

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Icon Sebastian Escada

Interviewed by Joseph Plaster

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Interviewee: Icon Sebastian Escada (SE)

Interviewer: Joseph Plaster (JP)

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JP: So do you want to just start out by giving me your name, your house, and maybe what categories you identify with?

SE: My name is Sebastian Escada. I'm an Icon, Sebastian the Icon from the House of Escada. I walk fashion categories including best dressed, foot and eyewear, labels, anything that has to do with fashion and ballroom. I've been in ballroom for 25 years. I've just been inducted into the hall of fame this past weekend and I first started walking balls in 1995.

JP: Okay, so before we get to your first ball, give me a little bit of background. Where were you born, when were you born, what was your city like growing up?

SE: I was born in Winnsboro, South Carolina. I'm the only child. I went to school at a high school called Fairfield Central High. There in high school, I was a drum major, so I think being a drum major and being in JROTC, it give me the opportunity to learn how to deal with people as far as directing them in different ways as far as band. I played the saxophone back at home. I was from a small town where it was probably maybe 2,000 people. I was close to Columbia, South Carolina, and I was there until I reached age 20.

JP: And then at age 20?

SE: Age 20, I moved and I was going to college and I left there and went to college to UNC in Charlotte, North Carolina is where I went to school.

JP: Okay and what year was that?

SE: This was 1993.

JP: Okay, so that was two years before?

SE: This is like two or three years before I went to ballroom because my whole thing was once I got into college, that was the first time that I actually was away from home and I saw that life was bigger than what I thought it was. And I was out, you know, having fun with different people and I went to Atlanta. And when I went to Atlanta, that's where I saw the lifestyle as far as people having,

you know, more things to do, and I decided to switch and go to school in Atlanta.

JP: And what do you mean when you say “the lifestyle”?

SE: During that time, we had Freaknik and I’d never experienced going to Freaknik before. Then we had –

JP: What is that?

SE: Freaknik, it was a time where all the colleges would come and they would celebrate, a time of the year where everybody would come from all the black AUC colleges and have parties all over the city. And they did it in Atlanta back then, back in ‘93, ‘94, ‘95, so I took my first trip down there and saw how it was a big time where people were together and just having fun and I had relatives that lived there, cousins that went to school at Morehouse, so I was on their campus and my whole thing was now I really want to be in Atlanta.

JP: And so when was it that you came out?

SE: When I came out for the lifestyle?

JP: Yeah, I guess as gay or however you identify.

SE: Oh, I came out around maybe ‘89 or ‘90. I came out right before and right during the time of high school, but a lot of people didn’t know that. So, once I left home, I think I really decided to say, “Okay, now I’m free. I can do – I can tell people. I can do more things, you know, what I really want to do.” When I was home with my parents, I couldn’t do everything I wanted to do, so I took that time and that’s when I did it.

JP: Tell me a little bit about your parents and your relationship with them, I guess, growing up.

SE: My mother, she worked two jobs. My father, he worked in – he was a deputy warden for a prison system in South Carolina, Columbia. He did that for 35 years. My father was never really at home. I was with my mother all the time and I was the only child. So most of the time during the day, during the night, I was always with my mother. So that was the person who I was with all the time until my mother died in 1994 and at that time, growing up, me and my father didn’t really have a relationship.

So when my mother passed, you know, I was just – I wasn't left alone, but I was able to live without my mom because I left at a time when I was in school and I was already separated from her and I was coming back to visit her. So, not having a father like figure there all the time, maybe it did make me into a person more where I'm able now to deal with certain situations because he wasn't there, but it wasn't a bad thing that he wasn't there because I did understand that he was working and he was taking care of other things for us.

JP: And so your mom died in '94 and then you got involved in ballroom in '95?

SE: Well, I got involved in ballroom. It actually happened in '94 I got involved in ballroom. At the time, when I was in Atlanta, I actually met a group of friends that were going to Morehouse and at the time, our house was called The House of Evangelista, so I don't know if you ever heard of *Pose* when they have on a show, they mention the House of Evangelista. Okay, that was the house and that was the name of my house back then. And we were all just friends and we were all going out just to have fun at clubs.

JP: That was your ballroom house?

SE: Yeah, it was called The House of Evangelista at first. When we decided to take our house on a platform of mainstream ballroom, we decided to change the name to The House of Escada.

JP: And back up just a little bit. How did you even hear about ballroom in the first place?

SE: I actually was dating someone in ballroom and he took me to a ball and I thought it was a fashion show, and they actually participated in the ball. And it was like, "I want you to come with me to this fashion show."

And I was like, "Where is it?"

He was like, "It's in New York City."

I was like, "What time does it start?"

He was like, "Well, it starts a little later on. Will you please come?"

So I went there, like a normal time for a fashion show. At that

fashion show, I met Jack Mizrahi at the door. And during this time, Jack just saw me and was like, “Oh my God, you’re so cute. What are you doing here?”

I said, “I’m looking for this person.” I’m gonna leave that person’s name. “I’m looking for this person and what time does the fashion show start?”

He said, “Well, it starts late. Just stand back here with me.”

And that’s where I met Jack. And on that very night while waiting with Jack, I saw different people coming in. It was like 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. And I was still trying to figure out like where are all these people going? Some were dressed crazy. At the time, I didn’t know anything about ballroom, so I just saw people coming in, Jack collecting money.

Then the FBI came in and during this time when the FBI came in, I was standing there and they were asking questions about Dorian Corey and Dorian Corey, you know, had died and they had found her ex-boyfriend’s body in her chest, so they were trying to find information on what happened and this is how like I came into ballroom, with the Dorian Corey situation. So I was like, “Oh my god.”

JP: Okay. So it couldn’t have been higher drama.

SE: Right. It was drama before I even entered into the ball. So that night, I saw my friend walk out for his category, which was face, and I just saw –

JP: Wait, before you go on, can you – if somebody’s listening to this, they don’t know who Jack Mizrahi is. Can you explain who he is now?

SE: Jack Mizrahi would be an Icon for the commentation and ballroom. He’s been around for years, as many years as I have been in ballroom, he and a few others, which are not here anymore, like Eric Bazaar would commentate these events as masters of ceremony. They would be the people that will let you know what category is next, what is it calling for.

To me, they would be the true historians because they have the stories of all the things that have happened at balls. They know who walked in one of those categories. When it comes down to being deemed or calling people a legend or icon, they can actually

identify what that person has done in ballroom because they were actually there to see it that night. They were – those are really like the true historians that can actually give you what you actually need from understanding what happened in those times.

JP: And did they – as historians, are there times when they tell that history? How does that happen?

SE: It may be a time in the ballroom where there may be a category and Jack may remember it was a category ten years ago. He's like, "Bring it like Octavia St. Laurent on the same night when she brought in a gown." They'll just use different things to make you feel that same energy that happened back then. They'll just have a time where they'll just talk about it in ballroom.

JP: And when you say that, do you mean that that's written into the categories or that –

SE: No, just vocally. He may have the microphone and he would say, "I remember this night. It was a night like this where Octavia, she came from the ceiling. Let's try to make it a night like that." Or he will just start talking about different events that happened at balls, while he's on the microphone. So it all depends on the feeling of the commentator and what all they know and what all they remember. Or somebody may have a production that you know, kind of reminds you of a production that happened 20 years ago. You know, somebody may pay homage to another person that has died or left the scene with the same identical recreation of that for a category. So it's many ways to still keep history going on and on in ballroom.

