



Liner Notes:



Nadine George-Graves
Serouj "Midus" Aprahamian

Liner Notes:



Joseph Schloss
Jesse Mills
Imani Kai Johnson

Conversations

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Cyber-Rock: A Virtual Hip Hop Listening Cypher

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The Cyber-Rock Mixtape: A Virtual Hip Hop Dance Listening Cypher

Intro

grace shinhae jun & MiRi "seoulsonyk" Park

Hip hop is an American culture that grew from the innovation of Black and Brown youth in New York City (NYC). It is a way of being, a way of moving, an identity, a practice, and a theory. The movement grew from parties and social gatherings. It has always been about expression and making a name for oneself in a culture and system that continues to discriminate against and police Black and Brown bodies in the effort to uphold white supremacy culture and racial capitalism. Hip hop practices emerged as a protest, a means for social justice, and the ongoing practice of building community. In the shadows of Robert Moses' infrastructural projects, the ways that youth moved with and against neoliberalism became a standard repertory of dance-, music-, and art-making practices for people across time, space, class, and race, resisting structural and political limitations imposed upon them.

This issue of *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* centers hip hop dance practitioners' knowledge and analyses of race, ethnicity, history, appropriation, ownership, commercialization, gender, and sexuality in ways that typically remain verbally unaddressed in the dance cypher. While much has been written about hip hop in regard to the elements of graffiti, DJing, MCing,

and the culture in general,¹ as dance studies scholars, we are most dedicated to expanding the field of hip hop dance studies,² specifically. This issue also centers on the form of a dialogue as informed by academic oral history methodologies that emphasize deep listening and co-authorship.³

Method

Hip hop dance encompasses a genealogy of many social and vernacular styles of dance. There has been much discussion regarding what the hip hop dances truly are, and this issue continues the scholarly discourse about breakin' (b-boying/b-girling) and party dances as "the" hip hop dances. But if we consider the broadest formulation of "party dances," then it stands to bear that regional dance styles that emerge from young Black and Brown diasporic communities all find each other under the auspices of hip hop dance. Due to limitations of time and space, we cannot attend to *all* global participants, voices, and other dance styles categorized as underground/street/club dance forms like vogue, waacking, house, Chicago footwork, Memphis Jookin', Lite Feet,

1. See the work of Tricia Rose, Michael Eric Dyson, H. Samy Alim, Cheryl Keyes, Dan Charnas, James Spady, Manning Marable, Cornel West, Jeff Chang, Robin D. G. Kelley, George Nelson, Mark Anthony Neal, Murray Forman, William Eric Perkins, Ivor Miller, Robert Farris Thompson, Joan Morgan, and the Pleasure Ninjas collective, among others.

2. We hope to expand upon the work begun by academic scholars such as, but not limited to, Thomas DeFrantz, Sally Banes, Katrina Hazzard-Donald, Halifu Osumare, Sally Sommer, Kyra Gaunt, Raquel Z. Rivera, Joseph Schloss, Imani Kai Johnson, Mary Fogarty, Emery Petchauer, Naomi Bragin, Lorenzo Perrillo, Rachael Gunn, Freida Frost, Serouj "Midus" Aprahamian, practitioner-scholars like PopMaster Fabel, Rennie Harris, Ken Swift, Rokafella, Moncell Durden, Alieness, Storm, and the countless hip hop dance practitioners around the world who investigate and transmit hip hop dance history and culture every day. See "Suggested Reading List" in the Back Matter of this issue for specific readings.

3. For more information about academic oral history methodology, see works by Mary Marshall Clark, Ron Grele, Luisa Passerini, Alessandro Portelli. A good text to refer to is Perks, R. and Thomson, A. (2015). *The oral history reader*. Routledge.

Hyphy, jerkin', krumping, Detroit Jit, and all of the other styles that continue to develop not just in the United States but around the world. We hope that the method we developed for this issue of *Conversations* will inspire other scholars to investigate or instigate conversations in other locations, styles, and especially other languages.

To that end, *The Cyber-Rock: A Virtual Hip Hop Dance Listening Cypher* attempts to do a number of things. First, this is an experiment in what knowledge production might look like that reflects our relationships across practice and theory, in and outside institutional spaces, and virtual and in-person connections. Second, we wanted to institutionalize the conversations already taking place within the hip hop dance community by publishing and circulating this production of knowledge. The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, which has reached new heights of mainstream consciousness in the United States following the murder of George Floyd, fundamentally changed how we lived our lives. No longer able to gather in person at practices, jams, and competitions, members of the hip hop dance community took to Zoom and other social media platforms to address the issues of racism, sexism/misogyny, history, and trauma, in the form of interviews and panel discussions. The conversations that sometimes took place off the dance floor now became the central way in which the community gathered to speak and listen to one another. Most importantly, in developing *Cyber-Rock*, we asked ourselves how we could create and present a knowledge cypher between practitioner-theorists and academic scholars who are dedicated to the field of hip hop dance studies.⁴

4. We want to acknowledge the institutional work taking place like the Dance Oral History Project and Archive at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library as well as panel discussions like *The Black Xperience in Collaboration with Battle Manifesto* at Temple University.

The Mixtape: Form and Content

The notion of the cypher and cyphering runs throughout all elements of hip hop culture. Party-goers naturally form circles to spit rhymes, exchange dance throw downs, or trade black books. The cypher, therefore, is both the physical and metaphoric place that we bear witness, and to which we contribute our own expression in an ongoing exchange of energy. In this case, we coeditors thought about what we'd want this cypher to look, sound, and feel like. As a result, this issue of *Conversations* is set up as a mixtape where we invited scholars to listen to conversations between hip hop dance practitioners to discuss a particular theme or topic. Cognizant of the fact that there are many people within the hip hop dance community that the dance studies community might have less familiarity with, our intention with this project was to introduce other voices and stories that corroborate, contest, and bear witness to hip hop dance history and culture. Curatorially, this meant that we worked "close to home." In other words, we reached out to people with whom we are in deep relationships as crewmembers, mentors, found family, colleagues, and fellow activists engaged in dance practices, crucial social justice, and/or teaching work. In having lived life with many of them, we anticipated how they might articulate themes and theories that emerge from their life experience in hip hop dance.

Each duo of conversants has a relationship with each other already: Break Easy and Mighty Mike share a history of growing up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn; Buddha Stretch put Ms. Vee on in the NYC scene; big tara and Stacey Stash are members of the international b-girl crew Heartbreakerz; BuddhaCFM brought WaAaKSun in to teach Inuit youth as part of BuddhaCFM's BluePrint project; Dr. Shamell Bell and d. Sabela Grimes are friends and colleagues in Street Dance Activism (SDA). Each conversation is exactly that: a conversation. Each has its own energy and rhythm. Most conversations could have gone on for many more hours, but as editors, we did our best to try to keep each

to about an hour. We then transcribed and annotated each conversation, which conferred another layer of deep listening and consideration of what was said.

Hip hop scholars have been experimenting with formats of knowledge production that reflect hip hop aesthetics.⁵ The form of a “mixtape” as an organizing format in hip hop academia is not new. In “‘The People Keep on Going,’ A Listening Party, Vol. 1,” in *The Futures of Black Radicalism* (2017), Shana L. Redmond and Kwame M. Phillips present an annotated mixtape of songs they believe express Black radicalism through music-making. In thinking about this series of conversations as a mixtape, we extend this format to invite academic scholars from across the disciplines of dance studies, ethnomusicology, history, and ethnic studies to listen to and read the conversation afterward and provide their insights in the form of “liner notes.”

Our mixtape would not be complete without representing the other elements of hip hop. The music in the intro and outro of each video is a track titled “No Illusion” by the Anomalies Crew, featuring 427 and Zion I (RIP Zumbi). Thanks to Anomalies members big tara and DJ Kuttin’ Kandi for allowing us to feature their crew’s beats. We give big props to BazeOne STF for the graphics that got us cut hype every time we looked at the cover and logo.

A Note on “Translation”

As with writing about any culture, the representation of hip hop culture in textual form presents questions and quandaries that vex most traditional academic editors. The demand to be original in hip hop culture flows through every element. Most people hear this in the cutting and

5. Most famously, Cornel West produced “Sketches of My Culture,” a hip hop album (2001), and, most recently, A.D. Carson presented his doctoral dissertation as a rap album that subsequently went viral. <https://phd.aydeethegreat.com/>

sampling of records that DJs/producers continue to practice. In dance, we take movement and literally turn it on its head in unexpected ways. Hip hop writers (aka graffiti writers) have long practiced twisting, deconstructing, and reappropriating the visual representation of written language in their pieces. All along the way, practitioners routinely flkwt with the spelling of names and phrases.⁶ In processing this particular series of conversations, we attempted to strike a balance between making space for each contributor to express their prerogative in writing phrases like "Hip-Hop" or "Bboy/Bgirl" in their bios, while standardizing "hip hop" and "b-boy/b-girl" in the annotated transcripts. To that end, some conversants chose to represent their names differently from how they are referred to in the transcript. For example, when we noticed that Buddha Stretch set his Zoom name to "Bundaskratch," and if he'd like to change it, he replied, "Nah." Another conversant chose to share their story, but not their full identity, which we happily accommodated.

We also attempted to retain the conversational grammar in the annotated transcripts, again to push back against the academic instinct to flatten it out into colonized, heteronormative, "proper" English grammar. In some cases, how conversants refer to other people may flip between their dance monikers and their government names. We chose to have the writing reflect what and how they were recalled in the context of the storytelling. Readers will notice that some of the names mentioned in each conversation are footnoted and some are not. We asked ourselves whether or not who was mentioned had a bearing on understanding what was being discussed.

In the process of peer review, along with questions regarding the standardization of spelling and grammar, there were also requests for clarification of people, events, and places. We asked ourselves: How much do we translate in each transcript? Do we footnote or hyperlink? Should reading these conversations feel like jumping into a cypher that might be somewhat discombobulating? Are we imposing colonial

6. For more scholarship about hip hop sociolinguistics, see Alim, H.S. (2006). *Roc the mic right: The language of hip hop culture*. Routledge.

practices if we footnote passing shorthand reference to a particular jam/event? Or does it enhance and clarify the knowledge being produced in the conversations? As a middle-ground solution developed by the mindful editing board, we have included a selected glossary of terms that includes some (NYC-specific) Spanish slang and a list of breaking events/jams referred to in multiple conversations. We've also compiled a suggested reading list. Edited glossary and events lists are included at the end of each conversation. The reading list can be found in the Back Matter of this issue.

The Get-Down

The experience of getting down in a cypher can be exhilarating, overwhelming, chaotic, and a test to see how much you can maintain a sense of awareness and control in the circle. Some moves are legible to others, while some moves are obscure to viewers due to your particular innovation of how you throw your set. In a separate conversation with our good friend, b-girl and choreographer Ephrat Asherie, we discussed how watching a concert dance piece about hip hop or club culture does not mean that an audience member can, or should, walk away from that performance feeling like they "know" either scene. Similarly, we hope that the editorial decisions we've made furnish readers with the experience of both familiarity and strangeness when listening to/reading these conversations.

As with any cypher, however you decide to get down in it is entirely up to your style. If you want to sample each conversation, you might decide to read all the liner notes first. Perhaps you want to feel like you are at the edge of the cypher itself, in which case listening to/watching a conversation is more your speed. Or if reading *is* in fact the fastest way to get something into your brain, you might want to read the annotated transcripts first. There's another level of cyphering that calls for engaged analysis once you have listened to these conversants and respondents. Whatever you choose, we hope that these conversations

evoke the kind of awe, inspiration, respect, and love for each of these participants that it did for us as we hosted and continued to spend time with them as we transcribed and annotated their words. Mostly, we hope that these conversations will inspire you to listen deeply to the lived experiences of hip hop dance practitioners. We invite you to join the party and get down in these cyphers.

Author Biographies

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 the Asian Solidarity Collective and collaborator with SDA. 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 transcDANCE 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 California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) Dance Studies program where she teaches dance history and hip hop dance. She is currently a doctoral student at

University of California, Los Angeles's World Arts and Cultures/Dance (UCLA WAC/D) focusing on Asian American corporealities in hip hop dance. MiRi is a recipient of the *University of California, Riverside* (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 coeditor of a special issue about dance and protest for International Association for the Study of Popular Music (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).



Breakin' & Rocking in Williamsburg, Brooklyn: Break Easy & Mighty Mike



Break Easy

Breaking In Style/Dynasty Rockers



Mighty Mike

Scramblin' Feet, Inc./Mastermind Rockers

Breakin' & Rocking in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, a conversation with Miguel "Break Easy" Panzardi and Michael "Mighty Mike" Santiago. Video recorded and edited by MiRi Park and grace jun, April 4, 2021. Watch the full video here: <https://youtu.be/8VLBSEfiLBs>

MiRi Park: Hello, welcome everyone. This is our first conversation in our *DSA Conversations*. My name is MiRi Park and I'm here with Dr. grace jun and Richard "Break Easy" Santiago and Miguel "Mighty Mike" Panzardi. We are excited to have you both in conversation today. To give everyone a little bit of a background: Both of you all grew up in Williamsburg [Brooklyn] and started breaking in your own crews, sometimes against each other, and you [laughs] through the years have both maintained staying in the scene and also mentoring the next generation of dancers, consistently. So part of our interest in having you both in conversation is to talk about, first, your experiences growing up.

What inspired you to get into this dance? And then also what continuously inspired you to stay in the dance and keep fostering, keep teaching in the neighborhood?

I should disclose that Break Easy, I call him fondly Papa Rich because he is the person who taught me from the very, very beginning. And so I learned almost everything that I know about breaking and hip hop primarily from Papa Rich. We've, you know, broken night, in terms of looking at photos, talking through different elements of the culture, including immigration to the area, talks about the, you know, the careers that parents had, why they moved there. Also we looked at photos. He taught me some DJing, which is really hard, digging for letters, so I owe a lot to Papa Rich.

And Mighty Mike I used to see all the time at jams, and battles, at the club. At Spa—because I remember one of your crew—while your crew growing up was Scramblin Feet, Inc.—the crew that I met you in was JBC. So I remember Kryptonik used to throw that that that weekly event at Spa which is—That's what got me, sort of, open as a dancer was to have that experience, but then used to throw a jam called "Chico's Gotta Have His Share" up at Planet 28. And so, and you guys continue to keep teaching, which is just remarkable.

Break Easy: So first, to start off, my name is Break Easy. I grew up in the Northside of Brooklyn. The area is called Williamsburg. At that time, we used to call it just Los Sures, for our particular location, because in the Williamsburg section in Brooklyn, there was two or three parts in that location: you had the Southside and the Northside.

At that moment in time, I was on Metropolitan Avenue—I'm a long-term resident there, for I think 35 years, before I moved out of there, you know? And this was growing up since 1966, you know? I'm 54 years old now. I've been active currently in the scene from '95, you know, offering both breakin' programs—rocking programs—breakin' is more catered to the youth

because hip hop is really all about the youth and it's created by the youth. It's also being recreated constantly by the youth, you know? And then the rocking which weren't aware of this secondary dance that was in that time frame, developing currently now which they want to attach it to hip hop,¹ which is another moment for discussion when it comes to that particular dance, you know? So again, my name is Break Easy. I was born in 1966 from Latino parents: my mother being Japanese-Peruvian and my father being Puerto Rican-Spaniard. Take it away Mighty Mike. Miguelito.

Mighty Mike: Yo, what's up, Break Easy. First of all, my name is Miguel, last name is Panzardi aka Mighty Mike. Born in Puerto Rico, raised in New York. I was living in the Southside during my teen years and I had met a couple of street kids that used to hang out in the neighborhood, you know? And these guys were up to no good and doing bad things out in the 'hood. And I had approached one of those young kids that I had some interest in what they were doing because they were kind of cyphering, kind of footwork, in front of my neighborhood and I took a big interest in that. So I was able to connect with some of the youth at that time.

In the neighborhood around there, there was a couple of DJs during that time. One of them was named Little John. He used to play music outside at the park. They used to bring out their equipment, put it out in the park, steal electricity from the lamp-post. That was kind of like how I started to view what hip hop was at that time. You know, the music that they were playing were a little different because—it was a little more rock and roll, more disco at that time. Just by listening to music it kind of—got me into the groove. But during that time, those kids were just doing footwork. They were trying to do a little bit of backspins, hand

1. Break Easy mentions this to help clarify that rocking preceded the development of breaking and hip hop (as it became formally known). He uses the term "secondary" to refer to rocking as many breakers practice breaking first and then usually see rocking as a dance form that helps inform their primary form (breaking).

glides, maybe a drill. It was just a few little things that they were doing. At that time there was no really power moves to say.

And I approached this kid named Macho, which is Choco's brother. They were rolling with these gangs at the time, you know, [Break Easy: Yeah.] and there was a lot of kids that were involved in the street gangs and he introduced me to his brother named Choco, which Choco happens to be part of, you know, Rock the House, which is an outlaw crew as well. The whole family's outlaw. And I was invited to their house to meet the family and meet the brothers and all that and that's how I got involved into the whole, the whole world of hip hop.

It was crazy at the time, because a lot of kids, you know, were doing a lot of mischief during that time. It wasn't easy hanging out or moving around the neighborhood because, you know, areas were kind of blocked off, as territories as well, so . . . You know, but getting involved into that kinda saved me from getting into those bad habits as well. And that was just the starting point of it. And that was like, early '80s—not familiar with the years—but it was early '80s.

Break Easy: Yes, now, with myself, my introduction to the dancing, it starts—it stems from my parents, you know? Originally, when I was growing up, my mother was very overprotective. My father was like, you know, "Go ahead do your thing . . . you you man now." And mind you, I'm 12 and 13 years old. So we were being reinforced with that particular aggressive attitude from my father. My father's old school, very stern, aggressive, you know? His word was practically law, you know? So he thought. My mother was very more free spirited, open minded, but she was also disciplined and she always made sure that I never got into trouble, you know? With my father is, "If you get into trouble, you man up," you know? With my mother, I was afraid of my mother more than my father, because of the sternness, you know. She would, she would give me *papow*, you know? Take a broomstick, take a

chancla—sandal, you know, and hit you over the head if we did something dumb. So, mind you I'm a 12 year old.

You know, I already was influenced through movement and dancing because of the programs that were offered in the school. I went to a school called P.S. 84, Jose de Diego in the Southside. [. . .] they would have, every year, these cultural activities. So, being Puerto Rican because of my father, I will be dressed with the, with the whole jíbaro hat—the straw hat—with the white gi that I would have, and perform *bomba y plena*² because that was my cultural background. And then another year, take turns, then I'll be dressed in a whole Inca uniform with the whole color for llama and alpaca vest, so I was already involved in dancing.

My parents would always have Pokeno gatherings at the house, you know. For those that don't know, Pokeno—it's like a card game on a board, you know. They would also play Bingo, you know, with the family. And my father used to love playing his ranchero music, you know, on a big furniture system that will play eight tracks and records, and in the center, you will open up, you have your records lined up. And you will have your shot drinks. You know, your rum, your, your liqueur and everything. My father would have his rum, my mom would have her pisco, you know, two classes of alcohol.

So, because of that, I was already instilled in dancing and expressing my thoughts and my energy and the social gatherings to be had in the house. Now, mind you, this is 1978, '79 where, just to add on to Mighty Mike was saying—At that moment in time, you know the Southside was infested with nothing but *títeres*, you know, gangs, outlaws. And it's not to say that sometimes

2. These two practices are often conflated, but dance studies scholar Jade Power Sotomayor clarifies, "Many Puerto Ricans regularly use the metonym to signal generalized festive, folkloric black percussive sound. Though the two share vocabularies and certainly many musicians make a living by expertly playing both—indeed many *bomberos* were first *pleneros*—they are distinct in instrumentation and history." Power-Sotomayor, J. and Rivera, P.L., 2019. Puerto Rican Bomba: Syncopating Bodies, Histories, and Geographies. *Centro Journal*, 31(2), pp. 10. See also Rivera, R.Z. (2003). *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 39.

those gangs were just social clubs later, or they were MCs (which is motorcycle clubs) later, but back then they were just outlaws, a collective of kids gathered together to cause mischief. You know, it just was that—that's just the way it was, you know.

So, at that time frame and stuff, you know, my parents were—had migrated from their own countries to come into a better location. So when they married, they found Williamsburg. And then there is where I was associated with not so much intentional bad people, but the fact that my community was so diverse within the Latino community, you know—we had Cuban, we had, we had Asians from India, you know, I'm being from Puerto Rican-Peruvian background—We had that whole mosh on my block, you know. And we had a local swimming pool.

So on the block there was two individuals that I, actually a few, two individuals and I could state their name. They were from the Unknown Bikers at that time residing on my block. So, if anything happened, those two individuals—which I'll just say "M" for one guy, and "C" for the other guy.

M was a male outlaw and C—well, I can use the alias, "Chunky"—Chunky was a dyke. For those that don't know, a dyke is a lesbian, you know. So, M always looked out for the younger ones. If you were a teenager and above, eh, you're big enough to take care of yourself, but he always looked out for the young ones on the block. The outlaws in my block, yes, they committed their own things, but if you were on their block, those people that were on the block, you were practically a secondary family to them. Of course they kept to themselves but they looked out for their block, 'cause you, there was no way you're going to cause problems on their block, you know? A lot of outlaws were very territorial so that's why that wouldn't happen, you know.

So I used to watch the outlaws in the back alleyways, you know, do their gatherings, you know, and sometimes they'll express themselves through a dance. At that moment in time, I wasn't

aware of the labeling of it, but it was, it was practically just an outlaw dance, you know, later to be known as rock, you know, as, as uprocking, you know. Later I knew it as uprocking but at the early time, I just didn't know what it was called, but that was the prelude of my becoming a Rocker.

But getting back to that is—there was a collective of guys on my block that they were going down to Flatbush Avenue,³ and they were learning a particular dance, and this is 1978-79, from another two guys that were coming from California. I forgot if it's Sacramento or somewhere there because it was the President of my collective group that we originally started as what was later on, to be known to me, is a part of the hip hop culture, cuz back in '78-'79, we weren't aware that there was a hip hop establishment [. . .] or this is labeled as "hip hop." It wasn't until the '80s that acknowledged that. You know? So we formed a collective that were interested in just going [sound effects with gestures] "BA BA BA BA BA" popping, later to be known as electric boogie for the East Coast, but back then, our first group in '79, late '78, early '79 was Popping Unlimited and at the same time, and being on the cusp of the BQE [Brooklyn Queens Expressway] we which is Green Grass, remember Green Grass, [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] Mighty Mike? [Mighty Mike: Yup, yup.] You know what used to be in that tunnel in Green Grass, right?

Mighty Mike: Yeah yeah. [crosstalk]

Break Easy: The Arabian Knights. The Arabian Knights.⁴ So on the BQE since my boy Tito lived right near that location, there was the, the overhead express, and they had a tunnel that will get you from—well, we used to call the real Southside to the other side, which was where Mighty Mike was what we used to

3. In between the Flatbush and Crown Heights sections of Brooklyn.

4. This *NY Times* article from 1983 gives an account of Brooklyn gang life that mentions the Arabian Knights and some of the other gangs/motorcycle clubs mentioned in this conversation: <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/27/nyregion/life-in-city-s-gangs-some-things-have-changed-but-it-s-still-a-dead-end.html>.

label at the other Southside. So that's where, in the Southside community, we had already a divide because of the BQE. So if you wanted to go from the Southside to the other side—oh, at that moment in time, it was Los Sures- to the *other* Los Sures, if you went through that little tunnel that goes underneath the overpass- the Arabian Knights—you will go in there with whatever you got, and you'll probably come out either barefoot, no wallet, nothing, cuz they used to, you know stick you up, you know, take whatever they felt you had that was worthy, you know.

So continuing from where I left off, the collective that we were, when I first started was popping. We called ourselves—because of Thomas and Angel, those are the leaders from my collective, was Popping Unlimited, you know? But we were a short-lived group because all we did was pop, you know? It wasn't until I met the guys in the Northside, you know, that they had a group called Northside Breakers because they were already—they're already was initiating the b-boy movement, and they were into that particular collective.

So what happened is like, "Yo. I kind of like that dance," and we were just doing one dance, they were just doing one dance, we merged together and we formed Breaking in Style and that initiated our merger between a popping dance style, and a breaking, or b-boying, dance style to become a much better compact collective now, you know? And we had two leaders, which was Angel Santiago from Popping Unlimited and the leader from Northside Breakers was Vincent Andujar, you know? And Vinny was supposed to be your competitor, cuz Vinny had floats, Mighty Mike. And back then, we didn't know you as Mighty Mike. We only knew you as friggin' Miguelitoo!

Mighty Mike: That's right. That's right. Yeah during that time, it was insane because when I was growing up in the Southside and I attended these park jams, because that's what there was at the time.

Break Easy: Yeah, there were park jams.

Mighty Mike: There was a DJ here with two turntables, mixing back and forth, and then he would drop these, you know, the breaks, you know, and I was like, "What is this?" And then I finally got to see these two guys named Tony and Chaos. You know, these two guys were rocking against each other, and I didn't know what they were doing at the time, but that caught my interest, man. I was like, "Yo, what is this?" And that started to give me a little groove of like what I was feeling, you know?

At the time, I was hanging out with Choco. Choco used to be part of the crew from Coney Island called Furious Rockers, you know? And he was like, "Yo. Let's take a trip to Coney Island," and I was, remind you, I was like 12 years old, 13, and he was like my guidance, you know? So he was like, "Come on, I'm going to take you up there, you gonna check them out. They're gonna be practicing and we're going to try to get down." And we started that for a little while, you know, but I noticed that during that time Joey was the leader of the time and [Break Easy: Yeah. Speedy, right?] Yeah, Joey [Break Easy: Yeah, Furious Rockers.] Yeah, Speedy, he was a little tough. He was always tough, you know? He was always like, [crosstalk] "Yo, man. You got to get that shit." You know? "You got to get that footwork, man. If that ain't right, you know, you can't be down." Like, he was always dissing me instead of helping, you know, instead of coaching.

Break Easy: You know, we always dissed each other, no matter what. I mean, we didn't really have no freakin' names for movement. You know, back then we just called it, like you said earlier—we just had footwork. We didn't have no four-step, six-step, three-step. I mean, we were learning as we battled each other. There was no particular formula to say, "Well, you have to do this, then you have to do that," you know? So yeah, it was crazy yeah.

Mighty Mike: Well, I was practicing hard, man and I couldn't make this guy happy, honestly. I was like, "I'm trying hard," you know? But it wasn't just happening, you know. They wanted an overnight, you know, miracle dancer right away to be down and it kind of frustrated me because I didn't have that technique yet, you know, and I was working hard.

So I remember, I spoke to Choco, I was like, "Yo, man. I don't want to be part of this crew because of the situations. I think that it was better off if we do our own thing." And that's what we did. We just started to practice on the side, doing our own thing.

As we progress, you know, that's when the Roxy's started, you know, to make noise and we were like, "Yo, that's a spot where all the b-boys go," at the time—well, they were calling them break-dancers, at the time, you know, that's what everybody went. It was just like, "Wow. I will love to be a part of that."

Break Easy: Yeah the Roxy's was like the early '80s, or like maybe '81, '82, I think yeah.

Mighty Mike: Yeah, so after training for two years of dancing and then getting involved with this, I was just like, yo Choco introduced me to this guy named Tick and I was like, "Who is this guy now?" So he was like, "Yo, I need a partner, man," and I was like, "What?" He goes, "I want you to transform, you know, from breaking into popping," and I was like, "Man, that's gonna be tough, man."

So I took the challenge, you know? I started to learn how to pop, you know, that was my next thing and I absorbed everything that I was being taught and everything, but it wasn't really my forte, you know what I'm saying? So I was just like, "I tried it. I gave it my best," you know. And we'd done a couple of shows together and all that but I wasn't really feeling it. My thing was more about the beats, the drops, the footwork, and all that, and that's what I stuck to most to, you know, until I was invited to go out to the Roxy's at one time, and when I was in there, it was just—I was blown away, man.

It was an amazing thing to see so many in the community getting down with the diversity of all these people that were involved. At the same time, meeting all these individuals from different boroughs that were all peacemakers and, and having fun cyphering—That’s when the first time I ever saw cyphers because we don’t, we never called it cypher it was just a circle and in the Roxy’s you had many, you know, many, it’s not one. It was like five or six going on at the same time, so—That was my first introduction to being at an event, if you wanted to call it, or club and just being around the surrounding of all these dancers, you know, and for me that was mind-blowing.

During that time, that’s when I first met Dynamic Rockers that were in there, Dynamic Breakers, New York City Breakers. It was Rock Steady. It was so many crews. Break to Dawn, at that time. [Break Easy: That’s “Bandit”] It was Furious Rockers, yeah and all these guys and, and I was just really young and I—for the first time I met Normski in there, too, another kid named Willie. That’s when Fabel and Wiggles used to hang out together, like, and Mr. Freeze—they were always in this trio thing going.⁵ So it was incredible just to have that in one place and it was kind of like that.

I was like a freelancer to say at the time, because you know Furious Rockers, it was a crew that I was rolling for, for a little while but I had interest in staying and breaking, but I wanted to be with a crew that will take you in as a family, but not treat you like an individual- if you’re not good, you know, you’re always to the side and I met Stretch- Stretch from Scramblin’ Feet. I was really nervous to approach him, but I did, and I told him that, “Hey, I like your crew,” because everybody was kinda like just kids just hanging out, dressing however they wanted, nobody was in uniforms, like all the other crews and wearing the same thing. I approached Stretch and I told him, “Hey, yo. I want to—I like your crew, man. I like all your individuals.”

5. PopMaster Fabel, Mr. Wiggles, and Mr. Freeze are members of the Rock Steady Crew.

That's when Float—Valentino—used to hang out with them, too and I was even blown away that he was even part of that crew, because they used to be good friends. He was like, "Yo, if you want to be down, just go ahead, show me what you got, man." And I was like, "OK." And I went down and I got crazy and busy and footwork and everything, and then they liked my style. They were like, "Yo, I want to put you in my crew, man." And that's how I got recruited into the crew [Scramblin' Feet, Inc.], but not given the division yet. I was just a member. That was it, man.

After that, it was just more about, "Hey—" I talked to them about, "Hey, I got like six more guys back here," like, "What do you think?" You know. He was like, "Where you from?" And I tell him, "I'm from the Southside, Williamsburg, you know, Brooklyn." He was like, "Man it'd be nice to do a division out there, man," and I was—

Break Easy: We hated that. We hated that. We hated that. That's what started the friction. Because there was no way that was going to be a chapter from the Lower East Side coming into the Williamsburg section, but you know when that happen—when that happened that started kicking off a lot of b-boys in our community, because I know you from the Southside, too—That started pissing off not only my, my crew Breaking in Style because we were rivals for a short time. You started having Joshua with Spin Masters, you had rockin MixTriX On Feet. You had the Southside Rockers which was, I think, are led by Abdul by South 9—they were like an extension of Unknown. Then you had Together We Break, and stuff, you know, which they were originally a social club,⁶ which is Together We Chill and that's with Little MC and Mousey so that- that kicked off a lot of battles in the area as well, you know?

6. In a follow-up phone conversation with Break Easy on 13-SEPT-2021, he clarified that "when we say 'outlaws' we mean gangs." He went on to clarify that four groups of people can wear patches: outlaws, military veterans, motorcyclists, and social groups. A social group is not an outlaw gang but may have a similar style aesthetic.

I know that when we were in Breaking in Style—this is from '79 going forward—we started off the same way. We didn't have no particular class to attend to say, "Well we're gonna have to top rock, then we'll have to do six-step, then we'll have to do a butt-spin, a back-spin, a kick-out. All these labels later were needed in order for us to be able to communicate to create a system where we can have a fundamental language to teach and that was only for teaching design—the movement labeling was needed in order to be able to share our step with another person, you know. And that was—and that happened not with other crews, that happened internally, you know.

And, just like you, where you started seeing the collective happen in the club later on, for me, the early years was hanging out with my crew, getting into trouble and stuff, finding a personal space that we can say, "Yo, this is going to be our practice space." We used to practice by the waterfront in the Northside. We used to practice at McCarren Park,⁷ but McCarren Park was like open season for like, if you were there, somebody else was going to be like, "Yo. What you guys doing? Let's step in, let's battle." There was no peace there because that was open space until later on, we decided to take over.

But we were always practicing in the Northside by Vinny's block toward the waterfront, you know? And then even there we were worried because you have freakin' the [. . .] freakin' needles from the junkies, the prostitutes hanging out in the area. Come on. Kent Avenue? Back in the day, and Wythe? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] Yo! [crosstalk] And then back then, it was nothing but waterfront piers. So we had to get into one of those spots, get a drum, put some paper and fire, practice a little, get a little cardboard, and then later on, linoleum came into play, just so we can have a private spot to practice closed-in,

7. Located in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and borders Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

isolated from everybody. You know? Cuz we didn't want nobody to bite our stuff. [Mighty Mike: Yeah, during that—] It was a big thing. Everybody did the same move. I'm like, "Come on. They didn't even really change one thing"

Mighty Mike: Yeah. Back then, the only way to learn a move was to ask somebody that knew a move, to teach you the move, in order to have the move. So that was basically how it was. We didn't have camcorders. We didn't have cameras or anything like that, so everything you saw you had to record mentally in order to make that happen, yeah [Break Easy: Yeah.] And if you did it wrong, you were going to do it wrong for a long time until somebody else can correct you, because that was the way you were learning.

But it was crazy because that was how we learned how to get our bumps on our backs, our skin burns that we got from windmills and backspins, and our elbows being burnt, and, you know, busting our knees and—There was a lot of injuries during that time that people don't know how we were doing these moves and going raw, because there was times when we would use no hats to do head spins and we were getting bald spots and everything and—

Break Easy: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I don't know. [crosstalk] I don't have it. I think you have more than I do, on that.

Mighty Mike: Yeah. And it was crazy how that was kind of like the beginnings of what started to launch something big, you know? But we were the first ones in the front lines that took the beating before we could have—could understand the move in order to make sure how—we know how to break it down. So it was much easier to teach somebody—the move after you have went through hell, and you can give them some shortcuts and explain that you can, "Do it like this, and like that," and when it put the hand and all that because during that time we didn't know

what the hell we were doing, so we were just going through our bumps, you know. [crosstalk]

Break Easy: Nobody knew how to do a proper footwork, you know. Everybody had their own presentation of what footwork was supposed to be like, you know? This is what's the beautiful part about it, I guess, from our generation is the fact that because we weren't taught, so there isn't a format that they all follow, not like it is today. Today you have teachers that I can get—I can debate on my labeling of what, how they teach their fundamentals and what they call foundation, you know?

Back in the days, we didn't have that so we were self-creating, self-expressive presenters, learning on the job as independent critical thinker b-boys, because every time I battled for, let's say, you and me saw each other, I was definitely going to look at everything you do, and then if there was something that I wanted, I'm gonna take it, I wanna flip it. I'm not gonna present it the same way you present it. I'm going to add my own twist on, on the thing, you know? And, but there were a lot of guys that you know that if you did it that way, they will come and they will battle you that same way. And I'm like, "Yo! This n**** actually took my footwork flow, my presentation, or my—" like,—If I did four and a half footwork and then did a good freeze that fool is gonna do four and a half footwork and do that same freeze. I'm like, "Really? You don't even bother to change, you don't even bother to change the presentation!" It's like you wearing the same underwear [for] two days?! Papa, change it up! Change it up!" Or give it your own twist, you know? But back then, we were learning by experience. I was teaching him or her, and vice versa, so there wasn't a format presentation, you know. We were learning—we were self-taught from each other's collective. We learned as we battled, you know? If anything, I think I got better because of all those battles.

You know, I used to—I mean, I'm from Los Sures, but even in Los Sures, I had to battle against Joshua—Crash—Joshua's crew, you know I forgot what they called it—The Crash Crew, or something like that? Joshua's Crash Crew. Then you had Mond with freakin' Spin Masters. You have White Rock and Mousey and Little MC from Together We Break, you know. You had Abdul with Rock Smelly from, from the South Nine, you know. You had Mixtrix On Feet. Then you had Scramblin' Feet, Incorporated, y'all fools on the other side and stuff, you know? I remember Densis. Densis used to live right down Metropolitan by, a little bit past Lorimer. [Mighty Mike: Yep.]

