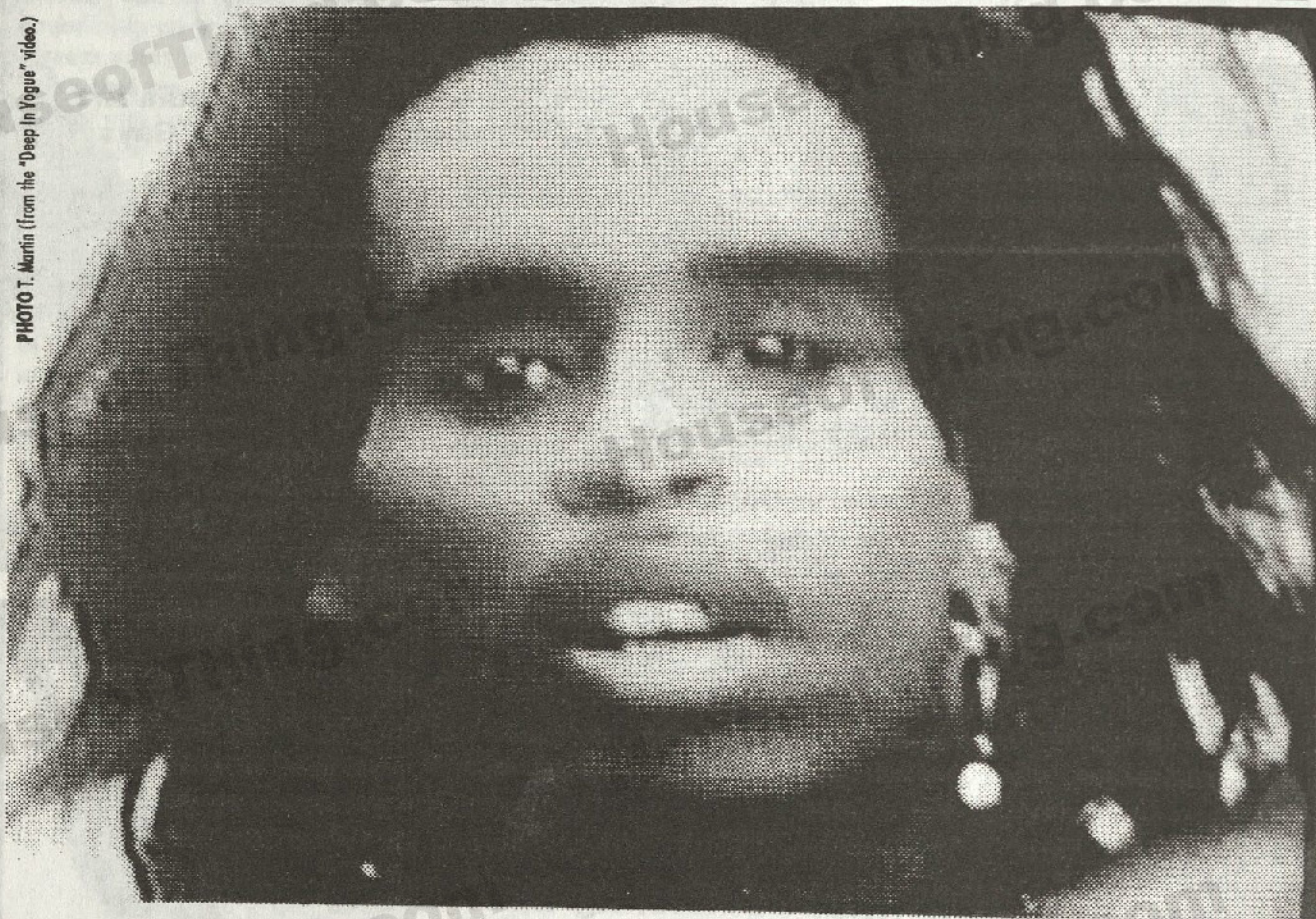


WILLI NINJA

PHOTO T. Martin (from the "Deep In Vogue" video.)



THING 34

Willi Ninja was born to dance. With no formal training, he has honed a whole new creative dance language: voguing. Malcolm McLaren captured him for the definitive "Deep in Vogue" video, and suddenly voguing was "crossing over." His sense of style and movement made him a hot commodity as a fashion runway choreographer, and brought him work in the music video industry as well.

I caught wind that he was in Chicago for a few days doing a corporate trade show, and tracked him down. The only time for an interview would be at the crack of dawn, in the dressing room while the girls finished hair and makeup. Without the aid of caffeine I made the early call. My fears of meeting a "fierce ruling diva" ended when I met Willi. Truly friendly and down to earth, in a model-model world, Willi has his head on straight.

Robert Ford: Let's start with one of those questions you've probably answered a million times: how do you give the history of voguing?