JP: And it's not just telling the history, it's asking people to like embody it.

SE: Embody the history, invoke the person, you know, it all depends on whatever the category is calling for.

JP: I love that. Okay, that's amazing. So I need to interview more commentators then. Right?

SE: Yeah.

JP: If they're the historians.

SE: Yes. Yes. Commentators are historians.

JP: Okay. So back to this first ball you went to. What were you feeling? What was your response when you met Jack and he was like, “Oh, you’re really cute,” and then the FBI came in and you saw all these people.

SE: It was just so much going on at that very moment, I couldn’t really process everything. I think I had to wait till I got back home because at that time, I wasn’t in ballroom yet, so I went back home and I processed everything and I was like, “Wow, this is a lot. I don’t think I could do it.” That’s what my first initial thing was, I don’t think I could do it.

JP: What?

SE: I wasn’t ready yet for ballroom. I had just really came out, so I was trying to figure out – I was trying to – I was saying to myself, “I think if I was to do ballroom, I know I’m living my lifestyle as being gay. This will put me on another platform of being even more gay.” And a lot of people at that time didn’t understand what ballroom was. They would just think that I was way out there, like just way out there and I was trying to debate should I or should I not. But once I got back home and I had a conversation with some of my friends that were thinking about taking ballroom mainstream, I decided to go ahead and go with it. And my house was the first house in Atlanta because ballroom started up north. So there was no house in the South.

So my house was the first house in the South to start ballroom and have the very first ball, and that’s what made the House of Escada, made me the bread and the ... because I’m the first person actually judge balls up north and made a whole system down south where people now have ballroom down south. So whenever there are wars or whoever they’re doing anything, they’re always paying homage back to me, my house and everything that we embodied back then to create space for them now.

JP: And so if it didn’t exist there, how did you know how to create it?

SE: We actually, there were a few people that attended Morehouse that were in houses in New York that were not a part of the south house. They came down with their members to have a conversation with us and actually told us, “This is what is needed for you guys to really take it mainstream. You have what it takes, but to make it a real brand, you need to compete up north.

You know, starting down south is fine, but you have to bring it up

north to let everybody know that you're here." And we did that for years and years and years until finally, you know, we basically pushed through and persevered. Where when we first started by being from the south, they were like, "Who are these little boys? What do they think they're doing? This is New York. You're coming from Atlanta? You're not going to win anything from Atlanta." So we had to really concentrate and do things out of the box to stand out among all the people and all the house.

JP: And when you say bring it mainstream, what does that mean?

SE: Some of the categories would call for you to have a production and we had never really done anything mainstream before and our first time coming up there, our house was a face house, and a face house meaning some houses are defined for different categories. You may be in a fashion house. You may be in a runway house. You may be in a face house. You may be in a face and runway house. You may be in a performance house. Your house is known for one or two or maybe even three things.

Our house was known for face and fashion. So we brought face, whatever category it was in New York, we would try to do that category and spend as much money and time to make sure it was executed correctly. And the majority of the times when we did it, we stood out because we were the underdogs and the underdogs were bringing it like the super dogs. So that's what helped us.

JP: And how do you know that you're actually a house? Because I was talking with somebody at the university yesterday and they were like, "Oh, well could students at the university become a house?" And I was like, "I don't think so." But like who decides if you're a house or not?

SE: Well, you and your group decide together if you really want to commit to being a house. And if you want your house to be a part of ballroom, there are other houses that are not a part of ballroom. You have other houses that are part of the pageant system. You know, they support their pageant members and you know, they may call themselves the decrees.

They may call themselves different names, but when you come in ballroom, you're already under the umbrella of the things that go along in ballroom, so you're now saying you're ready to compete, to show your talent on the floor. And I consider your talent on the floor is like we all have different hobbies that we enjoy, so you could find one of those hobbies that you enjoy in ballroom. If you

fit into one of those categories, that's the one that you would most predominantly walk if you feel like that you – that's a part of you. With me, it's definitely fashion and I've been judging balls now for 24 years because coming from the south and going north, I've judged balls in Baltimore, I've judged balls in Philadelphia, I've judged balls in Virginia, all over. So, yeah.

JP: And can you be a ballroom house if you don't compete at balls, or is that a requirement?

SE: It's a requirement that you compete in balls, but not all house compete all the time in balls. Like, you may have your season where you want your house to compete. You may be on blackout for right now, so there's no true criteria as far as being a ballroom house besides just actually walking balls. That's it.

JP: And so most people I've talked with came into ballroom, into a house that already existed and they had mothers and fathers. It sounds like your story is different.

SE: Right. We didn't have a mother and father. I was actually the mother of the house and we had a mother before me. He was in school as well. He attended—everybody that was in the House of Escada, they actually attended Morehouse. I was the only one that didn't. I was from a whole other school, so when we all came together, we promoted, when we changed our names and I was promoted to the new mother of the house and we had the father who is the founding father, Tony Escada. So if you look at Tony Escada, you look at me, Tony Escada would be considered Thomas Edison, the creator of the light. I would be GE. I just made the light brighter. So, that's the way we always look at it as far as our house.

JP: And you were both in Atlanta and you both founded the house in Atlanta.

SE: Him and his peers on the campus founded the House of Evangelista, which I became an Evangelista, but then when we changed our name to Escada, because we felt like we were more familiar with Linda Evangelista, we all loved Linda Evangelista, the supermodel, so that's why our house was named Evangelista. And then we were trying to find out what house could we name it because most houses resemble fashion labels of house and I think during that year, Linda Evangelista in 1996 or 1995, she was on a campaign for Escada. She did a campaign, so when she did that

campaign and we just thought, “Hmm. Linda, Escada,” so we went with that. Yeah.

JP: And how old were you when you became mother of the house?

SE: I was 24.

JP: Okay.

SE: I was 24 years old.

JP: So you can be young and still be a mother?

SE: Yeah, you can be young and be a mother. I think by me before ballroom, I always had friends and other friends that were younger than me that always came to my house and we would eat, I would make sure they were okay. I would even take people to – take a few to school. You know, I was always doing those things and I think maybe I was doing those things because as a child, I saw how hard my mother was doing things and my father wasn’t there, so they would all come to me, have conversations with me, and you know, some of them felt like I was just as young as they were. So we would talk about some of the most things that they wouldn’t even talk to other people about.

So, I was more like a mother father to them. So they would call me mom. Some would call me dad and it just happened, you know, organically like that, even the ones in college. They would come over, we would have conversations and it just felt like I was a person they could talk to.

JP: Um hmm. Well, I guess that’s another question is, what’s the difference between a mother and a father in ballroom?

SE: Really nowadays, there isn’t one, but back then, the father was the head of the household and the mother actually ran the house. But nowadays –

JP: What do you mean by ran the house?

SE: Like the kids, you know, when the kids are not doing what they’re supposed to do correctly, the mother makes sure when it’s time for balls or any real life, “What are you doing? You need to be in school. I’m going over here. I’m going to talk to your principal.” You know? And most of the kids in ballroom back then, they were kids who had left home or their parents no longer wanted them to

be a part of their family, so they looked up to the person who they considered their mom or their father to actually guide them the correct way.

So a lot of these mothers of houses stepped in as the role model, as a real mom to them and the fathers, you know, whenever they needed anything or whatever they could provide for them, they were there or if anything happened outside of the house, the kids were like, "That's my mom. That's my dad." You're not going to – it was basically you was creating a family nucleus with all these kids and different members of your family.