I had to go there, because there was a guy on his block called Dragon. Dragon had two sisters and he was a popper, you know? At that time, he was doing tutting style, really cool, you know. So when we used to go pick up Dragon, guess who we'd see there, on the stoop? Frickin' Densis. And I'm like, "Oh man." [Mighty Mike: Yeah.]

And, and not only that, but I'm from, I'm from Metropolitan, Bedford-south side and he's on the other side, so I'm like, I just crossed the BQE to meet my boy Dragon, which is on that side, so now I saw that. I know, I know who started the battle between my crew and your crew is one of our guys, Angelo. [. . .] He lived down on Division and he used to talk a lot of smack. He was the talker in our group and he wanted us like, "Yo. How is Lower East Side and Scramblin' there. They're battling people [. . .] and they're talking shit," and I'm like, "N****, you talk shit, too!" You know? So I'm like, "All right." So it's because of him that he started that friction between your camp and my camp, you know?

Mighty Mike: Yeah, man. I remember that time. I was at the candy store right on South Fifth and Keap. I sent MiRi a photo of me standing there [crosstalk] and [. . .]



Old stomping grounds where Scramblin' Feet Inc. used to hang out. Photo of Mighty Mike, personal collection.

Break Easy: Yeah, I know that one.

Mighty Mike: So Angelo comes in, I remember him coming in with somebody, and he came—he approached me and he was like, “Yo. I hear you guys are talking shit. I told you that, you know, it’s

going to happen. So we're gonna battle. You know, you're gonna have to bring it to the park, to the school yard, that's where we're gonna have it at. And, and I was like, "I don't got all my guys together, but I'll do my best to, to gather everybody up and go." I was still young, you know? I wasn't aggressive like he was because he was—

Break Easy: Yeah, I think you, I think we were 13, 14, 15, I think. This was like early '80s now. I think we started—I think we battled—I dunno sometime after—it was '81, '82 something? I don't know, but some time [. . .]

Mighty Mike: Yeah. And I was like, "Cool," you know, "We'll meet at the park," you know? And we walk—I only had like four guys with me at the time. The rest of the guys were, kind of, out doing other business and stuff. And I remember walking into the park and I see this car coming in.

Break Easy: Ha ha! That was Julio! That was Julio! Julio was our wannabe manager back then. He was a mechanic, a mechanic with a freakin' what is it? I think it was a Dodge with the linoleum on top of the car, coming over the frickin bridge, yeah.

Mighty Mike: Yeah, came in there, parked the car, threw the linoleum on the floor, the radio came out of nowhere, and it was, it was time. And I was just like, "Yo who?" Like, "All right let's do this." Then, you know, the outlaws during that time they were like, "Yo, you guys got beef? What's going on, yo? Yo!" you know, "You want us to kick their ass?" And I was like, "Dude we're just dancers," you know?

So we just decided, you know, to try to keep the peace. Let's just dance and have fun and that's what it was. It was just a straight-up bringing it to your territory, to call you out and because back then that's how it was [crosstalk]

Break Easy: Yeah it was, it was. I mean that, I mean, I was surprised that my crew was down to say, “You know what?” you know, “Let’s kill this *basura*,” you know? “Let’s go over there, let’s—” because it was Angelo. I know Angelo started [it]. He was telling us, “Yeah, these guys talk shit about us, you know.” I know Angelo always wanted a battle. He was always looking to battle crews, you know? He was always the big mouth, you know, but we took care of him once we got home.

But when that happened—I know because I’m like, “Really?” So, then our manager Julio, he was a mechanic, you know, he used to get us some gigs where we would perform. So, all right. So it was Edwin, you know we call him Flip-o-Matic, then it was Vinny, then it was Butchy, Pete, myself, Angelo, um, who else was there? I think—Steve—Omar—Steven, Steven was there, he was, he was the best one in a group. And then the twins, Dennis and David, you know?

Mighty Mike: Yeah, I remember them, yeah.

Break Easy: We went—It’s funny because we got our, we got our team together. Julio has a linoleum, coming in a car, the car—is almost like a little parade, a mini parade of b-boys and stuff. Or like the [. . .] How would you say? Like the freakin’ Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. Seven little boys, “Hi-ho, hi-ho, it’s off to battle we go.” So we’re going down that bridge, going into the park on South Third and Keap. Wha—that was, what? PS 19? No 17?

Mighty Mike: Yep, yes [. . .][crosstalk] Yeah, PS 19.

Break Easy: We get into the school yard, we drop the lino, the boom-box is there. Mind you, no DJ—it’s just a tape, popping in the tape, you know, and then they come out, boom boom boom. And then the people in the area are right there, right behind them like, “Yo, what’s poppin’? What poppin’?” But it’s true cuz he said that—

Back then and stuff, there were you know, there was, there was outlaws out there, so there was outlaws like outside the park just looking [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] I guess they wanted something [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] I think they wanted the radio [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] I think they wanted the radio. [crosstalk] But what I know Julio wasn't having it because he already knew people.

Mighty Mike: Yeah that time it was crazy [crosstalk]

Break Easy: That was a serious battle, though.

Mighty Mike: [crosstalk] Yeah man—

Break Easy: Everybody had to come out.

Mighty Mike: Yeah because the problem is, I already had a manager already during that time, which it was Eddie and that was Adam Ant's brother. And he was our manager and he was the one that was kind of assigning all these trips to travel in the city to do performances at you know, restaurants, and small clubs and all that. He was already booking gigs and my biggest rivals that I had during that time was more LDS, which is Love Disco Style. [Break Easy: Yeah.] And they were a massive, big crew, like, they had, like, over 50 members, and it was insane and they were from Borinquen and you couldn't really travel up there on your own because, again, you're in different territories, you know, [Break Easy: That's right.] but I remember meeting Dr. Love during that time, and he was really fascinated with, with—

Break Easy: Yeah! Dr. Love! That's my boy right there!

Mighty Mike: And he was like, "Yo, you got to come out to 49," you know, "to the park, you know. There'll be peace. You ain't gonna have no problems, you know LDS is out there. They heard so much about you guys and you know, want to see if you guys can have a battle." And we were like, "Yo, OK."

And Mr. T comes out during that time, and he was like, “Yo, let’s take it into the candy store. Let’s have a battle like now,” and we [were] like [. . .] “Let’s do it.” We went in there, man, and we just went at it. It was insane, you know, like having those moments where it’s just spontaneous, when shit just happens, like the spot is crazy.

And sometimes, you know, you battle it out, but the crowd decision is, you know, they are the ones that make that decision, who wins or who, who losses, you know?

Break Easy: That’s true. That’s true.

Mighty Mike: But when you have these two dynamic crews in a circle and they’re battling it out and you’re getting hyped from both sides, man, it’s really hard to tell the difference, who won and who didn’t, but—

They were more like exhibition battles, I will call it, because there was no winners at the time. It was everybody was the winner at that time.

Break Easy: Exactly. You know, I mean, you could say that the community selected who was the winning team in the end, but you know what, at that moment in time, I think the community was aware of what we were doing. As opposed to now, that you have people that have no knowledge of what we do and how we do stuff. But because we were so in tune in our community, they already knew, “OK, it’s another dance,” you know, “You came from us,” you know, “from our, from our collective,” you know. And I [Mighty Mike: Yup.] say that as a community level and stuff. Right now with the social media—which is oxymoronic because well no one’s together no more! You know, send me a picture, eh eh eh—socialize! No, no, back then, we were up in your face—wham! Bam! Or, “I just smoke you!” You know, it was just like that.

Mighty Mike: Yeah. Shit was real, man. [crosstalk]

Break Easy: We were very in your face, you know [crosstalk]

Mighty Mike: Back then—Yeah. Back then, it was like, “I’m going to your neighborhood, I’m callin’, I’m goin’ to your house, I’m gonna knock on your door [crosstalk]

Break Easy: I’m gonna knock on your door!

Mighty Mike: I’m gonna bring you out, and we’re gonna battle right in the corner, and that’s how it was. And at the end, there’d either be a fight, or you get chased outta there, or I guess—you know, that’s how it was—that how—that’s how real it was. But now in these days, things are a little different, you know? I mean, things are a little more organized, but back then, we didn’t have that organization [crosstalk].

Break Easy: I would agree to disagree. Yeah, it might be organized, but then the people that are organizing have no freakin’ idea of who they’re dealing with. You know, a lotta these organizers are like, “Oh we’re gonna get some b-boys. I’m gonna get some b-girls, and we gonna have a good exhibition, but unfortunately the promoter has no knowledge of who they got—who they really have [for] broadcasting or doing the event, you know. “Look at me! Just cuz I have a Kangol hat, I’m a b-boy! Look at me! I can do a six-step, I’m a b-boy! Oh, look at me, I’m a b-girl cuz I have the hat with the bun, and stuff. No, it doesn’t work like that, you know. You have to really be knowledgeable if you’re gonna be a promoter, you have to be knowledgeable about such things, you know.

If you’re going to be a participant in hip hop, you better know what the physical elements and what the non-physical elements within hip hop. Are you a contributor, or you have—or an observer, you know? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] This is why—For me, I take it very personal when someone has a, for example, no disrespect to those who have studied some, some of the hip hop texts that’s out there, but when you have someone that declares

himself a, a doctorate in the hip hop—I'm like, how can you be a doctor of hip hop if you're freakin' over 30 years old? Hip hop is designed for the youth. Hip hop was designed for me when I was 30. That's a doctorate. Not the fact that you are now looking into it. Nah! You're out of it! You're out of the loop. That's how come I'm sayin': hip hop is not meant for old guys like us anymore.

Hip hop is now dictated by the youth, because we were about, we were about that, not knowing we were about that, you understand what I'm saying? Because back in the days, if someone was like, "Oh, you down with hip hop?" And I'm like, "No I'm not! I'm breaking!" "You, you're down with hip hop," "No I'm not! I'm popping!" You know? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] So back in the days, later on, I was in the '80s, then I was like, "OK, I guess I'm a part of hip hop because of this," you know? So I was, I became self-aware based on someone's understanding of how we're gonna merge the dancing, the DJ, the graffiti, and the rapping, emceeing because back then if I spoke—if I hung out with my graffiti writers and I say, "Yo, you down with hip hop?" They'd be like, "¿Qué carajo, hip hop?" "That's nothing!" You know. Hip hop didn't do anything for me. It pre-existed. B-boying pre-existed. We didn't have nothing to do with hip hop. Later on we brought it together, you know?

Mighty Mike: Yeah [crosstalk]

Break Easy: And I know, and I know that you agree, I hope you agree—if not, we'll battle—the fact that back then, there was no labels that—or codes that we had to stick to, other than that old mentality of Pres., Vice Pres., Secretary, and Treasurer, which stems from what we learned in school. You know? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] Or what we learned in gangs, believe it or not. [crosstalk] Hip hop is just another form—the crews was basically another form of gang, which, if you go back further, it's the old gang mentality, you know?

Mighty Mike: Yeah you're right. [crosstalk]

Break Easy: You have to learn how to break away from that and be more aware and restructure and define ourselves and be accountable for ourselves, which it's not happening now, I'm sorry to say, you know. That I don't—like, if I were to ask you—Mighty Mike- a question about—Are there real b-boys today? Yes or no?

Mighty Mike: Real b-boys? Wow. I mean it's hard to say "real b-boys," but I mean—

Break Easy: If you can't yes or no, there isn't enough—there aren't real b-boys, you know? There are—you give me at least two b-boys that actually went over to somebody's house and say, "Yo. Come on, let's battle." Or give me at least one crew that actually did that. There's no crew that does that today.

Mighty Mike: No, no, not in these days

Break Easy: Not in these days, but you can see a thousand of them on the Internet. "Oh, I can do this. Oh, I can do this. I can do the—I'm better than you. Uh uh. Look at me, look at me. Look at my video. Look at it. I choreographed it. Look how edited—it's nice. Presentation sells." No, *puñeta*. Bring it. Bring it. [crosstalk] Back then, you couldn't hide.

Mighty Mike: No. Back then, I tell you I remember witnessing one battle when Ozzy at that time when he was alive—

Break Easy: Which Ozzy?

Mighty Mike: Ozzy—He was part of Dynamic, I believe it was.

Break Easy: Oh Oz-Rock? [crosstalk]

Mighty Mike: Yeah—[crosstalk]

Break Easy: Another one [crosstalk]

Mighty Mike: He shows up at the Roxy's by himself and started to battle Dynamic by himself, you know? And that was the first time I ever saw somebody have all these elements together because, back then, remember, when you was in a crew, you have seven people, right? Seven people: one of them was a head spinner, one was the hand glider [Break Easy: Right, right.]. One was a float, one was a windmills, like everybody had their own signature. [crosstalk]

Break Easy: Right, everybody had a signature move. That, that's why with our group we had that. We had Flip-o-Matic was the flipper. Vinny was supposed to be popping and floats, and stuff. Butchy was supposed to be ticking and waving. You know, Thomas was tutting. Angel was freaking what they call it? Tick, tick, tick, ticking [Mighty Mike: Popping? Ticking. Yeah.] Yeah and then, you had Kid Tick in your crew, Scramblin' Feet, Incorporated [crosstalk] which was funny [Mighty Mike: That's right.] because well, we had—at the day of the battle was—we had Kid Tick's teacher, which is Kid Lock with our crew. He was a big-headed, a *more-no*, Calvin, that he was going Bam, Bam, Bam, Bam, Bam, and Tick was like, "Oh, shit." That's his teacher, you know, like damn, there you go [crosstalk]

Mighty Mike: Yeah. That's how it was back then. It—you know, but for me to see somebody that had everything, all in one that was like the game changer right there because we were kind of respecting the rules of, like, "This is your, your move and that's it," you know? [Break Easy: Right. Right. We were doing that as a crew.]

But then [crosstalk] I started to see the changes that people were kind of involving a little bit about doing everything, instead of just one thing, you know and it was very intriguing to see that, you know, where people would just kind of merging into one. [Break Easy: Yeah.] And now you have one guy that was very powerful that can do every move in the book. [crosstalk]

[Break Easy: Yeah. Yeah.] And there were very few individuals that were very powerful at the time [Break Easy: Yeah.] that will show up at a spot by themselves and be like [Break Easy: by themselves.] [crosstalk] and can tear up a whole crew. [crosstalk]

Break Easy: This is why that—when we first started off the crew, we were just like you said earlier, everybody stuck to one particular groove-move in the collective. Like, in our squad, we had one guy which was the youngest one in our group, which was Steven, Little Omar. And Little Omar actually took the steps to do, what Valentin did, you know Float, what Kid Float was [doing]—but Little Steven, Omar from our group, he was supposed to be our megastar. Like he does the turtles, the floats, the halos, the swirls, the frickin' head spins, the 90s, footwork. So, not only did he learn how to do that and break the rules of just sticking to your own presentation-move and do only combinations that are based on that move, he wanted to do a combination of all of them, you know. That was supposed to be our power guy.

But he also learned not only from within our group. He learned to piss us off and battle our own group and network, because he used to practice with Joshua. I know that he used to practice with some, with some other guys too, in that area. So I think he used to practice with Mondy from—I mean, he was crossing boundaries, trying to learn and merge so he can be better and do exactly that—go to a club by himself and say, “I’m taking all you guys.” You know? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] And that was, that was the move that was the move right? Then, if you can master all of that, you know?

Mighty Mike: Yeah. I mean if you look at old footage from back in those days, I mean, even the Rock Steady and the New York City Breakers battle inside The Roxy’s, you can see the whole crew—everybody had their own individual signature move [Break Easy: Yeah, true.] So that’s a perfect example of that.

Break Easy: Yeah.

Mighty Mike: And everybody has something for somebody there at the time [Break Easy: Yeah.] [. . .] That's what made the battle very interesting because, when you hear somebody doing floats, like I was, and I heard so many others that had it, I was nervous to get into contact with somebody that knew how to do this and how many combinations he had [crosstalk] and what I can do, yeah. So there was a lot of practicing at that time—how to have many variations of this sort of move, but just only one move. You gotta have like at least 15, sort of, combinations [Break Easy: Yeah.] [crosstalk]

Break Easy: This is why, when you used to do floats—cuz I remember this cuz when I see Vinny—Vinny used to do first, you know, the little cockroach, and then they—then he would do the little moving turtle. And then he'll do the turtle that walks and then stops over and pees on your leg, you know. And then they started doing spinning turtles, and then you have the 360 turtles that will go around in circles, and then you had the hopping turtles. Then you had guys that would do turtles walking, and then flip and then walk, walk, walk, flip. I mean you have so many variations of that one particular move.

Same thing with windmills. At first it was the basic shoulder-to-shoulder windmill. Then it was forehead windmills. Then it was hand windmills. And there was no-hand. And there was airplanes. There was ragdoll. There's [. . .]—Again, we had a different variety of moves, and, and that's a good point because back then, if you were stuck to that move you branched off and did any combination under that move as your headliner. [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] Same thing with me. I grew up loving handspinning, so I used to do handspins and footwork. Those were my two key moves. I need to do everything for that. I made the footwork. . .

Mighty Mike: For me, I mean I was b-boying or breakdancing all the way to about '87. That's when I kind of gave it up. I had no interest at the time. It was just more about family at the time. It was more about, you know, commitments, jobs and responsibilities. That's what left me to, kind of, stop dancing at that time. But I was a freestyler, to say. Because, I mean, I had that in me constantly, where I would hear music and I just want to dance, and there was—

During that time is when I remember going to Palladium—this was like '94 and—or '95, somewhere around that—and I remember going into Palladium and I ran into Speedy-D at that time, he was in that spot. [Break Easy: Oh wow.] And I was like, "Yo. Who is this funny guy," you know? I mean, they were cyphering and—

Break Easy: He's another *títère!* He's another *títère!* [crosstalk]

Mighty Mike: I was like, "Yo. I'm gonna—I wanna cypher. I want to get in there, too!" You know, I remember my, my six-step and my toprock, you know? I remember getting down and he was like, "Yo. That's dope man. I'm from the Bronx," and he started to introduce himself and everything and that's how I got acquainted with Speedy. I remember going a couple of times to the Palladium and then I got into a battle with, with Cyclone and Miss Twist. [Break Easy: Oh wow.] I was like, I was like, "Yo. Who is these guys?" And we went at it for [Break Easy: Step Fenz! Step Fenz!⁸] at least 30 minutes [Break Easy: Yeah, they were young.] And right there, he was like, "Yo, you got some old skool moves," he told me, and he wanted—he invited me to go to ah, Kwikstep's practice out in Union Square on 14th street, at the PMT it was called.

8. Step Fenz is a crew from Long Island who combined breakin' and house dance before other dancers thought it acceptable to do so. For some background: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1YVOneMFro>

I remember going there and I was like, "Wow!" I just got blown away because I didn't know they were back doing this again, you know? And that's how I got back involved in the dancing. Kwikstep was one of my first mentors that he was like, "Yo. You know you got some moves there. I can, I can tweak you. I can fix you," you know? And that's how I got back involved into b-boying again. And from there yeah, things just [crosstalk] took off—

Break Easy: Kwikstep said he was going to tweak you—He's making you into the six million dollar man, "We can rebuild you, we can remake you."

Mighty Mike: I was like, "Yo. I'm gonna do it," and that's how I got involved. I got involved there, and from that point on, I was still partnering up with Speedy-D at the time, and just, kind of, hitting the spots, you know? And that's what kind of led me to be like, "Yo, man. I think I can do this again and get more involved into this. And I got really involved into, you know, into the b-boy scene really heavy at that time.

And at that time—during that time that's when I came across, it was with you, King Uprock, at the time and we would just kind of socializing a little bit about the past and talking about all this stuff and—I remember seeing King Uprock for the first time, and I was like, "Yo! What is he doing? That's some old skool stuff there." And I remember these two dances never came across each other, but I remember very well from the 'hood, you know?

As far as that, you know, that's where it kind of hit me right there on that spot, where you know, this is what I wanted to do from this point on. And at that time I was kind of mentoring a couple of people involved already, just kind of teaching just the basics of these moves because—From what I learned in the past, it was like, I went through my bumps, and my hurts, and my scratches, and my cuts. And I was like, "Man, I can take you and teach you these moves and you'll learn this in about six months

instead of twelve months, because we already have some short-cuts to how to do certain moves, man," and that's how I got involved into the community of this.

But it was so dynamic. It was just a lot of people involvement. And I didn't know that this was happening underground and once I just got involved into this, it was just like taking off, you know?

I was recruited to be into Full Circle, so I did send you a photo of that. That's when I joined Full Circle, like, I'm not sure like, '95-'96. I remember going to Bushwick [Brooklyn] with them at one point, and they had a rock battle out there in Bushwick. I know that you guys got photos of this. I don't—I still haven't seen them yet, and—

Break Easy: I know that you were already a part of Full Circle in '95, or '94. I know this because there was a footage that I came in that was—that already had you at a Party Hardy which is somewhere in Bushwick that you were there with Full Circle and London.

Mighty Mike: Yeah. I was like, "Yo! This was crazy, man!" And that's true, man, London was another part of my timing as well, but that was further down when—in the years that I wind up joining New York City Breakers, the new division of that, yeah. I started to mentor some of the kids during that time and again, it was only a handful. It was not classes like how we think, because during that time, you're still polishing yourself up, but having people within the community come together because—Remember, back then, there were, practices were in gyms and maybe one individual come up to you and say, "Hey, teach me this, teach me that." That's how you kind of coach them and work with them. It wasn't like a full class where you're the teacher in front center and you're giving out your information, but back then that's what it was. It was more enclosed, smaller practices that you kind of be able to teach kids.

And that's how it all started for me, teaching, but never gave up hope because when it's in the blood, it's in the blood. I grew up in this and that's something that I never forgot, and you never lose and that's how I continue my path as far as a b-boy.

But then the injuries catch up to you, you know? That's when you have to make some decisions of what you want to continue doing. But that was my introduction, at the time it was like '94–'95 when I really got involved again and that's when I started to mentor at the same time. Go ahead, Break.

Break Easy: All right, all right. That's, that, that was a smooth intro, "Yeah, go ahead, Break!" OK.

[. . .] In 1984, I had decided—I was in already in high school, ready to graduate—so I had decided to serve the United States of America. I decided to serve by doing some time with Uncle Sam, enlisting in the United States Marine Corps. September of 1985 I joined the Marine Corps, you know. I signed my way—I gave my life away to the Corps. I don't regret it. I love it. It makes me who I am today. You can see my military haircut, high and tight, as always. So what—

The reason why I had to go away is because at that time frame, Mighty Mike, you know that was the crack vial days and all that, drugs and stuff. We were, we were killing each other off and stuff, you know. The ghetto was the ghetto. So I decided to redirect my energy and focus in that, you know?

We were getting older, you know, this is a phase we were getting through. So I did my time with Uncle Sam, you know. I did a six-by-two: six-year reserve and then two-year inactive reserve. Then I finished my time in '91. After I came out, I was activated again because of Desert Shield/Desert Storm. So I has to do another six months [. . .] until Desert Shield/Desert Storm finished. Then I was a civilian again, so I thought, you know—It was, it's hard to take away years of drill discipline from the corps, overnight.

Now, how I got back into the b-boy scene stems because I was in a Latin club doing my salsa-thing, you know? I'm a dancer just like you are, and stuff and—We just love dancing, period. It's a good way to meet our fair maidens, you know? It was in this Latin club—now they call that Latin spot Trash. Now it's like a bar/dive for Gothic dancers. So, I'm in this dance club, I'm in a two-piece suit with a tie. I'm with my date and in this Spanish club. They're playing salsa, merengue, you know—cuz we had the merengue going, and the salsa at that time frame—and in the corner of this freakin' club, there is a kid doing windmills and I'm like, "Is this guy for real?"

So I go up to the kid, you know, and this happens to be Randy, Randy Ninatanta—you know him [Mighty Mike: Yeah yeah.] because he hung out with my boy Pete, from Breaking in Style, [Mighty Mike: Yup.] you know? So I'm looking at this kid, I'm sayin', "Yo. What?" In Spanish I'm telling him, "What the hell are you doing here?" In Spanish "¿Qué carajo tú 'ta haciendo esto en este locál?" in this location? He's like, "Oh, you don't know about this [. . .] I'm practicing windmills."

I'm like, "But dude. The music! The music, papa! You're not dancing now, you're doing the move." He's like, "I know, but the floor is so smooth, I figure I can work on my spins here and [. . .]." And I'm like, "All right. All right. Now what the hell are you doing? [He's like] "Backspins, windmills." And I'm like, "That's not the way to do it."

So what I do is, I'm taking off my tie, I'm takin' off my blazer and then I'm just with the t-shirt—I didn't wanna dance—I didn't wanna mess up my shirt. My date is actually looking me like, "Yo sé que tú no te va dar vuelta hací! You're not gonna get on the floor like that!" So I'm like, "Give me a second, I just want to show this kid one thing." So then I'm out there and then I'm starting to do windmills, brap brap brap brap brap. I got up, and he's like, "Oh shit! . . . I like that." I'm like, "OK. Cool." So, then I got dressed and stuff and the girl's lookin' at me like, "Are you done?"

Are you done? Done? So I'm like, "One second, one second." I told him, "Where are you—who's teaching that?" That's when I find out that Pete, Pete Rodriguez—Luli—is teaching him at McCarren Park and I guess he must have been there, like '93-'94.

So I'm like, "OK. When do you guys meet? I just want to go over there and check you guys out." So it's because of that kid in '95 that I meet up with Pete and then in McCarren Park and then that's when Randy then sees me and he's like, "Oh, wow. You're Richard from my block." 'Cause the kid lived on my block, at the corner on Driggs. So because of that young kid, I started going and having fun with just dancing with Pete and Randy and buggin' out. And I'm like, you know, I came out of the service—

My first year you saw me with a freakin' orange shirt or a green shirt with military fatigues, with my Reeboks for breaking with these guys. Now, mind you, I was already out of the game for about eight to ten years, you know, from '85 to '95 so I'm like, "All right. I'll—let me focus on myself," just like you did. I had to rebuild myself, I had to be my own self-made six million dollar fool, you know? So I focus on me, retriggering all the mechanics, analyzing my movements, you know?

Then ever since then, '95, I started to redefine myself and start teaching people. Randy and Pete, they may have started their own individual practices, but from '95 on, I religiously started working and wound up developing myself, you know? And then, too, because of the self-development, creating my own b-boy vocabulary to open doors to teach. And then that's in '96, we helped to develop a collective of kids called BREAKS Kru. Then '98, you know, we started another collective, you know, Breaking in Style, the new generation, a remake of my old crew, you know, with the permission of the of the leaders. Then, [in] 2000, Brooklyn Kaos Connection, you know? Then from there, McCarren Park became like a Break Easy Park, BREAKS Kru Park, Breaking in Style Park, BKC Park. Now it's like Papa Rich Park, McCarren Park. It was never—it was never

designed to be just one thing. It started off as being personal to me and my community.

Then globally, it took flame, and everybody was looking at where are all these b-boys coming out? Because first, we had BREAKS Kru. We had a squad of about maybe nine or ten. They started making noise in '99. They started advertising, boom. We were going to the BreakBeats at Hunts Point [Bronx]. Crazy Legs is behind the mic, "And Brooklyn's here again." I mean they have footage of when BREAKS Kru crew versus Rock Steady Kids and stuff. You see Crazy Legs get down, you see me get down, and stuff. You see everyone tryin' to hold me back and I'm like, "I'm goin' in! I'm goin' in!" You know?

[. . .] I remember seeing a video of you in '94, that you have gone to a rock competition that Charlie Uprock was holding, you know? [Mighty Mike: Yeah, yeah.] With DJ Kool. I think I have the video somewhere. It has you, London, Kwikstep, Rokafella, Pete, Randy, but this is a year before I came along, maybe a few months before I came along. I found it strange and I'm like, "Yo. They doing this rocking thing?" To me that was pretty cool because not too many people knew about the real rocking, you know? Everybody was doin' that b-boy shuffle, shuffle down, you know?

Even back then, I would try to battle people in b-boying but because my toprock was still young, I was always rocking, you know? When I used to go to battle, people would say, "Yo. You can't do that cuz that's not what we do here," which I understand, yeah, but rocking is rocking, and breaking is breaking.

But now, today, people want to mash it all together. [They say] "It's the same thing." No, it's not. Back then it never was the same, so how are you gonna make it the same now? So that's how I got back into the scene from '95 to date, actually. I'm still doing, teaching breaking, now open the doors for rocking, you know?

I'm grateful for having the opportunity to share my experiences and that's beautiful that we can do that in this day

[and] age, because—[. . .] a lot of articles have been written from a third person’s perspective, as opposed from the US, the WE, are the hip hop collective of that time frame that developed that. We are the hip hop movers and shakers of that time frame, and we should be able to share and express our thoughts and ideas, if someone is willing to listen to it and take notes of that. Because even to this day, when I read a lot of these textbook material of people’s analysis of hip hop on the economic poverty that these kids were under, or the ability to recreate a new gang, under crews or, oh—it was a safe haven for us, for a lot of us. Yes and no. But it’s being written from a third perspective, as opposed to we—the, the actual participants of the movement. And [Mighty Mike: It’s true, man.] it’s good to be heard. Yeah.

Mighty Mike: It’s true—we mean what—[crosstalk]

Break Easy: Right now we can joke about the battle aspects of it, but there was a lot of some serious shit that went on, serious shit. [crosstalk] I mean hip hop culture, like they say, it’s supposed to be about peace, love, and having fun, yeah, that’s true, but just like in every culture, you have the good, the bad, the ugly, and the [gestures locking up lips to not speak]. If I see you, you die.

Mighty Mike: Yeah. Yeah, man. For me, when I was involved back in the days it was more like when you talked about MixTriX On Feet, I created that crew right there, you know? [crosstalk] I put that crew together and that was my first taste of putting a crew together. And back then, yeah, that was the mentality of that gang stuff [crosstalk]. You had to have your Pres [crosstalk], you had your Vice-Pres—

Break Easy: You had your Pres, [crosstalk] your colors.

Mighty Mike: Come with like, colors [crosstalk]. Everything had to be organized a certain way in how you want the things to look. And back then, wearing colors were a little tough because—[crosstalk]

Break Easy: Yeah, it was tough, woo! Yeah. [crosstalk] The only thing that saved us was the fact that we had a different design. We had stars—we had the Playboy bunnies, the stars, and the lighting bolts. That's what broke us off, but you couldn't wear colors, oh God, no. Couldn't wear colors [crosstalk]. And when we talk about colors- it's patches, not just cuz you want yellow or green or blue or red, you know? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] I'm gonna fight you because of a red color or blue color? C'mon. Think.

Mighty Mike: Yeah, man. So that was my first taste as well, you know, creating a crew and getting them together, but it gave me a good aspect of how to, to become a teacher, because you have so much knowledge of all this dance in your head and you want to express this out and share it.

For me, that's what it was, I didn't want to keep all this to myself, man. I want to go out there and express it, and share it, and teach it. That's how all that became about, you know? It's not easy when you're the dopest guy in the block but you don't go and battle. You had to go out and test yourself in order to find out how you was, you know? So I'd taken some losses in the past when—

I remember going to Coney Island and I ran into the Fresh Kids out there and I got surrounded by [crosstalk] yeah, yeah I got surrounded by these guys, man. And we were wearing colors and they were like, "Look, you guys are not going to leave the neighborhood with your colors donned and you're going to have to battle us right now," and they had the radio, the linoleum, and we had to go for it.

I told my guys like, "Yo, we gotta take the loss. We'll flip our colors upside down, you know, shirts inside out. And we're going to leave out of here peacefully, because we are surrounded by

outlaws here.” And we got caught on the express you know, with the [. . .] is the express, Polar Express?

Break Easy: The Himalaya Express?

Mighty Mike: Yeah. We got caught right there, man, and we had to go for it. And that’s what I mean about finding yourself in places that you shouldn’t be.

Break Easy: Dorothy, you weren’t in Kansas anymore! Same thing happened to me one time when my crew, we stepped up to go to Erasmus Hall.⁹ You had the crew out there led by Powerful, you know, Black Powerful? He was a gymnast and b-boy? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] And he had a set of twins. So we had gone out there. We went out there. We thought we were cocky. We crashed their spot. We say, “Yo, what’s up. We’re B.I.S. We’re from the Southside. Yeah, we come to battle. Again, we did the same thing we did to you, when we rolled up to you. We battled, but then we left peacefully, you know? But with them, it wound up differently.

We went over there. We got into battle. I say, in the routine battle, we were good, but in the individual battles, I think they took it, you know, honestly, but we had [to] check ourselves. We’re like, “N***az. If we freakin’ win this battle, we’re gonna get a beat down outta here.” We started to think about that and we were like, “Oh, dip. Alright so let’s leave it where we keep face, a little bit,” but we had to give it to them, because if not—

So what happens after the battle—I think we battle for about 30 minutes or—battles were like a little bit longer back then, you know? [. . .] They popped [a] lot of garbage, caca, and then we walk out. It wasn’t until we got to the station out there—and it’s an open platform station which [. . .], we’re taking the train home—all of sudden we hear glass coming down. Pshhhhhh. Then all of the

9. A high school in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn: 911 Flatbush Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11226

sudden we hear a trash bag coming over. Pshh, pshhh, pshhh, psh. Comin' out- it's that the guys wanted to freakin' beat us down when we were in the station. So we were like, "Oh, dip!"

So what we do is, we get off the train platform, run to the next platform, right? When we get to the next platform, there's the police. They're tryna pick everybody up, thinking that we had jumped and we were making all this ruckus. And we were just trying to get our way home, but we had to go from one stop to the next, because we were going to get our ass beaten. One of our guys got his arm cut cuz he fell on the gravel track. He got caught. Another guy got caught.

It was me and my boy Alex that, when we got out of the platform, we ran through the turnstiles. We get out of the station, because the cops are tryna grab us. All of a sudden, me and him are running down this one dead-end street and we're like, "Damn, it's a dead-end street," because you know the trains, the way they block off—when it's in the outside train, it blocks off certain blocks? So we were like, "Oh, dip. What we gonna do?"

So I'm telling Alex, "Get underneath, hold onto the muffler and jack yourself up." So I'm hugging to—I'm huggin the bottom of a muffler while you see the cops walking around with flashlights underneath, cuz you know how they used to put the light? [Mighty Mike: Yeah, yeah.] So I mean, we—there was some—You had [to] hit and run or hit it and quit it, you know. There was no way you were gonna get away from that. But we had fun because, I mean—Now it seems that we could talk about it, but back then, you know, you pee-peed in your pants a few times.

Mighty Mike: [laughs] It was insane. So Break, let's, let's kick it off with me and you conversating about the rocking at the time and that's how all that started to develop from there. Because me and Break Easy already had started some projects already before that and that's how I got back to hanging out with Break Easy.

We were—There was a guy named Tiny, at the time—what was the other guy’s name, Break?

Break Easy: Hypno, Hypno. Tiny and Hypno. Yeah. [crosstalk] You’ve met them because of Union Square. [Mighty Mike: Right.] But I wanna go a little bit further. You and I hooked up when we started going to Pseudo Radio.¹⁰

Mighty Mike: Right, right. [crosstalk]

Break Easy: Remember the Internet shop? [Mighty Mike: Yes.] That’s where I got to meet a lot of kids from Step Fenz and some of the kids from BREAKS Kru—Chino used to go there, Cyclone, you and me hooked up there a few times. [Mighty Mike: Yeah. Right.] Because that was an Internet hip hop show.

Soon after that—but we were still doing b-boying, but it is because of Tiny, that we did hook up, cuz at that time frame, Hypno and Tiny, Dr. Funk, and there’s one more person¹¹ used to do Union Square gatherings, right? I used to go over there and I used to take BKC [Brooklyn Kaos Crew]. This was a little bit after 2000, you know? BKC- I started taking them so they can get aware of how to break and present themselves as b-boys to the community. That’s why you and I hooked up, because of Tiny Love.