Willi Ninja: Not a million, about four million five hundred times...As you know, the dance started in the black drag balls in Harlem. It progressed literally, I'd say, from the hand movements the drag queens used to do with the "La Cage Aux Folles" look; big feathered fandance moves. And because there were a lot of them that didn't want to get up in drag. A lot of the boys that didn't want to go up in drag wanted stuff to do for themselves, categories they could compete in and win. I'm not sure who created or invented it, but it goes back to the early seventies. The moves progressed from that fandancing; also out of the fashion magazines. Making the moves a little more drastic and to the beat. Old school was a lot of hand movement, hardcore, quick hand movements and a lot of poses to the beat of the music. And as the years progressed, they just kept going on and on, adapting and adding new things. It's basically your challenge dance. Kind of like what breaking was for the homeboys, voguing was for the gay population. Instead of fighting, you took it out on the dance floor. It has that meaning, too. But it is right now, as far as I'm concerned, a major art form created by the black and latin gay community. It should be seen as that, and not just taken as "oh, let me throw a little shade here and there." A lot of people, even in the gay community, see the shady side of it, not the art form side of it.

RF: Do you see it gaining more respect as an art form?

WN: Yeah, it's gaining a lot of respect. PBS has aired different programs with it, "House of Tress", "Everybody Dance Now". It's getting respect in the dance world, as an art form. Which is good. A lot of professional dancers feel that there's no technique. As a friend of mine said, "there is technique in a dance if they've studied it and do it to perfection. So that's their technique. There's technique in freestyle and hip-hop, whatever." Just like in ballet, just like in jazz. So give us our due. For me, it is an art form. It is a dance.

RF: Have you studied dance?

WN: No, no formal training. My formal training was watching PBS, my mother taking me to the Apollo, being fascinated by music and dance. That was my teacher, and a teacher only corrects what's already inside of you. You don't have to have one person standing there yelling at you to be your teacher. If

you have an adaptable mind, anything can be your teacher.

RF: Are you in touch with the New York ball scene much at all?

WN: Not really. When I am, I go in as a judge. My competition days are looong gone! I'm supposed to — if I'm in town in July — judge the Chanel ball, because they're starting theirs up again. I do like to go back to say "hey, I didn't forget." To help other people get out and try to further their careers as well. It's hard sometimes when you're trying to keep yourself floating, and you want to keep yourself in the eye, but you can't help nobody else if you can't help yourself.

RF: Have you seen that scene change much over the years? Has it grown any?

WN: It's grown as far as new ideas and concepts because now it's multiracial, almost. Now, some heterosexuals taking part. And I also see it getting kind of evil, because the new kids that are coming in are again taking the wrong idea; taking the bad instead of the good.

RF: What did you think of Jenny's film, and the aftermath.

WN: The aftermath? I didn't even know that there was going to be any aftermath. It was just a pure fluke.

I enjoyed the film. I thought it was well done. It kinda educated people. It's like one section, not the whole, one small section of the black and latin gay community in New York, not the whole. A lot of people take the wrong thing and think that it's like the whole and it's not. That's what I try to do on a lot of the interviews and stuff is correct that. But it's just an education showing what happens when people have two things going against them: color and sexual preference. No, three things, excuse me: for a lot of them low income. They have to come up with new ideas and concepts to create their own life...

RF: ...create their own social order.

WN: Yeah, you're gonna create your own social world because you have no chance of being successful in the real world. Some of them do, but it's such a small number in that community. It's unreal! And what I find also is lot of middle class black gays (or some of the rich ones) like, "Ugh! How could they! Why don't they do this for themselves and get their

lives together!" So I say, "But darling, where were you? What kind of a neighborhood did you come from and what kind of education did you have because of your money? Give these kids their due. It might not be your cup of tea but at least they did something that kept them out of trouble for a little while. Gave them some way to let loose their energies and frustrations. You have the chance to go on; give these kids their chance to do something for themselves." We've got to stick together, not fight each other.

RF: There are so many factions in the gay community

WN:...Too many damn factions as far as I'm concerned.

RF: Those people who want a "straight-acting/straight appearing" slide into the mainstream thing and they don't want drag queens and leather queens to be visible.

WN: Darling no. Catch it: you're being hated, not because you're feminine, not because you're a drag queen, not because you're a leather queen, not because you're macho: you're being hated because you like another man, and you are a man. When you get that in your head, darling you better stop hating that next person that's in the same boat that you are. If you're hating that next person, what gives you the right to get something better than that person? You're doing the same thing that the heterosexual world is doing to you. My point of view of those people: they're full of s-h-i-t. Capital S-H-I-T with an exclamation point! You can quote me on that.

RF: Have you sensed a prejudice against voguers, that people expect them to all be boosters or shady...

WN: You saw in the film where I stressed "I have the receipts, I bought this!" I wanted to let them know that I'm not one of those people. They assume that all of us are. It's a hateful thing, because certainly not all of us are. You have Juan from the House of Adonis who dances with C&C, he's never lifted or done drugs in his life. You have Lance Adonis who's now in Disneyworld as a Disney character. You have Kevin from the house of Magnifique, working with Crystal Waters. There's a lot of children out there that work. From House of Africa there's a makeup artist in Europe. A lot of us have gone on and done well. And we have to keep this positive image out there, because they're assuming it's like, "watch them." ▼

by Robert Ford