

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Alvernian Davis

Interviewed by Joseph Plaster

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Interviewee: Alvernian Davis (AD)

Interviewer: Joseph Plaster (JP)

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JP: We're gonna go ahead and start. Today is March 24, 2019. This is Joey Plaster. I'm here in Greenwich Village, New York. Do you want to go ahead and just introduce yourself, your name, your house, any titles, that kind of thing?

AD: Good afternoon. My name is Alvernian Davis. I'm the founder of the Iconic House of Prestige, which was created in 1990 in Philadelphia.

JP: Maybe we'll start with a little bit of background, before you got into ballroom, when you were born, where you were born, a little bit about what your life was like.

AD: I was born in Philadelphia, 1972. As a child, I probably was into writing music, doing plays. I went to boarding school as a teenager. When I graduated, my plan was to become a songwriter/producer, but that didn't go that way.

So I went to my first ball in 1988, which my good friend, Michael Gaskins, took me to. Later that year, in 1989, he had the first ball in Philadelphia, which was called the Onyx Ball, back in August 1989. I was a part of the House of Onyx.

Eventually, a few people left. I joined the House of Jahdu in later '89. In 1990, January, I created and founded the House of Xavier, which was open for six months. Then later that year, we created the House of Prestige.

JP: Okay. I'm gonna take you back just a little bit. Tell me about your family, the neighborhood you grew up in. Just paint a picture of your life throughout elementary school, middle school, that kind of thing.

AD: My mother was 14 when she had me. So, basically, we was more like brother and sister more than mother and son. So my grandmom basically raised me.

I guess when I was about maybe eight, I probably was playing hide-and-seek and playing house with the other boys and girls in the neighborhood. So I was always wanting to be the mother when we was playing house. I think that's when I was trying to identify

my sexual understanding and my sexuality, not really understanding it too. I didn't really consider myself gay because I probably didn't know what that meant at that time. So basically I guess I was finding myself.

I think about when I turned 12, I started really indentifying that I was really attracted to boys. So about 14 years old is when I first came out into the gay scene in Philadelphia. It was fascinating to see all these people that looked like me and acted like me and such a good community. So I just fell in love with the gay scene in Philadelphia.

JP: When you were 14.

AD: Yeah.

JP: So what did the gay scene look like to you, because you probably couldn't get into bars?

AD: I couldn't get into bars, but I used to sneak into them sometimes. But just the atmosphere, not even going directly into the club, but just hanging out on the gay strip with people that was my age or even older, just hanging out all night was just a beautiful, amazing thing. It was the experience of just hanging out in the strip with everyone, the gay scene.

Now I hate when we try to compare the two, from now till back then. The younger kids always say, "Y'all old, so y'all had a different upbringing." No. The upbringing was a lot better in the '80s and the '90s, because I think the respect level was better back then, the elders in general. I've always been a respectful person, but even me being young in the gay scene, we always still showed respect to the elder gays.

But the young gays that were out when I first came out, they was respectful anyway. People thought I was older. I was 14. They thought I was like 19 years old because I was well respected, mannered. Just my thought process was a mature level, was different. But sometimes I would sneak into clubs, get in there and party and just hang out and stuff like that.

We had more places to really go to back then in the '80s and the '90s. So I guess when ballroom came along, it just opened, flooded a new door in the gay community also.

JP: Tell me about that. Do you remember the first time you heard about ballroom?

AD: Well, the first time I heard about ballroom was from Michael Gaskins.

JP: Who is that?

AD: He was the founder of the Philadelphia ballroom scene. He had the first house and the first ball. So he would talk about balls. I would watch him vogue in the club and I was like, "I want to do that."

He was voguing the old way, him and this other guy named Mick Aiello. I used to be amazed at how swiftly and precise their hands and feet would move and stuff like that. It was just like something out of a movie scene. So I used to just sit and imitate them and watch them, like this is what I want to do.

JP: You were how old?

AD: I was about 16. So Michael Gaskins took me to my first ball in New York City, which was the LaBeija Sunshine Ball. So that had to be in 1988. I was 16 then. So in 1989, Michael said he was opening a house and he wanted me to join and everything. So I joined the House of Onyx, not knowing what the – I could just guess that it was just like gay family, but not really understanding ballroom culture, because I had no understanding of it.

So even looking at that first ball, it was exciting to see. So I guess he put the ball together in August 1989, which was the first ball of Philly. A lot of Philly people came out, but mostly it was more New York people there. The House of Omni, LaBeija, all of them were there. I think it was a couple of months after that all the LaBeijas became Revlons, but they were LaBeijas at the time of our first ball.

JP: You were talking about the first time you saw voguing that you were fascinated by it. Can you say a little bit more about why you were fascinated? What drew you to it, what you saw?

AD: When I was younger, I used to dress up with high heels and dance in the mirror and stuff like that. But it was just something about the way they moved so swiftly. I don't know. It was just alluring, captivating. I was just like, "I want to do what he's doing." Plus, he was handsome, the guy, Mick Aiello. He was a pretty boy, but there was just something mesmerizing about the way he was

voguing, like, "I need to do this." So I just learned and practiced until I created my own style.

