

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Legendary Mother Marco Blahnik

Interviewed by Joseph Plaster

January 24, 2019

Interviewee: Marco Blahnik (MB)

Interviewer: JP (JP)

Date: January 24, 2019

JP: Here we go. We are recording. I am Joey Plaster. What is the date today?

MB: January 24.

JP: January 24, 2019. We're here at the Peabody Library, in the Bridal Suite. Do you want to just start out by introducing yourself with whatever name or ballroom name you want to use?

MB: I am the Legendary Mother Marco Blahnik. I am the mother of the House of Blahnik, the DMV region.

JP: And tell me what the DMV region is.

MB: The DMV region means that I am in charge of Baltimore, D.C., and Virginia. So those are the three states or the three places that I cover.

JP: And what does that mean, that you're in charge of the states?

MB: Meaning I have members in all of those states, and I am one of the highest forms on that regional level. Each house has a mother and a father –

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and then you have mothers and fathers of cities. So almost like your overall parents would be like your CEO. Sometimes they are the CEOs. Then your regional leaders would be your supervisors. So I'm one of the supervisors *[laughs]*.

JP: Okay. So that's something we'll talk about later, how you kind of climbed the ladder I guess in ballroom.

And maybe actually this is a question for you. If this became kind of a radio program, how would people in ballroom introduce themselves? Would they talk about the categories they walk? How would you identify yourself?

MB: Of course you would – I think non-title ... will always identify ourselves by status. That's why I said I'm "The Legendary" Marco Blahnik and then title, so status, title –

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if you have one, but you'll definitely introduce status and then what it is that you do in ballroom, and then so on and so forth.

JP: What you do in ballroom meaning what?

MB: Your category, yeah.

JP: And what is your category?

MB: My category, I'm legendary for butch queen runway. It's a type of runway that's not like a traditional male model, but it's more so of actually a female model with flamboyance and more extravagant moves.

JP: So let's start with, I guess, childhood, where you were born, raised, a little bit about your life through elementary and middle school.

MB: Okay. I was raised in a neighborhood called Cherry Hill, which is south of the city, South Baltimore, with my mom, my dad. I grew up in South Baltimore. So after I moved from Cherry Hill, I lived in a neighborhood kind of close to Federal Hill.

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So I went to school in the South Baltimore, Federal Hill area. I went to Francis Scott Key magnet school, because I'm a pretty smart guy. That school is a magnet school for gifted and talented individuals. So there's where I went to – I went there from the third grade to the eighth grade because it's an elementary/middle school. So I was there from the third grade to the eighth grade. So I spent a lot of time there.

JP: And so you moved around in different neighborhoods, but it was always in South Baltimore?

MB: For the most part. When I got to high school, I ended up going to live with my aunt, because I wanted to be close to the school and she lived three blocks from my high school, so I ended up going to live with her. I was spending a lot of time there so that I could

easily get to school, because I didn't like catching the bus to school. Yeah.

JP: Can you describe what South Baltimore kind of looked like, what it felt like at that time?

MB: Oh, wow.

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Actually, what it is today is what it was then. It's a mixed neighborhood. You can get your high class. You can get your middle class. You can get your low class. You can even get your under-poverty. Cherry Hill was definitely one of those under-poverty kind of places, but it was a tight knit community. Everyone knew each other. Generations of families lived there, so you knew that that was someone from the – that family was someone from that family or that's So-and-So's grandchild.

So yeah, but when we moved to South Baltimore, which is adjacent to the Raven Stadium and the Oriole Stadium, that was a little different because it was more upscale and upper class, but you still had the same thing, like in Cherry Hill. You still had your –

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under class, things like that, but where I lived, we lived on a more upscale side. So yeah, that's how – South Baltimore was a mixed neighborhood, yeah. There were good restaurants, but you could also get robbed [*laughs*].

JP: What about your family? How would you describe your family?

MB: My family is very religious. My family is also very abstract. What I mean is it's like – I'm gonna say abstract to sexuality, because in my family we have a lot of gay people and, hence, however people identify. In my family, you don't really get grief for being who you are. So yeah, that's how my family is.

JP: So even though they were religious, they were accepting of –

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MB: Yeah, because a lot of my family is Jewish. So sexuality and things like that, that's more of a civil issue. So we don't really get into

sexual – one thing we do not talk about is religion, because my grandmother is Jewish, but she married a Christian pastor. So her kids, she had nine kids, three Christian, three Muslims, and three Jewish. So at Thanksgiving, we don't talk about religion. And then their kids just kind of trickle down and do whatever way they feel fit to go religiously.

But yeah, my family is pretty open and just loving. It's just about family and community.

JP: So you didn't feel any grief from your family about sexual identity or –

MB: No, no, not at all. Nope.

JP: What did your parents do for a living?

MB: My mother works at the Post Office, and my dad is a lawyer.

JP: Okay. What kind of law?

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MB: Insurance. Wait a minute. I think it's insurance. It has something to do with insurance, like – insurance, yeah, nothing good.