JP: How did that feel to you?

SE: To me, I don't know. I mean, I just felt like everybody just felt that I was a great person to talk to. I have stories for a lot of people and things that happened to me and I think we can relate to one another because I never judged anybody when I listened to their stories. I just tried to find out what would help them to see a better day, or whatever. And I didn't have any like really bad days as far as me coming out or doing what I wanted to do because in school, I did what I was supposed to do. I left home. I decided to live my lifestyle away from home, but a lot of people choose to do it younger and sometimes it affects the family and I never had to experience that part.

And once I left home, I actually had, you know, two jobs working at McDonald's, you know, working at a gas station, going to school, you know, things like that nature. So by the time I reached Atlanta, I was stable enough to actually have conversations with different people and living my own life. Yeah.

JP: And did – I mean, did part of you – well, I would imagine that part of you liked being in the position of mother and like being able to tend to the children and everything.

SE: Yeah, because you find out a lot of kids have a lot of things that they're dealing with, not just conversations. Sometimes you know, they may call you and say, "Oh my god, I missed a car payment." You know? And you're a parent. If you're able to help and assist, "Okay." You know, you're in school, you're doing what you're supposed to do. If it's possible, you know, we can see, can we do – that's some of the things that I was doing. I was actually helping the ones that were in school that couldn't afford to go to some of these balls. You know, I would rent cars. We would – I would rent a van.

We would all get in the van and we would go up north. I would find out what everybody's schedule was, what day they had to be back to school for classes. If we left Friday after class, we were definitely back by Sunday night for class Monday morning. And now that part I would not, you know, make them lose out on. I just felt like anybody that was in school, that was more important than going to a ball.

JP: And school, you mean college?

SE: College, yeah, they were in college. Many of them were in college, but they didn't have the income to do things and during '95, you know, if I look back on some of the things I did when my mother died, you know, I had money put to the side, so I was definitely using some of those things to do some of the things that I could physically do if I could, if I had to do it, I couldn't probably do it, but I did – I did use some of the things like that to help out.

JP: And what was your role as mother in terms of the balls?

SE: I was there to be the head figure of the house. Whenever it was time for us to go different places, I was there to actually be there as the person that made sure that they were walking their categories. If I was judging that night, all the kids were there. They were being accompanied by me. So by nobody really knowing who my kids were and the people in the ballroom knew me, and all they had to do was say they were in the House of Escada and if anything happened at night, they knew those kids came with Sebastian.

So they were already told. If anything happens at an event, you know, come to me. Find someone that you see me talking to, you know, get to me as quick as possible 'cause you never know what may happen. We were – they were a long way from home, so I just made sure that they were all safe wherever we went. Ninety-nine percent of the time when we went out of town, we stayed at the Marriott on the financial center, World Trade Center. That's where we stayed every time we came to New York. We stayed there so they always knew where – how to get back to the hotel if they did go out with somebody else, when we were leaving. I just – I think I organized pretty well with them.

JP: And New York, was that considered like the center of the ballroom world?

SE: Yeah. New York was the center. New York is the center of ballroom. It's the ballroom mecca. So in order for you to be a real house, you have to go through New York. There's no way you can not go through New York. You have to go through New York and you have to definitely travel to Atlanta. You definitely have to, you know, be out there. Now, back then, it wasn't all these other states. It was just New York and it was Jersey and, you know, we didn't have a west coast. We didn't have Florida. We didn't have Texas like we have now. And we didn't have Atlanta and Atlanta was being built, but people started coming to Atlanta once we had our first ball.

JP: Okay. When was that?

SE: Nineteen ninety-six, we had our first winter solstice ball in Atlanta. I think that night we drew in about 1,200 people. And that –

JP: From where?

SE: From all over because it was the first ball in the South in Atlanta and it was at Tracks and everybody just heard about it. I remember passing out flyers months and months, you know, giving people flyers here and there and everything. And when that ball, you know, when we had the ball, they were like, "Wow." It was people from all over, from New York. It was icons.

At the time, I wasn't an icon. I wasn't a legend. I wasn't a statement. I was just new to ballroom. I was a star. You know, and it just let me know that there were things that we were doing correctly that I wanted to see, you know, later in life how would it go for us, and I wanted, every year, I would say I wanted to go another year, another year, because a lot of people who graduated from Morehouse, they decided to step away from the ballroom scene that was with me in the beginning. So I'm the last one of the oldest one of the members in the house that's still there helping the house.

JP: Um hmm. And well, so you said when you went to college, it felt like a whole new world kind of opened up for you. Did it feel the same when you started getting involved in ballroom 'cause ballroom is like its own world as well.

SE: It was different. In college, that gave me the space where I could be free but once I got into ballroom, it was just even – it was – I don't know what word I could say, heaven? It was open world where people had the opportunity to do everything they wanted to

do. You didn't have to worry about what people thought about you when you was doing those things. You didn't really care. You just wanted to express yourself. So, you know, when you start walking balls, balls can be very addictive and it'll give you that adrenaline rush that you always wanted, that you never felt and sometimes it definitely makes you feel better, you know, if it's coming from a real good place. I liked it a lot.

JP: And what – I don't know. I mean, like tell me more about what was available to you outside of ballroom like in terms of gay spaces or black spaces. What was unique about ballroom, like what need did that fill for you?

SE: Ballroom, what was different from any other space, it gave you opportunity to be yourself. I just felt like people have – there is more inside of every person and ballroom just allowed you to do those things that you couldn't do on the streets. You couldn't do certain things that you wanted to do in public all the time because you had other people watching you. People didn't understand that ballroom was actually a space where you showed your talent or your creative side and you know, you never want to be ridiculed by some things that you do totally different from other people, so ballroom provided a space for different demographics to come in and have a meeting place of competition.

So my thing was, you know, I've always saw people who danced totally different from other people by me being a drum major and I see all different types of dance, but once I got in ballroom and saw vogue and once I saw people doing all these different things that I've never seen before, it just made me realize that the world is not as small as I thought it was. It's actually big. So, I just felt like me being there and me trying to understand what was actual going on, if I had to go back and have a conversation with someone who didn't really grasp what the whole true idea of ballroom was, I could easily tell them exactly what it is.

JP: And I'm going to push you a little bit. Tell me specifically what you can do in ballroom that you couldn't do like on the sidewalk? Give me some examples.

SE: Runway. Like, we see all these different models walk the Victoria's Secret runway and how they are – the women going up and down the street or going up and down the runway, showing you the things they have on, you couldn't – if you saw a normal person walking down the street doing the same thing that a person would be doing on a Victoria's Secret runway, you would think

they were like crazy.

If you're not standing in a circle and you saw someone dancing and people not standing around giving them money or throwing it there and they just break out dancing and totally something you've never seen before, you would have thought they was on drugs. So, it's definitely a place and a time for everything, but sometimes people want to live their life free and when you see those things, you don't know where they're coming from. You don't know why it's happening, but it's happening because the underground aspect of ballroom is trying to come through. It's like trying to cage a lion up inside of a cage and it's been caged for so long and now it's trying to fight its way out.

So a lot of times, you would see these outbursts of people saying things or doing different things that you never heard, chants, people probably hear people chanting all day and don't know what they're saying. But it's just ballroom trying to release itself, trying to be a part of the world.

