

Rachel Male

Nora Ambrosio

DANC-419-01

5 May, 2022

Hip Hop Dance: The Forgotten Narrative

Hip Hop culture is prevalent throughout many areas of society. If anyone were to look at the top streamed music on Spotify, they could see that one of the most common genres is rap or hip hop. DJing has become commonplace at weddings, school dances, and many other social events. Hip hop dance can be found in the commercial industry, in social settings, being taught by secondary institutions, at dance studios, etc. One can easily find graffiti on various architectural structures whether it be on the freeway, on the wall of a building, or in an abandoned structure. It is not hard to recognize that hip hop culture is undeniably present in various aspects of American life. What many people do not understand however is the strong linkage between hip hop and its cultural roots, which are “found in the social fabric of African and Afro-Caribbean concepts of communication that have re-inventions in ragtime, jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, rock ’n’ roll, funk, and soul” (Guarino). Hip hop is the culmination of a turbulent history. Shaped by the transatlantic slave trade, treatment of marginalized communities in the United States through the following centuries, as well as political, societal, and socioeconomic factors, the philosophy and aesthetic of the hip hop dance form is a clear example that art reflects and reacts to its surrounding era. Understanding this narrative and the passionate expression that resulted in hip hop culture and dance is of utmost importance in recognizing its prestige and paying homage to the form itself.

It is impossible to pinpoint a specific date on which or person by whom hip hop was created. It was a gradual process, helped along by many years and countless contributors. The general era in which hip hop boomed however was in the early 1970s, specifically in the Bronx neighborhoods of New York City. During this time, New York City was in what it is commonly referred to as a “state of chaos”. It was a period of political, societal, and socioeconomic unrest. New York was in a state of economic decline. Governmental programs and services were being cut, industry was declining, people were losing jobs, and people were getting angry (“NYC in Chaos”). One group particularly impacted by this unrest were the already marginalized African American and Latino members of the Bronx neighborhoods in New York City (Baker, 12). Coming from a history of horrific mistreatment, facing racism, and inequality, it is no question that these people felt like they had a lack of a voice. They needed a platform on which to express their disdain, share their unique stories, and express their personal individuality. These are the exact, time-sensitive conditions under which hip hop began to develop.

These political, societal, and socioeconomic conditions had a great influence on hip hop dance and culture’s aesthetic and philosophy. Economic circumstances surrounding the black and Latino Bronx neighborhoods in the 1970s had a particularly heavy hand in the development of hip hop culture and its dancing. In their book *The History of Rap and Hip Hop*, author Soren Baker explains how with the lack of resources available to them, residents of the Bronx neighborhoods had to get creative with their means of expression. “They played the record collections of their parents to entertain themselves, they used cardboard boxes littering the streets as dance surfaces, and they used cans of spray paint to make their own art” (Baker, 12). Using these materials, what resulted were elements unique to hip hop culture’s aesthetic and philosophy

such as disc jockeying and graffiti. Here it is clear that economic status helped birth elements of this culture that would greatly influence the dance style.

Another aspect of hip hop culture that developed out of the social unrest described above was MCing. With MCing having been one of the first accompaniments of hip hop dance, the nature of this oral expression influenced the movement alongside it. In regard to MCing, The Harlem Gallery of Science explains:

“Manifested from the social conditions of the time. This form of poetic and ‘verbal acrobatics’ was derived from ancient African culture and oral tradition. Also known as “rapping” this element removed the veil that isolated the wider culture from the social conditions of many underserved urban communities. The rapid fire wordplay, spoke the truth of stories that weren’t being told and gave rise to a new urban narrative. (The Five Pillars)

Here one can see how societal and political factors shaped some of the philosophy and aesthetic of hip hop. With MCing revealing the narratives that had been suppressed for so long, its passionate expression caused a mirrored representation in its aesthetics of movement.