Mighty Mike: Right. So we started to do those projects for—[. . .] “introducing these power move videos,” I remember. It was called, “Step-by-Step”. The other one was “Power Moves”. So that was the project you involved me in and you had told me about after you called me. That was kind of like where everything began, right at that time.

10. Pseudo Programs, Inc. was an early internet content creator community that was founded by Josh Harris in 1993. The Pseudo offices resided at 600 Broadway and hosted internet radio channels like 88hiphop.com, among others. The space was open as a site for socializing, with dancers from the underground scene commonly referring to it as “Pseudo’s”: <https://nymag.com/nymetro/news/media/internet/1703/>

11. Tony Flow

That was kind of at the beginnings when we were like, “Ey, what’s up?” We look back, we were talking and getting involved into this project that we did these instrumental videos of teaching and all that. Which—it was great because those videos made a lot of headlines during that time. [Break Easy: Yeah.] [. . .] A lot of people don’t really know that.

Break Easy: This is why I wanna go back to that. For those that don’t know what we’re talking about, there’s a “How to Breakdance” DVD that was a project that Tane Langton—he’s the editor/producer of that. He was from—what is it? [Mighty Mike: Was he from London? Or Germany?] Australia! Australia, Australia. It was Matthews—Matthews, he was from—from, I think somewhere in the United States. So they were looking to do a “how to b-boy” video. They came to me because of all the students that I had already taught. I have many kids, you know? I actually hired the kids, and they all got paid to do their thing in the video.

At that time frame, I said, “The only person that actually equal me at the timeframe of teaching and directing—” because you’ve had already established Just Begun Crew, you were planning on doing an event, “Chico’s Gotta Have His Share”, and that’s why I’m like, “Hey what—lemme see if I can speak to Mighty Mike, and see if he would like to work on this project, you know, with me.”

[Mighty Mike: Yeah.]

And you were like, “Yeah. Break, is there money?” And I’m like, “Yeah, there’s money there,” you know? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] So it was like, “Yeah, why not get paid for teaching?” That’s when you and I worked, because of that b-boying project, you know? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] And then the song “Black Betty.”¹² [singing] “Woah, Black Betty, ram-a-lam.” We were going crazy. [laughs]

12. Traditional, Huddie Ledbetter, as recorded by the band Ram Jam. *Black Betty*. Epic Records, 1977. https://youtu.be/4cn_woPvjQI

Mighty Mike: Yeah. We kinda started on those projects, and it was great cuz it lasted for a couple years doing that. We did three videos, I believe we did. We also were able—I was able to do my event that was able to be part of the video as well, and that was kind of like what I was kinda doing. I was promoting and doing events at that time.

I remember crossing again with King Uprock during that time, after the thing that happened in Bushwick and the issues that they had [Break Easy: Yeah.] [crosstalk] during that time with Kwikstep and all that. I remember, there was some issues there. And I already had broke out and branched out, started to do my own thing.

We got back involved in the projects and we started to do all this, and I remember seeing King Uprock back in the scene. He's doing his thing, and it always takes me back to the Southside of Williamsburg, Brooklyn and I was like, "Man, it will be so dope if we can—if I could get more deep into this rocking thing," because I didn't really understand the concepts and things of the dance, but I knew how to break down the mechanics, you know?

And I was saying to myself, "I really want to learn this dance." I remember meeting—we sat in your kitchen and we talked about this, and I was saying, "Yo!" [Break Easy: Yes.] "Let's try to—"

Break Easy: Cuz you had called me up because you want to talk about this rock-thing cuz you wanted to know more about it. And I was like, "But, dude. You, you, you grew up [. . .]" [video momentarily freezes] . . . inner workings of—I was already with Dynasty—well, I was a part of Dynasty at that time, you know? But I was independent. I wasn't a Dynasty member until much later.

But I was already working with Ralph¹³ on that project, because me and Ralph were—practically anybody that would rock, we were shutting them down. We were putting them on check,

13. King Uprock, aka Ralph Casanova.

"What you're doing is not rocking. I'm gonna show you the proper way of execution, a proper way of dancing." But putting that aside, when you and I spoke, your concern was because you had discovered a collective of other individuals that had saw interviews that Tiny Love was posting. [Mighty Mike: Right.] They were concerned that some of this information that was out there was incomplete or not done. [Mighty Mike: Yeah. Right.] But you were worried that, if you were to do that, that you—would you be overstepping King Uprock's toes? And I'm like, "No offense to me." One, we want you to go and pull other rockers because it adds more to the sauce, you know?

Mighty Mike: Yeah. During that time, you guys were already ten years involvement in rocking, or something like that.

Break Easy: Yeah, we were established already. [crosstalk] We were very well established.

Mighty Mike: It was established already. I just kind of walked into this and I was like, "Man, it would be nice to learn this. It would be nice to get involved into this." I remember telling you like, "Yo, what do you think if I could get some individuals to talk to, and all that. Can I do some interviews?"

And you say, "Yeah, do some interviews." And I started that off with some rockers, but during that time, when I was talking to Choco, Choco was like, "Yo. I'm going to bring you to some rockers and you're going to talk to them and ask them these questions and all that. What are you looking for?"

For me, everything just started off as interviews, that was it. I had no intentions to get into the dancing yet, because I just wanted to get some information and that kind of led me to that position to say, "Hey, you want to learn this? Who do you want to learn this from?" and all that. I remember when, when they were filming the *Sures*—during that [Break Easy: The project *Los Sures*,

yeah.] time in *Los Sures*¹⁴—they filmed it on Hooper and right by, I believe it was in South Fifth it was. I remember that I wanted to bring some rockers in there. And I remember Choco was like, “Yo, I’ve got these two guys from over here, from Bushwick, from the Williamsburg area, and they said, “Hey we’re going to bring these two guys named Ringo and Spin. They’re going to do a routine and you check them out,” and all that. And when I saw Ringo, the style and what they were doing, man, that fascinated me and I was like, “Yo! I gotta, I gotta bring this guy to have an interview with,” and that’s how I brought Ringo in and I just had just a few questions for him and all that.

For me, I was thinking, “Man, this doesn’t look too hard to do. I think I could probably do this.” The more I kept bringing more people involved into the interviews kinda led me into it. I remember telling you, *Break Easy*, “Yo, what do you think if I form a crew and put it under the umbrella of that Dynasty?” Remember I told you that, and—

Break Easy: You wanted that, and I’m like, I have no say on that. You can try to do that, but it’s a different realm, I told you. It doesn’t work like the b-boy side of the scale. It’s a little bit more dirty, I’m going to tell you that [. . .] You know.

Mighty Mike: And that’s when I said, “You know what?” You told me, “Mike, just do as an individual,” you know, “Just, let’s keep them separated—their own identity,” and all that. That’s how it started for me in the rocking scene.

I was always glad that this dance has taken its trips, because this dance never made it out of the boroughs, you know? From what I was hearing that King Uprock was traveling and teaching, it was great to hear that because this dance never made it across

14. Diego Echevarria, dir., *Los Sures* (1984; New York, NY: Metrograph, 1985), Film. <http://lossur.es/> For an article regarding a 4K restoration of the film, released in 2016: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/los-sures-film-review-884328/>

the border like that, you know? [Break Easy: Yeah, it didn't. It didn't.] And that's what really got me involved.

For me, I had different ideas with the dance. I wanted to do—I wanted to take this dance and escalate it to where it should be, because it was so old, you know, the dance? It's been from the early '70s and late '70s and I wanted to take it to the year that we're [in] now. In order to do that, it has to escalate how b-boy had escalated in the many years, you know? So that was my vision of what I wanted.

Little by little, talking with all the O.G.s and everything, I remember what these Mastermind guys [said]. They were like, "Listen. If you have any interest just use the name." I remember, I had to talk to a couple of people [from] the crew. I remember Fano and Rubberband, and Dash. They were like, "Listen, we'll bless you with the name. No one's using it. It's been a long time and we're not involved into this, so go ahead. Start it off." [. . .]

That was the first thing I did was use these O.G.s at the time because, remember, there was nobody really rocking in my corner, you know? It was just me and Ringo. I brought in Dash, Rubberband, Fano and that was it. It was a five-man crew at the time. We did a video with Bam Bam up in the BX. It was called "The Mexican"—you can look that up also on YouTube¹⁵—that Bam Bam the Liquid Robot did at the time. They were in the video with us at the time. That was my starting point of that, and, for me, I needed to learn how to rock. I needed to know the reasons why I'm doing this.

Break Easy: Yeah, basically. You better know the reason. If not, I'm gonna spank you down. I'm gonna spank you down.

Mighty Mike: [. . .] I needed to know the formula. I needed to know the foundation: What could be changed, what couldn't be changed. Why do these two individuals stand in front of each other? Can

15. You can see Mighty Mike dancing and the Mastermind Rockers at https://youtu.be/nVilSxtX_X8

they move around? I have so many questions, man, like everybody. [Break Easy: Yeah.] I had to do my homework.

It took me a couple of years to really understand this, because as a b-boy you're never going to lose that energy that motivates you when you hear "Just Begun,"¹⁶ because remember, back then, those songs were for the b-boy part. But now, crossing over into rocking, it was different because you had to change the tempo of your mindset in the speed of everything we're doing. [Break Easy: The mindset, yeah.] That was really what I needed to work on, man. And it took me a long time, but after that man, it was just downhill, from that point, you know? But again, how do we know who became members—[crosstalk] [Break Easy: Downhill? Downhill? You mean uphill!] Well, you know, I'm saying, [crosstalk]

Break Easy: I know, I know. That a lot of [. . .] that we face now, yeah.

Mighty Mike: And then how—if you really wanted to have members—how you wanted to bring them in. We had to teach people. It was a lot of work. But 15 years in—it took me a long time to really start off this whole thing. But that's how with Mastermind [Rockers]—that's how the name—it got established because I was given it, you know? They gave it to me through conversations and talks and meetings. It was one of the best things that ever happened. But it was always nice to have Dynasty there because you also need a crew that's always gonna challenge you—

Break Easy: We were, we were your big poppas until—we were actually—we were your mommy for a while, until we tell you, "[. . .] we have to cut you off, because you need to develop on your own. [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] Then after that, we was a big father, because we took you with us to different events. But then after

16. Gerry Thomas, Jimmy Castor, John Pruitt, as recorded by the band The Jimmy Castor Bunch. *It's Just Begun*. RCA, 1972. https://youtu.be/KY_BBaluTC8

that, like any child, you rebel, and then you want to try to kick this ass and then we've got to go [smacks hands], "bofeta," to spank you, but it's welcome to have that today because—and this is something that I wanted to happen—

I just don't want everybody that comes into rock, all of the sudden, ride the bandwagon and be part of just one rock collective. I need the opponent, and I need the other factor. I need the other pieces to come in. You can't play chess with only the king, you know what I'm saying?

Mighty Mike: Exactly. Yeah.

Break Easy: Yeah. You need that.

Mighty Mike: Yeah. You need that rival [Break Easy: Right.] that challenge[s] every other time, when you guys see each other, you know? Because that's the only way to develop. It was really weird, because we started off something really great because this became worldwide now. Being asked to fly out somewhere to teach rocking was like one of those mind-blowing things because you don't expect that. We hear it a lot from b-boys when they say, "Hey, you know, we got to bring this guy over here to teach," and we're all happy about it because that's dope but rocking is a whole 'nother thing, you know? [Break Easy: Yeah.]

But now, seeing the rocking now, at the level that it is—it took a lot of work from a few individuals like you, King Uprock, Mr. Loose, Charlie Uprock, Ringo, me—it was a handful of people that were able to teach this—

Break Easy: That's a handful! You just named a handful!

Mighty Mike: And that was it. There was no—I could name ten other people that are in the scene now that were never around, and people were trying to take credit for something that we have worked really hard to get at—to this level, you know? [Break Easy:

Correct.] It's sad because, the more people that are getting involved is becoming watered down because they're—They kind of want to do it now, but they're not really learning the format of the stance and they don't really know the history, the culture.

There's a lot of things that we can go into of—because this is a street, ghetto dance that was violent, that was about outlaws during that time, and, and no one seems to talk about that part, and then they—[crosstalk]

Break Easy: This is where I wanna break this down to what—and I know you and I can go into a big discussion about this alone, and I think I have—I think I'll probably be a senior in this—is the fact that the rock dance in itself in its original form and its true form, was a dirty, obnoxious, male egotistical, a physical dance, and I've always stated this many times. In its original form, the rock dance, or what they call the outlaw dance, and stuff was very down and dirty.

It got tweaked over the '70s and '80s, to develop what was later on, to be known as the Uprock. And now [in] today and age, you have a few new dancers that also rock, but they didn't do the outlaw version of it, you know? Cuz the rocking itself morphed into what's presentable today, involving the aspects of the drops, the jerks, the freestyle, which is very key, and the burns.

Unfortunate to [this] day and age, a lotta these kids only practice the one aspect of it, which is the burning-jerk, or the burning-jerk, or the burning-jerk, so you get my point. Now, [. . .] when I see rock—and you could probably argue or agree with me on this—that back in the days when we rocked, there wasn't no gun, that was no knife. It was—I would just give you the finger, I will give you the bird. The girls would do it, the guys do it and it'll be like, "Boom, boom, boom, ah! It wasn't to the extreme, that is now because for us back then, when I was a youth, we didn't take it to that battle aspect of it. It was about showcasing your style and technique. Cuz the Southside, we had, [Mighty Mike: Yeah]

yes, we had some burners but that wasn't our thing, you know? Love Disco Style they were, they were outlaws-slash-rockers but they had style. A lot of rockers like Mousey from Together We Chill, actually Together We Break, as a b-boy, he had style. He would burn you, too, but he had his drops and his flavor. He came out in the documentary *Los Sures*.

Mighty Mike: Yeah. It's crazy [crosstalk]

Break Easy: It's beautiful to see that. My vision when I started doing this rocking teaching—Ralph didn't want me to teach. He's like, "Nah. We gotta take this and just do it for us." I'm like, "Dude. If you're the only one doing it, you're not—we're not gonna have no opposition. We'd have no collective."

That's why I was teaching rocking. You seen me teaching rocking in McCarren Park. You seen me teaching in my house. I used to have a squad of maybe fifty people in my basement, booming system in the backyard, half the guys breaking, another half rocking but not only that—what I mean, you know this and I think MiRi knows it but I guess the audience doesn't know that—that when I was teaching breaking, I was not only teaching you the physical movement of the dance, that one particular dance, but I'm teaching you the origins of why all these steps and moves come from.

When we do salsa—I used to take my students out to the Parkside Lounge¹⁷ and have them freakin' dance salsa and they're like, "What? We're b-boys! Why are you taking me to dance salsa? Oh, I'm a rocker. Why you teaching me [to] dance salsa?" Because I want you to learn how it is for you to feel that groove. It's not so much about the breakbeats like the b-boys want to get

17. Venue located on E. Houston and Attorney Streets in the East Village, Manhattan. The front part of the lounge is a dive bar, and the back room hosts live music events.

into. It's not about just the melody that the rockers want to get into, you know?

But then my kids started learning how to do—I mean, all my dancers, and I'm saying it specifically: dancers- They may have [come] to learn breaking, but they walk out as dancers, cuz they learn how to salsa, merengue, bachata. They learn how to loft. They learn how to disco, to do the hustle. They started expanding their minds because the music. They heard my "Papa Rich stories. Oh my God." You know? Heck, I loved it when I had taken one of the girls—I think it was—oh, Bounce, little Ephrat Asherie. I was there, I dunno if MiRi was there and I think Pauline might've been there, and Ephrat saw this little viejita, an old lady dancing. She's freaking, she's—this is in [Parkside] Lounge—older than me, right? She's like, "Papa Rich, I wanna see you dance with her." I'm like, "All right, let me go dance with her." That lady, she was older than me—I think I must have been like maybe 36, 37—she waxed the floor with me just the same doing the simple moves!

Again, rocking was the same way about learning the origins of the move. And your concern was not only so much about the moves but when you wanted to—you had asked me about changing the game when it came to wearing patches, I'm like, "That's—[Mighty Mike: Yeah.]. . . pretty crossover step. That's a very bold move you're going to try to change certain ethics," cuz a lotta gangs will not allow you to come in trying to change the rules, [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] and then we had a good discussion that you gotta respect—there's a code when you do that.

Mighty Mike: Yeah, yeah. I remember having a conversation with you about patches and all that. And I remember talking to Choco about this and I was like, "Yo—" Because Choco, if people don't know who he is, he is also a graphic designer. [Break Easy: Yes.] He's into airbrushing and he's into calligraphy. He's into drawing, and I can go—he was also a writer.

Break Easy: He was a writer, yeah.

Mighty Mike: Yeah, so I talked to him because his family's been outlaw for a long time, and I wanted to know a little bit. So he kind of schooled me a little bit about the whole patch-thing. The three patches, what they meant, and all that and I was like, "I want to have a patch like the way Dynasty have." This was influenced by Dynasty, and I was like, "Man, I want to have something to represent that," because I think it would be nice to have crews that could represent rocking in a format that is not outlaw but is close to it that it kind of gives us the dance, to represent more of the dance.

By doing so, Choco was like, "Listen, I can make you a patch." And he was the one that designed it, The Mastermind patch. It has to be one single patch, can't be three patches. So he kind of broke everything down for me and that's how I got schooled of how patches are, [. . .] and how to wear them and all that, so I don't get into issues with gangsters and outlaws [Break Easy: That's right.] and MCs. [crosstalk]

Break Easy: You don't wanna get into issues where you're gonna meet real [. . .] outlaws and you have to identify yourself, like, "Who sanctioned you? Who gave you the blessings? Where're you from?" Cuz that's a whole different territory, this is why even in Dynasty, I instruct all my members with the courtesies and etiquettes that you have to have. If you're going to wear your patch, you're going to put yourself out there to be a mark, you know, by both the legal authorities and both by other gang—other patch wearers, not just gangs. You [. . .] have outlaw gangs, may have MC rider gangs, you [. . .] might have social clubs, and other groups that fly patches, but we all still adhere to certain rules, etiquette that we do and that's very key. [Mighty Mike: Yeah.][crosstalk]

And that's something I'm trying to instruct now for anybody that has the idea, or inkling to start wearing patches. It's not

the same thing as when you're wearing crew colors and reping a crew. It's a totally different discipline. [Mighty Mike: Yeah. I think—] You have to grow some [. . .] to do that. You have to grow some. Be mature.

Mighty Mike: Yeah. I believe that's what gave me that edge. It was that we were able to communicate, talk, lay out some foundation. That's what gave me my start and [it] was that. It was great. It was great to get involved into this dance that has grown worldwide and has taken a good trip to where it is now. [Break Easy holds up his Dynasty Rockers vest with patches.] I mean that is—that's awesome, man. Yeah.

Break Easy: You coulda earned one. You coulda earned one.

Mighty Mike: I was there, Break. I was there with you. I know, but it was great. I think that we took the right path. I think that's what made us who we are. And I think that we did an amazing job spreading the love of this dance. I think we have different opinions on certain things, [Break Easy: Yes. Of course.] but it all narrows back down to the same roots. It is rocking and that's what it was.

I think that we did an amazing job just taking it where it is now, and I feel that we—you guys should be credited for that and I hope that down the road you know, in the future that that happens, because we put a lot of work into this to, to take it to that level. Especially King Uprock keeping this dance alive, you know. This isn't wasn't easy for him, as well—

Break Easy: Yes, I agree. King Uprock is the reason why the rebirth is here—I call it the rebirth, not that he invented or founded anything, no. This is where it gets confused, you know? It was, "King Uprock thinks he's the man." He *is* the man. He's the man for the rebirth. That's the aspect we're teaching.

He's not saying that the rocking that he does is the ultimate rocking, no. [What] he's saying is that, "What I'm presenting to

you is the proper way of rocking or is a proper way of rocking. Not the ultimate or the only way of rocking," OK? [Mighty Mike: Aiiight.] That's what he's been saying this whole time, but people read misinformation—think like, "Well, he thinks he's the man." Well unless you can prove him otherwise by battling him or showing a technique of your own that defeats him, then that's fine.

This is where me and him have gone at it before, because I was never a burner-burner, per se, you know, as a rocker. For me rock—I love the freestyle. I love the freakin'- the shoulder, the drop, the jerks, you know? I'm not, I'm not, I'm not much of a burner. I just burn for the sake—I just wanna make fun of you. That's it, you know? But you better dance. And I'm talking about not just dance me—like thirty seconds like b-boys do. Boy, it's what I call—I'm sorry to say this—but it's what I call the minute-man-thing. When you're in love with something, you don't make love to it for a minute. Get my drift? You want to be able to enjoy the whole song. So the same thing is in here when it comes to the rock dance.

So it's not about the burning aspect in the short time. I wanna be able to enjoy the whole song and present what I have in my dancing skills before you, as well as the audience and learn how to humiliate you. You shouldn't have to go to burning, you know?

But my idea was just that—to set up a door where people can learn through my mechanics and this, this was brought forth very hardcore when I was working- was working with Tane Langton. Because I was already teaching kids how to rock, both male and female. There was no—I wasn't selective, "Well, this is a man-thing or this is the girl thing." Like, no. I saw it as, [crosstalk] back in the days, there were female rockers. Back in the day, there were b-girls.

[. . .] and it wasn't like, like, "Oh, because you're a girl you're gonna win. Oh, cuz you're a girl." No. I had foreseen stuff way back then. I had teached this to my kids, that: OK. When two b-boys are in battle, you know what's going to happen? You're gonna have to choose one. What beats a b-boy/b-boy?

B-boy/b-girl. But again, now we're talking that you have to have the skills. OK, so now what beats the b-boy? The b-girl. Now, when you have two b-girls battle, you judge 'em on their skills. What beats a b-girl? Get a little b-boy. OK, now you got a young b-boy. What a beats a b-boy? Do the math again. Get a little b-girl now and now over twenty years later, that's happened already.

At first, we had a wave of where it was b-boys: learn how to get your game up in everything. All of a sudden, you had this wave of the female upbringing—girls coming up to the ring now and competing with the guys. That's beautiful that that's happened but you're still segregating them, you know. Put them on a [. . .] level platform. Show me your skills, doesn't matter. Then all of the sudden, now you have—After that, that girl-thing, now it's the young generation. Oh, you have two b-boys. Oh now you got little girls.

Now you have the Olympics. Now you have people fighting for positions to be like, "Oh well, I'm a good b-boy from the street," and now you have to compete in the Olympics.¹⁸ I'm like, "No. Half of you b-boys are not gonna make it. You know why? Because half of you guys [are] already over 21. The other half of that, that's leftover, you guys are not going to make it. You know why? Drug tests! You gonna fail.

The other collectors- you guys have no mechanics and stuff, no drills, and no charisma for this thing. Three- you guys don't read the fine print when you look at the IOC [International Olympic Committee] and ask dumb questions on the social media, saying like, "Oh but, who's the staff?" It's on their site. "How they're judging?" It's on their site. B-boys are too lazy to do the research on that. They wanna be taught what to do. [Mighty Mike: Yeah.]

18. For further discussion about breaking in the Olympics: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4xzq33/the-battle-for-breaking-on-the-olympic-stage> Li, Rong Zhi, and Yonatan Asher Vexler. "Breaking for gold: Another crossroads in the divergent history of this dance." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 36, no. 4-5 (2019): 430-448.

And then, when they're told, they never prove that information. They just recycle and, and repeat instead of letting the whole full wash go through. [Mighty Mike: Exactly.]

This is my gripe with a lot of the young ones, when they just follow—it's the herd mentality. One says that, "I'm gonna repeat it, because it's got to be true." Prove it. You have to do your research and, and I say that honestly and endearingly with a lot of affection and emotion [feigns coughing] that anyone that gets involved in this should be responsible enough to do the research. Just like you did the research when it comes to the rocking, to find out the history. A lot of people don't understand that.

Even myself, I had to check myself and, and make sure that anything that I say doesn't affect—offend someone of my sex genre or not my non-sex genre or because of someone's sexual preference or their religious obligations to their faith, to their culture, or just the fact of cultural differences and/or language differences.

[. . .] I've learned to grow because of the breaking community. Even more, I've been blessed to have so many diverse kids, you know, that I've got to acquire a lot of their good habits and bad habits, as we all do. To be honest, I love sharing my kids, all my students, which I call my kids—

And lemme tell you something—from being a dance teacher, I've learned to really listen. Because a lot of these kids that come to learn this dance, they have their own stories, you know? I can sit here and tell you that, yeah, they come in on a path that they wanna learn how to break, they wanna [learn how to] rock, but then I stop and listen to them.

And alotta these kids come from a non-functional home. A kid that grows up with his father or kid that just grows up with his mother. I've had kids that were abused come before me. I had kids that were illiterate. I had kids that didn't even speak one word of English, but they knew how to say their first word,

“six-step.” I feel like a proud father when I hear that, you know? [Mighty Mike: Right, right.]

A particular story, for example with E-Rock. E-Rock was a Polish kid. He came from Poland and stuff. He didn’t know an ounce of English, and he was just watching us in the park. He comes up and then he’s like, he wants to learn this. I’m like, “Come on over.” So then we started talking on the b-boy vocabulary. It went to such an extent, that one day he introduced me to his mother and he wishes that I will be his father, you know? [Mighty Mike: Wow, wow.] You believe that? Another story- I had a young girl and stuff in one of my classes come down and she openly explained to me that she came from a household where she was molested. You know? Stuff like that. And I took it upon myself to listen to her, just listen. Don’t take any actions yet, because sometimes I don’t want to impose my actions to be like, “I’m stepping in as a replacement for that,” you understand what I’m saying? [Mighty Mike: Yeah, yeah.]

Sometimes yeah we as instructors, we wanna do good, but we want to be like the welcoming superhero, but you can’t do that unless the person asked for help, you know? Because, if not, it’s a catch-22. I had another kid one time and stuff, invite me to his graduation because he had never completed school, so he asked me to come to his GED graduation. So I went there [to] support him.

Like I said—I’ve been hearing both sides of the stories that it’s other than just the b-boy factor, other than just hip hop. Because if you’re going to be true to hip hop, hip hop is not for the older generation. Hip hop is of the new generation, the ones that are creating and speaking out, you know? Sometimes we just have to listen.

Mighty Mike: Yeah. I think that the biggest thing in this, is that we have been friends for many years—we go back to the ‘80s.

Break Easy: Dude! We, been the—OK. Dude. Yeah. We may not have started off really friends-friends by first, first like that. We knew each other from the ‘hood, right? [Mighty Mike: Right.] And you

know that subconsciously I saw you, saw me. We were like, "F, F, F," you know. Heck, you used to go out with some of the girls that I knew. You know who I'm talkin' about. It's crazy.

Then not only was it because of breaking, it's because when we were lofting. We used to go to the same places to hang out and loft but we [were] just from two different camps. But we were part of the same collective, you know, with Gino, Ultimate, Bishop all those guys lofting. We been in the same 'hood [crosstalk]

Mighty Mike: Yeah and it's [. . .] funny because you blessed me with a B.I.S. family shirt [Break Easy: Yup.] which I still have.

Break Easy: [. . .] Who would have thought about that? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] I was like, "Yo, man." You were from Scramblin' Feet, Incorporated, which I hated. [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] I hated! That's a Lower East Side came over. But then because we work together for ooh, quite some many times and stuff. I mean, we argue, and we agree and disagree—that you became—

Yeah, I remember honoring you to come into the Breaking In Style family, [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] because we have the same direction, vision and mentality when it came to that. [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] And you've already seen how disciplined I am with my, with my kids. Heck- [Mighty Mike: Oh yeah.] you used to be sitting in the chair when I'm drilling the hell outta this poor girl, "Do it again! Do it again!" She's like jerking, jerking, jerking, jerking, jerking, jerking.

Mighty Mike: Yeah, I went and saw that, man. It's great because we have the same vision, yes, you can say that—

Break Easy: Yeah, we do have the same vision. How we get there is our own path, yeah.

Mighty Mike: Right, right. And it's funny because, if you remember, we wind up battling in rocking in Pro-Am, which was the [cross-talk] first—

Break Easy: That was in 1999—no, no, no, that was 2000. 2000, yeah.

Mighty Mike: No one knows about this because remember it was a very, very small community of rockers and we went to Pro-Am and we wind up battling in there and I remember that I had to do a moment of—I had to take a minute to express myself there, and you know? And it was crazy that we wind up doing it—[crosstalk]

Break Easy: You went in strictly for the rocking and I know that I was there for two different events. I was there for the rockin' event, and I was there for the old-skool b-boy event competition [Mighty Mike: Right, right. That was a very—] [crosstalk] So I had to wear two hats. I had to change to be a b-boy, and I had to change to become a rocker.

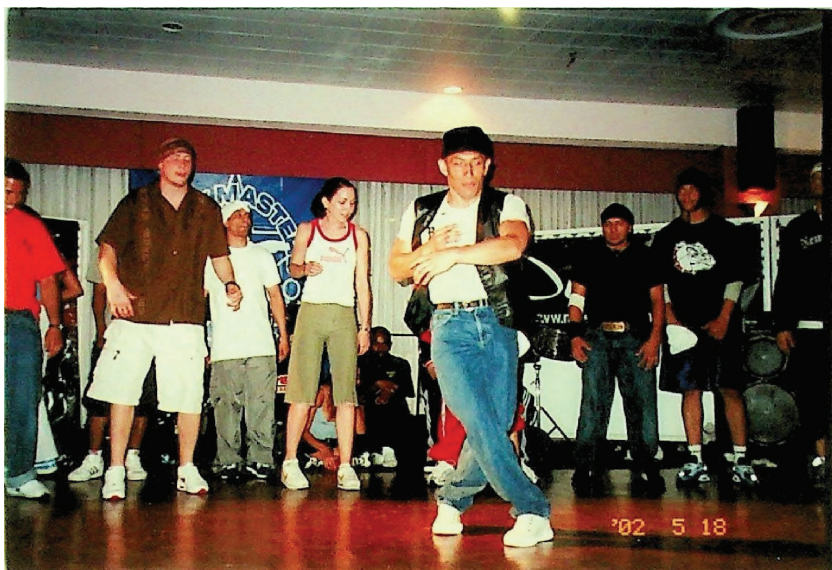
Mighty Mike: And nobody knows about that began—the community was small, so- [Break Easy: Yeah, it was small]. That was the very, very first rock battle in all this time that we was involved, that finally happened there. And King Uprock was the judge, I think it was Mr. Loose, I think there was somebody from Miami that was also a judge, that we wind up in there. I remember Karyn being there.

Break Easy: Yeah, Karyn. Dan Duce—

Mighty Mike: Dan Duce.

Break Easy: I think Tells was there from, from Ground [Zero]

Mighty Mike: Numbers. [Break Easy: Numbers, yeah.] Yeah it was all these names that people never—[crosstalk]



Photos from Bboy Pro-Am 2002. Photos courtesy of MiRi Park's personal collection.

(Top) Break Easy in Rocking Exhibition with Dan Duce (brown shirt) and Karyn Lish (white and red shirt)

(Bottom) Break Easy vs. Mighty Mike rocking in an Apache Line.

Break Easy: Heck, I believe MiRi was there another year [. . .]. I think, oh no—I think [the] following year later, I wasn't there, and she had to help Don Campbellock because he was a little bit ill and people didn't know who the hell he was and MiRi was like, "Oh! Oh! They don't know who this guy is! Oh my gosh!"¹⁹



Photos from B-Boy Summit 2003. (L-R) Tiny Love, Don Campbellock, MiRi "seoulsonyk" Park.

Photo courtesy of MiRi Park's personal collection.

Mighty Mike: So yeah. That was the actual first rock battle that took place in Pro-Am. That was the first event that opened the doors to rocking that—no one ever did. It was Speedy Legs that gave us the opportunity to do that—

19. MiRi: I was at the Pro-Am that Break Easy and Mighty Mike recall. The incident with Don Campbellock occurred at B-Boy Summit in Los Angeles the following year. Campbellock injured his ankle during an exhibition and Tiny Love and I stepped in afterward to assist him with getting first-aid. It's worth noting how memory functions in this story. As I listened to Mighty Mike and Break Easy recall this specific Pro-Am, I had a slow realization that it was the one I attended, but in my mind, it was 2001.

Break Easy: To be fair, the Pro-Am did set off a precedence for that, but, to be honest, it was Numbers who did it independently. It had nothing to do with Pro-Am. [Mighty Mike: OK, OK.] Numbers flew King Uprock in the initial stage in '99 and then I tagged along with Ralph because Ralph was like, "Rich, I'm gonna be alone. Hold my hand." So I'm like, "OK, let me go with you and support you in this," and I was the—[. . .] When something like that happens with Ralphie, I let him take stage and I'm backstage, looking at the audience. That's the way I like to operate. I like to step back and observe what's happening to the environment. So at that time frame, Ralphie was educating the Miami collective about what rocking is. And then a year later, you compete in and I compete in and people now become aware about it, you know?

Mighty Mike: That was, that was it right there. That was the starting point of what became what it is now. To sum it up that's where it has taken us in our path [Break Easy: Yeah.]

MiRi, I want to say thank you for having us and [. . .] taken us down memory lane from back in the '80s to now is great. Thank you.

MiRi Park: Thank you both so much. You both are such influential people in New York City, specifically, but as a result of that, in the entire world, in the entire global breaking scene, because so many people have come through New York specifically to work with you both, in separate ways. [Mighty Mike: Yes.] Our intention with this conversation is to let folx know that there are people out there that you might not have ever heard of but are a really big presence.

Dr. grace shinhae jun: [. . .] Thank you for taking this time. [Mighty Mike: Thank you for havin' us. Yeah.]

Break Easy: No, thank you very much for the invitation to have this and be able to share and, I mean, I could go a lot further and stuff. [crosstalk] For me, I will feel that it's more therapeutic for me to actually speak out on this because there's a lot of stuff that people are not aware of that happened in the late '70s early '80s, you know? [Mighty Mike: Yeah.] We would like to at least share that and have people become aware or become self-aware of themselves through my, through my disclosure of what I've done.

Mighty Mike: Yeah, yeah definitely.

Contributors

Miguel "Mighty Mike" Pazardi was born in Puerto Rico and raised in the Southside of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York. He witnessed the beginnings of Hip Hop dance from watching a few young kids dancing on cardboard outside of his family's apartment building. Since then, he has dedicated his career to teaching and practicing breaking and rock-ing dance styles, as well as holding the local histories of these cultures. He was a member of the Furious Rockers, Scramblin' Feet, Full Circle, New York City Breakers (2nd Generation), and Just Begun Crew, and toured extensively as one of Kurtis Blow's break dancers. Inspired by the work of the Dynasty Rockers crew, Mike began to research rockers he knew from his youth. He reconnected with rockers Choco, Rubber Band, Popeye, and Dash, and in 2009, they established a new generation of the Mastermind Rockers.

Richard "Break Easy" Santiago is a native of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where he grew up dancing with his family and then with his crew Breaking In Style. Upon returning to Williamsburg from service in the U.S. Marine Corps, he reconnected with local b-boys who reignited his passion for dancing. Since then, he has hosted a free practice in McCarren Park which has become a destination for dancers from all

around the world. Break Easy is a member of Dynasty Rockers and has taught, fostered, and mentored generations of b-boys, b-girls, and rockers throughout the past three decades.

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. 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 on 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. Ex. windmills, 90s, air flares, swirls, elbow spins, etc. 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.”²⁰ She makes 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.

Lofting: a term that loosely refers to dance/atmosphere/ethos that permeated David Mancuso’s Loft in the East Village. Dancer Brahm “Bravo” LaFortune notes that “lofting” does not connote a specific dance style. The dancing that developed at The Loft is characterized by smoother, more lyrical movement than rocking and breaking, which were characteristically aggressive and dynamic. (See Fikentscher, Lawrence, and Sommer’s work included in the “Suggested Reading List” in the Back Matter of this issue.) For another viewpoint on lofting, dance practitioner Jon Malavé has been documenting his findings here: <https://loftstyledance.tumblr.com/>, and additional information about The Loft here: <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/19/807333757/still-saving-the-day-the-most-influential-dance-party-in-history-turns-50>

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.