JP: Were there any major conflicts in your life throughout middle school, high school, after that? I guess I ask because a lot of the people I've interviewed, who are gay or lesbian identified, they had a conflict with their family. It seems like that's not true with you.

MB: It is a little because my mom is a lesbian. My mom is a lesbian and my dad – my mom is a lesbian. At that point in my dad's life, he was experimenting with men. So actually, it was kind of like a mistake a little bit, like, "Okay. I'm experimenting with men." This is dad. And mom, "I'm not sure if I want a man. So let's just do this," and then comes me.

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But actually my mom – everyone in my family is very affirming and things like that. My mother was actually a little displeased when I told her I was, at that point, gay. I don't identify as that now, but then, when I told her that.

I didn't know until maybe like years later why, but she felt like she made a mistake with her life, in terms of being same gender loving. She didn't want me to take that same path, but we're good. It's good. That was just it, yeah.

JP: How do you identify now in terms of your sexuality?

MB: Pansexual.

JP: What does that mean to you?

MB: To me, I'm not attracted to a person based upon their gender.

JP: Do you remember the first time you heard about ballroom?

MB: Yeah. I remember. It was 1999. I was actually with a group of – okay –

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in this lifestyle, we have something that's called a gay father, gay mother, and these people are supposed to kind of help guide you through the whole gay experience, because nine times out of ten your family have shunned you and they're there for the support. So my gay father, he was over here, had been in balls for years. So that's actually how I heard about balls, through him.

JP: And how did you meet your gay father? How did that come about?

MB: I don't even – ah, I met my gay father through this guy that I was dating. Well, actually, at that point, we weren't even dating because this was 1999, and I didn't even start dating guys until 2000. So I met my gay father through a friend that I ended up dating, like –

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a year after I came out, kinda, sorta.

JP: And how did he become your gay father? He obviously didn't start out as your gay father.

MB: Actually, I don't know if I set out – because my boyfriend at that time – well, he wasn't my boyfriend at the time, but my friend at that time, he was in balls. He was involved in the ballroom scene. He kind of meshed me and my father together.

My friend wasn't into it like that, but my father really was into it. I was like, "That sounds like something that I would want to do to." So he kind of like, "Okay. Well, he's into it, so let me push you with him."

JP: When you say "into it," into ballroom?

MB: Into the ballroom scene, yeah. He was really, really into it and my friend was not. So he was like, "I'm gonna link you guys together," and actually we kind of hit it off. We hit it off really, really quickly. We hit it off really, really quickly.

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JP: So you had already heard about ballroom –

[Crosstalk]

MB: I did, because of the friend. The friend, he was kind of dipping and dabbing in it, but that's who was – so pretty much, essentially, my friend was kind of like the first person to tell me about ballroom, and then he linked me with my father.

JP: Okay. And then your father, I guess, became your father pretty soon and started introducing you to ballroom.

MB: Yeah.

JP: So what did that look like? What did that introduction look like?

MB: Wow. That looked like – everything in ballroom is accelerated, like everything. Everything moves fast. So whenever we was around each other at that time – that was, let me see, what year – okay, so 2000. So my father was taking me to balls –

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but I was walking not in any house. I was just walking into what we call now a 007, a free agent. You're not on anyone's team. So I was walking balls, a couple of balls.

Then he was like, "You have to come with me." I was like, "Okay." So my first house was the House of Christian Bazaar. It was founded by a guy named Eric Christian Bazaar, who is like a founder for a bunch of huge houses in ballroom that are around

still today. So he's kind of like an innovator for a bunch of houses that's been around 20, 30 years.

Anyway, I joined that house, which is the House of Christian Bazaar. That consisted of me walking. At this point, I'm a new designer, so actually for me, ballroom was really all about me designing –

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me being creative, me trying to – because at that point, I didn't have any clients or anything like that. So the only way for me to show my creativity was through sewing for myself and others in ballroom.

JP: So it's kind of like a form of advertising.

MB: Yeah, yeah.

JP: When you say you are a designer, what does that mean?

MB: Costume designer. So we would go and compete at the balls from state to state. I think, with the exception of my family, ballroom – well, my early years, ballroom is the reason that I've probably been to some of these states that I probably would never even go to. Even early on, I was in Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Virginia, Atlanta, like in a very short period of time.

I would like to my mother and tell her I was going to a fashion show, only for me to find out ten years ago that my mother –

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my mother was in ballroom as well. So she kind of knew what I was doing.

JP: Your biological mother?

MB: Yeah, my biological mother. My sister had a baby with someone that runs a house in New York City, which is Keith's House. It's the House of Ebony. So my mother had walked under their house and had already knew. So me and Dre Ebony, we share a nephew. So my mom had already knew what I was doing [*laughs*].

JP: So your biological family and your ballroom family are all kind of meshed together.

MB: Yeah.

JP: Before we get further into ballroom, before you went to your first ball and you were interested in it, what kind of spoke to you about it? Why were you attracted to it, do you think?

