



Liner Notes:



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Liner Notes:



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# CONVERSATIONS

Across the Field of Dance Studies



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## Breakin' & Youth Social Justice Movements: BuddhaCFM & WaAaKSun



### BuddhaCFM

Founder/Executive Director, Blueprint  
Canadian Floor Masters

Hip Hop Dance and Youth Social Justice Movements, a conversation with Stephen "BuddhaCFM" Leafloor and WaAaKSun. Video recorded and edited by MiRi Park and grace jun, April 18, 2021. Watch the full video here: <https://youtu.be/ilHlbdHPnVk>



### WaAaKSun

Founder, Breaks Kru  
Founder, IRAK NYC

**MiRi Park:** Hello, welcome. I am happy to welcome Stephen Buddha from Canadian Floor Masters Leafloor and WaAaKSun from Breaks Kru. And I'm happy to bring you both together, especially because separately and together you've dedicated your professional careers to using hip hop dance and culture to empower youth, in New York City in the case of WaAaK but specifically in Brooklyn and the Bronx and in Canada and Ottawa and remote First Nations with incarcerated youth in the case of Buddha. And

so, we've brought you together because we welcome you to tell your stories about getting into breaking and how it inspired your journeys into social justice work.

**WaAaKSun:** Thank you.

**BuddhaCFM:** Thank you. You know I love that intro because from an early age I've always said the personal is political, you know and so our personal stories are also a part of the whole fabric of who we are and what we do. Because to me, everything is political. Life is political. You just turn the corner, most time we just have our blinders on and aren't looking at it correctly, you know, and I wish hip hop would become more involved, politically, you know, I mean I think that's some of the reason I chose to move into working with kids in maximum security places and stuff.

Because trauma's political and social injustice and how our own personal stories and you know all of this is political about why we got involved. And a lot of it had to do with our own personal healing you know and so I'm really proud of that, because it kind of, it kind of anchors an honesty that I miss sometimes in hip hop you know. I don't always see it, but I feel like the early days we felt kind of honest about it, even if we didn't really fucking know where it was going.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah, it was honest, it was organic you know, people were just doing what they were already doing, part of you know, maybe what of, where we might have steered off and lost the sense of the direction, a little bit of direction you know it got out of our hands and became a little industry, you know. Not there's anything wrong with that but there's industry and there's in the streets right and when all is said and done this is always going to be about grassroots you know. It's always going to be about the activism, you know. Yeah, we should have more of a political stance, but I think we before we start getting to a political mindset, just like before we start getting into an industry mindset, we

most definitely have to get into an activist and active mindset and a lot more of doing, rather than saying and being about it, instead of just dreaming about it.

And I feel like a lot of times the politicians, at least the ones you know who we have surrounded about around us now, are just as bad as in the industry that's exploiting the culture, so you know I want to be very very weary and mindful about how we get into these political conversations culturally and just make movements on the ground level you know. And it's symbiotic, it works hand to hand, you know we have to you know, but I feel like just like how the industry got away from us, politics you know at least in my city and my country, have really gotten away from us, and the people who are in charge of that do a good job of you know oppressing and keeping us out of the loop.

**BuddhaCFM:** I find it's so ironic that in the early days part of the excitement I really remember you know when it was just even the names were starting to come up about you know what is hip hop and you know punkers are hanging out with these new heads and we're cypherin' in our own ways, we slammed danced in one minute and one minute we're like cypherin' and getting down. And there was this excitement that, I mean the hippies must have felt it and stuff too, like we were going to change the world where you know, F the man we're coming up with our own stuff. We're going to build our own community, and we're not fully know where where it's going to go, you know it was that excitement and passion of youth.

But, for me, cause I was already politically involved in like some anarchy movements and stuff I was excited about like F the man cause capitalism's really insidious and it's going to find a way of wheezing its way into this, which it did you know and it's ironic that you could make some pretty good arguments that hip hop was a response to capitalism. [WaAaKSun: Oh absolutely.]

Like we want to create our own thing and take control back of our lives. And then, and then it becomes still this ongoing big battle, you know. When I mean all the first b-boy videos

I watched that were made was the Mountain Dew commercial, was you know Cad—you know whatever it's a Cadbury chocolate bar or something and you saw like that much of a windmill [show two fingers split as a frozen picture of a b-boy's legs]. And you had to try and figure out what the other parts were and then they left us and went on to BMX bikes for a while like kind of '86 or something you know. So you know capitalism has no interest in preserving who we are and what we want to hold dear. It's on us. But that's kind of where it should be, you know, but I just sound like the grumpy old man sometimes when I get disillusioned and I'm kind of like well what happened to, like, real crews?!

[both laugh]

**WaAaKSun:** No, not at all, not at all. Listen, you know hip hop for me, I've always viewed hip hop as a survival mechanism right?! [BuddhaCFM: Yep.] It's what got me through. So its, you know in regards to capitalism you know and sticking to the man you know before I was dancing, I was writing [graffiti] and, my come up, I started in '96 you know dancing. I was writing since I was in like I don't know since like eight/nine years old you know it was always around me.

And I started bombing in '96 and so there's a difference, I was like, you know, a little toy, right running around writing on things, so I started bombing. I started boosting and everything that I need to do to bring me to that level as an actual writer and aerosol artist eventually that I started doing '96 and—again back to the grassroots, back to the you know survival, you know we didn't we didn't need capitalism. You know, we didn't need to pay for anything. I went years before I would even pay for food in the supermarket or buy [BuddhaCFM: Wow.] any type of clothing, you know everything was acquired, everything was boosted, racked you know, [BuddhaCFM: Yeah yeah.] so you know I've learned through that you know, where where I no longer go out and boost, well you know if I find an opportunity, sometimes I seize it. Allegedly, allegedly. However, capitalism wasn't even a

thing, we didn't care about it. [BuddhaCFM: Yeah.] We hopped the train everywhere we went, we stole food that we wanted to eat, and we just fuckin' danced for hours and hours at a time.

**BuddhaCFM:** That was some of the beauty of it. [WaAaKSun: Yeah.] It was still spontaneous, and we would kind of like sit around going, "what are we gonna do man? I don't know what do you want to do? Alright let's party in the parking lot at the club and then we're going to get in cypher all night and then?" you know, yeah I kind of miss those days.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah, if we needed a jacket to spin in we stole it, if you need a pair of kicks [BuddhaCFM: Yeah that's a] we obtained by any means necessary you know.

**BuddhaCFM:** I can, I mean you're a bonafide artist, but, like, for me, I was just doing cause I was a punk back then. I was throwing up very large anarchy "A"s all by myself all over cause Ottawa is the capital city of Canada, so we just kind of like that song the Clampdown by The Clash, where like "you start wearing blue and brown working for the clampdown" [sings it] right, so I felt like the clampdown in the national capital was everywhere and I wanted to strike a little fear into them so I was putting up hundreds of anarchy A's all over just so they have a little nervous energy that "yo shit there's an undercurrent of something that's not really happy with you guys here" you know.

**WaAaKSun:** What year was that?

**BuddhaCFM:** I was probably doing all those in like '82, '80, '82. You know and then even our crew, even the Floor Masters, we did the first large graffiti pieces in the history of our our town because we also felt like we had an obligation not to just be a dancer but kind of be full feature, even if you weren't good at it that didn't matter, that the thing was that you went out and wanted to get up, you wanted to represent, you know.

**WaAaKSun:** Now having been to Ottawa right, how did you guys get away with that — too? How are you guys, I would imagine there's only a handful of you guys like you know mohawks leather, chains, or whatever.

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah, we were just stealth just going out at night, you know and and like so whatever you know all the places you would throw something up, but we were doing them on bus shelters and shit. And we could tell they were getting nervous because they would buff 'em off like sometimes real quick, like we did a giant head spin piece along the transit way that was about three buses long and they had it off in a day. Cause they were just really, they didn't want it to catch on you know.

**WaAaKSun:** And nobody came knocking on your door?

**BuddhaCFM:** Nobody came—nobody came knocking on our door. [WaAaKSun: Nobody ratted you out?] I'm just talking about it a lot now you know and here's one really fun and I know we're both dancers but I got to tell this one cause it it's about the American President back then which was Ronald Reagan and he was involved in Nicaragua and selling weapons to Sandinistas<sup>1</sup> whole bunch of shady shit right. So you know whenever there was wanted a story on hip hop, they all, they would often come to me cause I was at university also right and I was writing my master's thesis on it and stuff. So you know I had my big Billy Idol hair and stuff, and the night before they interviewed me for a national news story on graffiti, Reagan was coming to our national capital so we went out and we did a giant bubble letter piece that said "Reagan is a psycho."

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1. Sandinista National Liberation Front/Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sandinista>

And then I stood in front of my own piece acting like I didn't know who the fuck did it and just point to it "and sometimes there's a political message" you know, which was really dope because then it got shown on national news right across Canada and stuff you know but, yeah you know there's even an old Canadian Floor Master piece that we put up in '83 maybe '84 that's still up in the down- in the ByWard Market<sup>2</sup> in the alleyway. It's really faded, [WaAaKSun: Oh wow.] but I'm like, you know, I have a few drinks and want to take someone on a walking hip hop tour of the streets—I'm like "Yo, this is a old piece" you know.

**WaAaKSun:** Yo, please send me a picture of that when you get a chance.

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah, yeah it's fun man. So. . .

**WaAaKSun:** Oh, I was going to say what did you receive first? What did—what was your first like, I know you probably heard the music before you saw anything else but . . . [BuddhaCFM: My, you know my. . .] Did you see the graf [graffiti] first or the dance?

**BuddhaCFM:** The music in the 70's was my bedrock you know what I mean, because I'm older than Kenny and Legs and people you know. I'm 62 this summer so when I was a teenager, in '75 I was 16, so you're kind of in your hormone bliss and it was all about the roller rink and cause I lived in southern Ontario near Windsor Detroit. It wasn't about disco. It was about funk. [WaAaKSun: Funk.] You know what I mean, so I—And you know that as a dancer everything like that was the energy that really, really gave me and at the roller rink there were no rules like "mens only skate." You know you'd cross your arms with two other dudes and you'd be every which way. It was like combat out there. You couldn't go out unless you were an expert skater, but you are also doing

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2. Downtown Ottawa Canada



acrobatics on skates and most importantly, you're moving to the funk. So your body got used to it and because I was severely bullied you know when I was in high school cause I was so tiny, you know, I was put in garbage cans and laughed at in front of 500 people. You heard my story on BluePrint Projects,<sup>3</sup> you know but I was a smart little kid and I looked around and said well that's where I'm going to get my swag.