Outlaw: a term used in reference to people engaging in extra-legal activities. In the context of hip hop, it’s often used in conjunction with or as a synonym for gangs and gang activity. The term also sometimes references the one illegal hip hop element graffiti, the culture specific to that practice, and its participants. For more information on the disambiguation between street organizations, refer to the Conversation with Break Easy and Mighty Mike, Footnote 7.

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.

Rock dance: also known as “uprocks” or “Brooklyn rock,” which is the dance that has roots in outlaw culture in Brooklyn. This dance is practiced in an Apache Line—two lines of people facing each other. Rockers dance for an entire record, as opposed to breakers, who usually get down to looped breaks in a song. Moves include “jerks,” which is to move/squat rhythmically down to the floor, and “burns” or insults to your opponent. A rocker should not be confused or conflated with “breaker” or “b-boy/b-girl” though there are breakers who also rock.

Tutting: part of the “West Coast Styles” sometimes referred to as “Funk Styles” of dance that loosely includes popping, waving, strobing, dime-stopping, and so on. For more information, refer to Naomi Bragin.

Spanish slang

Basura: Spanish term for “trash.”

Carajo: Spanish term for “shit.”

Moreno: Spanish term for “brown” to indicate hair/skin tone.

Papow: Spanish term that sounds like “powpow,” indicating a spanking.

Puñeta: Spanish term of exasperation that can translate to anything from “wanker” to “fucker.”

Popular Events/Jams and Practice sessions mentioned throughout the Conversations:

B-Boy Summit—now known as “B-Boy/B-Girl Summit”: event started in 1994 by B-Girl Asia One to celebrate all elements of hip hop culture:

The Bboy Masters Pro-Am: event started in 1996 by B-Boy Speedy Legs with Zulu Gremlin in Miami, FL.

Liner Notes: Serouj “Midus” Aprahamian

You have to do your research. And I say that honestly, endearingly, with a lot of affection and emotion. Anyone who gets involved in this should be responsible enough to do the research.

—Break Easy

Since my earliest involvement in breaking over twenty-four years ago, I remember virtually every seasoned breaker, popper, and locker I encountered—many of whom, like Break Easy and Mighty Mike, traced their beginnings to the late 1970s and early 1980s—implore our generation to question mainstream, often distorted, depictions of hip hop culture and to do our own research on the background of the dance styles associated with this movement.

Fast-forward to 2021 and this same emphasis on “knowing your history” comes across in this in-depth conversation between Break Easy and Mighty Mike. Their memories of New York during the height of breaking’s commercialization in the 1980s demonstrate just how far this dance proliferated back then, with stories of b-boys and b-girls from every borough teaching, performing, and competing with one another throughout the city. Unfortunately, most of these stories have never been formally documented as journalists and academics have tended to rely mostly on those who appeared in major film and television programs. Practitioners from areas such as pre-gentrification Williamsburg—let alone Brooklyn as a whole—who did not make it onto movie screens have often been overlooked, as have affiliated dance styles such as popping (electric boogie), rocking (uprocking), lofting, and the hustle. As this discussion illuminates, however, community-based figures like Break Easy, Mighty Mike, and countless others have continued to pass on their local embodiment of these important cultural practices to

generations around the world, despite their general lack of institutional support.

Interestingly, as their conversation moves from past neighborhood experiences to present mentoring activities, both discussants also seem to modify their outlook toward breaking and rocking, accordingly. Their positive remarks about the lack of formal rules and authority in the 1980s give way to appeals for greater structure, compartmentalization, and "authenticity" today. For instance, Mighty Mike talks about gravitating away from the Furious Rockers Crew in his younger years, due to their scrutinizing and discouraging president, in favor of the more horizontal approach he found in the Scramblin' Feet dance crew. The latter's more self-organized approach seemed to allow greater creative exploration and collaboration, something that Break Easy also lauds about his early embodied experience. However, this emphasis on informality begins to slightly shift as we move into their recollections of more recent years, with each expressing concern over properly labeling their dance practices and determining "What could be changed, what couldn't be changed" in each style, as well as admonitions that there are no "real" b-boys anymore and that "rocking" has become "watered down." In line with this insistence on independent research, it would be important to dig deeper into these remarks and explore what factors have affected such conceptualizations. How have institutional, ideological, aesthetic, and socio-economic transformations affected the performance and principles of dances such as breaking and rocking—both among present practitioners and those who trace their roots even further back than the current discussants? This conversation prompts this and many other questions, while also driving home the scholarly imperative of not relying on one or two sources but, rather, gathering as wide a cross-section of testimony as possible. In other words, "knowing your history" is understanding that this discussion is itself only one layer of a much broader social and cultural formation.

Author Biographies

Serouj “Midus” Aprahamian is a long-time practitioner of breaking, popping, and underground hip hop dance styles. In 2021, he completed his PhD in Dance Studies from York University, with a focus on breaking and hip hop history. His scholarly writings have appeared in the *Journal of Black Studies*, *Dance Research Journal*, *Oxford African American Studies Center*, and the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies*.



B-girls Worldwide: Hanging with Stash & big tara



big tara

Heartbreakerz/Anomalies/MAWU



Stash

Heartbreakerz

B-girls Worldwide, a conversation with tara “big tara” chrichlow and Stacey “Stacey Stash” Earsman. Video recorded and edited by MiRi Park and grace jun, April 6, 2021. Watch the full video here: https://youtu.be/hScyqN8_4fM

MiRi Park: Hello, welcome. This is our conversation between B-girl tara and B-girl Stash. My name is MiRi Park, otherwise known as B-girl seoulsonyk. And we are going to have a conversation today with the two of you. As two dancers in a global b-girl crew known as the Heartbreakerz, we’re most interested in hearing about your experience in the scene. tara and I have known each other for a very, very long time and in many ways, tara is synonymous to New York. And also as hip hop is also synonymous to New York, for me, tara equals hip hop equals New York.

And Stash—I have just recently met—and has been very active as a b-girl in the Middle East and now resides in Australia. Is this where you grew up, Stash?

Stacey Stash: No, I grew up in New Zealand.

MiRi Park: A-ha. OK, so I'm sure that you all will get into all that. So I think—While hip hop, a Black cultural form, has become a shared youth culture among multicultural, multi-generational people, what's often missing from these spaces in these conversations is the acknowledgement of race, gender, ethnicity and nationality, so we welcome you to tell your stories about how you got into breaking and explore your observations about the scene.

I was also hoping that maybe you could tell us about how you all found your way into Heartbreakerz, specifically, and could also name check your other crew members as well. Dr. grace, would you like to add anything?

Dr. grace shinhae jun: I'm just curious—and adding, particularly as women, what that means to you to be in the space. And I think tara, specifically—Black women are often erased from hip hop and breaking scenes, specifically. I think about if young Black girls want to go learn, where are they going to go or who are they going to reach out to when there's a lot of erasure? And then MiRi and I both [have] been talking about invisibility of Asian Americans and their contributions, and balancing that invisibility, but also not erasing Blackness on the account of—So just thinking about that, but I'm sure you all have some amazing stories that we're excited to hear.

big tara: Wow. This is cool. I would really love to know how you got into breaking and stuff. In general, I feel like when I think of anyone in our crew, everyone has like a hardcore tomboy streak but you know—How did you get into breaking?

Stacey Stash: You know I don't actually even think a lot of people know when I first started, which was in New Zealand in Auckland and I signed up to this summer school and they had—it was probably when I was about 15 or 16, initially. It was like a performing arts school. I didn't even want to be in a theater show. The only thing I went there for was because they had a breaking class, so I'd only turn up to that. And then I got kicked out because I wasn't going to anything else.

And then I found out where the guys that were teaching me were down at a youth center. Then I would go down there and just train all the time, by myself. There were no other girls there at the time, breaking.

That's how I first got into it and I would just train on my own and keep going, like every Friday night by myself and—Yeah, that's how it first started, in Auckland.

It was just something, I just like, I saw, you know, you see, you saw it on TV or you saw it like—And I was like, “Oh wow, I wanna do that. That looks dope.” Then also growing up in the hip hop scene with my brother being older, and he was into the music and everything and the culture, and my father, so it was—initially, it was all really there but the dancing, I hadn't been introduced to until I'd seen it on TV. Then I saw the guys at the school for the performing arts group, and then I went there and then it was just like OK, “I'm going to keep doing this.”

big tara: OK, and where does Melo¹ fit in this story?

Stacey Stash: After I ran, *She Got Game*. We met after [crosstalk] so well later.

big tara: Wow I really thought y'all I grew up together, that's how tight y'all are.

1. Fellow crew member b-girl Melo, with whom Stash co-owns Migrant Coffee.

Stacey Stash: She ran a jam up in Queensland—so I moved to Melbourne, maybe in like 2000? 2001? And then she was up in Queensland at the time, and she ran a jam—This was before *She Got Game*, and she invited me out there to judge, to be a judge. We weren't initially friends then. I just went there to judge and then I came back to Melbourne. And then we met at *She Got Game*, but [we] still weren't really tight then.

And then she happened to be in New York at the same time I was for *Rock The Bells*. So we all went to New York for *Rock The Bells* and *Rock Steady Anniversary*, the 30th, 30th anniversary. Yeah. A mutual friend was like, "You need to meet up with Melo." And I was like, "Yeah, all right." And this is when, you know, mobile phones and the Internet didn't really exist, so we'd have to get on a pay phone and be like, "Yo, I'm at this corner. I'll meet you here at like, in an hour." [laughter]

big tara: Wow.

Stacey Stash: After that, she moved down to Melbourne.

big tara: Wow, OK.

Stacey Stash: Maybe two thousand—what was that? 2007? 2008 maybe? I don't remember when the anniversary was—what year it was.

big tara: Yeah, that we can look up.

Stacey Stash: Even I didn't even know you then.

big tara: Yeah I didn't meet y'all until we were at Freestyle Session? Yeah, I think we were at Freestyle Session—This was the Freestyle Session when a lot of us were there. Beta was there, Aruna was there, Honey Rockwell was there—It was just a lot of people at this particular Freestyle Session. I was out there to perform

because [b-girl] Emiko [Sugiyama] was having the J.U.i.C.E./Hip Hop Fest. So that's what got me out there.²

But yeah, that's so cool. Like you and Melo's story sounds very similar to me and Aruna's story where we really bonded—We met in New York, but we really also bonded over Rock Steady Anniversary, and all the jams. All the stuff that would be kind of complementary to it.

Yeah, and like hanging out around the City having to leave a message and whatever.

Stacey Stash: Did you and Aruna meet when you were both already in Heartbreakerz or in New York [big tara: no] and you connected?

big tara: Before Heartbreakerz even existed, we were cool. Yeah we— This was a super long time ago. We recently celebrated maybe— we're friends, 25 years now. Something like that—We met at a party that Invincible³ had invited me to because this DJ Jackie was spinning, and I got there, and Invincible was like, "Oh, that's another b-girl," and I was like, "Uhhh, what? Maybe I should battle her." [laughing, crosstalk]

Stacey Stash: I feel like you know—That was like when I was—When I saw Melo and she invited me to judge. I was like, "Uhhh. . ." Like everyone had this attitude. Now it's so much more uplifting. I see the changes with women in the scene—with other women. [big tara: True.] But back then, it was [. . .] like, "Yeah, pffft. Yeah, I'll just battle her." You know? [big tara: Yeah.] "I don't know you. I don't wanna get to know you."

big tara: "This is my territory." Exactly that. I remember that instinct and I remember being glad—I always am glad I didn't act on that

2. Beta, Aruna, Honey Rockwell, and Emiko are all b-girls who are still active in the scene in varying degrees.

3. Invincible is an MC in the Anomalies crew that includes Pri The Honey Dark, Helixx C, big tara, and DJ Kuttin Kandi (<https://emergencemedia.org/pages/invincible>).

first impulse and I was just like, "Oh, calm down." Like, "Let's make friends," and that's one of my best friends now, so you know [Stacey Stash: Yeah.] Yeah.

Stacey Stash: Yeah, Aruna!

big tara: Yeah. Yeah, Heartbreakerz—I feel like Heartbreakerz came after Rokafella created that documentary, *All the Ladies Say*. I feel like it was a spin-off of that because Beta was like, "I'm doing my own thing," you know?

Stacey Stash: Yeah.

big tara: So yeah. [. . .] How I got into breaking [. . .] The first time I got into breaking was just because it was the one of the things to do around the neighborhood- an activity that was, you know, a fun activity like double-dutch, like, "Oh, go break." And I remember, I was super hype that I figured out how to do a hand spin. I was like, "Yeah! I'm doing it! I'm official!" You know—my family's like, "Whatever," but—

Later on, I took it—I took it on again because I was in my crew The Anomolies and we really wanted to represent all four elements of hip hop so—I was MCing—we were all MCing—we had Kuttin' Kandi our DJ. So we were like, "All right. We need the other elements." So I was like, "OK. I'll break," you know? So I went to start training with Crazy Legs.

That lasted for like, just like a few months because I just always knew that wasn't the place for me to grow—like, no shade to him. And, seeing how things have turned out nowadays, I really am glad I trusted my instincts.⁴ But—I just knew, like, that wasn't the space where I would be nurtured properly for me to be the kind of b-girl I wanted to be.

4. In December 2020, Crazy Legs admitted to committing sexual misconduct within the breaking scene. <https://www.okayplayer.com/culture/crazy-legs-sexual-misconduct.html>

Then I ended up with Rokafella—training with Rok and Kwik[step], which is awesome. They're really great with foundation, and they had an awesome practice session at this African dance studio which was really cool because that had the Africa-vibes. But—

Stacey Stash: So it's such a [. . .]. It's such a huge difference because in New Zealand there wasn't any other outlets or other people to go to. It was like one space, and that was it. And if you weren't really accepted there, there was nowhere else for you to go. You didn't have other options, you know?

I remember, because I was going to school when I was living on my own and all that. [I was like,] "Damn. This is like literally, the only thing I can do that I don't have to pay to do. Like, [big tara: Hip hop.] can play music, I can do it on the street, I can do it at home," as an extracurricular activity that you don't have to spend money on because everything you do now is—you have to pay a fee. You have to pay, you know, a membership fee. You have to pay to get into the studio, or the youth center, or—you know?

And it was like, "Ah well, shit, if these guys aren't going to accept me here, I just have to go home and do it by myself." So that's the thing you have when you're in New York—you had other options.

big tara: Yeah. I feel like at the time—it was really—I was really lucky. That happened to be the time when like breaking was just starting to make a resurgence—in '97—I don't know exactly why, but I remember, I went to the Zulu Anniversary jams, which were so awesome—It's a shame, they don't have like—there's nothing like it anymore, but—It used to be three days. It would be at an armory, a huge building. It would have all the elements—Tribe Called Quest would perform, Wu Tang Clan, George Clinton would be there. There'd be Muslims with all

the bean pies and publications. It was just a mix of all different types of black culture that connected with hip hop. [. . .] It was a really nice, big flourishing community [. . .] None of that really happens now.

That was also when crews started coming out—like, more people started coming out. Pro-Am started that year, which was like—I feel like because we didn’t have social media, Internet, it was even more exciting when you saw other people in person, like other breakers and, like, other b-girls. And like, “Oh wow, y’all. This is—that’s the flavor of Miami.” Or like, “Oh, that’s the flavor of Chicago.” Or like, “Oh, that’s the flavor of Toronto.” Just seeing—They have some people in person, because, [it was] really the only way we could see other people, besides that was, like, VHS.

Like, sending people a VHS in the mail—trading a VHS like, “Oh, you have Battle of the Year? I’ll trade you for Freestyle Session ’97,” you know? And mail it to each other. Like yeah, used to be cute. Now you can just watch stuff on YouTube.

Stacey Stash: Everything on YouTube. I think when the Internet started happening, and you’re on dial up, you know, when it was connected, but to a phone jack?

big tara: [laughing] yeah.

Stacey Stash: And I would go on this website—can’t even remember it was called—it was probably like, breakdance.com or something, I dunno—But I, that’s how I learned how to do the six-step properly, but it was written in a Word document, so you had to read. [big tara: Woooow.] [crosstalk] I used to work in this real estate—as like reception and—it’s closed, but I would be there. So I would get on their dial-up and then print out the Word document and then just practice in the real estate [. . .]

big tara: [laughing] That is so cool.

Stacey Stash: Alright, cool. So you'd be like on the floor in the position to start your six-step and I have a Word document right in front of me, and I've moved it here, but OK. And then I'd be like—

big tara: I love that!

Stacey Stash: [. . .] it was just in a Word document of, "How to Six-step." [laughs]

big tara: Wow. That is so dope. Like, it has never occurred to me to learn from reading a document, so that is—wow. Well, you did that.

Stacey Stash: Yeah. No one was teaching me in New Zealand, initially, you know? So I was, like, Word document it is.

big tara: So, how did you get to where you were gonna throw a jam? How did you get there?

Stacey Stash: Well, after I moved from Auckland to Melbourne—[. . .] I was breaking when I got to Melbourne—That was a disaster. Like, initial disaster, but the crews that were here—and there weren't a lot of women that were dancing then. I remember going to my first jam by myself. I would watch, and kind of just see what, you know, what everyone was up to and just observe and then I was like, "All right, cool." Went to the cypher they had one night at the bar, called, I think it was Everland—and I always remember this—and it was like one of Australia's, like, best b-boy crews Fresh Sox were there. And I remember coming out into the cypher but I was just absolutely shat on, like, I was spat on, you know, by a dude, like a specific dude—and I won't name names—but I—and I remember that time and I was there and [. . .] it was like, "What the fuck?" You know? "What the fuck you doing?" Like, "This isn't your—this isn't for you!" And I was like, "What the fuck? All right." I was like, "All right, cool. OK, no problem. Fuck you, you, you, you." And then I just walked out.

And I remember I hired—probably for like six months to a year—I hired this hall. And I had to catch a train with my boombox that fit in a bag—it was like this big [gestures size with hands], with a cord, you know, you had to plug it in. And [big tara: OK.] I would go train by myself for hours on end, with whatever spare time I had because I just wanted to come out with more determination and into another cypher without that happening again, you know?

big tara: I feel you.

Stacey Stash: Yeah and then I went out, I met a girl, a woman called Demi, B-girl Demolition and—[big tara: OK.] [. . .] and we were just chilling. We were just dancing, and she was like, “Yo. Come on, show me your shit. What have you got? Let’s go! Let’s just do it together!” So she was a real motivator as well.

And that’s how I got my b-girl name, because then I came out—I was like, “Yeah, I think I’m ready now.” You know? And I came out and she was like, “Yooo! Where have you been stashing your shit, bro? Like, that’s your name—Stash! B-girl Stash!”

Then I went to more jams with her and coming out—And then, it just took years to kind of build that, I guess that respect in the scene—just [to] know that there was a woman who was in the scene who was dedicated—It wasn’t just a phase. It wasn’t just, “I’m gonna hang out at a jam, maybe break a little bit and show you guys a couple of things,” and then not be involved.

So I just made sure that I was very present for a very long time, regardless of what people would say I do, and I think people just got bored of, like, giving me shit because [they thought] “Ahh, well, she’s not going anywhere.” [laughter] And, and then it just kind of snowballed from there.

I ended up being in Fresh Sox, which were a huge inspiration, I think, for sure. They definitely made a lot of who I am as a b-girl. Without them, I don’t think I would be [. . .] where I was or where I am now. They definitely built a foundation and made me a lot stronger. [. . .]

With that [. . .] I was put into Zulu Kweenz. And then I guess with that status and that recognition, and having been to jams, and having respect throughout Australia, and having traveled a lot, I was like, "I'm going to run a jam." There's never been a[n] international b-girl jam in Australia. I don't think there were even many b-girl jams at all. And I was a bit—

It was controversial at the time, because there was that whole thing about being, you know, having equality within the scene, and—If you want to be a b-girl, you should be up to battle with the b-boys, which I know at the time—of course, I believed in it as well and that's why I was going by what—[I] would always compete against b-boys 'cause to me, it didn't bother me at all—but I wanted to be able to give women in the same opportunity to battle the best b-girls at the time in the world and put that on the map and see that they're girls out there, women out there, who can be just as good as you, if not better. You all just haven't seen it because you're stuck in Australia being like, "Well, you know, why am I going to travel around the world?" There was a lot of this mentality of men or boys in Australia, where they'd go, "Well, why would I travel across the world to be the worst—when I'm the best at it here?" Which blew my mind. I was like, "How's that—?"

big tara: Mediocrity?

Stacey Stash: Yeah, right? I was like, "Why would that—How is that possible? Like, why would you not want to travel to get better, to battle people, to be in a cypher with people that are—you know, that you've looked up to?"

big tara: hmmm.

Stacey Stash: Yeah. That was a trip. But then I got—then I was like, "I'm just [gonna] run a jam, and I'm gonna put a lot of my own money into it. I can get some loans. Fly people out and just do it."

big tara: All right.

Stacey Stash: I'm a doer!

big tara: Yes, I'm down to do one. I'm coming to the next one.
[crosstalk] [. . .]

So two parts of what you said really struck a chord with me: One, because, after a point of being around Crazy Legs, then learning with Full Circle, then for a while rolling with Twist and Kmel—I also was like, "I'm going to do this by myself." And I would go to the local gym and train for four hours a day, just by myself. Yeah, like, "Fuck that." And it was also definitely to feel a certain way, empowered in my own—dancing in my own identity within the scene, not that I needed to be attached to anyone, [. . .] or have to compromise to accommodate other people's kind of ways of boxing me into a certain role that I'm supposed to play.

So that—I definitely remember having a time just being in my own zone, like, "I'm just doing this breaking stuff and I'm just going to get in my own little zone." And when I would—when I came back out from being away quietly, then I entered some battles and I did a lot better. You know, I smoked a few people, and I was like, "OK, this is fun." But I definitely feel like [you] should have some time to yourself to discover your own voice.

But I also feel like within this scene it's, it's helpful for b-girls if they have a b-boy boyfriend, or husband, or a counterpart. I feel like a lot of b-girls who are well-known—part of it is because of their being part of a "power couple."

[. . .] I know you also haven't been specifically attached to one dude and [. . .] platform. [. . .] You did it—Word. [Stacey Stash: No.] Oh, my goodness. [laughter]

Oh, my gosh. Wait, it's so funny because the other day, someone said that to me—he was like, "What about y'all in Heartbreakerz? Look at the name of your crew! You're a bunch of Heartbreakerz. You treat guys like—" And I'm like, "I don't know

what to say [. . .] You're just getting a taste of your own medicine. [crosstalk] A lot of times, y'all can't handle it when it comes from b-girls." [laughter] Oh, my goodness. Yeah. We really are a girl-gang, though.

Stacey Stash: Yeah. [. . .] very strong.

big tara: People get intimidated. I feel like that summer that you stayed in New York was so awesome.

Stacey Stash: Yeah. I was there for a minute. I just kept extending my—[crosstalk] "Ah, another week. Another week." Then it turned into, like, six weeks or something completely ridiculous.

big tara: Yeah. [. . .] I love that—I just feel like our independence, either as Heartbreakerz or as b-girls, in general, it definitely is intimidating because a lot of b-boys are so immature or—I mean, it is misogynistic [in] a lot of ways within the scene. [. . .] I do feel like in my journey—there were times I thought, people were like, "Yeah, let's practice," and I'm like, "Awesome." And then we're going to practice and then they're like trying to hit, and I'm like, "Awww. Yeah, no. I actually really just wanted to practice. I don't like you like that." You know?

Stacey Stash: Yeah [. . .]

big tara: So, like Heartbreakerz definitely offered a bit of a safe haven for alpha females. [laughter]

Stacey Stash: [. . .] Yeah I think a lot of b-boys just get like real butt-hurt—Just real ego hurt, you know? When it's not—what they, what they expect or what they want, or—[. . .] there's a fair few [. . .] that are not like that, you know?

big tara: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yeah, without mentioning any names, I will say I really admire the way you've handled certain people in

the scene, who had taken a liking to you, or—[laughter] I always respected your gangster with that.

Stacey Stash: Yeah. [. . .] no time for that. [laughter]

big tara: Exactly. Yeah. How, how did you get to that space, though, because, like I do feel like there are a lot of b-girls—Like, being a b-girl, sometimes you can feel that you need to overcompensate in certain other ways to show you're feminine. Or accommodate a certain narrative in order to prove that you're still a woman or something. How do you really maintain your independence the way you have? Cuz you travel everywhere, you do whatever, you throwin' jams, [. . .] you date whoever or not, you know?

Stacey Stash: [. . .] I think from a very young age, I had to learn very quickly to be independent, regardless if I was with somebody or not, if I had family or not, you know? And I went to a lot of different schools—I've entered, like, 15 different schools. I lived in five different cities. Three different countries [big tara: Wow.] So it was very quick and easy for me to also detach from things because I knew a lot of my life wasn't permanent. So it was very easy to just go, "Well, on to the next thing, cool that's happened, adapt, that's what's happening now." And if I didn't do things for myself, it was never going to happen. I couldn't rely on other people. [. . .] That whole independence came with me—[. . .] it's still there now because I don't rely on anybody else. I don't expect that I'm going to be able to get what I need from somebody else.

[. . .] It does make me feel whole, if I can do those things on my own and not have to rely on other people, you know? If I do, I'll totally reach out to someone if I need help, but majority of the time it's like, "Nah. I'm good this way, thank you." And for, say, [. . .] a man—if I like him—I want him to be part of my life, [he] would have to be pretty strong and pretty independent for him to be able to maintain a relationship [with me], because

otherwise it wouldn't work. So, if he doesn't fit into what I need, I'm like, "See you later." [. . .]

big tara: Word.

Stacey Stash: So yeah, I guess it's just something that I've had—yeah, I learned very quickly to just carry forward and not care too much about what I need from somebody else, because I get everything I need from me. You're just a bonus.

big tara: Mm. Mm. OK.

Stacey Stash: Yeah. So, very happy with my friends and my family. They provide all of the things that I need, you know? For sure, one day I'll get married, [. . .] have some kids, but—I'm a strong woman [. . .] really chill and relaxed, but if there's a dude that can't—[hang] with a tomboy—because we were saying about women, especially in Heartbreakerz were like super alpha—[. . .] Like I was saying, boys get butt-hurt, you know? Like, they don't [like that] a girl that can break better than them, who can skateboard better than them, or snowboard better than them—[. . .]

big tara: Exactly.

Stacey Stash: You know? So it's hard to, like—[. . .]

big tara: Exactly, yeah. Like I feel like I've seen b-girls kinda dilute themselves to fit into their couple and you're like, "Awww." And no shade, I'm a name a name—like when I think of, for example, like AT—she was totally one way when she was [. . .] with Focus, but once she broke it off with him, she was like, "Ahhhh!" [. . .] What? She, she posin' with her butt in the picture. I was like, "Oh, shit! Wow! You givin' us panties?" AT's comin' out!

Stacey Stash: Yeah!

big tara: That's a whole new woman finding herself. [. . .] I feel like, maybe even like—that's how—sometimes—even grooming happens within the scene, you know? Like just trying to really box, the way that women are represented within hip hop. I love that we're kind of against that grain. [Stacey Stash: We're different.] Yeah.

Stacey Stash: Heartbreakerz, as well, is a very, very, very, like very different style—very different—everybody has a feminine side to them as well, but it's still very raw, you know? We don't play off, like, one particular, not style, but form, I guess, in a way? Because we all add our own personalities into our dance, you know, I think. [crosstalk]

Roxy. I love Roxy—watching her break. Yo, you're, like, such a lady, but she's so [. . .]

big tara: So raw! Yeah. It's a perfect example. She'll bust out some head spins and crazy hollow backs and hop around, and then pop up, and give you a little pose, [Stacey Stash blows a kiss] a hair toss, and a spin off, like—yes, with a twirl. Exactly, yeah.

Stacey Stash: Yes [. . .] right. And most girls wouldn't want to do that because they think there's a[n] expectation from b-boys that you have to be like a gangsta. You have to be straight and narrow foundation, all g'd out. There's no femininity about it whatsoever, you know? But it's like, yeah—

big tara: Like you're supposed to totally erase any parts of you that even looks the tiniest bit feminine and just move like a man.

Stacey Stash: And they all start calling you a man and then you're a lesbian. So it's like, bro, can you even win here?

big tara: Exactly. Exactly.

Stacey Stash: It's ongoing. It's so stupid.

big tara: So stupid. [. . .] When a bunch of us were at IBE—it was me, Melo, Aruna, Beta, Ladie, Candy, and Roxy—[. . .] To witness how people—Because obviously, we were just going to stay together, and just go around, and do stuff, and talk shit, and laugh, and be ourselves, and be excited to see each other in another country—But people’s reaction to us was like, “Oh, my goodness. Who are they? What’s going on? Is that a—Is that a crew of b-girls? Why are they so loud?” and “Oh, they don’t care about us,” and like, “I think she just hooked up with one of the guys and then didn’t care about him after!” [laughter]

Just to see [. . .] wild women who are also still united, I think, is a scary thing for a lot of people [. . .]

Stacey Stash: And they’re dope b-girls! You know? On top of that, too!

big tara: Yeah, and just not gushing over the people, people are sweating like, “Oh, my goodness, so-and-so is here!” We’re like, “OK.” And we’re excited to see each other, though, you know. [laughs]
[. . .] I remember you have mentioned something—I can’t remember the exact story—but you had went to a jam in the Middle East and you couldn’t even enter the battle? Like, what was that?

Stacey Stash: Well, I moved there [. . .] in 2010, 2011. I was like, “Yeah, sick. I’m going to be able to—” Also I had no idea about the country—I didn’t even know where it was. I had to get a map of it, “Oh! That’s where I’m moving to.” I had to read about it, you know? And when I got there, I was like, “Oh, dope. Like, I’m going to be able to train and I’ll be on my own. It’s gonna be sick and—

I reached out to a guy, Hakoomy, on the Internet, like emailed him. I was like trying to find a b-boy or some type of breaking thing happening there. And we linked up and he’s dope—he’s still my friend to this day and he’s awesome. He was—him and his

crew, they're Mighty Jokerz, were breaking. I was training with them for a bit, but women weren't allowed to dance in public there. Not even today, unless you're at a hotel bar, the bar that's attached to a hotel, or something like that. But barely that either because—Yeah, it was horrible. [big tara: Wow.]

You weren't allowed to dance in public. So there were jams—a lot of the jams were held in a community center, or in public at a park, or at a shopping mall. Yeah, and you weren't—women weren't allowed to dance at all. If you're caught dancing, you're deported. See you later. Yeah.

big tara: Like, for real, for real? Deported? Deported?

Stacey Stash: It's no joke. You can go to jail, and you can get deported.

big tara: For dancing.

Stacey Stash: Yeah.

big tara: Wow.

Stacey Stash: As a woman. Yeah.

big tara: Wow.

Stacey Stash: In Qatar.

big tara: That's hardcore.

Stacey Stash: Yeah. So I remember my friend, he was, "Ah you could probably get up and have a jam on the stage—" this is, Tyrone was there as well. [big tara: OK.] So it was on stage—it was all, "Just tuck—" he was [like], "Oh, get your ponytail, put it in a plait. Tuck it into your hood, put your hood on." [Stash puts on her hood] And then to start, you know, just breaking. So I did that, and the next minute I get a tap on the shoulder by the CID, which is a local

police, on the stage—[big tara: Wow!] They're like, "Yeah, you need to get off the stage. You need to not be dancing."

So I was like, "All right, cool." So then I stood next to Tyrone on the stage as he was DJing, and [the CID was] like, "No woman on the stage at all. Get off!" It wasn't even allowed to stand on the stage, you know? So I think when I initially thought I would be breaking a lot there, it kind of died off for me there. The only thing that kept me connected to breaking while I was living there was traveling.

So I got to see you guys in New York, or I was traveling to London, I got to see some of the Zulu Kingz, Kweenz, and you know? That was kind of the only thing that still kept me connected to breaking because I wasn't—It was depressing! Like imagine going to a jam and it was poppin' off and you can't go dance because you'll get deported. [laughs]

big tara: Ughhh! I can't even imagine. Oh my gosh [Stacey Stash: The music—] I would be so mad. I would be so mad.

Stacey Stash: The music's dope and it's just, like, everyone's having a great time and you're standing on the edge like [. . .] I just—stopped going to jams there, because I was like, "This is stupid—I can't not—" Yeah.

big tara: Wow.

Stacey Stash: Yeah and it's not—there's nothing you can do about it, you know?

big tara: Yeah that's what I was gonna say. There's no measures you can take to try to shift—Wow. Wow. But, did you encounter any other like secret b-girls out there, or—?

Stacey Stash: Not one, no. Not in Qatar.

big tara: Damn.

Stacey Stash: Yeah.

big tara: Wow. That's crazy.

Stacey Stash: Yeah I don't even know even to this day—like a few b-boys in Qatar, but not a lot. I mean, there's a lot of stuff happening in Dubai and Bahrain. But—I didn't know a lot of women. I didn't know one woman that's breaking there. I make it sound so sad. [laughs]

big tara: No. I mean that sounds—you know—

Honestly, like quarantine—not being able to dance so much was torturous enough. I can't even imagine being someplace and I'm not allowed to dance. That's even [. . .] more aggravating.

Stacey Stash: Yeah.

big tara: [. . .] So there was a question of what, like, racism within the scene. Have you experienced racism?

Stacey Stash: I haven't so much. I think—[. . .] I feel like New Zealand—growing up there—You know, majority—it's all pretty—equal—Everyone in New Zealand is raised—

There's a Maori culture, which are the Indigenous people of New Zealand, and that is still very significant to this day there, it is a priority for the country so there's never been—as an adult anyway, you know—grown up, as an adult I hadn't seen it.

As a child, yeah. Kids that bully you because you couldn't fit into a specific way because I'm half-Maori, half-Thai, but growing up, I didn't look either, so I didn't fit into any specific group or ethnicity. So I was either teased because I looked more Asian, and then if I tried to join the Polynesian, kapa-haka group, which is [the] Indigenous dance of New Zealand group that schools have, I wouldn't fit in there either. And that as a child, I think a lot of—I found it worse [. . .] probably as a child than I do as an adult. Just bullying and things like that it's not as—I don't know.

I feel like a lot more people in New Zealand are more educated about it—treatment of others—but in school it's like a given—Like, it's school, you know? Kids are just little assholes.

big tara: Pretty much. Pretty much.

Stacey Stash: Which I see now is happening around the world with adults and I'm like, "Fuuuuck."

big tara: Yeah. Yeah.

Stacey Stash: [. . .] In the scene I haven't experienced racism, or anything like that. Have you?

big tara: I mean, I've experienced it as like—Like I can say that I'm very sensitive because I'm a native New Yorker and my experience of hip hop is not like, "Oh, the first time I saw it was on this TV show and this movie." It's, it's actually my Indigenous culture until I do a DNA test and—

[. . .] Yeah, I definitely have experienced erasure, or just [. . .] people not wanting to deal with the inconvenient parts of the culture and just wanting to deal with the fun parts like, "Oh, I want to dance and go to parties and meet other dancers, and get some clout." You know? But, like the work-part of being part of a culture—you know, having the uncomfortable conversations, actually participating in activism—[. . .]

I really was reminded of it last year because—They started having interviews of the first generation b-boys from Kool Herc's parties. That whole [. . .] having them just tell their story—a lot of people got angry and upset and [said,] "You're tryin' to take away the contributions of Latino/Latina/Latinx people!" [. . .] Just by hearing the stories of pioneers? That's a threat like that? So there's that.

And then just certain people like saying n*gger, who—I'm like, "Why are you even—? You shouldn't be saying that word. Like,

I don't care how cool you are. I don't care how dope you dance. You actually shouldn't be saying the N word."