JP: So there are like frustrations that people have to release in ballroom?

SE: Right. You have to release. Yeah.

JP: So it's like an escape.

SE: Yes.

JP: Let me see, okay, you talked about when you started ballroom. Talked about what attracted you to ballroom. You talked about the history of your house, which was not long when you founded it.

SE: Right. It's only been 25 years.

JP: Let's see, and then, well I'm curious 'cause now you – you're in the house since the beginning. How do you tell the history of the house, like, and what circumstances would you talk to somebody in ballroom about the history of your house?

SE: Like many people in ballroom that are fathers that were there when I was there, they already know. But as far as now, because social media is so wildly being used and utilized, we actually have inside of our page where we have our bylaws and our history and it's been in there for years. So, if you join my house and you go onto that page, you will see how it started, how the people from

Morehouse, me, how our house almost split. Our house colors, what they represent, you know, like our colors for our house is red. Red gives us fire. Black is for the boldness. We have gold and silver, which is part of our creative side. So that night, if we ever use those colors at a ball, you will see where the house of Escada is getting its power from, those colors.

And we just do that for any people that's coming in now that's new or old or just don't know the history and we have that page set up for them. A lot of people didn't know that me, myself and Tony Escada was the first person who made the category realness with a twist. See, we made that at an Escada ball in Atlanta in 1997 and we had that category first and when Jack saw the category, Jack was like, "Oh my god, this is so nice. I have to do it up north." So Jack took that category that we made and he put it up north and they decided to have it at every ball. And people are now legends in that category and that category was started by me and Tony Escada.

JP: Okay, tell me more about this because I would say that realness with a twist is my favorite category.

SE: Oh, okay. Well –

JP: And I insisted that we have it at this ball.

SE: When you said that, I was going to say something to you about it, but I was like, you know what, I was like, oh my god, he loves it. Back then when we were – when we made that category, we wanted that category to be for a person who really didn't walk performance. It will be for a person who walked thug and we wanted a thug person to emulate another person in ballroom who walked performance, which is a fem queen.

So, the whole objective was to see a thug come out and everybody be like, "You about to walk?" And then he started performing as a fem queen, like as one of the girls in our ballroom scene that's really big is Saniya Ebony, to see a thug performing like Saniya Ebony, selling sex but voguing fem, it was really funny. It was like unbelievable, but those were the people who would actually get tens versus the ones today who really knows how to vogue. It's supposed to be very much as if a kiki, make you laugh, makes you laugh and say, "I can't believe he just did that." That's how it was at first, but over the years, it turned into the person knows how to vogue and look like a thug, but that's not the true way it was from the beginning.

JP: So originally, it was kind of a joke. It was –

SE: It was a joke.

JP: And it was something to make you laugh.

SE: It'd make you laugh and make you, "Ah," like you'd be like, "Oh my god, I can't believe he just vogueed. He was acting like Sinia," and then you go home on the phone and you said, "Did you see so and so last night who walked the," and he really don't – and he really don't vogue. He's not supposed to really know how to vogue. He's just doing it out of fun for that night.

JP: And so when he did vogue in that category, would he do it correctly or –

SE: It didn't matter. It was just – it didn't matter if he did it correctly or not. It was the point of we could see him voguing like a fem queen and we would like, "This is crazy." And he would get tens and we would pick the one who actually did it that we enjoyed the most. They didn't have to do it correctly, that we thought like was the biggest wow factor of the night. So, that's how we would pick that category.

JP: And when you say the biggest wow factor, like the funniest or –

SE: The funniest or he tried to do it, we knew what he was going with when he tried to do it. Did you see him pull his shirt up over his, you know, tie it up in a knot, you know, and he's really a thug. Like, it was all out of fun, but when Jack saw it, he took it up north and they actually turned it into a category and it turned into a national category. And it just went from there.

JP: And now it's more kind of like you're supposed to be able to do thug absolutely correctly and –

SE: Perform.

JP: Perform absolutely correctly.

SE: Yes. So that right there will – if we look at ballroom 25 years ago where it first started from, that category, 25 years later, it has evolved. So, that's how ballroom moves on a real scale.

- JP:* And that's how any art form, you know, moves. Like it's constantly changing because if it doesn't, then it's dead. Right?
- SE:* Right. Yes.
- JP:* Okay. That's cool. I like that story. I don't know. I mean, like I guess when I read about it, like you know, there are academic books about ballroom and they talk about realness with a twist like Marlon Bailey has a book, *Butch Queen up in Drags*, which is about ballroom in Detroit. He has this whole section where he talks about realness with a twist, and I think for him, it's like, okay, realness with a twist is about demonstrating how gender is socially constructed. Like, gender's not a real thing; it's just how you kind of perform in it.
- SE:* Yeah. But you know, he is basing it off of what he's probably seen and from when you put a spin on a category and you change it, so he's basing it off of what he's seen, but the true nature of the category was a desire like that, but in actuality, it has – it has become its own category. Now it's like when you have a ball, when we did it, we was just throwing it in. But now at a ball, you have to have that category in your ball. So, that is – that is great in itself. And now they also have another one called realness with a twist where someone else redone it where you can walk realness, but on this part of the twist, you walk American runway.
- JP:* Okay.
- SE:* So they have – that's another part. It's called thug realness with a twist. They call it thug realness with a twist.
- JP:* Okay. Complicated. Okay. Let's see. What brought you in, blah, blah, blah, history of your house. Mothers and fathers. Oh, well, tell me just a little bit more about the categories you walk and why they appeal to you.
- SE:* The fashion category. The fashion categories appeal to me, best dressed, ... back then it was called head to toe overness. Or it was labels. As a child, my mother used to make clothes. She used to sew for a living. That was one of her other jobs. I used to be with her all the time when she would go to the fabric stores, pick out fabrics, ask me how does this feel. I like this, you know, my favorite thing is tweed. I like to dress in the wintertime and I love my mother made and created things in the wintertime.
- She used to get a pattern from Butterick, Vogue, all these different

name brands and she would make her own outfits for Sundays when she'd go to church. So I was always around fashion per se with my mom. And she would wear things and people would be like, "Oh my god, where did you get that from?" And she would say, "I made it." And people was like, "You made that?" "Yes." "Oh, my god. Okay, could you – you think you could do some wedding dresses or you could do some bridesmaids dresses?"

So I'd be right there with her watching her cut it out. I never got the opportunity to get into sewing machine. I wish I had. I wish I had, but I would pick out buttons for her. Then my mom was an interior decorator, so I think just being an interior decorator, learning where to put things as far as in your house, dealing with lines and with her being able to tailor her own clothes, it gave me a part of me so when I decided to figure out what I wanted to do in ballroom, I was like fashion. Let me try that out. And then I saw by watching different people walk that category before I did, and I would say to myself, "I could do that." You know, "I could pick out my own stuff. I can do that. Okay. That looks easy."

JP: And if somebody's listening to this, they don't know what the fashion category is. Can you break it down?

SE: The fashion category would be if best dressed is wearing clothes, going to an event. Normally, the categories will say to you, "I want to see the person come in tonight looking as if they were about to receive an award." How would you look if you were going to receive an award? It's the actual – it's what the category is saying to you. It's saying to me, how do I want to look? I may not look the best to everybody, but to me, I may look the best and when I hit the runway, I want to be – I want to receive my tens. Once you receive your tens in ballroom, you go into a battle zone.