The cool kats are the best skaters and they can ask any young lady to skate, if you're a good skater. You know I was also motivated by the hormones, too. And yeah man, I was doing round-off to back handsprings into the splits, spin it up, doing a locker jump [leans and points fingers in the air] and, like, seriously look straight at the bullies like "what what you got?" And so that taste! How hip hop is that right?! With the early music and just the swag and rebuilding your own self confidence. So again, it's the personal is political. I needed it as a survival mechanism to reclaim. My energy and everything was beaten down by these kids like so. . .

I remember when the Columbine massacre happened.<sup>4</sup> The shooting and I was like "yo I fu . . . I get it, I get it." Man, I wanted to kill people, you know. If I would've had access to a gun, I can't say I wouldn't hurt somebody because I was that raging and angry inside. But I could smoke people at the roller rink right. So then when I finally saw *Flashdance*<sup>5</sup> and *Style Wars*,<sup>6</sup> you know and all these and especially when *Beat Street*<sup>7</sup> came out, it blew my mind. It's like when I saw that first backspin, I was like don't,

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3. BluePrint is Buddha CFM's organization. <http://www.blueprintforlife.ca/>

4. The Columbine Massacre took place on April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School in Colorado. It was a mass shooting perpetrated by two students who murdered a total of fourteen students and teachers. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbine\\_High\\_School\\_massacre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbine_High_School_massacre))

5. *Flashdance* (1983) was one of the first films to feature the Rock Steady Crew breakers that were seen by b-boys across the globe.

6. *Style Wars* is a 1983 hip hop documentary

7. *Beat Street* 1984 hip hop film that featured the New York City Breakers and the Rock Steady Crew.

no idea how is that even physically possible but I need that personally. For my own healing.

**WaAaKSun:** And you saw it on film before you saw it in person?

**BuddhaCFM:** Yep, yep. Like a lot of, like you talk to a lot of the originators in London and Paris and stuff you know from around the world, that's a lot of people's stories, but another big thing happened for us, WaAaK I don't want to make this all about about my history, you know but but..

Then the New York City Breakers<sup>8</sup> came to Ottawa, to my city. And then we hung out with them, went back to the hotel with Pexster and with Tony and Flip Rock. And then we started this relationship. We sent our video down to them and they watched our crew at Chino's house and apparently, they were freaked out by how good we were. We had already bit the name Floor Masters cause one of my early crew Sheldon moved from the Bronx to my city and he knew about the original Floor Masters and he was like, "yo they'll never know, why don't we call ourselves the Floor Masters" right. [WaAaKSun: That's crazy.] So then we finally met the New York City Breakers. We asked for it in reverse, we said "we're sorry man, out of respect we shoulda ask permission, but we never thought we'd meet you or anything" and they said "no, you guys are dope man, go with blessing with our name" and then since then you know, like Mr. Wave came down back then stayed at my house. We did shows together. We're planning on going to Russia on tour with them, we're supposed to be like the opening crew for the New York City Breakers. Me and Holman have become kind of lifelong friends you know, so it's funny how things work. [WaAaKSun: Yeah.]

You know like that, so we used to go and visit New York in the mid 80's, so we would stay at Flip Rock's house you know. We

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8. Bboy crew featured in *Beat Street* (1984) and *Graffiti Rock* (1984). For more information on the crew and its members, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_York\\_City\\_Breakers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_City_Breakers)

went to The World<sup>9</sup> one night and Grandmaster Flash was spinning and there's my whole crew. You know and we're largely a white crew and there was like Trevor, Trevor was our best dancer. Trevor's young black DJ you know and some crew from, I don't even know the crew's, name stepped to us and next thing you know we had Flip Rock battling with us, and it felt just like *Beat Street* you know. And then they couldn't believe, they wouldn't accept that we were from Canada cause they thought we're so ill, they were like "naw you're bullshitting us you're from Cali". You know, like "no, no we ain't from Cali" you know so . . .

But you know it's interesting to see history pass and think about, digest, I think hip hop needs to do a lot of that. I've done this personally, whether [WaAaKSun: Oh yeah.] you know like digesting what we've seen and what we know about ourselves as individuals and using that wisdom like "well why did this work for me? Oh, well, maybe it'll work for some other kids. Maybe they just want an honest story and an honest relationship with some other peeps because they don't got a big brother or they don't got a dad involved." Right?! And I'm sure that's been your leverage you know that kind of "each one teach one" stuff, not a slogan, but like an action, an action call you know.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah absolutely. You know Breaks Kru was my family, they still are my family you know but Breaks Kru is my surrogate family and I didn't realize it at the time, you know but yes, we would kind of bring each other in just you know like a, man we all have different backgrounds and different situations, some people's home environment was worse than others you know. So like for me not that I had the worst home environment I just wasn't com-

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9. An iconic night club in Alphabet City that "brought together avant-garde weirdos, celebrities, and black and Puerto Rican locals, as well as the uptown crowd" <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/a-maybe-exaggerated-definitely-foggy-look-back-at-the-world-the-most-iconic-nightclub-youve-never-heard-of#:~:text=Located%20in%20a%20crumbling%20former,American%20debut%20in%20the%20Sugar%20cubes.>

fortable in my home. And I had it a lot better than a lot of my friends and I didn't want to be home, so I wanted to be in the street. I wasn't allowed to be in the street. For the record, you know my mom wasn't having me being a street kid, you know my mother—everything that I did, I did out of rebellion. Not necessarily to my mom, but just to a system unknowingly, you know my mom taught me that, way better than the things I was doing. [BuddhaCFM: Yep.] But I would sneak out. I'd be on the street and I was in the street because a lot of my friends, a lot of people I cared about they couldn't go home, so they were in the street, you know, and when I was able to, I'd bring to my home because my home was safer than their home and stuff like that. So yeah definitely essential family and kind of tribe that we built without noticing it, just kind of looking after each other and definitely teaching each other you know.

**BuddhaCFM:** But when we look back, those are values that we want to pass on her own children and stuff, you know those are values that are going to save the world. Like I know I don't mean to sound like some corny shit you know but with social media and everything we've got we've gotten so far away from that, people really understanding what it is to have someone's back. You know.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah definitely you know like not to say that we set out to save the world like some superheroes but I definitely I've had enough testimony in my life from people who were you know positively affected by the culture and or me bringing the culture, the art form to them, you know. I have letters from my homies in prison you know who would be like "yo I shoulda just kept dancing with you, I shoulda just kept writing with you," you know. And it was that kind of the, like even though when we were running around the street painting, or you know boosting all day, that was still better than things that landed them in jail that they were doing you know. I have a lot of testimony from people who

I really care about who regret not participating in the culture in that sense.

**BuddhaCFM:** It may seem small but it's actually large you know, those things, because you know like KidQuick from our crew, he was kind of our second in command but like he had an abusive mom, he was put in lockup himself. Be-, you know, be- beaten with electrical cord, like all kinds of stuff and he's like "yo Buddha if I didn't have you." I was like you know four years older than him. I was, I was his big brother you know and like that little shit can save you through those dangerous tumultuous years you know so- [WaAaKSun: Yeah absolutely.] We don't see each other that often either but when we do it's like we're right back there as lifelong friends, you know.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah you know one thing I'm starting to realize about relationships that as I'm getting older right, [laughs] is that it's alright if you don't see like your crew or peoples all the time but you know it's definitely like you know friendships and relationships that I've had for like you know over 20 years that you know I could not see somebody for months or even years and then get on the phone with them or see them in person and we're straight you know. [BuddhaCFM: Yep.] But then I also realize that there's some relationships that need that work and some people want you in their life in a way where it's more immediate and more necessary and sometimes they don't know how to communicate that.

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah and som—and sometimes there's relationships that you felt were more meaningful to you and deeper to you and they were actually more frivolous and more about the other person and stuff that you know. I mean I've [WaAaKSun: Yes.] seen and been there with lots of different things but I think for me one of the great gifts like when we do our outreach is that, and especially as I've gotten older, I'm kind of like "there's no time for

bullshit, there's no time for frontin', there's no time to prevent or to like perpetrate a fraud about who you are [WaAaKSun: Mmm hmm.] as a person. Especially with kids in lockup [WaAaKSun: (inaudible)] because their spidey sense to survive has had to be highly tuned to bullshit. And they feel like it's bullshit when the counselor comes to them and the probation's coming to them and everything. And so it's really refreshing when they meet young you know young kats and old kats who kind of like are "naw you know I'm not telling you what to do or nothing, I'm just going to share some of my thing and tell some of my story" and that there can be—that honesty is got to be the starting point for you to have an impact with anybody.

And then we have all these other tools of interest, it's kinda—you know because we moved on in BluePrint to doing bucket drumming, street drumming and stuff too and body percussion [hits hand together and then his body] stuff. Well it's a perfect fit. [WaAaKSun: Mmm.] Angry angry kids locked up yeah they want to bang on a bucket hard, you know. But like you know, one of our guys now, he's the bucket drummer for the Toronto Raptors [WaAaKSun: Mm, nice.] and he, so the kids think that's mad cool and he's all tatted up and everything you know, and he was the only Canadian to be the lead in the musical *Stomp*. So he's toured the world with *Stomp*, and so you know what I mean and he was a b-boy too, so he knows all this stuff, so- you know. But some of the tricks, I always find is if you got some celebrity status, you know you're WaAaK from Breaks Kru or I'm Old School Buddha whatever, we gotta, we gotta not play that card, you know, because that gets in the way of an honest relationship with young people and go, you know I want them to know me as me, you as you you know and they're the ones in the deficit of their self-confidence so we gotta build, we gotta if we have any ego to shed, give them ego. [WaAaKSun: Yah.] Cause they need that to kick start with energy, you know.

**WaAaKSun:** It's funny that you said that because for years like you know when I first got into teaching, it was kind of like accidentally. The entire time I've been dancing I've taught, you know just like whoever was around me, we taught each other. And by doing that we also volunteered in a lot of places because people would ask us and you know they would offer a space or whatever. So we did so. But for years once I started teaching officially, I started getting my start with teaching with for organization called El Puente in Brooklyn. And I was on the record, you know my government name and I worked for a long time at keeping WaAaK separate from who I was at work or [BuddhaCFM: [laughs]] on the record. And it was exhausting yeah, and this is like pre-YouTube and stuff like that so you know.

But it was really exhausting and I hid from it for awhile and to what you were saying about working with incarcerated youth in regards to like being completely honest and not having any time to waste, I felt that sense of urgency because during my time at El Puente when I first started working there I ended up you know landing on Rikers Island for a little while. And being on Rikers Island I realized holy shit this is exactly how school is, this is exactly how we are treating our young people, like, "stay online, be quiet," like I felt like a kid the entire time. [BuddhaCFM: Yep.] But what really resonated was watching these like obviously like really aggressive and hardcore dudes be treated like children and I immediately went back to working for El Puente when I got out with the mindset—

**BuddhaCFM:** Cause where's the respect in that you know what I mean?

**WaAaKSun:** I had the mindset where I'm not going to treat children like this anymore you know. And it—nobody knew at the time but I started just kind of going against the grain and it was just in my head. I didn't express it to any my my my peers or my colleagues or you know my my superiors, but I just went back

you know, now I can say like I was a little, it was a little bit of trauma, I was, “yo I’m not treating my kids like that. I don’t care what—you can fire me.” I just went against the grain and started operating in a certain way.

