HIP HOP DANCE: PERFORMANCE, STYLE, AND COMPETITION

by

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A THESIS

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The purpose of this study was to identify and define the essential characteristics of hip hop dance. Hip hop dance has taken many forms throughout its four decades of existence. This research shows that regardless of the form there are three prominent characteristics: performance, personal style, and competition. Although it is possible to isolate the study of each of these characteristics, they are inseparable when defining hip hop dance. There are several genre-specific performance formats in which hip hop dance is experienced. Personal style includes the individuality and creativity that is celebrated in the hip hop dancer. Competition is the inherent driving force that pushes hip hop dancers to extend the form's physical limitations. Defining these vital characteristics in the vernacular context should help dancers, scholars, and educators to develop a better understanding of hip hop dance.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Hip Hop Culture is most commonly defined as the combination of four

foundational elements: DJing, graffiti, b-boying/b-girling, and MCing. Each element

serves as a method of self-expression relying on individual creativity and highly

personalized modes of performance." (Price 2006) B-boying/b-girling, which is also

casually referred to as breaking and/or breakdancing, is the dance element of hip hop

culture. In the founding years, 1973-1979, "Dancing was the essence of early Hip

Hop Culture." (Price 2006) Hip hop was "…entirely dependant on face-to-face social

contact and interaction." (Dimitriadis 1996) This form of expression involved

rhythmic steps and gestures that had a strong affinity for the floor. Breaking is hip

hop, straight up.

Over the next few years, 1979-1984, the musical element of hip hop, which

became a combination of the DJ and MC elements mixed with record industry

production, began to grow as rap music was pressed on wax. Although hip hop dance

was featured in a few movies like *Wild Style, Beat Street,* and even *Flashdance,* the

rap music industry took the front seat in the visible commercial scene as the

popularity of hip hop grew. There was a move toward materialism in hip hop culture

and the commoditization of the music overshadowed some of the cultural elements that were once central to its existence. Interest in the dancing came and went. Breakdancing became a cultural fad, and just as quickly as it had become popular it was pushed aside for the take home product of hip hop, which was the record, or tape, and eventually the CD.

In recent years there has been a huge resurgence of the dance form associated with hip hop that has taken many forms. Hip hop dance is not just b-boying anymore; it has developed and grown in a number of ways, some more conducive to it as an art form than others. Today there are movies and TV shows that feature hip hop dance exclusively, and it is offered at almost every dance studio in the nation. In many instances the dancing has become watered down, and unfortunately, "…the history written by the texts of hip hop dance is on the way to being lost in the commercialization, globalization, codification, and commoditization process." (Huntington 2007)

On the other side of the coin, through all the attention that hip hop dance has gained on the global scale, many of the pioneers are stepping forward and bringing an awareness to the history and roots of traditional hip hop dance styles. There is a movement to keep hip hop dance potent in its original forms, rich with culture and meaning. It is also beginning to be studied in the academy. There are classes offered on college campuses across the nation that focus on hip hop culture, some even specifically on hip hop dance. I currently teach an advanced level hip hop dance class, a beginning breakdance class, and I just began teaching an intermediate level

breakdance class at the University of Oregon. Students are earning college credit for studying breakdancing. Breakdancing, and hip hop dance in general, is becoming widely accepted as a legitimate dance form, gaining much more academic esteem than it was once given as a street dance fad. With this recent flood of interest, popularity, and artistic respect, we are seeing a new breed of scholars who are interested in this dance form.

Statement of Purpose

As a hip hop dancer, educator, and scholar, I am interested in contributing to this new field of scholarly research by defining what I have found to be the three most essential characteristics of hip hop dance: performance, style, and competition. It is the purpose of this thesis, which includes an article that will be submitted for publication upon approval from my committee, to explain the importance of these characteristics in the context of hip hop dance and to define their roles in the development of this spectacular vernacular dance form.

Definition of Hip Hop Dance

In order to discuss the essential characteristics of this dance form, it is necessary to try to define it first as a distinct genre. What is hip hop dance? This question poses a challenge because by definition hip hop dance is *hip*, which the

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines as "keenly aware of or interested in the newest developments or styles." (Mish 1997) So, in a way it is always changing with the times. However, now that hip hop culture, and the dancing that accompanies it, has been around for close to four decades, there are some dance styles and characteristics that have remained prominent throughout. Because it is hip, there are always new styles developing, but there are four that are generally accepted as the traditional styles of hip hop dance. In Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon's article *Physical Graffiti: The History of Hip Hop Dance,* he defines them as "locking, popping, b-boying/b-girling, and up-rocking." (Pabon 2006) Supporting this assertion I found an article published in *The Philadelphia Tribune*, wherein Janae Hoffler says "At its most organic level, hip hop dance is up-rocking, locking, popping, and breaking." (Hoffler 2004) Usually referred to as old school or true school hip hop, all of these styles originated in the 1970's and they have been an integral part of hip hop culture ever since.

There is a broad umbrella term for street dance styles called urban dance, or vernacular dance. For example, there are older dance styles like the jerk, and the robot, and newer ones like the krump and hyphy movements. These are clearly specific dance styles, and they even have cultures associated with them, but these belong to broader vernacular categories. Hip hop falls under the umbrella term urban dance, and within hip hop there are four styles that have become prominent. For purposes of this thesis, hip hop dance refers to the traditional styles of up-rocking, b-boying/b-girling, locking, and popping.

It is interesting to consider what qualifies a dance style to be hip hop. At what point does it become hip hop? It is hard to say, and this could bring up some controversy, but the four styles of up-rocking, b-boying, locking, and popping seem to be generally accepted as the traditional hip hop dance styles, and most of the scholarship I have found supports this assertion, and addresses these specific styles.