So, you know, there's two parts of ballroom. There's a battle zone and most of the time, the people that win those categories are the ones that have the most confidence, and I think I'm very confident because I love fashion. I know my mother used to do, so that is – I'm getting confidence from my mother when I hit the floor. I think about my mom. So, it's coming from a good place with me, so I'm thinking about things that she would have done I she was wearing what I was wearing, how she would be acting. So it kind of like goes hand in hand for me.

JP: I guess that's another way that history comes into the ball, it's like your own personal ... too.

SE: Yeah, yeah. I draw energy from anything that I feel like is going to help me on the floor whenever I have to be in a battle zone, but outside of ballroom, I'm just a regular, normal, everyday person, but there are people who work in fashion and they live fashion 24/7 in their life and they're walking balls too. But that does not mean these people are going to be a person like me when it comes to ballroom. It all depends on what are you doing that night, your attitude, your fit, your everything. It's just the whole total package.

So you never should underestimate your opponent based off of what you do in real life because there are some people in ballroom who are executives in real life and then they also bring that executive – that executive-ness to the floor and sometimes it doesn't translate for the next person they walk against who is not even an executive. He may wash dishes for a living. You know? But that person that night did that extra mile because he knew he had to actually battle you for that category.

So you know, sometimes people feel like they should win. A lot of people may feel like they should win. A lot of people may feel like they should win when I walk, but I feel like on the floor, I do what I'm supposed to do. I know how to – I know what to do against my opponent.

JP: Okay, well tell me about like a typical ball, if you're preparing for the fashion category, tell me about – a little bit like about the months that are leading up to that night and then how you approach that night and how you approach the actual category.

SE: Okay. If there was a ball that I wanted to walk or there were balls which most of the time, they have these categories, I'll read the categories, see, do I feel like that's a category for me. That's the first thing. If I feel like it is one for me, maybe five to six months before that ball, I'll start looking around for different things. I'll think about what time of season that is 'cause if I see the flyer in the summertime and the ball is in the wintertime, I don't want to wear a summertime outfit in the wintertime on the floor. Some people don't think like that. They might just be like, let me just get this out.

So, I like to be in season when I walk so if I walk that ball, I'm going to do that. And I want to be in season. And after that, I begin a process where I try to find those things that I want to wear and, you know, after I find my actual suit or whatever I'm planning on wearing because I feel like in ballroom, I'm a gender bender. I feel like I can mix and match, I can mix women clothing and men

clothing together and you don't know if it's men or women clothing. All you know is a style. I'm more of a style person.

So I don't feel like a woman's – a woman's top and a man's top should define me on the floor. I feel like style 'cause every night or ever ball, you don't want to see the same look that you saw the night before. You don't want to – that's just too narrow. So I like to bend fashion, not all the time it's successful, but I like to bend it where, you mind just takes you to another place where you just feel like, "Oh my god, where – like what is that? I never saw that before." I like to do things like that.

JP: And specifically like bending the rules of gender or just –

SE: Bending the rules of fashion as far as I might have on a feminine top, but I might have on a man pair of pants and I might have on a woman's hat. You don't know. I may bend it. I may change something up. I might take something off and add something to it, but everybody don't think like that. Some people feel like, you know, I have to be in all men's clothing. "Why did you beat me because you're in – you're not in all men's clothing."

This is a fashion category. If you are a fashion person, you should be able to wear anything. Nothing – you should be able to take the rug off the floor and turn it into a gown if you had to. I don't know, but you should not let anything stop you in fashion because nowadays, people are wearing all different types of things from different countries. You don't know if it's man, woman, or whatever, all you just know is, it's wearable and if you've got to turn it over and use the opposite side of it, then do it. That's how I feel.

JP: And so tell me the night of, when you're in the ball, you're waiting to hear the category being called, like what are you thinking, how are you preparing?

SE: Well, I didn't prepare like three days prior to that, but at the ball, I'm definitely – I'm definitely not in my outfit yet. I'm actually sitting there in maybe jeans and a t-shirt and maybe when I find out where the category is, I'm going, I'm getting myself prepared. It's more of a mental thing for me. I don't – at that point, I feel like I've done everything I possibly could for my house so now all I need to do is do my own thing spiritually and mentally where I get my mind and my body connected to my category.

And I'd rather for my house to be more waiting for me to come out

or assisting me and that's just me. I don't like a lot of people around me during that time because I don't walk that much now. At one time, I used to walk all the time, but by me being in ballroom so long, I may walk now once every three years. So – and the majority of the time that I do walk, once every three years, I win.

So, *[laughs]* so I try not to be on the floor that much. And I like being a mentor now. I like to help other people in different house, you know, try to give them the trick of the trade for the category, let them know that just because people are wearing Gucci and Balenciaga now, you don't have to be one of those persons. You can be a person who you found a brand new label and you want to display that on the floor and you just choose the right outfit and you say that's what you have on with a bunch of confidence. You could bring anything to life.

JP: Right 'cause it doesn't seem like it's – you know, it's about the clothes, obviously, 'cause it's fashion, but that's not all it is.

SE: Right. A lot of people feel like they're more comfortable with wearing something because of the name, whatever's hot, they feel like or out there now, they feel like those names is actually what carries you over into the win. I feel like the style carries me over. I can be wearing something less than what you have on, but my style is ten times better than yours. I feel like that is more of a strong statement than actually the name of the clothing you have on. If we take away the label of the clothing and we don't know what he or she have on, then what are we actually judging?

JP: So tell me more about that. Like, why is the fashion category important to you? Like what does it do for you, not just in ballroom, but generally 'cause I mean, it says you're talking about like confidence and ... style. Yeah.

SE: As far as outside of ballroom, in my church, I am a youth choir director, so I have to dress up at church too. My father is also a pastor, so I was always at church and I was always the little boy that dressed up really nice. So me being a part of church, my mother in fashion, then me being a drum major dressing up, I just feel like all those went together. Everything represented me on the outside and inside. I don't know if it happens for everybody, but a lot of people that's connected to dance, they normally dance at a dance studio outside or they have work steps outside of ballroom, but I just think that was a category for me.

JP: Okay. I'm going to ask a few more questions about the category. I want to know, like how does it feel when you're walking that category, when you feel like you're doing really well with that category, like how do you feel differently than you would feel in your everyday life?

SE: I feel like I have a whole other personality when I walk that category because that gives me a time where I don't have to be the Sebastian everybody knows on the street. I can be the ballroom Sebastian. So that ballroom Sebastian has his own personality. And when I walk the category, I feel like I just have more confidence. It's some type of confidence, a feeling that I can't describe it, but it's more where I know I'm competing. I know I want to be seen. I know I want to make an impact and I want to make a moment. So I'm doing all those things to make sure that it comes across correctly, executed correctly, so they can remember.

So if I'm battling someone, I know if I'm battling a guy and if I have to battle a male figure, I'm going to do it very masculine or if I'm battling a female, I'm going to be masculine, but I'm going to be a little bit edgy because I know she has on a gown. I know she's swinging her gown, so I might have to swing my arm or my gloves. I'm going to be right in between 'cause you never know with that fashion category.

Someone can beat you in a full gown or, you know, it's very hard for a male figure to beat a female figure, anyway, I don't care what nobody says, because a male figure to me in ballroom is like the female carrying a pocketbook, like a man is normally a pocketbook to a woman. So, you have to really be on your game that night if you're going to beat a woman in a gown.