And like you know, like eventually I was able to kind of like communicate that to everybody around me like, “yo you know we treat kids the way they treat prisoners on Rikers. If we’re a human or human rights organization, we shouldn’t be doing that. I’m not going to do that. I’m going to do [BuddhaCFM: Yep.] it my own way you know,” and that sense of urgency and letting young people know that you know “we’re on a clock.” Like you know “you’re 10 now, 10 turns to 15, 15 turns to 18, 18 turns to 21, 21 turns to 25, 25 turns to 30 really fucking quickly,” and I just stop bullshitting kids, I’m like, “yo it’s real out there, this is, this is what I’ve gone through this is what I’m going through,” you know, “learn as soon as possible, you might I could tell you everything, you might still have to make mistakes, but just understand—”

**BuddhaCFM:** And you had to learn that stuff and self-analyze as you kind of went through life and different stuff was happening. [WaAaKSun: Yeah.] Wouldn’t been fucking great if some older kats kind of like pulled us aside and just drop the bomb on us sometimes along the way.

**WaAaKSun:** Some of them did, some of them did but like I said a hard head makes a soft ass you know [BuddhaCFM: Yeah, yeah. {laughs}] Definitely. But you know I—like there were there were times where I definitely had to pull that card with young people and be like, “you know who I am, you know what I’m about,” right, like, “don’t—like listen to me because I know like no one else is going to tell you straight the way I’m telling you [BuddhaCFM: Yeah.] and you know where I come from, you know what I do.” And like I had to pull that card sometimes. I had to pull that WaAaK card and doing and pulling that WaAaK card and seeing the data and see how effective it was, that helped me



transition over to just being WaAaK full time. Like I'm WaAaK, like this is what you get what you paid for, it's what the kids need.

**BuddhaCFM:** That's the beauty. Like you know they talk about that other element of hip hop knowledge of self, right, and that ain't a slogan that actually is something that takes a lot of work and time and humble pie as you go along to kind of go, "damn, shit, I just learned a life lesson" and [WaAaKSun: Yeah.] stuff, "now I'm WaAaK full time you know what I mean." [WaAaKSun: Yeah.] It's a, and so there's like all these little philo—philosophical things that still I hold dear to my heart cause they still work, even though I'm going to be 62 you know, as I, as I analyze the bigger world out there. It seems to be like a paradigm shift or something in my mind that my vision of what hip hop used to be or could still be or still is in smaller ways, seems applicable because it really is about finding a voice for the voiceless, finding—rebuilding communities even if they're micro-communities, then connecting them micro-communities, and celebration along the way, and spontaneity along the way, and creativity on the way, and hustle along the way so you don't fucking starve, and ethics and values and morality also along the way too. That it's not it's not good, hustle don't mean fucking over your brother and sister, you know what I mean. Like so a lot of these things, we're in a unique position to kind of drop some of that, because when you tell your story, when I tell my story and stuff, it's got some real cred with the kids.

You know like when I tell my story in the prison, kids I have, I'm looking at them and sometimes I feel like the grandfather leaning in you know kind of like tell going "yo, let me tell you how it is" right. You wouldn't believe how many kids come up to me and pull me aside privately and it's like "Buddha, I felt like you were telling my story," you know about anger, about rage, you know. I often talk about the story of hip hop is, yeah, [. . .] you can do all this stuff about who did this first and where were the parties in—but for me one of the real stories is the story of rage. That and what that's kind of why we still need it around the world because

we still have way too much rage happening everywhere in the fucking world. [WaAaKSun: Absolutely.] In its own cultural context and stuff but there's shit going on where people don't have power all over the place and it messes them up and it messes up them raising their own children.

Man, I felt blessed you know. I was at the Silverback thing and it was the first time I got to meet Float.<sup>10</sup> And me and Float were sitting beside each other at dinner, Klown over here [indicates to his left], Float, who else was there? Dwayne Blitz was there, a whole bunch of us you know what I mean, Storm, all of us all us old guys just sitting together having a steak. And man, Float was such a wise man. I was talking to him about elder dancers still needing to heal and that a lot of them missed the opportunity to dig deep and just humble themselves and get away from that rough edge, just for a moment and going life's just too fucking short. It's getting in the way of me talking to my daughter whatever it is, you know what I mean. So it hurts me inside because I'm like in the early days, we all had the promise that maybe hip hop could fix these things. But there's nothing like the hard work of the self-work and healing that you need to do and a lot of elders in hip hop didn't do this. And so, even me and Float we stayed up then the next night. We're up drinking and telling stories to the young kats and stuff, and me and him were like, yeah man like maybe some of them old guys would listen to me and Float if we were to just talk about being open and honest. You know what I mean cause sometimes you don't want to talk to someone who's 20 years younger than you and stuff and maybe some won't but there's too much anger still in hip hop right?! There's too many OGs that are still [WaAaKSun: Yeah.] just want to tear each other down and stuff and I'm not trying to sound like you know we just need to sing kumbaya together but anger and rage has been my issue my whole life. I—somebody pisses me off, I'm

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10. B-boy Valentin "Float" Becerril

you know I'm a social worker and I can visualize pulling people out of their car giving them a fucking beat down because they cut me off or something.

You know, like I'm that close [brings two fingers close together], sometimes for losing it. But it's a bad look for a dad. It's a bad look for someone who wants to work in the social justice space and it's a bad look in hip hop you know.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah, you know, we have this narrative that is portrayed in hip hop that like we came from gangs and then we created hip hop, and then after we created hip hop we eliminated gangs, everything was peace, love, and having fun, and it's it's like the furthest thing from the truth. I think it [BuddhaCFM: It bit us in the ass.] Yeah and it haunts us right, because I know I, like when you hear from like the academic standpoint or from the the layman's standpoint right, the civilian standpoint that's what they either go by, that narrative. Because it makes them feel safe and it makes them feel better about like you know hiring practitioners or using hip hop, but they're really scared of it and that fear is the reality of where we come from and what powers this culture. There's a lot of toxic shit that people are dealing with, you know that they and they're using hip hop to get through it and that's their right, but then we don't know how to like go further than that you know. Like I was suicidal you know, like I was depressed as a child and I was suicidal you know. I would go out and put my life in danger intentionally. [BuddhaCFM: On purpose I bet yeah.]

Yeah yeah I wouldn't turn on a fight. Imma run—I was always the smallest dude. I was raised by people in my community that were like throw the first punch, don't back down from a fight you know. And if they heard otherwise, you'd get back to the block and that's your ass, you in trouble. So, you know I got into a lot of shit you know, a lot of like unnecessary shit in during my time where had there been like older brothers telling me like, "naw there's another way," like don't get me wrong, I'm grateful for those lessons and those experiences cause I'm able to pass them on.

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah, but you were one experience going wrong from not being who you are today [WaAaKSun: Absolutely.] and being able to do what you do today, you know, [WaAaKSun: Absolutely.] so that's what's at stake.

**WaAaKSun:** I grabbed onto this culture and I said like no this is the—I felt like at the moment it was only thing keeping me alive, but then like you know the ego's still out there and I'm like you know in train tunnels and hanging off of bridges and ledges and roofs and doing all types of things where, and putting myself in the in neighborhoods I shouldn't be in, in positions I shouldn't be in, where I knew what the outcome was and I didn't mind, I didn't care.

And so I had to do a lot of like, you know, searching and self-discovery and constant re-evaluation of who I am, what I want to do in my communities, and what I want to be a part of, in order for me to realize I have to leave some of that behind. And it's conve—, these are conversations that are not happening in our communities, you know we tell people, "oh yeah use hip hop as an outlet—"

**BuddhaCFM:** We need people to see that deeply personally role modeled by people that's kind of like "yo I'm not trying to front on anything, this is the real deal story," because that'll give help hopefully give other—just like someone talking about sexual abuse. [WaAaKSun: Mmm hmm.] Here's somebody else come out and talk about sexual abuse and then all of a sudden 10 more people for whoever that person was to come out and stuff because hip hop can be about a collective power but it also could be about collective courage you know, which is—

We're not meant to do it alone, we need each other on that, but it needs to be honest, and it needs to be willing to be vulnerable, and that seems like a polarization in the mean streets you know what I mean like [WaAaKSun: Yeah.] how the fuck can you be vulnerable you know?

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah you don't ever want to be seen as vulnerable, because if you're seen as vulnerable, you're you're seen as being a weak but also [BuddhaCFM: Yeah.] you know those vulnerabilities sometimes are you know deepest darkest secrets and once you've released and you put that out there to the wrong person, they're going to use that against you and then go back to that ego again you know so—Yeah we have a hard time being vulnerable, I think men in general, you know like no matter where we come from, what culture we practice whether it's hip hop or not, we're told not to be vulnerable, we're told not to be honest about our emotions and—

**BuddhaCFM:** But isn't it great if you can get to the place where you're actually modeling how vulnerability is actually a strength but you wouldn't think that. [WaAaKSun: Yeah.] You know I even think about I mean, you know about my son Aaron is now 31, you know he's got Down's syndrome and autism and he's like, ultimately vulnerable. But man I can't tell you the wisdom that he's imparted on me about what I see as, like, I'm not naive, I know the mean streets exists, but he also teaches me so much more, like I actually bring him on BluePrint projects now when I can. So imagine we're working. I brought him into the prison. Well you'd have to be a re—incredible dick to like pick on my son, when he comes in even though he can't talk but he's trying to help teach the hustle. We're doing the hustle with KC and the Sunshine Band stuff you know. But it actually encourages empathy. Like one vulnerable situation, you releasing some vulnerability about WaAaK, has this incredible empathetic spin off effect to get other people to be empathetic, which then fights bullying, then fights all this other stuff you know, so we can spin it the other way as opposed to keep spinning it down just the—or we use fear and big egos and aggression [He laughs and WaAaK smiles and nods] you know what I mean. And I get it, I understand all that but like you know even a few years ago cause I thought I'm getting good at

dealing with my anger, and then I'm like, "no I'm still a ang—, a real angry guy," so my goal, so now I try some meditation, something gratefulness, a bunch of different things you know, which made total sense to me.

And not that I'm great at it, but I'm less angry today than I was this time last year. And so, if I live a longer life, say I live [to be] 80, my goal is every year progressively I want to be less angry mofo. I want to be able to be more emotional. I'm cool that Buddha can cry watching Bambi with his grandchildren or something when Bambi's mom dies or whatever it is.

