



## Smith, Willi (1948-1987)

by Linda Rapp

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Willi Smith, cofounder of the WilliWear company, has been called "the most successful black designer in fashion history."

Although his clientele included wealthy and prominent people, his principal aim was to design clothing that was stylish yet affordable and that people would enjoy wearing. He favored natural fabrics and unconstructed clothes since they are more practical for the average consumer. "Models pose in clothes," he said. "People live in them."

A leap-year baby, Willi Donnell Smith was born to Willie Lee Smith, an ironworker, and June Eileen Bush Smith, a homemaker, on February 29, 1948, in Philadelphia. Smith took inspiration from his parents and grandmother, who always dressed fashionably despite being on limited budgets.

After studying commercial art at Mastbaum Technical High School in Philadelphia, Smith enrolled at the Philadelphia College of Art to study fashion illustration in 1962. He soon realized, however, that he wanted to be a designer.

He earned two scholarships to the Parsons School of Design in New York in 1965. Soon after arriving in the city he began doing freelance work for the designer Arnold Scaasi and the Bobbie Brooks sportswear company. In 1967 he quit school to pursue his career full-time. By 1969 his name was on the label of clothing made by Digits, a sportswear company.

Smith and his sister, Toukie Smith, founded their own clothing company in 1973. However, the Smiths, lacking business experience, soon saw their enterprise fail. Willi Smith continued doing freelance work until 1976, when he entered into another business partnership, this time with Laurie Mallet, with whom he co-founded WilliWear.

Smith and Mallet had met in 1970, when both were working at Digits. After leaving Digits, the two went their separate professional ways, Mallet working primarily in importing textiles and clothing.

WilliWear got off to a modest start. Mallet financed a trip to India so that she and Smith could buy materials and create their first collection. They used the only fabric available, cotton, and, unable to find buttons, designed wrap-around coats. Thus, their initial twelve-piece collection had what would become hallmarks of Willi Smith designs--natural fabrics, a relaxed, comfortable fit, colorful and eye-catching material, and a reasonable price tag.

Smith's talent for making the most of limited resources extended to the presentation of his fashions. Since his company could not afford a runway show, he posed his models in the WilliWear showroom, which featured plain brick walls, parking meters, fire hydrants, and wrought-iron fencing to emphasize the populist nature of his clothes. He was also a pioneer in the use of video as a means of presenting fashion collections.

WilliWear never undertook corporate advertising campaigns, but Smith's eclectic, whimsical, and inventive designs attracted the attention of fashion editors and buyers from department stores and clothing chains such as TJ Maxx. Customers responded favorably, and the fledgling company soon became established in the industry.

Smith's style has been described as "street couture," a designation with which Smith quibbled. While acknowledging that he was acutely aware of what was being worn on the streets of America, he emphasized that he was not designing "for young people who like to look alike," but rather for people who wanted "real clothes" but with a sense of designer fashion.

At first WilliWear produced only women's clothing, but in 1978 the WilliWear Men line was added. Smith won a Coty American Fashion Critics' Award for women's fashion in 1983 and a Cutty Sark Menswear Award in 1985.

Each year Smith spent several months in India, working on fabrics and designs. On a trip in February 1987 he contracted shigella, a parasitic disease that causes dysentery. His health declined rapidly, and he was hospitalized with pneumonia in April. Two days later he died. A subsequent autopsy revealed that he had AIDS.

The news came as a complete surprise to his business partner, Mallet, who said that she had "absolutely no clue" that Smith had AIDS. She described Smith as "fragile" and said that coworkers "were used to him not feeling well, not coming to work." If Smith knew the nature of his illness, however, he did not disclose it to them.

By the time of Smith's death, WilliWear was selling over 25 million dollars' worth of clothing a year.

In addition to his retail ventures, Smith occasionally worked for individual clients. For example, he designed suits for Edwin Schlossberg and his groomsmen when Schlossberg married Caroline Kennedy in 1986. He also designed clothing for Spike Lee's film *School Daze* (1987).

A commemorative panel for Smith is part of the AIDS quilt. He is also remembered in a list of gay black AIDS sufferers in the poem *I Speak: A Poem for the Millennium March* by Keith Boykin, which the author read at the Millennium March on Washington for Equality on April 29, 2000.

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