"The particular form of dancing most associated with hip hop's formative years is breakdancing." (Dimitriadis 1996) DJ Kool Herc, who is credited as the father and innovator of hip hop culture, originally termed the dance style *b-boying*, but the terms breaking and breakdancing have become synonymous. Although B-boying sounds like a gender specific term, through the years it has been accepted as the term for any dancer, male or female, who practices and participates in the dance element of hip hop culture. "The term *b-boy*...is widely viewed in the community as a generic term that includes women." (Schloss 2009) Furthermore, although b-boying is only one style of hip hop dance, my experience and focus, along with most of the scholarship I have come across, deals with this style specifically. So although I mostly make specific reference to the b-boy style of hip hop dance, I believe that the three essential characteristics I have identified apply to the other styles of hip hop noted above.

Significance of Study

My research of the history and development of hip hop dance is based on what the originators have said in interviews and video documentaries, what I have found other scholars have written, and my own experiences with hip hop dance over the past ten years. The existing scholarship on hip hop dance has focused mainly on contextualizing and describing generally what hip hop dance is and what purpose it has served from the cultural perspective. "Another reason that the internal discourse of b-boying has been overlooked is that most academic hip-hop scholarship still operates within the framework of literary analysis and culture studies." (Schloss 2009)

My own experience with hip hop dance has taken many forms including being a b-boy myself, directing and choreographing my own hip hop crew, and studying all forms of hip hop dance that I come across. I have read numerous interviews, and attended dance workshops where many of the pioneers have discussed what they did in the founding years. But from the academic standpoint, there remains a lack of discussion on the essential defining characteristics of hip hop dance and how these characteristics have shaped the art form into a global dance phenomenon. What I have noticed is that no matter what form of hip hop dance I encounter whether it be a break battle, a hip hop performance crew, or a freestyle dancer at a club, they all have these same three core characteristics; it is transmitted through a performance, there is expression of personal style, and there's always a

competitive edge. It seems that the vitality of hip hop dance as an art form rests in these three areas.

Discussion of these essential and vital characteristics should provide a useful vocabulary and basis for future study of hip hop dance. Also, the positive attributes that hip hop dance brings to hip hop culture are embedded in these characteristics. Because of hip hop's broad scope there needs to be a foundation of ideas that help to outline the dance in descriptive, definitive terms. As hip hop dance progresses, knowledge of these ideas will give dancers, educators, and scholars a better understanding of what this dance form consists of and how to work within this vernacular culture.

Definition of Terms

Hip hop dance is performed in a number of ways. The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines *performance* as "a public presentation." (Mish 1997) Hip Hop, like many other dance forms is presented as a performance, usually in a public place such as a park, community center, or even a theater. According to Shelley Esaak, the term *performance art*, "…got its start in the 1960's", and "was originally used to describe any live artistic event…" (Esaak 2009) "Performance artists saw (and see) the movement as a means of taking their art directly to a public forum." (Essak 2009) Hip hop dance is known for using the public forum in street performances.

The whole culture of hip hop is based on elements of expression. In this case, expression comes through in the moment of the dance performance. This dance form lives in its transmission from dancer to dancer and dancer to observer. This lived experience situates hip hop dance in the vernacular, as the oral traditions, in the form of non-verbal communication through the action of dancing, pass on the history and legacy of the dance. Performance is the vehicle in which the attitudes and ideas of the hip hop body are expressed.

In hip hop slanguage, which is a combination of literal and slang terms used in the vernacular setting, there are various terms that identify hip hop dance as performance. B-boys and b-girls have been said to *show off, display, rock, flaunt, work,* and *boast.* All of which are references to the moment the dancer performs his/her moves. (Westbrook 2002)

There are a number of structures that hip hop dance uses as modes of performance. There is the circle, or cypher, as it is referred to by those who participate. A group of observers, usually dancers themselves, create a circle, and one at a time they enter the circle and dance. This is the original structure in which b-boying was done, and it continues to be practiced in this way. In this setting the group offers support to the performer in the middle by clapping to the beat of the music, known as the *soul clap,* and yelling out exclamations of affirmation. There is a certain code of ethics at work, and generally the dancer in the middle is given attention and respect for that moment.

Another structure that hip hop dance uses is the stage. Western Concert Dance has used this format for years, and over the past few decades hip hop dance has been presented in this way. Theaters have become performance venues for hip hop dance. Hip hop crews who practice the art of contemporary hip hop dance choreography use this performance structure. The movement vocabulary usually remains within the realm of the four traditional hip hop dance styles, but crews choreograph routines to be presented on stage rather than in the cypher. Examples of this are hip hop dance performance groups like Rennie Harris' Pure Movement from Philidelphia, and the Groovaloos from California.

There are also hip hop theater shows with a full narrative that are more like plays and/or musicals. They use a proscenium stage to present a story based in the hip hop vernacular. An example of this type of performance was RAWK, a hip hop dance showcase that I produced as part of my MFA work in the department of dance at the University of Oregon. I will discuss the details of this show more later.

The individual's style and personality has always been celebrated in hip hop culture, especially the dance element. "As in the cyphers at Herc's parties, there were rarely group routines, instead the spotlight was on each dancer's style." (Chang 2005) Hip hop is always developing new styles of dance as part of its definition. This constant flow of new energy and innovation has kept hip hop on the cutting edge for years. There were a few pioneers that danced in ways that were particularly creative and expressive. Improvisation and spontaneity sparked these dancers and they used their individual talents and tendencies to lay the groundwork, sometimes literally, for

world-wide dance phenomena. These dancers developed their own styles and techniques and they began to teach each other and pass on their style through the dancing.

