Street Dancing, "Rapping" and DJ Mixing:

Traditional African-American Performance and Contemporary Urban Culture

by LeeEllen Friedland

LeeEllen Friedland has researched the history of folk and vernacular dance styles in the United States since 1975, and has focused on street dancers in Philadelphia since 1980. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania.

In the last year there has been an explosion of mass media attention to some new and exciting performing arts. "Break dancers" have made their way into mainstream American consciousness via major motion pictures and television appearances. Rhythmic dance songs on the radio feature clever poetic "raps" about the trials of urban life or the joys of dancing. And the "funky" dance music played in clubs and discos, heard on radio, and seen on television musical variety shows includes a new type of instrumentalist: the disc jockey, or DJ, who plays a barrage of electronic turntables, mixers, and special effect synthesizers with the finesse of a symphonic percussionist.

As these performing arts attain widespread popularity, the initial media images of tough minority youths leading the urban avant-garde are being transformed into an all-American craze of national proportions. Youths of every cultural background are trying to spin on their heads, while tapes of DJ mixing, such as "scratching," play in the background. But at the same time, the abundant exposure in the media has not revealed the extent to which these popular performing arts have developed from, and are continually enriched by, cultural and community traditions.

In different ways, street dancing, verbal rapping, and DJ mixing on the airwaves have all developed from the traditional forms and aesthetics of African-American artistic performance. Street dancing, for example, has a long and venerable history in African-American culture. Whether this dancing is actually performed on the street is not as important as the fact that it is exhibition dancing, performed by dancers who cultivate a specialized repertoire and set of skills. In contemporary urban black communities this exhibition dancing is a vital part of children's and adolescent culture. Younger children learn from older children, teenagers teach toddlers. Often the teaching networks progress along family lines, though it is also common for neighborhood acquaintances to develop an apprentice relationship. Street dancing is easily intermixed with other sorts of play activity, and playgrounds and street corners frequently become impromptu sites for "jamming," when youths will take turns dancing in friendly competition. Sometimes a "jam" will evolve into an informal teaching session, as dancers exchange new steps and practice complicated moves and variations.

The exhibition dancing repertoire is extensive and fluid, and falls generally into three major categories: 1) fast stepping; 2) mimicry; and 3) acrobatics. Fast stepping is very important in the African-American dance

tradition, and includes both soft-shoe and tap dance styles. Historically, these vernacular fast stepping styles have had a tremendous influence on dance in American popular entertainment, but community innovation has always continued alongside theatrical development. Soft-shoe stepping, known in some areas as "GQ," features flashy stepping patterns that are punctuated with quick turns and flips. Two dancers often work out routines in which they coordinate stepping sequences with clever gestures, dramatic expressions, or partner related kicks and slides. Tap dancing, while not as common in the repertoire of today's young street dancers, is still considered an impressive artistic endeavor where certain young dancers have adopted it as their specialty. There are fewer older tap dancers in Black communities today than there were a generation ago to tutor these young tappers. There are cases, however, where the generation gap has been bridged and the step fundamentals and tapping rhythms have been continued in the traditional dance repertoire.

Disco Queens and Kings performing a GQ sequence.
Photo by Roland Freeman

The second type of exhibition dancing, exemplified by "the pop" or "popping," employs mimicry. All of the several different styles of popping involve some sort of imitation, parody, or exaggeration of body movements. In one of the most distinctive styles the performer moves the body with robot-like segmentation, while executing simple tasks like bending, turning or walking in a mechanical rhythm. Another common style of popping is sometimes called "electric boogie," to describe a pulse rippling through the body with a wave-like effect, and "moon walking," in which a dancer glides backwards while the feet seem to step forward in a stylized way.

The third major type involves some sort of acrobatics, such as flips and tumbling which are injected into stepping sequences. Additionally, there are two important acrobatic forms that are considered quite difficult to perform but artistically satisfying when well executed. One of these, "ground stepping" or "floor floating," refers to various movements performed while the dancer hovers just above the ground (or the floor), balancing all the body weight only on the hands. In one move, called "the sweep," the dancer swings the legs around in a full circle, shifting the body's weight from hand to hand as the legs sweep under them. Another ground stepping move is "the helicopter," in which the dancer balances as if in a handstand, but then kicks and twists both legs up in the air in flashy, yet graceful maneuvers.