JP: Then how long was it until you joined the house?

AD: This was '87. No, this was '88, me watching them in the club. So a year later, '89, I joined. Later that summer, Michael Gaskins created the first ball, which was the Onyx Ball.

Not knowing the different things about people leaving houses and joining houses, a group of us wanted to leave and we wanted to join the House of Jahdu, which was another house in Philly, which the leader was Taffy. She was the mother and she wound up taking me under her wings, making me her son, her gay son.

So I wound up joining her house, and throughout me being there and learning the history of her house and learning the history of the House of Onyx, I was like, "Well, if they can do that, I can do this too." I was only 17 years old, but I just felt like I was a born leader, and that I wanted to lead people in a different direction than what they was leading them into.

So, again, after Christmas I left the House of Jahdu. I went home and I kept saying, "I'm going to create my own house, my own family, to run it the way I want to run it." So I kept trying to figure out what should I call this house. Most of those houses were named after fashion designers. So I kept saying, "I don't want it to be named after a fashion house. I need to come up with a cliquy name."

So one day I was thinking about this boy I used to date and his name was Xavier. So I said, "You know what. Since I'm thinking about him and I'm missing him," he left Philly and moved back to whatever state. I think he moved to California or something. So to keep remembrance of him, I'm going to name my house after him. So the house became the House of Xavier.

I had so many people following me and joining my house and stuff. I remember Madonna's "Vogue" song came out and we did a production in the club. The club was called Lagros. They said they were gonna sponsor our house, the club. So they had a logo up in the club, had a logo on the wall that said, "House of Xavier." So that was our headquarters. The nightclub was our headquarters. So when Madonna's "Vogue" came out, we did a production of that, recreated the video at the club, and it was beautiful.

So one day, the owner of the nightclub, his name was Joey Venuti [sp?], he invited us to his penthouse to talk about sponsoring our house, paying for us to go to all these balls, renting a van, paying our admission. Everything was gonna be sponsored by the club.

So he was like, “Who is the father of the house,” which was me. He asked me how old I was. He was like, “You look kind of young.” I was like, “I’m 18.” He was like, “Huh? You’re 18. You’re the leader of all this at this young age,” and I was like, “Yeah.” Then he’s like, “You’ve been coming into my club all these years and you’re only 18 years old.” I was like, “Yep.”

He was like, “Well, for you to be the leader of this, you need to be 21. We need to find somebody else to run the house, but you stay on as a board member.” I was like, “No. I’m not doing that. I created this. You’re not taking my position, to give it to somebody else, for me to fall in the background.”

So I got mad. I left. I said, “Whoever wants to leave with me can leave. Whoever wants to stay here with him can stay.” So a few people left. I went straight to the nightclub, took my banner off the wall, stormed out of there and went home. I was just like, “Ugh.” I was irritated.

So a couple months later, me and this boy that liked me – his name was Michael Brown. They called him Mike B. We was in the Nile club, which was an after-hours gay club in Philadelphia. He asked me; he was like, “I want to start a new house and I want you to run it.” I was like, “Well, what’s gonna be the name of this new house?” He was like, “I don’t know. I’m coming up with a couple of names.”

So he was like, “Well, you’re gonna be the father and you recruit the people, because you’re talented in finding new talent.” So I said, “All right, we’re gonna make this work.”

So we had our first meeting at my apartment in West Philly, and he decided that the name of the house was gonna be Prestige. I was like, “That kind of works,” because, again, it’s not after a fashion house like a lot of ballroom houses were, and it had a meaning behind it.

JP: Why did you want to kind of buck that trend, the naming trend?

AD: Because I just felt like it didn’t belong to me. I heard a lot of those ballroom houses got sued by them fashion houses, because they

was using their name and their logo. So you can't use a fashion house's name and logo and not get sued, even though the fashion houses were flattered because they found a new pathway into this community. They found the talent of ballroom by them interacting with these people's legit business name. So they were mad and they was happy at the same time.

But the ballroom community wasn't really profiting off of their name as far as the fashion houses, because ball houses were more into competition and they were into designing clothes. So they weren't doing the same thing.

Anyway, we came up with the name Prestige. It rung a bell with me and stuck. When we first created the house, I was the mother. Back then, the mothers ruled ballroom. They had the most power.

JP: Back then was about when?

AD: This is 1990 when the house originally opened. So about '92 is when the trend shifted. The fathers had become more powerful in ballroom.

JP: Tell me about that shift.

AD: I don't know how it shifted. I guess the mothers started trending down. I guess the fathers started taking more responsibility and being more assertive. So when I seen that changing, then I had to change my title. So I became the father because I needed to be in charge. So that's the reason I became the father.

JP: Were your roles different as a mother versus a father?

AD: They still was the same. I still was running my house. So then, I decided I wanted a real female to be the mother instead of a boy or a femme queen, transgender. So I recruited this girl. She was beautiful, hair, face. Her name was Obsession. So she became the mother and I was the father.

JP: Why did you want a cis female?