So you know, like microaggressions like that, where people want to put on—It's like they want to put on your—put it on like a costume and then try to out-hip hop you, so—

I'm still learning the language to express it in a very calm and verbose way—And not just curse people out [. . .] I've definitely over the years just witnessed a lot of stuff. I was like, "Oh that was wack." Or like, "Oh, let's actually give that person props for what they contributed or—" Stuff like that everywhere—
[crosstalk]

Stacey Stash: I remember I would travel to New York and I had friends, you know boys, I was over there with, you know, from Australia and a lot of them would mimic—you know how you basically see people in front of you, and then you start mimicking [big tara: Mm-hmm.] their behavior, and their characteristics, parts of their personality, and they start talking like them.

There was one dude—We understood why as well—and he put this durag on—which he didn't even need to have one on—and you know, saying the N word, and all this around us [. . .] and I was like, "Yo, why are you—?" It was so [. . .] "You're talking about being from the ghetto—" Mind you, this guy grew up, like, by the beach in a two story house, and it just made no sense to me. I was like, "Why are you trying to be somebody that you are not? Just don't—Like, just break, and like, you know, be good at it." There are no—

Is it whether or not boys feel like they're going to be accepted if they act and behave the way that their mentors do, or that they look up to do—? Is that not—? I think that's such a big difference with—well, women that I know anyway, and our friends and the crew that we're in, is that we don't feel like we have to be somebody else to be accepted. [big tara: That's true.] [. . .]

You don't like it? That's cool. Like, whatever. We do [crosstalk] We're at IBE. We don't care, you know? We're not going to try and be that. Like, that's not—which I feel a lot of people in this scene do to be accepted and—[big tara: Mm-hmm. {crosstalk}] Yeah.

big tara: Definitely [. . .] I love that our crew actually is one of the crews that respects the whole idea of being original and not being a whole biter. [Stacey Stash: Yeah.] Everyone really works hard to be their own individual self, you know? And you know, we've seen each other all grow in all these different ways and just become awesome people, because we've been together for a while now.

Recently a lot of stuff has been coming out in terms of sexual assault within the scene and just [crosstalk] making it safe. Even recently, B-girl N'tegrity came out with naming the names and was like, "This person raped me."⁵ [. . .] I think they really coming for people, because the Olympics is a huge platform for breaking⁶ and we can't just have—Well, we just can't—we can't go out like that. We can't have people who have issues with boundaries, and sexual assault be our ambassadors for the world stage [. . .] That's like a terrible way to start.

[. . .] I'm really glad that we're continuing the dialogue until we can really address it in a healthy way within the community, because we have not—We have not been able to even from when that first time Afrika Bambaataa was accused, and it was just like, limbo.⁷ Nobody knew how to resolve it, so—

At least now the conversation is really being had even though it's awkward and uncomfortable, you know?

5. B-girl N'tegrity shares her story on sexual assault on her blog. <https://www.ntegrity-inmotion.com/blog>

6. Breaking will make its official debut in the Olympics in Paris 2024 (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/07/sport/breakdancing-olympics-paris-2024-spt-intl/index.html>)

7. In 2016, Afrika Bambaataa was accused of sexual abuse. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/8xx5yp/afrika-bambaataa-sexual-abuse-zulu-nation-ron-savage-hassan-campbell>

Stacey Stash: Yeah. I mean it's still awkward and uncomfortable for b-boys in the scene who are gay, right, as well.

big tara: That's true. That's true. That's true for, just like, [crosstalk] people don't know how to [. . .] just let them be. [Stacey Stash: Yeah.] That's true. That's true and—

Stacey Stash: [. . .] compare it—like, no comparison, but in terms of just like wanting to be accepted and not—[big tara: Yeah.] Sucks.

big tara: Yeah. It's just that the b-boy mentality has to mature and grow up. It can't be so hyper-masculine that it's toxic. You know? It needs to be able to—In real-life, hip hop is supposed to be a safe space where we can all go and jam out, so I'm glad that we're finally working on making that a reality [Stacey Stash: Yeah.] more so than before. Because, yeah, it did seem like a breeding ground for, you know, potential predators with, like, power dynamics. [Stacey Stash: Yeah.] Sometimes people are so caught up in being able to battle and conquer and that's the only way they know how to engage with people. They don't know how to actually just have an equal exchange.

Stacey Stash: Yeah. But even an equal exchange outside of breaking, too—[big tara: Right.] There are people that I'm still friends with, to this day, from traveling, but breaking wasn't the only thing—I mean, yes, that was what initially connected us to becoming friends, but then I could sit with them all for hours and not even speak about breaking at all, you know? And that's like, where I have found a lot of my good friendships have come from, because [. . .] breaking initially connected us, but then we can still have conversations about basically anything else to do with life, other than breaking, you know, which I love as well. It's not just, "Yo, let's watch footage! Yo, let's do this! Let's go break! Let's go do this!" [laughs]

big tara: Exactly. Yeah. There's more to life. Yeah. That's awesome, there's more, yeah yeah.

Dr. grace shinhae jun: . . . just really thinking about like both of you talking about [. . .] breaking not just being an activity that you do, but it really being about your life. So how are you still connected and—especially, where it feels like right now—Maybe in preparation for the Olympics, that it's all about the battles and if you're not in a battle, or you're active in the battle, you're not relevant as a breaker, or a b-girl? So maybe just [. . .] What are you doing to stay connected? Or what's your practice now?

Stacey Stash: Well, I'll quickly talk about Auckland and breaking there. So just as a timeline [. . .] Well I'm 37 next week! [crosstalk]

big tara: That's right! Aries season!

Stacey Stash: So 37 next week, so—Initially first saw breaking when I was fifteen [years old]. Moved back to Auckland, and that's when I first started. Then it dropped off, and in 2000, 2001—So, like seventeen? Yeah, because I was still—I was still at school, so I would have been like, 16, 17, 17? And then when I was going to this jam, it was Black Attack—this crew called Black Attack—

It was one b-girl I remember, B-girl Tweak but I never saw her, because she lived quite far away. And it was me—learning was observing. It was—I did it quietly. I just—I would go, I would observe. I would go home. I would practice my headstands on a towel. I remember getting teased for doing that, quite often, actually.

There were no VHS circulating, not through my hands anyway. And then, it was the—going online and getting Word documents, and that was it. I would—Yeah, that's how I first learned and just watching the b-boys in Auckland at the youth center. [. . .]

Tryin' to think if I did anything else. I didn't have—there were no, not any jams really that I went to in Auckland that I can remember. There may have been one in Wellington but

I can't actually remember what that's called now. I didn't really see many b-girls down there from memory. But that's going back so long ago. I remember I got a lift with a friend of mine, and then I had to hitchhike all the way back out, which was like a 10-hour drive. Yeah. [big tara: Wow] Yeah [. . .] Body Rock! How did I forget that? Body Rock! That was what it was. B-girl Chic ran it, who's actually in Melbourne now, who I'm still friends with, to this day. She was down in Wellington so—Yeah that was dope, actually. That was a really good jam. Actually she's thinking of holding one here, soon. She wants to get me involved. We've been speaking about it, funnily enough. Yeah.

big tara: What is your practice now? Your breakin' practice?

Stacey Stash: Literally, not much at all. I'm not making—It's not that I don't have the time, I'm just not making the time for it because, Melo and I opened our business⁸ and the main focus is really just to get that up to—to get that popping off, so that we—her and I—can earn some money more than what we are now. Staying relevant—We're still friends with everybody that we've been friends with in the scene for a long time.

I also don't know of many jams that are happening like they used to, where there are cyphers and it is just super raw, and it's—I don't even know who's in the scene in Melbourne. I know a few kids that are in, like the—maybe from five years ago or so, but also, I left the country for nearly eight years, so I never saw new up-and-coming b-boys or b-girls.

The guys that I was still friends with are still in the scene now but I wouldn't know who's new. I don't hear of any jams that are happening because they just don't happen much anymore.

8. Migrant Coffee shop, founded by B-girls Stash and Melo <https://migrantcoffee.com/>

I don't know what happened to the generation after ours in Australia. [. . .]

For me, and I don't know if it's for anybody else, but I just— or it's because I'm not online as much, or I'm not—[big tara: Yeah.] So I just don't think a lot of these jams are happening. I know there's one that happened, like, a couple of weeks ago around with Lava Rock, who's still doing his thing. But other than that it's—I don't see much of where that, where the line was drawn, where it dropped off, or how it dropped off, and why it dropped off.

Speaking of B-girl—Tweak earlier [. . .] She's here in Melbourne now, and she had the Body Rock in Auckland, sorry, Wellington in New Zealand, which she wants to run again, and it was the same thing we're talking about earlier, where are those authentic kinda jams, where they're all elements? It's like, breaking, and graff writers over there, right? That just doesn't happen anymore.

big tara: Yeah. Those are the jams.

Stacey Stash: I want to go to those jams! Where are those jams now in Australia? That would make me be able to go out and have a—break for fun and not feel tied to having to compete to go to a jam, you know?

big tara: Yeah [. . .] For me, I totally relate to that. I was in the scene and then the more it started to become not jams, but full-out competitions, with people traveling from other places, and charging \$20 at the door, \$25, to sit and watch—You're not even getting to dance—The more it moved into that, the less, I was wanting to go out and be part of that. Plus, I really love the clubs anyway, so I just got more and more into house [dance]. Currently, in terms of the breaking scene, I spoke on a few panels last year on Zoom, but even—like at IBE and other places—basically about creating safe spaces whether it's as a

Black person, or a New Yorker. Or being able to hold space for the LGBTQ community within the breaking scene. So I've been doing that kind of work.

I also teach breaking in university and in my community. And I try to kind of look out for younger generation[s] within Heartbreakerz and a few Black b-girls like Pep-C, Macca. I've made more of an effort since last year to actually kind of support them, and be in solidarity with them, even though we're not a crew, per se. Just keeping in better support of them as future generations. And because there's really still just a handful of us, still. Even though the breaking scene has pretty much exploded. [. . .]

Stacey Stash: [. . .] You mean the breaking scene exploded internationally? Or are you just talking about, in the States? Or?

big tara: Both [Stacey Stash: In general] Especially now that the Olympics is in the picture, more people are like, "Oh, that's a real accolade," or like, "Oh, now I can really take it serious because I have this big goal that's a possibility," and it's like from countries all over the world, so like—More people are getting excited about it. Even like O.G.s are coming out the woodwork who have been moved on from breaking and were doing other things. But they're now wanting to speak out in terms of sharing whatever they feel about breaking being part of the Olympics, so—[. . .] The scene is so much bigger now. Especially also because we have social media. We have online battles. [crosstalk] Online classes. Online trainings. There's like an airflare machine, like, an airflare machine. [crosstalk]

Stacey Stash: [. . .] how the generations now would just go down that Internet rabbit hole, you know? I would be nuts!

big tara: Yeah. I just don't like that they're biters. They're like, "Oh, I like that throw down. I'm just going to do it." Or, "I like that

move." [. . .] The struggle of having to rewind a VHS or reading it off a Word doc, you know? That's the real shit! [crosstalk]

Stacey Stash: You're like halfway down and you're like, "Dammit, I missed the last move!" [. . .]

big tara: I can't even imagine.

Stacey Stash: Like, whoever, whoever wrote those Word documents—mad props because that would have taken forever!

big tara: Yo. That is dope. They were like, ". . . and then this, and then that" [Stacey Stash: Step 1, 2] [both laugh] I love it. I really would like to see that six-step Word doc.

[. . .] Was there anything else MiRi and [crosstalk] grace wanted us to answer?

Stacey Stash: [. . .] put down into Heartbreakerz and what was the process?

big tara: Ohhh- Aha ha! You know what? Yo. Heartbreakerz is like a firecracker crew—Initially,

I think it was like how real crews start, where people happen to just chill together and then they're like, "Yeah, let's do this. Let's make it official. We're committed to each other," you know? And then, it just expanded, like, because I feel like, what expanded it—so Rokafella's documentary *All the Ladies Say*—she had a little tour-thing, I forgot what she called them, but from that crew—Aruna and Beta were in that crew—and I remember through that crew Aruna got down.

And then I remember, Beta flew up to New York. She's like, "Yeah, let's go to this party," like, "Yo, we want you to be down with Heartbreakerz," and I was like "Hell Yeah!" You know? [. . .] I just remember those stories. Some people battled in—some people battled-in like hardcore. Some people

Beta just put down. Some people Beta put down and the crew was like, “No,” and then they left. Then, we realized as a crew, we all have to be part of the process of putting people down. So it’s shifted from hardcore like, “Unnnhhh! Battle! Yeah!” To now, “Let’s have a conversation. Who are you feeling? Send us her Instagram. Let’s see what we think? Ahhh! We don’t like her!” or, “Oh yeah, yeah, yeah,” You know? But yeah—How did you get down Stash?

Stacey Stash: Man, I’m trying to figure out the timeline of when Rocksteady Anniversary was, the year, and whether it was before *She Got Game*, or after.

MiRi Park: I looked it up. Rock Steady 30th Anniversary was 2007.

Stacey Stash: Yeah. Cool so, then what date? Do you know the date it was?

big tara: July.

MiRi Park: Yeah, usually July—

big tara: It’s usually at the end of July.

Stacey Stash: OK, so then [. . .] I had Beta—I mean, the girls that I flew out to *She Got Game* that year were Beta, Vendetta—

big tara: Vendetta was in that crew, too, that Rokafella had. Yeah.

Stacey Stash: Taya, AT, Narumi, Shie Chan.⁹ So I had all the different continents [crosstalk].

big tara: Yes! That’s a jam!

9. B-girls Taya and AT are from Flomo Crew in Finland. B-girls Narumi and Shie Chan are from Japan.

Stacey Stash: Anyway, like you said, we're all partying and whatever and Beta and I got along really well. So then that year I went up to New York for Rocksteady. Beta had spoken about me being down with the crew. Ricochet was there, Kaya was there [big tara: Yeah] Yoma—I dunno if Yoma was there. Zoey was there.

big tara: Oh, wow. It's a throwback.

Stacey Stash: [. . .] I remember Ricochet, she was like, "Yo, Beta told me like you want to get down in the crew, or whatever." And I like, I'm just chillin like, it would be cool to get down. It would be cool not to get down, like, whatever. And she's like, "Well, throw down!" So she made me go jump into the cypher with them and they—I think they still weren't sure about it.

So then after New York, I went to Miami. And that's when Jillian was there, Yoma, and we went to this club. And I remember, I was like, "Oh, yo. Beta wants to put me down," and she was like, "Well, I don't. So get down!"

big tara: Ahahahaha!

Stacey Stash: And I was like, "Well, all right, well, here we go, then!" So I had to battle with her at the club as well. That was fun. And then from then it was like, yeah, cool. And then after that, Jillian—Yoma—came up to me and was like, "Yeah, dope. Down." So—

big tara: Yaay. That's what's up.

Stacey Stash: That was '07. Wow. Wow. Yeah.

MiRi Park: I just realized that that is the summer that I think for exactly that jam, Beta sublet my—not sublet, but crashed in my

apartment in Harlem, because I had to go away [. . .] And then, when I got back to my apartment, they had left me a bottle of Hpnotiq as a thank you. [laughs] Because it had to be blue liquor, right?

Stacey Stash: Yeah, yeah. Of course.

MiRi Park: So I was like, “Oh yeah! I think I’m actually connected to this story somehow!”

Stacey Stash: I was thinking that’s how I met Melody at *She Got Game* and we found out that we were going to be in New York at the same time. I was friends with Beta from the jam. Yeah, and then it just—
Yeah.

MiRi Park: And tara, you have known Beta for how long?

big tara: Yeah, I’ve known Beta since’97. Yeah, we recently posted a picture on our IG. We look like babies. Beta’s like—what do you call it? A shapeshifter. So I’ve seen Beta in so many different shapes.

I remember her really tiny and quiet, and then I remember one time going down to Florida—cuz I went—I started to frequent Florida after September 11 cuz I was like, “Maybe Imma move here, because fuck this.” One time, I went down there, and she was thicker, and she had blue dreadlocks. And then she came up and she [. . .] had her hair all wet, slicked back. She was workin’ the twins and with a leather jacket, and I was like, “Oh shit!” So just seeing her grow up, you know? Yeah, I’ve known Beta super long, and her brothers, the whole family and—Ground Zero, yeah, yeah.

MiRi Park: Yeah and also just to shout out that her initial crew was Floor Angelz with Candy, [Stacey Stash: Yeah.] right?

big tara: Well, Floor Angelz came out in '98 to Pro-Am. We [Beta and I] did not know who they were. We were like, "Who are these people? Cool. There's twins." And then we're like, "Aww, they're wack!" So we didn't like them at first. I was actually like, "Oh, you're getting down with them? Cool." But I was also surprised like, "Wow." There was a friendship that developed because initially we were mad snobbish about it. We stuck with like the O.G. b-girl thing, like, "Arrgh! Who are those girls?" [Stacey Stash: Yeah.]

MiRi Park: All right, well, I think that—I mean, you both covered so much ground. I keep having this image of you guys doing foot-work, like, all over these topics. [laughs]

big tara: Yes!



big tara and Stash at Epstein's in LES (Lower East Side).



big tara and Stash at Soul Summit.

Photos courtesy of big tara.

Contributors

tara “big tara” Crichlow is a New York City native. She is a pioneer in the world of hip hop, best known for her contribution to the art form as an international teacher, performer, and curator who specializes in breaking, hip hop, house, waacking, voguing, lindy hop, and pole dance. big tara is a founding member of the Anomalies

Crew and a member of MAWU, HeartBreakerz, and the 2006 We B*girlz Championship squad, Fox Force Five. Her career highlights include performances at the Apollo, BB Kings, and Lincoln Center, with Run DMC, the Roots, Erykah Badu, and LL Cool J, and at the events DMC World Championship, Bgirl Be, Ladies Hip Hop Get Down, Under the Radar Festival, Ladies of Hip Hop, J.U.I.C.E. Hip Hop Dance Festival, and Howl Fest. As a member of the U.S. State Department Next Level 3.0 team, she helps to create bonds of peace through hip hop-centered culture and education. She consciously uses her platform to empower women, people of color, and other underrepresented communities.

Stacey “Stash” Earsman is a member of b-girl crew Form One Lane, HeartBreakerz, Zulu Kweenz, and previously Fresh Sox. She is the founder of the international b-girl competition *She Got Game*.

Stash started breaking in late 2002. She made an impact on the Australasian b-boy scene as a strong and influential b-girl. *She Got Game* was created in Melbourne in 2007 and hosted again in 2008. In 2010, it was held at the legendary B-Boy Summit, produced by Asia One in Los Angeles. This groundbreaking collaboration was the first time in history that an Australian competition was held internationally in conjunction with an overseas event. Stash relocated to Qatar in the Middle East in 2011, where she worked as a private flight attendant for the royal family up until her move back to Melbourne in late 2018. During her time in the Middle East, Stash travelled extensively throughout the world and now resides in Melbourne, where she co-owns Migrant Coffee with her best friend Melodee Malazarte.

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 on 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.”

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.”¹⁰ She makes

10. 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.

Popular Events/Jams and Practice sessions mentioned throughout the Conversations:

**This list is inclusive of events that are mentioned in this issue of Conversations, and is by no means a comprehensive list of all breaking/street dance battles, events, or practice sessions.*

Battle of the Year (BOTY): event started in 1990 in Hanover, Germany, by Thomas Hergenrother (*Planet B-Boy*. Directed by Benson Lee, 2007, Mondo Paradiso Films.).

B-Boy Summit—now known as “B-Boy/B-Girl Summit”: event started in 1994 by B-Girl Asia One to celebrate all elements of hip hop culture.

The Bboy Masters Pro-Am: event started in 1996 by B-Boy Speedy Legs with Zulu Gremlin in Miami, FL.

Freestyle Session (FSS): started in 1997 in San Diego, CA, by B-boy Cros1 (Christopher Wright).

J.U.i.C.E (Justice by Uniting in Creative Energy): a hip hop culture collective that also holds breaking practices, along with instruction in the other elements.

The Notorious IBE: started in 1998 in the Netherlands.

Rock Steady Anniversary: an annual hip hop event thrown by the Rock Steady Crew that included performances, battles, and exhibitions.

She Got Game: International BGirl Competition founded by Stacey Stash in 2007, held in Australia.

Zulu Anniversary Jams: these are annual jams hosted by the Universal Zulu Nation (UZN). For more information about the significance of UZN, refer to Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A history of the hip-hop generation*. St. Martin's Press, 2005.

Liner Notes: Imani Kai Johnson

The conversation between b-girls big tara and Stash begins with a not-unexpected reference to a “tomboy streak” and quickly gives way to a rich interweaving of their particular lives from completely different parts of the world. However, the resonances in their experiences signal that they’re b-girls of a similar generation. Both foreground the culture, personal growth, and developing relationships. And though the word “misogyny” doesn’t come up until midway through their exchange, and “racism” even further along, their stories nonetheless activate the nitty-gritty of their gendered, racialized, and classed experiences. From being spat on for entering a cypher to racial epithets thrown around in unchecked minstrelsy, Stash and big tara talk about these experiences with a casualness of everyday life. Yet it is also clear that such incidents animate their narratives as watershed moments that motivated them to stand more firmly in their practice. Their responses share a sensibility: to elevate their craft and maybe their hustle, and offer a hearty F.U. to anyone standing in their way.

When I first came to the interview, I brought big tara and Stash on a walk with me, allowing their voices to fill my headphones. Then I replayed their conversation with background music and sat with them as if we were hanging out. I laughed and mm-hmm’d along, and they used the doublespeak of an in-group conversation held in front of outsiders. For example, both b-girls were cautious to not “name names” in a manner that might instigate drama. In fact, they only named people to give credit. In the end, *so much went unspoken*. Yet I also understand that I never feel totally in the know because I’m not meant to. Both purposefully (publicly) under-articulate certain discussions—for example, tara’s brief reference to predatory behavior—because they are also ambassadors of a culture about which the public still has a lot to learn. And you need much more skin in the game and in the cypher for such disclosures. I appreciate that kind of stance. You should too.

Author Biographies

Imani Kai Johnson is an interdisciplinary scholar whose research focuses on African diasporic ritual cultures, Hip Hop dance in global circulation, and intersections of race, nation, and gender. Her manuscript on breaking cyphers and their epistemological possibilities is forthcoming with Oxford University Press and is titled *Dark Matter in Breaking Cyphers: Africanist Aesthetics in Global Hip Hop*. She has published articles in *Dance Research Journal*, *Alif*, *Women & Performance*, and the *Cambridge Companion to Hip Hop*. Dr. Johnson is the founder and conference chair of the "Show & Prove" Hip Hop Studies Conference Series. She is also the co-editor of the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies*. She is Assistant Professor of Critical Dance Studies at the University of California, Riverside.



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 stoled 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 Sandinistas¹ 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."

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 Market² 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

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,³ 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.⁴ 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*⁵ and *Style Wars*,⁶ you know and all these and especially when *Beat Street*⁷ came out, it blew my mind. It's like when I saw that first backspin, I was like don't,

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)

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 Breakers⁸ 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

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

went to The World⁹ 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-

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.¹⁰ 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

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,¹¹ 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*

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 Square¹² 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 1-2-5th¹³ 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.]

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,"¹⁴ 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

14. Lyrics of "Funky President" (1974) by James Brown: 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 STF¹⁵ 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

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.¹⁶ Anyway so I was down, Bambaataa was there and we were speaking and *de-de-de*. I met this guy Tomás Alvarez¹⁷ 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,

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,¹⁸ I can cater to that community. You put me in a Zaatari refugee camp,¹⁹ 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.

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

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.”²⁰ She makes

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.



Transmission—4D Teaching & Learning Hip Hop Dance Styles: Ms. Vee & Buddha Stretch



Buddha Stretch

MopTop/Elite Force Crew



Ms. Vee

EAD/Juilliard/Pace/BDC/LoHH

Transmission: 4D Teaching & Learning Hip Hop Dance Styles, a conversation with Val “Ms. Vee” Ho and Emilio “Buddha Stretch” Austin, Jr. Video recorded and edited by MiRi Park and grace jun, May 3, 2021. Watch the full video here: <https://youtu.be/vYCB-0Yfb6g>

MiRi Park: Hello, welcome, today we’re here with Ms. Vee and Buddha Stretch. Today is Monday, May 3rd. Ms. Vee and Buddha Stretch are joining us in New York and New Jersey respectively and we’re so excited to have you both here for our conversation today. The reason why we wanted to put you both in conversation is because we wanted to hear about your thoughts on the fact that technology has always played a part in transmitting dances and specifically hip hop dances.

When Ms. Vee, and Dr. grace, and I were all younger, we grew up watching MTV, not knowing that we were actually learning your choreography, Stretch, and it was very uni-directional kind of teaching. I think there are a lot of folks who think that this moment, this pandemic moment, and moving—you know, teaching dance online—is this huge monumental thing, when in fact this is something that we’ve kind of all grown up with on two different sides. So we were hoping that you would potentially have a conversation intergenerationally, but also now that you are both teaching on Zoom, primarily. I know Ms. Vee you are now starting to go back in person, face-to-face. I’m not sure about you, Stretch, but, [Buddha Stretch shakes his head] no, not yet.

Ms. Vee: Thanks for the invite. Stretch!

Buddha Stretch: Ms. Vee!

Ms. Vee: Man. I don’t know where—I mean what MiRi said was exactly right, that’s how I started. I—on my VHS machine recorded all—any music videos that had any dancing in it whatsoever. They got recorded and then those were my teachers and most of the moves were, and choreography was, you. I mean not exclusively you, but you know, relationally you. [Buddha Stretch: Right.] In terms of what was happening in the hip hop clubs and in the community, yeah, those were my first teachers: the VCR and MTV.

Buddha Stretch: Well, the funny thing is, we barely had VCRs at the time and our first teachers were television. You know, basically watching TV, seeing things like *Soul Train*, [Ms. Vee: *Soul Train* yeah.] *What’s Happening*¹ and movies, and then you know, trying to do what you saw based on memory. [Ms. Vee: Whoa.] You know, and then hoping that you get to see it again, [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] Cuz *Soul Train*

1. 1970s TV series where the character Rerun (Fred Berry, former member of The Lockers) frequently danced on the show. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074071/>

had reruns, of course, all TV had reruns and movies, you know, you would occasionally see it. If it came on once, it will probably come back on, [Ms. Vee: Right.] within another couple of months again. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] Unfortunately, back then we didn't have the actual electronic guide, so you could check. [laughs] We actually had to use something called a *TV Guide*. Which was—

Ms. Vee: I remember those, you flip open—[both laughing]

Buddha Stretch: Exactly—the booklet—and you had to scan through it to find out when something was actually coming back on.

Ms. Vee: Oh yeah yeah yeah, that, and they would print it in the paper too, where I'm from. [Buddha Stretch: Yeah.] I would tear that up and highlight, "Okay, these are the shows I want to see and these are the things I want to catch." But also that's so interesting that you say that that's how I—that was my, you know, origin story—the VCR and MTV and I like how you kind of parallel that with the TV and the film that you saw, but also the storytelling that I've been told by a lot of pioneering b-boys and even not just b-boys, like even Archie [Burnett]—that generation not learning actual dance steps but taking influences from like Kung Fu movies. [Buddha Stretch: Yeah.] I remember Ken Swift—the first class I took from him, he said they would go down to Times Square and pay for one movie but stay all day and just go from theater to theater and stay all day and then go home and then try to remember all those moves.

Buddha Stretch: Well, the thing about the movie theaters—

Ms. Vee: And then create from them.

Buddha Stretch: —on 42nd street, the thing about it is if you went in for one movie, that usually it was a three-movie matinee. So if you went in for one movie you could stay and see the other two movies. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] And they would show and then you just

go next door and they had three more movies. And you go down the block and they had three more movies so if you wanted to spend the day watching movies, you could. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] But trying to retain everything that you saw is basically impossible. Imagine you're watching all of this stuff and then when you come out of the movie you feel like you got it down but by the time you get home it's a blur. [Ms. Vee: Yeah, yeah.] Now you don't remember what's what and now you got to just, you know, try to recreate [Ms. Vee: Yeah] what you thought you saw.

Ms. Vee: I even have that experience going to jams or going to parties and seeing people get down and going like, "oh wow, I like what they did there," or "oooo, let me try something like that" and just like, you're mentally cataloguing it, but then you forget everything.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, I mean it's really hard to—[Ms. Vee: Really.] Your memory is—it seems really good at times but it's not what you actually think it is, and especially when it comes to movement—and in particular because you look at something and you think, "That's great. I could do that," and if you have it in front of you, yeah you could probably do it, but try to do it like an hour or so later, you don't remember the mechanics of it. You only have a visual like flash of it in your head so then it's like, "oh damn." You're trying to do something that you think that you saw, and like you said with the advent of the VCR then it was just, the beauty of the VCR and your ability to retain depended on how good the videotape was. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] Cuz I remember—

Ms. Vee: And the editing too.

Buddha Stretch: —yeah, when I first got into locking, I was serious about it. Disco Dave² brought me, I think it was literally, like,

2. David Sarul—Disco Dave

10 tapes of The Lockers,³ Electric Boogaloo,⁴ *Soul Train*, and I was literally watching these tapes all night, every night, fast forwarding, rewinding, slow motion [Ms. Vee: Slow motion.] just looking at the tapes over and over and over again, to try to get the nuances. And for me that was my introduction to actually learning locking properly, you know? Prior to that it was trying to do, remember what I saw on *What's Happening*, remember what I saw on *Soul Train*, remember the people that I knew that could actually lock, things that they did, but not actually knowing any of it. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] And then watching these tapes and then learning the nuances of Don [Campbell], of Greg, God bless the dead, of Gogo, of [Toni] Basil, of Shabba Doo, God bless the dead. Watching how each one of them did the same move, but in a different way—[Ms. Vee: Different way, yeah.] and without a VCR, I would've never been able to do that. [Ms. Vee: You can't catch all that.]

Buddha Stretch: It's just impossible. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] Without actually meeting them and studying under them, it's no way to know that. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] So that was our original way of learning. I mean the funniest thing about it is, if you look at *Thriller*. *Thriller* is—here is it what, almost 40 years later and kids are still learning *Thriller*. Michael [Jackson]'s been dead over a decade and there are little kids who know every aspect of that video. Because they've been able to watch and learn through video.

Ms. Vee: It's an archive. [Buddha Stretch: Yeah.] These videos eventually become an archive, yeah, yeah. And then there was like a VCR or VHS kind of era I guess, because like, you know, I would, I was trying to get, same thing, I was trying to get my hands on

3. The Lockers crew included "Don Campbellock" Campbell, Greg "Campbellock Jr." Pope, Anthony "Gogo" Foster, Toni Basil, Adolfo "Shabba Doo" Quiñones <https://campbellock.dance/>

4. The Electric Boogaloo Lockers was a crew from Fresno, CA founded by Boogaloo Sam: <https://www.redbull.com/us-en/popping-history-electric-boogaloos-members>

any kind of tapes I could whether it was from, you know B-Boy Summit or I know I have Pro-Am '98 somewhere in my house. [Buddha Stretch: Right.] And then dancers would produce their own tapes—

Buddha Stretch: Like Freestyle Session, like Wiggz's [Mr. Wiggles]—his videos.

Ms. Vee: Wiggz, yeah yeah, all those and you're just trying to get your hands on anything because the technology didn't exist for you to see everybody else, like there is no YouTube, there is no—you had to travel to go to see these dancers dance live.

Buddha Stretch: If there was a place for you to actually do that.

Ms. Vee: If there yeah—

Buddha Stretch: Because B-Boy Summit and all of the—

Ms. Vee: if you had the means to get there.

Buddha Stretch: —didn't start until later.

Ms. Vee: Yeah, and if you had the means.

Buddha Stretch: And if you had the means to get there. Not just get there, but have a place to stay and be able to eat and pay for admission. So it was a tricky proposition. I remember the first B-Boy Summit I went to, we didn't go the first few days. I caught the very last day, the Sunday and that was 2003. I caught the Sunday and then I went to a—what is it—Homeland on Monday. And it was so much fun, you know, getting to, like we have more fun at Homeland than I actually had at B-Boy Summit.

And then the craziest thing about that, we're talking about videos, dancing at Homeland that Monday, I was being followed around by a guy who would actually become a friend of mine,

Nishi, he had his own studio. He was literally following me around with his video camera, recording everything that I did. And when he, that got back to Japan, that made the rounds as a videotape and multiple people got to see, got to see, me dancing at B-Boy Summit and Homeland and that led to a company, ADHIP that does the contest Dance Delight, actually requesting me to come back to Japan to judge. [Ms. Vee: Whoa.] All based on, [Ms. Vee: That guy had foresight.] all based on his videotape, [Ms. Vee: Buddha Stretch Volume 1.] of me dancing, then him sharing it on VHS, you know, and videotape to other people and them sharing it, and then these guys at ADHIP seeing, oh wow, Buddha Stretch is, we got to get him to come back.

Ms. Vee: Wow, wow, yeah. And then I guess the evolution after that was YouTube, is YouTube. When was YouTube?

Buddha Stretch: 2005, yeah. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] Yeah, YouTube was a game changer. I mean, having access to, well the ability to upload videos is one thing, but then having access to videos just by searching for them. Stuff that you would imagine or wouldn't think that you would see online and then suddenly it's online and being able to go back and look. Like I've seen footage of shows we did in Japan that I never saw when I was in Japan. [Ms. Vee: Whoa.] And somebody uploaded it to YouTube and it's the same show that I know 'cause we did it, but it's a totally different angle than any other [Ms. Vee: Right.] video that I've seen and I'm like, "Wow, who had this angle? [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] Wow, where they at, to shoot this and the same thing I've seen footage of when we were practicing to go to Japan?" [Ms. Vee: Whoa.] And we were with some dancers here in the city and they had a hidden camera and they were filming our practices. Then years later somebody uploads the VHS version of that and puts it on YouTube and I happen to see it like, "Whoa, when the hell did this happen and who had the camera?"

Ms. Vee: Yeah that's crazy. It's also like, my perception of it, because you know, because I came through the VHS/VCR kind of era, and then so like that's kind of my entry point right. So that's how I came to the dance. That's how I discovered the dance, and the music, and then [it] eventually started for me just finding other people in my area where I was, finding other people who also were interested in the dance and doing the dance and just like exchanging with them. We had to teach each other, there were no classes in the early '90s anywhere, and so it was just like this exchange of information. Until classes started popping up kind of in the mid '90s-ish.

Buddha Stretch: But we actually had classes here in New York. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] They had classes at Broadway Dance Center. Ejoe [Wilson] had a House class, I can't remember the name of the studios right around the corner from PMT was.

Ms. Vee: [cupping her mouth to reiterate] I'm from Vancouver, Canada. [both laugh]

Buddha Stretch: Yeah. where PMT was. So we had some classes here, but yeah for the most part, yeah there was definitely, you know, no way to, no place to physically go where there was someone teaching in most of the world, I mean. Thank Robin [Dunn] for that, for you know coming up with the idea here to have class. But I mean it's funny because it's the same way, it's the same concept like how I learned to count and to teach was from watching Debbie Allen. [Ms. Vee: yeah] You know, watching her on Fame, the TV show, and seeing how she ran the class, seeing how she taught. That was my blueprint for how to do, like if I get put in this position, do like Debbie did, that was my whole blueprint and mindset and then to understand that, you know, it's not like I can rewind the TV show so I have to retain all of what I see from Fame each week. I literally have to sit there and study it and keep

it in the back of my mind, because this is what I think I need to know to create what I'm going to need to do as a performer—like watching her run the school and teach—and the counts and placement, all of these are things that I learned without actually knowing that I'm learning. I'm just watching this show and then when I have to, when I get put on the spot of, "Oh we want you to perform at this club and we need you to put a show on each week," and the guy said that "you're the choreographer" and I'm like, "how did I become the choreographer?" "Oh because you know how to count." [Both laugh] And how did I learn how to count?

Ms. Vee: That's how you became the choreographer? I love that story.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, I mean they picked me because I knew how to count. Whenever we would dance together—

Ms. Vee: Right. You said, "5-6-7-8."

