, that was still my family, but I was just walking under a different house.

Interviewer: And so, did that idea carry on after you left Ebony and when you went to the House of Revlon, did you still kind of feel like Sandy was your mother and your only mother, or did you kind of join Revlon and have kind of this new idea of—because, I think, in Revlon you said that you started walking femme categories.

MW: Yes.

Interviewer: And so, kind of, did you find a mother there that you kind of felt attached to in addition to Sandy, or was there—like, did that grow in Revlon more than it did in Ebony?

MW: No. Once I got to Revlon and I became what ballroom called a femme queen, I turned into a mother, versus—so, it was always, like, Sandy was always considered my mother, but I took on the mother role so much that I kinda sorta wanna stay...not forgot, but it was my turn, kinda sorta, to be a mother, I wanna say.

So, yeah. So, when I went to—so, when I went to Revlon, that's when everything just kinda sorta changed for me. I was kinda—you know, I was switching categories because I was walking, all the categories that I was walking as who I was before, they all switched over to femme category, feminine categories.

So, it was like, ballroom changed for me at that point. I was finally—I was super excited, I didn't finally feel like I was looking for myself any more. I felt comfortable in the categories, I felt comfortable in the categories I was walking. You know, I could win the categories I was walking, because it was like—okay, I finally found my niche.

But also, that was also the moment when I turned into a mother instead of actually, you know, still kinda searching for that role. It's like, I jumped into it without even knowing I was going into it. I jumped right into it.

ML: And I think in your interview with Joey, you described when you were in the House of Revlon, you saw a turn to the gay in ballroom, I think is how you described it.

MW: Mm-hmm.

ML: And I was just wondering if you could—I think you were talking a little bit about how you felt that transgender women were being kind of, like, pushed out of ballroom as it was getting—

MW: Mm-hmm.

ML: - I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about that change that you saw in ballroom.

MW: Okay, yeah. And, like, being as though I had started living, I had kinda sorta lived both lives, like a gay male life and then a transgender life, I realized that ballroom didn't seem like it was a

place for transgender women. It seemed like it was more so a place for gay males, like male dominated, like a male dominating kinda thing.

So, I noticed that—like, we couldn't have a lot of say-so in a lot of things. It was mostly guys that would actually throw balls. Like, as far as deeming people—like, deeming is when you take someone to the next level. Like, someone that's—like, making somebody legendary or making them an icon, it's like, women couldn't do it. Women in ballroom couldn't do it. It was like, you know, come out when you're asked to come out or come and walk when we want you to come walk or, you know—just like how it is in everyday life. Like, a male, it seemed so—just seemed so male dominated to me.

So, at one point, I kinda sorta felt like I wanted to back off from ballroom. Like, I felt like I didn't wanna be in it, because I felt like I didn't have time to really waste with arguing with the gay males about how they felt like we should be and, you know, we should only speak when spoken to, we should just stand there and just be pretty. Yeah, it was—yeah, that's how I would describe it. That's how I would describe the turn that it took around that time.

ML: Did you feel like it ever started to kind of—like, now, do you feel more comfortable in ballroom than you did back then? Like, do you feel like it's kind of switched back in any way, or?

MW: Um—go ahead, go ahead.

ML: No, yeah—you go ahead.

MW: No, I felt—well, I feel like once I've decided to be a voice, to be a voice for my community, I feel more comfortable. I feel more comfortable with it. But I could see how a person that doesn't have a voice could feel uncomfortable. So, you know, being as though I decided to step up and be an advocate for me and, you know, people that are like me, you know, I'm a little more comfortable with it, because I don't mind speaking up, and now I know I can speak up. And I know I have a little bit of backup, whereas though, back then, a lot of people just wanted to stay away from it, including myself.

So, I'd say, for myself and a few others, I feel like ballroom is—you know, it's a little better. But I also noticed some people don't have a voice. Some people don't know how to speak up for themselves, and some people probably—some transgender women

probably do still feel the same way that I felt back then, just because they just simply have to wait for somebody to speak up for them and then you don't know exactly what their issue may be. So, you know, they may not be getting advocated for the correct way that they wanna be advocated for. So, I feel like for me it is, but for some people, it may not be.

SG: Do you think part of that had to do with kind of like you being a mother? And you also mentioned you were a chapter mother.