Personal style in the context of hip hop dance means adapting any given movement within the hip hop dance vocabulary to make it unique. While improvising, there is an element of creativity that happens as the dancer executes the moves, weaving their own personal signature into the dance. It may be a step or move that has already been performed, but adding ones own personal touch makes it hip hop. Personal style gives the movements a depth and life each and every time they are performed. "You strive to take your move to the next level...keeping it flavor and stylized and making it yours." (Chang 2005)

The third essential characteristic of hip hop dance is competition. The competitive element has also been a part of hip hop dance since the beginning. The history of hip hop dance can be traced back to gang culture. Originally gangs would settle disputes with violence. At a certain point in the late 1960's and early 1970's gangs grew tired of the violence and began to challenge each other with dance battles instead of actually fighting. "Battle dances were refined as an alternative to violence." (Fricke and Ahearn 2002) The dances that they would perform emulated fight movements, but the goal was to see who had more style and finesse in the way that they moved.

Competition takes on several definitions in the context of hip hop dance. Early competitions, or *battles* as they were called, were usually one on one. While in

the cypher, one dancer would instigate a battle with another dancer to test his skills. This format was an impromptu challenge and without any verbal discussion, the dancers would battle. "The winner was the one who could bust out moves that hadn't been witnessed before; who could do something the other guy couldn't match." (del Barco 2002)

Although many battles were spontaneous, sometimes they were also planned and organized. Events that were centered on battles were produced, and crews would practice together in preparation. Many times a cash prize would be advertised for the winners along with the respect and bragging rights that comes with winning a battle.

Today hip hop crews compete in a newer version of the battle. They perform pieces of choreography and they are judged against another crew's choreography. In this format the dancers don't face each other while dancing as they would in a cypher battle. Each crew or team, one at a time, performs their routine and they are judged based on predetermined criteria such as technical ability, difficulty, and overall impression. Examples of this format are the *USA and World Hip Hop Dance Championships*, and MTV's *America's Best Dance Crew*.

Included in this thesis is a general introduction to this study. In chapter I, I have defined some of the terms that are crucial to this topic. Chapter II is a review of related works. I have divided this chapter into three parts: published literature, video documentaries, and my own personal experiences. Following the review of related works in chapter III is an article that I will be submitting to *WORDS.BEATS.LIFE. The Global Journal of Hip Hop: Culture from the Streets to the University*, with the

approval of my thesis committee. My goal to contribute to the new field of hip hop

dance scholarship will be fulfilled with publication of this article. Research article

submissions for this journal must be limited to 3000 words. Following the article in

chapter IV, is the conclusion and some suggestions of how this study can be used in

the field of hip hop dance.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED WORKS

Published Literature

Sally Banes, dance historian and journalist, has written several articles on hip

hop culture, especially the dance element. As a dance scholar, Banes' coverage of

this topic lends some early, unexpected legitimacy to this dance form. One of her

articles on this subject, "To the Beat Y'all: Breaking is Hard to do," was published in

the *Village Voice* on April 10th, 1981. In this article she describes breaking by saying

"But most of all, breaking is a competitive display of physical and imaginative

virtuosity, a codified dance form cum warfare that cracks open to flaunt personal

inventiveness." (Banes 1981) In this one sentence alone Banes references the same

three aesthetic characteristics that I have defined in this study as the essentials in hip

hop dance. The vocabulary that she uses is slightly different from what I have used

but the main ideas seem to be the same. She writes "display" and "flaunt," words that

seem to be references to this dance style as a specific mode of performance. When

she writes "physical and imaginative virtuosity" and "personal inventiveness," she

seems to be making a reference to what I have called expression of personal style. Thirdly, she actually uses the word "competitive."

In this same article, Banes describes a typical sequence of breakdance moves, "A dancer in the center of a ring of onlookers drops to the floor, circles around his own axis with a flurry of slashing steps, then spins, flips, gesticulates, and poses in a flood of rhythmic motion and fleeting imagery that prompts the next guy to top him." (Banes 1981) The vocabulary is slightly different from what I am using but she makes reference to this dance as a performance with "A dancer in the center of a ring of onlookers." Personal style surfaces in Banes' description of what the dancer is physically doing, "slashing steps, then flips, gesticulates, and poses in a flood of rhythmic motion and fleeting imagery." And finally, she makes another reference to the element of competition with "prompts the next guy to top him." In these two sentences Banes foreshadows my discovery of the three core characteristics of hip hop dance.

Michael Holman, owner of one of the first hip hop night clubs in downtown Manhattan in the early 80's called *Negril*, was a well respected figure in the hip hop community in New York City. He wrote a book that was published in 1984 titled *Breaking and the New York City Breakers*. One of the chapters "Breaking: The History" was later published in 2004 in *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*. In this chapter Holman references steps of other vernacular dances throughout history that have similarities to breaking. The breadth of cultural dances that he discusses is impressive, but what is central to

this study is a parallel that he draws between Colonial American and pre-Civil War American dance and breaking. He lists them like this:

1. Dancers standing in circles while somebody in the middle does his thing.
2. A little electric boogie action.
3. The beginning of competition in American subculture dance.

These three similarities are intriguing to me because they are almost exactly the same as the three characteristics that I have been discussing. The first is a reference to the dance as a performance with the audience surrounding the dancer. The second is a reference to a specific style of hip hop dance, the electric boogie, which is an expressive style performed with personal inventiveness that is known for its popping techniques and body waves. Finally, the third acknowledges the competitive element.

