

SCHOOL'D BY FUNKMODE

You want to become a Hip Hop expert? Learn the info below and you're on your way, yo!

BECOMING A HIP HOP PROFESSIONAL DANCER - PART 1

What do you want to be when you grow up? It's a question many of us find ourselves faced with as soon as we can talk. Yet, finding the answer can take a lifetime. Some people begin to gravitate towards particular interests as children and know they want to keep doing those things as long as possible. Some people find their professional calling as an adult. Some people find their careers in Hip Hop. If you are someone who has ever considered becoming a Hip Hop dancer as a career, this series of lessons will show you how others have pursued and achieved that dream. As no two people will have the exact same path to any particular destination, consider the information in this interview as more of a compass than a map. Let it guide you as you make the personal decisions necessary to get closer to your goal. Today's interview is with Mighty of the FUNKMODE Crew and was conducted in May of 2013.

When did you start dancing?

"My most honest answer would be as a small child. My mother was, and still is today, a big fan of funk and soul music; music that is meant to rock parties and make you dance. She would make me dance to the beats of that music before I could even stand on my own. When funk music started giving way to Hip Hop and the B-boys began making their mark on the dance world, I was right there on the front lines. I had older cousins who were breakin and I jumped right in. In the first grade, I was choreographing routines, entering talent shows and battling people wherever there was a cypher. As I grew up, family parties were a ready opportunity to dance and I was always on the floor. I would dance at school, imitating music videos with friends and making up our own dances to popular songs. While all of this dancing predates any professional or trained dancing I would later do, it was really where it all started for me. As important, all this dancing established my love for Hip Hop dance."

When did you first know you wanted to dance as more than a hobby/recreation?

"I took a Hip Hop class at a fitness facility and had one of the best times I've ever had dancing. Up until that point, I don't think I ever realized people were working regularly as Hip Hop dance teachers. That opened my eyes to the professional world of Hip Hop dance. I knew then that I was interested in learning more."

How did you make the choice to dance as a professional?

"It wasn't until probably a year later, when I met a dance studio owner who specifically told me that having a career in dance was possible, that I made the choice in my mind. I didn't even have the experience or knowledge to know if what she was saying was true, but just the fact that she thought it could be true for me was enough. I was looking for a career change and the time was right. I committed to that path with my full force and never looked back."

What did you have to do to become a professional dancer?

"Haha, I had to find work! But seriously, you're not a professional if you're not being paid. I started seeking out performance opportunities that paid and securing paid teaching gigs. Fortunately, while my trained dance experience was limited, I was really experienced as a teacher and my Hip Hop dancing skill was there. I found jobs pretty quickly once I made the firm choice to head in that direction. I was lucky to have some dancers around me in the early going that pushed me to find work and ask for the kind of money that I deserved. They helped me with auditions and finding opportunities to teach and perform."

What was your first professional opportunity?

"My first actual dance job was teaching a Hip Hop dance class at a fitness facility twice per week. It was a really unexpected opportunity and I was not ready. However, I had a friend to help me out a lot in the beginning and I used every bit of time she would give me. She helped me choreograph my first routine. It took me three hours on a Sunday afternoon. Today, I could probably choreograph that same routine in my head while on a Sunday afternoon drive."

How did you train?

"Again, I would say my training really began with all of the informal freestyling I did as a kid. Especially speaking from a performer point of view, getting out there in battle circles and taking the floor at a party before anyone else was stepping up did a lot for my future career. However, the more formal portion of my training came once I made the decision to dance professionally. I had a lot of years to make up for that other dancers had over me. I started taking classes like crazy. I went to New York, Los Angeles, Asia, and all over my home in the San Francisco Bay Area to take from the best teachers I could find in

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Hip Hop. I made taking multiple classes per week a regular part of my schedule. I also started training with professional dance companies so that I could gain knowledge and skill from top choreographers in my area and pick up new styles and lessons. At one point, I was training with four different Hip Hop companies at the same time. In the last decade, I've taken class with just about every notable choreographer in my area. And while Hip Hop has been my major focus, I have also trained in ballet, jazz, modern, salsa, tahitian, swing, african and musical theater. I wanted to have a solid base of knowledge so I could relate to all of the different types of dancers that I might meet as a professional. I'm also really into history in general, so I made learning dance history a priority and though my knowledge of Hip Hop history is the strongest, I know quite a bit about the origin of many other dance styles."

What challenges/obstacles did you have?

