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## “Decyphering” the importance of artistic play

*When the pressure of looking “right” makes you insecure about freestyling, consider what the creativity of hip hop’s cypher can do for your artistry*

by Alexis Morris

When I was young, I would occasionally be told to “freestyle” before or after the choreography I was given, but I never felt I knew how. The older and more skilled I became, the more often I would be asked to improvise. I found myself in situations where I felt extremely confident one minute, and then felt like hiding the next. Every other skill I possessed as a dancer had been broken down, formulated, and then methodically taught to me. Dance was something I had *learned*, whereas improv seemed to be something I was just expected to *know*. This structure of dance training robbed me of confidence in my own instincts, the very same instincts that got me into dance classes in the first place.

Somewhere in all the corrections, technique lessons, and rehearsals spent “cleaning,” I internalized the idea that there was a “right” way to dance and a “wrong” one. This notion stemmed from correct ways to execute technique or codified movements, but it was inherently flawed because dance itself is more than a series of steps. Since freestyle doesn’t come with instructions, I fixated on what the “right” approach was. I was looking for someone to teach me how to improvise correctly, so I could do it well, but improvisation is spontaneous and open-ended, so there isn’t one right way to do it. I was looking for someone to teach me how to do something that can’t really be taught, and I had forgotten how to access the joy without judgement that had five-year-old Lexy dancing to any song, anywhere, anytime, purely for the love of it.

No dancer makes it far into their training without encountering some sort of improvisational practice. The more dancers I’ve met, the more I noticed that a dancer’s earliest training often shapes their relationship with improvisation. So, the question, then, is *how* our training shapes the way we understand and approach dance. Young dancers who grow up competing are often taught to prioritize their performance and how they place. Even in non-competition spaces, dancers are awarded visibility and stage time based on how well they can execute choreography or dance in an ensemble. By the time dancers reach college age, improv at an audition is an opportunity to show specialized skills, freestyling in class often feels like an assessment, and access to formal performance opportunities is tied directly to ability. We spend so many years in competition with each other for roles, highlights, or titles that we learn to equate perception with judgement.

Conversely, in hip hop—which includes rap music, graffiti art, breaking, and other street styles—the youth and flexibility of the genre help protect novice dancers from the rigid mental frameworks of “right and wrong,” because they aren’t limited by a single, overarching school of technique. The styles commonly categorized under hip hop have not been codified under one universally accepted system. Having originated in the 1970s, hip hop evolved through mutual influence grounded by a knowledge of artistic lineage (Aldridge and Stewart 190). There isn’t even an absolute consensus on terminology yet, and where you learn or who you learn from heavily impacts how you converse with the styles. This malleable stylistic context leaves room for dancers to interpret their training in ways that are authentic to themselves and encourages original or spontaneous choices. In many cases, dancers who started “informally” discover their personal style sooner because they spend significantly more time freestyling than they do performing prepared choreography.

I have many colleagues who are “self-taught” or learned dance in improvisational spaces. They overwhelmingly specialize in hip hop or closely related street and club styles where community play and improvisational exchange are integral to their origins and culture. Take house, for example. The music was designed to get people to dance and, as the dancers played off each other, innovation fueled innovation: “Central to the dancing and the vibe are the improvisational exchanges between DJ and dancer, and between dancer and dancer—the playfulness” (Sommer 73). In hip hop and breaking culture, the term “cypher” refers to a circle which dancers enter, freestyle within, and then exit. As a community, members of the cypher inspire, communicate, share, and learn from one another.

With so many studios and universities including hip hop in their curriculum, why, then, are so many talented performing artists still scared of a cypher? Unfortunately, in many spaces, the cypher’s original spirit of play, curiosity, and shared discovery has been overshadowed by performance, judgment, and the pressure to prove ourselves. Even in community cyphers that are not connected to my academic classes, I still feel uncomfortable and out of place. Being a graduate student in amateur or undergraduate spaces adds another level of perceived expectation as well. After all, I’m working on getting a master’s degree in dance. I should be talented. My freestyle should be entertaining, unexpected. I should be inspiring people with my choices. I have devoted so much time, effort, and energy to this. I need to prove it’s been well spent...right?

But that’s not the point. The purpose of improvisation isn’t to determine who’s the best dancer in the room. The purpose is to create a collaborative space of inspiration and creativity. To let us contribute to something larger than ourselves. I have to remind myself—I dance for the same reasons five-year-old Lexy did, for the same reason most of us do: I dance because it’s *fun*. It can take a while—and the right circumstances—to reconnect with the cypher’s original spirit of play,

curiosity, and shared discovery. But it's worth it: by returning to the playful cypher, we can allow ourselves access to new avenues to improve our artistry.

Dance has never been about what we have to prove, it's about what we have to share. When we stop treating freestyle as a performance to be judged and return to it as a form of play, we reconnect to the self-exploration and self-expression that make dance such a compelling art form. Prioritizing judgment-free improvisational play doesn't make us less disciplined artists—it lets us become more complete ones.



*Alexis Morris is a dancer, artist, and educator born and raised in the Bay Area. As an M.F.A. candidate her work is influenced by the interdisciplinary nature of her dance background and academic history. Her studio work pulls stylistic influence from multiple genres, while her research explores the impact of ADHD on creative works and the artistic process.*

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