Dance Research Journal published an article in the Winter 2001/02 issue that was written by a senior at Duke University, Sara LaBoskey. LaBoskey has been a performer and student of hip hop dance for many years. She wrote "Getting Off: Portrayals of Masculinity in Hip Hop Dance in Film" as an assignment for a course she took at Duke titled *Dancing in the Movies*. In this article LaBoskey pinpoints hip hop dance as an "expression and affirmation of masculinity." (LaBoskey 2001) She has supporting evidence for her case and it is true that it was created mostly by male adolescent youth, but its development has definitely included the female population. We have seen more of this in recent years with the inclusion of instruction of this dance in public and private dance studios.

LaBoskey concludes her article with this summary, "Preserved like oral history, the stories are performed over and over, each time with a different twist, reflecting the individuality of each narrator. It is the story of battles, of a struggle to be heard, seen, and remembered." (LaBoskey 2001) LaBoskey is stating that this dance is shared through performance. She calls the dancers "narrators" when describing the element of personal style which she calls "individuality." Again we also get the idea of this dance as a competition with the inclusion of the word "battles." These three ideas of performance, personal expression of style, and competition, seem prevalent in the descriptions of this dance no matter what the intent of the author.

Hip Hop Dance: Meanings and Messages, published in 2007, is the only book I have found which actually focuses entirely on the subject of hip hop dance. It was written by Carla Stalling Huntington, an Assistant Professor at Missouri Southern State University, where she teaches marketing and management. As a African American Feminist she makes it clear that she feels that hip hop dance is the feminine expression of hip hop culture, quite the opposite to that of Sara LaBoskey's conclusions. Huntington says that hip hop music is the "masculine," and that hip hop dance is the "feminine." (Huntington 2007)

Huntington describes hip hop dance as a social text. She says that it is "cool, rowdy, defiant, sexy, athletic, smooth, creative." (Huntington 2007) She also says that it is full of meaning. "Meanings metabolize in the distribution channel and at points of consumption, when the dance is codified and made into a commodity,

used as a medium of value." (Huntington, 2007) One of her main points in this book is that hip hop dance theory, interpretation, and communication are lost when hip hop dance becomes a commodity through "television commercials and programs, commercial films, music videos, at concerts, in commercial dance studios, at cheerleading and marching band locales, online, in graphic and cartoon form, and in private consumption spaces." (Huntington 2007) Hip hop dance brings up many interesting questions because of its overwhelming global reach, but the scholarship thus far does not discuss its aesthetics.

Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon is a legendary New York street dancer, and one of the few who writes first hand accounts about the subject. He is currently the Senior Vice-President of the world famous Rock Steady Crew and the cofounder of GhettoOriginal Productions, Inc. He was a featured dancer in the movie *Beat Street* and he helped choreograph two of the first hip hop musicals that were staged in the 1990's, *So! What Happens Now?* and *Jam on the Groove.* Pabon wrote an article titled "Physical Graffiti: The History of Hip Hop Dance" which was published in 2006 in Jeff Chang's book *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip Hop.* Pabon gives a very clear and concise account of the various people and events that helped shape the hip hop dance cultural movement.

In describing a particular facet of b-boying, the "top rock," which is the fancy footwork done by a dancer standing upright as s/he enters and exits the circle; Pabon alludes to the same three characteristics that have emerged through

this study. He writes, "Although top rockin' has developed an identifiable structure, there is always space for individual creativity, often expressed through the competitive nature of the dance." (Pabon 2006) He suggests here that it is simply the nature of the dance to be competitive. "Individual creativity" is what I have been describing as personal style, and again the performance is the vehicle in which the dance is "expressed."

Video Documentaries

The Freshest Kids: A History of the B-boy, is a video documentary that was produced in 2002 by QD3 Entertainment. *The Freshest Kids* is the most comprehensive account of the history and evolution of hip hop dance that I have found in my research. It includes video footage of early hip hop dancers, and it covers the evolution of the dance from its birth in the South Bronx to its more current worldwide popularity.

The intent of this documentary is to trace the history of the art of b-boying through the voices and experiences of the pioneers. Most of the story is told by early b-boys discussing their experiences at hip hop jams and events. It highlights interviews with hip hop pioneers such as DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaattaa, Crazy Legs, Ken swift, and many more. This is a great example of how the history and culture of hip hop is passed down by word of mouth tradition. This is a virtue that video documentation has over written scholarship, because we are able to see and

hear the pioneers as they discuss the formative years. Their character and passion is tangible through this medium of scholarship.

In the *Freshest Kids,* Crazy Legs, who is an iconic figure in the global b-boy community and the current president of the Rock Steady Crew, describes his early years as a member of the Rock Steady Crew and he quotes an early martial arts film from the 70's when he says (mimicking the accent of old kung-fu movies) "I heard your style is good, but mine is better"! (Watson 2002) He says that he used this mentality to battle other b-boys around New York as his way of recruiting for the Rock Steady Crew. "That's basically how I met everyone else that ended up being in Rock Steady." (Watson 2002) Ken Swift, another early member of Rock Steady Crew, adds "I got down with Rock Steady when I battled Legs, and that's how a lot of my crew got down with Rock Steady." (Watson 2002) Frosty Freeze, another member of the Rock Steady Crew, says that after he outgrew b-boying, he told his younger cousin, Ty Fly, who still practiced b-boying, "Anytime you all got any battles coming up I'll take your side." (Watson 2002) Clearly the element of battling is at the root of this dance. Like the oral traditions being passed down through stories, these dancers were passing the b-boy legacy on through their battles.