JP: And you said, okay, I've heard this word from a few people. You want to create a moment. What does that mean?

SE: A moment is when you actually have decreed your category meaning that night, you pulled out all the bells and whistles and stops for that category. You did something that everybody, when they leave that night, they still say, "Out of all those categories, that one category, best dressed, I enjoyed what he or she did. I've never seen that."

You want to create a moment where not only are you just walking your category, you want them to remember you. I'm not saying set yourself on fire and win the category, but you want to make a statement that when they talk about what you did that night, it goes

from state to state where people wasn't there and they're going home and they're getting online and they want to see what you did and people are saying, "Oh my god, you looked really nice. What made you do that?"

So that's what makes you a star or a statement and then a legend. If you do something really, really, really big and it lasts for years and years to come, you become a legend because, "You remember that night when he did this or she did that?" So, you definitely want to make a statement in ballroom every time.

JP: And I guess that connects to what you were saying about Jack Mizrahi or the commentators, you know, they're chanting at the balls like bring it like –

SE: They remember all those good things that's happened in ballroom.

JP: They remember those moments?

SE: Yeah, they remember those moments so if there's a moment that people don't remember or he has to talk – if you have to find out about that, well, that will come from them because Jack was in ballroom way before I was in ballroom. Like, they were in ballroom in the '80s. Back in the '80s, I was still in middle school. You know?

JP: And I guess if you create that moment, like you become part of that history.

SE: You become part of that history, yes. Yes. Yes.

JP: Okay, I love it. I love it. Okay. More questions. Maybe we'll talk for another like 15 minutes or so.

SE: Okay.

JP: Let's see, categories, categories. You talked about gender. Well, what else do you think is important to record about ballroom, not just the balls, but the whole world?

SE: I think there's a misconception that ballroom, at the end of the day, is just for fun. It is – that's just a small piece of ballroom. I think ballroom helps to bring people together dealing with different crises in their lives as far as – there are people in ballroom that may have been suicidal. There may have been people in ballroom who were homeless. But when they join these houses, 99 percent

of the time, the leaders of the houses connect them with different things outside of ballroom that will help them along with having a productive life and a better lifestyle living outside of ballroom. So the misconception is that there are a bunch of people going to balls, you know, walking balls and they're not doing anything with their lives.

There are people in ballroom. There are doctors. They have doctor's degrees. They are sitting on boards of different organizations. They are doing extraordinary work in the community. Some people, you may never know that were ballroom walkers at the time, they are – I consider them as being alumni of ballroom. They may not be around anymore, but you can't just go into a place and start talking about ballroom and not think that someone was once a part of it. So, there are people like that in the world that exist and I think that ballroom helps to create a place where the youth that's coming in definitely have a system or a vessel to get to a point where they can have any type of financial or any type of need they need, medical assistance, to help provide them with a better lifestyle.

JP: So in ballroom, you get people from all parts of the social strata, from like homeless to people who are doctors and on boards?

SE: Yes.

JP: Okay.

SE: Yeah, like we have a few members from the House of Escada that are like, we have one that is no longer in our house now, but he's about to be a doctor. Then we have another one that's a nurse. We have different people in different houses that are doing like really good things, and I think that, like I said before, the misconception is they're not doing anything with themselves and they really are doing a lot of things.

JP: Okay. Well, so maybe this is a bigger question, but what is the role of homophobia or racism, do you think, in terms of the ballroom world? Like, you know, that's – ballroom is kind of like an alternative world, but there's also this mainstream world that is homophobic, is racist.

SE: I think a lot of people feel if they're connected or any people that they know is connected to ballroom, it actually defines them as being gay, and that's not a true statement because with any type of hobby or anything that's going on in the world, people should want

to see what's going on without being ridiculed, and I think a lot of people just don't actually come in to find out what's going on because they're worrying about what other people may say.

But I don't think – I think then like that stereotype in ballroom of saying that people in ballroom or being homophobic, I think that's very cave like and you know, we don't live in the Old Testament anymore, so it's like you have to wake up and realize that a lot of things are happening because they're supposed to happen. And a lot of things were hidden back then because they were supposed to hide them, but nowadays, you know, we have people that are actually doing things, they're coming out, sports people, we have people playing football coming out saying, you know, they're gay.

So I think with all that, those things being done, why not try to explore what's actually going on. You can make a better judgment on what's going on if you're actually there and see what's going on.

JP: Let's see. How do you think ballroom has changed over the past ten years or twenty-five years?

SE: One time ballroom, you had to actually be there to understand what was going on, but now because we have Facebook and we have all these – we didn't have the internet as accessible as it was back then, so now you can be at home and you can watch Little Johnny vogue at these ten to fifteen different balls and you can learn how to vogue from watching Little Johnny.

You couldn't do that 25 years ago. You actually had to be there. And like now, you know, you can get online, you can learn how to – and let me give you another example, you can get online and learn how to change the battery in your car, change spark plugs. You know, I'm not a person that knows how to change spark plugs, but if I really want to learn, you know, bad enough, I'll learn.

So it's easier now to do those things. That's the one thing I can say has changed for ballroom. You have more people now that want to have status in ballroom, and status meaning they want to be labeled as legendary. Back then, you didn't have that opportunity to even make a, you know, to suggest that. That same along with Jack calling you out as legendary or somebody who's in ballroom for a very long time doing that, but now they have systems and correlations set in place where they can actually appoint people to different categories.

We didn't have that, like a council. You know, we have councils that actually go around and give you the names of different people that have been in ballroom for years and then we tried to give them titles or give them legendary status. We didn't have to have anything else. So that's different too. What else?

JP: So now there's actually a council who's responsible for deciding if you're legendary or an icon?

SE: Yes.

JP: And who sit on that council?

SE: You have different councils in different states, different regions. There's a council in the Midwest. There's a council in New York. Or, sometimes you can bypass a council and if you have three icons that say they want to make a legend, you can do that, like me and two other icons can make someone a legend.

But, what we do is we try to compile all the information and see, do they qualify. Like, I wouldn't want to make a decision on somebody being a legend or an icon if I know for myself I've been to more balls than them and I won more balls than them, you know, as far as them being a legend now because nowadays, to be a legend, I feel that if a person just became a legend before you, you should have done just as much as that person did or more than what that person has done before you become. You shouldn't be coming in with doing half of the things that person done before you who was just deemed. So you should have –

SE: That's the way I feel and a lot of people feel like that's just – I'm just too tough. But I just feel like if you keep the standards up and you keep the – if you keep the standards, yes, it's going to be harder, but it'll be less people in those – in filling up those shoes and those spots, but that's just the way how I think.

JP: And so, I'm just curious, that rule that three icons can make a legend, where did that come from?

SE: Well, it's like they've always did that. They've always – like some other – you have icons and you have super icons. Sometimes super icons will do it on their own and nobody won't say anything because they've been in ballroom longer than me. And super icons to me are pioneers or they've been around a very long time. So, I respect all of their decisions on what they do. I would never say, "I

don't think you should have done that." If they've been there longer than me, you have every right to do whatever you want to do. That's just me being a real person at the end of the day.

But we still have a younger icon council with people where if you decide you want someone to be legendary, you can have three icons to do it, you know, and get them a plaque and everything like that and 99 percent of the time, the ballroom community will accept that, based on the icons that are attached to that crown, that plaque. So if they feel those icons did it the correct way, they have no problem, but if they feel like someone else just doing it just to be doing it, then you'll hear the feedback on that.