AD: I wanted something different. I just felt like the people would relate more in the community to her, this cis woman being the mother. She would feel more motherly to them for some reason. I don't know. That was just my observation at that time that I wanted my rules to be different than other ballroom houses, because back then, most of the mothers were butch queens or

transgender women, and a lot of the mothers were actually just the mothers for ballroom. When ballroom was over, they was back to being a boy, just like Pepper LaBeija.

I remember at that time Aura LaBeija was the mother. She was walking femme queen categories, but she really wasn't a femme queen. She was a butch queen. She was only a femme queen for ballroom. I didn't understand how can you be a femme queen for ballroom, but don't live your life as a femme queen. She lived her life as a boy, but she was just a ballroom femme queen. But now she just walks butch queen categories.

I don't know. I just wanted to be different. I wanted to be a pain in the butt and I wanted to go against the grain. I never followed anybody's rules in ballroom. So I guess that would make me different. Plus, my name stood out. I don't think there's any other person with the name Alvernian Davis in the United States. So my name stood out. Me being defiant stood out in ballroom.

So back then, people thought I was the founder of the ballroom scene in Philadelphia. Michael Gaskins actually was the founder. But after that ball, Michael Gaskins did not participate in ballroom anymore. Maybe the next two years he joined different houses and walked, but he never gave another ball after that. So it was just like he was there.

But the next year of ballroom, '91, I created the first mini ball series nationally. So that was historic right there.

JP: So there were no mini balls.

AD: There were no mini balls. I think Kevin Omni might have gave a mini ball in New York in the '80s, the early '80s, but they wasn't a series. They was just like a small version of a ball that year and that was it. Maybe he might have did it five or ten years later, but I created a series.

So my mini ball series was every Tuesday night at the Nile for the next six years. People from all over the world was coming down to those mini balls. They used to drive in U-Haul trucks and vans and be piled up. Those mini balls was very exciting and competitive, bigger than some of the big balls.

So a year later, in 1992, I created the category butch queen voguing like a femme queen, which is now called butch queen vogue femme, which is the most popular category in ballroom, and

I'm the founder and the creator of that. I was the first person to have that category, March 1992, at my ball in Roses. The winner that night was Tiny LaBeija St. Laurent LaBeija, rest in peace.

JP: Can you describe that that category is?

AD: The category then, it was just the butch queens imitating how the femme queens vogue, not knowing that it would take off and be the biggest category in ballroom to this day.

After that category that night, then probably a year later, Jack Mizrahi changed the name of the category to butch queen vogue femme. So that's how that came about, but I am the founder, the first person to ever have the category butch queen vogue femme at a ball. So yeah.

But in the early days, ballroom was just so different then. The era we live in now is more social media type. So everything now, you can find out by looking on YouTube or all these different ballroom channels, Facebook and Instagram. You can find people voguing.

Now, it's become international since it became mainstream. You got balls in Paris and London and China. But back then, in the '80s and '90s, you had to go to another ball to find out when the next ball was going on. So back then, it was probably about six balls a year. Now, you can get six balls a month. It's so easy to attain status and celebrityness in ballroom because there's so many going on now. But back then, yeah, the competition was better.

You didn't have a lot of categories. You probably had about 10 to 12 categories back in the day. Now, you've got about 20 to 40 categories.

JP: I imagine that you would learn how to perform in a really different way. Some of the young people I've talked with today, they look at YouTube videos to learn how to vogue.

AD: Mm-hmm.

JP: You mentioned this actually, that you did a lot of practicing to come up with your own style. So I'm curious how you learned yourself, what categories you walked in.

AD: The first category I walked was the old way because that's what I was fascinated about. I wanted to do the old way, because the old way was the only category of voguing style back then, until '92,

which became butch queen vogue femme, became a phenomenon. All the categories that are out like new way and vogue femme, they were created through butch queen old way, which is the original voguing category. So every style that people are doing now, they've taken elements from the old way to create the new categories that they're doing.

So, basically, that was the first category that I walked, but the first category that I really enjoyed, in 1992 I won new face. I did schoolboy runners before. I did pretty boy runners. I walked best dressed. I walked runway foot and eyewear. So I got up in drag. So I played around with a lot of categories, but my passion still was always voguing the old way. So that's what I'm legendary for. So I've walked a bunch of categories, but old way has always been my main category, which I've been fascinated about.

JP: So tell me more. Again, go back to the very beginning, when you saw it for the first time. Tell me exactly how you learned it. Was it just by going to the balls?

AD: Going to the clubs. The club vogue battles was way better than going to any ball. We would just be standing against a wall and join the club atmosphere. A certain beat would come on and those people that you thought was masculine, the whole femininity came out. Even though old way is still a masculine category, it still have feminine traits.

When certain songs come on, the way they would – I was like, “How do they fall into these dips and twirling and locking like that?” It was just so amazing. So I would go the clubs just to watch that.

One day this guy named Gigi, he said, “Do you want me to teach you a couple of moves and stuff?” So he would sit down and practice with me and tell me to do this one, two, three, and pose and do that. So I watched those people like Mick Aiello.

