

**W**hat is real and what is imitation? Which gender is which? Jennie Livingston explores the world of drag balls within the black gay community in New York.

"I was in this drag bar dressed in tighter fitting clothes than I usually do, and a drag queen looked at me and said 'you're good, honey.'" "I guess I looked real," laughs Jennie Livingston, producer and director of the documentary *Paris Is Burning* which opens at Film Forum this month.

But although you probably can't find a subculture more marginalized than gay, black and transvestite, *Paris Is Burning* is ultimately a social comment about America itself.

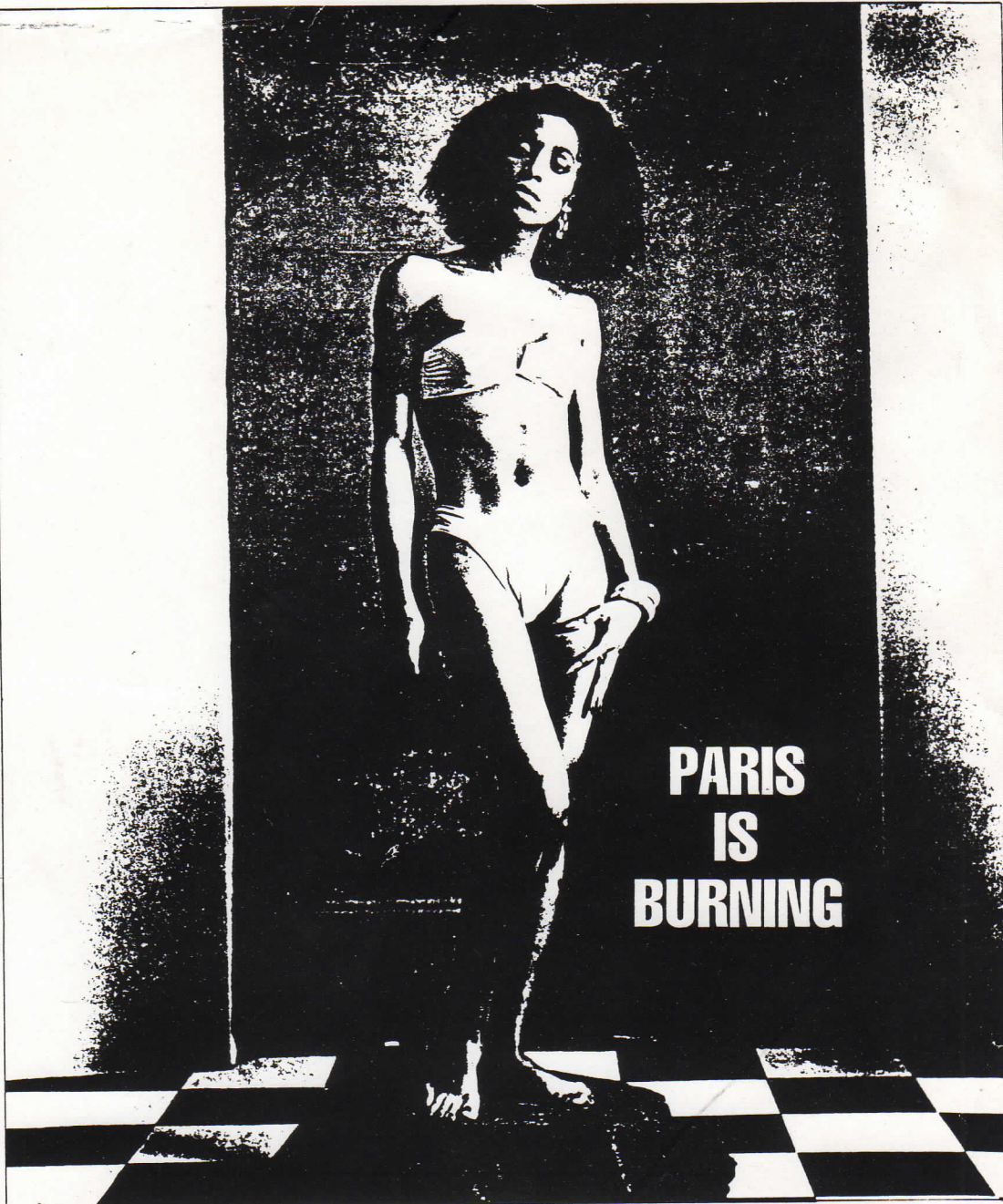
"The complexity with which the ball world is structured could only happen in America," Livingston comments. Here men imitate, and indeed futilely aspire to, fantasy models of the mainstream society that excludes them because of their race, class and sexual orientation. On the runways of the drag balls that are held either in Harlem or downtown Manhattan these men parade as "school boys" and "school girls," "business executives," "military men" and of course the glamour queens of the fashion world.

The dance that evolved out of these balls—voguing—has now entered the mainstream. "It's like

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this hall of media mirrors. The ultimate irony is that this group is imitating people like Madonna and then Madonna picks up voguing and imitates them."

Livingston feels that not only the "Ball Children" are hooked on the American Dream represented by the glossy images of media advertising. "I don't feel so separate from them. I may be a little more sophisticated and intellectual, but when I was 17 and I read *Vogue* magazine I felt pretty inferior because I didn't look like those girls." She believes that although the more affluent among us can actually buy the health products or become the executives, this group of black gay



Paris Is Burning is not a drag

## Drag Balls & Cocky Counterfeiters

men "have more spirit and more soul in their imitation."

She was drawn into the subculture of the ball world five years ago, when she came to New York to study film at NYU. She saw some men voguing in Washington Square Park and stepped into another world. "I didn't know what was going on, but I liked what I saw."

Livingston was frustrated with her previous work in still photography because it was a "silent medium" and she wanted to be "much more overtly political" and "just tell stories." The ball world seemed to play out a lot of the issues that concerned her: "the pressure of gender on people, race and class in America and how people succumb or overcome those pressures." She had discovered the subject of her first feature. "I felt these

people were the most articulate group I'd ever met, and this is after leaving Yale!" Her camera was her passport into this culture where looking fabulous and being documented was of paramount importance. "It was flattering to them to be photographed." Soon the young white woman with a camera became a fixture at the balls. They called her "Miss Jennie."

But Livingston also discovered that documentaries on off-beat subjects could take over one's life. For the next four years she shot a bit of film here, edited a little there, and worked whenever there was money. Sustained by meager grants, a generous contribution from a public television station, the British Broadcasting Company, and, on one occasion, a legacy from a deceased great uncle, she completed the film.

After five years of hard work, critical attention at festivals both here and abroad (the film was voted Best Documentary 1990 by the L.A. Film Critics), Livingston is still looking for a distributor. She cannot afford to nurture *Paris Is Burning* any longer. The current engagement at Film Forum and exposure at international festivals will hopefully give this important film a future life.

"I started when I was 23 and now I'm 28. I don't have any money and I have to start thinking about doing some other films. When you are 23 you don't care, you are young in the city and you are having adventures. But when you are 28 you begin to realize that not having health insurance is really stupid and it's not so romantic to live three months behind the rent." †