MB: It really just was designing. That's what – me being creative. That is the only thing. Actually, when I joined ballroom, I still had a girlfriend. I wasn't even gay at that point.

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So I was just like a weird kinda – I've always been really open to a lot of different things. That's just my personality. That's just how my family is. So when I went to the balls, I wasn't even gay. So my father was really protective over me. Yeah. I was still in high school, too. I was like 15, 16, going to balls, yeah.

JP: So that's when you first started, when you were 15.

MB: Yeah. I had to be in the tenth grade, so yeah.

JP: So if somebody is listening to this and they don't know anything about ballroom, can you talk about the relationship between costume designing and ballroom? What does that look like?

MB: Oftentimes, the things that are being asked for, for balls is not something that you can just buy from the store. So you'll need costume designers to design those things for you, so that you can fit what the category is calling for. So that's the parallel between designing and ballroom. Yeah.

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JP: Say a little bit more. Actually, do you remember the first ball you went to?

MB: It probably was at Bunns. I know it was at Bunns. It was either at Bunns or the Paradox, one of the two. It may have been at Bunns. Yeah, it had to have been at Bunns, yeah.

JP: Okay. Again, for somebody who doesn't know, can you explain what Bunns is?

MB: Club Bunns is a black owned gay club here in Baltimore that is actually a staple in our community. It's downtown, in the heart of the city. It's been around probably 50 years. Yeah.

JP: Do you remember what it felt like as a 15-year-old to go to Club Bunns, to those balls there?

MB: Oh, I was terrified. I was terrified. I was terrified because of transgender women that were there. I was so young and I really did not understand. So that was the most –

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I was really scared. I was. It wasn't the lights. It wasn't the screaming. It was the transgender women. I was like, "Oh my goodness."

JP: What do you think scared you about that as a 15-year-old?

MB: 'Cause I was so little and they were so big [laughs]. And some of them didn't have the softest voices, so it really freaked me out.

JP: But you still kept coming back.

MB: Yeah.

JP: What was it?

MB: I definitely felt protected. My father, he was very – even to this day, he's very protective. So yeah, I was scared, but I didn't feel so scared that I did not want to come back.

JP: What was it about the balls that kept you coming back though?

MB: Well, the love, especially once I started competing, the love, the creativity. That's the core, the creativity. Ballroom has some of the most creative people that I know.

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It's been shown and it's been proven. Yeah, the creativity, yep.

JP: Can you give some examples of the creativity you've seen at balls, maybe even specific categories or costumes that stand out for you?

MB: Yeah, costumes. When people have voguing and they come from the balcony or voguing, coming out of a huge cage, or someone dressed like Barbie coming out of a life-sized Barbie box.

Just recently, I walked a ball just recently. I don't walk often anymore, but we had to create a look from a movie. Myself and one of my best friends – his name is Barry Blahnik; he's one of my members – we did Lydia in "Beetlejuice". I had a really big, huge red dress on and Barry was underneath of the dress, and I pulled up my dress and there came Beetlejuice.

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So things like that, yeah, [laughs].

JP: Can you talk a little bit more about the creativity? Why is that important? I can imagine some people will listen to this and say, "Oh, that's cool that people create costumes," or whatever, but how do you see it having an impact on people's lives or your life?

MB: It doesn't have an impact. Well, it may have an impact on a personal level, but in ballroom it's all about making a moment. When I say a moment, an impact. You don't even have to win because sometimes the person that won, yeah, okay, they won. They may have gotten money and a handclap, but the person that made the moment, you're not gonna forget that. You're not gonna forget that at all. You know what I'm saying. You're not gonna forget the person that had shoes, that had fish swimming around in their shoes.

So it's important because when it comes time to talk about status, and when I say status I mean stars, statements and legends.

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That's like our Oscars. So when it's time to talk about that, if a person deserves to be deemed legendary or becoming legendary, you factor in the winning, the traveling, the moments that they made. You're never gonna forget the moments. So that's why it's important to make those moments in ballroom.

JP: Tell me what you mean by moments. What does that mean?

MB: Impact. You may walk and you may have on – they may say bring a military look. You may bring the military look. I might bring the same military look, and I'll be sitting in a raft and have six of my

house members bring me down the runway. That's the moment. I brought the category, but I'm right here in a life-sized raft. So yeah, things like that.

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And you may beat me, but do y'all remember Marco when he was in that raft? He didn't win, but he was in a raft.

JP: So moment, it blows people's minds.

MB: Yes. It's like the gag, the gag factor.

JP: Okay.

MB: Yeah, the gag factor.

JP: Okay. I like that. So tell me more about your house. When you're talking amongst yourselves in the house, do you talk about the history of your house?

MB: Well, ballroom has changed so much. I still do. Whenever I meet someone, especially a younger person, I will direct them to watch *Paris is Burning*, because for me, there's no way a person can be part of ballroom and not know where it has come from. So I mean it has changed a lot, but then some of the core stuff has not changed.

So my house is actually on its way to be an iconic. What does that mean?