Michael Gaskins, he was more into the new way, style of voguing, which is still the old way, but with stretching. So I didn't really like his style too much because I wasn't trying to bend my body up into a pretzel. But the old way was fascinating. Again, I picked up moves from them, and I just added my own little style into it to create my own style.

But yeah, my voguing is just from watching people at the clubs and stuff and watching the battles. They would make a big circle in

the club. If you didn't like that person, you would stand into that circle and that was your fight right there. Y'all two battle in that circle, and sometimes friendships was built out of that.

I remember me and this boy named Carlos. We used to vogue at Nile and I ain't like him for some reason. I don't know. I just didn't like him. One day we was on the floor. We was voguing and battling each other. Then we wound up hugging and we became friends. He was one of the co-founders of Prestige, too, along with Mike B. So we got close after that. I couldn't stand him, but that one day battling in the club brought us together to be friends.

JP: And when you say battling in the club, were you battling for a trophy?

AD: No, just in the clubs. There wasn't no – you only get trophies at balls. So this was just – the clubs would be your freestyle battling, and voguing freestyle, because more people, when they're at the balls they was home practicing. When you're at the club, you just do stuff and you don't know where it came from, and you're like, "Damn, I need to take that to the ball," and you get there and you forgot what you did at that club night. So yeah, that freestyle voguing was awesome.

Then people would come down from different cities on club night and it'd just be a battle. But those were the best battles, way better than balls was the club freestyling, battling. So you two would have an attitude and battling with each other, and then a circle would form around y'all. Then the whole club has formed a circle around watching ya'll battle. So those were probably the best for me.

JP: Then at the end of that battle, is there a winner?

AD: Whatever the crowd go up for. Whatever the crowd was like, "You ate her. You served her," or you felt like you won, or by the time you ate her up, that person left and somebody else done came on the floor to battle you. So you thought you was the winner then, because that person you battled on left. So you done tore her up so much somebody else had to come in and try to get you.

JP: I think that's fascinating. I mean the anecdote you shared, the person you hated for whatever reason, and through this battle you turned it completely around.

AD: Yes.

JP: Why would that have happened?

AD: I guess they always said back then your beef was supposed to be on the dance floor instead of you actually fist fighting with this person. Gay people back in those days, you could step on a foot and then that turns into an attitude with that person. Or you don't like this person because they don't like your friend, so you don't like them.

You're disliking these people for no reason, just because your friends don't like them, or they might have bumped into you in the club or they looked at you wrong in the club. You know, they might have been cruising you or having an attraction to you, but to your mind that's like they throwing shade, so I don't like them.

So I guess people that you dislike for whatever reason, y'all wound up battling on the floor and talking afterwards, becoming friends or cool or associates or whatever. You get to meet a lot of people, get to talk to them and understand them, that you didn't have an understanding because you didn't know them. You didn't get a chance to know them. So battling it out on the floor is how a lot of friendships started.

JP: So instead of having a fist fight –

AD: You would battle it out on the floor.

JP: You would battle it out on the floor, and that almost transforms your relationship.

AD: Yeah. Mind, don't get it twisted. They still had fist fights back in those days, but that was a way that eliminated a lot of that stuff.

JP: Okay. Let's get to Baltimore. Why did you move to Baltimore? When was that?

AD: Okay. Before I even moved to Baltimore, I always loved Baltimore. The House of Revlon was the first house in Baltimore, even though they was a New York City house. Tony and Stewart, which were the mother and father at the time, they moved out of New York and moved to Baltimore. So they created this whole community of ballroom people down there, which mostly were Revlon members.

Their second house ball, they gave it in Baltimore. So I went to the ball down there. I started meeting people, hanging out with people in Baltimore. So one day the club owner, he was real cool with me and stuff like that, and they started having mini balls at Club Bunns, which is still open.

JP: What year was this?

AD: This was about '94. So he was like, "Why don't you come down here and do a little mini ball at Bunns." I said, "I'll think about it."

JP: Because you were already doing it in Philly.

AD: I was already doing it in Philly and he knew about it, people coming from Baltimore, coming up to my mini balls in Philly, because I was the only person doing mini balls nationally. So people from New York, Jersey, D.C., Baltimore was always coming to Philly to my mini balls every Tuesday, which was called Elements of Vogue. So he asked me to do a mini ball. He was like whenever I wanted to come do one in Baltimore, just let him know.

JP: Was that Sandy?

AD: No. That was Dana who was the owner. People was having mini balls already, started having mini balls or having balls, period, at Bunns. The House of Revlon had their house ball there. It was set up a little different back then, then it is now, in the '90s. So people was having regular balls at Bunns. They wouldn't call them mini balls. They was regular balls, big balls.

So I wound up having a mini ball down there and just growing a good friendship of people and networking down there. I was a good networker.

JP: And Bunns was in the same location?

AD: The same location it is now. It's been there 20-something years, almost 30 years. That place has been the staple of Baltimore Black, African American LGBT community. So over the years, I had various mini balls there.