**WaAaKSun:** Those Pixar movies uhh.

[Both laugh]

**BuddhaCFM:** But you know it's, yeah man there's lots of great potential for male role models you—you know for you to flip the script I mean I think that's what all BluePrint team are—you know we all came to hip hop for different reasons and we have different personal stories but I think we all became- come to the realization that we kind of owe a debt if it's actually really helped us survive, and what better way than paying it forward and whatever we think we can. And it doesn't have to be a big organization, you know what I mean. It can be just like "yo I mentored this one kid", but we know where that was going if he didn't have somebody involved in his life one-on-one you know.

**WaAaKSun:** Definitely all my years of working with young people and just working you know and building community in general has definitely taught me that you know. And especially now that you know I've had a bit of a struggle, you know, with all of this Covid stuff as far as like where's my place in the community and I realized that a lot of what I was doing was you know social was for me, myself. It was therapeutic for me and I needed, yeah I was out there helping people, but once I lost that community it was like a shock to my system. Once I couldn't be in person. So

I struggled for a while to figure out how to really connect with people and to help people work for my community, through social distancing you know, through quarantine or what the case is. And I'm just kind of like coming out of that now and I'm realizing you know, maybe it's alright if I go on hiatus and I'm not always out there putting myself out there for everybody. It's teaching me how to be a better teacher.

**BuddhaCFM:** Maybe you're just the one pushing someone else a little bit for for the front line and—I remember even like first time we went down we did some work for Cirque du Soleil and Smooth [Crazy Smooth from CFM] and Dazzle from Flow Rock and you know, and CBC wanted to interview me and I'm like, "fuck I've done a million interviews, Smooth you get this" you know. It's like, push some other young kats to the front—let them talk on national news about Cirque du Soleil or whatever it is you know what I mean. And you gotta have a stronger ego, less ego to do that, cause if we remain egotistical like "no man they want to interview, [fffft] it's all about me, I'm the OG, let me fucking tell you what it was," and then and then history gets twisted and and all and there's no love, there's no sharing, there's no like are we a collective or not, you know, are we a community or not.

Doesn't all—like that's a totally capitalistic thing, always just thinking about yourself, you know. So how do you let that go? You want to be that dude on your deathbed where you go, "I was a selfish motherfu—you know my whole life," right. Wouldn't you rather be on your deathbed kind of going, "yeah man, I may not have done a ton, but you know there's some kids out there that you know they reconnected with me 20 years later and said, 'Yo WaAaK how you doing? I wanted to let you know I'm okay?'." It's—that's—that all still blows my mind you know when I have kids purposely hunt me out and go, "you may not have thought much about it, Buddha, when you were young, but that changed my life."

Quick funny story like that—so imagine this, I’ve got an adopted Black sister, right? Angela was adopted when she was two months old into our family when I was growing up. So anyway, I’m in Toronto having a beer at largely a Black club and this huge guy comes up and is leaning and over and looking at—I’m drinking with my sister and she’s got another Black girlfriend with her right, so I’m thinking this guy’s mad that I’m a white guy who thinks I’m hitting on these girls and this is my sister you know, and he looks down at me goes “Steve, is that you Stephen?” and I’m kind of “oh shit” like who wants to know, you know? Anyways when I was a probation officer, one of my first jobs with kids, I had this young Black kid who was 15 whose father died, and he got in some shit just cause he was angry and I didn’t really know what to do but I spent some time with him and I signed him up for beaver boxing in the boxing club. And he was now on the Olympic team of Canada in boxing, that was him looking down at me years later and excited to see me again. I was just doing my job and trying to be present and trying to be realistic. And not gushy about it or anything, just trying to go, “Hey maybe, you know, anger, yeah, people need to be involved in something,” but you never know the trajectories, ey, that might move for somebody.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah absolutely I’ve definitely got a lot of you know feedback from young people and you know even parents or whatever, but even my peers you know the people who were, might have been my age, slightly younger, little older than me, and we came up together and because we were holding each other down and teaching each other and going through it together you know. I’ll have this conversation with [them]” Yo man like you—know you remember that time whatever whatever, well yeah like that changed the course of my life or that perspective and you said this or you said that,” like, “Yeah I don’t remember that, but cool, yeah.”



That's what it was about you know, you just you're doing what you got to do, you're doing your job, or what you feel is right and you—by doing that you change people's lives and you know in a way that's helpful and when you get that that feedback that's, that reward, that little tingle, that sparkle that's that's what's up, you know? [BuddhaCFM: Yeah.] You hold onto that.

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah, you know we all want to have more than for our children then we have. You know as a dad that was the thing for me like I think that's a natural thing and my kids have more than I ever had you know but I don't know there's nothing like just, especially these covid times, it's just really made me disappointed in humanity. [laughs] I just got to say like just like all the things that I hope for the world for me, for my close family, for my extended family, for hip hop, you know I just feel like we've got so many things working against us, and people have really shown the selfish card and it's the opposite of what I bought into, why I signed up you know. And it really kinda was crushing me, still does sometimes. I have really bad days. I've been suicidal too, a number of times in my life you know. I kayak.

I remember once I was—just took my pills, went on in my kayak on a really cold weather day with the big waves and just sat in my kayak and it—cause I wanted—if I was going to die, I wanted my kids to think it was an accident just a boating thing. And it was really dangerous because I didn't have my spray skirt on so water's coming into the boat and it's cold water and I thought, you know, the cold water . . . I'll just drown and they'll find me. You know and we'll get over that, but I get depressed I think, I don't know man. People—I think some of us involved in hip hop, we actually feel really deeply. We're actually you know what—and maybe that's why we feel the music, we feel the arts, and we feel pain, and we feel rage, and stuff, so it's a double-edged sword like on the one hand. Well, you know, that's living and you live large and

you create also out of that, out of pain and rage but it feels like you're walking a tightrope sometimes, you know? I can't tell you how many times my own crew, my old crew and new crew and BluePrint like call me in the middle of the night, "Yo Buddha, I'm thinking of you know—"

I don't know that's why I think you know part of me still believes in, like, well at least we can still try to rely on each other, that's something that you called me.

**WaAaKSun:** Absolutely. For me—just to take the opportunity now man, thank you, cause you been very important and integral in my life and me becoming a man, whether you realize it or not. You know, and in doing so effecting change and young people in my community around me. Going to the Arctic Circle,<sup>11</sup> taking me out to Cape Dorset in Nunavut, and that whole experience changed my life, you know. And to tell people, especially to young people like say, "Oh, you know hip hop took to me to the Arctic Circle" and they're like, "what, where's that," to show them on a map, [BuddhaCFM: Right.] to see where you know from Bushwick to the Arctic Circle how [BuddhaCFM: Yeah.] far that is. [BuddhaCFM: Yeah.] It blows people's minds sometimes and I just kind of like throwing it out there. It's fun sometimes when people are, "Oh well what's the farthest place you've gone to?" You know, "Yeah, Arctic Circle." They was like "What? How the fuck?!"

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah cause sometimes sometimes they're really down on themselves and it's like I'll only ever kick it around the block you know and they don't realize like travel and meeting people [WaAaKSun: Yeah.] of other cultures and just being real with them. I used to—I got story after story about when the *Beat*

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11. The Arctic Circle is an imaginary line of latitude that circles Earth's northernmost end. <https://www.livescience.com/arctic-circle.html>

Street tour was happening, touring through France and Germany, I was backpacking through Morocco and doing windmills and hanging out with the snake charmers in where they'd never seen it in Marrakech and shit you know what I mean. [WaAaK-Sun: Yeah, you once showed me a photo.] Yeah, but what but you know then that just made me get invited into their homes, instead of the tourist on the bus, so now I'm sleeping over in someone's home and really getting to understand what Muslim culture felt like in Morocco or something you know what I mean? I don't know. We just want these little elevator pitch fortes into culture, which is so disrespectful. It's like you're on a cruise ship and you get off for a day [. . .] and then [WaAaKSun: Excursions.] you come back and go, "Yo, I really understood poverty in Bermuda." You know? And then you're back on the boat you know what I mean, and it's like, it's like, I don't know—

**WaAaKSun:** Hip hop was able to give me and some of the other people perspective that we wouldn't otherwise have, you know? I remember like I first started traveling through breakin', like, people holdin' an event in Philly or in Connecticut and Massachusetts and we started traveling really locally, but I remember coming back to the block and just, you know—or even like going out boosting [. . .] it was hard.

But by—in the 90's, late 90's—by the time I was really heavily into painting and—I was more into painting than I was breakin' but eventually I kind of had to shift because painting was getting me into a lot of trouble. But I remember we would go out to Jersey, because it was easier to still paint or Massachusetts whatever, and I'd come back to the block. And dudes on the block be like, "Yo, you was in Jersey today?" I'm like, "Yeah, you know. We was in Jersey." "Yo, how was it? Is there girls in Jersey?"

[BuddhaCFM laughs]

I'm like "Yeah, there's literally girls everywhere my dude?" [. . .] So I would take people with me to Jersey. [BuddhaCFM:

Yeah.] I'd be like, "Wait outside the store. Wait across the highway with the bags and I'll be back out and I'll get you something." And it was those little things like taking people outside. I remember when we all lived—we had the Breaks Kru crib. The first Breaks Kru crib was in the Bronx in Jerome. 183rd and Jerome. And there was a young man who used to, you know, we had my little dude Raff—Riff Raff—and he had us do Naz—this dude Naz N-A-Z—he used to write, he used to hang out with us. And we used to hang out in Union Square<sup>12</sup> on Fridays, just go hang out and eventually turned into this big thing that you know apparently still goes on.

But we would go to Union Square on Fridays and this kid had never really passed 1-2-5th<sup>13</sup> and I remember [BuddhaCFM: Wow.] always trying to drag him down and him being like, "nah," him frontin.' And then one Friday, we're like, "Yo, now you're comin' with us." And I remember seeing the panic on his face and he tried to jump off the train at 1-2-5th [BuddhaCFM: Really?] cause he wouldn't go downtown.

And then eventually he went downtown, he's hanging out with us and at the end of night I remember seeing him like, you woulda thought he was on ecstasy or something. He was like, "Yo WaAaK, I love you," and crying like *da-da-da*, and just so emotional over just the experience, just talking to different people. This is a straight young Bronx kid, straight up thug kind of kid who was into his street shit, doing street stuff. I won't say the kind of things he was doing, but he was in the street. But he was also writing and had he not been a writer, he wouldn't have met us and got that perspective, you know? And I remember seeing him a couple years later and he was doing less street stuff than he was and he was kind of like hustling, like legal hustles, but he looked better. I got a better feeling from him the way he spoke and he seemed like he was just happy, you know. [BuddhaCFM: Yeah.]