The second acrobatic form consists of different types of spins performed using some part of the body as the fulcrum. These spins are the distinctive element in what has come to be known as "break dancing" or "breaking." A break dancing sequence generally begins with a few rudimentary steps, followed by a descent to the ground where the dancer spins on the back, head, knee, hand, or torso. Variations of the sweep and other ground stepping moves are sometimes used in break dancing in order to help build momentum for a spin. Break dancing has been highlighted by the media, albeit out of proportion to its relative importance as a form in the traditional performance repertoire. Although an exciting and difficult acrobatic form of street dancing, it is fairly limited when compared to fast stepping or the pop.

Verbal arts are also a highly respected and important type of artistic performance in African-American communities. The traditional repertoire includes a number of forms, such as verbal insults—known variously as

"the dozens," "sounding," "signifying"—poetic "rhyming," and narrative "toasts." The rapping that is interspersed with the broadcast of funk and disco music has evolved from these traditional verbal arts and incorporated some musical elements as well. Disco rapping generally uses rhyming patterns, and the content usually describes a scene, tells a story, or comments on some current state of affairs. For example, a rapper will often begin by introducing himself by his "disco name" (nickname) and proceed to brag about his excellence or some exploit for which he considers himself famous, progressing thereafter to more descriptive topics, which often center around music and dancing or urban life. The content of a rap and the verbal style with which thoughts are expressed are quite important, and listeners attend carefully to all the words. A good rapper will incorporate clever turns of phrase and quote from well known songs and familiar expressions in the attempt to catch the listener's ear. Though there is improvisation in rapping, material is composed in parts ahead of time. In fact, segments which prove successful are commonly written down by a rapper and saved to complete a longer piece. In performance, a rapper will draw on his or her stock of composed poetic segments as well as the traditional repertoire of formulaic fillers, rhymes, and responsorial chants.

In addition to its verbal artistry, rapping is also important as a part of musical performance. The recitation style used for rapping is highly inflected, although never considered to be actual singing. The musical significance of rapping lies more in its rhythmic patterns which provide a contrapuntal embellishment to the recorded rhythm track playing continuously in the background.

Music is the inspiration for rapping and dancing, and a successful dance event requires the services of a disc jockey and an electronic sound system. In addition to speakers, amplifier, and a record collection, DJs surround themselves with an orchestra of electronic equipment, including two turntables, a mixer, headphones, echo box, and whatever type of synthesizer is affordable. Much more than merely shuffling commercial recordings back and forth, the DJ is a master performer on the "wheels of steel" (turntables), and thus considered a creative musician. The musical performance arises from his "mixing," which includes playing discs, creating new non-recorded sounds, and integrating the varied sound output. There are several techniques of mixing: one, called "scratching" or "cutting," involves the controlling of the mechanical revolutions of the turntables with a finger, so that the sound of the recording is distorted in some way to produce different rhythmic patterns. Non-electronic percussion playing, such as drumming or tap dancing, can be used to add another rhythmic layer to the music. Rapping completes the aesthetic picture with poetry.

The street dancing and rapping that is performed by urban Black youths today demonstrates how traditional African-American performing arts continue to evolve and influence mainstream popular entertainment. The role of traditional musician and percussion playing has been inherited by the DJ, who has adapted modern audio technology to a creative endeavor and transformed its formerly passive use into an active artistic pursuit based on traditional aesthetics.

Suggested reading

Friedland, LeeEllen. "Disco: Afro-American Vernacular Performance," *Dance Research Journal* 15 (1983): 27-35.

Kochman, Thomas, ed. *Rappin' and Stylin' Out—Communication in Urban Black America.* Urbana: University of Illinois, 1972.

Stearns, Marshall and Jean. *Jazz Dance.* New York: Schirmer, 1964.

Suggested recordings (dance singles):

Jam On It, by Nucleus. Sunnyview Records SUN 411.

Mega-mix, by Herbie Hancock. Columbia Records 44-04960.

The Message, by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Sugarhill Records SH 268.

Pumpin' It Up, by P. Funk All-Stars. CBS Records 4Z904981.