I moved to Baltimore probably about 2006. That year, I created the first Baltimore Awards Ball. Tony Revlon had many ball award ceremonies at Bunns, but I created the first big awards ball, and it was at The Paradox. So I did that for about three years. After the

third year, the Baltimore Coalition took over the awards ball. So that's how that happened.

But yeah, I moved there. I love Baltimore. I have a rich history of going there since the '90s. So when I moved there, it was already still like family. I had gay kids there and grandkids and nephews and nieces. So it just felt like home. That was my second home.

JP: Take me back to those first mini balls you organized with Bunns. Maybe first of all, for someone who has never been to Bunns, can you kind of paint a picture of what did it look like? What did it feel like to be there?

AD: Bunns was just the spot in the '90s. There was no other clubs in Bunns [*sic*] besides The Paradox. The Paradox was an afterhours club and it was only open on Saturdays. Bunns was open seven days a week. That was the headquarters for everybody. If you came to Baltimore, that's where you went, to Bunns.

Every night was something different. They had drag shows there, exotic dancers. Then they started their mini balls and regular balls there. Bunns wasn't a humongous club, but there was always a good gathering of people, so everybody was close-knit.

So like any other gay club, you had your ups and downs and stuff, but the feel of it was just so beautiful back in those days. Bunns was exciting. Just like everything evolves, things change as the years go by. So yeah, the experience of Bunns was just beautiful. Plus, a lot of the memories of people that are no long with us that was there, just the family values.

People party different now than they partied then. Plus, there wasn't no social media back in those days. So again, you had to go out to these events or social gatherings to build friendships and connections and network with people. To find out when upcoming events and balls and parties were going on, you had to go out and mingle with these people. So the atmosphere was different.

There wasn't no text messaging and no stuff. Back then, you had beepers. So you had to beep somebody and then go to a pay phone to call them back and find out what was going on. So there wasn't no text, no cell phones, but everything was more close-knitted. The experience was better.

JP: So Bunns was like a community space.

AD: Yes.

JP: How would you describe the crowd that gathered in Bunns?

AD: Um –

JP: Again, I guess I'm thinking about someone listening to this who would have no idea about ballroom, no idea about Bunns.

AD: It wasn't a lot of fighting and arguing. I think everybody, for the most part, got along. The friendships was good. I cherish those friendships with people, especially a lot of them that's not here no more, just the memories. I have a photo album from the '90s to now of different events at Bunns, parties, balls, us just hanging out, snapshots.

[Crosstalk]

AD: I can bring them with me when I come to the Peabody. I've got old flyers from Bunns, balls from the early '90s. I got all that stuff.

JP: Okay. Tell me about, again, like some of the first mini balls at Bunns. You said this was like around '94?

AD: Yeah. Again, you had Sandy Dior was giving them. She's originally from New York. So she moved to Baltimore, too. So she's like one of the pioneers down there also. So, again, you had Tony Revlon giving balls, Sandy Dior.

JP: Would you say that those were the two kind of founders of ballroom in Baltimore?

AD: Yeah, you could say that, yeah. Sandy and Tony was mostly the blueprint of ballroom down there, along with Lisa Revlon. So yeah, those were more the blueprints.

And Dana, the club owner, he was real supportive of ballroom, even though he wasn't really a part of ballroom. They called him Great-Grandfather Ebony, because him and Dre, which is the grandfather now of Ebony, they was like real close brothers. So he was an honorary member of the House of Ebony.

He always supported ballroom 100 percent. He gave ballroom a space. So when those balls and mini balls started in Baltimore, they was always at Bunns, nowhere else. Then as the years went

by, they started having events at The Paradox, but Bunns was the headquarters for everything.

JP: So in '94, what were the major houses in Baltimore?

AD: Revlon was the major house down there. Dior. Who else started down there? Then Aphrodite opened up, a chapter of Aphrodite, which was from New York City.

Most of the houses in Baltimore were chapters of New York houses. There wasn't too many actual houses that were born out of Baltimore until later in the 2000s, but in the '90s they were chapters of other houses. I created a chapter down there about '95. I started recruiting members in Baltimore. So I had a chapter of Prestige down there in '95.

Then you had the Khans down there, which was a D.C. house, but D.C. is part of Maryland and Baltimore, that DMV area. So the Khans were down there, part of that. That's basically that's it. Then the Ebonys came along. Then Richard, the founder, moved from New York and moved to Baltimore, and then he had a bunch of Ebonys down there in the mid-'90s.

JP: I'm curious what was different about ballroom at that time versus now. You mentioned social media.

AD: The social media plays a big part in it. The value of houses were different. They were more family-oriented. If you look at *Paris is Burning*, the way they duplicated that in the movie is mostly the same way they were doing it in the '90s. It was more family-oriented.

People were scared in those days to leave their current house to go to other houses. The attitude, the mentality now, this younger generation, they'll leave your house in a minute and have no remorse about it. I think they have a stronger platform, a stronger voice.

Back then, people were scared to leave houses. They'd think they would get beat up or chopped if they left that particular house to go to another one or start their own. So a lot of people stayed in their house, too, for fear.