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That means that my house has been around. It has stood the test of time for 20 years. You become legendary when your house gets to ten years. So we're coming up on 20 years. My house debuted in the year 2000.

My house initially started as the House of Manolo Blahnik, you know, named after that Italian shoe designer. We're one of the only houses, probably only three that actually have permission to use the designer's name. We have a letter from him, a proclamation saying that it's okay for the House of – when we were Manolo Blahnik. We're no longer Manolo Blahnik because my house does other work and so forth. For incorporation purposes, we had to drop the Manolo Blahnik.

So when it started, it was the House of Manolo Blahnik. Now it's the House of Blahnik. We're one of the first houses to integrate African American and Latino.

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Most houses have African Americans as probably 90 percent. Well, maybe. Now that we have overseas balls, that ratio has changed, but here in the States, I would say probably say 90 percent African American. My house never started out like that. We always had half and half. We're the first ones to merge houses with Latino houses to make one house.

JP: Was the house down here in Baltimore?

MB: No. The house was founded in Philadelphia. So our debut was in May of 2000. I wasn't even one of the original members. I was actually the 34th member of the house, the first member in Baltimore. So there was no Blahniks in Baltimore until me. So the 34th member.

My house was founded on of course African American/Latino, but our core value is HIV/STD prevention.

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So our house does a lot with that, does a lot with counseling and giving back and things like that. That's what my house was built on.

JP: Are you part of the free ball that Keith organizes?

MB: I would say that in a small percent. I actually named that ball. When we started our coalition years ago, when we started the ball, it was all the leaders of the ballroom here in Baltimore. So every house had representation. So yeah, I named that ball.

At that time, I was not a Blahnik. So I started out as a Blahnik. I joined Blahnik in 2001, after leaving Christian Bazaar. But when we started the ball, I was not a Blahnik. I was in Escada. So I was in Escada for year. So when that ball started, I was actually Marco Escada.

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So every leader, for the most part, had a little bit to do with the ball, up until last year.

JP: So when you first joined the Blahniks, how did you decide which house to join?

MB: Actually, I joined the Blahniks for this guy I was dating. Yeah, because at that time, the father of Christian Bazaar had passed away. So we were trying to decide were we gonna go somewhere collectively, meaning as a house, the House of Christian Bazaar. Were we gonna go somewhere collectively or we were gonna split up? And I didn't want to go where they were going, so I said, "I'm gonna go here."

At that time, the House of Blahnik was probably the number one house in ballroom in terms of success and wins and all of that stuff like that. You wanted to be a Blahnik. Me saying I was the 34th member, that was a huge thing.

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Everyone wanted to be a part of Blahnik at that point in ballroom.

JP: So being part of different houses is about status as well.

MB: Yes.

JP: Okay. And people recognize different houses as –

MB: Yes. Yes, because you sometimes have – like you may have a house. They perform well, but they might not be as classy as the other houses. My house, I've always been in a classy house, always, always, always. We come out in numbers. We don't always come to every single ball. We may come to this one, this one and this one, but we might not come to that one. So yeah, it definitely is about status and class, yeah.

JP: And each house would have its different own personality.

MB: Yes.

JP: So if you want to become part of the house, do people allow you? What is the process for you becoming a part of the house?

MB: Every house is different. My house is –

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we do not allow – okay, let’s say you wanted to be a Blahnik. You would have to get someone to sponsor you. What does that mean? Someone has to have enough faith in you, like, “Okay, I’m gonna put myself on the line for you,” and hopefully the people at the meeting like it.

Now in some houses, like I say, we had 20 people who were at a house meeting, and if we had 20 people here, you’ll come in. You’ll get interviewed. You may show your talent, things like that. Then some houses will allow all of the members to vote.

In my house, we don’t do that because we’ve seen some issues where members don’t come to meetings, but then they’re trying to push someone in. So you’ll bring – all right, “Let me come. I need five other people to come and we’re all gonna vote the same way.”

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So a person might get in the house wrongfully or something like that. So our leadership votes on who gets in the house, but we have to have a sponsor to get in.

JP: Okay. And you mentioned that the house is incorporated.

MB: Yes.

JP: As a nonprofit?

MB: Yes. My house is probably one of the only houses that has a nonprofit. We have a nonprofit. We have a scholarship fund. We’re the only house to give away scholarships.

Up until last year – wait, we’re in 19. Okay, this year – this year is gonna be the first year that we actually split our scholarships. So there will be one that anybody can apply for, and then this year we’re introducing one for only transgendered women in the name of our mother that passed away. So it will be only for trans women, that they can apply for that scholarship.

JP: And when people win the scholarship, can they use the money any way they’d like?

MB: Well, we’d like them to use it for school –

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because that's what it's for, but hey, *[laughs]*, we just give the money.

JP: Can you say a little bit more about the HIV/AIDS education?

MB: There are certain things that each chapter has to do. It's a quarterly time now. So you have to do some kind of fundraising or some type of outreach or something like that. You have to do one of those things. That's one of the obligations of being in the house. You have to do it.