Later in this documentary, Crazy Legs discusses the importance of personal expression within this dance. "There is a beat and there is a rhythm to this music. It isn't about how dynamic your move is, but it's about the feeling that you can

express with the dance. The dance is about expression, and a lot of people seem to have forgotten that." (Watson 2002)

Another video documentary that focuses on b-boying was released in 2005 as a supplement to *The Breakin' DVD Collection,* which was *Beat Street, Breakin',* *and Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo,* sold together as a boxed set. These are three of the first hip hop movies that were originally released in the early 80's. The bonus DVD that comes with the box set has two mini-documentaries and footage of an old Rock Steady Crew battle against the New York City Breakers. In one of the mini-documentaries titled *The Elements of Hip Hop,* Zulu Gremlin, a well respected b-boy, talks about hip hop dance. He says, "It's an interpretation of rhythms with your dance, and it's a self-expression done for your own personal intent, really just to feel and dance. Dance is a celebration of life, and there's nothing better than celebrating life." (Carson 2005). He goes on to validate my assertion that all the dance styles associated with hip hop are similar in aesthetic when he references lockers, poppers, and breakers, "It all comes from the same hunger for self expression." (Carson 2005)

Ken Swift, also interviewed in this documentary, shares some insight into the art of battling, "When I'm in the trenches and in the circles, it's the same school, if dudes want to go for it, I have no problem with them taking it to me and battling me. That's part of the game, and that's the golden rule. If you're gonna be in the circle you gotta be ready to hold it down." (Carson 2005) Another well respected b-boy from more recent years, Rox Rite, says "Battling keeps pushing people to new

limits, that's how you get your name out, that's how you get recognized; Battling."
(Carson 2005) The element of competition keeps this dance new and exciting, and
it challenges the dancers to keep creating and innovating new dance moves to add
to their repertoire.

<center>Personal Experience</center>

In my pursuit of learning everything I can about hip hop dance, I have
developed a broad base of knowledge. I have read all that I could find that focuses
on the history. Through summer scholarship grants I received as a student at the
University of Oregon, I have been able to speak and dance with many pioneers of
this dance form. I was able to meet the famous DJ Kool Herc and spaek with him
about hip hop dance in academia. I have been to some of the biggest worldwide
dance competitions that are held on the West Coast. I have followed current trends
through battles, internet sites, and real live hip hop dance companies. I have
learned, practiced, and performed many styles as a member of a hip hop crew. I
have founded, organized, and directed my own performance/competition crew. I
have also taught various hip hop dance classes in every age range and skill level.

Through all my past experiences, my recent MFA movement project
production, and my present knowledge on hip hop dance, I have noticed the
importance of this triad of essential characteristics: performance, personal style,

and competition. In my studies of hip hop dance I have been interested in the role these three aesthetic characteristics play.

For my movement project, which is one of two terminal projects I have to complete to satisfy my MFA requirements, I wanted to see if it was possible to isolate each of these characteristics. My questions were, "Is it possible to isolate these three aesthetics and study them individually? Can they be separated from each other? Or are they always working in unison when we experience hip hop dance"?

I set out to produce a dance concert in Dougherty Dance Theatre that would attempt to isolate each of the three characteristics that I have defined. I decided to choreograph three dances, trying in each to distill the ideas of personal style, performance, and competition respectively. I created a solo for myself that was an amalgamation of my own style. I choreographed a large group piece that was based on performing for the crowd. And the final piece was a live improvised battle between two crews of dancers.

The show was a collaborative effort between me and Valerie Ifill, another graduate student in the same graduate program. Valerie choreographed the first half of the concert titled *Kinesthetic Sense*, and I choreographed the second half of the show titled *RAWK*. Together we called our show "Something for Everyone."

Although I created three separate dances trying in each to isolate one aesthetic of hip hop dance, what I found was that all three aesthetic characteristics are present no matter what shape the dancing takes. My solo was made to just be a

showcase of my personal style and skill, but it definitely had a competitive edge, and because it was a show in a theater I was aware of the audience and I was performing for them as well as the onstage dancers.

The second piece in *RAWK* was created to be a performance based piece. I took all the composition training I had gained as a dance student and choreographer and put it to use, using hip hop as the movement vocabulary. The dancers performed in unison most of the time with breaks where soloists would emerge. Although I was trying to isolate the mode of performance, in retrospect, this piece was just as much about style as it was about performance. Each dancer even had a specific solo part where they showed off their individuality and personal style. They weren't necessarily competing in this piece, but referring to a structure of hip hop dance competition that is popular today, crew choreography, this piece could have been put up against others like it to be judged and it would have had integrity.

Lastly, the live battle onstage was just that, a hip hop dance battle. It was improvised, the music was provided by a live DJ, and the dancers created it on the spot. I invited the audience to come out into the performance space and sit on the floor making a circle around the dancers. This made a more intimate experience for the dancers and the audience, and it followed the same cypher format as traditional hip hop dance battles. And most importantly, as each dancer entered the battle, they came in with a flood of individual style and creativity.

So although I intended to isolate each aesthetic that I had identified, each is ever present no matter the form, shape, intent, or format of hip hop dance. This is an

interesting conclusion and could be the basis for a new approach to creating or teaching hip hop dance. It uses performance formats to transmit its message, there is always an expression of creative and personal style, and with its competitive edge it is always ready for battle.

Through all of my personal experience and my review of the existing scholarship, I have found numerous descriptions of what hip hop dance is. Many scholars and hip hop dancers themselves have discussed the history and various dance styles associated with hip hop culture. Through this research I have defined performance, style, and competition to be the three most essential and vital characteristics of hip hop dance. Some of the vocabulary in the existing scholarship is slightly different from these terms, but the main ideas remain the same. Furthermore, no one has isolated these three ideas when discussing the positive values of hip hop dance. I have found that these characteristics seem to work in conjunction with each other and they are the basis for many life lessons that can be learned through hip hop dance. We can define each individually, and study how each is important, but they all work together in the phenomenon of hip hop dance.

