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droppin' science

critical ■ essays ■ on ■ rap ■ music ■ and ■ hip hop ■ culture

edited by william eric perkins

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hip hop 101

robert farris thompson

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Hip hop ain't no Hula-Hoop, no matter what the trend spotters say. In 1984, of course, hip hop was hot news. Everywhere you looked, you could see hip hop in one or more of its manifestations: break and electric-boogie dancing, rap music and graffiti. Then the media moved on, leaving the impression that hip hop was a fad. Here today, gone later today. Over and out.

But traditions just don't work that way. Hip hop is still with us in all its sainted sassiness, and its impact is likely to reverberate for years and years. Rappers in concert crisscross the nation. During his last tour, Prince shared the limelight with Tony Draughon, a break dancer known as Mr. Wave. Michael Jackson's 3-D Disney project, *Captain Eo*, will feature one of the main innovators of electric boogaloo, Pop'in Pete (Timothy Solomon) of Fresno, California. And this summer, Mr. Wave, along with the New York City Breakers, will bring his inimitable body lightning to sixty American cities.

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All of this is simply part of an enduring cultural evolution. And the roots go back, baby. *Way* back.

Consider Charles Dickens in 1842. He's in New York, digging the action at the Cotton Club of that era, Almack's, in a tough but vibrant Manhattan district known as Five Points. The scene, which he wrote about at length in a travel book, *American Notes*, really blows his mind. He describes the manager of Almack's, an elegant black woman in a multicolored African-style head tie. Then he zeroes in on the work of a master black dancer, of that city and of that time, performing what the landlord of the bar actually calls "a regular break-down":

> Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut: snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels . . . dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs.

What does this have to do with hip hop and its roots? A lot. For example, in 1986, as part of his New York electric boogie, Tony Draughon turns in his knees, then spins around to present the backs of his legs. African American dance history is evident in other moves that Dickens witnessed. There were intimations of Kongo, an ancient and distinguished black civilization in central Africa, in the shuffle and double shuffle (in the Kongo language, these contrasting modes of perambulation are called *ta masamba* and *ta masamba n'swalu*). And the Kongo people, apparently since the Middle Ages, have poked fun at a knock-kneed bird in a dance they call *ta minswele* and have patted their thighs and chests and snapped their fingers for extra percussion in a dance called *mbele*, which was described by a French priest in May 1698.

Back to the future. It's 1969. James Brown, Soul Brother Number One, needing no further praise or introduction, is performing onstage at Madison Square Garden. *Newsweek* is there, taking down the moves: "dazzling double shuffles, knock-kneed camel-walks and high-tailed, chicken-pecking atavisms." The imperative was clear: get loose and let loose. A cultural threshold had been reached. Moves Dickens had seen, and some he hadn't, were coming into play again. And all creative hell was breaking loose. James Brown begat soul. And soul begat George Clinton and the funk movement. And James Brown and George Clinton and others, in combination with cultural forces including jazz, salsa, and reggae (dub and the sound-system style of record playing more than the music itself), begat Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation—in short, the hip hop revolution.

Watching James Brown and listening to George Clinton from afar were young black dancers like the Solomon brothers in Fresno and Afrika Bambaataa and his followers along 174th Street in the Bronx. Out of the Bronx emerged breakdancing, turntable percussion, the beat-box sound, and rap. And out of Fresno and black Los Angeles emerged electric boogaloo, which New York renamed electric boogie. All of which takes us up to where we are today.

Of course, it's easier to savor the influence of tropical Africa in the DUN-tuh-PAH, DUN-DUN-tuh-PAH, DUN-tuh-PAH, DUN-DUN-tuh-PAH now resounding

from a thousand beat boxes than to comprehend that sound as an aspect of a serious historical tradition. But in the effort to do just that, we might discover why 12.2 percent of our population, black Americans, are consistently responsible for more than 50 percent of our popular music.

Hip hop is a tale of three cities. As I've said, breakdancing and the hip hop sound emerged in the Bronx, electric-boogaloo poppin' and tickin' moves arose in Fresno and Los Angeles (Watts, Long Beach, Crenshaw Heights). Naturally, the outsider might wonder how the devastated lots of the South Bronx and the suburban sprawl of Fresno and Los Angeles could have sustained the energy and the beauty of the hip hop arts. Well, in the Bronx at least, it seems the young men and women of that much-misunderstood borough *had* to invent hip hop to regain the voice that had been denied them through media indifference or manipulation. By manipulation I mean filmmakers' exploitation of what they took to be prototypical ruins, along the southernmost edges of the South Bronx, as backdrops for the social apocalypse—witness the film *1990: The Bronx Warriors*.