So our – what is he now – our founding father, he's not the father anymore because he works in HIV prevention and he's on the other side of the house. So all the scholarships and things like that is a conflict of interest, so he can't be the father.

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So he is the founder of the college organization in Philadelphia, so one of the things we do is a really big ball, a free ball. Of course it's based upon HIV, STDs and stuff like that. So all the categories are based on that, so that's one of the huge things that we do on a national level. We do that as an outreach.

JP: To raise awareness around HIV/AIDS.

MB: Mm-hmm, yes.

JP: Okay. Do you think that that is gonna be a trend, that different houses incorporate as a nonprofit or have you seen that?

MB: I haven't seen it. I don't know of any houses that do what we do, honestly, but that is the goal, to be a nonprofit, even with throwing balls and things like that, and getting donations from different agencies and stuff like that. They like you to be incorporated, so that they can write it off as a tax credit. But I haven't seen –

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I'm not sure if the different houses are becoming nonprofit.

JP: Okay.

MB: I think the House of Escada is a nonprofit as well, but they still don't do the same thing that we do in terms of the outreach and stuff like that.

JP: Okay. So let's go back to when you were 15, 16, 17, like getting into the scene. How did you learn how to be part of ballroom?

MB: You don't really – well, some people are taught. I kind of learned just by – I've always wanted to be a model. I taught myself. My father, which is Cayenne [sp?], he gave me the core values and the stuff to stay away from, because in ballroom you have your good and you have your bad. That's just the reality of it.

JP: What are the core values and what to stay away from?

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MB: Drugs, sex, unprotected sex, bad people, bad vibes, bad energy, things like that, yeah. Pretty much he made me to be a stuck up person early on in life. I'm not stuck up now, but I think that helped in molding me, because sometimes people don't have anyone in their corner. They don't have any good influences or things like this.

Some people are homeless coming to balls. They're going out stealing and doing whatever they need to do to get that one outfit, to look nice for the ball. I came from a good home, so I don't have that experience. I had good parents, a good family, a good gay family. And I don't even like to use that language, because for me it's just family. That's just it.

JP: When you say that he stressed these core values, what would those have been?

MB: Pretty much just staying on the straight and narrow path, finish school –

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because some people cannot handle ballroom, so they may out there voguing and feeling fabulous, and school might be a second or third option and then they drop out. So he made sure I made it at least through the first phase of college [laughs].

JP: Okay. And when you were first starting out, remind me which categories you were walking.

MB: European runway, that's what I walk.

JP: And what is that?

MB: Modeling like a female, but more flamboyant and more extravagant.

JP: Okay. Tell me more about that. Paint a picture of what that actually looks like on the stage. Also, I'm really curious about what that feel like, what it feels like to be in that moment.

MB: Like a Victoria's Secret model. I say that because they're the most fun, playful type of model. Typically, models are straight up and down, but Victoria's Secret, they might –

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pull on their clothing or shimmy and shake. So kind of Victoria's Secret model, that would kind of show ballroom runway a little bit, yeah, if I had to give a description.

JP: You're actually on a runway for that.

MB: Or a path, a space, not necessarily on a runway, but yeah.

JP: Depending on the category, you have to create a look.

MB: Yeah. You have to create the look. What they want to see is maybe based on the theme of the ball. So they might ask you to bring in all black or a dramatic headpiece. They might ask you to bring it in from a foreign country. They might ask you to bring in like a legend, me. They might ask you to bring it like a killer clown. Anything, it just depends. They might ask you to bring in high fashion, *avant garde* or couture. It just depends what the category is calling for.

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JP: It's hard to put this in words, but what did it feel like to walk those categories as a teenager at these spaces?

MB: It felt great. It felt great because I was really good really fast. So it felt great. It was great, yeah.

JP: Okay, because you were good at it.

MB: Yeah.

JP: You were winning the category.

MB: Yeah. And even if I wasn't, I think I still would have had a good – it was just a good time just doing it, everybody screaming, stuff like that.

JP: Can you tell me more about the families or your families? You had a ballroom father.

MB: And a mother, too.

JP: When did that happen? When did you get a mother?

MB: Typically, you only have one mother and one father. I think it should be that way. I'm like that. However, I'm like a weird person, so I have –

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I've only – well, for a long time I had one father. That was Cayenne. He's known as Cayenne Balenciago. I think that's what most people would know him as. But my mother was Octavia Saint Laurent. She passed away two years ago. So she was my mother. Cayenne was my father for years.

Then about ten years ago, Sebastian Escada became my mother, but of course Sebastian Escada is a man. So Sebastian is my mother. But I also still have a transgender mother. Her name is Monica Tom Ford [sp?]. So I have two mothers. I have Sebastian and then I have Monica. But I'm closer with Sebastian.

Sebastian has been my mother for years. So has Monica. They're just there to just –

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coach you, give you advice, just all the things that a mother is supposed to do, mother and/or father. With Cayenne, our biological families are kind of – because he has the same kind of family like me, our families were meshed together because of our relationship. That doesn't happen often in gay families. You don't really touch the biological family thing.