CHAPTER III

DON'T STOP THE BODY ROCK: THE POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES OF HIP HOP

CULTURE THROUGH THE ELEMENT OF DANCE

In a recently published article in *Words.Beats.Life: The Global Journal of Hip Hop Culture,* Dr. James G. White declared a "call-to-action for organizational and activist elements within the hip-hop community to launch a hip-hop world revolution." (White 2009) He claims that the corporate rap music industry (CRMI) is responsible for "…encouraging the glorification of pimping, drug dealing, violence, and exploitation of women in the lyrics and videos of their signed artists." (White 2009) Needless to say, hip hop has developed a bad rap. I am a hip hop scholar, activist, motivational mover, and I am inspired by Dr. White's call-to-action. I am ready to join in on this fight against the New World Order, and my weapon is dance.

Hip hop culture has reached a crossroads. The music, culture, and politics of hip hop seem to have all gone their separate ways. What happened to the times when hip hop was about coming together at DJ Kool Herc's parties and getting down? Through the 35+ years of hip hop culture's existence it has been the catalyst for many movements. Looking back at the history of hip hop, the original catalyst was simply for movement: movement in the form of dancing. Somewhere along the way,

as hip hop developed, the focus of the culture was turned away from the centrality of the dancing, but this is where the positive attributes that Dr. White is calling for have always lived. The b-boy/b-girl is the silent hero. The b-boy/b-girl has always carried the positive ideas, attitudes, and messages through the hip hop body. Let's go back to our roots.

"Dancing was the essence of early hip hop culture." (Price 2006) DJ Kool Herc, who termed the early hip hop dance style *b-boying*, developed a turntable technique that allowed him to play certain sections of songs over and over again without a pause in the music (Watson 2002). This was the birth of the element of hip hop known as DJing. He noticed that when the break section of a song was played, which is the part where the vocals and melody usually drop out and the percussion picks up, the dancers would hit the floor, literally. The dancing that was performed during these break sections of songs was much different from the normal dance floor activity. The energy and athleticism was elevated. "Breaking is a competitive display of physical and imaginative prowess, a highly codified dance form that in its early stages served as an arena for both battles and artistic invention and that allowed for cracking open the code to flaunt personal inventiveness." (Banes 1985) There was a creative new form of communication and expression being developed. "B-boying is the ultimate body manifestation of hip hop." (Watson 2002)

Kool Herc noticed this phenomenon and he began to isolate only the break sections of songs using his new mixing techniques. He had two turntables set up side-by-side so that he could switch the audible sound from one record to another

with the flick of a switch right in beat with the music, a technique he called the "Merry-go-round." (Watson 2002) This gave the dancers a chance to showcase their moves for extended periods of time. This was the birth of hip hop culture. "Hip hop music and b-boying were born as twins, and their mother was the break." (Schloss 2009) Following this lineage, hip hop music was originally the product of the DJ cutting and mixing breaks, and the culture that arose with it was centered around the dancing.

Hip hop culture spread and developed through the 1970's, and by the end of the decade it began to produce a marketable product, the rap record. "Rap music was pressed on wax for the first time in the spring of 1979 with the limited release of King Tim III's 'Personality Jock' on Fatback Records." (White 2009) Shortly thereafter "Rapper's Delight" was released by Sugarhill records; hip hop music took off and never looked back. You no longer had to go to a jam to be involved in hip hop culture. You could buy it at a record store and enjoy it in the privacy of your own home. This was a pivotal moment in time for hip hop as the culture became more centered on the music. Eventually, the unique social aspects of the culture and the face-to-face interactions that were created by the dancing fell by the wayside. At this point in the early 80's the popularity and recognition that hip hop dancing had gained, partially due to mainstream coverage in movies like *Beat Street, Breakin, and Breakin II: Electric Boogaloo*, was beginning to diminish.

By the mid 80's the dances that were associated with early hip hop culture, particularly up-rocking, breaking, popping, and locking, had nearly disappeared.

They didn't die though; they just went underground for awhile. The culture was no longer about the dancing and interaction that went along with it. Hip Hop became a commodity based culture and there was a turn toward materialism. At this point the dancing was treated as a pop culture fad, and it fell out of style.

In the past decade or so we have seen a huge resurgence of the dance element of hip hop culture. It is becoming *popular* again. It seems that the CRMI has marketed hip hop as a thug lifestyle for too long and people are beginning to get tired of the negativity. As was the case in early hip hop when the Bronx gangs finally turned to dance battles to settle disputes rather than gang violence, once again there has been a turn from these negative images of the hip hop body to a more positive release of energy through hip hop dance. This phenomenon has spread into a worldwide culture that now has youth across the globe practicing top rocks and body pops.

With this resurgence of the dancing comes an opportunity. This culturally rich and traditional form of hip hop can be used to showcase the power and positivity that hip hop has always garnered. Taking the original forms of hip hop dance and looking at its vital characteristics as a dance form can give us a new platform to stand on. The hip hop revolution is coming in the form of a movement alright, movement known as hip hop dance.

I have been studying this dance form for close to ten years. I have studied and practiced the dance styles that fall under the umbrella of traditional hip hop dance: up-rocking, b-boying, popping, and locking. I have attended and performed in many

showcases and battles. As a graduate student at the University of Oregon I have also been able to extend my studies in the areas of pedagogy and academic scholarship.

Through this research of personal experience and academic scholarship I have found three essential characteristics of hip hop dance that seem to be vital to its existence: performance, personal style, and competition. I have found it necessary to be a strong performer, have a unique personal style, and have a competitive edge to execute this dance style properly. Embedded in these characteristics are the valuable life lessons that hip hop teaches.

