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## Struggles of a (former) Hip Hop Hater

*New dance styles can be intimidating, but an emphasis on community helps dancers explore dynamic skills that increase their versatility*

by Emily James

My relationship with hip hop has changed immensely since my very first class at my home studio. Back then, I identified myself as a “lyrical” dancer and to be frank, I hated doing hip hop. The movements felt awkward on my body, and I felt so self-conscious about what I looked like. It was such an isolating experience and going to class each week felt like a chore. I grew up fearing hip hop because of that experience and the second it wasn’t one of our competitive team’s requirements, I stopped taking the class.

In high school, I re-attempted hip hop and was fortunate enough to have a teacher that found importance in incorporating the history of hip hop into our classes. Through learning about hip hop’s foundations in community and social communication, our class atmosphere reflected a safer, more judgment-free environment where I could finally start loosening up. Though I took two whole school years’ worth of hip hop classes then, I still never felt fully comfortable. Being asked to freestyle was the scariest thing in the world and even trying to perform hip hop dances on stage was an absolute terror to me.

Fast forward to this year, my senior year in college, I felt like I could attempt hip hop once again. I joined the Hip Hop 3 course at the University of California, Irvine reluctantly, but to my surprise, my experiences here have been nothing but lively, fulfilling, and educational. What a 180! I no longer felt isolated in my uncomfotability because we embraced it and made a place for it in class. I felt supported and encouraged by my fellow dancers and by my professor as well.

So, what truly made the difference between my experiences outside of UCI versus now? In reflection, community is key! I’ve found that it was because my professors carefully planned their courses to educate us on hip hop history, and by doing so, they implemented and encouraged us to form a community and support each other within it. I was fortunate enough to interview two of our professors, Professor Ariyan Johnson and Professor Cyrian Reed, about how they structure their classes and ensure that community is felt among their dancers. Much like other universities, UCI focuses mostly on modern, jazz, and ballet with the majority of its dance majors having a stronger background mostly in Eurocentric styles. I can confidently say that my fears of hip hop are not uncommon among other dance majors, and unfortunately cause many to shy away from the style. Hip hop did not start out a requirement for the Dance BA or BFA track, but Professor Johnson, Professor Reed, and now I all believe that it should be. [Hip hop has now become a choice in dance form requirements for dance majors at UCI, just as ballet, jazz, and modern/contemporary are.]

Community in its basic form has been defined as “both a feeling and a set of relationships among people” (Chavis and Lee). We often think of a community as a gathering of people with common interests, but communities can’t exist without the feeling of togetherness and support. This is

especially true when referring to hip hop. Community is crucial to hip hop culture as it was originally a social dance. In our interview, Professor Johnson recalled her experiences explaining enthusiastically that when she danced, it was in clubs and. “the cypher used to happen naturally and organically.” Cyphers are a spontaneously formed freestyle circle where dancers can experiment, battle, and dance with each other. Emmanuel Adelekun, in his article “Breaking cyphers: What they are and why they’re important” featured on Red Bull’s website, talks about breaking cyphers. He writes that “trying new moves, pushing your stamina, using everything you’ve practiced without fear of losing” creates the perfect environment for dancers to learn and grow. Cyphers are a perfect example of how foundational a sense of community has been to hip hop culture since the beginning.

So, if community is so important to hip hop and its beginnings, why do I feel like so many dancers haven’t felt it in their classes and training? “In my opinion, competitions have sort of diminished community immensely,” said Johnson. Dance competitions require dancers to match each other’s movements almost exactly for the cleanliness of the final product. For dancers like me who have grown up competing, it becomes second nature to match the instructor or those next to us. Professor Reed notices that in her classes, “there is mimicking that is happening, or just regurgitating” what the teacher shows them. Again, it’s second nature for many dancers; but as much as community is a core value to hip hop, so is individuality. “Hip hop is open in its free form. It is celebrated by its individuality,” said Reed, and it thrives on innovation and trying things that no one has done before. From the very first night the father of hip hop, DJ Kool Herc, debuted his own new technique of DJing at a dance bash, hip hop has assumed a code: “Use skills and whatever resources are available to create something new and cool; 2) Emulate and imitate the genius of others but inject personal style until the freshness glows” (Friedman, et al.). Reed believes that, “If you’re really studying the culture of hip hop dance, then you realize that there is something impactful about being one body, like fifty billion bodies, but one body.” In other words, a hip hop piece can still have clean formations and dancers who do the same movements, but it allows and almost demands individuality from each dancer.

Though I was the dancer who refused to take hip hop and hid from it for many years in my dance career, I now feel that every dance major should experience hip hop classes like those of Professor Johnson and Professor Reed. It takes a well-educated and extremely thoughtful instructor to teach hip hop in a way that incorporates the history and community culture it was founded on. It takes planning and care to implement these things in the classroom, and our professors here are experts in building community within their classes.

Specifically, Professor Reed has a strategy for structuring her classes. She balances an “atmosphere that is not judgmental but challenging, that’s fun but structured, that’s open creatively, but not overwhelming” and adds that, “you have to know your community” to find this balance. As one of her students, I can confidently say that she has succeeded in creating a community for her class. She implements finding our individuality with improvisation at the beginning of each class. When spending time on fundamental training, I feel well challenged, but not scared to take risks or to try the movements in ways that might feel uncomfortable. Her comments and suggestions are genuine and constructive, but most importantly she does not make me feel self-conscious or isolated for performing a move incorrectly. Finally, I feel like I can do

hip hop for real without fear of what I look like, without worrying about how I look in comparison to others, and without stressing about doing the movements “correctly.”

Because of all that I’ve learned, I think every dance major should give hip hop a try. No matter what type of dance you chose to pursue, versatility and individuality are key, and hip hop provides a space to explore. Its influence can be found everywhere in the dance world nowadays. It might be scary at first, but I assure you, with a skilled teacher like I had, you’ll be greeted by a supportive, loving, hard-working family, learn about hip hop history and technique, and even the names of other styles under the hip hop umbrella, like funk styles and street styles. To Professor Reed, “Every dance major should be required to take a hip hop class, because it is essential for personal and individual growth,” and I couldn't agree more. Push yourself! Free your style and your soul, be brave and embrace your individuality, and, like me, go beyond being a hip hop hater.



*Emily James graduated from University of California, Irvine in 2023 with a BFA in Dance Performance. She will be continuing to enjoy her time dancing professionally at the Disneyland Resort.*

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