MW: Mm-hmm.

SG: And so, if you could first explain that and then kind of talk about how your role as a mother maybe helped you, or if it didn't help you, kind of like feel that necessity to use your voice to help your community in this ballroom scene?

MW: Okay. First, a chapter mother is, you have an overall mother which is the overall mother of the entire house. You have an East Coast mother—self-explanatory—a West Coast mother, you have a king, a queen, a prince. And then you start going into chapters, like Baltimore chapter, D.C. chapter, Philadelphia chapter. So, you know, I had made it to a chapter mother.

So, it's like, that role wasn't really—like, by me having a nurturing energy all the way around, it was kinda sorta like it wasn't something I could turn on and turn off. It wasn't like, "Okay, I'm only gonna be a mother at the ball, but when I come home, I don't have to worry about anybody." The mother thing, *[Laughter]* the mother role followed me. The mother role followed me, like—like, it followed me, like, I really sat and was in the hospital and pushed out these children. Like, phone calls—like, phone calls late at night, going to get, going down to the police station to pick up kids because they were out and weren't supposed to be, and they're giving out my name, saying that I'm their parent.

You know, giving you—you know, sacrificing things for myself, sacrificing things for myself just so they could be okay or so they could actually go to a ball or they could walk a ball or they could have food. Because it also was, like—it was also like ballroom was also still, it was still operating away from balls, away from balls as well. Because, like, you know, they would come over to my house and we would make outfits and, you know, practice for the balls and stuff.

So, it was like being a mother, once I stepped into that mother role and actually took it on, it was like—it was like a 24/7 thing and it just grew. It just grew more and more every time, every year, I would say.

SG: And so, then that kind of—do you think that that mothering nature that you have helped you feel the necessity to use your voice to speak for your community?

MW: Yes, yes, yes. And it was also, just to go into a little bit more, it was also something that I battled with personally, because it's like...you know, being a voice for people makes you a bad, makes you seem like a bad guy to some people, to a lot of people. Because you're the one that actually has to get out there and take the blows for these people because you're gonna speak for them.

So, I'd honestly say, like, I battled a lot with if I wanted to say and do certain things. But then I felt like, you know, I was chosen—I felt like I was chosen to do it. So, it's like, okay, I'll take the beat down for this, but somebody has to do it. *[Laughter]*

Interviewer: So, kind of, like, continuing—I guess, so, we wanted to ask a little bit about how one becomes a legend and how one can become an icon and, maybe, if there's a difference between the two and kind of like how that system works, because ballroom definitely has these ideas of, like, I mean, there's obviously this competition element that's really powerful and these status symbols with these titles. And so, we kinda want to know a little bit more about...

MW: Okay. Okay, well, you have star, statement, legend, and icon. So, I'll just run down a little bit about all of them. I'll be brief with them.

So, a star is when you first—when you first come into ballroom and you're new and you're learning your category and, you know, you're still new.

A statement is once you've made a statement, when you're kind of known for your category and you're kind of, you know, you're not—you know, you're not quite there yet, but you're a statement. You're known, you're starting to make your mark.

So, once you've been a top contender and winning for 6 to 10 years, that's when you can—that's when you can get deemed legend. But you have to get deemed legend by an icon, somebody that's already an icon.

So, once you get deemed legend, then the next step to get to icon is, you have to walk—walk and win and be a top contender of at least three categories. You had to have been a parent of a house before. You had to have given back to the community in some sort of way, whether it be community work or things that you privately do or whatever, as long as it's some type of giving back to the community. And I think that's...I think that's about it. Like, you have to have, it's another 5 years after the 10. Yeah, yeah, I believe that's it, and then you're an icon.

So, once you're an icon, you have the power to deem people legendary and icons. Like, when I got deemed icon, just last year, when I got deemed icon, I got deemed by other icons. So, all the deeming is done by the icons.

ML: What was some of the community work that you did to give back in order to get your icon status?

MW: Okay. Well, I founded a group called Girls United, and it's a ballroom group for black transgender women bringing unity amongst—it's a safe space. It's an online safe space for black transgender women just to unite. And in that safe space, it was, you could talk about and discuss anything from safe places to do sex work, or learn about a job, doctors to go to, doctors to go to for feminization surgeries. It was just a—it was just a group for anything pertaining to transgender women. It wasn't just—it was founded and started out with the intent of black transgender women, but it initially just opened up to just transgender women, period, and it was based off the people in ballroom.

