



"Hip Hop Hooray: Breaking into the Big Time"

By Mandalit del Barco

The B-boys have come a long way from dancing on street corners and in parks, nickel-and-diming it for the Manhattan crowds. They're breaking into the big time now, making up to \$12,000 for a single appearance in films, commercials or on stage. Breakers from the first professional crew, Rock Steady, were first documented by Charlie Ahearn in his \$300,000 film, *Wild Style*, and rose to fame by dancing in a two-minute segment in the 1983 film, *Flashdance*. Recently, Rock Steady returned to the South Bronx where break dancing started 10 years ago, for a major part in the Harry Belafonte-David Picker film *Beat Street*. The six Rock Steady dancers, who are from Manhattan and the Bronx, will be playing the fictitious "Bronx Rockers." Another group, Dance System #10, whose 10 dancers are all from the South Bronx, have also been moving up, performing at Madison Square Garden and touring South America and the Caribbean.

When *Beat Street*, the first major motion picture on break dancing, opens on June 8, it will inaugurate a summer of dance movies featuring breakers. Others coming out will be *That's Dancin'* with Gene Kelly; *Shootout*, directed by Sidney Poitier; *The Last Dragon*, which will combine breaking and Kung fu; and others, including *Breakdancing*, *Breakdancin'*, *Body Rock* and *Flashdance II*.

For now, breakers can be seen on TV commercials for Burger King, McDonalds, Panasonic, Pepsi and Coca Cola; on MTV and late-night dance shows. Breakdance crews have performed at Washington's Kennedy Center for President Reagan and at Madison Square Garden and Radio City Music Hall. Alfonso Ribeiro, the "Tap Dance Kid," dances a short electric boogie stint on Broadway. And Off Broadway, breaking will be featured in Rick Atwell's musical "Street Heat."

Crews such as Rock Steady and Dance System #10 have introduced everyone to the fresh South Bronx street culture of Hip Hop, which includes the acrobatic break dancing (flips and glides and "suicide dives"), electric boogie (a dance in which an invisible electric force seems to jut from joint to joint), funky b-bop music whose steady, computerized beat is missed by DJ's who add "scratch" sound effects to the records, rappers who talk/sing in rapid-fire rhymes, and the visual art of graffiti. "People on the streets have talent," says Jeffrey Greene of Rock Steady, whose graffiti tag name is Doze. "What we're doing through break dancing, rapping and graffiti is bringing our culture to the world."

Ahearn, who documented Hip Hop in his 1981 film "Wild Style," says the scene has had tremendous influence in communities all over the world. Young Turkish immigrants in Berlin, and kids in Japan, Hawaii, and Italy are all break dancing. In the United States, the Cuban community in Florida and the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles have been "transformed" because of Hip Hop. "These subgroups have been given a focus; something to be proud of and to identify with," Ahearn says.

Graffiti and rap also have grown from hobbies to businesses. Graffiti paintings are being sold in SoHo art galleries for up to \$10,000 each. Artist Keith Haring, who once did subway graffiti, has had major exhibitions around the world, and is critically acclaimed. Others, like Futura2000, Dondi, and Fab Five Freddy have also stopped tagging and painting "throw ups" on the trains, and have turned to spray-painting canvasses. DJ's like Afrika Bambaataa and

Grandmaster Flash started in clubs and at street jams in the Bronx. Today, their records are topping the charts. Like other youth movements, from disco to punk to new wave, the styles are only recognized as "legitimate" when they become commercially acceptable, when the big bucks are behind them.

While the commercialization of Hip Hop has caused some to worry about the effects on the dancers and the dance form, its popularity has been praised for curbing street crime and violence. Ahearn, who has toured with Rock Steady and other Hip Hoppers from his film, says the recognition breakers are getting may be helping to change attitudes towards people in the South Bronx and other areas. "It can give a sense of pride," he says. "It can give younger people the feeling that they're important and worthy of being role models." As a result, Rock Steady and Dance System #10 members have seen their influence as role models grow.

