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Gretchen Villaluna

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Student Name (print or type):

Gretchen Villaluna

Faculty Supervisor (print or type):

Dr. Charles L. Carter

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Abstract

This thesis is a comprehensive chronicle of Hip-Hop dance from its birth in the 1970's to the present. My intention is to lead Hip-Hop away from its reputation as an informal way of dancing, and introduce it as a legitimate genre of dance. Important milestones and terminology are included in the paper, as well as influences on Hip-Hop's beginnings. In addition to the APA style essay, a self-choreographed Hip-Hop duet was produced. Rehearsals for the dance took place for the first three weeks of March. It was finally performed and videotaped during Northern Illinois University's Orchesis recital on the 25th, 26th, and 27th of March, 2004. Many of the elements of Hip-Hop dance mentioned in the paper can be seen in the choreographed piece as well.

Running Head: HIP-HOP DANCE

The Evolution of Hip-Hop Dance

Gretchen Villaluna.

Northern Illinois University.

The Evolution of Hip-Hop Dance

Today Hip-Hop is a multi-billion-dollar industry. It is hard to believe that a successful business such as this one originated from the unlikeliest of places. Hip-Hop was born in the South Bronx of New York in 1973 (Clayton, 1999). It is a fusion of many styles that came before it. Jazz had a big part in the development of Hip-Hop. The syncopated beats of jazz can be heard in many Hip-Hop songs. Jazz dancers interpret the music by doing strong and sharp movements, then contrasting them with smoother and more fluid movements. Much of jazz dance is asymmetrical and concentrates on the hips and shoulders. This technique is mirrored by Hip-Hop dancers, also called *Break-Boys* or *Break-Girls*, and later abbreviated to *B-Boys* and *B-Girls*. Tap dancers of the 1940's have been big influences as well. Sammy Davis Jr. made an impact with his graceful and rapid-moving feet. And much of the partner work done by B-Boys and B-Girls is reminiscent of the Nicholas Brothers.

There are several other building blocks to the foundation of Hip-Hop dance. In the late 1960's, James Brown created a new dance called *the Good Foot*. This dance was very high in energy and almost acrobatic. In 1974, Michael Jackson gave the world its first look at *the robot*. He also inspired many B-Boys with his *moonwalk*. Actor Steve Martin even lent a hand with his move *King Tut*. It is where the hands are shaped as blades, remain parallel to the floor, and point either right or left. The famous mimes, Shields and Yamell, motivated four amateur mimes to form their group called the Harlem Pop Lockers. Dances from Latin America and Africa make up the essence of Hip-Hop dance as well (Pabon, 1999). The salsa step can be seen in Hip-Hop footwork. One

characteristic of African dancing is getting the body very low to the ground, which is a common trait in modern breakdancing.

Even martial arts has played a role in the development of Hip-Hop dance. Capoeira is a Brazilian fighting form which parallels not only the style but the culture of Hip-Hop as well. It originated during the 16th century and is still practiced today. Slaves in Brazil were forbidden to fight, but dancing was allowed. When disputes broke out, the slaves would make a circle around the fighters. If a guard was approaching, the fighters would quickly change to make it look as if they were dancing. Because Capoeira was used during slave uprisings, the practice was prohibited. After the abolishment of slavery in Brazil, Capoeira slowly grew to be appreciated as an art form. Presently, it is studied all over the world.

Similar to Capoeira, Hip-Hop dancing began among society's underprivileged. Breakdancing was even looked down upon at one point because some people thought it revolved around violence. The structures and forms of the two are also alike. A *macaco* is a back walkover on one hand. This move is used by breakdancers as well as *Angoleiros*, or people who practice Capoeira. Many of the sweeps and kicks are comparable too. Breakdancing is also generally performed within a circle of people, and many times dancers compete, or *battle*, to see who has the best moves. The battle is very essential to Hip-Hop dance, and actually pushed it to grow. Crazy Legs, a well-known and respected B-Boy said, "If you're not prepared to battle, you can't call yourself a B-Boy." Just like Hip-Hop, music is very important in Capoeira. It tells the fighters how fast to go and keeps the energy high. A final similarity is that Hip-Hop began as an obscure dance but is now recognized world-wide.

A very interesting part about the comparison between Hip-Hop and Capoeira is that the original B-Boys and B-Girls were not familiar with the Brazilian fighting style (QD3 Entertainment & Brotherhood Films, 2002). Many of the similarities were formed independent of each other. This may suggest an innate sense of the movements.