Michael Ventura, in the fascinating chapter "We All Live in the South Bronx," from his *Shadow Dancing in the USA*, describes how the cameramen in the streets would seek negative local color and apparently little else: "In roughly six hours of footage—*Fort Apache*, *Wolfen*, and *Koyaamsqatsi*—we haven't been introduced to one soul who actually lives in the South Bronx. We haven't heard one voice speaking its own language. We've merely watched a symbol of ruin: the South Bronx [as] last act before the end of the world."

How wonderful, then, when the Bronx started to talk back. In the late spring of 1981, there was a panel at a Bronx-based conference on the folk culture of that borough with the title "This Is Not Fort Apache, This Is Our Home: Students Document Their South Bronx." Tony Draughon, who grew up on 169th Street near Yankee Stadium, maintains: "That performing-in-the-ruins stuff is all a crock. There are no abandoned buildings where I live, and breakdancing didn't start where all those broken buildings were—we danced at Bronx River, where Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation was, and Poe Park and the schoolyards and even the back of classrooms when the bell would ring." It also happens that Bambaataa grew up in a comfortable apartment in the Bronx River Project, on East 174th Street, with his mother, a nurse. The bottom line is that Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, DJ Kool Herc, and the other South Bronx hip hop performers transcended and transmuted violence with music and peacemaking.

Nor were the original hip hoppers confined, as some outsiders imagined, to a single, monolithic black culture. If lesson one is that a living, creative, ebullient people live in the Bronx, then lesson two in hip hop history is the appreciation that these creative people can be divided into at least five distinct African-influenced cultures:

First, English-speaking blacks from Barbados live in the Bronx. Afrika Bambaataa's mother and her two sisters were from Barbados, as was the family of that other prominent Bronx DJ, Grandmaster Flash.

Second, black Jamaicans live in the Bronx. Among them figures most fa-

mously DJ Kool Herc (Clive Campbell), originally from Kingston, who was immortalized in the 1984 film *Beat Street*.

Third, thousands of blacks from Cuba live in the Bronx. The smell of Cuban coffee and the sound of Cuban mambos enliven the streets. (As early as 1954, a blind black Cuban guitarist, Arsenio Rodríguez, had extolled in song the talents of a legendary "guy from the Bronx," or "el elemento del Bronx," according to the original Spanish lyric. In line after swinging line, Rodríguez praised him because he could dance mambo and *danzón* like a Cuban, right in the middle of the Bronx.) It was only natural for Afro-Cuban conga drums to become one of the favored percussive springboards for early breakdance improvisation. "Afro-Cuban bongos gave power to our dance," says Draughon.

Fourth, there are thousands and thousands more of *boricuas*—Puerto Ricans—and they not only augmented the Afro-Cuban impact, in the timbales of Tito Puente and the salsa of Eddie Palmieri and Willie Colón, but eventually provided an able-bodied army of knowing dancers who were to take breakdancing to its second, efflorescent phase between 1979 and 1982, after its invention in the South Bronx by black dancers, circa 1975.

Fifth and finally, there are the North American blacks, whose music was jazz and soul and funk. And the Bronx also loved rock. In the sixties and seventies, James Brown, Sly and the Family Stone, and George Clinton were the main men. Bambaataa elaborates: "I loved their *funk*—hard-hitting bass and heavy percussion. Before James Brown, funk meant the smell of sweat. But James Brown turned it into a sign of life. And George Clinton changed it into a *way* of life, with funk adverbs, the funk sign [pointer and little finger up, other digits and thumb tucked behind the palm], funky costumes, funky glasses—all that came in with him. And Sly took rock and crossed it with funk, and had 500,000 people rising to their feet at Woodstock."

In short, to live in the Bronx was to live in a multicultural happening. The Bronx blacks had the cultural depth and confidence to talk back, when challenged by the media, staying loose, creative, different. "They stayed fresh, they maintained that certain volatility that hip hop craves," recalls Michael Holman, a young black hip hop impresario, student filmmaker, and author. No fear of the end of the world, just fear of being stuck: "If you became classifiable," Holman says, "you became all the things that kept you in check."