Some think break dancing is simply a passing fad that will soon wear out its welcome. But the form dates back at least 300 years to Africa, when warriors danced to show solidarity. Breaking has appeared at different times, under different names or sometimes, without a name. Earnest Smith, a jazz historian and author of *The Black Book*, a history of black culture, has been collecting film clips of dancing, dating back to the early days of film in the late 1800's. He describes a 1903 two-minute silent newsreel from the Thomas Edison Company, featuring three black teenagers on a city sidewalk. One plays the harmonica, one claps his hands, and another dances. When Smith shows the clip to audiences, it gets a "shock of recognition," for the dancing looks just like the break dancing of today.

Last October, the members of Dance System #10 were performing on Friday and Saturday nights on street corners in Greenwich Village, breaking and boogieing on flattened cardboard refrigerator boxes, making \$20-\$50 a performance. In less than a year, with the help of a family manager, they made \$30,000 for their first tour of South America and the Caribbean. They've already performed before 300,000 people at a Madison Square Garden concert with the Salsarengue band, at the Miss Latin America beauty pageant, and at Manhattan's Cocacabana, Roseland, and Fun House discos. They'll be touring South America again this summer, sponsored by Concourse Hotels International, and touring Paris, sponsored by the Latin American Music Industry.

Wilfredo "Freakazoid" Correa, the 15-year-old leader of the crew, formed the group last May with his school friends: 13-year old Jesus "Cujo" Justin, Juan "Kid Freeze" Rodriguez, Danny "Wave" Santiago and Terrence "Popping Freeze" Parker; 14-year olds Robby and Noel Arthertin, Bobby "Kid Freak" Ginnett; and 11-year old Anthony "Baby Freeze" Gonzales. They danced at school assemblies and at downtown Village spots to collect enough money to buy uniforms and music tapes for the B-box.

Before joining the group, Popping Freeze lived in Gardena, California, where he danced in a movie called *Beat This*, with Afrika Bambaataa. "I got \$175 for working four days," he says. "It's something I always dreamed about." Popping Freeze attends Bronx Jr. High School 143, and practices imitating Michael Jackson in the Castle Hill Community Center.

Baby Freeze has been dancing since he was four years old, and has been featured on TV's *That's Incredible*, *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, and ABC's *20/20*. "It was fantastic," says the fifth grader, who attends P.S. 95 in the Van Cortland Park area, of his TV spots. "I used to be a shy kid, but one days I said, 'I want to dance like all my friends,' They said I was pretty good, and started teaching me." Baby Freeze, along with Cujo, Popping Freeze and Kid Freeze, were taught by Mr. Freeze of the Rock Steady crew, who was seen dancing in *Flashdance*.

"I was surprised in five months to get up there so big," Freakazoid says of his crews' success. "For most groups, it usually takes two or three years. It's hard to keep it from going to my head. But it was good fortune and good connections." The fact that crews like Dance System #10 have gotten so far in so short a time infuriates Rock Steady. "I earned it. I worked hard for it," says Richie Colon, "Crazy Legs," one of the doubles for Jennifer Beals in *Flashdance*, of his celebrity. "For all these other groups to try to go for the top and think it's gonna happen that easy, well, it's not going to."

Crazy Legs, the 18-year-old president of Rock Steady, with six other members of the crew, have made four world tours so far, and are planning a fifth. They're a sensation in France, Italy, Japan and England, where they've performed at benefits, carnivals and in a show for Queen Elizabeth II. The crew has also toured around the United States, breaking in the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Telethon, and at the Kennedy Telethon last December in Brooklyn to raise money for underprivileged children in the South Bronx.

Stacks of fan mail pile up for Crazy legs, Lorenzo "Kuriaki" Soto, 19; Gabriel "Buck Four" Marcano, 19; Ken "Prince Ken Swift" Gabbert, 17; Jeffrey "Devious Doze" Greene, 19 (also a graffiti artist); and Daisy "Baby love" Castro, 16, who also sings. In addition to dancing, the crew recently released an album, a pop Hip Hop collection that includes their single, "Hey You, Rock Steady Crew." A month after the single was released in England, it went silver by selling 250,000 copies. The song also topped the charts in Holland, Belgium and Scandinavia.

The Rock Steady Crew became so well known after the release of *Flashdance*, which revived the form of breaking performed on the streets of the South Bronx, Harlem and in Brooklyn, that the producers of *Beat Street* heard about them and cast the group almost sight unseen. "They kept on hearing about us from a lot of other groups," says Crazy Legs, between scenes on the set of *Beat Street* in downtown Manhattan. "They found out we were number one." Kuriaki adds, "and then they got in tough with us."