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12. 14th St and Broadway in Manhattan

13. 125th St in Harlem

So hip hop gives people perspective, if you so choose to take it, that you're not going to have otherwise and it's like that, people don't say that, you know? People don't tell you like, "Yo, this could change your life." And we latch on to it. Like, we just we gravitate to—latch on to it because of what it means and what it gets us through, but nobody, there's very few people out there giving direction and [ . . . ] for me to tell young people, Yo, I've been to the Arctic Circle—and not only that, I got to the Arctic Circle and I thought I was gonna be the only one from Brooklyn there and it was already somebody from Brooklyn there/ [BuddhaCFM: Oh yeah yeah.] There was a guy from Bedstuy [Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn] and I was like "Oh I was tight," but. . . [BuddhaCFM laughs]

. . . to tell people, "Yeah, I went to the Arctic Circle and there was already somebody from Brooklyn there." Tell a kid from Brooklyn that. [BuddhaCFM: Yeah.] Even if I told a classroom of 20 kids that, even if that resonates with one or two young people, maybe they might not go to the Arctic Circle, but they might think about that moment and think like, "Yeah, I can be anywhere I want."

Growing up in New York, growing up in Brooklyn, there were certain blocks you wouldn't go to. You can go here, you can't go to that neighborhood, you can't go to this neighborhood. [BuddhaCFM: Yeah. When I—] Learning how to break in '96 took me to the Bronx. People in the Bronx like, "Oh, you from Brooklyn," or "You- *chh*. I don't go to Brooklyn. Brooklyn's crazy." [BuddhaCFM: Right.] And this—Bronx people telling me Brooklyn's crazy. I'm like, "Aight," you know?

**BuddhaCFM:** That's why they all stayed on their block.

**Both:** Yeah!!

[laughing]

**BuddhaCFM:** I remember when we took—cause my sister and my mom lived down in Windsor [Ontario, Canada] across from Detroit—

and so my sister knew the Mechanical Puppets [Dance Crew] in Detroit. This is early '80's and they were more boogie crew and funk crew, but they did some breakin' too, so we just we set up a Canada/USA battle down there. But anyways, just the road trip of the crew—most of my young crew was losing it, freaking out cause they'd never been anywhere. They'd never been out of our city. And now we're going over and hanging out in Detroit and Detroit's got lots of no-go zones back then and stuff. It was a real eye opener for them, but it was like an important building block in that "Yo, maybe I could. . ." and then Wayne/KidQuick started going down to New York and staying at Pexster's house all the time. He would have never done that if we hadn't done a few of the baby steps along the way [ . . . ]

And so I think a lot these days about, "Well, how do models of how we treat each other and stuff?" How can we grow that in other work environments, like real well-being where people care about each other? Because people frontin' corporate culture all the time, and there's no honesty. There's no—you know it's—I don't know, I just wanted to put that out to ya.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah, I think it boils down to having purpose, right? And to answer your question in short, no, I don't think it's selfish. I, however, will say that a lot of people culturally, a lot of people within our culture do use the culture selfishly. But I don't think it's selfish. I think it's our right. Like, hip hop is—hip hop belongs to young people who need it, no matter where they're from. It might have started in New York City, it might have started in the Bronx, but I think hip hop belongs to any young people, any young person who needs it. And that's why I've worked with all different types of communities. I've worked in the suburbs of Maryland and I've worked in refugee camps in Jordan, you know? Young people need it, I'm going to bring it to them. I needed it and [ . . . ] these are thoughts and philosophies and ideals and models that have come to form over the years and lots of just thinking and

self-reflection on how I use the culture. Because I've had guilty moments where I'm like, "Oh, I'm taking money for this and this is something that I could and will—and something that I do for free, and this is a lot of money." What I've come to realize is, it's a balance, and I struggle. I still to this day struggle with balance. I've definitely put a lot into my community and a lot into this culture. I will never say more than I've gotten back, but I've put so much into it that's drained me.

And I put it, you know—sometimes I feel very rewarded and sometimes I feel gypped. Now there's been times where it's left me a little salty for things that I've done. But it needs to be done and that's just if I feel, like, if I felt that way, it's either a mistake I made because whoever I was aligned with or—

**BuddhaCFM:** Or you need a passage of a couple of months to then put even that in perspective—

**WaAaKSun:** Perspective, yeah exactly. Or there was something there that I don't understand yet. There was a lesson that I'm not getting in that time so I've learned to be patient with myself. But yeah. [BuddhaCFM: That's a big one right there.] Yeah, I don't think it's selfish. I think the work that we do takes a lot, and it's taken a lot [. . .] from you personally, from your soul, from your spirit, probably your family, relationships and things of that nature, so I don't regret it. I just—I'm now realizing and working to understand how I balance it so that I don't have to feel so drained all the time or feel like I'm being selfish.

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah I totally feel you in all that and it's tough even though I've worked as a counselor, and a street worker, and a child protection childhood abuse investigator, like some pretty fucking gritty jobs. And I—if you and me were were to sit, I could tell you some things that probably motivate you and make sense about balance for your personal life. And yet Buddha's not very

fucking good at doing it for himself sometimes you know what I mean cause I just, I just get so—and sometimes in a good way just caught up in the moment and the energies and stuff that I put myself maybe out there a little bit too far and feel vulnerable too. And especially since I have to come home from a prison project after hearing about a kid who watched his dad’s hands get hacksawed off by Hell’s Angels you know, like some crazy shit. And then I gotta immediately flip headspace and be there for my son.

It was really hard for me sometimes cause I’m angry. I’m angry. I’m angry that that happened in the world, that it happens so much in the world, you know? But I’m no good to anybody—why did I have children if I can’t help teach them that anger is not the way to roll through life? I used to think I don’t think I woulda started BluePrint—I use that anger as energy to do work if that makes sense, you know what I mean, like a lot of energy comes out of anger, creative energy, and you know grant writing energy or whatever just to get some shit done. But.. [WaAaKSun: Anger’s motivational] yeah but more and more I realized that it’s unsustainable. And that you don’t want to, you know you don’t want anger to always situate here [puts hands around his head], you kind of want to be able to call on it when you need it but put it over here [moves hands to the side of his head]. Like another head on your shoulder, it’s still part of you, can’t deny it, you know what I mean on how that formed who you are as a person and how you interact and and all this, but I’ve been slowly in my life carving out a new relationship with, [laughs] because I need to not be it’s servant. I need to—I don’t know if that’s that’s making sense but that’s a big life lesson, cause I think this, we know—if we really analyze how many people like our friends and stuff, like most of them most of our friends have real anger issues too—

**WaAaKSun:** I struggled with that. I realized that eventually that anger will get you killed and [BuddhaCFM: Yeah.] it’s almost gotten me



killed a bunch. And I realized this not necessarily with myself like, "Oh, you're playing yourself and you're playing too close and you're putting yourself in danger." But I realized it when I'd been in situations and circumstances where people I cared about that I loved and anger was involved. And I'm like, "Wait a minute like if I don't defuse this or we don't regulate this energy right now, somebody I care about is going to be in danger, somebody that I care about might get hurt, might get killed."

That's the reality of anger. But in terms of that violence—so my relationship with that has always been now, like okay. Where, when I was younger, I—my anger was my fuel and motivation, I'm no longer in the mindset where I need to be aggressive or be violent. I could take that anger and I could kind of filter it out and take the parts of it that I need and say, "Okay, instead of acting violently, what do I need to do with this energy?"

**BuddhaCFM:** And what a gift for—just that single gift, to pass that on to other people. Oh my god, that just flips up people's lives man, you know.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah and I didn't know and I think I figured this out a couple years back, but I think I really kind of wrapped my brain about it recently, because—Personally, I have—well, I'll be transparent to the situation with the mother of my children. And everyone was telling me to be angry at her, but I felt like I couldn't be angry at her and use that for motivation, because any anger towards her is reflected on my children, so therefore I'm bringing that—[BuddhaCFM: Kids are going to feel it.] and that energy to my children, so I displ—I don't have any anger for her, you know? I get angry—I get upset at some of her actions, but any anger that I would have towards her and the actions from that energy I would have towards her would reflect on my children, and I don't want that for them. And it kind of just, like, [snaps fingers] "Oh shit, I don't have to be angry."

**BuddhaCFM:** That's a huge revelation though, right? Because most anger just pops, off you know what I mean?

**WaAaKSun:** And that's how I was raised. [BuddhaCFM: Yep] That's how I was raised. Somebody disrespect you, they fragile your—you know, bruise your ego, you get angry, and you retaliate, and [BuddhaCFM: Yep] that's always been the case. Cops do something to your community, you get angry, you retaliate, whatever it was you retaliated with—whatever made you upset or angry, you use it, and you just act out impulsively, and it doesn't—it no longer serves me. There might be a time and a place for that for other people, but not for me.

**BuddhaCFM:** Well sometimes we need to still call on it for protection: protection of ourselves or protection of people we love—like I get that, but it's—I think that's huge when you redefine a new relationship with it to move forward. Cause I know you know lots of people are stuck with it, you know what I mean? And it ain't changing, and it doesn't get better ever, so—I don't know. There's so many lessons, you know? It's fascinating to me how many young men needed, need hip hop because they just don't really have a dad active in their life, or big brother in their life, and so that alone is such a big role for us to fill. But if we're going to fill those boots, that's a huge responsibility to try and model—also morals, values, ethics, and stuff, you know? Not that we're perfect and stuff. Like, we all mess up, that's okay, but we should be moving in that direction with people. I—there's no fucking lazy lunch with this, you know what I mean? It's like, if you're involved, show some commitment. I wish I—There's so much more room for people to be more deeply committed [laughs] to this and maybe that's just grumpy me thinking, "God, [it] didn't live up to our dreams," you know? It does though still, but—

**WaAaKSun:** I think that—so again, hip hop is there for everybody, right? And people are going to use it the way they need to.

I don't think everyone *needs* to be as deeply committed as maybe you and I. They're just not built for that. It's going to take certain people who are having certain experiences and they're on a certain journey to practice hip hop and deliver hip hop the way that you would. Not everyone can fill those shoes, you know? I just think we need some people stepping out of the way a little bit because they're doing more harm than good. [BuddhaCFM: Right.] That's something that's challenging to me. There's a lot of people setting us back, you know?

**BuddhaCFM:** Yep. Yeah, we see that well, people who have power want to hold on to power, cause they get the spoils of war, whatever, you know what I mean? And I'm not going to name names either, but we see this happening and it's not really for the greater good of the culture. It's for somebody's personal whatever-thing.

Was dance for you a big anger release, too? For me even battling and stuff, I just remember I could go to the club five nights a week, six nights a week, cypher every night. Go outside on the balcony, take my shirt off, wring out a cup of sweat just outside, shake out my shirt, put it back on, back in cyphering. But I felt that good-exhausted, you know what I mean, when I had a whole night just dancing in the club. Maybe I started drinking early, mostly water at the end so I could come down, but I think it prevented me from getting in a lot of other trouble because I had a chip on my shoulder of people that had attitude. Cause if I was in a club with my crew and I saw somebody looking at me, "Oh, look at the white guy. He thinks he's a good dancer," or something, you know what I mean, like the redneck standing in the back. I would stop dancing on the floor, go right up in their face and go, "What the fuck you looking at?" And my younger crew is trying to stop me from starting shit because I hated people if I felt they were judging me in any way, you know? But the dance itself was so explosive that it probably helped me along the way from not getting in more fights and stuff.

