Comming A Long Way On the Street

By Katherine Walker

Hip hop dance has come a long way since its arrival in Aotearoa during the 1980s. Bboying (breaking) was the first form of hip hop dance to take hold and grow in New Zealand. However, while some of the moves made it to our shores the full knowledge of what this dance was and where it started didn’t accompany it. Terms such as ‘break dance’, ‘pop’n’lock’ and ‘bopping’ were often used to encompass a pick and mix range of movement styles that emerged from the East and West Coast of America.

This was however just the seed of what hip hop dance has grown to mean in New Zealand today. In the global street dance community, genres have become clear and codified; authentic technique and style are clearly recognisable. While there is still contention with nomenclature, the terms ‘hip hop dance’ or ‘street dance’ are now often used as umbrella terms for a wide range of dances which have come to be grouped together. Dance genres such as bboying, party dance, hip hop choreography/new school, popping, locking, house, krump, waacking, vogue, all stemming from differing origins have been collectively grouped into the street dance family. Of these genres, bboying and hip hop choreography are the two main genres that have flourished in New Zealand and both have well-developed and established communities and practices. One of these practices is competition.

The word battle is synonymous with hip hop culture. So it is only natural that this aspect of the culture is extended through most street dance forms. Bboying events such as the ‘Bop Olympics’ held in Tauranga in 1983 and Auckland in 1984, are among the first recorded battles for New Zealand bboying history. These events and other regional and national battles or ‘jams’ have provided ‘check points’ for improving skill levels, opportunities to connect with other bboys and bgirls, as well as inspiration for the future generations.

Commonly in New Zealand other street dance genres such as popping and locking were often included in conjunction with bboying events by having a battle or cyppher during the event. This tradition is still alive today as the communities practising these styles have unfortunately not been large enough to afford regular events. Today there are many consistent bboying events and the community seems to have a bright future ahead.

Hip hop choreography has a different way of approaching battles. Instead of face-to-face or one-to-one battles like bboying, hip hop choreography competitions typically include choreographing and performing routines in crews and being ranked according to set criteria. Initially one of the most influential competitions for the hip hop choreography community in New Zealand was the church based event Christian Teen Convention (CTC) held in Wellington in the early 2000s.

This event welcomed a variety of art forms where street dance was only one section in the event’s programme. Crews started to form around New Zealand during this time, and would travel to Wellington to take part in the annual competition. CTC provided a platform for youth to form street dance crews with the purpose of performing in mind. Crews such as Dziah, Rain, O2, OBC, Jireh, and Legacy took part in CTC. Other competitions started to sprout around the country with regional and national competitions being equally important to encouraging growth.

Since the early onset of competitions, New Zealand street dancers have preferred to build a community based on crews rather than freelancing individuals. And even though bboy battles largely focus on the individual, the community relies heavily on crews to keep going as well. The model of a dance crew can relate both to the concept of whanau as well as to professional dance companies. Through the model of a crew, dancers build support networks that train together, enter competitions, produce choreography,
encourage work ethic, accept gigs, and put on showcases, often appointing a leader that acts as choreographer and director. This model has proven to be successful in many street dance genres and has built the foundation for the communities that exist in New Zealand today.

A dance crew is an accessible form of a dance company that anyone of any age can create and it is up to one’s own will to push it further. Recently however there has been an influx in the number of individual freestyle based competitions so it is possible the structure of our street dance community will see a new development in skill sets over the next few years. However I do believe that the structure of the community will rely on dance crews for many years to come.

It is through competition that New Zealand dancers started to gain recognition for being in the top echelon of street dance internationally. New Zealand started competing on the international hip hop dance scene as early as 2001 (and possibly earlier through individual travel) when the all-star bboy crew Black Attack flew to ‘Battle of The Year’ in Germany. Most of New Zealand’s international reputation however, can be attributed to the success Kiwi dancers have had at Hip Hop International’s World Hip Hop Championships; commonly called just ‘worlds’ amongst dancers.

A landmark occasion for the hip hop choreography community was when the crew Dziah travelled to Los Angeles and competed at the worlds in 2005. The following year they returned to the competition and secured 2nd place in the Adults division. Dziah’s success and energy sparked a nation-wide enthusiasm to do the same. The all-male crew Sweet and Sour was the first crew to place first in the adults division. In 2008 the all-female ReQuest Dance Crew were the first to get gold in the adults division and in 2011 New Zealand made history by winning three out of four divisions of the competition.

Every year Kiwi dancers show heightened progress by making their mark internationally. This year, 2013, illustrates this progress further with many of our dancers representing New Zealand through a range of international competitions and opportunities. In the bboy community we have Haley Ng (Wellington) and Shadae Cullingford (Hamilton) heading to Germany to compete at Battle of the Year. Aron Mahuika (Christchurch) has earned the chance to represent the country in bboyng at Red Bull BCOne in Japan and also Challenge Cup in Taiwan.

In the hip hop choreography community we have dancers and choreographers successfully finding work internationally, being invited to judge and also achieving highly at international competitions. Identity Dance Crew from Auckland had great success at the worlds this year placing 2nd in the adults division while the Royal Family succeeded in winning the Mega Crew division for the third year in a row.

Individually, Parris Goebel, who is known world-wide for her work and has choreographed for artists such as Jennifer Lopez, had her work in Cirque Du Soleil’s MJ One debut this year in Las Vegas; and has plenty more exciting opportunities lined up in future. The international profile of New Zealand street dancers is on the rise.

Street dance has come a long way in its short life span in Aotearoa. Competitions have provided strong platforms for progression and with so much success it is clear that New Zealand street dancers have achieved a lot in a short time. However there are many avenues that are only just starting to be explored such as individual free-style and street dance in theatre. There is still plenty to learn, and the path that street dance is on is full of surprises and unexpected turns. There is still much of this road yet to be travelled.

DANZ is a great resource! DANZ helped us find our way in the Wellington dance community and develop With Lime.

William Franco & Miki Steiffert
With Lime

• NZ Highland Dance Company formed
• Dance accepted at senior scholarship level for Year 13 students

STREET DANCE

WELLINGTON DANCE FESTIVAL LAUNCH, 2011
DANCERS: THE R.E.A.L/SEEK DANCE CREW
PHOTO: JUSTINE HALL

REQUEST DANCE CREW
2011 HIP HOP INTERNATIONAL WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

SIMON WATTS & ANDREW CESAN

WELLINGTON DANCE FESTIVAL LAUNCH, 2011
DANCERS: THE R.E.A.L/SEEK DANCE CREW
PHOTO: JUSTINE HALL