Hip-Hop as we know it today can be attributed to a disc jockey, or *DJ*, by the name of Kool Here. Many refer to him as the Godfather of Hip-Hop because he embodies the trinity of Hip-Hop: graffiti, dance, and music. He noticed that people were very enthusiastic during the percussion solos of songs. These solos are also known as breaks in the music. Dancers exploded with their best moves to these beats. Kool Here used turntables to combine breaks from several tracks so that people can enjoy longer opportunities to explore fresher and more difficult steps.

Extended breaks in music became very popular, and a new style of dance was brewing. The early style consisted mostly of intricate footwork while standing, which is called *top rockin'* (Pabon, 1999). People began forming Hip-Hop dance groups called *crews*. One of the first is the Rock Steady Crew, which was founded in 1977 (QD3 Entertainment & Brotherhood Films, 2002). In 1981 they battled and won against the Dynamic Rockers in Lincoln Center in New York. This event was covered by National Geographic, the New York Times, *20/20*, and channel 7 (QD3 Entertainment & Brotherhood Films). All the publicity sparked the establishment of more dancing crews outside of the New York area.

The Rock Steady Crew began performing in many hip clubs and they quickly gained respect and an impeccable reputation. By this time new elements were being added to breakdancing such as *freezes*, which are poses while the body is contorted in an

impressive manner. B-Boys and B-Girls who showed more control and pizzazz going in and out of freezes were greatly praised. *Floor rockin'* was another upcoming craze on the scene. It consisted of rapid footwork while holding oneself up with one or two hands (Pabon, 1999). The transition between top rockin' and floor rockin', also known as a *drop*, was just as important as the previous two. The more ease and grace a dancer had changing from a higher level to a lower one, the more kudos he or she would receive.

In 1982 they battled a fairly new crew called the Floor Masters at Club Negril (Light, 1999). Although the Rock Steady Crew clearly exuded more finesse and elaborate footwork, the Floor Masters demonstrated more athleticism and power (QD3 Entertainment & Brotherhood Films, 2002). The Floor Masters were the trailblazers to a new technique in Hip-Hop dancing, called the *power move* (Pabon, 1999). Power moves include several types of spinning. The first were called *pencils*, which are spins on the head. Spins on the hands are called *floats*, and spins on the back are called *windmills*. The Floor Masters were responsible for having Hip-Hop dance acknowledged as a sport (QD3 Entertainment & Brotherhood Films, 2002).

Also in the early 1980's, Hip-Hop dancing was becoming big in the West Coast. California dance crews introduced new dances such as *locking* (Light, 1999). This style of dancing was done upright and was characterized by its jerky, multiple freezes. A young man from Los Angeles, Don Campbell, inadvertently created this new dance style when he was attempting to do the funky chicken (pabon, 1999). He set up his own locking dance crew called the CampbeUock Dancers (Light, 1999). One of the members was Fred Berry, better known as Re-Run from the television show *What's Happening*. He made the dance famous by using it as his trademark during the show.

Other California styles that emerged are *popping*, *hitting*, and the *electric boogaloo*, which are variations of locking and all considered/unk (Pabon, 1999). To the untrained eye, these dances look quite similar, but there are distinct differences. The media made a mistake to place these forms in the same category as the breakdancing from New York (QD3 Entertainment & Brotherhood Films, 2002). Therefore, California was not given credit for a new genre of Hip-Hop dance.

Breakdancing was everywhere, and many wanted to take advantage of its success. For instance, the Rock Steady Crew was approached by movie producers and asked to do a breakdancing scene for the 1983 movie *Flashdance* (QD3 Entertainment & Brotherhood Films, 2002). Also, talk shows, such as David Letterman, requested interviews with B-Boys (Light, 1999). Some crews began to cater to capital demands. The Floor Masters decided to change their name to the New York City Breakers in order to sound more appealing to the public. In 1984 they performed in the opening ceremony of the summer Olympics, and were also asked to do endorsements (QD3 Entertainment & Brotherhood Films, 2002).

