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Voguing legend Willi Ninja succumbs to AIDS

Self-made star performed on stages around the world

by David Stout Q-Notes staff

Openly gay dance legend Willi Ninja died Sept. 2 at the age of 45 of AIDS-related heart failure, according to *The New York Times*. He had been in New York Hospital Queens since July.

Ninja, born William Leake in Flushing, N.Y., in April 1961, began dancing at the age of seven. By the 1980s he was gaining notoriety across New York City for his mastery of Voguing, a dance form from the gay underground that incorporates runway walking, hyper-stylized modeling poses and flexibility defying body movements.

Voguing is a key element of ballroom culture, which also includes permutations of drag and fashion. After pop superstar Madonna saw Ninja perform at one event she was inspired to record "Vogue," her 1990 chart-topper celebrating the art-form. The same year, Ninja was prominently featured in Jennie Livingston's acclaimed documentary about Harlem's ball scene, "Paris Is Burning."

Ninja successfully parlayed his niche celebrity into a global career. He performed and taught throughout Europe and Japan, walked the runway for French designers Jean Paul Gaultier and Thierry Mugler and danced in music videos.

He also performed in works by postmodern choreographers including Doug Elkins, David Neuman and Karole Armitage, and even found limited success as a recording artist. "Hot," his collaboration with House music super-producers Masters At Work, is considered a drag ball classic.

Close friend Emanuel Xavier wrote about Ninja's passing on his MySpace blog. "As a friend and someone who loved him very much for all he has given us, I am really sad to write that Willi passed away this morning.

"When I last saw him on Monday, he had a really high fever and it was very difficult for me to see him. He listened and held my hand

as I read the poem 'Legendary' to him from the Latex Ball program since he couldn't be at the event. We spoke over the phone on Thursday and I promised to visit him after the camping trip I never took this weekend. At least I got to tell him how much I loved him before hanging up.

"He will always be remembered in a special way. His strength and love will live on with his legacy."

In the wake of Ninja's passing, some of his friends were angered by the media's revelations of his HIV status and his cause of death. Keith Boykin, a leading black gay activist, addressed the issue in a Sept. 6 post on his website. "In 2006, there should be no shame



Willi Ninja inspired one of Madonna's biggest hits, the aptly titled 'Vogue.'

that anyone is living with HIV. It is a stigma that belongs as much to the '80s as shade within the ballroom community. What is shameful is that people of color still do not have the proper and necessary health care coverage.

"If Willi Ninja left us with any message, it would be to get tested and know where we stand in this battle. Whether the results are positive or negative, the sooner we are informed the better opportunity to protect ourselves and others.

"Willi was a beautiful gift to many of us and I know many are sensitive to his loss. However, our focus should not be how or why we lost him but what he has taught us."

Funeral services for Ninja were held the evening of Sept. 8 in Queens. ▀



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