Flagging: A History of the Dance That Healed the Queer Community

"It was because of AIDS that we started to gather in these large numbers."

By Mike Miksche

If you've ever been to a circuit party, you've probably seen flaggers dancing and twirling tie-dye silk fabrics to the beat, as if they're drawing musical notes by hand. Flagging is similar to poi—the spinning of weights on a tether, often with fire or LED lights on the ends—but instead uses silk, poly silk, nylon, and lamé fabric with weights sewn in the hem to allow the flags to flow. To an outsider, these flags may seem like a novel party prop, but in truth, they're part of a queer art form with emotional and spiritual significance.

Robert Gomez, who's been working hard to keep the art form alive in New York City through his group, NYC Flagger Invasion, is no exception. Gomez and his late husband, Jeff Hettinger (the founder of NYC Flagger Invasion), used to go to nightclubs together. But back then, Hettinger would flag on his own. Instead of joining in, Gomez would follow his partner with two UV flashlights to help the flags be more visible in the clubs (the patterns on flags generally use fluorescent dyes so they pop under black lights).

"I did that for like four years," Gomez tells NewNowNext, "and one day I just looked at his movement when I was doing flashlights and I went up to him: 'Can I borrow your flags for a second?' Then I did the movement and realized that I had it down." That was in 2010. "And my husband said, 'I was wondering how long it was going to take you to figure that out.'"

Jouke Lanning

From left: Jeff Hettinger and Robert Gomez flag together.

People fly flags for a variety of reasons, whether it's for artistic expression, a way to celebrate or attract attention, or to just blow off steam. For Gomez, it heightens his dance experience: As the silk flags move across his skin, they raise his endorphins and feelings of sensuality. Flagging had also strengthened the relationship between Gomez and Hettinger. Being a non-verbal art, the act of doing it together made them more in tune with each other's bodies, a connection that continued even when they weren't on the dance floor. They were able to communicate better day to day without having to say a word.

"When we would come to a difficult point in our relationship, we would actually both start actively looking for a dance club to go to so we could lift our mood and change our headspace. We would flag together, toward each other. It was healing because we were communicating non-verbally."

The origins of this transformative art are ambiguous. It's argued that flagging dates back to lesbian avant-garde dancer Loie Fuller, who became known for her unique skirt dances in the 1890s that utilized silks with colored lights. Of course, dances that employ skirts have been around long before that—be it cancan or whirling dance—but Fuller's work was different: Her psychedelic explosions of flowing silks is what most visually resembles what we know as flagging today.

Flagging reemerged in the gay scene in the 1970s, but the origin stories vary. Some say that it came in the form of fans, and some say weighted hankies and sweaty tees. It has also been rumored that flagging has been around at least as long as the first circuit-type parties in San Francisco, New York City, and on Fire Island, but its reemergence has also been pegged to the leather scene.

"Nobody alive now really knows jack shit, anyway," says legendary fanner Candida Scott Piel, who suspects that various communities might have their own origin stories. Piel has been working hard since the '90s to sustain fan dancing, a dance which has similar movements to flagging and is rooted within the same community. Due to the secrecy surrounding flaggers, and the sad fact that the AIDS epidemic took the lives of many in the scene, we may never know the true origins definitively.

While there was a lull in the scene during the worst of the epidemic, according to Xavier Caylor, a new wave of flagging came along in the mid-90s, which he correlates with the advent of effective HIV treatment. Caylor, who has been flagging for 21 years and is the producer of Flagging in the Park in San Francisco, says, "It was because of AIDS that we started to gather in these large numbers."

"People had been having parties to raise funds," he adds. "I mean, that's what the circuit was built on. People would travel from all over the country so that way they could go to these parties, but the inception was because they were raising money for people with AIDS."

"Some people that were [around] after the '80s and '90s, when their health got better, they found flagging," says Gomez, "and they found it a source of healing because they were able to finally meditate and relax and self-express in a way that they hadn't been able to before the epidemic." Gomez's husband was one of those people.

Caylor claims that the flagging scene is thriving in San Francisco, while, according to Gomez, New York City is seeing yet another decline. With club sizes shrinking in the city, there's less room for the community to do their thing. Gomez, who's based in New York, says that they can take their silks out on the dance floor for as long as possible before it fills up. Some promoters aren't allowing them up on stage either, since space is at a premium due to the LED lights, which wasn't so much of a problem in years past. The fear now is that the lighting could be damaged by the flags.

"I think all across the country everybody is having a little bit more of an issue. More producers are not letting flaggers on the stage because once you have the stage you can stay up there all night."

Gomez has made it his mission to make flagging more visible and accepted in clubs today. “It basically is just about keeping new people exposed and becoming part of the community,” he says. As well as running his weekly group, Gomez organizes Central Park Flagger Invasion, which happens once a month from June to September in Central Pars. In addition to coordinating, his group flags at Folsom Street East, NYC Pride March, and at Pride Island on the pier.

“[My partner] started all of this here in New York and it was important to him,” Gomez explains. “And when he passed, there were a few things that he’d already set into motion that I had to make sure got carried out. They were his events, and I found that in [getting involved] it was a [way] for me to work through my grief.”