**WaAaKSun:** See I have an interesting relationship with it because, again, I'm doing graf and breakin' at the same time, right? So I'm heavily in the graf world where I have to be on edge. I have to be on my toes, and [ . . . ] I'm getting into altercations, so I'm really aggressive. And then I'm on the—in the breakin' scene—well, at least during my generation where everybody had that b-boy attitude and a certain aggression behind it. So now people are being aggressive towards me on the dance floor, but I'm still in the graf mindset, so sometimes that I wasn't able to tell the difference. All of it was, because I was in the graf world, all of it was confrontational. All of it was win or lose, life or death, so it would just come out of me instinctively because it was like muscle memory, you know?

**BuddhaCFM:** Were you gettin' in fights in the club? [laughs]

**WaAaKSun:** Not really but I would get into altercations. I remember when we were younger, and I can only speak for me—I can't speak for everybody else in my crew and why they were hot-heads the way they were—but for me it's because I was in that graf world full-time and breakin' world part-time. And then people in the breakin' world would act aggressive and then I would confront them and they would back down. And then I'd be left there looking like a maniac like, "Oh well, wait a minute. . ." And I realized that it's just the persona people are playing. They think you gotta be hard because it's like this whole b-boy personality and I learned to filter it out eventually. But in the beginning it got me into a lot of trouble. [BuddhaCFM: Yeah, yeah.] I looked like a real asshole.

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah, no, I'm honestly not proud of the way I was, but I learned, lived and learned. Even—I was having a discussion about drugs with people the other day. And from age 20 to 30, I was living in other cities. I lived in England and I was part of

the early hip hop scene over there and stuff but I was in such a ADHD explosive mentality about trying everything . . . I almost died a couple of times from being cocky about, "I can handle all these drugs. I can mix these things," and stuff. You know, I've been really clean for at least 20 years which is would—at some point I just made a decision, "Been there, done that, don't need that anymore." I don't necessarily really regret it [. . .] I've learned a lot. But I think it was also some of my anger, some of my confusion about who I really was. I hadn't really thought it all through, and I don't know. I think it's just such—again that's just my story, but it can be such a beautiful story if you could use hip hop for self-reflection on your journey to being a human being. [laughs]

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah and all the knowledge is already out there, right?

They blessed us with that. Everybody, you know what I'm saying, [. . .] it's in the language, it's in the songs, it's the vernacular, but for some reason, [for] some people just- it eludes them. And some people, it just takes a little longer to set in, you know? And I think that comes with being an actual practitioner: you will learn those things if you listen to music and if you stay the course, and you treat this like school and you—[BuddhaCFM: Yeah.] you're willing to learn and take in information and just build with people you'll realize those things much sooner than later and you'll be much better for it. I think personally—this is my own personal philosophy—that you know we're—humans are a terrible, terrible species. However, some of us are capable of doing great things on behalf of our species and make it [. . .] up a little bit.

And it's like that in hip hop, too. We have this huge community and it's unregulated, unvetted. There's no real rules to this community, so we let people in with open arms. Because of that, sometimes you get some knuckleheads and some people who aren't the best for us. But if you're willing to learn from these

experiences and teach what you know and practice and just be communal, it's like, we're supposed to be doing this as a people, right? Power to the people, all the people, by the people, right? And "People, people we gotta get over before we go under,"<sup>14</sup> and all the messages are already out there, but we don't seem to be learning from them and maybe it's because of the technology, maybe it's because of the industry or social media or whatever. Maybe we're over-saturated because we're living in this Information Age. Maybe the solution is finding more effective ways to communicate these lessons to our community, but the lessons are already there. I feel like every generation that does a terrible job at—and ends up repeating the mistakes that our elders did. And I'm not sure how cultural that is—I don't know if it's just a hip hop thing, or a Black and Brown thing, or inner city thing, or something that poor people do—but I feel like now's the time that we could definitely learn from these lessons and pry away from the big picture and worry about like the micro and be more on the community, and on the grassroots level, and just not have to have these conversations going forward. The next WaAaK and Buddha shouldn't have—shouldn't be complaining about these hardships that—[BuddhaCFM laughs] We're definitely in a position right now with the technology and the knowledge that we have to prevent that and have other better, more important conversations going forward.

**BuddhaCFM:** Well, I want to have a short conversation with WaAaK about what's his philosophy. I know what mine kind of is, about empowering young people and encouraging young people that they have their own gifts and nuances and culture that they can bring into hip hop because hip hop grew as such an organic thing. So the balance of foundation and history and stuff about where it came from and what early days were, to

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14. Lyrics of "Funky President" (1974) by James Brown: [https://youtu.be/8\\_ODghRTeyQ](https://youtu.be/8_ODghRTeyQ)

encouraging an Inuit kid to bring his Arctic game movement, like one foot kicks or something into his dance style, or something or when—you mentioned you were in Jordan, you know what I mean? This is a different cultural mix there, right?

People have their own ways of movement and storytelling and even drum beats and stuff if you were to [. . .] mix in the musics and stuff. So, my position always has been—and people can challenge me on this and disagree—but I see that as such—yeah, it's got its history and all that. Let's say in the Olympics [it] should be talked about in that too, but the great gift of culturally sharing and—youth culture always wants to recreate their vision of something. Their modern vision of something. So, "Yeah yeah yeah, I heard what you were saying, WaAaK, and that's really dope and *de-de-de-de*. I got my six-step and things, but I really want to, out of respect of stories my parents told me back in Palestine, or something, you know what I mean, tell this story with my movement in my flavor or whatever."

And that gives young people such power and I feel like it's a respectful place, you know what I mean, when you come to them like that. That's why on BluePrint we always try to—cause they're looking at us and going, "Oh, the hippity hop superstars that come from all over North America to this remote community. . ." Well, if you stay like that, you're out of balance with them. There's the kids and there's you [places one hand above the other to indicate a hierarchy], cause they're already putting you on a pedestal. So right away [brings hands in line with each other] you got to find techniques to have them teach you something and go, "Yo, shit. That throat singing is dope. It's so much like beatbox," you know what I mean? Cause they're in a deficit [shows hand again on different levels] on so many things we got to bring up their power [brings hands inline] and part of their power lies in their culture. That's my rant.

**WaAaKSun:** Uhss. No definitely, yeah. Again, those symbiotic relationships, right, communicating—I sometimes think about have wanting to had the perspective so many years ago. I would have done things differently as far as teaching young people and letting them know that, “Although I’m the top of the classroom and I’m teaching them and I come in there with the skill set or this understanding, this knowledge, I’m gonna be, I’m going to learn more from you then you probably will from me.”

**BuddhaCFM:** And you’re honest about that.

**WaAaKSun:** I wish I could have done that much sooner. [BuddhaCFM: Yeah.] I wish I had that insight so many years ago when I first started teaching, just to thank every young person that I’ve ever worked with ahead of time like, “Yo, thank you because I’m gonna come in here, I’m gonna teach you for an hour and half or whatever it is. I’m gonna teach you for the semester, however I’m going to learn more from you for my life than I can possibly teach you in this short amount of time, so thank you,” you know? So, I’m grateful for every young person I’ve ever worked with that my teaching experience has made me a better person, a better partner, a better father, so I’m always grateful for it.

As far as personal philosophies, my purpose and [. . .] I’ve gone through a lot of different changes and lifestyle changes and personal changes and development in my life. And right now, my purpose is cultivating healthier environments and lifestyles through hip hop and that’s an acronym for H.E.A.L.T.H.: Healthy Environments And Lifestyles Through Hip hop, so that’s my personal purpose. So, however I can use this art form to create healthier environments and to kind of preach and let people know that like, “Yeah, this is this is for you, this is something that will get you to probably the hardest parts of your life. You



don't have to be a hip hop practitioner, you don't have to grow up to be a famous hip hop anything. Just acknowledge this culture, use it the way you need to use it, but also give back as much as possible, 'cause everybody's capable of giving back somehow."

And also, there's this notion that we have in hip hop that we outgrow it, you know? That we like—oh that's something, "Yo you still doin' that shit, WaAaK? You still writin' and shit? Aw, that's great. Naw, I don't do that shit no more." "You still dancin'? Naw, I don't do that shit no more."

**BuddhaCFM:** Damn, if you can imagine how much I get that.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah yeah, so that being said you know like I'm 40 years old. I'm grateful to be here. I'd never thought I'd make it past 18. I never thought I'd make it to 40. And I have hip hop and my community and my family to thank for that. I have STF<sup>15</sup> to thank for that. I have Breaks Kru to thank for that. And I just wanted to—if I could pass anything on to anybody out there who's using hip hop personally or professionally, there's no expiration date. You don't have to outgrow it. You don't have to retire and leave your community behind. Keep the community in mind, keep the culture in mind. Don't turn your back on the culture that birthed you and you're a prime example [gestures hand out to screen towards BuddhaCFM] of that brother, so "uhss" thanks and my respect to you. [brings hands together and then places one hand to his chest and gestures out to BuddhaCFM]

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah I wanna you know—I tell the young kats this like, "Yo! If you like the time we spent together and this and that, then

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15. Straight To Fame graf crew from NYC. For more information about WaAaKSun's graf endeavors, refer to following article from GQ Magazine that explores the history of how he developed the IRAK graf crew from STF: <https://www.gq.com/story/irak-legendary-new-york-graffiti-crew>

you got to come visit me and wipe the drool off my face when I'm in the old age home. And sit with me and we'll watch old school videos together," or something, you know? Or take me out and roll me up in my wheelchair to the—right beside the cypher just so I can feel the energy and stuff. That's kind of the way I want to go out, you know?

The whole Olympic thing has put things into my head about what is the stories to tell. I did a little video-thing on my opinion on that, but I really hope that—it's such a missed opportunity if they only do some of the history and the athleticism of it and not tell the story about how, on deeply personal levels, in small communities all around the world, it helped people survive and heal.

