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Pat Cleveland — Willi Smith Community Archive

3-4 minutes



Pat Cleveland in Willi Smith for Digits, Fall 1973 Presentation, 1973

Pat Cleveland

In the early seventies, we were all a tribe of young people in a very small world of fashion. At the time, there was an entire scene of young African Americans called “glide” designers coming out. Willi Smith was a part of the group; so were Stephen Burrows and Scott Barrie. Everybody knew each other and would say all the time, “Oh, wow, you know we’ll share our girls, our stallions.” Everyone loved Willi and his sister, Toukie, because she was shapely, bubbly, and lively. Toukie was so social, and her brother was the anchor in their relationship, but she danced around him all the time and made everything so glamorous. Their relationship makes me think of Gianni Versace and his sister, Donatella. She was the ambassador, and he was the artist. We would tease Willi about their relationship with jokes like, “Oh, you’re doing all of this for your sister,” or “You don’t like us; you just like your sister.” So he’d put good clothes on us, and we’d let up eventually. I remember the WilliWear showroom on Seventh Avenue being quite extraordinary. It was like this club of girls and realm of clothes.

We did our job, which was a fashion job, but mostly we just loved being together. We couldn’t walk and move on the runway as wild as we were at parties, but we struck a balance so that people would appreciate our spirit, but not be scared to think they’d have to get up and dance too. The ladies would come to the WilliWear show tired from walking collections from Bill Blass to Halston to Oscar de la Renta. But Willi’s shows were such a contrast to the lofty designers with his modern, wearable, and clean-cut clothes. Even though the Seventh Avenue shows were established for editors and buyers, Willi’s shows were really fun and encouraged

the models to approach the runway like theater and entertainment.

At night we went out. Everyone was mixing with Stephen and Willi and Scott, which was so wonderful. And we went to Fire Island on the weekend, which was a paradise of imagination. There were tons of pool parties, and nobody locked their doors; you could just go into anyone's house and say, "I'm here!" Fire Island was a place that designers went for inspiration. Everyone would change their outfits three or four times a day for various activities, like teatime, dancing, dinner, or breakfast at the beach just to show off like peacocks. Everyone would copy each other's style, mirroring similar colors, then take all of their weekend energy, come back Monday, and bring it back into the clothes.