So ballroom has good aspects and bad aspects. We could sit here and talk about all the good that ballroom does, but you've got to have bad with the good. You can't have it all one. You have to

have a balance there. So there's a lot of bad stuff that has happened in ballroom that probably continues to happen, but I think the good outweighs the bad.

There was less fights back in those days. The respect level was better. When you heard the word "legend," even if you never saw that person a day in your life, you was supposed to get up, clap for them. That respect was due.

You can go to a ball now and someone says legend or icon, and then people will sit there, be on their cell phone, texting. They was like, "Well I don't know how that person is." But as soon as their favorite YouTube clip voguer come on, they get up and go crazy and stuff like that.

I think, again, that social media part plays a part. Then ballroom becoming mainstream plays a big role in it, because ballroom back then was underground. If you wasn't in ballroom, you didn't know nothing about it. You didn't know when the ball was or going, because there was no, "I need to look online and see if there's a ball coming up." There was no information about that. You had to attend that last ball to find out when the next two balls was coming up. So if you didn't go to that ball, you didn't know about that ball, because that's how deep underground it was.

JP: So how did that make it feel differently? What impact has the mainstreaming had on ballroom today?

AD: I think the mainstream – it's good that we're mainstream because you're getting so many more opportunities. People are making movies and becoming – people are hiring people, that queer graph stuff and design. Ballroom has a lot of talent. You've got so many professional dancers and models and singers. You've got people that design clothes.

So these celebrities and companies are hiring people through ballroom. There's so much documentaries going on about ballroom, movies. People are doing plays about ballroom. All these cable networks are doing scenarios around ballroom. So that plays a good role of getting the network system with our community, our ballroom community good. But sometimes you miss that privacy of just being a secret society.

JP: I was gonna say are there downsides?

AD: Yeah. The downside is that you miss that, “Oh my god. I’ve got to wait six months until this ball.” There’s like 50 balls coming up, so you’ve got to pick and choose where you want to go. Before, you didn’t have to pick and choose. You had to get prepared months in advance for the upcoming ball. Now, it’s like, “Am I going to this ball this week or should wait till next month, to the next ball?”

JP: When you say it was a secret society, tell me what you mean by that.

AD: Again, if you was not part of ballroom, you didn’t know about it. Straight people didn’t know what ballroom was. To them, Madonna created voguing. That’s what people thought that didn’t know nothing about ballroom, even gay people. If you didn’t know about ballroom, you would think Madonna created the vogue category. Paris Dupree created voguing the old way.

So social media has played their part. You can Google anything about ballroom now and find out. A girl hit me up a couple months ago and said, “I heard about your ball. I found on Google a ball coming in Philly. That’s how I found out about the Dorian Corey Awards.”

That’s a good thing business-wise now because you’re getting more exposure, more revenue. But back then, it was just like – it was an “Ah.” And people that didn’t know about ballroom that you introduced them to it, it was just like a whole ‘nother world opened up to them.

Now, it’s not a whole ‘nother world opening up because people have heard about it. You’ve got eight year olds on YouTube voguing. I met a lady saying, “Is there an age limit, because I want to bring my kids to the ball because they’re interested in watching the voguing?” So that’s the difference.

JP: I guess related to that is the question of the ball at the Peabody. This is part of the kind of mainstream movement in Baltimore. So I’m curious about your thoughts about the Peabody Ball, how it fits into the longer history of ballroom that you have been a part of.

AD: I think it’s a wonderful thing. I know people are excited just to have the community experience the library. I’m quite sure if there wasn’t a ball there, people probably wouldn’t even know what the – I didn’t even know what the Peabody Library was, never heard of it, and I lived in Baltimore.

So to be a part of this history is opening up doors of experiences that people never knew of, and to experience this type of event and magnitude going there is exciting. I think it will open up people's lookout of people that work at Johns Hopkins, to look at ballroom different, to get an understanding, for them to get an understanding. Because they might have heard about it, but to experience it and to see it, it will be exciting for them.

It is a good networking thing, because you never know who you might meet at this event or wind up collaborating with and stuff. So it's a lot of opportunities that this is going mainstream.

JP: If this becomes a more long-term project, what would be the pitfalls of this kind of collaboration? What would you want to steer clear of? How would you want to design the ball or projects like the ball in a way that makes it the best for everybody?

AD: I don't know. That's kind of a hard question. I don't think there would be no downfalls. I just think making sure that no one destroys anything. That should be the most thing that you worry about. You've got these historical books and stuff. Just making sure people respect the space is all that I'm concerned about.

Other than that, everything is exciting, up in the air. I think it's a wonderful thing. I think it will grow into something bigger and bigger every year if you continue it. But yeah, just making sure the boundaries are set and it's a safe atmosphere for everybody. For the long part, I think people will respect the building. You've just got to always set rules and regulations for stuff.

JP: Yeah. I have some wrap-up questions about ballroom. Actually, some of these come from Marco. I'm curious if you can kind of think about what ballroom has meant to you over the past 30 years and what you think you gained from it. What are some of the things?

