

UC Irvine

Dance Major Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1rm8c6cz>

Journal

Dance Major Journal, 14(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2026-09-25

DOI

10.5070/D5.69479

Peer reviewed

How Josephine Baker can inspire you in hip hop class

by Shelby Ells

This exploration happened in my Hip Hop 1 class with Professor Cyrian Reed in winter quarter at UCI, while we were experimenting with expressive performance, as well as movement. My goal was to connect hip-hop locking with earlier performance traditions by looking at the work of Josephine Baker. I was inspired by how Baker used exaggerated facial expressions, sudden poses, and playful character in her performances during the jazz era. When reviewing material about her performances, I noticed how she used quick stops, dramatic poses, and expressive gestures to interact with the audience. This made me think about similarities with locking in hip hop, which also includes freezes, pointing, and performance personality. I wanted to explore how Baker's theatrical movement style could inspire the way I perform hip-hop locking.

When I tried to combine this historical idea with hip-hop dancing, I focused on movement qualities like sudden freezes, rhythmic hits, and expressive gestures. During the exercise, I experimented with moving through a groove and then sharply locking my arms and pausing in a pose, similar to the way locking dancers punctuate movement with a freeze. I also practiced pointing gestures, wrist rolls, and quick directional changes, which are common in locking, but I added exaggerated facial expressions and playful body language inspired by Josephine Baker's stage presence.

For example, I started with a relaxed groove in my knees and shoulders to match the beat. Then I performed a quick arm swing followed by a strong lock, holding the pose briefly to emphasize the rhythm. After the freeze, I used a large pointing gesture and a turn of the torso, making the movement bigger and more theatrical. I also experimented with hip isolations and playful pauses, imagining how Baker might interact with an audience through character and expression. Through this process, I realized that dance history can influence how I perform movement today. By thinking about Josephine Baker's expressive and theatrical style, I was able to add more personality, exaggeration, and storytelling to my hip-hop movements instead of focusing only on the steps.

Shelby Ells is a senior at the University of California, Irvine, and is expecting to graduate in the spring with a BFA in both Dance Performance and Dance Choreography.