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Author

Iwama, Megumi

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Freshmen! Don't be Afraid of Hip Hop

If you want to increase your artistic creativity and stay current in contemporary dance, you'll want to expand your artistic horizons

by Megumi Iwama

At UC Irvine, during Week Zero of freshman year, you walk through the Anteater Involvement Fair shoveling your way past what feels like millions of flyers thrown in your face. You look up at the tall stage set up for the occasion, and you see the intimidating, powerhouse hip-hop dancers lined up waiting to perform. You wish you could be as cool and impressive as they are, but you say to yourself, “Nah, I am a concert contemporary dancer and hip-hop isn't really artistic. I could never pursue that as an artistic career so I'm not gonna try...”

Well I am here to tell you that hip-hop and contemporary are not that much different from each other. *GASP*, yes, I mean to tell you that contemporary dance and hip-hop are very stylistically similar in approach. Definition-wise, according to the National Arts Centre, contemporary “specifically means dance that developed from the roots of modern dance, but that it is no longer aligned with the modernist art movement of the 1930s” (artsalive.ca). On the other side of the spectrum, Christopher Gorney, the author of *Hip Hop Dance: Performance, Style, and Competition*, says, “hip hop dance is *hip* which the Merriam Webster Dictionary defines as ‘keenly aware of or interested in the newest developments or styles,’ so in a way it is always changing with time. Because it is hip, there are always new styles developing, but there are four that are generally accepted as the traditional styles of hip hop dance—locking, popping, b-boying/b-girling, and up-rocking” (Gorney).

Both definitions state that these two kind of dance are evolving and always focused on developing new and modern ways of movement, so why is there such a disconnect between the hip-hop community and the concert contemporary dance community? Perhaps it has to do with concert dancers believing that hip-hop is inferior in artistic value. Contemporary stems from modern dance, which evolved from ballet, which was initially only performed for royalty and higher class audiences; whereas hip-hop grew from the streets, expressing frustrations of the African American community facing poverty and injustice.

Dennis Dang, a fourth year bio major at UCI is involved in Common Ground, one of the most advanced competitive hip-hop teams on campus. Although he is not a dance major, he recently participated in two pieces in the undergraduate dance concert, *Physical Graffiti*, and was fully a part of the creative and rehearsal process. Since he can now compare, I asked him whether he believed hip hop has its own artistic elements and why. His first reaction was, “Of course! Hip hop is VERY artistic.” He further explained that, “Hip hop at its core is art because it combines intention with form. People use dance, especially hip hop, as a form of expression, and even so much as a survival tool in some communities.”

So, yes, although Common Ground is a competitive dance team and art is something that goes beyond technique and winning, hip hop teams can also be artistic. The teams, Dang explains, “don't really care about winning really—the competitions are just a stage space that allows the hip-hop community to come together and share their different ways of expression, movement, and stories, and the winning placements just come with.” He elaborates, saying, “We see more ‘technical’ movements integrated into hip hop sets now, and I want to say hip hop today is only different from contemporary and other similar styles in its spatial and temporal

interpretation of music. However, that's not said to disregard the core component of hip-hop, which is the deep history of black culture that hip hop dance arose from and is distinctly different from contemporary dance."

Jeanine Yoo, a professional hip hop dancer who was also part of Common Ground in the past, explained to me that she too believes, "Hip hop is just as artistic as contemporary. I guess to me, art has everything to do with the person. I believe that to create in the language of dance, it must come from a part of you that simply isn't constructed on the grounds of technique, but discovered, and expressed through the limitlessness of your individual soul." For her, then, even street dance that isn't presented on a proscenium stage can have artistic qualities because it comes from a genuine place of movement exploration. "We can see examples of artistry in hip hop in any concept video on YouTube," she says. "It showcases the intellectual thought and artistic/creative process that the director and or choreographer goes through to express what they want to articulate from their heart."

When I asked Yoo what she would say to contemporary dancers who are afraid to try hip hop because they think it's not "concert dance enough," she responded, "Art is within. Art is self-expression, self-love, and self-acceptance. It provides a canvas of passion. Not just for dance, but all things—a passion for growth and betterment of those around you. Dance is about learning how to live wholeheartedly, and that includes being open-minded and trying new things. I feel like you should never believe there is only one way or set of beliefs that you can adopt because there is so much more out there to learn".

Gorney also emphasizes individual expression: "Performance is the vehicle in which the attitudes and ideas of the hip hop body are expressed... It may be a step or move that has already been performed, but adding one's own personal touch makes it hip hop. Personal style gives the moments a depth and life each and every time they are performed... Hip hop dance is not just b-boying anymore—it has developed and grown in a number of ways, some more conducive as an art form than others." You can see an example of this in the performances of Compagnie Kafig, a company based in France with mostly Brazilian dancers. Combining many styles of dance, they create movement the same way street hip hop dancers do, but they perform and tour on many different proscenium stages. Although their music choices give it a more concert dance feel, the movement style is defined as hip hop, so I believe this is the perfect example of artistic hip hop finding its niche in the concert/contemporary dance world.

My advice is to be welcoming to every opportunity and form of dance. You'll find fulfillment and art in each one if you look in the right places. If you are a concert contemporary dancer afraid to try hip hop because you think it will not benefit you in any way, or you think that it has no artistic value, I recommend you look at the form closely and observe the creative and performance process each individual dancer goes through in the hip hop community. Whether it is on stage or street, if the intention of their creative choice goes beyond technique and choreography, it is art.

So—don't hold back on experiencing any type of dance because you think it is lower or less intellectual than the expectation of a theater stage performance. You have nothing to lose! Hip hop can be just as artistic and full of movement exploration as contemporary, which is continually evolving by using new forms and styles. Go ahead freshmen! Immerse yourself in different dance cultures and try new things! Art is everywhere.

Works Cited

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