JP: So this is what I'm talking about when I say like, okay, I didn't realize ballroom was this complex 'cause it's like there are so many rules, it must take – if you're becoming part of ballroom, it must take a long time just to learn about everything.

SE: Yeah, and it's – and you know, you have a lot of people, I feel like in ballroom, that are leaders that may want to do these things really, really fast, but with me, when I became an icon five years ago, I said to myself, I'm not going to deem anybody in the first four years, which I haven't deemed nobody yet, but I just received my hall of fame award so I'm accredited. I can deem someone without having a lot of people because they're going to look at me and say, "Well, Sebastian definitely, you know, he's opened the door for the South."

So I wouldn't have those problems, but sometimes you may have other people that will, but I wouldn't just be deeming people because I have the power. I would still, you know, call someone who's probably been in ballroom longer than me and say, "Hey, go on this ticket with me." And then I might call somebody who's been in ballroom, you know, not as long as me. "Get on this ticket with me." You know? And us three together, you know, I just do it out of respect for ballroom. But I would never like just do it one night, just say, I'm just sick of this, I'm tired of this. So I try to go – I try to do everything the right way.

JP: Okay. This is a question Marco had. What three things would you like the younger generation to know about ballroom? Do you need to drink some water? I don't know what he meant by the younger generation.

SE: I want the younger generation to know that it takes time in ballroom, that being in ballroom is not a speed race, that if you

take your time and you do exactly what you need to do, you can have breaks. You can have times where you're away from ballroom. Ballroom isn't going anywhere. It's going to be here forever. There's no rush to get to a finish line that's not there. Your life can continue on in ballroom or outside of ballroom and it should not offset what you need to do in reality.

So, that's one thing that they need to know about ballroom. Another thing is that you're going to meet really nice people and you're going to meet really bad people, and you need to be able to separate yourself from things that's not going to benefit you in a positive way. That's meaning, you know, drugs, sex activities, just doing the wrong things.

Also, being in ballroom, you need to know that there will be people who you consider them as parents and there will be people that will be your parents and they should just be your friends and you need to determine who are your leaders and who are just your friends. You can't listen to everybody that's actually trying to tell you to do things that you know that is really not correct. You know? It's okay to be friends with different people and do things and learn things, but sometimes you have to stop those things and grasp reality.

You must remain a true believer that outside of ballroom, there are other things that exist that you need to do. If you are really doing what you're supposed to do in ballroom, you should be doing those same things out of ballroom. That's the purpose of ballroom, to give you growth and give you the confidence you need to go outside to have that job that you always wanted, to live that lifestyle you believe exists, to be the person you always believed you thought you were when nobody believed in you. Take that outside of ballroom and live a productive life.

JP: Tell me more about that , purpose of ballroom is to take those things that you learn in ballroom and take them out in your life.

SE: Yeah. Ballroom will help you to build your confidence, like I said before. With me, it helped me with having confidence on the floor. Outside of ballroom, I should still have this same type of confidence and drive. Not to say that you can't be an executive, but there are other jobs out there that if you really come to ballroom and you're walking executive categories, you may be executive somewhere else.

You may be an executive at a store, but you should be taking

everything that you get from here and going out on the streets, filling out applications, going online and getting jobs if you don't have one or if you walk in a performance and you always wanted to be a dancer, you should be trying to find gigs or anything that will help to assist you financially. You know, there are music videos and people who are celebrity singers and things that are doing all kinds of things. You try to connect. It should be like a web system of connection, you know, to help you along the way. I don't think that anyone in ballroom is just doing it just to be doing it because they don't have nothing else to do. I think they are all looking for some type of like validation and sometimes validation of the floor should reflect validation in real life. You know? Yes, I do dress up.

Yes, I do go to balls and I walked balls before, but I do feel good when I go to church when I look good and my pastor tells me, "We really want you here. These kids really miss you," when I get those phone calls from the pastor or from my friends or from different elders in the church, they want to know where am I? And I always tell them, "You guys know I'm a part of ballroom scene. I have to go and help my kids." They're like, "Oh, well, we want to go. We want to come see." I was like, "Okay." I think I'm going to bring a few people to the ball when they have them here, let them see what I've been doing for a while. Yeah.

JP: Okay. You also said that you can kind of like become a new person in ballroom. I think that's really interesting. So there's an element of fantasy to ballroom, like you can like literally become a different person through the different categories, but then you're saying that you can bring that up into real life as well.

SE: Yeah, a lot of people, when they first come to ballroom, we have like – we're inside this cocoon or we're in a shell. We really don't know what's going on. Our eyes are closed. Once we get into ballroom and we find out that we fit in, we start to build our confidence. A lot of people's confidence just gets bigger and bigger and bigger and once it gets to a point where you're able to interact with people, you're not as shy as you used to be, you can have a conversation with an elder in ballroom, you should be able to go outside of ballroom and have that same conversation with an elder on the corner or an elder at your church or an elder in a business opportunity or going on an interview. Like, all those things should matter.

You should always look someone in the eye at this point. You should be able to stand and believe who you are. You know, you –

if you can go on the floor and find your balance on the floor and learn how to move around in a room full of people, it should be easy to talk to one person one on one about a job.

JP: Since you mentioned church, I'm just wondering if you see any connection between your life and church and your life and ballroom or is it completely separate?

SE: No, I see – I think it's all the same. Church I'm working with kids, ballroom I'm working with people that are coming in. They're considered kids in ballroom, so I'm actually leading them that way. And then part time, I work as a dental assistant with kids, so I'm surrounded by kids all day and I just feel like that with me being involved with kids and being around them all the time, it just keeps me in a space where I'm constantly thinking about what's next or what should I be trying to let them know coming up or the ones that are now coming into manhood, what they need to be doing, because like now I'm 47, so I have a lot of experience on the good side and the bad side where I can just say, "Hey, look, when I did this or I did that, this is what happened. These are the possibilities that could happen."

And I think a lot of people don't view their lives five to ten years in front of what it is today. I can see what I need to be doing in five years ahead and a lot of people just live for today. And I think when you can talk to someone who has been there and understands some of the things that they're doing, may be wrong and what they need to do to change them, it's easily to assist them with that if they believe and they think that you really do care about them.

JP: So tell me Baltimore, when did you move here and what have you experienced with ballroom in Baltimore and what do you think is unique to Ballroom in Baltimore?

SE: I used to come to Baltimore in '95 for balls, actually. But I moved to Baltimore ten years ago right after Obama became in office and that was ten years ago. Ballroom in Baltimore now is totally different from back then because we have new people that are actually in control of the ballroom scene here where a lot of balls are now being done in DC. And a lot of other balls are being done in Virginia. You have a ballroom system right here. The Baltimore ballroom scene was really like an underdog city. A lot of people didn't want to come to Baltimore because New York was so close by. DC was there. So, Baltimore really got the bad end of the stick for years, but believe it or not, Baltimore has the most talent out of any city there is, like with the different genders, the different

categories. They all live here in Baltimore.

I just believe that Baltimore's just never created a system where they can actually make sure their own city was actually represented the correct way as far as it needed to have growth inside of the city where people understood Baltimore is the place to be 'cause that's what it is. Baltimore is the place to be. When I decided to move here, I already knew that because I used to come here years ago and I just think that like nowadays, like now, Baltimore is definitely on the right path. And yeah, it was definitely an underdog city.