In 1975, the lines of cultural brilliance, North American black, Afro-Cuban, et al., were beginning to crisscross. Many of these musics, however different, shared Kongo qualities of sound and motion. The wheel of creative creole interaction was turning again, as it had once in New Orleans, Havana, and Rio de Janeiro when Kongo rhythmic impulses collided with Western dance and music. One reason for the Kongo tinge in New World dancing is the sheer number of Kongo and Angolan peoples brought to our shores in the Atlantic slave trade—a miracle of cultural resistance, demographically reinforced. The historian Joseph C. Miller tells us that some 40 percent of the ten million or so Africans brought

to the New World between 1500 and 1870 in the slave trade came from the ports of Kongo and neighboring Angola.

These powerful numbers, in combination with the spiritual and artistic gifts of the Kongo people, changed the course of the popular music of the world. In New Orleans, the city of jazz, the Kongo people were so numerous and their Kongo dance was so famous (in Mississippi, too) that the place where everyone hung out to hear the latest sounds and check out the newest moves, a vast dancing plaza called Congo Square, was named after them. Dena J. Epstein, an expert in the history of black folk music, has discovered a letter from New Orleans, dated 1819, that includes this telling sentence: "On sabbath evening the African slaves meet on the green . . . and rock the city with their Congo dances."

They also took creole Kongo beats and rocked Havana with rumba and Rio de Janeiro with samba. (Both *rumba* and *samba* are Kongo words for certain dance moves.) The upshot?

First, black Rio taught us how to samba, to dance to the sound of tambourines and Angolan friction drums.

Second, from Cuba came rumba and the conga line, the circling line of dancers moving one-two-three-*kick*. This style has returned to the spotlight in 1986 with the Miami Sound Machine's "Conga," the first Latin song since the sixties to become a major U.S. hit.

Third, from the Kongo dance of Congo Square, from jazz dance, and from rumba came "the Congo grind" (*tienga*), the hip-rotating sign of life that kept missionaries to Kongo muttering for centuries, that gave American Puritans cardiac arrest, that ultimately inspired Elvis Presley's famous suite of moves. Some of these motions have become part of the dance code of American people, white and black.

Fourth, wherever the Kongo people came in significant numbers, you frequently found their concept of the dance performance break: in Haiti, where *cassé* ("break") stands for the deliberate disruption of the beat of the drums, which throws the dancers into ecstasy, or in Cuba, where *rumba abierta* refers to the dropping out of melodic instrumentation and the taking over of the conga drums.

Must we know this to pass what music critic Robert Christgau calls raptitude tests? Bet. Because a fusion of break musics in the Bronx sparked the rise of hip hop. Afrika Bambaataa explains what happened in *The Beginning of Break Beat (Hip-Hop) Music*:

> Break music has been around for a long time, but not until the early '70s . . . brought to popularity. Break music is that certain part of the record that you just be waiting for to come up and when that certain part comes, that percussion part with all those drums, congas, it makes you dance real wild. . . . That break is so short in the record, you get mad, because the break was not long enough for you to really get down to do your thing.

How to restore the delicious length of live music breaks in a mechanical, turntable situation? The answer was found around 1973. The Jamaican DJ Kool Herc armed himself with gigantic speakers and thundering frequency ranges and defined a world where, as one hip hopper put it, "the loudest noises were the newest." Herc took a conga drum break and extended it across two copies of the same record on two turntables. As soon as one break ended, he switched to its beginning on the second record, and the beat went on. This was the birth of Bronx-style break music.

In response, no later than 1975, young black dancers in the Bronx were improvising moves to match the new length and intensity of the music. They danced to break music, so they called themselves breakdancers. Or b-boys, for short.

In neighborhood gyms and in the parks and playgrounds, they would break to the percussion portion of a tune. I remember running full tilt into one of these scenes while driving in the Bronx in the late seventies. There was a park filled with fifty or more radios, *all playing the same thing*. It left me thrilled and reeling. This was the musical background for the earliest forms of breakdancing as seen in 1976 on the schoolyard of P.S. 110 in the Bronx by G.L.O.B.E. and Pow Wow, two prominent rappers now working with Afrika Bambaataa: "Like, it'd be two guys, both doing uprock, stand-up moves, side to side, profile, and then one of them would fall back and the other guy would catch him."

Uprock was martial posing. Uprock meant battle mime. It was danced combat, a fight with steps instead of fists. One basic sequence: hop, step, *lunge*. Or the hands were used as if they were a knife in a form of uprock known as zipping, witnessed by a historian of breakdancing, Sally Sommer. Uprock is not unlike *nsunsa*, a fast-moving Kongo battle dance—a sport, really—that's also one-on-one and also very popular with men. Can this also be the black social amusement called *soesa*, which J. G. Stedman observed in Suriname in South America and described in a book published in 1796: "[It] consists in footing opposite to each other and clapping with their hands upon their sides to keep in time."