I have chosen three quotes from the existing field of scholarship on the subject of hip hop dance to exemplify the three characteristics that I have identified. One is from a well respected dance historian and scholar, one is from a young scholar from Duke University, and one is from a famous hip hop dance pioneer. These aren't meant to represent all the research on this topic, but they are a cross-section from the field of research on hip hop dance. Each of these gives great descriptions of hip hop dance, and the three essential characteristics that I have identified are embedded in them.

Sally Banes, who is a long time dance historian and journalist, has written several articles on hip hop culture, specifically the dance element. Her article *Physical Graffiti: Breaking is Hard to do* was published in the Village Voice in March of 1981. In the summary of this article Banes states, "But most of all, breaking is a competitive display of physical and imaginative virtuosity, codified

dance form cum warfare that cracks open to flaunt personal inventiveness." (Banes 1981)

Sara LaBoskey, a young hip hop scholar, was published in the Dance Research Journal in the Winter 2001/2002 issue. She wrote an article while at Duke University in which she discussed the role of masculinity in hip hop dance. In the conclusion she wrote, "Preserved like oral history, the stories are performed over and over, each time with a different twist, reflecting the individuality of each narrator. It is the story of battles, of a struggle to be heard, seen, and remembered." (LaBoskey 2001)

The third quote was written by hip hop dance legend Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon. Fabel is a member of the famous Rock Steady Crew, and a notable hip hop culture historian. In describing part of the b-boy dance vocabulary he writes, "Although top rockin' has developed an identifiable structure, there is always space for individual creativity, often expressed through the competitive nature of the dance." (Pabon 2006)

These three short descriptions of hip hop dance reference the same three ideas that I have identified. Performance, style, and competition are the ingredients that make up hip hop dance, and each of these characteristics bridges the gap between the individual and learned values in hip hop culture. So how have they developed as parts of hip hop dance and how have they contributed to the positive image of the hip hop body?

Performance in the Hip Hop Context

Originally hip hop dance was performed at hip hop parties. DJ Kool Herc would isolate a break section of a song and loop it back and forth between his two turntables and the b-boys and b-girls would drop down and perform their best moves. "The format of the dance was at first quite fixed. The dancers and onlookers formed an impromptu circle. Each person's turn in the ring was very brief—ten to thirty seconds—but packed with action and meaning." (Banes 1985) This structure became known as "the cypher" and is still used today at hip hop events.

In more recent years there has been another structure that hip hop dance has used to present itself: the stage. Originally hip hop dancers performed their dance as a solo endeavor, almost always through improvisation. As time has progressed dancers have formed crews and choreographed routines that are performed, sometimes in battles to compete with other crews, sometimes on a stage as a performance. There are even competitions now that use the stage as a performance structure. Crews perform choreographed routines on a stage, and they are judged against other crews.

The point I wish to discuss has to do with the values associated with performance. Like other performance arts, hip hop dance teaches its participants valuable lessons in the organization and expression of thoughts, not to mention the physical fitness that comes as a by product of dancing in general. Performing builds confidence and self esteem. Also, "performance has urgent social significance for the

dancers." (Banes 1985) It is their chance to be seen, heard, and respected in a society that often times doesn't offer this opportunity. "And if some of the most appealing aspects of b-boying are the lessons it teaches about how to turn your own life experiences into the raw material of artistic expression, it must also be noted that that itself is a kind of ethnography." (Schloss 2009)

Personal Style in the Hip Hop Context

Individuality and creativity have always been celebrated in hip hop culture. Other dance forms have codified techniques and/or prescribed body placement, and although hip hop has specific techniques associated with it, "…there is always space for individual creativity." (Pabon 2006) Personal style in this dance means having a unique way that you do the same things other people are doing. "It means making a style for yourself." (Banes 1985) Expression of personal style through hip hop dance has laid the foundation for the creativity of the culture. It has opened the door for many dancers who didn't grow up with technical dance training. Its improvisational structure and creative nature have been the welcoming committee for many urban youths to create identity for themselves.

The characteristic of personal style is actually responsible for the different hip hop dance styles that have emerged and become prominent through the years. Early hip hop dancers would practice and develop certain skills and moves over and over again until a whole vocabulary was created. These vocabularies became the

foundation for styles like up-rocking, breaking, popping, and locking. These styles of hip hop can be traced back to individuals who had such a distinct and unique way of moving that entire cultures were based around them.

There is a sense of self-worth that is built through this process. As dancers practice and perfect their own moves they begin to understand themselves and they are able to express something meaningful through their movement. A sense of pride is established and they are able to represent that with their dancing. "Some of the most powerful lessons I have learned concern the way one is to carry oneself in life, particularly with regard to the relationship between creativity and self-confidence." (Schloss 2009) Schloss goes on to say "…this is a valuable life skill for anyone to learn. The b-boy attitude is not false bravado: it is the intellectual confidence of a master strategist who believes that he has every possibility covered."

Competition in the Hip Hop Context

Many elements of hip hop dance were derived from gang culture, the competitive element being one of them. "Battle dances were refined as an alternative to violence, though they were sometimes only a prelude to it." (Fricke and Ahearn 2002) Hip hop dance was founded on the idea of one-up-man-ship. As early b-boys would hit the floor at Kool Herc's parties, each dancer that got down was trying to out-do the dancer before him. This mentality of competition has pushed hip hop dance to unimaginable feats in a short amount of time.

The competitive element has been there since the beginning of the dancing. There are three main formats of competition that have developed through the years of hip hop dance: cypher battles, crew battles, and performance competitions.