Buddha Stretch: Yeah I would be the, okay "1, 2,- 5, 6" like I knew how to count. I knew how to organize us and how to put the movements to music and understand the mechanics, so that made me the choreographer even though I'd never done any choreography.

Ms. Vee: That's, I've also heard storytelling I think it was, it was more than one person. Like I know Skeeter Rabbit said this in the first class I took from him and a b-boy—I think it was even Flo Master maybe—they were like, "We didn't know 5-6-7-8." Greg [Campbell Jr.] said this too, all of them, so it's like this kind of like overarching theme of like dancers, street dancers, they're just like they don't know 5-6-7-8, they just go "ready, go" [Buddha Stretch: Right.] and that was their 5-6-7-8.

Buddha Stretch: But that's the theme from all the way from—[Ms. Vee: All the way back.] Lindy Hop and vernacular jazz. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.]

You know, listen, if you listen to Frankie [Manning] and what's her name, God bless the dead, Norma Miller, they say they didn't do anything with counts. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] Everything was just based on movement and timing and off of each other. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] They didn't use counting, they used, they moved on rhythm and timing and that was the thing. When we used to dance in the park and in the clubs, we did the same thing. The only reason I knew anything about counting again is because watching Debbie Allen and figuring out that, okay this is the way that if I want to show somebody what I'm doing, I need to put this in a frame of reference that they can relate to. That was the only reason I knew how to count.

Ms. Vee: It's just a map, a map of the music. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, is just a map.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, and it's only because of watching Debbie Allen I'm sayin'. If I never watched that show I'd be in the same, you know I'd be in that same category of, oh yeah, just you know moving by the rhythm. I have no idea what the count is.

Ms. Vee: Yeah, no, that's fascinating. But do you think, so do you ever get students who like come to your class and then, you know, they come talk to you after and like, oh yeah, you know they look like they know what they're doing, but then you look closely at what they're doing, and you're like, you don't, you kind of have an idea, but you don't really have an idea. I get these students and then they can talk to me and then, you know, I say "oh yeah where have you learned" and they say "um YouTube."

Buddha Stretch: Well, I mean, I went through that for years with, you know, people that have watched videos and then come to class and they're like, [Ms. Vee: Right.] "Man, it was a lot easier on the video." And I'm like, well yeah, I mean you're watching the video and it just seems like yeah, it's really easy, but once you get into class and you get into, you know, actual—the nuance of the

move, because on the video it's one thing, and I've always told that to people. You're trying to capture a four-dimensional action in a two-dimensional image. You're going to lose a lot, you know, unless you can get that information, the other two dimensions you're missing, directly from the person in that video. You're going to always miss. I don't care how good you are, how well you could copy. Copying the feeling of something, you can't do that, you can copy the movement of it, but the feeling is something else.

Ms. Vee: Yeah, yeah, and then there's like, I would say there's like maybe a fifth dimension to it. I would argue that like, so, you know, say somebody's learning your choreography off of a video; that's choreography, that's just a sequence of steps, like do know what those steps are, do you know what that vocabulary is, do you know, that's a different thing.

Buddha Stretch: It's a whole different conversation. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] Well, yeah, I mean that's, with the advent of YouTube that's what used to come up a lot. People saw something on YouTube and they immediately said, "well, this is what it is cause that's what I saw on YouTube. And you know my answer always to that was, "okay, but I was doing this before YouTube, so if that's your answer to it, what is mine, because I was doing it before YouTube existed and this is how we did it." And I would go on YouTube and find the clip of us doing it, prior to YouTube and say "okay here, this is us doing it then, what do you say now that you've seen it on YouTube." Now it's the same thing, it's funny to me because that was the argument on YouTube but now that's the argument for like TikTok. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] You know people see it—

Ms. Vee: It's moving to different technologies.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, moving to different platforms, but it's essentially the same thing that's like—and now you have some things

that are named after what people have seen on television without actually knowing the history of the step—like a what is the, the mom and her daughters⁵ and they do all the hip hop stuff. [Ms. Vee: Yeah I saw that one.] And she has, she calls this the Aunt Viv⁶ [arms bent at the elbows moving up and down] and the Mary J vibe and I'm laughing because those are actual dance steps. But if you don't, if you're not in that, if you don't have that information, you're going to come up with what you can relate to at the time, which is, you know, nothing wrong with that.

Ms. Vee: Cultural reference versus, like [Buddha Stretch: Yeah.] reference that the community uses.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah it's not far off, but it's just, you know, it shows you that people really get into what they see, [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] you know and they really are looking for a reference, [Ms. Vee: Right.] you know, and the only reason you need a reference is because you want to share it, and that's what I tell people all the time. That goes back to the importance of terminology, you know, and in vocabulary [simultaneously]. It's like if you meet someone, how do you introduce them if—they have a name. And that name denotes a history, you know, a person, there's so much behind it, so when you're sharing something with someone, you really need to know the name of it or to have something as a reference that they can relate to. That's why a lot of the names of the steps are named after, you know, characters or TV shows or something like that. It's because that's an easy frame of reference for someone to remember. So I always laugh when me and Uko [Snowbunny] are teaching—

Ms. Vee: So wait a second, what is the Aunt Viv called?

5. Viral video of a mom and daughter dancing old school moves <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UR84WNgwf4>

6. Aunt Viv from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, Dance at 1:27 <https://youtu.be/l22GgsIfba0>

Buddha Stretch: It's the skate.⁷ [Ms. Vee: Ok. Oh yeah I see it. I see it.]
It's the skate, if you're just doing this with it [arms are up and bent
at the elbows, moving them up and down]

Ms. Vee: It's like a different vibe with it, yeah.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, she's just doing her arms with it, but it's the
skate. But I love it, because I remember that episode of Aunt Viv.⁸

Ms. Vee: It's so good. [Both laughing] In the unitard.

Buddha Stretch: And when I saw that reference, I was like ok, I get it,
she's using what Aunt Viv was in the studio getting down, I was
like okay. So now I can't help myself [keeps dancing and laughing]
when we're teaching, me and Uko sometimes, I'll start just—and
hit that Aunt Viv and we just do it anyway because it's just fun to
do. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] And I'll still teach people if they had, like oh
yeah, they'll call it the Aunt Viv and I'll give them the reference
for it but then give them the actual name—[Ms. Vee: The origi-
nal.] You know the original name of it and the history behind it.

Ms. Vee: But she didn't make it up, she was just doing it, she was do-
ing something—

Buddha Stretch:—exactly—

Ms. Vee: —that was being done. In her own way, with her own styling.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, I mean, but that's the beautiful thing about it.
The beautiful thing about it is, it's okay to call it the Aunt Viv, as
long as you know that there was something else that it was called
previous. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] And then the beautiful, really beautiful

7. Buddha Stretch demonstrating the skate https://youtu.be/Wk_Ti4oXa2c

8. The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, Season Two, Episode Seven. [https://www.imdb.com/
title/tt0583041/](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0583041/)

part is, once you get that information, it makes doing the Aunt Viv even more fun, cause now you start to reference all the things that you know about it. And see, okay, if I do the Aunt Viv okay, if I do it with this, that's the skate. If I do it like this, you know it becomes a whole journey into the information.

Ms. Vee: Yep, yeah, that's something that's something Greg [Campbelllock Jr.] taught me actually. The first time I had a session with him, I was out in LA and he invited me over [makes a surprised face], HUUUU, I'm gonna go to Greg's house. I'm going to learn everything that I'm missing in locking and I'm going to learn all these things, and he, like, I went over there, and he was like, "I'm not going to teach you anything new," and I was like, "what?! What do you mean?" In my heart, I didn't say that out loud, but in my heart, I was, "No, I want you to teach me everything," you know. He's like, "no, no, no, no, you're just going to learn all about all the stories. I'm going to tell you the stories about how this move was invented and why this move is and when you know all that information, what how you do what you do change". [Buddha Stretch: Exactly.] And you know I didn't get it 'till later, and I was like, that was genius. And now when I teach, I just try to share as much information as I can. This is the story of hip hop, or this is the story of the move, or this is the story of this [leans back with arms crossed], what does this mean [places hand at her forehead] you know, like it all has meaning.

Buddha Stretch: And it makes for me, it makes the dance that much more interesting cause it's, now you're moving beyond just the moves, but what that move means, you know.

Ms. Vee: It's below, yeah, if you're just doing the movement, it's just, you're scratching the surface of the thing. It's like it's purely physical and superficial even. [right hand is scratching and moving over the top of her left hand]

Buddha Stretch: Very superficial, you know, but once you get into the story—The funny thing is, sometimes people are more interested in the stories than the actual dance. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] You know when I use, I always use Don Campbell and the creation of locking as a reference point. [Ms. Vee: Oh yeah.] You know, and I tell them that Don wasn't trying to lock, he was trying to do a totally different dance, 50 years ago that no one does now. [Ms. Vee: Nobody.] No one even remembers how to do that dance that way, if you're not from Don's generation or unless you've studied it. But everyone knows what locking is. So that's what you want to do. You want something that you've put into the lexicon of information and movement that we have here in street dance to take a life of its own, to become, you know, to become something so special that it becomes something bigger than the original one. And if you're blessed to do that, then you'll understand just how great it is to do, to take what's there and build on top of it, instead of, you know, people are trying to be so original and for me it's like you're trying to be original only because you're too lazy to learn what's in front of you. That's your excuse now, like, "Oh I'm doing my own style." Well if it's your own style, then what do you call it?

Ms. Vee: I've heard that from younger dancers a lot.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah. I've heard that several times over.

Ms. Vee: And really talented dancers, really, really talented dancers and they'll say things like, "Yeah, I don't know." They don't bother with technique or vocabulary or learning. They're just doing whatever they want and, oh yeah, I mean it's really hard—[Buddha Stretch: But that's the thing about teaching—] Like, from my generation, it's really hard to hear that because when I was coming up and everybody in my generation that was coming up it was all about, "know your foundation," "know your history," know all these things so that you're connecting. So to hear young

dancers who are really, really talented and really good at what they do, just kind of like, “I don’t need that . . . I don’t even call what I do a [style]. I’m just doing me. I’m not doing one style or that style. I’m like, I’m just doing me.” And they are, but it just makes me fearful of, “Okay, is this person going to teach, then? And what are they going to teach if they teach?”

Buddha Stretch: Well see, I don’t worry about that because that all leads them back to me. Because they have—okay you’re doing your thing, and you don’t know what this is, know what that is, “I’m just doing me,” you have five minutes worth of information and you’re trying to teach a 90-minute class. And if you teach more than one 90-minute class, that five minutes of information you maybe can stretch to 15 minutes, but eventually people are going to ask you, “Well, where does that come from? What is it connected to? How does it connect to the music? What’s the culture behind it?” Well, you’re dancing to this music, but you say it’s this style, well there’s a dance that goes with this music and so that all leads back to [me]. I’ll explain this for you.

Ms. Vee: Hopefully, because it really—I feel like it’s really incumbent on the dancer to seek out that information. That’s what I did. I had my entry point, my VCR and MTV, and the people that were in my city, in my community. We exchanged information, but our information was so limited because of the time we were in and so it was really just my entry point. And then when I found Wiggles, and I found other people to learn from, I eventually found you, and I moved to New York, and the reason why I moved to New York is this is where hip hop was birthed. I was doing, I’m still doing, a deep dive. I feel like I’m still in the middle of my deep dive. [. . .] so I feel like it’s incumbent on the dancers to seek out that information and now because it’s so—the entry points, so it went from the VCR to YouTube to now it’s TikTok. The entry point keeps getting easier and easier and easier. And so there’s a wider audience and so because there’s more people involved

in the dance or trying to be involved in the dance—yeah, I don't know. I just hope that there's types of—that there's dancers out there that are just going to seek out the information to do their own deep dives.

Buddha Stretch: Well, that's one of the things that I'm most proud about, is we're in the age of information and so as you said, the technology has changed people's introduction to the dance. But the technology cannot—it can introduce you, but it can't give you a—it's not going to give you—again, it can show you the movement, it can't show you the feeling that created the movement. For that you need oral history, you need collaborative communication between people. [Ms. Vee: Need to go to the parties.] Yeah, well that's what I'm leading up to. You need the original social network, which is the party.

So, [Ms. Vee: Yes.] one of the things that I've noticed since the advent of YouTube and now you know Facebook and Instagram and the Vine and what is it—the other one I can't remember before TikTok. Ah, anyway I can't remember, but with the advent of all of these platforms and technology, it leads people to the same point, because they get to a point where it's like, "Okay I got this," [Ms. Vee: Yeah, now what?] "Is there anything more?" [Ms. Vee: Yeah yeah.] and once they find out that there is more, then that opens them up to search it.

And then once they search and they start to learn, then it becomes an entire different—they have an entirely different perspective of the dance and the culture and then they start to see the connections and then it opens their minds up, which in turn opens other people's minds up that they're connected to, and so it just leads everybody on the same journey. [Ms. Vee: Okay]. It actually—

Ms. Vee: You're giving me hope. Thanks. [laughs]

Buddha Stretch: I mean for me—

Ms. Vee: I'm always wary—of these. [laughs]

Buddha Stretch: I used to feel the same way about like a—like the dance contest like Hip Hop International, all that. [Ms. Vee: Right.] Like, people are doing these contests and it's, you know, becoming basically like a cheerleading thing or gymnastics competition and so people are like, "Oh man. You should be involved in these competitions, blah blah blah," and I'm like, "Naw, it's okay." I don't need to go directly; indirectly I'll just say what I got to do and keep doing what I'm doing. It's going to come around. Because at some point they're going to realize that they're missing something. All of what they think that they're doing is not what they actually think they're doing. Eventually, they're going—something is going to be the catalyst to show them, well, this thing that you're calling hip hop isn't actually hip hop.

And that's what—that for me that's what would actually happen, I just had to sit back and wait and watch and have faith. For me it was really strange at first because I remember Moncell [Durden] and Terry [Wright] and Brian, Brian Green they were all adamant, like, "Naw. We're going to this place and we're gonna—we scream and we're gonna let them know." And I'm like, "Naw I'm not going. Go ahead." And they were adamant in the cr—They were criticizing how it was run, but I'm like, you can critique it, but you can only critique it so far. They can't do what they don't know. They can only go as far as they don't—eventually they'll have to know and if you have patience, it'll pay off.

For me it was totally different in that I didn't take part in any of the competitions but I still took part in it, in that I got called by a group from Trinidad who—they had been in the competition for years and could never get past second place, third and second place. They kept coming up short and they kept wondering why. And so someone told someone else that they needed to get these guys in touch with me, that I had the information to show them what they needed to go on in order to win. And so in my

discussion with them, I was like, "Okay, what do you want me to do?" And it was like, "Well, we need to learn what some of these styles are." They didn't know what popping was. They didn't know what house was. They didn't know what hip hop was. They thought they did, but they didn't. [Ms. Vee: Right.] And so they flew me out to Trinidad and I worked with these guys for a week or so and I literally had to teach them, go through each style. [Ms. Vee: Wow.] We spent one—we spent the first day, like, two hours just, I was just teaching them how to lock. The basics and locking. And they're like, "Whoa." And then I'm teaching them how to pop, and just a technique like, "man we don't—They put these things in the rules, but we don't know what these things are." And I'm like, "Well yeah, that's because they don't know what these things are either, they're just throwing them in there."

And it made me laugh, because when we got to hip hop and I saw what they were doing, they were doing acrobatic stuff but I'm like, "But you guys can't dance." And they're like, "What do you mean we can't dance?" I was like, "You're doing a lot of acrobatic stuff, but where's the feeling of what you're doing? Once you've done that, hooray, and then what else is there? Where do you actually dance where the crowd feels like they want to dance, too?"

And then they started to understand. Then as we went through more and more stuff that—especially when we got past hip hop into house, they were like, "We didn't know there was a dance associated with the music." I'm like, "Well, yeah, now you do know. The music goes back. I mean, there's a dance associated with every kind of music, why would[n't] there be one with this?" So they were astounded and, long story short, the next year they came in second again. The following year, they won the whole thing. And when they won, they just so happened to tell people, "Well, we did train with Buddha Stretch." And that got my name into the Hip Hop International lexicon and people were, you know—Then I got to judge one, I think it was in Poland, and then

judge another one. And then they finally invited me to judge the finals here in the States.

But my point is, it was eventually—as I said before, that five minutes of information is only going to take them but so far and it eventually will lead you back to someone who can actually teach you where this stuff comes from, and then they start to value that information. Because now it actually means something. Because now, the kids that are coming into the competitions, now they're learning online, "Oh. Well, in the rule book it says we need to know what locking is." They've done their research. Locking is from Southern California, Don Campbell and the Lockers, and so they have a reference point. And they have a reference point for popping. They have a reference point for breaking.

So now their parents are demanding like, "Well, where are these people? Where's that information? How to—where can we get to the source?" And it leads them all back this way. So you know that gave me hope much in the same way. Once I got into the whole Hip Hop International thing and that bled into all of the other big competitions, UDL [Urban Dance League] and all that stuff—The same thing, it's like, "Oh, we need to get this guy because he knows, as a judge, he knows what he's looking at, he could judge on the skill level or the performance level and blah blah blah." So for me, it came to the point where everywhere that I'm going, it's like people are like, "No, no, no, no we're good, we do this and blah, blah, blah." Okay cool, do that. And then maybe six months later it's like all of those people are coming back to class, "Umm we want to learn." And I'm like, "So you were doing your thing and now you need to get some of this. Okay. I'll help you, I'll show you."

Ms. Vee: Yeah, how do you feel like your Zoom classes are going, cause now, cause with the pandemic and with Zoom, you don't gotta travel anywhere. You used to—your passport was like 50

pages thick. Stamps everywhere. You were never in New York. You were always globetrotting.

Buddha Stretch: Yep. I'm still globetrotting. Just from my living room. [Ms. Vee: Yeah. {laughs}] Most of my classes are international or basically national also. I'm teaching people from all over. In class today, I had people from Japan. I had some people from—a person from Cyprus, from Boston, from—

Ms. Vee: Oh, I can take it now, the BDC [Broadway Dance Center] moved my class to Tuesdays, so now my Monday is free and we don't conflict anymore.

Buddha Stretch: Okay, yeah. I had a bunch of people from different places from—I had a little girl from Ireland. [Ms. Vee: ohh.] Yeah from the—I had some people from the UK, from Romania. I get all of the places that I've been. Those are the people that are taking my class and I'm getting new students all the time from overseas. For my Saturday classes, I have a group of girls from Denmark I think it is. [Ms. Vee: Great.] Yeah, I've got people from Canada. Got people from the West Coast. I've had people from—I get different people from Japan. I've had—last year I taught a couple of classes in China, which were a real pain in the ass because they weren't on Zoom, but was this other platform they had where they didn't tell me that I wouldn't be able to see the people there, they would just be able to see me. So I was just like, "What?! Okay." It was like Instagram [. . .] teaching the class and people are typing asking questions like, "Can you do that move again?" [Ms. Vee: Ohh.] It was crazy, but I mean, it's been a blessing, just the fact that I've gotten to teach people from all over. It feels like I'm traveling but I'm not traveling, I'm just in house. And I've had to develop a different way of teaching because, you know, it's—

Both: two dimensional.

Ms. Vee: Four dimensions to two dimensions.

Buddha Stretch: —you know, so it's a different skill set but it's been a blessing. I've adapted pretty well and I'm still learning and adapting and trying to make it better. But it's been great. And the craziest thing is a lot of my students are asking since it's about to be the second summer, everybody's like, "Uhh looks like the US is opening up, are you going to continue?" And I'm like, "I'm not going anywhere." I'm not getting on a plane to go anywhere or do anything so it's cool. Even if I do go somewhere, I could still pull up Zoom at any moment on my computer and continue my class so—[Ms. Vee: Yeah yeah yeah.] I remember last year watching Sekou [Heru] teach and [Ms Vee: He's got a good class] Cebo [Terry Carr] teaching and wondering like, "Man, how are they doing this?" And then wondering—Talking with [Henry] Link and Caleaf [Sellers] and they're like, "Naw, we're not teaching online, I don't like online teaching." And I was like, "Ehhh, I don't know." And then having some students of mine from Switzerland and they literally, the day-of, wrote me, "Um, would you be—" "Would you teach us a class on Zoom?" I was like okay, the decision has been made for me, you know there's no debate now. I was thinking about it, but now I actually have a request. [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] And that was my—that was the catalyst for me to start teaching on Zoom. [Ms. Vee: Yeah yeah.] And it was—it's still a trip now, but I'm happy I did it.

Ms. Vee: I remember my first Zoom class I—when I pressed "Leave Meeting," I just collapsed to the floor, it was so exhausting.

[Both laugh]

Ms. Vee: I'm yelling at the computer but they can't hear me but I'm still yelling and I can barely see them. I've really upped my Zoom game. I've got a wireless mic and I connect my computer to the TV so that I don't have to squint to see anyone. I can see everybody and now because I'm on a mic, I can cue over the music and

at the same time which is even more powerful than I found as a teacher than being in a room and the music is blasting and like trying to speak over the music is like almost impossible sometimes, if you want to feel the music, or if you want the students to feel the music. [Buddha Stretch: Right.] So yeah, the mic was a game changer for me and being able to give real-time corrections as they're doing it, as they're moving—yeah, you know, we adapt. We all adapt. It got a lot easier after that first one.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, I mean, for me the game-changer was like you said—For me, it was—I had my what-do-you-call-it, iMac, so I had them on that, [and it] crashed on me.

Ms. Vee: Yeah yeah, you need a bigger screen, yeah.

Buddha Stretch: Mine crashed on me, so I had to literally move that, take my TV out of my bedroom and once I put it on the TV, I was like, even if I fix the iMac, I'm not going back. It's so much better on the TV. [Ms. Vee: So much better, yeah.] Yeah, sorry, correction: [it was] Uko who said take the TV out from the bedroom and use it out here. And I've never—I haven't even tried to fix the iMac since. It's still sitting on the floor. That was the game-changer for me, was being able to DJ my classes live while I'm teaching so I can—The program has a built-in mic, so I can adjust the music, they can hear me, the music's crystal clear and I can teach, I can DJ, I can play different things. I can stop. I can share the screen and show clips so if I'm demonstrating a step or if I want them to see that like a—for today—God bless, it's James Brown's birthday—so I want them to see James Brown doing his version of the James Brown. And then we go into the apple jack and so I can pull up and share the screen and show them that and then go back and then play, go through six or seven James Brown songs.

And so for me that was the game-changer for me, was learning to use Zoom, for the music and sharing the screen and being

able to do it all on the damn TV was so much better. Because like you said, doing this on the screen [leans close up into view] is not fun. [Ms. Vee: No, no.] Even on the iMac it was much bigger and I can see, but it's so much better on the television.

Ms. Vee: Yeah and it does feel like you're in some way, you're there with them, versus just little boxes on your computer screen. [Buddha Stretch: Right.] It does feel like, "Oh, look this—there's people here with me. Okay, cool."

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, the thing that I love the most is you know, being able to share music, seeing people's immediate reaction when I play something and they're like, "Ooo." Then they get hype and I'm like there it is, that's what I'm talking about, you know? Playing songs for Saturday's class—I just went through a bunch of stuff that I didn't normally play. But I was in one playlist and I was like, "Okay, okay, we're going to do it differently this time. Each person I'm going to play different music for." So I'm playing th—it and everybody in the class is like, "Oh oh oh ooo, oh I want this song! Oh I love that song! Oh I miss that song! Oh what is that song?" So for me, that, sharing the music makes up for us not being in the same space.

Ms. Vee: Yeah yeah, so important, the music.

Buddha Stretch: And being able to play the music live and to DJ. I'll be in at the end of my classes—For the last two months, I give them five minutes and I'm like, "For five minutes, you have to apply everything that we learned in the class." And I mix live music and they have to dance to live music. They don't know what I'm playing. They don't know what's coming, and it's the atmosphere like if you're at a jam, or if you're at a party. So you're getting the music and you're in the moment. So that for me is, you know, that was the game changer for me to share—Because for years, I've been telling people like, there's nothing better than being

together in the moment, and now we can't be together in the moment, so what the hell am I talking about? Well, this is what I'm talking about and I'm still able to convey that with the music, so that's the most important part of it for me, but that was the one thing that last year in the midst of starting this thing in the pandemic was, "How do I convey what I've been teaching all this time now through this damn screen?" And I'm—you know, again, it's a blessing to be able to do it and to have done it now for over a year and I'm like, "All right. Well, we're moving pretty well." And I keep saying to people, "Man, when we do get back in the room, you guys are going to be really fucked up because everything that we're doing on here, once we do it live, it's a whole 'nother thing."

Ms. Vee: Yeah. That sounds like some next level shit right there, next level Zooming.

How's my teaching changed? I think I've simplified a lot. It's even simplified my choreography—simplified. I haven't—my structure of my class hasn't really changed, and my structure has always been: there's a good long warm up, half hour to 45 minutes. It's infused with grooves and technique and some drilling in there. And after the warm up is over, I spend 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the class length of doing, drilling vocabulary. So I'll break down some vocabulary steps—whatever they are, the terminology, the storytelling behind it—we'll break that down, we'll drill it, and then only after we've done like this good amount of foundational vocabulary technique-driven things, we do choreography, in which the choreography will have those things that we just drilled in the drilling section. So that's my structure of class. That's never changed and it doesn't change from style to style. I was teaching locking, it's the same thing. If I'm teaching popping, it's the same thing.

Right now, I'm only teaching a hip hop class through BDC, but because the medium is the way it is. I'm not doing any kind of

crazy choreography that's really super complex or, not that I ever was before, but even compared to what I was doing before, it's like completely simplified from there. I would say most of the time my choreography is, I mean it was always very old-school-based but classics like that the party dance era—so the 80's and 90's—and so I've kind of found a niche in that and offering that information, just because I—the kids could teach me what's going on right now. I don't know what's going on, right? I'm not on TikTok. I don't know what's going on right now. So instead of offering the information that's like contemporary and current, I like to go backwards to fill in the gaps of if you weren't born before 2000 and you didn't experience these dances and they're not part of your lexicon, and so I always just tend to go backwards. And part of it is a bias, because that's the age I grew up in, the late 80s and early 90s. Or all through the 90s, really. But also it feels like it's the easier thing to teach, and the more necessary thing to teach too. Just like, "Hey, here's the history and vocabulary behind these dances."

Yeah, I guess that's how I've shifted also because the reason for the simplification of it is because in the beginning, when I was teaching from home, if I face the camera I would have to mirror myself so that they could copy me, right? And then if I turned around my back to the camera, then they could follow. I could do the choreography as it was originally set, but once I turn around because I want to be able to see them do it, but I also want to give them a reference point to do it. So I would have to flip it, all the choreography in my brain. Zoom teaching has seriously maybe given me dyslexia. I don't know my right from my left.

[Both laugh]

But because I had to mirror myself as soon as I faced the camera, I had to make—I had to simplify the choreography, so wouldn't be like, okay, now we're twisting this way, and now we're doing this, and I didn't do any of this stuff. So for me the

easiest thing to do was what was most familiar in my body, which was the dances that I grew up on. [Buddha Stretch: Mmm hmm.]

Part two, question number two, was for you, Stretch. Mariah Carey.

Buddha Stretch: Well, first and foremost, I mean that has more to do with the directors than—[Ms. Vee: Interesting.] I can't take credit for that. It was something that I always suggest when we're shooting videos. I always suggested that if you want to capture the feeling of the dance, you need to show the dance. So that *chop-chop-chop-chop* [editing], you're not going to capture any of the feeling of it. If you show the step, you're going to capture it, because everything that we do is going to enhance the music. We're going to dance like we're dancing in a club and that's the feeling that's going to transfer in the video, if you show what we're doing. So in "Dreamlover"⁹ you see us doing that, the butterfly and the bogle and all that, so you want to do it because it goes with it and they actually show it.

Ms. Vee: That one was on heavy rotation on my VCR. [Buddha Stretch: Yeah, so you know—] Basically, the videos where I could see the dancing were the ones that were on heavy rotation, because I hated those—all videos that were *chop-chop-chop-chop-chop*. And the other thing that I really used a lot was the live performances, like from the Grammys or from the AMAs, because there would be less editing.

Buddha Stretch: Right. And that's the thing. It's like we did that with Mariah but she was one of the very few artists to do that. Most of the artists just allowed the directors—with Mariah, we worked with her from the early 90s all the way to the 2000s, but as you notice by the late 90s, music videos became *chop-chop-chop-chop-chop*.

9. Released in 1993. <https://youtu.be/CqBtS6BIP1E> Butterfly at 1:30, Bogle at 1:34

And so that's another reason why I stopped doing choreography and I got out of doing music videos cuz you're putting in weeks of rehearsal to make up and teach all this choreography and then when they film it you're getting to see, what we called then, a "low-key blink"—blink and you'll miss it. So what's the point of me making up all of this choreography and the only part you're going to see is like [puts hands up and freezes]?

Yeah, so I mean, I can't take credit for that. That had more to do with the suggestions that we made to Mariah and the directors at the time. But as you notice, more and more of her videos later became choppy, and that had more to do with the direction that music videos were going in. It's basically the same with Will.¹⁰ Will wanted to show the dance. So he made it a point to tell the directors, "Figure out how you're going to shoot it because this is what it is." [Ms. Vee: Yeah.]

As far as the question about teaching on Zoom, I had to completely readjust what I was doing because I have been teaching—I had readjusted how I was teaching years ago, and I have specific—what is it?—what is the word?—Dammit, I just had it and I lost, I lost it that fast. I had specific things that I did in the class to demonstrate the specifics of each movement. If I'm teaching a class based on foundation, [. . .] I had exercises to show you what exactly foundation is. Foundation isn't a step. Foundation is what you take to use to build on top of. So having those exercises made it easier to do in studio when I had the people there, so I could just say, "Do this." I could get people together and they could demonstrate off of each other and see.

Now, trying to translate that through two-dimensional imagery with a second or two lag time in the music, that's not going to happen. So, I had to completely rearrange that and how I would teach and come up with newer exercises that went with the two-

10. Will Smith's solo career after DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince. Two of the videos with Elite Force Crew were "Gettin' Jiggy Wit It" <https://youtu.be/3JcmQONgXJM> and "Miami" https://youtu.be/lwBS6QGsH_4 from his album *Big Willie Style* (1997).

second delay, so that I could see. Because for me, it was one of the things that my peers were talking about when they teach is when people you don't know—if the people are on beat or off beat. And I'm like, "No, that's not true." I know if they're on or off beat because I have a specific exercise and I'm watching how they're moving and I'm counting. So since it's a delay, everything, if I start on one, they're on three. Cause there's a two-count delay to what we're doing. So everything, if we end on eight, they should end on two. So, if they're not ending on two, then I know they're off beat.

And so I had to figure that out because there's no way I'm going to just teach a class and people are just running through movement and there's no connection to the music. So that was an entirely different learning curve for me, [. . .] to make sure that what I'm teaching them that they have to be, everything that we're doing, is because of the music. So if they're off beat, then I've completely eliminated the entire reason for us doing the class.

So, I had to really change that because now we're not in the same room. If I'm in the room, I know if you're on or off beat. I'm right there, but on screen is totally different. So having to develop that so that I can keep track of people, and then you know there's also the thing of adapting to different people's level of internet. Cause some people's internet is fast and some people's internet is slow, some people's internet is choppy and it was just like, "Oh god. What the hell?" How do I keep track of some people? You're trying to keep track of them, but they're freezing up and it's like, man, this person's wifi is terrible. But having to figure out that, having to adjust, using specific exercises that I had where everybody's in the same room so I could pair people off. I can't do that on Zoom. They're all in different places, so I have to take those exercises that I was most comfortable with and push them away and come up with new stuff to teach with, because it was just—it was much trickier to do it.

And then one of the things that I will say was easier than it is, with Zoom is, I would do it in class sometimes, that in class if I'm teaching specifics, I will stop the class and pull up something on the computer and walk through the class so people can see the video that I'm showing them. "Okay, this is what I'm talking about. Watch this. Everybody come to me. Look at the screen." On Zoom, I don't have to do that. Now it's like, share the screen, boom, everybody automatically sees it. Now I know what they're looking at. I can fast forward, zoom, slow mo. I can play multiple clips. I can already have this stuff pre-arranged on the computer when I'm ready. So that aspect of it is so much easier. [Ms. Vee: Yeah, you're better at that than I am.] That's one of the things that I love. Also, if I'm talking about something and I don't want to demonstrate it, I can always just pull up the video. And be like, if I'm talking about James Brown, "Okay, here's what I'm talking about. Look at JB . . . this . . . look at what he's doing. Don't do it like I'm doing it. Do it like he's doing. Try to capture that feeling."

Like today in class, we did a step from Janelle Monáe's song the "Tightrope"¹¹ and the step that she's doing and I'm like, "You're like the tightrope. What is that?" Rather than me trying to demonstrate. I've already shown them the step. I just pull up the video. I'm like, "Okay guys, grab your water, take five. Here, watch this. This is what I'm talking about," and they all saw it. They're like, "Oh wow, that's dope." And then referencing James Brown in class, people got it. They're like, "Oh, she's moving like James," and even one person like, "Yeah, her hairstyle's from James Brown." And it's like, "Yes. Now you guys are getting it. You're getting all the references, you're putting it together without me having to say." [Ms. Vee: Yeah.] So that's another thing that is a pro as far as I'm concerned with teaching on Zoom. That was, you know that that's instantaneous, being able to show—it takes it from just a regular class to more like lecture and demonstration.

11. See video at 0:58 and 1:07 and throughout the video <https://youtu.be/pwnefUaKCbc>

Ms. Vee: Yeah yeah. Lec-dem, totally.

Here's the third question, it's for me. My experience traveling, performing with Ephrat [Asherie] bringing social and street dances to the concert dance stage, am I seeing more of an interest in students incorporating that vernacular into their college and academic work. I would say yes. I mean, we tour to a lot of colleges and we're performing at a lot of colleges, so there's a lot of dance students there, but also in my experience with where I'm teaching. I'm teaching at Pace—I'm teaching at Juilliard and Pace, the various different programs. Juilliard is very concert dance, ballet-, modern dance- heavy. And Pace is a full-on commercial dance program. That's what they're called. And they're both conservatory-like BFAs.

When I first started at Pace, you know I was never gonna like it—commercial dance [. . .] what's current in the industry now, what they're aiming to do. And I was never going to go in and teach them that, because in order to make that look good, you have to know what that is based on. So I was always going to do *me*, which was, teach foundation, and teach vocabulary, and teach technique and give them all these—the dances that came before what they know today, right? And I will have to admit that going into the program and knowing that's how I was going to approach it, I was like, "Uhh, they're not going to like me, cause I—" maybe that's my bad in assuming that the young children will—the young kids will only want what's current.

I've actually found the complete opposite. I've found that they are thirsty for learning the foundation and learning the technique and learning the history, even. I get some kids who are like, "How come we didn't learn this in dance history?" And they get really mad and they're super appreciative of learning all that. [. . .] Just last week in my Juilliard class, we were doing breakin' and one kid goes, "Oh, this is . . . contemporary dance is just breakin'," Like, "Yeah. Yeah it is. Contemporary floor work, and that's why I'm doing it with you." It just has a different intention behind it.

The mechanics are the same. How you use the floor and how you transfer your weight and some of the patterns are the same and conceptually it's the same thing. What street dancers do to create something new or to remix something, those concepts are exactly what's used in compositional structures of contemporary dance, transposing something, or retrograding something, or taking something and flipping it around and making it new somehow, and/or combining two things together. Those are all things that street dancers do naturally when we're just fooling around and freestyling. So I've found that the students that I encounter in dance academia are really open and willing to learn all this stuff. If anything, they want more.

MiRi Park: Thank you so much.

Do you have any last thoughts that you wanted to end on? I mean, I feel like you've touched all of the things that we could possibly have touched regarding teaching and transmission of these dances and these dance styles. But I don't know if you have any—

Ms. Vee: What's after TikTok, Stretch, what do you think? [MiRi Park: Direct mind control.] What's gonna be the new TikTok? And gonna be the new VCR?