Crazy Legs, Kuriaki, Ken Swift and Buck Four, along with other original members, Wayne "Frosty Freeze" Frost, Mr. Wiggles, Fabel, and Normski, were first spotted by promoter Henry Chauffant in 1981 at Lincoln Center, where they were performing outside with the Double Dutch girls. They were put on stage at the Roxy, a well-known Chelsea club frequented by many breakers now as a workshop and a stage to give kids exposure to talent scouts and the press. "We weren't paid nothing. It was just petty stuff, just to get our fame up," says Crazy Legs. They were chosen to dance in *Flashdance* after producers from Paramount Pictures saw them in "Wild Style." "They came up to us at the Roxy and asked us if we wanted to be in a movie," recalls Crazy Legs. The rest, as they say, is history.

Seven years ago, when he was 11 years old, Crazy Legs would watch his cousin, Lenny Len, dance with his friends. Those were the days of wild style breaking, a cruder, less choreographed version of the dance, involving mostly footwork and moves from martial arts and boxing mixed with a few "tricks," a few flips and spins. The legendary DJ Kool Herc is said to have introduced Hip Hop in the South Bronx in the summer of 1974, when he would plug his mobile turntable unit into the power lines at the base of street lamps in the parks. Emcees would take the microphones and invite teenagers to break dance (it was called floor rocking then) on the ground, artists would spray paint graffiti murals onto building walls, and thus Hip Hop was born.

When breaking began to fade away in the late '70's, Crazy Legs decided to try and preserve the dance form. He picked the best B-boys in the Bronx to be part of Rock Steady. In fact, Rock Steady is credited with introducing acrobatic, gymnastic head spins and flips to the street dance. They began by dancing in the streets, at parties, battling or competing against other crews. "We used to meet up with other groups and slowly but surely they'd start breaking 'cause they'd hear about us," Crazy Legs remembers. "They started stealing our moves, and we wasn't going for it. We said, 'We gotta start doing something BIG.'"

Today, Rock Steady is so big that they are attracting more attention than they ever dreamed. "The last time they were in Italy, at the Cathedral Square," says their manager, Rita Moreno, who is Ken Swift's aunt, "they were mobbed by thousands of girls." Their prestige has also enabled the crew to meet many celebrities, including dancer Gene Kelly, actor John Travolta, singer Harry Belafonte, ex-model Twiggy -- even the Queen of England. "I was so nervous, I didn't know what to say," recalls Crazy Legs, about meeting her highness. "She asked us where we were from," adds Kuriaki. "She said, 'did you boys come all the way from New York to do this?' We said, 'uh... yeah. Yeah.'" Then we shook her hand. She said she liked our dancing the most."

On a somewhat more local scale, the boys in Dance System #10 have also earned attention around the Bronx. Freakazoid says that at Bronx Jr. High 80, where he's in the ninth grade, kids crowd around him between classes. "I could just be moving my arm and they'll form a crowd," says the master electric boogier, adding that his teachers also congratulate him on his dancing, and that he is often asked to teach his moves to friends and schoolmates.

Rock Steady and Dance System #10 are aware of their influence. Crazy legs and Kuriaki say they don't use drugs or alcohol. "We're allergic to smoke, period," says Crazy Legs. "It's crazy. If I woulda been smoking, I wouldn't be able to do the things I'm doing now-breaking. It be so tired." The kids in Dance System #10 are not allowed to use drugs or alcohol either; they must bring in good report cards from school or they are fined. Several members were "dropped" after they started showing up late for practice, spending more time with girlfriends than with the group. "We gotta keep those kind away," Freakazoid explains. "We can't let anyone mess us up now."

Even some dance routines reflect their philosophy; Dance System does a routine for the Grandmaster Flash song "White Lines," in which one dancer deals drugs while the other buys. The buyer takes the drugs and starts pantomiming, shaking and vibrating. Then he dies. The message, as the rap goes, is:

"My white lines go a long way
Either up your nose or through your veins,
With nothin' to lose, except
Killin' your brain...."

Other raps are messages of survival and peace: go to school, get a job, don't waste your life. The raps also realize that the world is rough ("so get tough!") and to survive, education and a clear head are needed.

