

## Brief Hip Hop Culture & History Handout

### Defining Elements:

- Urban ethnic dance form (originated within the African American and Latino communities)
- Focuses on individual dancers' personalities and expression through movement and improvisation
- Breakin' (break dancing) considered the starting form of Hip Hop out of Bronx, New York
- Funk styles (popping, locking, electric Boogaloo) came from the West Coast
- Tiers of the hip hop culture: Disc jockeys (DJ), Graffiti (art), MCs (rappers), B-boys/B-girls (dancing), and knowledge
- A street form of dance
- The body is both an expression of the rhythmic hip hop music as well as inspiration for it
- Breakin' became popular in the 80's from films like *Flashdance*, *Breakin'*, *Wild Style*, *Beat Street*

**“Physical Graffiti: The History of Hip Hop Dance”** by Jorge “Popmaster Fabel” Pabon of the Rocksteady Crew/Universal Zulu Nation

“In the early 1970s, the unnamed culture known today as **‘hip-hop’** was forming in New York City's ghettos. The common pulse which gave life to all these elements is rhythm, clearly demonstrated by the beats the DJ selected, the dancers' movements, the MCs' rhyme patterns and the writer's name or message painted in a flowing, stylized fashion. The culture was identified in the early 1980s when **DJ Afrika Bambaataa** named the dynamic urban movement ‘hip-hop.’”

“At about the same time, certain slang words also became titles of the dance forms, such as **‘rockin’** and **‘breakin’**,’ used generally, to describe actions with great intensity. The term “break” also had more than one use. It was often used as a response to an insult or reprimand, for example, **‘Why are you breakin’ on me?’** Break was also the section on a musical recording where the percussive rhythms were most aggressive and hard driving. The dancers anticipated and reacted to these breaks with their most impressive steps and moves. **DJ Kool Herc** coined the terms ‘b-boy’ and ‘b-girl’ which stood for ‘break boys’ and ‘break girls.’”

“Some of the earliest dancing by b-boy pioneers was done upright, a form which became known as **‘top rockin’**.’ The structure and form of top rockin' has infused dance forms and influences from **Brooklyn uprocking, tap, lindi hop, James Brown's ‘good foot,’** salsa, Afro-Cuban and various African and Native American dances.”

“Although **top rockin’** has developed an identifiable structure, there is always space for individual creativity, often expressed through the competitive nature of the dance. The same is true of all dance forms associated with hip-hop and west coast funk; as long as dancers represent the root forms of the dances, the rest can be colored in with his/her own flavors. As a result of the highly competitive nature of these dances, it wasn't long before top rockers extended their repertoire to the ground with **‘footwork’** and **‘freezes.’** Top rockin' was not replaced with floor rocking; it was added to the dance and both were key points in the dance's execution. Many times one could tell who had flavor and finesse just by their top rockin' before the drop and floor rock. The transition between top and floor rockin' was also important and became known as the “drop”. The smoother the drop, the better.”

“Equally significant was the way dancers moved in and out of a freeze, demonstrating control, power, precision, and at times, humor. These moves pushed the dance in a new direction in the early 1980s, the era of so-called ‘**power moves.**’ ‘**Power moves**’ is a debatable term since it is questionable which movement requires more power: footwork and freezes or spins and gymnastics. One notable point introduced by B-Boy **Ken Swift** is that spins are fueled by momentum and balance which require less muscular strength than footwork and freezes. The true essence of the dance was slowly overshadowed by an over abundance of spins and acrobatics which didn't necessarily follow a beat or rhythm.

“In the late 1960s and early '70s, Brooklyn, NY gave birth to another dance in Hip-Hop culture, known as "**Brooklyn uprocking.**" Inspired by similar or the same break beats used by b-boys/girls, this dance was more confrontational. Typically, two opponents faced each other and engaged in a "**war dance**" consisting of a series of steps, jerks, and the miming of weapons drawn against each other. There were also the "**Apache Lines**" where one crew stood in a line facing an opposing crew and challenged each other simultaneously. This structure was different from b-boying/girling since dancers in b-boy/b-girl battles took turns dancing while Brooklyn uprocking was done with partners.”

“Just as power moves became the focus of b-boying/girling, one particular movement known as "**jerking**" became the highlight of Brooklyn uprocking. Jerking is a movement which is used in direct battles, typically repeated throughout the break of the record. Today, Brooklyn uprocking consists almost entirely of jerking.”

“The west coast was also engaged in a cultural movement throughout the 1970s. This scene was nourished by soul, R&B and funk music at outdoor functions and discotheques. In Los Angeles, California, **Don Campbell**, also known as **Don Cambellock**, originated the dance form ‘**locking.**’ Trying to imitate a local dance called the "funky chicken," Don Campbell added an effect of locking of the joints of his arms and body which became known as his signature dance.”

“In 1976, **The Electronic Boogaloo Lockers** was formed in Fresno, California by **Sam ‘Boogaloo Sam’ Soloman, Nate ‘Slide’ Johnson** and **Joe ‘Slim’ Thomas**. Some of Sam's early inspirations were **Chubby Checker's ‘Twist;** a **James Brown** dance called ‘**the Popcorn;**’ ‘**the Jerk;**’ cartoon animation and the idiosyncrasies of everyday people. From these many influences, Sam combined incredible steps and moves conceiving a dance form which he named ‘**Boogaloo.**’ This form includes isolated sharp angles, hip rotations and the use of every part of the body. He also compared the body to a musical instrument in which the movement was as varied as the notes. Originally, "**popping**" was a term used to describe a sudden muscle contraction executed with the triceps, forearms, neck, chest and legs. These contractions accented the dancer's movement causing a quick, jolting effect. Sam's creation, popping, also became known as the unauthorized umbrella title to various forms within the dance, past and present. Eventually, popping was also misrepresented and lost its purity as younger generations strayed from its original forms.”

“For the most part, each dance form had a different musical influence, dress code and terminology (all of which were mismatched and misrepresented during the 1980's media coverage of these dance forms). As relatively new dance forms, b-boying/girling, Brooklyn uprocking, locking and popping are rarely seen in a theatrical setting. They are usually performed in music videos, commercials or films for just a few seconds revealing very little of their full potential. Another challenge related to the commercialization of the dance forms is the loss of spontaneous performance. In a cipher, a circular dance space which forms naturally once the dancing begins, the dancers can direct their performance in various directions, uninhibited and free from all counts and cues. This freedom is the key to creativity since the dancer is constantly challenged with variations in music, an undefined dance space and potential opponents among the audience. What was once improvisational forms of expression with spontaneous vocabulary became choreography in a staged setting. A stage performance creates boundaries and can restrict the free flowing process of improvisation.” Having the

audience at only one vantage point also makes the viewing of this artform restricted, causing the storylines of the dances to sometimes become distorted.

“Unraveling the history of locking, popping, b-boying/girling and Brooklyn uprocking takes us towards a true understanding of their essence and significance in the world today. Many other genres of dance have borrowed without giving credit to their rightful owners. Hopefully, we will see the day when these dances are clearly distinguished and given their due respect. Every so often, the dance world is introduced to innovations which revolutionize the arts. In summary, the hip-hop and west coast funk movements have succeeded in replenishing the world with new exciting dance forms which entertain and change the lives of many people worldwide.”

### Works Cited

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