

SCHOOL'D BY FUNKMODE

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

HIP HOP DANCE - FREESTYLE AND CHOREOGRAPHY

Today when you see people Hip Hop dancing, you either see them freestyling or following some choreographed routine. This has been the way of Hip Hop dance since the very beginning. But which came first, choreography or freestyling? And which is most important to Hip Hop dance? In today's lesson, we will look at both freestyling and choreography and answer these questions. In addition, we will explain what a true Hip Hop dancer needs to know to genuinely represent for the dance style and the culture.

To give a quick answer to the first question, all Hip Hop dance started as freestyling. In a past lesson, we taught that many early b-boys started off improvising on a dance called the "Good Foot" made famous by James Brown. But James Brown created the Good Foot while freestyling to his own music. In essence, his freestyle became a sort of choreography once it was named and other people started to imitate the moves. The Good Foot became a party dance like "The Twist", "The Funky Chicken" or "The Swim". While people at parties often danced these dances when the song came on that made these dances popular, there wasn't a dance to go with every single song. Most of the time, the partygoers were just freestyling while the DJ played records. Freestyling is always influenced by the type of music being played. In those days, the party scene was dominated by heavy hitting funk music and uptempo disco tracks. Therefore, the freestyling done at block parties, in the streets and at discos reflected these sounds. B-boys hit big moves, with hard hits and constant rhythm just like the funk sound. In the discos, you saw fast foot work, quick turns and a lot of flair to match the fast, flashy disco sound. These sounds and styles heavily influenced one another and it was common to see disco dancers who had more of a heavy, funky feel to their freestyle, as well as b-boys and Funk Style dancers who had really fast foot work, spins and flashiness in their breaking.

A constant feature of 1970s block parties and discos were dance or battle circles. Sometimes people would go into these circles and do established party dances or routines, but most of the time these dancers would enter the circle and just let the music take them without thought or preparation. Some of today's most famous dance moves and some of the best sets of dancing ever seen came out of people freestyling in a circle without any idea of what was going to come out of their body next. In this way, freestyling was essential to the development of Hip Hop dance, for what was freestyling yesterday became moves and routines tomorrow. As people sought to learn some of the moves they saw freestyled, there became a need for the moves to be taught. Informally, these moves were simply passed on from individual to individual at parties, homes or on the street. Or, in the case of b-boys, new moves would get picked up in battle sessions or open circles. But as more and more people got exposed to B-boying and the Funk Styles, the need for more formal training started to grow.

With older, and more established styles of dance, the most common method of instruction is to learn from an experienced teacher in a studio. Eventually, some studio dancers and teachers became interested in the street dance forms and invited these dancers in to teach at their schools. Many street dancers didn't know and couldn't even explain how they were doing what they were doing. Some though, with the gift of teaching, found themselves leading regular classes in these established dance studios. Jazz dancers, ballerinas and even just people off of the street were taking classes in B-boying, Locking, Waving, Popping, Tutting, Rocking, Boogaloo and Gliding. In those days, there were taught both basic moves and short routines. The best teachers, however, always emphasized the need to add personal style to the moves and included freestyle circles in their instruction. They knew that there was no such thing as a "choreography-only" Hip Hop dancer. Hip Hop is, and always has been based on freestyling. If you can't freestyle, you can't really call yourself a Hip Hop dancer, no matter how many routines or individual moves you know.

To graduate to being a fully fledged Hip Hop dancer, you must be creating dances, moves and constantly honing your freestyling. You can practice on your own, in your room or around the house and that is a great start, but eventually, you need to test your skills in public. Hip Hop is a style that was made to be seen by a crowd. Hip Hop dance is meant to entertain and dazzle. You contribute to Hip Hop culture every time you step into a circle or go out on the dance floor and show off your own style. That is how we keep Hip Hop dance alive and evolving.

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If you are primarily a studio dancer and don't have much experience freestyling or dancing for crowds in an unrehearsed environment, don't worry, you can still become a great Hip Hop dancer. Sometimes there is a stigma that if you are a studio dancer then you can't really know Hip Hop. This idea comes from the unfortunate fact that some people in studios only ever follow choreography or imitate moves that they see on TV, movies or music videos. While it's true that if you only ever follow choreography, you are just imitating and not really Hip Hop dancing, you don't have to stay that way. Hip Hop has always been about creating first. If you're only imitating now, start to add your own style and make changes to the moves you learn. Hip Hop dancing grows and changes just like Hip Hop music. Remember, from past lessons, that the first Hip Hop party DJs took parts of existing songs, sampled them and then mixed, cut, and scratched them up into completely new creations? You can do the exact same thing with dancing. Take moves you learn from teachers or friends and chop them up, mix them together and add your own flavor. Add them into your freestyle and see what new things you come up with. Hip Hop is always moving and changing, and this only happens when dancers freestyle, experiment and create. If you take Hip Hop classes at a studio and freestyling isn't a regular part of your classes, ask your teacher if you can make it so. Also, there are many different kinds of Hip Hop music. As we said earlier, each style will inspire a different style of movement. Research these styles and see if you can get your favorites played in your classes to challenge yourself and your classmates. If you are a Hip Hop teacher, make freestyling and innovation a consistent part of your curriculum. Don't get caught in the trap of constantly teaching routines. Choreography is fine, even essential, when you're trying to coordinate a group dance or performance but it cannot be all you do as a real Hip Hop teacher. Never pass up an opportunity to let your students let loose with their own style and get a little wild. As with all things, they only get better with practice.

Bottom line, if you are going to be part of the Hip Hop dance culture, you have to be an innovator and creator. There is no sitting on the sidelines. Freestyling is the key to your growth as a dancer. You can do it any time you have some music and imagination. So get out there and get your freestyle on! Make every move an expression of your love of Hip Hop music, dance and culture.

HIP HOP WORDS OF THE WEEK

Phat: A derivative of the word "fat", meaning huge, big, outstanding and popular.

EX: "The beat on that new E-40 song is so phat. That's gonna end up being a radio jam for sure!"

Mad: Extremely. A lot.

EX: "That kid in my core class is mad smart, yo. She's got straight-As every single semester so far."

Cray cray: Crazy.

EX: "I was trying to make friends with that new dude over there, but he was actin' mad cray cray so I bounced."

BONUS: Create a sentence using all words of the week

EXTRA LEARNING

- 1) What opportunities do you have to try out your freestyling skills?
- 2) What type of Hip Hop music best suits your particular style of dancing?
- 3) On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the most, how would you rate your comfort level and skill with freestyling?