Even though the Hip-Hop dance community was enjoying the fame, there was a downside. The dancing was not being represented to its full potential. Television and film can only show one view at a time, unlike a live performance which enables more of a stereoscopic viewpoint. Furthermore, film makers can unintentionally leave out important transitions, but consulting the dancer beforehand can prevent this situation (Pabon, 1999). Jorge Pabon of the Rock Steady Crew explains that commercialization causes a loss of spontaneous dance forms. And once choreography is involved, it changes the intention of Hip-Hop dance. Lack of improvisation discredits a B-Boy or B-Girl.

During the mid-80's breakdancing followed the pattern of any trend and slowly lost its status. People were beginning to lose interest. Crew started to break up. Hip-Hop began to revolve around the *Me*, otherwise known as a rap artist. A new image of Hip-Hop was emerging. Artists such as N.W.A, Ice-T, and then later Tupac, exemplified Hip-Hop's new glorification of *thug life*. Thug life can be generally explained as having a tough attitude and non-concordance with authority. Many B-Boys and B-Girls fell into the scene of thug life. Some found themselves getting into trouble with the law, and some even lost their lives (QD3 Entertainment & Brotherhood Films, 2002).

Amidst the sudden turn in Hip-Hop dance, many remained true to their roots. Prominent B-Boys and B-Girls continued to hold events for the Hip-Hop community. Asia One is a well-known B-Girl who organizes the annual B-Boy Summit. Crazy Legs still continued to dedicate himself to the Rock Steady Crew. Because of devotees such as them, Hip-Hop dance thrived. Dance crews from other countries were growing, but it was considered *underground*, or not a popular thing to do. However, in the mid-1990's rap artists were featuring breakdancing in their videos. Wyclef had original members of the Rock Steady Crew perform in his rendition of *Staying Alive*. The Black Eyed Peas did a lot of breakdancing in their own videos and concerts. Breakdancing was having its rebirth, and Hip-Hop dance was becoming popular once again.

Nowadays, one can see Hip-Hop dance on television, in dance clubs, and movies. It is more prevalent than ever. Dance studios all over the world offer Hip-Hop classes alongside the classical styles of ballet, jazz, and modern. A big following has developed in Japan and all over Europe (QD3 Entertainment & Brotherhood Films, 2002). New moves are always being invented, and they are becoming more complex. People are

holding freezes and spinning longer. Jumps and flips are higher. Footwork is faster. Many new moves like *the Crypt Walk* and the *Harlem Shake* have become popular as well. Hip-Hop is truly its own genre of dance with specific terms and techniques. And the fact that it is still around today suggests that it is not a fad, but a new culture that will prevail.

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Appendix

In addition to this essay, I choreographed a Hip-Hop dance to a compilation of Hip-Hop songs which I mixed myself. The songs are a timeline of Hip-Hop music history, and the dance moves done are the popular moves that were around during the release of each song.

I begin with *Rapper's Delight* by the Sugar Hill Gang, which was released in 1979. My partner and I do a lot of popping, locking, and the robot in the beginning to mirror the west coast's style during the late 70's. The next song is *The Choice is Yours* by Black Sheep, which was released in 1991. At this point, we mimic a dance battle. We perform freezes, footwork, and windmills. The third song is *Hip-Hop Hooray* by Naughty by Nature, which was released in 1993. The song quickly transitions into *Passin' Me By* by Pharcyde, also released in 1993. During this part my partner circles me with syncopated footwork very low to the ground while I do a move similar to the moonwalk.

Rebirth of Slick by Digable Planets is the fifth song on the track. I decided to make the moves to this song very intricate and elaborate to match the jazz-influenced beat of the song. The next songs are *All About You* by Tupac and *Big Poppa* by the Notorious B.I.G., which were released in 1995 and 1996. Hip-Hop dance in the mid-nineties revolved more around choreography. My partner and I do popular moves to these songs like *the Running Man* and *the Snake*. The Wu Tang Clan is a group of rappers that disliked the commercialism of Hip-Hop in the mid-nineties. Their song, *Triumph*, is next in the mix. The moves to this song are military influenced because the beat sounds like a march. Also, it represents conformity and resistance. The last song is *Jesus Walks* by

Kanye West, released in 2004. Many say that this Chicago-born artist is taking Hip-Hop back to its roots. My partner and I do newer moves like the Crypt Walk and the Harlem Shake, but also incorporate classic Hip-Hop elements. For instance, we have another battle where we do more freezes and other power moves. I did this to symbolize how Hip-Hop has gone full circle and has returned to its original style.