Also, I worked at University of Maryland as an outreach specialist there also, giving back to the community.

ML: And also, I think in your interview with Joey, you talked about a transgender ball that you organized at Morgan State.

MW: Oh, yeah, yeah.

ML: And I was just wondering if you could describe a little bit the process of organizing your own ball and how you did that.

MW: Yes. Before I worked with, before I had legally worked with University of Maryland, I organized a, I linked up with University of Maryland, Girls United and University of Maryland. I linked up with them and I threw a ball with them, and the ball was, again, it

was geared towards transgender women in ballroom, bringing unity to transgender women in ballroom.

So, what I did was, I put together categories that were focused toward transgender women, so that way, we could get transgender women engaged and wanting to come. And again, that helped with—like, some things were so male dominated, when you looked at that ball, that ball, you could see that that ball wasn't male dominated because, you know, we had \$1,000.00 categories for female figures, we had \$800.00 categories for female—so, a lot of things were geared toward transgender women at that ball. So, you could clearly just look at the flyer and tell that, you know, this is something different going on here.

So, what I did was, you know, I got my categories and stuff together. I did a lot of promoting. Promoting requires you going state to state promoting other people's balls so they can come to your ball. I also had vendors there from different nonprofits that wanted to come to, you know, just so that, you know, the transgender women that did come out and the people that did come out, they could find out about resources that they maybe didn't know about.

So, planning that was good. It was really wild, it was a really, really a big success.

SG: And so, when you kind of go and go state to state to promote these different balls, do you go to other balls to promote, or are you kind of just creating, is there a greater ballroom community that kind of just is connected regionally? Does that kind of happen through the house system, maybe? How does that connection stay really strong, like, in terms of the ballroom community over a greater geographic location?

MW: Okay. It's kinda weird, but I'm gonna give you an example so you can understand. If I myself, Monique West, was, you know, deciding I was gonna throw a ball without an entity backing me or without an organization backing me, this is just me throwing a ball, I would have to, in turn, go to—well, there's so many balls that go on now, I can't go to all of them.

But I would really have to—like, if there was a ball in Chicago, I would have to go to the ball in Chicago. If I want people from Chicago to come to my ball, I would physically have to get up and go to a ball there. Like, I would actually have to go there. If there

was a ball in Detroit, you know, I would have to go there if I want them to come.

But sometimes, you don't have to directly go, you could send your house members. Like, I could send the Wests over to the, you know, to that city to go. Because of course, you can't make it to every city. But it is something that you do have to show your face and your house has to get out there and your house to get out there and, like, put your name out there if you do have an event coming up.

SG: And so, kind of like, I guess, thinking about names and the names of houses, obviously, we have something like Dior that kinda speak to the fashion aspect of ball. What do you think about, or what are your feelings about the names of houses and how kind of—do they kind of become a defining point of houses? I mean, obviously, certain names are legendary and become very well known.

And so, what would you kinda like say about the naming of the houses and how that kind of affects them?

MW: I think when houses first—when houses first started out, you had, like, Revlon, Chanel, Dior. You had, like, a lot of—Ebony—you had a lot of designer name houses, you know, like, designer. And now, like, my house is the House of West. It's just like, you know, it's kinda—you know, it has nothing to do with any, it has nothing to do with any of that. So, it's like, I think just like everything else, I think things have evolved.

But I think most of them, most houses are typically designers. So, I think that's what most people go after when they start a house. I think most people go after a designer, because you know, the whole key to everything is being fabulous. So, of course, you wanna go for something that's—of course, you wanna go for something that has a fabulous ring to it. Like, you know, some type of—you know, some type of high-end designer or something.

But yeah, that's—I think house names, I think the first thing people, the first thing that everybody does is go after a very high-end designer to name their house after.

ML: Do you know how the House of West got its name in that case? Do you know the history of—

MW: Believe it or not, and it's my gay son that founded the house, but I don't know how they got—how they got the name. I don't.
[Laughter] I'm assuming—I'm assuming Kim and Kanye probably would've been some type of inspiration, would've been some type of inspiration to them, but I'm not all the way 100 percent, but I'm pretty sure that was it.