The Bronx fall-back-and-be-caught moves recall another Kongo dance game, *lukaya lweto*, "our leaf that never falls." In this game, the child who is "it" leans back precariously and is spun around in the hands of children seated in a circle on the ground around him. They spin him roughly, quickly, but never let him fall.

Then the b-boys brought breakdancing down to the level of the ground. G.L.O.B.E. and Pow Wow elaborate:

> We got tired of just stand up and catch. We started kicking side to side and hitting the ground. Jump down, bend, crouch and take a set, all down, doing whatever moves we could, spinning top, sweep, back spin. There were guys who danced [these moves] so much they said every week they had to get a new pair of sneakers. Anyhow, you'd fall, touch your hand on the ground, improvise something, bounce right up, and freeze.

Tony Draughon participated in the creation of these early moves. He says these strokes of prowess deliberately set up a contrast between the spin and the freeze: "Imagine, man, you're *spinning*, as fast as you can, and then you *stop*, in a beautiful position, in the twinkling of an eye."

Tradition built this tone of confidence, this arsenal of instant moves and creative options. What kinds of tradition? Why, freeze and swipes and spins, of course.

Move-and-freeze sequences were legendary in the history of jazz dance. From the fifties, I remember the New York mambo picture step, in which William Pittman and Teresita Pérez, two well-known mambo dancers at the Palladium on Broadway, turned and froze, becoming momentary sculpture. I also remember the legend of a rock & rolling freeze dancer in Dallas in the fifties. It is told that he'd show up with an alarm clock concealed within his britches. He'd sweat and dance and freeze, then shake and shimmy and freeze. The ladies loved him. And then an alarm clock would go off in his pants, signaling departure time for an amorous rendezvous, and he'd disappear, mysteriously.

But there is nothing mysterious about the origins of the sweeps and swipes of early breakdancing. They clearly represent an ingenious adaptation of the pommel-horse exercises of Western gymnastics to the Africanizing "get down" level of the ground. Keep the muscle, get rid of the horse, and get on down.

The spin also recalls, in part, the virtuosic whirls of Kongo dances. In the summer of 1985, I saw a dancer spin on his right hand in the middle of a revolving, chanting circle of children in Kiluango, a hilltop village near Luozi not far from the river Congo. In other villages, I saw standing children link arms with horizontal children, spinning them close to the ground. In another town, a youngster spun on his back.

What are we to make of all this? Simply that it's no more surprising to find spin dancing in the black Bronx than it is to find "London Bridge Is Falling Down" on the playgrounds of Anglo-Saxon America. In fact, some intervening links between Kongo and the Bronx can be found:

First, a marvelously detailed nineteenth-century Cuban engraving shows a black dancer, bare chested and with a belt of bells, spinning on his left palm in the streets of Havana on Epiphany, the Day of the Kings. His pose is like a stop frame from a film of today's New York breaking step, the four corners.

Second, hand spins came from Angola to Brazil, where they turn up as one of the moves of *capoeira de Angola*, the black martial art of the city of Salvador, in the state of Bahia.

Third, as we learn in Lydia Parrish's classic *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*, a ring shout in black Georgia includes a sequence in which one member "gets down on his knees and, with head touching the floor, rotates with the group as it moves around the circle."

Fourth, powerfully illustrative is a silent, very early kinescope, *Three-Man Dance*, probably from the period between 1890 and 1910. This film bears an extraordinary relation both to ancient Kongo and to the modern Bronx. While one black man plays a harmonica and another beats time with his hands, a third

comes in and choreographically introduces himself with a time step. (One of the other men has just danced a rudimentary version of today's moonwalk.) Then he turns his back to the camera, and he *breaks*. Suddenly, he's dropping on the ground, touching the floor with his hand, flipping his body upside down, then resuming, in a twinkling, verticality.

Spin-pattern vocabulary, coming down the body line from Kongo culture, was very likely reinforced by other sources. Blues historian Samuel Charters saw a West African Fula dancer fling himself down on the ground, land on one hand and begin spinning wildly, and I have seen similar stunts among the Gelede dancers of Ketu, an ancient town in what is now the Republic of Benin. But however blended and recombined, the spins in the Bronx were far from fixed or static. Indeed, the special intensity of the breakdance revolution split the atom of the spins and released more creative energy than had probably ever before been seen in this particular suite of moves.