Another important philosophical aspect of hip hop is known as “knowledge of self”. This is the idea that with hip hop culture being the culmination of narratives, there should be an impetus that comes out of it for one to better the world and their communities. The Harlem Gallery of Science explains the sociopolitical reasons behind this philosophy as an “Afro-diasporic mix of spiritual and political consciousness designed to empower members of oppressed groups” (“The Five Pillars”). With this context it becomes clear that hip hop can not be observed from only the lense that focuses on the physicality of the movement, but rather from a political, societal, and socioeconomic lense as well to reveal a bigger picture.

Although various styles of hip hop dance exist, the original one to develop is known as b-boying or break dance. The technique is greatly influenced by the DJing aspect of hip hop culture. This technique is characterized by what is known as “breaking”, which is a reflection of the meticulous pauses and starts that occur within the percussive elements of the music it is being danced to. Most accredited for orchestrating extended periods of this “breaking” technique in the music is Kool DJ Herc. When he noticed dancers were more inclined to dance during these periods, he began calling them “break boys” which eventually was shortened to “b-boys” (Baker, 16). According to Guarino of *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*:

“B-boying is a dance form divided into three parts: up-rocking, top-rocking , which includes “drops” (a stylized way of getting to the floor), and floor rocking. Up-rocking was influenced by everyday living and environmental experiences in New York youth culture, with pantomimed characteristics and gestures found in gang life. Top-rocking is culturally based in Afro-Caribbean heritage fusing Charleston steps, Mambo, Rhumba, and other Latin dances. Floor rocking has deep roots in Brazilian Capoeira, a descendant of Angolan dance; b-boying also includes influences from gymnastics and martial art films.” (Guarino)

As one can see, the actual b-boy style of hip hop itself is rich with various cultural influences such as other dance styles, arts, and personal stories. It is not empty movement, but movement that is distinguished by the centuries of history that led to its culmination.

Although hip hop dance is marked by valuable expression and stature, some people fail to recognize it as so. Similarly to how whites conducted jazz minstrels mocking black dance, hip hop dance was originally, and still often is ridiculed. In the *History of Rap and Hip-Hop* by Soren Baker, they explain how hip hop has “endured its share of doubters and controversy...

dismissed as a fad... with parents who thought rap was not music, that graffiti was not art, and that break dancing was not dancing” (Baker, 10). Even nowadays, while Ballet, Modern, and Jazz are often required in dance curriculums, hip hop is often left out of the picture, framing it as less of a necessity to create an affluent dancer. Ironically, hip hop has made its way into mainstream music and advertising with big corporations having “utilized it for capital gain by associating it with product and service consumption” (Huntington, 19). The question then becomes, if hip hop culture is so neglected by “prestigious” institutions of society, then why is it so prevalent in capitalist industry? Scholar Carla Stalling Huntington theorizes in their book *Hip Hop Dance: Meanings and Messages* that “separation of the dance from its theory and history via commoditization, codification, and the effects of global capitalism denied the urgency of African Americans’ outrage at their unending marginalization” (Huntington, 19). From this angle, it is clear how the use of the style in a capitalist manner masks the very real struggles of the marginalized community, many of which are the reasons the style was created in the first place.

In conclusion, hip hop dance is rich with a history and passion which when understood, rewrites the style into a completely new narrative. 1970s New York chaos ignited people’s last straw with the economic unrest they were facing. Economic limitations enabled hip hop to earn distinguished features such as graffiti, DJing, and many more. Social and political strife started a forest fire, which its relentlessness kept burning, mutilating that forest, but only paving the way for something newer and stronger to come into existence. While hip hop has its haters, its voice is unavoidable to deny. It is a work of art, one that shares a history of narratives that had been kicked under the mat for so long, but now are accessible to everyone.

Works Cited

Baker, Soren. *The History of Rap and Hip-Hop*. Lucent Books, 2012.

Guarino, Lindsay, and Wendy Oliver. "Hip-Hop Dance as a Community Expression and Global Phenomenon." *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL, 2015.

Huntington, Carla Stalling. *Hip Hop Dance: Meanings and Messages*. McFarland & Company Inc., 2007.

"NYC in Chaos." *American Experience*, PBS,
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/blackout-gallery/>.

"The Five Pillars of Hip Hop." *HARLEM GALLERY OF SCIENCE*,
<https://hgs-ny.org/five-pillar-of-hip-hop>.