SG: And are you—

MW: And I love the idea of them doing that, because it's different, it's not a designer, you know? It has a strong ring to it, but it's also—and it's also not a designer. So, I feel like that's a part of evolution.

SG: Yeah, and I guess thinking about that and how ballroom has evolved, what would you kind of say—I mean, obviously, there are so many good parts about ballroom, but there's also some drawbacks.

What would you kind of say are some of these really good parts and really bad parts that kind of have a negative effect, especially as you've seen it as someone who's been in ballroom for so long, what have you kind of seen that's worked really well and other things that definitely aren't working as well and need to be changed?

MW: Okay. Ooh, this is where it could get kinda good. I think that underground was a really good place for ballroom, because you develop raw, natural talent, people that were hungry to learn about history, learn how to walk their categories properly or learn what they were really walking or get education on what they're really walking.

Whereas, though, now, there's been a lot—there's been a lot of organizations that have stepped in and have seen that, you know, they can get numbers and also...it's a pro and cons in it as well. Okay, there are a lot of organizations that realize that they can get numbers off of throwing balls, and a lot of these organizations, they offer large amounts of money for categories, which makes it become politics, because each house wants people to—each house wants houses to win the money.

So, instead of someone who really, really is deserving winning, it's more strategizing, more politics when it comes to people judging now, because it's a lot of money on the line. And when money comes into play, everything—everything is different for people.

So, I feel like the raw, natural talent was taken away when the organizations got involved and all this money started being put up for the categories versus rivalries when, you know, it wasn't really for money, it was just natural rivalries and it was for a natural trophy and it was just for natural hard work. Now, it's a lot of money on the line, so people only wanna send out—they only wanna send out their heavy hitters, their winners, and people that are on the panel. People that are judging are often people that are our peers that we hang out with. So, depending on what mood they're in or who they're hanging with that week, it could just all be strategized out, and a whole bunch of money just goes to somebody that was very lackluster to what the category asked for.

You know, but what I feel like is a good thing about the organizations coming into place, because a lot of organizations come in with testing and they come in with, you know, just like, a whole lot of information that people would not have got their hands on if it wasn't at the ball. Like, if it wasn't at the ball, they would not have got tested if it wasn't at the ball. Because when it comes to testing and all that stuff, you know, some people just don't wanna hear it. They don't—you know, when it comes to condoms and PrEP and...some people just don't wanna hear it. So, the best way to catch them with it is at a ball, so I will say that that's the good side of it.

But I feel that the bad side, another bad side of it is that a lot of the balls are—a lot of the balls from the organizations are free. So, now, a lot of people don't wanna pay to go to balls, because they feel like they all should be free, and that's not how it goes. Often, what a house does is, you know, you charge—you have to put out a lot of money for your balls or whatever, but the money you get back, you can put it into your house, you know? Like, the House of West, we do retreats, we do cookouts, we do family outings, we do sweatshirts, we do T-shirts. You know, there's a lot of different things that we do. So, a lot of people are hooked on—a lot of people are just feeling like it should be free now, because the orgs do it for free.

ML: And another thing that you brought up to Joey was, you thought that he should maybe ask the other people he's interviewing, like, how to better ballroom. And I was thinking, like, you might be in a place where you could probably answer that question pretty well, too.

MW: What's a better ballroom?

ML: Yeah, how to make it better, or how to fix these issues that you brought up.

MW: I don't...it's funny, because we talked about, we talked about this on a different interview I was on. And we really can't think of a way to fix ballroom at this time, because it's gone so mainstream, and you know, once stuff goes mainstream, money comes into play. And you know, once money comes into play, you need management, you need LLCs. I heard that it was a house, it was designers, about to sue a house for using their name on a flyer.

So, it's like—okay, little ol' ballroom is getting a little bit too much attention now, okay? So, that's—so, we were talking about, because there's a show about to come on HBO and it's called *Legendary* and it's full of, and it has all ballroom people on it, and it's showing ballroom. So, it's like, once Chanel—I'm just gonna say Chanel. Once—because I believe it was Chanel—once Chanel heard that they were going by Chanel, they started, you know, sending out letters and all of this other stuff. So, it's like—okay, now we're barking up a tree that we don't wanna bark up. Because if somebody's gonna get sued...