Buddha Stretch: Listen, I can tell you I was amazed when it was Vine and Snapchat and now it's TikTok, so. . . [Ms. Vee: Right.] . . . who knows? I mean, soon you'll be able to upload something directly from your brain. [Ms. Vee: Something VR, something VR.] Yeah, you don't even have to, you know, even have to physically move anymore, you can just think it and it'll virtually come out.

Ms. Vee: The matrix. [Buddha Stretch: It will be interesting.] Earlier I was gonna say I want somebody to plug into the back of my brain all of Stretch's information and just so I can download it.
[Everyone laughs.]

Buddha Stretch: Then you can [makes noise as he put his hand on the back of his head] you could be like Neo,¹² "I know Kung Fu."

Ms. Vee: "I know Kung Fu."

Buddha Stretch: Show me.

Ms. Vee: I know hip hop.

Buddha Stretch: Now the thing that—one of the things that I'll say is interesting and when you're talking about teaching at Juilliard and commercial dance. I remember last year I taught—was it UC?—not UC Berkeley, UC something, it was a couple of—I did two different college courses last year and they came up with commercial dance. And I remember laughing because I always broke down commercial dance and explain it to people as, "Okay, what you say is commercial dance, what does commercial denote? Commerce, and commerce means you get paid, correct?"

And so if I'm dancing on the street now, put a bucket or a hat down and people throw money in that, I'm a commercial dancer. If I put a pole here, and put my cheeks between the pole and I make them clap, I'm a commercial dancer. I said, so when we were doing music videos we were commercial dancers, when we were doing concerts we were commercial dancers, when we were doing theater we were commercial dancers. There's no difference in the dance, you know? It's not when you say "commercial dance" it suddenly becomes something else, [it] just denotes commerce and it just denotes that you're making it, I guess, more homogenous for people, whereas street dance is already that. You don't have to change it for the people.

What you do is, you invite those people into the culture and the culture changes them. One of the things that I always talk about is, as we brought her up earlier, is Mariah. People would

12. Keanu Reeves' character from the *The Matrix* film series.

always ask us, “Man, you guys worked with Mariah for so long, how is it working with a pop star, and doing pop-stuff?” And I always say we didn’t do any pop-anything. And said, we did hip hop and we brought Mariah into hip hop culture; we didn’t bring hip hop into pop. We brought her into the culture, she immersed herself into the culture. We didn’t change to fit her, she dove into the culture head-first and adapted the culture around her. [Ms. Vee: That’s really cool. I didn’t know that.] So that’s what you’re supposed to do. We didn’t change to fit her, we brought her into the culture. We never changed what we did to fit anything. We make them fit into the greater culture. We are the greater culture. We are pop. We are what’s popular, that’s why they want us in their things. So, we fit them into the greater culture of hip hop and street dance, not the other way around, not the other way around. And that’s how we always looked at it. It’s like, why do I need to change this to fit somebody else’s perspective? How about I fit them into the perspective of this?

This is the dominant culture. We’re going to make this the dominant culture. This is what you think it is, but you want me to rearrange it so it’s less threatening to you and I’m not going to do that. It was never threatening in the first place. That’s you projecting, you need to look in the mirror and come to grips with yourself. When the beat drop, we’re all on the same note.

Ms. Vee: Hopefully. [Buddha Stretch: Well, most of us.] Yeah, yeah.
[Everyone laughing]

Ms. Vee: Shout out to Stretch, for giving me my first job moving to New York City.

MiRi: Oh, really? Can you tell us about that?

Buddha Stretch: Man, it was crazy because I had taught at this festival in Colorado and I believe the gentleman’s name was Tim and he just told me, he’s like, “I have a friend and she’s right up your al-

ley. Look out for her, she's coming to New York. Her name is Val." And I was like, "Oh okay," and he was like, "Trust me." He's like, "Where I'm from, she's it." He was like, "She moves just like you do. She'll fit in perfectly with what you're doing." So I was like, "Okay, cool," and then it was literally—

Ms. Vee: Whoa! I didn't know he said that. He just told me, "Look this guy up when you get there," and I, of course, I had already heard of you. I was like, "Yeah, okay. I'll go take his class." I didn't know he said all that.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, no. He told me to look for you. And he was like, "Yeah she's—where I'm from, she's great. She does exactly what you do you know. She's heavy into street dance." And he said, "And I think she'd be a perfect fit with you," and I was like, "Cool, I'll look out for her," and it was literally like—

Ms. Vee: Timmy Rietz.

Buddha Stretch: —maybe. What, a month? A month or so later and we hooked up and I was like "Oh, this is who he was talking about." I was like, "Okay. Let's go Val. Let's see what you got."

Ms. Vee: Yeah, so I took his class. I went to Steps. I took his class. I didn't say anything. I'm just in the back taking his class, doing the thing, and then at the end of class I go up to Stretch and I was like, "Hey yeah, Timmy told me to come take your class." He was like, "Oh you are Val, yes." And then Stretch says, "Give me your number, because you need to be working." I was like, "What?!" I just moved to New York the month before. I was like, "What? Really? Oh my god."

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, I mean he told me, he was adamant. He pulled me to the side and he talked about you, so I was like, "Cool. If she's who you—if she's half of what you're telling me, cool. So

when I meet her I'll see." But when you came to class, I was like, "Oh okay. You're Val. Cool, let's do it." You know? And I already can see you knew how to dance so I was like, "Cool. Here let's do this, and this is this, and these are these people and let's go."

Ms. Vee: Yeah yeah, I was just so fortunate. Dang.

Buddha Stretch: Well, of course, you know, she rocked every time we did, anything we did she rocked.

MiRi Park: What was the first gig?

Ms. Vee: Yeah, the first job was—it was some charity show and it was—that's how I met Voodoo Ray because Ray did the—and then Mega, b-girl Mega and who else was doing it? Tanisha Scott was doing it too. And Eric—I think Eric [Negrón] was part of the crew too yeah. Yep.

Buddha Stretch: Yeah, I don't even remember what it was. I just remember we did the Hip Hop Fest.

Ms. Vee: And then a few months later we went, we did, and then I met V [Violeta Galagarza] from KR3Ts. Yeah, and then, a few months later, we did the Hip Hop Fest. Yeah, "Din Daa Daa" [sings] that was that piece.

MiRi Park: Yeah, oh my god, I love that! I love it so much.

Ms. Vee: Stretch gave me my big break.

MiRi Park: It's also such a great New York story, too. It's all those names that are just so intensely New York. [laughs] A very specific time in New York. Thank you so much.

Ms. Vee: All right.

Buddha Stretch: Thank you, good to see you guys, be safe.

Contributors

Emilio Austin, Jr. aka "Buddha Stretch" is a Brooklyn-born dancer, choreographer, teacher, and father. Stretch heavily impacted the dance world by bridging the gap between what was termed "Ol' Skool" and "New Skool." His dance style, known as Freestyle Hip-Hop, draws from all aspects of Hip-Hop culture, music, and dance. His career spans from being the first dancer to teach Hip-Hop at Broadway Dance Center in 1989 to working theatrically with Full Circle, and as Co-Artistic Director of MiddleGround Dance Theater Co. Together with his crews Mop Top and Elite Force, he choreographed and toured extensively with recording artist Mariah Carey. He has also worked with Diana Ross, Eric B & Rakim, Thalia, Rah Digga, Heather Headley, and Angie Martinez, among others. His most memorable experience was choreographing and dancing in Michael Jackson's "Remember the Time" video. His choreography for Will Smith's "Gettin' Jiggy Wit It," "Men In Black," and "Miami" have been nominated for MTV Video Music Awards multiple times. Stretch believes that "music is the universal language; dance is its interpreter."

Val "Ms. Vee" Ho is originally from Vancouver, Canada, and started making her mark in the NYC dance scene in 2003. She's had the pleasure of working with distinguished choreographers Buddha Stretch, Rennie Harris, Luam, Maria Torres, Bradley Rapier, and Ephrat Asherie. Among her numerous TV, film, and stage credits, highlights include 'Hideaway' Video by Kiesza, The Detour, *VH1 Dear Mama TV special*, *Step Up 3D*, Rennie Harris' *Legends of Hip Hop*, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Sadler's Wells Breakin' Convention, Guggenheim Works & Process, Lincoln Center Out of Doors, and New York City Center Fall For Dance. Ms. Vee is a celebrated teacher, and on faculty at Broadway Dance Center, Pace University's Commercial Dance BFA Program, and in

2017 became the first hip hop teacher at the world-renowned Juilliard School.

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 on 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.

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.”¹³ She makes 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.

VCR (videocassette recorder): a device that recorded moving images to magnetic tape and could be used for playback.

Popular Events/Jams and Practice sessions mentioned throughout the Conversations:

**This list is inclusive of events that are mentioned in this issue of Conversations and is by no means a comprehensive list of all breaking/street dance battles, events, or practice sessions.*

ADHIP/Dance Delight: ADHIP is a Japanese company that promotes various competitions and events. Dance Delight is a street dance competition. <https://www.dancedelight.net/>

B-Boy Summit—now known as “B-Boy/B-Girl Summit”: event started in 1994 by B-Girl Asia One to celebrate all elements of hip hop culture.

The Bboy Masters Pro-Am: event started in 1996 by B-Boy Speedy Legs with Zulu Gremlin in Miami, FL.

Freestyle Session (FSS): started in 1997 in San Diego, CA, by B-boy Cros1 (Christopher Wright).

Hip Hop International: an annual performance festival started in 2002.

Homeland: a practice session that takes place in Long Beach, CA.

13. 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.

Liner Notes: Joseph Schloss

There are several themes that really stood out to me in this conversation.

First, it is common in Hip Hop Studies to draw a basic distinction—either explicitly or implicitly—between “mainstream” hip hop (generally associated with commercialism and mass media) and “underground” hip hop (generally associated with a more personal, grassroots orientation).¹⁴ But that distinction just doesn’t apply to dance. Not only is this an important conceptual point for understanding these dance forms, but it is also a significant intervention that Dance Studies can offer Hip Hop Studies generally. What kinds of practices, relationships, and philosophies may come into clearer view when we no longer expect them to come down on one side or the other of this false divide?

Second, it is apparent that hip hop dance pedagogy is often a matter of teaching people how to learn for themselves, as opposed to teaching them to follow instructions. This is largely a result of the cultural environment in which hip hop dance developed, and it involves a wide range of perceptual, cognitive, and kinesthetic processes. Buddha Stretch and Ms. Vee both speak at length about how hip hop dance developed in a time and place where resources like video recordings were simply not available. Moreover, even when dancers

14. The “underground” versus “mainstream” distinction emerged from the hip hop community as part of a larger authenticity discourse in the 1990s. As hip hop music became more commercially viable, many artists and fans felt an increased pressure to take a position on whether hip hop should become a form of commercialized popular music or whether it should remain a community-based art form. In this context, self-identification as an “underground” rap artist—or rap fan—was a way to publically align oneself with the latter position. Many academics who studied rap music adopted this distinction, either because they felt that the conversation itself was worthy of critical attention as a social phenomenon (e.g. Rose, 2008; Harrison, 2009) or because the term “underground” served as a useful shorthand for an artistic agenda that emphasized concepts of authenticity (e.g. Belle, 2014; Saunders, 2015). My point here is twofold. First, precisely because the distinction has been so valuable to the discourse around music, scholars may not realize that it doesn’t necessarily apply to other elements of hip hop, such as dance. And, second, that blind spot is itself evidence of how dance and other non-rap elements of hip hop have been marginalized in the academy.

had the means and opportunity to teach their moves to others, they were often unwilling to do so.

As a result, one of the foundational learning tools of hip hop dance is the ability to memorize and reconstruct a movement based on a single viewing. This, in turn, requires what the speakers refer to as “four-dimensional” memory. Students must not only be able to comprehend and remember the move in three spatial dimensions, but they must also understand the way it unfolds over time. Moreover, even if they are able to develop this knowledge after a single viewing, students must still develop the ability to reproduce the movement with their own body. And even once all of that is achieved, the result is still only an understanding of the movement itself as a physical act, stripped of its social, cultural, historical, and emotional contexts. It is not surprising, then, that both Ms. Vee and Buddha Stretch place a great deal of emphasis on teaching this context. Before the widespread availability of hip hop dance videos on various streaming platforms, that was automatically part of any hip hop dance education, simply because there was no way to learn the movements without personally engaging with members of the community. The teaching environment and the social context were one and the same.

Finally, I think it is instructive that rather than reject the use of streaming video on these grounds, both speakers choose to address this issue by thinking creatively about how these new resources can be leveraged to still serve the original goals, such as by providing direct access to archival footage and rare recordings. As hip hop has always done, they choose to embrace new technologies and approaches, and then reconfigure them to suit their own needs. Although the simultaneous embrace of traditionalism and innovation is not unique to hip hop culture, hip hop is rarely given credit for the sophistication with which it balances these two imperatives. This conversation, in my opinion, is an ideal example of how this powerful dynamic is not just maintained but also actively reinforced.

Author Biographies

Joseph Schloss is an interdisciplinary scholar who studies the way people use art—especially music and dance—to develop new perspectives on social, cultural, and political issues. He is primarily interested in hip hop culture as part of a larger complex of expressive traditions of the African diaspora. A past recipient of the Society for Ethnomusicology’s Charles Seeger Prize, he is the author of *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Wesleyan University Press, 2004/2014), which won the International Association for the Study of Popular Music Book Prize in 2005. He currently teaches at Princeton University and the City University of New York.

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Street Dance Activism & Black Liberation—Spatial Affirmation: Shamell Bell & d. Sabela Grimes



Dr. Shamell Bell

Street Dance Activism



d. Sabela Grimes

USC/Street Dance Activism

Street Dance Activism & Black Liberation, a conversation with Shamell Bell and d. Sabela Grimes. Video recorded and edited by MiRi Park and grace jun, May 24, 2021. Watch the full video here: <https://youtu.be/2rAnSU1NATo>

Dr. grace shinhae jun: Good morning, welcome, we are here with Dr. Shamell Bell and Sabela Grimes. Inviting these two wonderful amazing scholar practitioners to talk about their work in hip hop and beyond, and I'm like really thinking about just all the work that both of you do like outside,¹ you know. Sabela the clips you were putting up during the meditation² of you outside

1. Literally dance in the streets.

2. Street Dance Activism Global Dance Meditation August 2020. <https://www.streetdanceactivism.com/>

I mean you just mentioned, you [Shamell Bell: best part] going to Leimert,³ so [. . .]

MiRi Park: I think we're really interested in understanding your points of arrival to activism, which I think has been an ongoing practice, I would presume, throughout your lives. But how that really informs the work that you do today [. . .] but that Imani⁴ also sets out this thing in her dissertation where she's talking about her last chapter towards a cypher theory and to think about what cypher theory is⁵ and in that she talks about, is Sabela your section, where we look at the cypher is being half in real life and half in the digital space and so, so I'm thinking about the fact that you know Street Dance Activism in what we did last year was everything was online because there was a pandemic, we were all connecting with each other from wherever we were physically to each other in the digital space. And those spaces also open up to other struggles and. . .

Shamell Bell: Thank you for having us. So Sabela I'm gonna have you start us off.

d. Sabela Grimes: [Smiles.] Okay. So yeah I think we should just go ahead and just dive in the, some of the [Shamell Bell: Let's go, we family] MiRi and Grace brought up a lot of good juicy nuggets for us to think about. One is you know if it's cool with you Shamell, I just want to just give a shout out to some of the people that made me think about what I do with deeper intention. A is just living in South Africa and toyi-toyi'ing⁶ the street with everyday folk, right? And living there during the apartheid shout out then

3. Leimert Park, South Central Los Angeles, CA.

4. Imani Kai Johnson, hip hop scholar and Assistant Professor, Critical Dance Studies at UC Riverside.

5. See Suggested List of Readings in the Back Matter of this issue.

6. Toyi-toyi is a South African protest dance consisting of the stomping of feet and chants performed at protests and marches. <https://theculturetrip.com/africa/south-africa/articles/toyi-toyi-south-africas-spirited-dance-of-protest/>

moving to Philly and working with Mama Kariamu Welsh,⁷ who's piece *Raahmonaaah*⁸ literally changed my life and I wasn't even a quote unquote dancer then, I was, you know, I'm like most Black folks, I dance. Like I just go to the party and dance. I dance trying to impress somebody. I danced to, you know, link up with people that have new friends. I dance for, for so many different reasons. So this is way before I began to be identified as a dancer or choreographer. But I was actually dating someone in the dance department in Temple and was invited in to work on a project that Mama Kariamu was doing and it was about Ramona, Africa.

And it was the first time I got a chance, at least in the context of Philly, to hear the full story of the Move Organization. Right? "Move," the name of the organization is "MOVE," like, just think about how profound that it is to then be invited in to do a piece on Ramona, Africa, and it started with [sings "Raaamonaaa!"]. And to be invited into, to just move and do poetry, and what have you and still be—and this was my first time doing quote-unquote concert dance. Right?! I think it's really important for me to share that because a lot of people connect me to Pure-movement as if that was my beginnings. And even though Pure-movement is really important in my life, Mama Kariamu Welsh is paramount and also at the time my sister, my elder sister-mother would let me just sit in her class. How come, I'm just like, I can see Mama Kariamu, Sonia Sanchez. Right? And I don't know if you've ever seen Sonia Sanchez recite poetry but she's, she be [vocalization], she be in it, like the body, like really paying attention to the body, and so where I also met Spady,⁹ who is a mentor to H. Samy Alim.¹⁰

7. Dr. Kariamu Welsh, founder of Kariamu and Company and the Umfundalai technique. Professor Emerita at Temple University.

8. *Raahmonaaah* by Dr. Kariamu Welsh <https://vimeo.com/107057124>

9. James G. Spady, scholar, historian, and journalist.

10. H. Samy Alim, scholar and Professor, Anthropology and African American Studies at UCLA.

So the whole concept of hiphopography I got from Spady. Spady was just a kat that I would see around on the train. I built with Spady in so many different spaces. So this idea of us being in the community and for people to invest in us, even though you know that time I was young, and these people were with the institution or I would see them on the block. And Homer Jackson, who I really began to chop my teet with, chop my teet, I think teet, there's difference between teeth [points to his teeth]. Anyway, yeah. Homer Jackson—I just want to honor the folks that invited me in, and continue to nourish my root system, cause I feel like what you and I do is really grounded, right?! It's like there's a root system to what we do. And it's really complicated because there's ideas of what we supposed to do at a protest, at least in the American context, and what we're not supposed to do at a protest. You feel me. So just a shout out to all those people. We'll circle back around to in real life and in the digital space, go ahead and say your piece Shamelly-Mell. Dr. Shamelly-Mell.

Shamell Bell: Yeah, no, that was really powerful. Always thinking back to roots and you know that's why I asked you to go first. I wasn't gonna put you like, "Oh, you the ol' head," you know. [Both laughing] But I was—I—that's exactly what I was thinking. I was like, "Go ahead and start us off." "This idea of Street Dance Activism" being founded by me is something that I, like y'all know, I push back on that. We're at the LAPD headquarters. "I didn't know how to be a core leader." I read so much about social movements, through my training with Robin D. G. Kelley, through having [an] American Studies and Ethnicity/African American Studies degree from USC and then I was currently in my PhD program in Ethnic Studies, so "I had all of this knowledge" written knowledge about what social justice movements should look like and I can't tell you where it came from in the physical because I actually didn't know up until that point that there—I knew in my body that we always danced for liberation. That's what liberated me, you know.

I like to say that I'm one of the freest people that I know, and someone told it to me, and then I started to claim it. And in that, you know, organizing the LAPD occupation [air quotes], I was just wanting to dance in the space and do choreography. And I think what's important about that moment is that I fell back onto what reminded me of living. And I—and it wasn't this idea of curating anything. It was just—I wanted people to come in, social media blast it, to just come in and live in the space but—I guess what I'm saying now while we're thinking, and I'm just looking up to the ancestors for that work that they put in the ring shout, all of those things that literally channeling through me, and it shifts. I love how, I think it was Sarah from *Street Dance Activism* that called me a visionary instigator and I'll never let that go, you know this idea of founders. I'm like, "No, Sabela go, go first, talk about what brought you here." I haven't actually thought about outside of an academic sense in kind of graining against it, what made me dance in this space of having so much knowledge about social movements and what it should look like. I like how you said that: What is this supposed to look like?

And that contrariness, if that's a word, in myself that always tends to—I'm not going to necessarily do what they say, society says I'm supposed to do, I'm going to feel into it. And honestly I wanted to live in a space, I wanted to lift people's morals. I wanted to not consistently be—the anger was righteous and in our anger—but I was holding on to so much. So my dance background is very much just people in the street, and so I wish I had these markers I can tell you in dance, like, this is the person that helped me to do what I do. I still am working through my own imposter syndrome, where I can go and live—live dance when I'm dancing for myself, but as soon as you start to critique me, or I think that you're critiquing me, my body kind of shuts down because that's not what I dance for. I dance as a, as a praise, as a, as worship, to the Divine, the Most High, to God, in—I'm looking to those people, you know?

I had, for me—if wasn't you know, Miss Prissys in the street, the Tommy the Clowns in the streets, the people that were in the dance organization that I had when I was a preteen, that I was finding literally people on the streets. Sabela if you was out here in Leimert, back when I—We would've [brings hands together]. I'm like, yo, you trying to be a part of this, and you would have taught me, just like you teach me now, you know? So I am, as far as my roots and my legacy—my roots are so heavily in street dance culture and my peoples. I learn so much through you all, and just being in community with you, so I want to go back to just honoring those before me that have continued to do this work and just making it known that the work that we do here in Street Dance Activism is more of like community and so I wanted to, before I stop rambling because I listened to your answer and how you talked, I was like yo, I don't have those moments of this person, there's no dance person that took me under their wing, you know? It was always like, "Shamell's out in the streets," and "Shamell's getting people together," just exactly what you see in Street Dance Activism, me just gathering people. I've always been the person to gather. I've always been the person to see something and say hey I can break that down into an easier form for folks so they can, so it can be translated to folks who are not dancers, whatever.

But I guess where I want us—bring us right now with Street Dance Activism—I just looked over and it just reminded me, and MiRi will love this, my student has this line that he made out of my class and it's called the "freedom dreamer dreamers." I guess his—what do they call these? [pauses] Seasons? What do you call clothing lines, when you have—like a season, I guess. So based out of my class he has this line of "freedom dreamers" and I think that is honestly what I continue to do through my body and dance, you know?

I remember I was talking to you grace about this that when we were writing, I wrote you all in some conference, the ASTR¹¹

11. American Society for Theatre Research <https://www.astr.org/>

conference, and you're all facilitators cuz I put all your names in it, and I was talking about the body as an eccentric container of knowledge that generates possibilities to defy or transcend time, space, and reality. And I think that that's what we do together and when thinking about freedom dreams, this quote that we say over and over and over again, which I think we're dancing collective freedom dreaming together is, I should memorize it by now, I think I do have it memorized "without new visions, we don't know what to build only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us."¹²

And I just consistently go back to that: a process that can and must transform us, and the maneuvers that we are doing in dance and moving our bodies is something that really provides this space of possibility, I love that rebellious possibility that we do within our bodies, and I just like that's what I want to offer to what I envision we are doing in the future with Street Dance Activism. We're collecting everyone's embodied freedom dream and living it out collectively and shifting. Yeah, so I don't know. That was a rant. I don't know where I came from, but . . . [Sabela is talking but muted]

I don't know if you have anything to say [Sabela: yeah] about, because you do this so well. This idea of how we defy, transcend, time-space reality, the quantum activism you do. I think that that is where Street Dance Activism is this liberatory time-space of radical resistance and I just wanted to hear your thoughts on some of that . . . this idea of using our collective freedom dreaming and moving together and kind of defying the time, space, and reality and kind of, this sounds so weird, but when I am with you all energetically or not—like, Sabela, you don't have to be around me energetically for me to feel you.

12. Kelley, R.D. (2002). *Freedom dreams: The black radical imagination*. Beacon Press. p. xii

And I know you're going to call me sometimes, or I kind of joke because I'm like, "Oh, okay you checking in." But what is it that we have tapped into through our bodies that I feel like I do transcend or transport or go to another realm when we are, you know, even if we're talking in space together? So I don't know that transcendence and transformation that shifts us to this new, not even new, vision—like a new space. I feel like if I was a quantum physicist and I were to study us energetically, there's something that happens. And you can't tell me that there's not something that happens. So yeah, what are your thoughts on that?

d. Sabela Grimes: Yeah, I mean—Well, so many thoughts. I think about when we tune in, when we, what we tap into, what we have an opportunity to do through what we do, the doingness of what we do, the beingness of how we be, is that [pauses] yeah, I feel like we get a chance to celebrate the uncelebrated.

Shamell Bell: That's it.

d. Sabela Grimes: Right?! And I think about—I'm so sick and tired of you so concerned about being the founder or whatever [laughs]. It is, it's really, it's, it speaks to, it speaks to intention. You know some people want to be the founder in a very linear way and within a certain paradigm, where access or resources can be funneled to this individual, right? Because they're the founder, they're the godhead, they're the mind behind whatever.

And there is just something different that really dispersed the accountability, the responsibilities, the praise, the labor, the joy. It's the different sort of approach. You're so much of a connector [Shamell: yeah], and you're a connector within a continuum that—I think we're more concerned with being a part of a continuum, as opposed to being a point on the linear sort of historical timeline, right?

Shamell Bell: Yeah, it just stresses me out.

d. **Sabela Grimes:** Yeah yeah yeah and it's like if we do that, and we're thinking about the spirit work of it all, it opens us up to be able to be attuned to a wider energy field. Right? Instead of me, and this is all respect to people that we consider pioneers or what have you, but when I talk about Mama Kariam, I'm talking about she invited in a knucklehead that was snooping all around the dance program at Temple and he wasn't even a student, right?! I'm just a community person, like literally I'm just someone that lives in the community in North Philly, that gets invited in.

That's huge yo. It's—I'm not enrolled in anything, what have you, and that really inspired me and this is—You're part of that continuum. This is the work that you're doing, the work that I'm doing. We're inviting people in. And it's a—the invitation has already been written, right? It's not like I'm sitting down writing these invitations and so we just get a chance to change the perspective on what we do anyway.

When we go to the clubs, people think when I frame what I do in Leimert Park, I have to frame it a certain way and people think of it as site specific or whatever whatever. But I've been going to Leimert Park and dancing since I was in my late teens. Which is a long time ago, you know what I mean? And not as a dancer, not as an activating space, because movement lives there, music lives there. So for me it's like, I don't even go and do an activation. I am with—I am in this sort of experience. This place is already activated, it's already got an energy field and it's really complex, it's really complicated, it's really dense, it's really deep. There's all kinds of characters and players and that's the sort of energy field that I like to tap into and what feels right about when we do maybe a "protest", a protest right? It's something that's a different type of gathering, but it is a protest. I like Leimert Park because Black folks with their bodies, right, that have been codified, that have been marked, find joy.

I'm not looking for dancers. I'm—we dance. And we dance because we feel like it. Like, why is there music in the alley?! Like really, why they just set up the music in the alley? How come they don't take it in one of those places and do it properly? It's literally in the alley. Why does Harun¹³ open up one of the doors to his coffee shop and just got the DJ blasting? Why in front of KAOS Network,¹⁴ you know what I mean, like there's something about that and we're part of that continuum and we, we, we are intentional and deliberate about bringing that to a variety of different spaces, that energy.

Shamell Bell: I have a question. You brought up something: so inviting people in was so key and you just—I saw in my head when you said, “Why, why is the music in the alley?” I just saw the vision of inviting people in. I wanted to you a little bit about Leimert in specific—in particular, because Leimert is where I was studying and, not even studying, that's, Leimert was where I was dancing and then when I was studying, so krumping, jerkin' and then protesting, like they're all in the same space, you know? Doing artistic work in Leimert, like all of them, I noticed that I continue to—anytime I create, anytime I do interviews, anytime, I'm always heading back to Leimert. And there is some type of vortex there that I feel like, you know, it's you in particular when you dance. And this may be too, you know I be going off into crazy stuff crazyville, but I think that when you go there with those costumes, when you go there with your ancestors, when you go there, you're protecting a particular space and that's why they're always trying to like gentrify, or attack, or stop the drum circle, or whatever they're always trying to stop what's happening in Leimert. Because I feel like Leimert is this, you know people call it the hotbed of art and resistance and you know, Black, you know our little, you know, Little Tokyo or our Black community and

13. Harun, owner of Harun Coffee Shop located in Leimert Park. <https://harunintl.com/>

14. KAOS Network art center located in Leimert Park. <https://kaos-network.business.site/>

neighborhood but it's so much more than just geographically Black folks in concentration in a space.

There's something that's going on energetically in Leimert that draws people in, that invites people who are ready, and you sometimes don't be ready, you're just in it, you're in the flow, you're being invited in with the music, and then there's healing that happens. So many of my most transformative moments and cries, even Nipsey [Hussle] passing so close—so Leimert—I was sitting in Leimert.

This is the most crazy thing. I didn't even live—I was at UCLA and so I was living in UCLA family housing but the day that Nipsey passed, I just was driving to Leimert and I had a meeting that was in the Slauson/La Brea type area I believe. But I just stopped in Leimert Park and sat in my car and was talking on the phone and then heard all of the chaos when I was driving to go to my meeting. I saw that the streets were blocked off and I checked and then TMZ told me that Nipsey passed. And it's something about literally sitting in Leimert as Nipsey transcends this reality that I wanted to talk about Leimert and its capacity to be the space where you're able to dance, where you're able to be invited in, where you're able to heal, where you're able to protest, where you're able to do workshops, where you're able to workshop yourself. I don't know. It's just something in there and something that you do in particular by dancing in it, as some kind of like—I see you as a steward of that area when you go in. I don't know if that's the right word, but what it—Does that bring up anything to you? When you were talking, those are the things that kind of came through. And I love that you say that we invite people in with Street Dance Activism because that's all I ever wanted to do. You don't have to be co-signed by any choreographer. You don't have to be a trained classical dancer or anything. You just have to show up and you just have to know that you're invited. All are welcome. And so yeah, I love, I love what you just said. I don't know if I sparked anything.

d. Sabela Grimes: Yeah, I know you want me to answer your question, but I'm really curious. Yo, when I was listening to you talk I think about—So it seems like we have this thing about being invited in, which I think is really important for Black folks, right, to extend an invitation and to be invited in. Especially when there's, yeah, I don't know, I'm just thinking about that—Maybe we'll circle back to another conversation around that and also think about—you know I love Tommy the Clown's whole outfit. And I don't mean like what he's wearing. I mean like this is what 20 years—20 years, right?—and I think about, and I don't want to romanticize it but at least there's enough. There's a long enough history where when I look at the clips now on Instagram or when I see them, like, they were down the block. And with my ignorant self talking about being invited—you know it's a little kid's party literally on my block, and I wanted—I was driving by slow, walk down, just wait for someone to come up, "Ay boy. You keep showing up." But it's a little creepy too because I think the kid was like seven, but anyway, it's like—[pause] the movement vocabulary, like what the body is doing, is so hood, it's so Black [Shamell: Yes]. It's—and the space that's created for the whole dialogue and discourse, and the back and forth, and the competition, and the conversations and the clowning on multiple levels of the clowning, not just the clown dancing but just like clowning [Shamell: yes]. There is—I love that shit. [Shamell: I love it] I love it.

Shamell Bell: I saw his van driving on the freeway and I'm behind him being creepy like, "Yo, I see you, I'm behind you, let's get up," this was just like two weeks ago, I'm like, "Hey, let's hook up." Tommy's still this force that, yes, keep going.

d. Sabela Grimes: Yeah and when he show up at Leimert, it literally takes the energy higher. I don't know what like—You know I'm in different places. I know very few people that when they show up in "concert dance" when they show up the energy literally goes

[gestures hands moving up] and most importantly amongst the youth, yo.

Shamell Bell: Yeah, yeah, so here you go, thank you. So I mentioned Tommy earlier as with clowning as far as Miss Prissy and then the whole situation—Let’s even go back to—I tend to shy away from the things that I did in the commercial area and I need to not do that but, Tommy the Clown is who really gave me an opportunity to be a “professional” dancer. Being in close proximity to some of his earlier formations of dancing with him and then we getting into Christina Aguilera’s “Dirty,”¹⁵ and them seeing us clowning. I was a clown dancing extra in Christina Aguilera’s “Dirty” and then David LaChapelle¹⁶ saying, “We need to do a documentary on that.” So a lot of people don’t know that before *Rize*¹⁷ had such a focus on krump, it was Tommy and some of us that were just in conversation with David LaChapelle. That is a really pivotal moment where I was kind of thrust into something that I wasn’t—I don’t think I was necessarily prepared to go into the professional career in that way. I was still very much wanting to study.

But I think that Tommy’s presence in, and I will say even more so than we give credit to to this day, I think we’re coming back around to saying how Tommy the Clown, in particular, how we were dancing at parties, clowning in in South Central, that joy that he brought, you know? I don’t know anybody from my high school experience that didn’t have a Tommy the Clown party. We was always going to the battles and that really gave us a safe recreational space. So there is, folks that were in the performing arts group that I had—so it was about 20 of us, and most of them were with Tommy, so I would have to have my rehearsals around when they were going, doing things with Tommy. And they would bring

15. Music video for the 2002 song by Christina Aguilera.

16. Director of the krump and clown dancing documentary *Rize*.

17. *Rize*, 2005, is a documentary on the street dance culture of clowning and krumping featuring Tommy the Clown.

back the moves and such that they were doing with Tommy to me. So yes, a lot of my early training came by proxy to folks who are in direct relationship and doing work with Tommy.

And so yeah, I give a lot of credit to even the things that I was doing and choreography and my organization because I would be like, "Oh what's that move? Teach us all. Okay, let's all put this together." And it's also something that there was not at that time. You didn't have to be a direct Tommy the Clown's dancer, Tommy the Clown dancer, but you took on that movement vocabulary in the hood. That's just what we were doing if you weren't stripper dancing, if you weren't doing a wobble and all of these things together. That's what we were doing.

So I just cut you off because it did bring me back. I'm thankful for this conversation because it does tie me into you know a space in a, in a, in a home that I was finding myself just be like, "Oh, I just dance in the streets," or "Oh, you know. I just danced with my friends." No, but I am a part of the legacy in South Central Los Angeles and thank you for like pointing that back to Tommy and Tommy's energy. And know that that opportunity for *Rize*, that I wouldn't be here as a scholar if not for that opportunity for *Rize* being played in a classroom. So, absolutely. So foundational.

It just keeps going back to that, yes, Tommy the Clown. Yes *Rize*. Yes, the stripper dance section. Yes. Now I get to be Dr. Shamell Bell and live my life in congruency where I can dance for my life, but dance for protest, but dance for transcendence and transformation, but dance for collective visioning, and dance for liberation. Thank you, Tommy.

- d. Sabela Grimes:** And when I'm—Yo—And what I'm saying is when I'm talking about continuum right when I'm talking about circular progress, so these are the things I love to talk about. There's linear progress and we're inundated with these ideas, especially if you've come through these institutions: linear product. You do

this, you take this class [indicating with his hand going down a line], yeah, linear, boom. What we do in our communities is a circular progress. Right, there's a, you know when you think about sankofa,¹⁸ like when you think about the circle in a really deep and dimensional way, right? And we think about spherical, if we think about spiraling, if we think about beginning to end and ending to begin, when I think about Tommy and I think about continuum, and I think of Dr. Shamell Bell, I think about Tommy the Clown is still in his flow.