Arguments can be made for that, for lots of things in life, you know what I mean, skateboarding or whatever it is, a ton of things. But what I particularly love about this culture as a dancer—I never had a dance class in my life. Back in the day there were no fuckin', you know, people touring around, making their living offering—you know Mr. Wiggles is coming in offering a seminar and *da-da-da*. This just did not happen [. . .] So all of us are self-taught with each other and I wear that like a badge of honor because it also represents our commitment to each other as brothers and sisters and I just worry that—That's such a beautiful story to tell, you know what I mean? Like if I was a guy who knew nothing about hip hop and I'm watching the Olympics and dudes are doing air flares off their nose and their ears and craziness and all this, and then people somehow told the story that, you know what? There's outreach all over the world with the street kids in Cambodia, with our friends in Uganda. There's a lot of programs—BluePrint's just one program like that—there's many programs like that. Ballet didn't do that. Modern dance didn't do that outreach. So I'm particularly proud as a dance culture that was invented by people who didn't, couldn't afford dance lessons or whatever, it was just people hanging with each other and feeling the music and trying to survive day by day. And

that it turned into something where it has this beautiful outreach around the world? That's a model for dance worldwide to consider, you know?

So, if we don't tell that story—and so here's the thing we need allies you know in academia and stuff who want to, will help us tell the story but it's kind of on us to take advantage of the opportunities to tell the story, you know what I mean? Because if it was *just* academia telling the story, it's a bit like the telephone call thing where it can get distorted. I spoke at what's the big—New York University, NYU? I spoke at NYU “x” number of years ago and [b-girl] Rokafella was on the panel with me and she blew it up cause she was like, “Damn, why is this always got to be filtered through an academic person?” You know what I mean? The academic person is being paid more money to come and talk, and then to get their credibility up, they invite me as a subset of them, but they're getting the the bulk of the money and I'm there to kind of like co-sign that academic person with some credibility, and you can just go direct to Rokafella and talk to her about what it was like being a b-girl, you know what I mean? And I was like, “You go, girl.” This is so true sometimes.

But we need to carve out this—and this is a whole other discussion. I respect academia, and I think there's a role and importance, and this and that. But again, academia has egos too and wants to hold on to stuff and people are writing their PhDs off the backs of people like WaAaK, telling WaAaK's story or you know examples like that. And it's like, “Well, fuck. Just just give WaAaK the PhD.” You know what I mean?

Anyways just cause I've seen this—I remember they had a CNN Heroes-thing or whatever or and it was on these people were doing academic research on rap therapy and they were putting it out there cause they were PhD types from Oxford or something, like this was a new fucking idea. People have been using hip hop since we knew it was a beautiful thing at the get-go to do change in our communities, but because you've got a PhD,

and you played a rap song to a prison kat and the lyrics moved him, that's not a fucking novel idea, you know what I mean? Elvis Presley saw it move prison kats, too [. . .] There's lots of stuff, but you're trying to turn it into something to pursue your own career. So I'm just saying I'm nervous. I'm nervous about people's agenda, cause hip hop's been fucked over by power dynamics and continues to be, and we need new relationships—And I'm not saying you guys are like that, but these are really strong considerations. So I'm grateful that you invite people that still live and breathe it and want to talk about it from the heart.

**WaAaKSun:** I think, yeah, we need to reevaluate how we have these relationships and how we hold the industry accountable. Part of that—because [. . .] most dance forms, or most cultural art forms start with the elite and eventually over hundreds of years or whatever, it trickles down to the poor, but we started at the bottom, and then you know we worked our way up, and then along the way people infiltrated the culture and then exploited the culture and there's a lot of that still going on.

Like you said to allies, we do have allies, but I think the most important thing to do is have this conversation publicly, have this conversation with our our communities, keep encouraging young people to seek a higher education and put themselves in position so that the PhDs, and the scholars, and the philosophers of this culture actually come from the culture and that's the only way we're going to truly change the narrative. Just like the only way we're going to change the hip hop industry is if we raise our own record executives, and raise our own philanthropists and entrepreneurs within the hip hop culture, and not that we need millionaire businessmen and women in the culture, we just need conscious capitalism and accountability within [the] hip hop industry.

**BuddhaCFM:** Oh damn I'm going to use that, conscious capitalism. That's dope.

**WaAaKSun:** Shout out to my home girl J. Love Calderón. I got that from her.

**BuddhaCFM:** Do we have a couple of minutes still? Can I tell you a political strategy that I fleshed out with some friends about overturning capitalism in the world and blah blah? So I was speaking at, was it Word Beats & Life, you know, Mazi.<sup>16</sup> Anyway so I was down, Bambaataa was there and we were speaking and *de-de-de*. I met this guy Tomás Alvarez<sup>17</sup> out of Oakland who was running—[. . .] So we both did a presentation, and we both have Masters in social work degrees so I'm always intrigued by this, it's like—so he's a hip hop head, a poet involved in rap therapy and how he fought the social work system all in Oakland to finally get this program going. And we shared so many ideas that we started staying in touch with each other and contact, going, "Yo, there's maybe five of us around the world that got Masters in social work degrees, and we're not voyeurs with hip hop, but we're entrenched with this shit." It's really part of who we are as people.

So, if you were to have people write things like professional boundaries and stuff like this or things around youth outreach, maybe we're some of the people to help guide hip hop outreach in terms of—so you don't have to reinvent the wheel on everything. We can move things forward. So, one of the first things that we did, and we've only done it once but it was brilliant, we—Mazi brought us back and they brought in hip hop outreach organizations from around the States and me from Canada. Me and Tomás curated a two-day workshop with all these hip hop outreach people and social agencies. So now we got the alternative schools, and probation, and mental health, and all them, and we got the big foundations there, all of us in the same room,

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16. Word Beats & Life Inc. hip hop community organization in Washington D.C. <https://wblinc.org/>. Mazi Mutafa is the founding Executive Director of Words Beats & Life

17. Tomás Alvarez is the co-founder Beats Rhymes and Life <http://brl-inc.org/>

learning from us. Cause our strategy was, “Well maybe we’re just using different language, but we’re actually talking the same thing,” and people would be really fucking surprised.

We went through the whole thing about complex trauma and the healing of the brain, what’s going on in the brain. Me and Tomás, we laid it all out, and it was amazing because—especially the big funders like the Kennedy Foundation, they were sitting there going—because if you want to change the world, you need money to run these programs and stuff too. But they wanna know that—I joke about it, they need to know we’re not just taking hippity hop shit and throwing it against the wall and hoping something sticks [ . . . ] The depth of knowledge is actually very great. But maybe not all the hip hop organizations have heard the scientific language about what’s going on with cortisone in the brain, and a whole bunch of these things about re-networking new neural pathways through the arts, telling of your own story, getting [inaudible] in your brain, and what that’s doing, and *da-da-da-da-da*. But if we all get together and we all imagine, I don’t know, let’s say for argument’s sake, there’s 50 hip hop outreach organizations across the States and they all start using similar language co-signing, like we’re elevating, we’re educating each other. And that’s going to get us longer term multi-year funding. [ . . . ] For me hip hop shouldn’t be—if it’s still where it’s at today 10 years from now, shame on hip hop. That’s how I feel.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah, that goes back to what I was saying about making the same mistake that the elders have went through. I have the luxury of building with folks like Ken Swift who [is] one of the first people who [is] making money like on the backs off of hip hop, right? And he earned the things that he went through, and the struggles he had, and how the up and down with the industry that he suffered. Just being able to have the experience of just meeting people from generations before

me—having all of these understandings of their experiences and knowing that one, it's something that was very sacred to them and in their time of survival through the culture, they were exploited. And because they were exploited this need to hoard this information—and in reality, this information is their life, their experience—hoarding their experience from other people so it doesn't get exploited, knowing that that information, that data, that knowledge is worth something financially. And because we don't share these experiences, and because we don't share these dialogues, these systems of teaching or everything else, because we hold them so tight, because we know we can make money off of it, but maybe I can't make money off of it, I'm not going to let you make money off of it either, that's that problem that we have culturally.

We had that same sort of situation with the organization I work with BEAT Global in the very beginning where [. . .] we have people teaching beatboxing, rhyming, beat making and breakin', and we have all these teachers. No one's communicating with each other. Then we started having these opportunities to see each other in the classroom or just have conversations and realize, "Oh shit. You're doing something I never thought about," or "I do something different, slightly similar." And that led us into revamping our whole structure and model for the organization. Then in turn, doing teacher-teacher programs because collectively, we had all these different models to teach, but we weren't even sharing them with each other internally.

So it goes back to just having the opportunity to have the conversations, saying it out loud, "This is what I'm doing: this what works, this doesn't work," and also like you said, having some sort of summit or some sort of get together where we can share this information overall and be able to tell people, "Okay, this is how you do it," that "each one teach one" however on a universal scale, and say, [. . .] "Bypass all the bullshit. Do it this way, and

by the way, add your own shit, your own flavor to it as you go along to best serve your community,” you know? I have systems in place—you put me in the suburbs of Baltimore or Maryland, I can cater to that community. You put me in a board of ed suspension sites in Lower East Side,<sup>18</sup> I can cater to that community. You put me in a Zaatari refugee camp,<sup>19</sup> I’m going to cater to that community.

**BuddhaCFM:** It’s been dope talking with you brother.

**WaAaKSun:** Yeah it’s been too long man, too long.

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah.

**MiRi Park:** With that, thank you so much, Buddha and WaAaK, for all of your time and all of your sharing of all of your wisdom. We truly appreciate it.

**BuddhaCFM:** Lovely meeting everybody. WaAaK, nice reconnecting.

**WaAaKSun:** We’re going to connect. I’m gonna email you.

**BuddhaCFM:** Yeah yeah, let’s do it, we’ll stay in touch

**WaAaKSun:** Dr. grace, thank you. MiRi, thank you.

**MiRi Park:** Thank you so so much.

**BuddhaCFM:** See you, peace.

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18. The NYC Dept. of Education site called Boys and Girls Republic (BGR)—this is a facility that suspended students report to as part of completing their punishment. For more information about these sites: <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2019/4/18/21107994/it-s-basically-jail-inside-nyc-s-suspension-centers-where-there-s-bullying-boredom-and-sometimes-sup>

19. Refugee camp in the country of Jordan, Middle East [https://elevation.maplogs.com/poi/zaatri\\_refugee\\_camp\\_zaatari\\_village\\_jordan.219587.html](https://elevation.maplogs.com/poi/zaatri_refugee_camp_zaatari_village_jordan.219587.html)



Post-conversation email sent from BuddhaCFM.

April 19, 2021

Also included this dope pic of WaAaK on the Arctic project.



*Blueprintforlife final showcase battle in Canada's Arctic in Cape Dorset. WaAaK is part of the team. Courtesy of Buddha CFM.*

"It was an amazing story—cementing the belief that it's so important for everyone to feel like the suprarstar [sic] at some point in their life.

This lil man was in a wheel chair [sic]. (I think WaAaK built the routine.) Anyway for the community battle the whole town came out. There had been a rash of teen suicides and the community felt overwhelmed and stuck in grief. Elders told us afterwards that what we did was exactly what was needed to break out of this and move forward.

Anyway, in the battle this dude in the wheel chair dragged out his lil friend who was lying on his back and wearing a slippery coat. (He hooked his foot into a leather strap at the back of the wheel chair.