JP: I guess just generally, not just for ballroom, but Baltimore as an underdog, like when I moved here, everybody told me, "Oh, have you watched *The Wire*?"

SE: Right. See, I think that's what – people think Baltimore is just a bad city, but Baltimore to me is just a city, it has very low income like it's just in a state of being in a depression for a very long time, so it never got its own chance to survive because of crime and violence and all that happens because of the low income status that people have and it causes, you know, different issues to come out that's not positive.

But Baltimore to me has more funding as far as grants for assisting people nowadays and I just think that when you're trying to compete with New York and DC, those two cities swallow Baltimore up because it's in the middle. And people will ride past Baltimore to go to DC, ride past DC to go to New York, but Baltimore is always holding down ballroom and that's – you have the House of Revlon here during the time and you had other houses, but the Revlons were definitely a big house in DC. You had the House of Khan and when I used to come here, all I knew was the House of Revlon in Baltimore. And I used to go to Bunns on Lexington Street and you know, that's where the Revlons were, all of them. I mean, it was just a lot of Revlons.

And then I would just – I knew the father of the house, Tony. He's still their father now. I knew a lot of their fem queens, trans women. They were in the house. They don't walk balls anymore, but I would just see them at balls. I was a judge at that – at the Bunns club. And it would be a nice thing because we would just travel here and then we'll leave. We'll actually be coming from New York and on our way back, we'll stop in Baltimore because there was a ball the next night and we'll get a hotel room at the Holiday Inn. At the time, the Holiday Inn didn't have the

Horseshoe beside it and it was just right there on the corner. We used to stay right there every time we came to Baltimore and we would go to the ball that night, and we had a really good time.

JP: And how have you seen ballroom change in Baltimore since you moved here?

SE: Well, there was a point where they were having balls a lot but now they – the last five years, there wasn't that many balls that they were having, but as far as the last two years and the years coming up, they're going to have more balls. I think after they created the coalition of different parents and stuff and wanted to support this city and make the city grow, I think now you're going to see Baltimore take off.

JP: And you're talking about the ballroom coalition?

SE: Yes. It wasn't – the ballroom coalition was not in play – I think we just started five years ago, so it wasn't in play at all but I think now because a lot of people get into their status, like you have Marco, you have me now, I'm not – the reason why I didn't do a lot of things when I first moved here, because you have to think of it as if me from the outside coming in and if I was here to do some things, you already leaders here, so I wanted to see how the city was before I could actually like get a lot of people's trust 'cause people don't know.

People didn't really know me. They knew of me, but they didn't know me. They didn't know what my intentions were. They probably thought it was coming in to take over the scene, but after being here ten years and they see I've been working hard with them and making sure that you know, somethings going. I just received another status. So they know I'm here for the duration. I'm not just here to make money. So, they are ready to, you know, take the next steps on making this city great again.

JP: Okay and maybe the last question I'll ask you is about the ball here. How does this ball fit into, you know, your whole, you know, 20 plus years in ballroom?

SE: For me, the ball at the Peabody, to me, it's an accomplishment to me. I'm not from Baltimore, but I feel like just being attached to it, and I believe like my house and the house of Escada, we've always liked to have opulence and I feel like because it's here inside the library and I've seen it and I know what it looks like, it just reminds me of an Escada ball.

And because of that, I feel like the city needs to see there's a beautiful side of ballroom as well as a mediocre side of ballroom, like sometimes not all ballroom places or venues are really well kept or historical and for this place to be that historical, to have it here in Baltimore, I think it's sending out a message that you know, yes, we don't live in New York. No, we don't live in Philadelphia, but we do have someplace here that cares about us just as the other cities do.

So, I just feel for me, being a part of that is going to make the city even grow even quicker because a lot of people are now coming for this event just to see it. And with the right team behind it and you have the coalition behind it, a lot of people are going to be here and they're going to be wild. They went on the ..., they were on the site, they see it, but I mean, I still feel like the pictures don't do enough for them. I think when they actually see it, they're going to be like, "Wow."

JP: Will that be a moment?

SE: That's going to be a moment by itself, yeah. That will be a moment, and to see everybody dressed up and doing different things because I think this is the first time where they're going to have categories that they actually read, you know, the little portions of the categories and it tells you what they need to do. It's really like upscale. And I think this is what they need because ballroom sometimes, you have to have the person do more than what is expected and a lot of people that don't participate, it's because they don't want to do a little bit more, but this will make a moment for someone. This will be definitely a moment.

JP: You said the House of Escada likes opulence. Can you talk a little bit more about that? Why? What is it about opulence?

SE: Well, ballroom is actually, it's always been a place of opulence, but as far as when you've seen other houses do it, you try to do it a little bit better and you know, there are other houses out there and I have to give them credit, they do a very good job when it comes down to ballroom as far as trophies, as far as the look, as far as the well planned, thought-out locations and everything like that. But just to have a venue like this is just like – it just intensifies, it just makes you be like, "Oh my god."

So, you don't really have to put a lot of things into it because it's already here. But sometimes just imagine just getting a warehouse

with nothing it and you have to create the space. Like a lot of people are not going to leave their valuables out for you to have a function in their space like this, you know, unless, you know, a lot of things are changed, but because it's in an environment like this, you get an opportunity to share it with the public. And it's – they're not paying admission. Everybody gets a chance to see what's going on in Baltimore and it just raises ballroom from Baltimore from five to a hundred and five.

JP: Okay, I'm going to push you a little bit. Tell me more about opulence 'cause I guess that's what – when I – well, I told you before, like when I first walked – when I walked in here the first time, well first of all, I had a friend who wrote a book about ballroom and he actually organizes a ballroom event in Berlin called Opulence. That's the name of it.

And he took me to a ball there and I was like, “Oh wow, this is exciting.” And so the moment I walked into this library and saw it, it was just kind of immediately, I was like, “Okay, there has to be a ball here.” But what is it about opulence? Why is ballroom so identified with opulence? What do you get out of that?

SE: Well, for me, I get the fact that it's a part of fashion. It's a part of art. Ballroom is a combination of everything and if we want to look back on our past and see where it came from, you would want it to look like this in your mind, you know, even though you may think of what happened back in 1921 or 1935 when you think about it, you think about a golden time, a golden era. You think about style. You think about fashion.

And I think these type of things where ballroom was driven off of is the style, the creativity, the fashion, the feathers, the beads, the diamonds, the way they presented themselves, you know, the Marilyn Monroe, all these different figures of ballroom and opulence is surrounded by normally the people that they use to describe these different things like, if we say Marilyn Monroe, we think about gorgeous. We think about pretty. We think about perfect. We think about you know, the attitude.

So, when we talk about different people and times like all those different things matter and I think because of that, we wanted to create a place where it was just like a garden, like a Garden of Eden for us. It was a heaven. It was a place where you come in through the doors, no matter how bad your life was and no matter how worse or where you lived, when you came into this place, it just reminds you of this is where I want to be. This is where – this

is what I've been wishing for my whole life. I found the place where I want to be. And I think that's what drew a lot of people in, the fabric draping along the curtains or the big balloons, the silver confetti, the cameras, the lights. Those are places that people want to be in life.

So, if you create that moment for them, you know, it may be inside of a bubble, but I mean, you create that moment, a lot of people want to come inside and see what it's like. And I think opulence and art, music, fashion, all of those things help to create that environment.

JP: That's a good place to stop.

[End of Audio]