Rize is a point, it's a point, it's a marker, it has a platform because it's a film, right? And it becomes a reference point, but what I witnessed—what I bear witness to is that the continuum of Tommy's work expands and has a different type of life because it's literally in the streets. This is street dance activism! You're going to tell me going to bring little black kids joy is not street dance activism? Y'all not, y'all playing with me this morning. Let me—Look. That's not street dance activism?! And we supposed to be in conversation with people about what real "activism"—Sit down, yo! Twenty years—whether you like him or not, whether you think the movement is sophisticated, whatever—that's 20 years. And I'm supposed to sit up in someone's lecture hall and they goin' tell—

I'm saying yo, this dude right here in this neighborhood where I live at, like literally I mean way up, his little spot, people don't know Tommy from a "studio." Where studio at? Where the Tommy, who references his studio? You said his van. This shit is mobile! He in them streets. [Shamell laughing: I'm out there following his van]. You know the van. Yo that's—there's a model there that we don't talk about enough and I think it's directly connected to what we do as street dance activists.

18. *Sankofa* is an African word from the Akan tribe in Ghana. The literal translation of the word and the symbol is "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind." <https://www.berea.edu/cgwc/the-power-of-sankofa/>

There's the model in what we talked about the people that invite us in, right?

And when I think about the Good Life¹⁹ right—So when I was younger the Good Life was everything to me. I'm talking about the Good Life before it moves to Leimert, it was on Crenshaw [Blvd] and Exposition [Blvd] and that was Miss, Miss B. Hall. I'll never forget her because she's the first person ever tryin' to have me drink some wheat grass. I remember back then before I was all conscious and health conscious, I was like, "These Negroes is in here drinking grass juice." They talking all, you know what I mean, like they trippin', but inviting in a bunch of young MCs to just come do your thing, and at the same time you can see a Steve Cokely.²⁰ I saw frickin' OJ Simpson talk real extra Black. You can find the clip on YouTube. Yes. These spaces, right? And there's, there's—it's these corrugated spaces to think about how Spady to bring Spady and Alim back in the mix. The folds like Spady used to talk about the corrugated spaces.²¹ We always look at surface level things, he would talk about what's in the folds [hand gestures] like you know what I mean. Like what's in there. I didn't mean to do that, my bad, that's a whole 'nother corrugated space.

Sorry, MiRi and grace, we keeping it real raw wit y'all today, my bad.

Shamell: Listen. We up in here going back in the akashic records like. . .

Dr. grace shinhae jun: No. [d. Sabela Grimes: Oh grace up in the mix. what's up?] Just keep going. This is amazing. It's just really amazing what you are all doing.

19. The Good Life Cafe was a health food market and cafe in Los Angeles, California, known for its open mic nights. https://hip-hop-music.fandom.com/wiki/Good_Life_Cafe

20. Steve Cokely, researcher and lecturer. <http://www.stevcocokely.com/>

21. Spady, J.G. and Lee, C.G., 1995. *Twisted Tales: In the Hip Hop Streets of Philly*. UMUM/LOH Publishers.

Shamell Bell: So grace. Do you know that Sabela didn't, remember that abstract that we were doing for the ASTR and we were trying to figure out how to get repetition and talk about the circle. And it's so funny cause Sabela just starts talking about it right now but we were—Like, I was looking at Tommy DeFrantz, thinking of another Tommy, and he was talking about how the body so easily contains narratives of transcendence through dances of physical eccentricity and then we were talking about how we transcend and alter the linear and cyclical patterns of repetition, and Sabela just—

Dr. grace shinhae jun: Circular progress. MiRi are texting to each other, so, keep going.

Shamell Bell: Wow that's crazy. [d. Sabela Grimes: Yeah yeah yeah.] Okay go ahead. No, I was, you don't know that I—I put you in an abstract for a conference and I put everybody that worked on the Global Dance Meditation and their affiliation. So I put Street Dance Activism or their university or whatever they call it, just so they can be published in and have it on their CVs and stuff. But I called grace like, "Yo, what am I gonna do with this abstract?" and we were talking about exactly what you just brought up so we're always so in line and in sync. Go ahead.

d. Sabela Grimes: Yeah I appreciate it. I appreciate it. It's funny because also going back to, I'm gonna talk about MiRi bringing in hiphopography²² and I think about street scholar, which was another thing that Spady would talk about a lot. You know, MiRi you might want to jump in this MiRi. MiRi like Alim's work at UCLA with—I was a part of it—what's the name of the group that we had? Used to read books and shit.

22. See Spady, J. G., Alim, H.S. & Meghelli, S. (2006). *Tha Global Cipa: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness*. Philadelphia: Black History Museum Press.

MiRi Park: The Hip Hop Studies Working Group.

d. Sabela Grimes: The Hip Hop Studies Working Group, right.

Shamell Bell: “We used to read books and shit.” Oh, let me take a sip of my Capri Sun.

d. Sabela Grimes: Yes, Capri Sun. So when you’re in grad school and you can meet with other people across campus and get a chance to be in dialogue, that shit is huge, and it’s community, right? It’s such a simple thing like let’s read a book together. And we’re going to come—I’m with you know this group of people from sociology, from linguistics, from . . . I’m coming from WAC/D.²³ [Shamell Bell: WAC/D] And it gives you an opportunity to really flesh out and get out of your little silo, right?

And I feel like just those simple organizational, community activate- like really being intentional about having community—And Alim’s been doing that for a minute, you know. But that comes out of Spady talking about what it means to be a skreet—street scholar. I said “skreet.” My bad—street scholar, street scholar.

So what does that mean if we’re talking about street dance activism? How do we affirm ourselves in these streets? [Shamell Bell: In these streets.] How do we see ourselves, who are we there? Who am I in the streets, as opposed to who I am in the halls of one of these institutions [Shamell Bell: Institutions.] and most importantly, who can I be?

I was in Leimert yesterday morning, as I was sharing with y’all, and what I love about it is, yo- I’m full-on quantum suit, in the new quantum suit, [Shamell Bell: Love it.] and I have, I just, like, spirit led—Yesterday spirit was like I’m just going to go down—and I’ve done this before, there’s a pathway, it’s yellow dividing line down Degnan [Blvd]—and I’m going down the the line and I’m just like, I got my headphones in and then I could

23. UCLA’s World Arts and Culture/Dance Program

turn it off but there's music and I'm just like my—I'm dedicated to just this pathway. What throws me off the pathway? A young sista—she had to be about six—and she just was going [waves right hand].



Sabela in his quantum suit. Photo courtesy of Sabela Grimes' personal collection.

And so I'm in the zone [vocalizes to indicate movement of body], I'm feeling [continues vocalization] and then I look over again she's going [waves right hand], so I wave [waves left hand], right? So in that moment I experienced like this, this, this [pause] like it's literally a transformative moment. I'm already locked in spirit in a certain way and then spirit says, "Pay attention to this." [Shamell Bell: Her.] Right? Boom. And then transition, boom into a deep—a deeper level of the transformative experience.

Shamell Bell: I'm telling you, you be doing stuff in Leimert.

d. Sabela Grimes: Right. And the thing is, [pauses] what is it to be affirmed for me in a moment like that? I'm full—y'all seen the mask, this is the mask I'm wearing, right? [pulls out mask to show] Right.

Shamell Bell: Is it COVID-safe?

d. Sabela Grimes: Listen. I made this out of them damn COVID shields. [Shamell Bell: That's—No. Can you talk about the brilliance of that?] I'm about to signify on all of this, I'm about to signify on all of this right here.

Shamell Bell: Brilliance. Don't, don't [d. Sabela Grimes: Right.] move away from that, you built that [d. Sabela Grimes: This is two.] on the COVID mask, during COVID, still out in spaces. [d. Sabela Grimes: Talk to me.] That's a rebellious act in itself and you go in as spirit-filled with your COVID mask turned into something else that you signify on to it aesthetically and went in. Ahhhh! They ain't ready!

d. Sabela Grimes: Yo. But it's like, what I was going to say is, in that moment, I felt affirmed and then just this [waves right hand] as this sort of being [gestures to his body], I can say, "Yo, I see you." [Shamell Bell: I was just gonna say that.] "I see you sis, I see you seeing me. I see you seeing me. I see you."

And for me that's, like, that's it. Dr. Katrina Hazzard Gordon [Shamell Bell: Yep.] says that. By the end of the day, it's Black people be like, "I see you." That shit is huge. It's really important. [Shamell Bell: Yeah] Right.

Shamell Bell: I see you seeing me, so not just [d. Sabela Grimes: Yeah.] I see you, I see you, seeing me, that same circle we're talking about [both make circles with their fingers]. I see you seeing me, and I think that's why like I say when we come together even across the Internet as Street Dance Activism where we just get

to witness each other. We get to see each other, see each other, and I think that that is something far greater than I thought, but I know that that's where I'm able to keep going. There is a bit of, not to get too dark about it, but there's a bit of hopelessness that I feel sometimes when I'm not connected, like you all are like helping me be connected into source. I don't know like I just had this visual, I see in images. And I saw you all as kind of like a power cord like when—I don't know if that makes sense to you, but I don't know. Anyway, I was just riffing off of you.

d. Sabela Grimes: Yeah yeah yeah, I'm gonna keep riffing, power cord.

I think about when you look at a rope and it's got all those different strands that make the rope right, you feel me?

MiRi, what are you talking about circles and digital space. I'm trying to connect, I'm trying to make sure we answer some of y'all's questions, cause we "been on our own" [sings it].

Shamell Bell: "On our own" [sings it].

MiRi Park: I think you're already talking about it because I was just referring to how you redrew what a cypher can look like, that it is half in real, in-person, but also half in the digital space. I think that was kind of the point of you focusing on Soulja Boy²⁴ as being, not necessarily trying to quantify the importance of it, but that there are communities that are interacting both with the video in real time and that it keeps going. That the cypher is not always at a jam per se, but it's also kind of made me realize that what we think about as a jam also kind of works as a metaphor too because it, as hip hop studies—I feel like individually, people have worked on different aspects of what hip hop studies, what hip hop is doing, in the form and like the sociology cypher, in the

24. MiRi is referencing Sabela's blog post on hip hop artist Soulja Boy. <http://socialdancemedia.blogspot.com/2008/08/street-scholar-sampler.html>

dance cypher, in the history cypher. But I was just thinking about going to a House Dance Conference, back in the day. And you walk in and you're just enveloped by the whole thing and you're going from place to place. You're going to—and it's kind of like you were talking about, Sabela, going to Leimert Park, just walking down the street with different DJs. You've got different elements that are all coming together but as a whole, it functions as a collective space to be in community with one another. But I think the way that you talk about the meeting space, of the digital divide in real life is being the URL, like the meeting spot, I think you talked about.

d. Sabela Grimes: Yeah and it's also like—it's funny, because at that time when I was at UCLA and I say I want to do my thesis project on Soulja Boy who at the time was a teenager, [Shamell Bell: I love it,] right, and had some little pop thing on this thing called YouTube, right? And [clears throat] you know Soulja Boy, it's just all about how we frame things right or how people's point of reference [Shamell Bell: They need to give that man his roses and stop playing.]

He—I was [Shamell Bell: [intonates]] I was reading Diana Taylor's what's it Archive Repertoire,²⁵ what else? [Shamell Bell: Yeah.] Forgive me, [Shamell Bell: Yeah I know what you're talking about] you know I'm talking about, and I was reading, I was thinking like, "Okay, cool I'm really into this new thing called YouTube which is—" and there was other platforms before YouTube, there was, but I'm like, "Oh, user generated this shit. . ." like what we do, already, right? Hyperlinks. So I don't know if y'all know people, but linear, like circularity and linearity, right? I'll give you an example.

When I used to go to church, the preacher would start a sermon, there'd be a tangent, he would circle back, there'd be another tangent, they would circle back, [Shamell Bell: Yes!] right?

25. Taylor, D., 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Sister so-and-so or brother so-and-so would start a song, there'd be a tangent. [Shamell Bell: Still singing that song.] The musician would go, right—the musician you know, they, some of the tangents sometimes would even bring in quote unquote secular songs. [Shamell Bell: [laughs]] I remember one moment there was—Tina Turner had “What’s Love Got To Do With It” and someone was singing a gospel song, they talking about, “What’s love got to do it, Jesus got the answer” [sings], you know what I mean? What, what’s the hyperlink? What’s the hyperlink?

So people were trying to convince me that time that you would that—Oh, when I first started, as a side note, speaking of a tangent, when I first started at USC, the lecture course, one of the comments about Professor G was, “He’s literally quote king of the tangents unquote.”

But when I first started at USC I was, like, I’m curious to know they’re like, “He’s king of the tangents,” and it really warmed my heart. [Shamell Bell: [expresses vocally]] I was like, “Yo, that shit is real.” And so then I started, when students would be like “you know you go off on a tangent,” I’d be like, “Okay cool.” When you read a blog post and there’s hyperlinks, do you read the whole post and then go back to the hyperlink and click it or do you read it, there’s a hyperlink, you click it then you go off on to this other, right, webpage and you read a little bit and then you come back? Come on man, stop playing.

So the circularity makes sense so the, in real life, in the digital space is so similar to how we think about spiritual life, how we think about our material selves, [Shamell: Ooo.] always being in communion with our immaterial selves. [Shamell: Oh my god.] Right?

Shamell Bell: Right.

d. Sabela Grimes: Try to wrap their heads around it. What my earth suit is nothing but an avatar so when I’m quantum, I’m an avatar. This [touches his arms] is nothing but an avatar body.

Shamell Bell: Yeah absolutely. You know you're opening up so much for me and giving me the permission to do what I do because I am the queen of tangents like but it's because I'm bi—I thought it was because I was "bipolar." I literally have racing thoughts, a million connections. You say this, I can give you a book that goes there and [rattles] that's just how my mind works. So I often kind of hedge and say, "Hey, you know I may go off on a tangent but just let me know and I can go back to what you're saying."

But what you're explaining to me is so much of just how we're able to, like you said hyperlink, bring it back. It's the church—you're singing that same song throughout, you go into the sermon, you go back, you go in another direction, then you go back to the beginning of what the point of the sermon is like absolutely that's us and it reminds me of this. I love how you did your UCLA on Soulja Boy on YouTube and I'm not sure what the years are, but I was doing YouTube in jerks.²⁶ I didn't know you, but literally my undergraduate thesis was on social media YouTube with these kids called the Rangers²⁷ that helped to make jerkin' an international phenomenon.

So it was something that we were hitting there and for me and and also like the idea of Soulja Boy having these dances that went viral—the idea of the Rangers or all the different jerks reclaiming space, taking up space and dancing in the streets. And what that means for me doing my summer undergraduate research fellowship at Yale and to walk outside and see boys jerkin' and trying to raise money for their skinny jeans. I'm like, "Oh, do you know you know who the Rangers are?" and they're like, "Yeah, yeah." And for people in Yale to know who the Rangers are you know from South Central Los Angeles, these are Leimert boys. They were dancing in Leimert. I was in Leimert every week doing ethno

26. Jerkin' is a west coast street dance.

27. Rangers are a rap/dance crew known for jerkin'.

“autoethnography” but just living, so that, there’s something key about everything you just said, and what the digital—

d. **Sabela Grimes:** And they were viral, and they were viral without social media. Of course, they were they were—social media was around YouTube whatever, whatever, but these trends, these dance trends literally catch on, people catch on and then it’s always about what the body’s doing and how the body is adorned.

Cause the skinny jeans remember—You go to the swap meet²⁸ right now—I’m a tell you there’s a—I don’t know now because I don’t know what’s going on Slauson, but I was at the swap meet. I bought some [of] my costume elements from the swap meet, [Shamell Bell: Of course the Slauson.] just to have the energy. Side note, did you know that the Slauson is literally set up like how they do that in Korea. [Shamell Bell: Yeah.]

This just, like, yo, I took my homegirl she wants to do this film on the uprising in ‘92 and I was like yeah you ain’t never been to the Slauson and she’s Korean, when she walked in and she was like, “Yo, this shit is just like in Korea,” and I was like, “What are you talking about?” For me it’s the Slauson—like this is the Blackest shit ever. She’s like, “Yo, the whole setup.” And it’s just anyway, that has nothing to do [with] what we’re talking about. Going back to the Rangers, go.

Shamell Bell: No, no I’m laughing because I literally would use the word “adorn,” skinny jeans, I wish I—I wonder where it was—I kind of did a poem of my first time actually seeing the Rangers and what it brought up for me in it, I use the word “adorned in skinny jeans” and I talked about the aesthetics, and this is my undergraduate thesis, and it’s so, you’re using the same word, let me see if I can, I’m just gonna do a quick—a search to see if I can find it cause you’re going to laugh that—Yes, here it is. This

28. Slauson Swap Meet in South Central Los Angeles.

is June 2009. Okay, flashback to June 2009, a YouTube entitled, a YouTube video entire, why can't read, okay I got it. So here it is:

June 2009

A YouTube video entitled, "The Ranger\$ Jerkin' in JerkVille" demands my attention and I'm glued to the computer screen as I watch adolescent Black boys adorned in tight, brightly colored jeans, beanies and multicolored flannel shirts, engaged in acrobatic and gymnastics moves. They are using walls as catapults, backflips off of playground equipment and the rooftops of homes and schools, taking leaps of faith, plummeting to their knees with elasticity akin to circus performers or performing simulated baseball plays during freestyle dance routines, dancing wildly in the middle of the street intersections as cars attempt to drive by, street corners, parking lots, alleys, and everywhere else you name it, it was their stage. Skinny jeans on a Black teenage boy, could there be more to their attention grabbing style and movements? For starters, their style is distinct from the typical baggy jeans we are familiar with in hyper masculine hip hop culture. Backpacks on their backs all day during any occasion as an accessory, not for educational purposes, noticeably artistic, bold and radiating radiating confidence as they dance around with friendly disposition and welcoming, inviting the presence of others, these kids are in direct opposition to the stereotypical images youth in being dismal because of their environment. Who are those kids? I was hooked. I wish I were that young again dancing in the streets, in the malls, and hallways at school, teachers pass by as it was the norm. Free spirits asking complete strangers, "Can you jerk?" I had just been introduced to the jerkin' movement.

So that was my field notes for my first, for my undergraduate thesis. That's what I was just writing, and I kept that journal from June 2019, I mean June 2009. Look I said 20—, 2019 is when I graduated with my PhD, June 2019. [d. Sabela Grimes: Eyyy.] Wow.

d. **Sabela Grimes:** So you's—around the same time, it was around the same time, cause I—I was 2008 and I started working on it 2007ish, whatever, like early YouTube days²⁹ which is crazy. And jerkin' and krumpin'—It's really fascinating about how—I don't know if you remember in the early days so called "real" street dancers were dissin' krumpin. A lot of kats—I was just talking to Toyin [Sogunro] and K'niin and Tatiana [Desardouin] about this last night—it's funny to just reflect on there was a moment—they're like, "They're spastic. What are these guys doing?" And then all of a sudden—

Shamell Bell: They all krumpin.

[Both laugh]

d. **Sabela Grimes:** And jerkin' was the same thing. "How are they wearin' these skinny jeans?"

Shamell Bell: The krumpers we're talking about the clowns, the jerks was talking about like, "Why are y'all beefing? Just get out there and move."

d. **Sabela Grimes:** And it's—that tension is always interesting to me and sometimes the tension is actually generative but that's a whole different sort of, that's a whole 'nother conversation right? It—Like, literally you get, [clenches his fists tightly] you just get like, [Shamell Bell: Yeah.] Bol—like, "Yo, jerkin's where it's at," whatever whatever, and people are so in they thing thing, [Shamell Bell: Thing.] that they not trippin. Anyway what's up? They done pop back up so it must be the end of our conversation.

Shamell Bell: Well the thing that I thought was so fascinating it did remind me of you know I'm gang-adjacent, is like what I call it. [everyone laughs] Gang-adjacent.

29. YouTube launched in February 2005.

d. Sabela Grimes: Aren't we all.

Shamell Bell: You know, it reminded me of this, the gang culture like street dance, jerkin', krumpin' all of that, like it felt like home to me. I told you I was around a whole bunch of gang members and didn't know. They was just my peoples, you know? But this idea that you are put into these different—and that's what we do in Street Dance Activism too when we do the workshops: we break out into these different groups who create their own intention, who create their own dance piece of liberation, built off of our, all of our movement vocabulary of our social dances. So yeah, [I] know that that was another tangent but I definitely see the link so, that's so South Central.

I mean, but that's so "urban", right, of gang culture and I—you remember my dissertation, I still had—I held the documentary—but so much of it was me really trying to transcend the pathologizing narratives of gangs and I think that that's also you know what we're doing in Street Dance Activism and I—That's why it's so important. No, you put the street dance there, because it provides the glimpses of us actually transcending those you know pathologizing narratives of gangs. And what does it mean to have these set of people that are, they're maybe consider[ed] the "misfits" or othered in certain contexts? And then you have them inviting more, inviting people across different sets. That's what was dangerous about Nip [Nipsey Hussle].

That, that video last time that I had checked, you remember that? The red and the blue and them wearing the red and the blue and them going in and out, he wasn't alive too much longer after that inviting across where we're supposed to be [clenches fist and teeth] Brilliant.

d. Sabela Grimes: Yeah Nip. I remember when that was March, end of March being in Leimert Park, how you talking about Leimert Park, being Leimert Park after Nipsey was killed, and every car

that drove by, every car then drove by, not only a couple, every car that drove by was playing Nipsey. Every car. Two days later, you in Leimert Park, every car.

Shamell Bell: Every car. I just got goosebumps.

d. **Sabela Grimes:** This year, yo. This year I was in Leimert Park on the anniversary and they had a go-go band out there, which was crazy, and they had these kats cyphering up, doing beat your feet like go-go dances. And you wanna talk about being transported, I was like, “Where am I? Am I in DC right now, or am [I] in Leimert Park?” and that’s how Leimert Park is like a vortex, fam. [Shamell Bell: I said it.] Listen, it was so dope and then of course, the kat from the go-go band starts talking about Nipsey moment of si—, like stop. Okay, we going on a whole different, don’t get me started.

Shamell Bell: I think that that is important like what you were saying about bringing Nipsey, we can talk about it offline, but I do want to have a conversation cause that’s the opening to my dissertation. I recut and did a lot of work—that was April and I graduated June, May/June. In the whole first half of my dissertation documentary I, not whole first half, but like you know the first intro I did a dedication to Nipsey. And what that meant and what does it mean to kind of have him be a bit of a hood Messiah and yeah no, so I think that. . .

d. **Sabela Grimes:** And a street scholar. And a street scholar.

Shamell Bell: Definitely.

d. **Sabela Grimes:** This dude—there’s very few—I mean there’s other—I think I can think of other people like him, but no one like him, you feel me? Like, there’s other models, I think about certain people, but talking about Nipsey, you’re talking about his

business acumen, [Shamell Bell: Yes.] Street. How many people do we know like that? [Shamell Bell: It's profound.] They got it from the streets right.

What he was reading, who was putting him on game about a variety of—? It's like when I think about the street scholar and I think about what I literally when I think about these institutions or UCLA and no shade, [Shamell Bell: No shade.] but what my knowledge and my ability to navigate space has everything to do with the scholars I met on the. . .

Together: Streets.

d. Sabela Grimes: Not in your lil' lecture room.

Shamell Bell: Lil'.

d. Sabela Grimes: Yo. Listen, any professor, including me, that'd be thinking that you putting people—it's only people that don't have that access to [Shamell Bell: The streets.] these, like yo, you know how much game I got in the streets?!

Shamell Bell: All of it. So before we go cause I know Sejani—I forgot Sejani got class at twelve. But I wanted to ask you about, so when I first started to do my work on street dance as activism in my undergraduate thesis because they just saw it as like young hoodlums all dancing in the street and I said that is a form of activism. And there was like a little bit of gatekeeping about what exactly activism is, and so I just wanted to before we you know leave is to explain how from your brilliance how is street dance, activism? You know? Cause people were saying like Tommy ain't activism, they're saying these jerks that are jerkin' here and then able to go all over the world and spread a certain message that that ain't activism. I wanted to hear your thoughts on that/for as it relates to street dance activism.

d. **Sabela Grimes:** Yeah I mean you know it's I feel like they're absolutely right. And they're right with—from their point of reference in the way they're framing it and I'm okay with them being right. I'm not even interested in the back and forth.

Shamell Bell: Okay.

d. **Sabela Grimes:** When let's let's keep it South Central.

Shamell Bell: Always.

d. **Sabela Grimes:** Bunchy Carter.³⁰ Let's talk about Bunchy Carter. There's literal stories about Bunchy Carter, being at a party, like—you talking about with Black Panther Movement of whatever—he'd be at a party, he'd be dancing at a party, he—[pauses] We don't think about Bunchy Carter just as this is the person would [puts hands close together off to the side], you follow me?

Like, this is part of what we do, there's a fullness to the way we approach things, and any, any—and I'm going to speak specifically about Black folk, I don't care about what non-Black people will consider act- like I ain't worried, I'm hearing none of that, that's a non-factor for me. No one's going to be able to, outside the Black community, tell me what I'm supposed to be like. I had enough of that, what's appropriate, what's prop—like, stop. Sit yo—sit down.

But if Black folks being in a Black ass body don't understand or allow themselves to depart from how important it is for my son to dance in the aisle of Trader Joe's, and not understand that me allowing space for that and not policing his body about he, how he's supposed to appropriately behaving, when my son is having

30. Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter was a member of the Slauson street gang and started the Southern California chapter of Black Panther Party. <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/remembering-black-panthers-bunchy-carter-and-john-huggins-who-were-assassinated-on-ucla-campus>

joy because he got his little airpods in and he feel—and then that extends to me not policing the jerkers that are on the corner that said—you follow me? So if we're not having that conversation? Now if my son's bumping into auntie when she trying to reach over and get her ve—, that's something different.

But when it comes down to policing Blackness and Black bodies, that's where I stop, that's very simple for me. And when we need to show up you're going to tell me, looking at the continuum of Black protest from a global sense, so my point of reference also with I lived in South Africa, and people toyi toyi'd. You can feel the energy of the floor yo and you—I'm supposed to come back to the American context, and all we can do is march?! [Shamell Bell: And yell.] Right?! And march, right?!

Well we know people go to the club to get they life. To be affirmed. To raise their spirit. [Shamell Bell: To be welcomed.] To block the bullshit out. And then when we get to a protest, we can't do whatever? A line dance?! And you mad?! I'm supposed to carry this placard and we supposed to do this sort of performance that our foremothers and fathers were doing umpteen years ago, you betta go somewhere. Stop.

Shamell Bell: Thank you so much and all I hear is "sit yo ass down."
[Everyone laughs]

d. Sabela Grimes: Exactly. You know they be trying online, they be like, ""Oh you know I can't believe these people are dancing at a protest. There's a time and place for everything"".

Shamell Bell: Yeah.

d. Sabela Grimes: Where did you get this notion that there's a time and place? That's the real question. [Shamell Bell: This is the time and place.] Where did you get that notion from? How was this not it? Anyway now if I'm handing, if I'm handing police

Pepsis like your girl Kylie Jenner, ya know what I mean? [Shamell Bell: Don't do that, don't do that.] With my phone, I'm handing a Pepsi and I got a phone like this [holding phone out away from the body] and I'm Instagram live, then you can check me. I'm okay with that. [Shamell Bell: I'm, I'm {shaking her head} Anyway Sejani got a class.]

Dr. grace shinhae jun: Well I wanted to say, you know it talks about like what's appropriate and what's not appropriate and who's the holder of what what deems that but also the like what I think a lot about is the legibility and illegibility of Black bodies, right? And where where people are pushing up against what notions of that is and that's really like systemic racism and white supremacy so—

Shamell Bell: Beautiful.

d. Sabela Grimes: Right, that we internalize on each other. [Dr. grace shinhae jun: Yeah yeah.] We are literally thinking, "What are they gonna think about us if we're out here dancing?" And this has a long history and legacy about us policing our own bodies.

Shamell Bell: Respectability politics. I am not here for it.

Dr. grace shinhae jun: This is why the work that you two both do, is so important and so necessary and and needs to be seen, shared and or maybe not—maybe it's not for people to be a part of but, you know.

Shamell Bell: I hope it's just that show, people to show up in their authenticity and really getting to [be] who they really are at a soul level and just live, you know I mean that's what you all allow me space to do. You give me permission to be in my body and live, as resistance, as in that joy being that radical possibility, that's what y'all do for me. And I just, I'm grateful, thank you for seeing me and I see you seeing me.

MiRi Park: Thank you so much.

d. Sabela Grimes: I appreciate y'all. MiRi this is crazy, it's like I'm looking at you all, I think about, I'm so grateful to have these relationships, over time which is really beautiful. I'm just grateful. Thank you Dr. grace, thank you Dr. Park.

MiRi Park: Not yet.

Shamell Bell: Listen.

d. Sabela Grimes: I'm affirming it. I'm affirming it. Thank you Dr. Park.

Shamell Bell: grace you need to get a new picture because

Dr. grace shinhae jun: Ok you ready?

d. Sabela Grimes: Thank you Dr. Bell

Dr. grace shinhae jun: Everyone smile. Ready 1-2-3. [Click. Everyone laughs] Sabela!



MiRi, Shamell, grace and Sabela posing for a picture during their zoom conversation session. grace's personal collection.

d. Sabela Grimes: Alright y'all big blessings.

MiRi Park: Thank you so much.

Dr. grace shinhae jun: Thank you.

d. Sabela Grimes: Appreciate y'all.

Shamell Bell: Bye.

d. Sabela Grimes: Bye.

Shamell Bell: Love you.

Dr. grace shinhae jun: Love you.

d. Sabela Grimes: Love you. Bye.

Shamell Bell: Bye.

Contributors

Shamell Bell is a mother, community organizer, dancer/choreographer, and documentary filmmaker who received her PhD in Culture and Performance from the University of California, Los Angeles's World Arts and Cultures/Dance department. Dr. Bell is currently a lecturer of Somatic Practices and Global Performance at Harvard University. Bell received her MA in Ethnic Studies from UC San Diego and BA with Honors in American Studies and Ethnicity, specializing in African American Studies at USC. Her work on what she calls "street dance activism" situates street dance as grassroots political action from her perspectives as a dancer, choreographer, healer, and scholar. Shamell's research examines street dance movements in South Central Los Angeles through an ethnographic and performance studies lens.

d. Sabela Grimes, a 2014 United States Artists Rockefeller Fellow, is a choreographer, writer, composer, and educator whose interdisciplinary performance work and pedagogical approach reveal a vested interest in the physical and meta-physical efficacies of Afro-Diasporic cultural practices. His AfroFuturistic dance theater projects like *World War WhatEver*, *40 Acres & A Microchip*, *BulletProof Deli*, and *ELECTROGYNOUS* consider invisibilized histories and grapple with constructed notions of masculinity and manhood while conceiving a womynist consciousness. He created and continues to cultivate a movement system called Funkamentals that focuses on the methodical dance training and community-building elements evident in Black vernacular and street dance forms. Previously, Grimes co-authored and performed as a principal dancer in Rennie Harris Puremovement's award-winning *Rome & Jewels*. He received a BA in English and an MFA in dance and choreography from the University of California, Los Angeles.

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 screen-dance 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

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

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.”³¹ She makes 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.

31. 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.

Liner Notes: Nadine George-Graves

Our obsession with locations of embodied knowledge and influence is an important topic in the conversation between Shamell Bell and d. Sabela Grimes. They interrogate hegemonic tools of institutional legitimacy and challenge sites of affirmation by centering on street dance activism and Black liberation. They ask, “Who am I in the street? Who am I in the institution?” “How do we affirm ourselves in the streets?” I come away from this conversation reminded that rejecting the identity crisis the academy wants us to have is a daily practice of decolonizing our minds.

I am reminded that the academy is just the white hood. Likewise is the studio. The creative and intellectual gatekeepers in these spaces make up the rules of engagement, just as much as we do in a cypher. (They just pay themselves more.)

This conversation honors people who dismantle institutions. Kariamu Welsh, Tommy the Clown, Sonia Sanchez, Shamell Bell, and others create spaces for people to show up and put their bodies on the line. They invite us into spaces where we are not “supposed” to be and insist on the importance of spaces too easily dismissed. Terms, labels, and structures come and go. And they usually don’t work in our favor anyway, so we just keep doing the work. While it is important to resist labels that institutions try to place on us, we should also be proud of our accomplishments. All four people involved in this conversation have or will soon have terminal degrees. But I’m confident they will not let academic institutions kill them. My words here are just part of the conversation—another hyperlink. They are the “they” that say. They will continue to affirm our right to define ourselves, locate meaning, and produce knowledge on our own terms. We see each other, no matter our experiences. Black people see each other. I see them seeing each other, and me. We know there is transformational Black magic in all our corrugated dance spaces—as long as we keep it moving.

Author Biographies

Nadine George-Graves is the Naomi Willie Pollard Professor at Northwestern University, where she chairs the Performance Studies Department and has a joint appointment in the Theatre Department. She also serves as Executive Co-editor of *Dance Research Journal*. Her work is situated at the intersections of African American studies, critical gender studies, performance studies, theatre history, and dance history. She is the author of *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender, and Class in African American Theater, 1900–1940* and *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of Dance Theater, Community Engagement and Working It Out*, as well as of numerous articles on African American performance. She is the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater*. She is a past president of the Congress on Research in Dance (CORD) and former chair of the Department of Dance at the Ohio State University (OSU) and the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). George-Graves is also an artist, and her creative work is part and parcel of her research. She is an adapter, director, and dance theatre maker.



The Cyber-Rock Mixtape: A Virtual Hip Hop Dance Listening Cypher

Outro: Shout-outs + Credits

grace shinhae jun & MiRi “seoulsonyk” Park

The process of planning, choreographing, and producing this issue of *Conversations* has left us feeling incredibly grateful for the generosity of time, knowledge, and love from each participant. Many of you are members of our families. It’s been an honor to cypher with you in this format and then to spend time listening deeply to what you shared as we engaged in the process of annotating each transcript. Your willingness to be open and vulnerable has left us verklempt on the regular and with the feeling of being a part of something greater than any of us individually.

Big love to our fam who were open to participating in this issue, but due to scheduling in these pandemic times, it just didn’t work out. We hope that we somehow can hear the conversations about memory and remembering with Ephrat Asherie and Archie Burnett as well as the much-needed conversation about sexual harassment/trauma with b-girls Candy Bloise and Rowdy.

Extra big props and love to BazeOne STF and Dr. Jesse Mills for literally living with us every moment of this journey. And to our kids who had to live hearing the refrain of “Hang on. Mommy is talking to 이모 again” ad nauseam for the better part of a year. There is no other Virgo b-girl 아줌마 duo in which we’d be able to do this.



From our fam to you. June 2021 on Kumeyaay land, the land upon which we are grateful to gather.

Pictured L-R: Baze One STF, MiRi "seoulsonyk" Park, Dr. grace shinhae jun, Dr. Jesse Mills, our children, Piglette, and Eclipse (RIP). MiRi and grace's personal collection.

Huge shout-outs to Rosemary Candelario for trusting this first issue of *Conversations* in this iteration to us. Your patience throughout the process of producing this with two working (one who is not yet even ABD!), non-tenured moms during a pandemic has been a salve. Thanks to Rachel Carrico for coming in as we conclude this process for continuing the patient work that Rosemary set the standard for. Thanks to each member of the editorial board for your mindful questions, comments, and edits as they pushed us to think

through, debate, and articulate issues that matter. We have great gratitude and respect for all of the Dance Studies Association. We are proud to be in a community with you all who are innovating our field and forging a path for the humanities in the twenty-first century. Thanks to MPS for being open to how this knowledge production can take a new, digital shape.

Thanks to all of you who are part of the hip hop culture past, present, and future. We hope that, like anything in the culture, this publication is a starting point from which you will innovate *knowing the ledge* in ways we can't even imagine right now. Take this method and flip the script again and again.

Finally, we thank YOU. We sincerely hope that, as some of the conversants stated, you get from these conversations what you need through this invitation to get down in this knowledge cypher. And that once you do, you keep the energy of these exchanges going in mindful ways in the classroom and your scholarship. Peace.

Credits

Cover Art + Logo: BazeOne STF

Music used with permission by big tara and DJ Kuttin' Kandi of the Anomalies Crew: "No Illusion" by Anomalies, 427 & Zion I: <https://youtu.be/2uvkskc-EJM>

Photos courtesy of each participant's personal collections.

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