JP: So your first – I’m still kind of interested in how you move from you meet a person for the first time and over time they become your mother. But what does that process look like?

MB: It’s different with everybody. Some people actually sought out or see something in you as an elder or, you know, somebody, and wants you to be their parent, but I think that’s like kind of weird. I think that a parent should be picking their child, like, “I see something in you –

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that I can help take you to the next level with.” You know what I’m saying. I just –

JP: Is that what generally happened with you?

MB: No. Cayenne actually – yeah, that’s what happened, yeah, and with my kids, I pretty much did the same thing, yeah.

JP: How old were you when you started taking on your own kids?

MB: I may have been 18, yeah, 18, but when you start walking balls at 15, then you’re kind of like 30. So it’s like when – yeah, I told you everything gets accelerated and sped up. The difference between me and others is that I was kind of grounded and more mellow in my thinking and more advanced, because sometimes you have parents that –

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you’re really like buddies, but I wasn’t like that because my gay father was not – he ruled with a hard fist. So he didn’t take any bull crap. He’d be like, “Okay, yeah, we’re going out of town. We’re going to the balls, but you’re gonna be in school on Monday. I don’t care if you’re sleepy.” Some people would not teach like that.

JP: Can you talk about when you turned 18 and you took on your first child? How did that take place?

MB: For me, most of my children were the underdog. I have a thing for the underdog. So most of my children are very talented and things like that, but all of them, for the most part, are the little ugly ducklings, who at that point – like when they became my kids, the

little ugly duckling, the person that's not respected much, things like that.

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So that's how I pick my children, "Okay, I can help them out. We can do this, yeah."

JP: What do you think it is about you that likes the ugly duckling or the underdog?

MB: That's just my nature. It's my destiny. I'm Jewish. So in Hebrew, your parents name you and give you a name, and one of my Hebrew names means "rock of help." So I am a helper. That's my destiny. Yeah.

JP: I get that from you, and from what you've said about your family and your house and doing HIV education. How much of that do you think is part of ballroom more generally, that kind of helping aspect?

MB: It's there. I don't know the ratio. It's there.

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It's supposed to be there and it is there. Yeah, I don't know if I know a ratio, but it's definitely there, even from the beginning. That is what houses were created for, to help the homeless kids that were on the piers in New York City that didn't have anywhere to go; their parents kicked them out. They all stayed in one house with the house mother or the house father, things like that. So yeah, since day one the helping aspect has been there.

JP: How did you learn about ballroom history, the history of ballroom?

MB: My father, Cayenne, that's what he did. He made sure. That's exactly why – it's like I told you earlier. When I meet someone, I show them *Paris is Burning* or at least tell them the core stuff. Even when someone comes to my house, "You're interested in my house. Okay. I'm gonna see on the website. Then I'm gonna ask you some questions," because when you come here, those are potential questions that people may ask you.

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What's our house colors? What's our motto? Who's the founder? There's no way you could want to be interested in something and have no knowledge of it. I mean there is a way. It's done, but I just believe in doing things a certain type of way. So my dad, he made sure that I knew what was what.

JP: Did he introduce you to *Paris is Burning*?

MB: I'm trying to think. I don't know if he introduced me to *Paris is Burning*, but he has so much knowledge that I didn't have to. I probably ended up watching it on my own because I'm really inquisitive, wanting to know things, but I don't think he showed it to me. He probably told me about it and I probably went to the library and got it myself. I actually did get it from the library, but yeah.

JP: So based on what you learned about ballroom history, what do you think are the most important aspects to focus on or to stress? What do you tell people –

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who want to become part of your house or your kids?

MB: Let's see. Well, it depends, because everyone in ballroom does not want the family aspect of it. So that's what I ask them, "Do you want the family aspect or do you want the ball aspect? Do you want both?"

We have people in our house that don't even walk balls. They're called support members. Those are the people that just want family and don't want to walk the category. So they're there to support, literally support, help people out, do things like that.

JP: Maybe I asked you this before, but how did you learn to walk your category, by watching other folks?

MB: Yeah, that's exactly how I learned. No one actually ever taught me. I learned by watching –

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like models and taking other people's – no one actually sat down and said, "Okay, come on. We're gonna do this. One, two, three, pivot, one, two, three, turn, one, two, three, pose." No one has ever done that with me, never, ever, ever, yeah.

JP: [Inaudible].

MB: Yeah.

JP: One of the things that I think is really interesting about ballroom is that it has its own kind of idea of what gender is, and there are a lot of different genders that can be part of ballroom. But I would be curious. Since you've walked this category for many years, do you think the way you think about gender has changed based on walking that category, based on participating in the balls?

MB: No. No, not at all. Gender doesn't really matter, especially for my category.