Dance System #10 manager, Freakazoid's godfather, is Joe Torres: a karate instructor who is on the city's Board of Education, and is a coordinator for the federal government's Youth Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Program. Torres says that he thinks the messages-- reinforced by raps and dance routines--are coming across: fewer kids are taking drugs and more are staying in school, he says. Kevin Daniels, the youth coordinator for Community Board 2 in the Bronx, agrees that the raps are sanctioning the messages.

By all accounts, break dancing has become a substitute for violence. "Instead of fighting, we break against each other," says Kuriaki. "If I was dancing and somebody were to say, 'you're whack, man. You don't even got the good moves,' I'd tell him instead, 'well, I'll battle you.' Right there, instead of me coming up and hitting him, I'd say, 'I'll battle you, see how good you are.' Whoever has the most moves wins." The consensus is that "battling" on the dance floor has replaced "battling" with knives, guns and fists. The lure of making money through dancing has also turned potential gang members away from crime and to dancing.

In dance "battles," showing off is sanctioned, and competition for respect encouraged. "If it wasn't for battling, breaking wouldn't be here right now," says Crazy Legs. "Battling's what made all these groups so good." In fact, the name break dancing is said to have originated in the early '70s, when rival gang members in the South Bronx decided to take a "break" from street fighting to compete against one another to find the best street dancers.

No one noticed the early floor rockers, the story goes, so they became bored with dancing. They either got married and went to work, or got into trouble and are now in jail, or were killed in gang wars. Some simply returned to the gangs. One of the biggest and best-known dance groups from the early days, the Floor Master Dancers, is now a notorious gang called Filthy Mad Dogs (they kept their initials). Before the Macateros were a gang, they were known as the Non Stop Dancers, and the Savage Demons were once the All Star Dancers.

Interest in the dance revived with publicity of the two-minute breaking scene performed by Rock Steady in *Flashdance*. Both groups' success can be attributed to strong family support and adult leadership. "They have very concerned parents who are very interested and

supportive of what they do," says Rock Steady's agent. "That might be one of the things that distinguishes them from other crews." Carmen Hernandez, Freakazoid's mother, says, "I think it's really great that they're doing this. I have high hopes from Freddy. I sincerely hope they do really well as long as they can." She adds that most of the parents of break dancers she knows feel their kids are headed "in the right direction, that the kids are doing what's beneficial."

Torres is very watchful of his group, using his connections, his "juice," to get them gigs and tours. "I gave them a structure to go by. Otherwise, they might have turned into a gang," he says. "I showed them how to make an organizational chart and what to do with their money." Most dance crews don't have any guidance or adult leaders, Torres points out. "The kids on the street corners just do it for the money."

The advice dancers giving aspiring breakers and boogiers is: practice, practice, practice. Roseanne Hoare, a choreographer at the Roxy who works with about 50 breakers, marvels at the discipline the best break dance crews have. Crazy Legs, who lives with his family in the Bronx, says he tried to practice at least two to three hours daily. Kuriaki and Buck Four, who have a duet-dance routine, sometimes jog through the Bronx Botanical Gardens before rehearsing their steps.

At home, breaking has become a way of life for Freakazoid, who lives in the Northeast section of the Bronx with his mother, stepfather, 12-year old sister, Jackie, and two year old sister, Amy. In the living room of their small apartment, Amy tries to copy her older brother's dancing, swinging her hips to the b-bop music blasting from the stereo, asking for help doing electric boogie "wave." Even their Chihuahua-Doberman, "Trukee," can do a backspin.

Freakazoid says he practices wherever he is. "I get up in the morning, I dance. While I'm getting dressed, I dance. I go to school, I dance. I come home from school, I dance. I practice dancing with the group, I eat, I dance," he says. "I mean, for me, it's 24 hours a day. If it's something you like, you shouldn't get tired of it."

It's such dedication that's reduced a lot of crime and gang activity in the Bronx, according to Arthur Crier, the Youth Coordinator at Community Board 6. Break dancing "has really solved a lot of problems," he says. "Because they rehearse everyday. Their whole hearts, their minds are all about break dancing, going to talent shows or dancing at the Roxy. It's making them feel important."