AD: When I first got into ballroom, like I said, I was excited about it because it was a new world to me, but I never envisioned that I would be here 30 years later. This is not where I thought my life would be continuing to be a part of.

It's been a long journey and an exciting journey. I've met so many wonderful people from ballroom. Some of my closest friends I met being in this scene, because, again, my mother moved to Florida in 1987. When I graduated high school in '89, I was supposed to be

in Florida, move with her, but I decided I wanted to stay in Philadelphia with my grandmother.

I always sit back and think. If I would have went to Florida, I would not have been a part of the Philadelphia ballroom scene. I would not have been a part of its history making. If I would have never went to that first ball, I would have never known nothing about ballroom.

Twenty years later, I probably would have found out about it because it became mainstream, but I probably would not have been involved in ballroom if I would have moved to Florida with my mom. Again, I created so many legends and icons. Prestige is the oldest house in Philly.

I don't know where I would be, but I'm glad I stayed. I've had so many awesome opportunities and blessings throughout my 30 years in ballroom, the experiences of traveling from different states and meeting new people, building new bonds and friendships with people, different communities, being a part of different organizations and nonprofits. So yeah, this 30 years has been very exciting and I can't wait to celebrate my 30th anniversary in August.

JP: Where's that?

AD: In Philadelphia. That's the Onyx Ball, the 30th anniversary celebration. It's celebrating my 30-year career and Philadelphia's 30-year as a ballroom scene together.

JP: It sounds like when you think about what you've gotten out of ballroom, it's very much the community.

AD: Yes.

JP: Friends and connections and nonprofits and organizations that you've worked with.

AD: Yes.

JP: So it becomes this space where a lot of different people are coming together and build friendships.

AD: Yes.

JP: Okay. How do you think you've changed through ballroom? That's a hard question because it started out when you how old?

AD: Sixteen. How have I changed? I don't know. I really think I'm the same person from 16 years old. I just think I became wiser and smarter and more knowledgeable, but I think I'm still the same person.

JP: How would you describe that 16 year old?

AD: Unapologetic, funny, ambitious, a little shady, but shady as a character in ballroom, but in my personal life, real shy, soft-spoken. I can command an audience. I'm also Philadelphia's first MC. So me being on a microphone, I can command hundreds of people in the audience and feel myself at peace. But when I'm one-on-one with somebody or speaking close and personal in a group, I tend to be shy.

That's always been a thing. I never knew why. But ballroom as a whole, being up in front of hundreds of people opens me up. But when I'm here, like even right now with you, in a small setting – I did a play a couple months ago. There probably was about 30 people there. I just felt so shy and scared and nervous for some reason. I don't know why. Small settings, one-on-one, make me real shy and timid. I don't know why. For some reason it's always been like that, for the past 30 years. But when I'm in front of a bunch of people, something opens me up.

JP: Other people have told me that when they're there with hundreds of people at the ball, they almost feel like they become another person.

AD: Yes.

JP: So I think that's –

AD: I'm Alvernian Davis Prestige when I get into ballroom mode, but I'm Alvernian Davis – when I leave that ballroom, the Alvernian Davis Prestige turns off. I always told people that, that really didn't know me. I'm not the same person in ballroom that I am at home.

A lot of people in ballroom think, "He might be shady or bougie," or whatever, but that's just that ballroom persona. When I'm home, I'm Alvernian Davis. I'm kind, sweet-hearted, shy. I have a small close-knit of friends. I'm known all over the world. I'm known in

ballroom. I know a lot of people, but I don't mess with a lot of people when I leave ballroom.

JP: Actually, this fascinates me. I think this is incredible because it's about how you change yourself through performance. Can you tell me a little bit more about what your ballroom persona looks like, and what you think that does for you just on a daily basis?

AD: I think it keeps me balanced. Even though I can incorporate my ballroom life into my personal life because, again, I think they're both connected into one. They used to be separate years ago, but I think now, being so long in ballroom, it is a part of me.

You hear people say, "Well, ballroom is just a hobby for me. I don't take it personal. It's not part of my life." But ballroom is a part of my life now. I've been in ballroom 30 years, so it is a part of me.

No matter when I go out in the street – like one day somebody introduced me and said, "This is Icon Alvernian Davis." I was like, "No, I'm just Alvernian Davis. You don't have to introduce me like that because we're not at a ball," but ballroom has become part of me. So it is who I am also.

JP: So when you first started, you might have had these two separate personas, but now they're kind of integrated.

AD: Yeah, they became one now.

JP: Some people, like Sebastian, have told me that participation in ballroom kind of prepares you for real life in a way. Do you think that's true?

AD: Yes, most definitely. A lot of people that come into ballroom have low self-esteem. A lot of them are not street savvy or educated and stuff. Ballroom can chew you up and spit you out. It's a good learning process. It has a lot of good tools.

Yeah, ballroom can get you prepared for a lot of stuff, just everyday living and the struggles of life. Again, ballroom has so much rich culture in it and a lot of good people. I guess ballroom is what you make of it now.