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I could be a male figure. Even though I'm a mother, I can be a male figure walking the runway and competing against a drag queen or a transgender woman. We call them femme queens in our scene. So it doesn't really matter. I could be a male and they say, "Bring a skirt," and I'll have a skirt on. So yeah, that doesn't matter.

JP: Maybe a related question then is just how you think you changed by participating in ballroom. You've been part of ballroom for what, over 20 years?

MB: Coming up on 20. I haven't really changed much. But what I will say, ballroom has been very instrumental in my life. I've met so many people business-wise, my first clients in terms of me sewing. My godfather, he sews.

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He used to have a business and I used to do a lot of business there, but in terms of my own business and my own clients, it came from ballroom. So ballroom has definitely taught me so many things.

JP: That's interesting. Some people, when they talk about ballroom, they focus on the family aspects. Some people focus on performance. But there's also this business aspect.

MB: I think for me, I get the medium, in the middle, between family – well, I'm always gonna get family. I'm the mother for goodness sake. But sometimes you have to give that ballroom aspect more

than the family aspect and then the business. So I am the business for sure. I would probably say that's at the top for me, the business. Then I would probably say there's a medium between family and actually walking at the balls.

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It just depends on what I'm trying to do or what the organization is trying to do. Right now, my house is going through a transition right now, and in this transition it's gonna encompass walking a lot, performing a lot. So right now, I don't have time for the family stuff. You need to get off your butt. You need to walk these balls. So it just depends. Yeah.

JP: One of the things I wanted to document is what is specific to ballroom in Baltimore. I think when people think about ballroom, they'll think about *Paris is Burning*. A lot of these films are based in New York. What is different or similar about ballroom in Baltimore?

MB: It's kind of the same. It's just on a smaller scale, honestly. It's a smaller scale than New York, since we referenced New York. It's just on a smaller scale.

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But what I will say is New York City has a lot of resources that Baltimore does not. You can almost get a ball every night in New York City, if you want. Not necessarily on a large level, but they have a lot of centers for LGBT youth and things like that that Baltimore does not have. So that's the difference, but it's still almost the same everywhere, so to speak.

JP: If this ended up on the radio, somebody was listening and they didn't know anything about ballroom, what's the most important takeaway? What's most important about ballroom, I guess to you specifically?

MB: Ballroom is a place where we're competing. It's almost like a football team or a fraternity or sorority. Each house, so to speak, is a fraternity or a sorority.

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You have your overall parents, which would probably be like a CEO or a founder. Then, like I said earlier, you have your regional

leaders, parents. They're like your supervisors. Then you may have other leadership and they might be like – wait. Maybe your regional leaders are like your store managers. Then you may have other leaders, and that may be like a shift lead or something like that. So you have overalls, regionals, and you might have godparents and things like that, typically old people.

We compete. We compete for prizes, things like that. The core is supposed to be family, but that's not always the case.

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It's definitely more than just voguing. That is like one big conception that ballroom is voguing. Ballroom is not just voguing. That's the first category, but that is not all. You pretty much can have any – voguing is not just the only thing. You have realness, face. You have so many other categories, fashion. You get a plethora of things and oftentimes it's only associated with voguing.

Yesterday, when I was on my way to New York, I met someone on the bus. I played a trick on him. He asked me why I was going to New York and I said I was going to get fabric. He was like, "Oh, okay that's nice that I met you. I'm trying to get something for a ball made." I was like, "What's a ball?" He was like, "A ball, like voguing and stuff like that, but it's taboo because it's so feminine." I was like, "Okay. Cool." So we talked and talked and talked –

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and he told me about balls. He had no idea what a ball was really about, just with voguing. He was like, "They have houses overseas and things like that." I was like, "Okay, cool, cool, cool." He was like, "And if you want to go to one, you can go to Club Bunn." I was like, "Where is that?" He was like, "It's downtown Baltimore." I said, "Okay. Can you take me to one please?" He was like, "Yeah."

So I got his phone number, so he'll probably take me to the ball. Then when I get there and call me out as a legendary mother, he's probably gonna be really surprised [*laughs*].

JP: Why did you do that?

MB: Because I wanted to hear his viewpoint on ball and how people would describe the ballroom scene, and it was totally off.

JP: Okay. And you think the biggest misconception is that ballroom is just about voguing.

MB: Yes.

JP: Okay. And your category is all about costume and creativity and design.

MB: Actually, some would argue that – some would say it’s about the walk –

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but I think it’s the creativity and the costume. It completes the package. So it’s about the walk and the costumes.

JP: Okay. We have maybe 15 more minutes. I want you to go deep into talking about your category. What does it take to win your category? What are all the different elements that you have to hone and perfect?

MB: Okay, so my category, butch queen European runway. Let me first say this. With any category, it just depends on the night because ballroom is very political. You might be my friend and you might ride in a car together, and you might feel compelled to vote for me. Me and someone else is battling or competing. They did better than me, but we rode in the car together, so you might vote for me because we rode in a car together.