So, we were like, "What are we gonna do?" Because it's like, once something is out the door, it's hard to bring it back. So, now, the ballroom is out and people see what ballroom is about and what ballroom can do, it's no going back underground from here. So, we were like—we don't know, we really don't know what to do to try to make it better again.

So, I think we are gonna come—the board is gonna come up with a plan where we try to see what we can do to keep ballroom, keep some legal rights to ballroom. Because before you know it, we probably won't even have rights to it.

SG: So, you were talking about a board. What board is this?

MW: The board—well, different regions have different boards. And on the East Coast, we have leaders from the parents from each house. The parents from each house can select, if they don't wanna be on the board, they can select two people from, you know, from the board. So, we have the Board of Icons, that's the board that I'm on. And then I'm not on the board for my house, because my house father and mother, they are on the board there.

But the boards will decide—you know, will try to decide on the answers and, like, longevity issues, like, what we're gonna do in

the future, what are we gonna do for the long run and things and try to put them in place.

SG: Yeah, because I think something you talked about in your other interview was this idea of history and how it's really important for younger ballroom members to enter understanding that there was a precedent, that people came before them.

MW: Mm-hmm.

SG: And how do you feel about that kind of being a part of the idea of ballroom changing? Do you think that that history plays a role in, like knowing that history plays a role in keeping ballroom underground or keeping ballroom kind of more raw and true, or do you think that the money kind of really does—like, that putting it on a stage really makes it less able to go back to where it was?

MW: I feel like knowing your history is the number-one most important thing about ballroom, so you can continue to—so you can continue to bring to the table, so you continue to bring the categories...so you can continue to bring the categories the way that we're asking.

Because a lot of people really don't know. A lot of people really don't know, so it's very important. That's the number one thing, out of everything we talked about, that's the number one most important thing is knowing your history. Because if you know your history, you'll kinda sorta know what to do moving forward, you know, with your category. You'll know why you're walking your category.

Like, for example, if I told you, "Hey, I want you to walk Realness" and you're like, "Well, what is that?" And I kinda sorta explain to you, like, "Okay, well, you just have to blend and something, something"—there's still so much more you would need to know about that, or so much more you would need to do your homework on to see what exactly you're really doing, and ways that you can win, highs about the category, lows about the category, the dos, the don'ts.

So, the good thing about that, again, is having someone that can talk to you about history or having YouTube, because YouTube has a whole lot of ballroom history. And sometimes, just sitting there watching it can show you like, "Oh, hey, this is what—this is what this means" or, "This is what I can do" or, "When I'm battling a person, this is what I can do" or, "Hey, maybe that'll look good on me" or, "Hey, maybe I could wear an outfit like that. Maybe

that type of look would look good on me.” Or even a person that wanted to throw a ball could even look at YouTube to see how creative you can be with your categories. Like, how you can ask, like, having a vogue category where they want you to bring it, like an animal—like an animal or something, you know, you can be any animal from the jungle. You know, all kinds of different cat suits and cheetah things—you know? It’s, like, different things.

So, YouTube and, you know, verbal history are the best things to make sure you have a roundup of people to keep ballroom going. Because I do feel like it’s gonna—just like everything has an evolution and changes, I feel like it’s gonna change.

SG: And so, do you think, like—so, kind of thinking about this history and what we are trying to do is, we’re trying to kind of attempt to capture ballroom in a way that is respectful and representative of that history. And so, how would you kind of attempt to do that? How would you suggest people try and understand ballroom and ballroom history? Especially because we’re toeing a very dangerous line between ballroom becoming too mainstream and also trying to make sure that people understand it and know its significance in history.

MW: What I would do is exactly what you guys are doing. I would talk to people that have experience, I would document it. You know, I would get as many people as I can get, and I would get information—you know, I would get information on, like you’re doing, I would get information on the categories and I would get information on who was around at certain time points, like, who was around from the late ‘80s to the early ‘90s to the mid-2000s. I would just get people, you know, get familiar with people, get stories.

But what I would really suggest is, you get on YouTube, you guys get on YouTube. Because if you get on YouTube, you’ll see certain things that we may have not even mentioned or things that we may have felt like weren’t important, but you guys feel like, “Oh, this is important. This is important information. You know, we can use this.” And it will also be something that, if you see—it will also be, if you see something, it’ll be something that you can come back and ask. Like, “Oh, hey, I need to hit up Monique, because I saw this and I wanna know about this, because maybe she felt like this wasn’t important, but hey, this is a key piece of information that we need.”