Enter the Puerto Ricans. They took breakdancing to another level in the late seventies and early eighties. They built tough, athletic structures around the original spins, mirroring an age of joggers, Adidas outfits, and Nautilus-trained bodies. For one thing, as suggested by hip hop scholar David Sternbach, they added a fast-stepping entry pattern that strongly recalled the flash and celerity of some of the steps of the Puerto Rican dance known as the *bomba*. The Puerto Ricans added new spins to the lexicon: head spins, windmills (a variation on the back spin, with flaring legs), and helicopters (one person spins two other dancers like human blades), plus a superathletic bit of virtuosity, a whirling one-arm handstand called the 1990.

By April 1981, when Sally Banes published the first article on breakdancing, the original black and subsequent Puerto Rican improvisations had fused to form the full-blown, breakdance sequence: entry (rapid-fire stepping), break (down to the hands), swipes (the ground gymnastics imparting momentum and special flair), spins (on the hands, the back, the shoulders, the head, and other body parts), finishing with a freeze and then an exit (returning the performer to verticality).

Some dancers pushed these moves to the limits of human anatomy. One dancer, for example, who dreamed that he had spun on his chin, tried it in real life and damn near broke his jaw. But the way some spins dissolved into the freeze could be truly magical. In the end there was no way of confusing the daredevil baroque of breakdancing with the straightforward spin games of ancient Kongo. For one was early and the other was late, and enormous amounts of time and creativity had intervened.

Meanwhile, drum machines were coming in: DUN tuh-PAH, DUN-DUN tuh-PAH, DUN tuh-PAH, DUN-DUN tuh-PAH. "These beats," reports Doug Wimbish, a musician who has worked with Bambaataa, "build the total tack-head experience—the tack head is young, formative, black, out for whatever, and the safest way to keep that tack head listening is to keep that beat."

The hard, relentless beat-box pulse—"total tack"—called for a correspondingly hard and relentless motion. Once again, the Afro-American vernacular was more than equal to the challenge.

For more had come from Kongo than horizontal play spins. Most remarkable were ecstatic healers, dancing in trance, famed for "sending waves" (*fila minika*). Kongo healers in trance make sharp, sudden pulsations with their shoulder blades as a sign that the spirit of God is with them.

Cut to the Solomon brothers (their stage names are Boogaloo Sam, Pop 'in Pete, and Tickin' Deck), who were to invent electric boogaloo. While attending services at the First Corinthians Baptist Church on Thorn Street in West Fresno in the sixties and early seventies, they saw women in the front row "jerking and trembling" with the Spirit. This may not have been a direct inspiration, but the fact remains that several years later they came up with poppin' and tickin', rhythmic angulations of the torso and the limbs executed at a moderate tempo if one is poppin' or very fast if one is tickin'. With electric boogaloo, dancers could scintillate as if strobe-lit.

Boogaloo was a Fresno term of honor. It meant that a dancer could master anything. It meant he could even mime electricity, pass it through his body and put his own stamp on it. These brilliant moves reached New York via Los Angeles, Cleveland, South Carolina, and other mediating points in the late seventies. New York turned the style slightly around and called it electric boogie.

Dancers of California electric boogaloo or South Bronx electric boogie, "popping hard, hard waves," perfectly captured the hard and driving sound of hip hop drum-machine percussion. In addition, according to hip hop tradition, some of the flashier moves were copied off jerky, badly synced Saturday-morning television cartoons. By this theory, wave dancing, in collision with "found motions" borrowed from television animation, helped build the corporeal cubism of the finest masters. Dancing like pneumatic drills given life and spirit, or shattering into fragments of deliberate oscillation, their cultural engine, fueled by the past and driven toward a high-tech future, matches exactly the rationale behind the work of New York painter Keith Haring. "I'm attracted by the [past], but at the same time I feel driven toward the future," says Haring. "Primordial [styles] help you to be new."

Being ancient and being new explains the contrasts in Haring's drawings: silhouetted pyramids irradiated by flying saucers and ancient-looking jars vitalized by boogie friezes. You might say that Haring is the Degas of the b-boys. In murals on Manhattan's Avenue D near Houston Street, on the FDR Drive at Ninety-first Street and in fugitive chalk drawings in subway stations all over town, he has captured some of the basic moves of breakdancing. He also captures the volatility and the camaraderie of the hip hop world, which I have experienced firsthand.

I remember sitting with friends in a New York restaurant one night after a breaking contest. A dancer who had seen us at the contest passed by on the street. Immediately he started a wave with his left hand, passed this current through his shoulders, down his right arm and into his hand, and aimed the energy at me. It shot like a laser from the street through the plate glass, stopping my pointless conversation with this message: We saw you digging us. Come back. 'Cause hip hop is here to stay.