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Is that right? No, but it is a reality. So it’s really based upon politics and things – of course with everything, but to win butch queen European runway, you have to have grace. You have to have style. You have to have fashion. You have to have an attitude, like a very unbothered attitude, like, “You don’t even belong on the runway with me. Why are you here?”

You have to have a good stride. What does that mean? One foot in front of the other. You have to have poses. All of those things are contingent upon a good runway walker, but the attitude, you have to have that attitude, like, “I’m that person.” So if you have all of those things and a good costume, you could possibly be a good contender for the category.

JP: Okay. I probably asked you this question a few different ways but why is that the category –

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you think you personally gravitated towards?

MB: Because I always thought I was the model anyway. As a young boy, I always thought I was a model. I liked models. I'm into fashion. I've walked other things and I do walk other things, but that is me. I am runway. Yeah.

JP: Okay, a few more questions. Right now, ballroom seems to be having like a mainstream moment. There's "Pose" and "My House" and all that kind of stuff. So I'm really curious to hear from everyone what that means for you that it's having that mainstream moment.

MB: Honestly, when I seen "Pose," I was not a supporter of that –

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or any mainstream things, because oftentimes what people do is they take out information and our knowledge and stuff like that, and they do what they want with it, and the people are not compensated for the stuff like that. It's like so many organizations and people. They throw money for us to have these free balls, but they don't really care about the people. They just care about the number, so you're like a number, and that's something that I was not very supportive of.

But I am now a supporter of "Pose" and other outlets. I think it's a good idea, just as long as people are getting their just due. For instance, it's been said that "Paris is Burning," I don't know how much they got paid, but it was pennies to what Jennie Livingston got for it. They were supposed to get more and they didn't. It was so unfortunate.

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So that's where I am with that.

JP: That going mainstream is cool as long as people are being compensation and as long as –

MB: Yeah. And not even that, even appreciated, because people sometimes – as long as the culture is still there.

JP: What does that mean?

MB: For me, in ballroom, for instance, there should always be a ballroom personality or ballroom affiliate attached to anything that is mainstream, in my opinion. There's no way that somebody could produce something or have events, in my opinion, and there is no ballroom context. Let's say if Sprite decided to have a ball. There should be some type of ballroom affiliate attached to it. And most times, you won't even get a good outcome if there is not a ballroom person attached to it.

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So yeah, there should always be that type of thing going on.

JP: I guess that's kind of the critique of Madonna, her song "Vogue." That was at a time when – also at a time when ballroom was having a mainstream moment. The criticism is that she really stole the art form without giving credit where credit was due.

MB: Yeah, yeah.

JP: Okay. So that brings me to the ball here. What does it mean to have a ball in the Peabody Library?

MB: For me, I think it's great, great, great, great, great. It's fabulous. It is fabulous. I think it's a great idea. I think it's gonna be a huge success. I just think it's wonderful. I honestly do. This place is beautiful. Oftentimes, when you're at a ball, you don't even have –

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a nice place to display your talent. This is 20 times better than any nightclub that we have here in Baltimore. So I think it's great and wonderful.

JP: For what reason, because it's a beautiful space?

MB: That's one of the top reasons. There's so much history here. Yeah.

JP: Ballroom, to me as an outsider, seems to embrace kind of opulence and kind of being over the top, and this is a really over the top space.

MB: Yeah.

JP: Also – I don't know. I mean for me, ballroom has a really long history. If you count the balls, like drag balls that would have existed in the late 1800s or something, you could argue that ballroom has a 100-year-plus history. The library is this repository of knowledge –

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but ballroom to me is a repository of knowledge as well. Maybe it's not passed down through books. It's passed down through performance or whatever. So I guess that's leading up to the question. What kind of knowledge do you think is being produced in ballroom? What are people learning?

I'm trying to ask this question. I'm not sure if I'm articulating it very well. What new knowledge are people producing in ballroom? What do you learn in ballroom that you couldn't learn other places?

MB: I don't know necessarily that you can't learn. Well, about our culture, you can't learn about our culture, for the most part –

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without actually being in it, and then also having a reputable person actually give the information, because sometimes history even in ballroom changes. The story lines sometimes don't add up and things like that, because everyone has their own story or whatever the case may be.

But yeah, you're learning the history. I always pass on information, because ballroom even in the last five years has changed, with it being mainstream, with balls being overseas. In 1986, when the late great Willi Ninja went to take – wanted to go to Paris and make it burn, and now we have a whole entire Paris ballroom scene, Amsterdam, Spain, all kinds of countries that we did.

They had houses there, but it wasn't like where you can get 50 –

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United States ballroom members to go. You would get one or two or maybe a couple, but never like – 50 people from the States to go into a ballroom in another country is pretty big. It's changed. So, yeah, our knowledge passed on *l'dor va'dor*, from generation to generation.

JP: Wait. What did you say?

MB: *L'dor va'dor.*

JP: What is that?

MB: It's Hebrew, from generation to generation.

JP: Okay. I guess that's it. Is there anything else that you think you should add?

MB: I don't know. Yeah, I think we're good.

JP: Okay.

[End of Audio]