Still, the phenomenon has its drawbacks. "We try to keep their private lives more and more private," Rock Steady's manager says. Kuriaki and Freakazoid both say they've had a few run-ins with people who were jealous, who wanted to start fights. "There's always somebody envious," agrees Freakazoid. "Some people want to start fighting us, saying we're whack, we don't know how to dance." Kuriaki says he would like to move his mother, little sisters and brother to a "house in a peaceful place. I mean, where I live is peaceful, it's just that everybody knows where I live, and there's some jealous people out there."

Others are wondering what will happen when the phenomenon of breaking subsides. Some veteran professional dancers praise the dancing as a novelty and admire the skill involved. "I love break dancing," Gene Kelly commented last November on the set of *That's Dancin'*, another summer release that features breakers in its opening segment. The 71-year old dancer has himself performed many of the same acrobatic moves in his old movies that the breakers now use, although some of the younger breakers don't even know who he is. "The great thing about it is its improvisation," Kelly says. "It sprang up, literally, from the ground."

Not everyone though is entirely happy with the success break dancers have had. Alexis Smith, a 20-year-old dancer with the Alvin Ailey Theater, for instance, says she hopes break dancing is a fad that will soon pass. Breakers, she says, are taking jobs away from professional dancers. The trade journals Variety and Show Business, advertise for breakers to act in commercials, films, plays. "We can't wait until the whole thing passes over," Smith says. "I went to audition for a movie the other day, where there was a call for dancers. They (the

breakers) took some of the spots away from us. I don't really resent it, though, because I know it's just a passing fad."

Sally Sommer, a dance critic and historian, begs to differ. She says the dance form has a tradition 300 years old. Sommer writes that break-dancers are "living links in the ancient tradition whose roots run deep into Afro-American culture, whose values are like those of an older and vigorous African heritage." Sommer suggests that breaking comes from a martial arts form in Africa, in the area now called Angola. The dance was performed by warriors in the 1500's and 1600's, a way of showing solidarity, strength and skills in improvisation. In various other parts of the world, the form known as breaking here goes by other names. In Brazil, for example, there is capoeira. Even in the U.S., the form has surfaced under different names. "Those who say breaking is a passing form are wrong," Sommer says. "It may become popular in the public eye and then subside, but it ain't passing!"

Jazz historian Smith says that most dances use steps recycled from other times. "Every 10 years or so, the dances surface again," he says. Sommer adds that it is a "subliminal" tradition. "It gets recycled according to different needs. Each generation believes or must believe it is creating something new." The fact that the form is now being passed on from older dancers to younger ones is evidence that the tradition continues.

Whether the fresh energy and spunk of the street form of breaking will be lost when the breakers are taken off the streets to perform "legitimately" is a controversy in professional dance circles. "The minute there's a fad, the pros get ahold of it, adapt it, change, bend, twist and shape it to suit their own needs," says Smith of professional choreographers, although others say this depends on who is directing the dancing. The dance form is being shaped by the media, Sommer suggests, by emphasizing more of the acrobatic tricks and the electric boogie and less of the floor work and spins that the kids say is the heart of break dancing. "The media's going to chill the form," Sommer says. "It already has."

Jack Haley Jr., a producer for MGM, says that other Hollywood producers are watching carefully before introducing more breakdown films, in case it IS just a fad. Kevin Grubb, a writer for the theater/film section of *Dancemagazine*, adds that producers are afraid of the *Flashdance* clones. "They say the derivatives might plunder the subject to the point where it gets exhausted," he explains. "But as long as the movies have some degree of invention, they'll be popular."

Even if break dancing fades from the spotlight, the kids say they'll keep it up as long as they can. Some have dreams of stardom; others, like Crazy Legs, say they want to go into the business, "something that would put money in my pockets and I'll be happy with." Popping Freeze says he wants to be a football player for the Dallas Cowboys; others opt for computer careers. Many, like Freakazoid, are putting their energies into school, so they'll have something to fall back on in case their dancing careers don't work out. Freakazoid is already saving his money to go to college. Most of the dancers say they're dancing now for fun, for money, for respect, so that in the future, their children can say, "My daddy spins on his head."

"The Hip Hop scene is here to stay/
At least until it goes away/
So rock rock rock/
And hip hip hop/
And zigga-zigga scratch/
Ha ha!
Don't stop!"

-Mandalit del Barco 1983

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