So, I'd say, along from getting the information from people, just going on YouTube and surfing around on YouTube and seeing what you can find.

ML: And what do you feel like has been the purpose that ballroom had for you, and what were some things that you became aware of because of ballroom and just what you learned from it?

MW: Ballroom shaped me as an individual, period, completely. Ballroom shaped me fully because ballroom taught me how to be competitive—it taught me how to be competitive, but not too competitive. It taught me how to put things into perspective. It taught me how to navigate as a transgender woman through society with knowing that I could not be myself, you know, in certain places. And ballroom taught me to be okay with it, because everybody's not—everybody is not really, everybody doesn't really know how to handle discrimination or everybody doesn't know how to handle being turned away from certain things because of who you are, but I guess that's discrimination as well.

So, ballroom has put, has gave me a stronger backbone, you know? Because if you can stand in front of those people or if you can walk in front of those people, you know, it builds your confidence to be able to walk in front of anyone.

Ballroom also has taught me how to manage money. Ballroom also has taught me how to—ballroom just completely, I'll just say ballroom just completely just taught me how to survive, you know? Because being around people that were like myself and that were in situations like myself, mentally and physically, it just showed me that, you know, that I can make it. You know, when you're looking for people that you're relatable to, when you're feeling like you're the only one that's gone through certain stuff, ballroom is the place that I can go where there are people that are like me, that are going through what I'm going through. And it lets me know that no, I'm not the only one, I'm not crazy. I'm not the only person that this has happened to in life. You know, this is just me.

So, to answer the question just completely, I'd say that ballroom has taught me how to survive, I'd say ballroom has taught me how to balance my finances. Ballroom has taught me a self-confidence, and ballroom has also showed me how to navigate around when I'm under the microscope and I don't wanna be—and I don't wanna be judged.

SG: So, do you think that, then, ballroom is a space that a lot of trans and queer youth should try and enter? How do you think that ballroom can play a role for everyone, or maybe it's not for everyone? Is there kind of like a perspective that you have on that, because ballroom played such a big role in your life, in your kind of like survival, as you called it?

MW: Mm-hmm. I don't think anything is for everybody. I think—I don't think anything is for everybody. I feel like ballroom is for most, though. If I had to go percentage wise, I'd say ballroom is for about 70 to 80 percent of people. And even if it's only for your finding people that are like you—even if it's only for that small reason. Finding people that are like you is a big relief when you feel like you're the only one that's a certain way, you know?

And trans and queer people often, in everyday society, don't see people like them. Because, you know, you have some people that you may not even detect is trans or you may not even know or may not want you to know or may not want to live out loud as trans. So, when you come into ballroom and you actually see those people that are living like you out loud in the ball, it gives you the opportunity to be able to reach out to them, then maybe they reach out to you. It just leaves you the option of not feeling alone.

So, that's why I'd say about 70 to 80 percent does need ballroom in some sort of way, because, you know, it helps you out. And it helps you out in ways that often can't be explained, because you know, when you're young and—you know, when you're young and you're gay and you're trans, all the logistics don't really make sense to you, but you just know you're trying to survive through and figure out who you are, what you are, and where you need to be. And when you come into those spaces, you see a lot of people like yourself, and you may even see how you don't wanna end up, you know? It's just, you never really know, but just seeing people that are like you is normally, you know, it's normally a good thing.

So, it's not for everybody. A lot of people don't like the competition. A lot of people don't know how to handle competition. A lot of people don't like to be critiqued or judged. So, you know, that's why I say it depends on—like, it depends on who it is, but I'd say, for the most part, it's somewhere that most trans, queer, and youth people would be safe and would wanna come. It would be a good place for them to come.

SG: So, I guess, like, building on that, there's these ideas of, obviously, you have a mother and a father and the family nature of ballroom.

How would you say that kind of the family aspect of ballroom has helped you not only as a person who had a mother, but as a mother, how did that kind of like kinship aspect of ballroom really influence you?