JP: Can you give maybe one example of how ballroom might have prepared you for real life?

AD: I think gay people in general and ballroom people are some of the – not shady and mean, but shady that will tell you how it is and won't sugarcoat stuff. A lot of people will water down stuff to help you prepare for life. Ballroom people will be like, "I'm gonna tell you how it is. This is how that is and this is that, that and that."

They won't hold no bars. I think ballroom people speak their mind. I think they keep it 100. Then a lot of people have so many struggles in life. It's a learning experience to talk to different people in ballroom, a lot of depression, a lot of mental illness, a lot of addiction, a lot of homelessness in ballroom.

I think ballroom has saved a lot of people's lives from drugs and alcohol and homelessness, especially with the resources and just having strong family ties with people, helping people out. You have people that have the ability to – ballroom has so many different types of people. You got people here that's educated, that are lawyers, that work in the medical field, that work in white collar businesses that have resources to help each other out.

You've got people that work in educational fields that can help you get your GED, help you fill out job applications and resumes. So there's a lot of good networking in ballroom.

JP: You said that you think ballroom has actually saved lives.

AD: Yeah, definitely, definitely saved lives. Just like a lot of people are lost, they're not understanding their sexuality. A lot of people have tried to commit suicide, been depressed and taking drugs. A lot of people have been raped and molested as younger kids. I think joining the ballroom scene, they get that family they never had.

A lot of people got disowned by their parents because they was gay. So these houses have become their family. I think I deal with ballroom people more than I do with my biological family. I think I'm closer to the people in ballroom, my friends. They are my family. So I think I'm really closer to them, the bonds that I've built over these past 30 years.

Then the people that I've raised over 30 years. I've helped people get into college, get into the military. I had some of my kids live with me. There's a lot of good things out of ballroom.

JP: And that's what you're talking about when you talked about family values.

AD: Yes.

JP: Okay. And so it's like this intergenerational community. I have maybe two more questions and then I'm gonna let you go.

You have fathers. You have grandfathers. You have sons and daughters. I'm curious. If somebody comes to you and they want to become your son or daughter, and you sit them down and you've decided to mentor this person, what are some of the most important things that you want to impart to that person?

AD: First, I need to have a connection with them, because anybody just comes and says, "I just want somebody to be my parent," just for the heck of it. I don't just take anybody and say, "I'm gonna make you my kid." I've got to have some kind of connection with you. I need to see something in you that I feel like I need to parent you. Just because I'm a leader or a parent don't mean I have to be your leader or your parent.

Then a lot of my kids, they're real picky. They're like, "I've got to meet this person before they become a part of our family," and stuff like that.

But me parenting or mentoring these people, I take that very seriously, like I birthed them. I do have a biological son. So I will treat my gay kids the same way I will treat my biological son, do the same exact things. And they need to have that understanding that you're gonna respect me as your parent, as your mentor, or we're not gonna with that.

But I always make sure to tell these people don't join ballroom for the hell of it. Don't join a particular house because you feel like this house is gonna fight for you or craft for you or do this for you. Join a house because you feel like this house can help you grow as a person, that they're gonna be supportive with you. They're gonna be part of your family.

I think a lot of these people now, they jump from house to house to house because they're not getting what they was looking for, or somebody promised them something that they didn't get. So that's a main reason why a lot of people leave houses.

The House of Prestige is built on getting an education, getting a job, you know, back in the '90s. If my kids didn't go to school or get jobs, I got rid of them. You're not just gonna sit around, lay around, sleep all day, don't go to school. What kind of parent or

leader am I if I'm just letting you sit around my house all day when you're supposed to be in school or getting a job? That was always my main concern.

JP: When you say the House of Prestige is built on education, can you say more about that?

AD: Anybody that was not in school, I made sure that they go enrolled back in school, no matter what I had to do. If they was really a part of my family, that's my main concern that I did. I took them to school, got them signed up, went and took my personal money and got them some school clothes, school books and all that stuff.

I even went to different organizations that I volunteer for and got them to give me money to help this person get car fare to school or to work or whatever. So yeah, that's how that operated.

JP: That's key. Okay. The last question is, again, related to the Peabody Ball. You're saying that education is key to your house. How do you see the Peabody Ball kind of playing into that or do you?

AD: I think in the future maybe y'all can have some type of categories wrapped around people like schoolboy runners as a category, about those schoolboys doing a project about Peabody, their experience not only about ballroom, but the history or the history of Johns Hopkins and stuff like that.

Inserting education into balls is good, inserting human resources, big network resources, like, yeah, we experience a ball here. We're giving you money and trophies, but integrating all these different services that could help them also, incorporate into Peabody I think would be a good thing.

JP: How would you incorporate education into the Peabody –?

AD: Let's say one year y'all get funding for something. That funding could be a scholarship to go to school or tuition, or maybe somebody might be interested in going to Johns Hopkins. So since Peabody is already part of Johns Hopkins, maybe doing certain volunteer work through the Peabody experience to get into Johns Hopkins, being an intern, just different things that doors might open up having this type of collaboration.

[End of Audio]