

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Charly Santagado

Breaking Down Breakdance

by Charly Santagado

HubChats: 50 for 50 Cypher celebrated 50 years of hip hop with a photo exhibition by Steve “Believe” Lunger celebrating the local breaking scene, a lecture demonstration by Mark “Metal” Wong and several Hip Hop Fundamentals students, and a 50-minute intergenerational breakdance cypher to the beats of DJ Yaks.

Audiences entering the lobby of [Performance Garage](#) were greeted by the photo gallery and complimentary snacks before stepping into the 105-seat theater, which is housed in a historic 19th-century horse stable turned auto repair garage turned dance space. People trickled in throughout Metal’s 45-minute talk, which established the tone of the space as informal. Metal invited the dancers and audience members to interject and check his facts as he spoke about the history and fundamentals of the genre.

Metal explained that the first “official” hip hop party took place in the Bronx on Aug. 11, 1973, was only open to people aged 16-18, and was drug free. He enumerated the four basic elements of hip hop: graffiti, an MC, a DJ, and dance. Unlike many other dance forms, there’s no [fourth wall](#) and no need for a stage. “We create our own stage.” Through live demonstrations of toplocks, footwork, and freezes, a small group of young people associated with [Hip Hop Fundamentals](#) defined the grammar of breaking. Metal’s projected slideshow featured hip hop and hip hop-inspired music videos including a Blondie “rap” song and Rapper’s Delight. He shared that in hip hop dance, originality and paying homage to artists that came before you are key, and emphasized that a [cypher](#) is not a performance.

By the end of the presentation, the room buzzed with anticipation. A group of around 30 dancers took to the stage and arranged themselves in a U formation, leaving the front of the circle open so the audience could see in. The beat dropped, and dancers of diverse ages, ethnicities, and levels of experience entered the cypher one at a time in a lively display of speed, agility, and creativity. I was enthralled by the unique styles and unexpected flairs of each participant. The way that some showed their capacity for deep listening by

referencing movements from the previous breaker and responding to the music accompanying their freestyle was particularly affecting.



Image description: *large group of dancers in sweatpants, hoodies, and sneakers jamming together on stage after the cypher*

The play of who enters the cypher when was as interesting as what happened within it, but it was disappointing to see many of the same faces breaking in four and five times before everyone had a turn. The MC navigated this imbalance by calling for an “unfamiliar face” to enter the space between each “familiar face.” I was especially dismayed at the disparity between the amount of floor time taken up by the male-presenting dancers compared with the female-presenting dancers. The femme dancers (who were far fewer in number) congregated on stage left, many of them entering only in the final minutes of the cypher and some not entering at all. And the camera person was so deep in the action that they blocked most audience members’ view. Recording for a few minutes would have been fine, but the entire cypher was filmed and some of the dancers seemed more interested in getting cool footage than engaging with the audience and their fellow dancers.

Nevertheless, the event certainly did what it set out to do. I left with a deeper understanding of breaking, hip hop, and the local Philadelphia street dance scene.

[HubChats: 50 for 50 Cypher](#), Mark “Metal” Wong & Steve “Believe” Lunger, Performance Garage, Nov. 16, 2023.

By Charly Santagado
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