"My biggest obstacle was my lack of experience and training. I was so new, I didn't even know what I didn't know. I had no clue how the dance world worked and I was learning as I went along. I didn't decide to dance professionally and then put myself through a bunch of training so that one day I could get work. I started getting work and then training and learning at the same time. I never wanted to seem like I didn't know what I was doing, so I taught myself as fast as possible. I asked questions. I took experienced dance professionals to lunch and grilled them with questions. I read. I watched videos. I took classes. I spent pretty much every free moment teaching myself to be a dancer. I was determined not to let my lack of knowledge and training stop me from doing what I wanted in dance. In fact, I wasn't going to let anything stop me."

When did you know you made it?

"It really took me a while to accept myself as a professional dancer. Due to my lack of experience, I felt like I was kind of playing a trick on everyone and at any moment someone was going to find me out and ruin the illusion. However, at a certain point, I was teaching up to 25 classes per week, which is a lot for dance, and taking just a ton of classes and also getting performance opportunities. When I didn't have a moment that wasn't being filled with something having to do with dance and I was paying all of my bills with nothing other than dance, that's when I realized the dream was becoming real; my goal was being reached."

What have you been able to do professionally?

"I have been able to travel the country and world teaching and performing. I've acted, danced, and choreographed for shows that played before thousands. I've written scripts for sold out shows, produced two Hip Hop albums, written educational lessons about Hip Hop and produced Hip Hop instructional and entertainment videos. I've been able to work with great people and make a lot of great friends. But, the thing that matters most to me, the thing I'm most proud of, is starting my own company. With that, not only have I been able to take my dream of dancing professionally into my own hands, but I've been able to make that dream possible for others. Having other performers and teachers working for me in my business means more than just about anything I can imagine doing professionally in any field."

Is it still fun to dance now that it has become a job?

"Always. At this point in my life, if I wasn't enjoying my work, I'd do something else. I'm not beyond doing whatever I have to in order to survive but, if I can find happiness and fulfillment while surviving, I'm going to move heaven and earth to make that happen. I look forward to what I do every day. I work harder than I ever have and I love it. I get to create on a daily basis and I do it on my own terms. I work with people I love and who love me. I can think of nothing better. As for dance specifically, when I get into a song and just jam out, I get as lost in the music as I did at six years old."

What advice do you have for other aspiring dancers?

"Work hard. There are no shortcuts. Even though I got opportunities to work before I had much experience, I still had to backtrack to train and earn everything that was being presented to me. I also had to appreciate just how much work I had put in when I didn't realize I was doing it; that is, as a young person dancing without a thought to being a professional. That time was important and it gave a foundation for dancing professionally whether I realized it or not. Also, don't wait for anyone to discover you. You discover you. That doesn't mean don't go to auditions or don't apply for work. It means that there are tons of opportunities to promote yourself while you're doing all of those things. The internet has made marketing yourself easier than ever and the smart people are using that technology to get a leg up on their competition. Train hard. Promote yourself like crazy. Don't ever, ever give up."

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There is much to be learned from this interview. One particular lesson is that it is never too late to get working towards your dreams. While this shouldn't be an excuse to put off decisions or actions that are better made now, it does illustrate that effort and persistence are more important than your starting point. Another important point is that you have the ability to create your own opportunities. If you are the type of person who has the discipline and attitude necessary to take charge of your own career, you can define your job yourself and determine your own income. Finally, it's important to learn that what you are doing today for fun, can become a professional career. You will have to work very hard and with great persistence to make that possibility a reality but it is there. There are many paths to becoming a professional dancer and this is just one. Stay tuned for more interviews that will show other paths to reaching that dream.

HIP HOP WORDS OF THE WEEK

Oh, snap!: An exclamation of surprise or disbelief.

EX: "Oh, snap! Did he just say that Mos Def is coming to our town for a concert?!"

Creep: 1) To sneak up on or sneak around. 2) To hang out too close to someone.

EX 1: "I've been creepin around his house all day but I still haven't seen him."

EX 2: "That dude's been creepin' all day. I wish he'd just come talk to us or bounce out already."

Break off: 1) To give something to someone. 2) To out do someone in competition. 3) To physically subdue.

EX 1: "Don't worry. I know you don't know what's up yet. I'll break off everything you need to know later."

EX 2: "He was all over him until he hit that crossover dribble for the three and straight broke him off."

EX 3: "If he doesn't stop acting crazy, I'ma hafta break him off."

BONUS: Create a sentence using all words of the week

EXTRA LEARNING

- 1) What activity do you do today that you could see doing one day as a career?
- 2) Is there anyone today doing that particular job professionally? If so, name one.
- 3) What training would you have to do to do that activity professionally?