

## Hip Hop

by Christopher A. Miller and Rebecca A. Ferrell

A cultural movement that blossomed in the African American and Hispanic communities of the Bronx, New York during the early 1970s, hip hop stands as a highly developed complex of performing and visual arts primarily focused on the core disciplines of DJ-ing (music), MC-ing (poetry), graffiti (art), and breaking (dance). While this article specifically investigates the movement arts of hip hop, breaking as an artistic construct is inseparable from strong influences circulating in hip hop music, rhymes, and visual art.

Widely recognized as the “Father of Hip Hop,” DJ Kool Herc transformed Bronx community spaces into large block parties in the early 1970s, employing a massive sound system and a personal talent for bringing people together. Using an audio set-up that incorporated two turntables, Herc began to lengthen the “break beat” instrumental sections on popular R&B and funk records, the point in the music where previous experience taught him that dancers were most active on the floor. By the late 1970s, two of Herc’s apprentices, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, perfected and expanded turntabling techniques while founding hip hop performance collectives that achieved widespread fame over time, the Zulu Nation and Furious Five respectively.

At the early dance parties of the 1970s, DJ Kool Herc coined the term “b-boys” and “b-girls” to refer to the progressively more talented dancers filling out his *break* beats. “B-boying” developed from dance movement closely associated with earlier gang-related mock-battle forms such as uprock and going off. Additionally owing much to popular influences, such as James Brown, Sammy Davis, Jr., and the [Nicholas Brothers](#), as well as certain kung-fu motions, early breaking focused on swift footwork combined with many of the arm

and hand gestures of uprock, subsequently termed toprock by b-boys.

Only after Keith and Kevin Smith, collectively known as the Nigga Twinz, took to the floor in the mid-1970s did the breaking dance palette expand to include downrock, a repertoire of movements danced low to the floor. Increasingly gymnastic in style, a quick succession of second generation b-boys introduced a mixture of leg sweeps, spins, headstands, freezes, and suicides (finishing moves that are designed to be fantastic, result in a sudden stop, and often appear very painful). In all cases, these movements were increasingly performative, specifically designed to illicit awe in an audience, and required focused rehearsal. Respected collectives such as the Zulu Kings (part of an expanding Zulu Nation), Crazy Commanders, Sal Soul Crew, and Rock Steady Crew pushed breaking into a more complex system of movement while training personnel who were increasingly professionalized. By the end of the 1970s, B-boy Spy (“the man with a thousand moves”) of the Crazy Commanders had refined the 6-step, CC rock, and many sweeps that are now considered core techniques, while other now-foundational moves such as the baby freeze, the chair freeze, and shoulder spins were seeing first runs in the streets of New York.

By the early 1980s, the media had taken notice of hip hop culture in general, giving breaking its first opportunities for exposure on a larger scale. Early documentary films, including the influential *Wild Style* and *Style Wars*, thoughtfully introduced breaking just before wide-scale exposure in a Hollywood blockbuster, *Flashdance*. Not only did the film feature four notable members of the Rock Steady Crew in street breaking scenes, but several key choreographed dance scenes set on the movie’s lead actress were

actually performed in the film by a body double, arguably the most widely known b-boy, Crazy Legs.

Increased exposure and internal organizational efforts coupled with the advent of a third generation of dancers further solidified breaking as a legitimate performing art form through the 1980s. The repertoire came to add more power moves (increasingly acrobatic variations of common handstands, swipes, windmills, flares, and air moves) to existing toprock, downrock, freeze, and suicide elements. Among dancers, influential practitioners in professional circles expanded to ever-larger numbers on top of innumerable amateur and hobbyist dancers. Yet, as hip hop aesthetics have claimed an expanding role in popular culture, breaking has been noticeably eclipsed in scale by its sister disciplines of MC-ing and DJ-ing, including the rise of recording-studio-based hip hop music production as high art.

By the turn of the millennium, there was little question of the vitality and importance of hip hop culture. And perhaps most importantly, the 2000s ushered in an era of increased reflection and efforts at preservation, which both actively and passively acknowledged major influences of the movement. Documentaries like *The Freshest Kids: History of the B-Boy* sought origins and founders, while local and university dance studios incorporated breaking into taught curriculums.

Among the clearest signs of the longevity of hip hop culture are the global expansion of all four component art forms as well as the development of locally cultivated versions of DJ-ing, MC-ing, graffiti, and breaking. Notable international breaking communities have established vital roots in western Europe, Scandinavia, and Japan, though no region of the world lacks for hip hop incursion into local dance culture. Breaking

has come to incorporate previously existing dance moves, such as the funk-related dances associated with popping and locking, but has also cultivated its own off-shoots. The most notable developments from the western coast of the United States are krumping and jerking. Alternatively known as clowning, krumping is characterized by assertive jabs, stomps, chest pops, and a distinctive style of dress that often includes clown make-up. Jerking includes movements such as the pindrop, reject, and dips, which are both crisp and repetitive.

Gay communities have also played a role in the development of hip hop culture, though sometimes at the margins. Among notable dance forms are waacking and j-setting, the former drawing on influences from disco and house music while the latter contains flavors of jazz and cheerleading.

Cultural, class, economic, and gender issues have always played a role in hip hop and by extension breaking. The community continues to widely acknowledge a strong male dominance across all art forms. Though b-girls find a place in performance, they are drastically out-numbered by their male counterparts. Similarly, though a gay community exists within hip hop, it is often marginalized and occasionally shunned altogether. Finally, the mock conflict derived from past gang-related origins persists in breaking even today, as the “battle” remains the event that drives most gatherings of b-boys and b-girls. Reputation and fame remain delicately balanced between nuanced expressions of simulated violence and dance movement that is artistically cultivated and sublime.

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