The cypher has always been used as a structure for this dance to be performed. It is also the structure in which improvised battles happen. Many times in a cypher, one dancer will challenge another dancer and instigate an impromptu battle. Sometimes this structure is used to get a dancer to show off his or her best moves, and other times it is used to settle long standing rivalries. These types of battles are rarely planned; they happen spontaneously and there are no rules. Usually the two dancers battling will go a couple of rounds each and then the cypher will return to its open structure. Also, these types of battles were sometimes used for recruitment. A crew member would see potential in another dancer and they would call them out into a battle to test their skill. It was sort of an improvised mini-audition. If the dancer being called out could hold his own in the battle, meaning his moves were solid enough to beat the challenger, then he would be accepted into the crew.

Crew battles are another structure and they are usually planned. These range in size from community events bringing together local dancers to world-wide competitions held annually, like the International Battle of the Year (IBOTY) held in Germany every fall. Usually in this format two crews will face off and battle as a DJ supplies music. There is a specified amount of time given for the battle and when the time is up a panel of judges, usually three to five, will determine the winner. Crew

battles will often times have a cash prize along with the respect and bragging rights that accompany victory. Most of the dancing is performed by individuals with the occasional crew routine to show their group harmony and cohesiveness.

The third most prominent structure used for hip hop dance competition is a performance based one. With the newer form of contemporary hip hop dance choreography as the medium, crews create performance pieces that are showcased one at a time. These are almost always choreographed and many times there are guidelines to follow such as crew size, age range, and piece length. This structure of competition has become increasingly popular in the past few years as more technically trained dancers enter into the hip hop dance world. The pressure on the individual is slightly less than that of a b-boy battle. Still though, the vital characteristic of competition is present.

There are many positive attributes that are learned through hip hop dance competitions. When entering a battle as a crew there is a sense of teamwork and camaraderie built. Whether it is a crew battle or a solo battle, the dancer learns that s/he must be held responsible for his/her actions, for that is what they are being judged upon. Once again, self-confidence is built whether they win or lose simply because they know that they represented for themselves and their crew. Finally, and probably most importantly, hip hop battles have always been the non-violent means to resolve conflict within hip hop culture.

Kool Herc used to get on the microphone at his parties as he would cue up a break, and he would call out "B-boys are you ready? B-girls are you ready?" (Carson

2005) Following DJ Kool Herc and Dr. White's call-to-action, I think we are ready. I propose that we all get up and dance. The positive physical and mental attributes of dancing are what we are lacking in hip hop culture today. There may be many political actions taken within hip hop but it is time that we go back to our roots and look at where hip hop came from. Hip hop, as a cultural movement, really is about movement. If we can get back to the centrality of the dance element we will once again find a creative, positive way to express ourselves within this context. Let's get up and dance, and don't stop the body rock!

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

From its birth on the streets of New York in the early 1970's, hip hop dance has reached almost every corner of the globe. What began as an alternative to gang violence and a response to rhythmic breakdowns has transformed into a worldwide dance culture. Children and adults alike are partaking in this dance style by practicing moves in their homes, at neighborhood studios, and on the streets. There was a time period where it seemed as though hip hop dance was going to fade away with acid washed jeans and trucker hats, but it has come back with more momentum than it started with.

With the move toward materialism in hip hop culture and commoditization of the music, some of the cultural elements that were once central to hip hop almost became extinct. The social aspects and the community involvement all but disappeared. There was a period during the 80's and 90's when the dancing in hip hop had taken a back seat to the music. In the past several years there has been huge resurgence of hip hop dance, and it seems to be growing in popularity with no signs of slowing down. With this renewed interest, a door has opened for a field of hip hop

dance scholarship. Hip hop dance is being accepted as a legitimate art form, and the academy is supporting it.

As a hip hop dancer, scholar, and educator I have been interested in hip hop dance for a number of years. With this research and my personal experiences I have been able to define hip hop dance's three most essential characteristics: performance, personal style, and competition. Performance is where the dance lives, and how it is shared. Personal style is the creative signature that each and every individual puts onto the dancing. Competition has pushed this dance form and its dancers to achieve incredible physical virtuosity, and amazing precision. The challenge to out perform each other has provided a battle ground for dancers to test their skill and bodily wit.

Deeply embedded in these characteristics are some important values. Hip hop culture has been an outlet of expression for youth around the nation, and world, for many years and the dance element is filled with positive messages and ideas. As we continue to study and learn about hip hop dance these three characteristics can give us a framework and context to work within. As a hip hop dance educator, I have implemented these ideas into my courses' curriculum. I teach the importance of being a strong performer and the aesthetics that support this. I encourage personal style, and individual creativity. I often times set up mini-battles in the classroom to push my students to perform the best they can. As a pedagogic model this teaches students the importance of the values associated with hip hop culture through dance, which are just as important if not more so, than the actual dance steps and techniques. There is a sense of community built in the classroom, and the students'

confidence in themselves shows through in their dancing as they learn and practice the steps of the original hip hop styles. They learn how to have a voice, through movement, how to express it, and also how to listen and respect each other. They are learning how to live life through the language of hip hop.

It has been exciting to see hip hop dance grow in popularity over the last few years. It has turned into a global language spoken through movement by dancers all over the world. It is interesting to watch new styles develop and to see if they will catch on like the original styles of hip hop did. The spread of hip hop dance also means that it may get watered down or oversaturated, but I believe that as long as these three essential characteristics are present, and the traditional styles are honored, it will remain a rich cultural expression.

Hip hop dance is an amazing positive release of energy. From the beginning of hip hop culture the dance element has been central to dancers finding a way to create an identity for themselves. The dynamics of the dancing provide a productive physicality while the freedom of expression challenges the creative intelligence. Thank you hip hop, for this amazing dance.

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