MW: It influenced me because the woman who I mentioned earlier, Sandy, she was kinda sorta, she was just like a real mother, she just didn't birth us. She made sacrifices for us, she cooked for us, she cleaned for us. Whatever she did to pay the bills, we didn't know, but we just knew we had a place to stay. It was like a real—it was like a real, you know, it was like a real family.

But my best instincts and my motherly instincts and stuff, it came from my birth mother, because I come from a very tight knit family. Like, family is first in my biological family. So, I was just a product—I was more so a product of my real mom. Like, even still to this day, my relationship with my real mom is the same as it was when I was a kid. It's the same, exact way, like, I can still get—she called me earlier and said, “Hey, I'm sorry everything is closed, I couldn't get you an Easter basket.” And I'm like, “Mom? [Laughter] It's okay.”

Interviewers: [Laughter]

MW: So, you know, that type of love, it trickles over to my gay kids, you know, my gay kids. Like, I give the same love that I give. So, if I was—like, now, I'm at an age and a space to where I don't really meet a lot of newcomers. But I have kids that meet newcomers, and they're products of me, so when they meet them, they'll be young and curious just like we were back then. And, you know, like, I listen to my son all the time, he talks to them, and you know, he talks to them and he tells them what ballroom is about. You know, how it's a safe space, how it can keep you out of trouble.

You know, because it's just—it's like, history's gonna constantly repeat itself, but it's just like not in a...we just don't have the same blood. But it's like, what I was taught, I talked to someone and he opened his own house, and you know, he's my son, and he's gonna have a son that's gonna do the same thing, somebody's gonna learn something from him.

So, it's just like, it's a bunch of—it's just a bunch, you know, it's just, the parental things are just passed down through people who kinda sorta have it.

ML: Did your birth mother have a relationship with your mother and the family in general in ballroom? Like, did your biological—

MW: Mm-hmm. Yeah, well, she knew her. I wouldn't quite call it a relationship, but she knew her, and she was actually thankful that she could help me in a way that my mom couldn't, you know? She was thankful for that, because the lifestyle that I wanted to live, my mom didn't know anything about it. She's still learning about it, as is, through me, you know? So, my mom is thankful for my house mother.

SG: Yeah, I mean, that's really amazing that your house mother and your birth mother can have that connection. That's so powerful—

MW: Mm-hmm.

SG: - to think about the family aspect not just from the houses, but also from your birth family. Do you—would you say that a lot of what you've learned has been not just learning from your mother, but as a mother, do you think that there was a lot of learning that you did when you became a mother and you had all of these kids and you were kind of navigating that?

MW: Yes. It was just like a rule of mine, like, once I realized I was in the spot and that I naturally got there because it wasn't something that—it was just a natural, like, people would just come to me asking me stuff. People would just message me on my social media and stuff and just want conversation and want advice. So, once I knew it was natural and I felt like it was kinda sorta my calling, it was like, I couldn't let them down, I couldn't disappoint them.

I had to kinda sorta give them the same love that was given to me, because I think about it—I didn't have, you know, if I didn't have who I had back then, what would've happened to me? If I didn't have ballroom, you know, there's a lot of other places that I could've ended up other than ballroom.

ML: Yeah, and then, is there just anything else that you wanted to kind of discuss or anything that you think we kind of missed?

MW: Uh...I think we kinda—no, I think we got everything. As far as, I feel like what you're doing is—well, I'll just add my piece in that I thought what you're doing is amazing, because it needs to be actually, like, everything is evolving, and the time is gonna come where this information could just be lost. Like, this information—it's not typically about us any more, and when I say “us,” I mean

like us, the older ballroom leaders and stuff. It's not typically about us any more, it's more so about what we've done and it not just being lost.

So, that's why when Joey had, when he asked me to do this, I was like, "I would love to do it." Because ultimately, you know, this is—you know, ballroom is something that helped me and I won't physically be here forever to actually tell my story, you know, tell my stories or tell a person. I won't even probably be relevant to some people at some point. I mean, we all have our time, and then it's time to—it's a new us born every day.

So, you know, so I feel like I just wanna add in that I think this is a very, very, very, very informative and very good thing that you guys are doing. I can't wait to see how it's gonna turn out. I'm glad to be a part of it. Yeah.

SG: Okay! Thank you so much. I think we'll stop the recording there.

[End of Audio]