Then once in the cypher he spun the powerful wheelchair around in a tight circle -this meant his young friend was being whipped around in a circle with his arms out. Then more members from his crew came out and did jump rope over this lil guy. Boom—battle over !!!! And the lil inuit kid in the wheel chair felt like big man on campus in front of his whole community. Moments like this are organic healing—with everyone in the room feeling it !”



*Buddha CFM dancing at 61.*

*Courtesy of Buddha CFM.*

## **Contributors**

**Stephen “Buddha” Leafloor** is a co-founder of the Canadian Floor Masters, Canada’s oldest B-Boy crew (ca. 1983). He has performed for James Brown, Ice-T, Grandmaster Flash, Black Eyed Peas, Public

Enemy, and George Clinton. He is a consultant and workshop facilitator for Cirque Du Soleil. At 62, Steve is a proud father of three and still gets down in the Cypher! He holds an MSW with over 30 years of experience in the field of Social Work. His company BluePrintForLife has pioneered accessible outreach programs that bring empowerment, hope, and positive change to Canada's north, urban centers, and maximum-security youth prisons. The BluePrintForLife team has reached over 6,000 youth through 120 programs in over 45 communities to date. He is a guest lecturer at universities and keynote speaker at conferences, including international United Nations youth conferences, representing Justice Canada at international conferences on crime prevention, provincial chiefs of police conferences, and provincial and national conferences on education, bullying, social work, and First Nations topics. He has contributed a chapter to *Therapeutic Uses of Rap and Hip-Hop* and a chapter in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies*.

**WaAaKSun** took full advantage of his environment and circumstances growing up in Brooklyn by emerging as a highly respected HipHop icon. Impacted by the people and lifestyle, WaAaK was inducted into HipHop culture through Graf Writing and Aerosol Art. In 1996, WaAaK continued to carry on New York City tradition as he started BBoying. Shortly after he began dancing, he founded The Breaks Kru. This fresh group of young HipHop practitioners found themselves at the forefront of a cultural renaissance, representing NYC as Breakin' resurfaced from the international underground to prove its value as a true Super Culture. With over 20 years of cultural representation, WaAaK is an activist for the advancement of HipHop and continues to push BBoying in unprecedented directions as he works tirelessly to define, portray, and represent the culture accurately. WaAaK's cultural and professional accomplishments have earned him respect and appreciation from the community and industry alike, working with BBoy icon and cultural pioneer Ken Swift and renowned human rights organization El Puente.

**grace shinhae jun** is a mother, wife, artist, scholar, organizer, and mover who creates and educates on the traditional and unceded territory of the Kumeyaay Nation. A child of a South Korean immigrant, a North Korean refugee, and Hip Hop culture, she values a movement practice that is infused with historical and contextual education and focuses on community, compassion, and empowerment to encourage rhythm and expression. grace is a choreographer who directs bkSOUL, an award-winning performance company that merges movement, poetry, and live music. She is a founding core member of Asian Solidarity Collective and collaborator with Street Dance Activism. grace received an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and a PhD through the joint doctoral program at UCSD/UCI. Her scholarship on Asian Americans and hip hop dance is forthcoming in the *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies*. grace teaches at UCSD, San Diego City College, and with transcenDANCE Youth Arts Project.

**MiRi “seoulsonyk” Park** is a b-girl, choreographer, performer, producer, scholar, activist, teacher, and mother based in Southern California. She reps New York City where she spent her formative adult years and learned the art of b-girling and other underground dance forms. MiRi was the associate choreographer of the 20th Anniversary tour of RENT and a lecturer in the newly formed CSUCI Dance Studies program where she teaches dance history and hip hop dance. She is currently a doctoral student at UCLA WAC/D focusing on Asian American corporealities in hip hop dance. MiRi is a recipient of the UCR Christena Lindborg Schlundt Lecture Series in Dance Studies and the CSU Faculty Innovation and Leadership Award. Her writing will appear in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies*. She is a co-editor of a special issue about dance and protest for IASPM and a producer/dramaturg/dancer for *This One Then*, a screendance directed by Charlotte Griffin, MA American Studies, Columbia, and BFA Dance and BA Journalism, UMass Amherst. Crews: Breaking in Style (BIS), Tru Essencia Cru (TEC), Fox Force Five (FF5).

## Selected Glossary of Terms

**b-boy / b-girl / breaker:** a person who participates in the dance style widely known as "breakin'." In the past, this term has also referred to someone who participates in hip hop culture, generally. In reference to the scene from which people who participated in this issue of *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* come, a b-boy / b-girl / breaker is someone who is both a dance and cultural practitioner of hip hop culture.

**Battle / Jam / Event:** Battles are when people test their skills against an opponent. They can take place anywhere. Jams are gatherings that usually focus on community building, which sometimes involve battles with judges and awards (usually trophies or small cash prizes). Events are larger happenings that can span a number of days. Events are centered around competition in a battle format with a judging system and awards of significant purses. Increasingly, these events are corporately produced or sponsored and/or funded by governmental agencies.

**Biter:** someone who copies moves or entire "sets" (a series of moves strung together) from other dancers. In a dance style that values originality, biting moves, sets, or someone else's style is a most egregious sin.

**Breakin' moves:** if you would like to see a demonstration of these moves, there are many tutorials on YouTube/social media. Here are some explanations of moves mentioned in this issue:

Floats—continuous rotations on one's hands with the body balanced on elbows/upper-arms.

Halos—spinning on the edge of head, not to be confused with "head spins," which is continuous spinning on the top of the head.

Swirls—spinning on one's forearms.

Head spins—spinning on one's head continuously. This is different from a "one-shot," which is spinning on your head from one whip/push only.

1990s—called "90s" for short. Rotating upside-down on one hand.

Footwork—sometimes referred to as “downrock” or “floor techs.” This is dancing that usually follows toprock and a drop to the ground.

Six-step—a foundational footwork move that consists of coordinating six steps while on hands and feet, in a circular pattern. It’s considered foundational as it’s possible to add or subtract steps to it in order to vary footwork patterns.

Windmills—also known as continuous back spins. This is one of the most recognizable breakin’ moves with legs held straight out in a “V” position.

Power moves—dance moves that usually involve continuous spins on a single part of the body—for example, windmills, 90s, air flares, swirls, and elbow spins. Sometimes referred to simply as “power.”

**Cat/Kat:** a slang term used for “person.”

**Crews:** a group of people that share an identity and sometimes function as a family unit. In the case of breaking, crews were sometimes defined by neighborhoods, but over time, they were defined by shared values or simply good chemistry between people.

Getting down with a crew, or being put down for a crew—the process in which someone is invited to join, but then must prove they are worthy of being a part of the crew. In some cases, this means “battling in” where the new recruit must battle one or all of the crewmembers.

**Cypher:** dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson has articulated multiple definitions of “cypher” in her scholarship. First and foremost, it is the physical formation of a dance circle in which breakin’ or other social dances take place. There is a spiritual aspect to it in which the act of “cyphering” refers to an energy exchange between dancers and/or dancer and spectator, or in her words, “the act of building collectively through the back and forth exchange in the circle.”<sup>20</sup> She makes

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20. Johnson, Imani Kai. *Dark matter in b-boying cyphers: Race and global connection in hip hop*. PhD dissertation. University of Southern California, 2009. p. 5. For an extended discussion of the etymology of the term, refer to pp. 4-5.

clear that not all dance circles are cyphers. The notion of cyphers and cyphering can also be applied to other aspects of knowledge and energy exchange.

**O.G.:** an abbreviation of “original gangster” that colloquially refers to someone who is known to have originated a move, a crew, or, more generally, an elder.

**Liner Notes: Jesse Mills**

This conversation between Buddha (Canadian Floor Masters) and WaAaK-Sun (Breaks Kru) brings the power of hip hop culture's history to life. Part memoir and part call to action, the conversation maps a rich northeast to more-north continental flow in a hardened-to-heartened, never-soft tone. As rebellious youth, each aggressively navigated the hostile conditions of North American cities in protest and counterculture, and these hostile conditions took their toll, as narrated here, in mental health, intergenerational community bonds, and freedoms. In their life and work, WaAaKSun and Buddha move as educators, knowledge bearers, storytellers, advocates, and service providers who reach many, including incarcerated youth and First Nations (Indigenous Canadian) youth.

A striking aspect of the conversation is the pair's observations and reflections on how to live a good, ethical life, challenging the dishonesty of institutionalized, commodified, and inauthentic structures of authority—and performances authority—and grounding into an honesty that speaks truth to power, truth to the zigzags of life's path, and truth to the importance of finding wellness and family. They stand before us, the audience, as deeply reflective and courageously honest men who share their treasures of knowledge for future generations.

Their stories and justice work with youth navigated them into unprecedented and precious sharing about masculinity. For both of them, masculinity has become more about maturity, vulnerability, and mentoring than the competitive and aggressive alternative to violence of their youth in hip hop culture. "The personal is political," says Buddha, and as men and fathers, they have found a power in love and care, brotherly and parental connections, respect and recognitions that have made critical interventions into, among other things in their life, (trigger warning) suicidal ideation. Each lifts up this honesty as being the most important aspect of their youth advocacy.

A provocative but less conclusive line of thought centers on hip hop cultural exchange and authorship of hip hop cultural history. Both Buddha and WaAaKSun present their stories and knowledge generously



with many audiences outside of the culture (as told by WaAaKSun), and even as professionals with advanced degrees (in the case of Buddha). Breaking in the Olympics represents an ideal cross-cultural ambassadorship for Buddha, and one of the most evocative moments in the convo is WaAaKSun recalling Buddha inviting him to teach in the Arctic Circle, where, unbelievably, WaAaK found someone from Brooklyn already there! "It blows people's minds!" says WaAaKSun. Hip hop's globality, broad appeal, and accessible yet powerful tools resonate here, but WaAaKSun and Buddha question academics who build careers off of such stories while many in the culture, past and present, struggle on the margins. Along these lines, are the pair offering alternatives to the exploitative capitalist system that they deftly outmaneuvered in making it to mature manhood, or are they seeking security, status, and stability that the system deceptively promises? What are the ends of the hustle? How in surviving capitalism can you be fully human? This profound conversation educates and elevates with WaAaKSun's and Buddha's hip hop cultural depth and gifts.

## **Author Biographies**

**Jesse Mills** is Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of San Diego. His teaching, research, artistic, and activist work focuses on Black liberation, immigration and refugee studies, social movements, Indigenous decolonization, and anti-racist philanthropy. In San Diego's Somali community, the primary site for his research, Mills has served as an organizer, advocate, ESL teacher, youth mentor, educational consultant, organizational advisor, and community member. He received both a PhD (2008) and an MA (2004) in Ethnic Studies from the University of California, San Diego. In 1999, he also obtained an MA in Afro-American Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles.