

Hip-Hop Dance

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Hip-hop culture sprang from the hearts of young African Americans and Latinos as a way to express themselves in the inner cities of New York. Beginning around 1973, it became a powerful influence on popular culture across the globe.

To put the dancing being done today in perspective, I interviewed members of the Rock Steady Crew, one of the first b-boy crews to emerge with hip-hop. The term “b-boy” was coined by DJ Kool Herc. It means break-boy. The dance was done to the “break” of the record, the funkier part, the part that was mostly a hard-driving beat. An example of a “break” would be a drum solo in a James Brown record. The Rock Steady Crew still performs and aspires to make hip-hop dancing an accepted art form, like ballet and tap dancing.

“Crazy Legs,” of the Rock Steady Crew in New York, said that hip-hop dancing started as a way out of violence. It kept young people out of trouble. Due to the influence of hip-hop, gang members began to settle their differences by dancing rather than fighting.

Opinions vary on the importance of names in hip-hop dancing. Pee-Wee Dance of the Rock Steady Crew says the crew is named that because “we steady be rockin.” Crazy Legs got his name because he is quite bowlegged and does some unique things with those legs. Pee-Wee Dance is named for his diminutive stature. Also, he is 32 years old, so he is called “the dance that won’t die.”

Some dancers name their moves as well. Break dancing gave us the “continuous backspin,” “windmill,” and the “whirl.” Crazy Legs invented the continuous backspin while Pee-Wee Dance invented the whirl. The continuous backspin was a method of using one’s legs to continue spinning when the dancer would otherwise have come to a stop. Pee-Wee Dance describes the whirl as a move where he spins while low to

the ground, comes back up to his feet, and then lowers himself again while maintaining his spin. Although there is structure to their routines, many times the best performances are the ones that happen instantaneously in a moment of creativity.

There is a tradition involved with hip-hop dancing. Older generations continuously pass on what they’ve learned to younger generations. Almost all the dancers agreed that they learned to dance by going to parties or by getting together with peers when they were younger. Little kids learn by watching their elders dance then going home to practice. Pee-Wee Dance studies styles that are similar but came before, namely buck dancing and the Lindy Hop. He frequents the Schomburg Center in New York to research and to keep his mind focused on the tradition of hip-hop dancing. This style of dancing dates back to Africa because there is one common thread — the music. The music is percussive. It is based on the beat. African communities used the drum as a primary form of communication and modern-day dancers rely on the beat as well.

Hip-hop dancing needs to be nurtured and accepted by those within the communities that hip-hop comes from, places like New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Detroit, and Miami, that have large concentrations of African Americans. As inner city youth strive for something to call their own, hip-hop dancing is one way to provide them with the means to control their own energies and to display them at will. Therefore, hip-hop culture and its dances will continue to influence popular culture in the years to come.

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