

Urban dance studio pops with hip-hop

The Studio enjoys huge success teaching students to dance like Britney Spears, not Ginger Rogers.

By MEGAN SCOTT, Times Staff Writer
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CLEARWATER - Let's go, ladies! I'm looking for style. I'm looking for attitude. Step and back. Dip, bring it up.

Heel, heel. Take it around. Side, side, side and down.

Wearing a black Nike sports bra and yellow Old Navy pants, Lisa DeCamella shouts into the microphone. She dances with the group of about a dozen teenage girls, who are dressed in baggy pants, bra tops and sneakers.

Cross over one! Pop back two!

The girls follow her lead.

They pop their shoulders, kick their legs and roll their necks to the beat of the remixes booming from the sound system. The voices of Missy Elliott, Ludacris and Jennifer Lopez fill the dance studio as the girls study their reflections in the mirrors.

This isn't classical ballet. Not ballroom dancing, either.

This is the Studio.

There's a barre and wooden floors in the 1,750-square-foot studio on State Road 580, but most of the 230 students taking classes here are engaging in a funky, modern style of dance known as hip-hop.



[Times photos: Carrie Pratt]

From left, Kamren Brooks, 13, Audra Robinson, 16, and Annette Koulouvaris, 14, practice at the hip-hop II class at the Studio on Wednesday.



Paige Williams, 11, of Clearwater is a student in the hip-hop I class at the Studio. There are 12 types of dance classes offered at the Studio, and all are influenced by the hip-hop culture. It's difficult to peg down the definition of hip-hop, but as Damon Dash, chief executive officer of Roc-a-Fella Records, would say, "It's not a matter of where you're from. It's where you're at. It's a state of being."

Such dancing is part of a larger movement: the mainstreaming of hip-hop culture. While the trend encompasses everything from politics to fashion to the visual arts, it is music and dance leading the wave.

If you've seen the recent movie *Honey*, you know what we're talking about. The film features a sexy music video choreographer as its main character.

"There was one line in that movie that pretty much sums up what I do here," said DeCamella, a University of Florida graduate. "The ma says, 'Why don't you do ballet?' She says, 'Mom, hip-hop can take you where ballet can't.'

"You have opportunities in music videos. You have opportunities in Hollywood. You don't have to be in a structured setting."

DeCamella, 26, of Clearwater, never thought she would be so successful when she opened the Studio in October 2002. She was working in advertising when she realized she wanted to return to her first love full time: teaching dance to kids. She offers 12 different types of dance classes, including urban ballet. But they're all flavored in some way by hip-hop music. Most classes have waiting lists.

On this particular night, the class is hip-hop II.

The description reads: Take on the Hip-Hop dance culture with intermediate/advanced levels of choreography. Dip into the realm of freestyle and develop your own urban style.

The girls in her class can't explain what kind of dancing they're doing. There are no certain steps that make up hip-hop, no *Idiot's Guide to Hip-Hop Dancing*. They watch MTV, though, and know those are the moves they want to learn.

So what exactly is hip-hop?

It's not just music. It's not just language. It's not just fashion.

As Damon Dash, chief executive officer of Roc-a-Fella Records, would say, "It's not a matter of where you're from. It's where you're at. It's a state of being."

"It's kind of your own attitude," said Katlyn Shuart, 15, a student at Dunedin High School. "Even if it's choreographed, you have to put your own style to it and make it yours."

Hip-hop originated in the 1970s in the south Bronx section of New York City. It is the culture from which rap emerged. In its earliest days, it included graffiti art, break dancing, cutting and scratching records and emceeing (rapping).

Some of the more prominent acts in hip-hop's infancy included Doug E. Fresh, Grand Master Flash and Run DMC.

While hip-hop began as a means of social expression that appealed to black audiences who felt as though the message spoke to them, today the culture has become so mainstream, break dancers are used to promote household products in the mass media.

"The appeal of hip-hop in the last 20 years is that it's something young people can relate to because many of the songs and dances are an expression of what the hip-hop generation lives and goes through on a daily basis," said Darius Carter, a professional dancer in St. Petersburg who has choreographed music videos.

Andrew Ryan, who teaches a course in hip-hop at George Mason University, said the culture spoke the language of the disenfranchised, a group that did not draw a lot of attention on the evening news. It was their way of telling the world what was happening in their lives.

Much of rap's social value, however, has been lost as artists such as Lil' Kim, Luther Campbell and Khia use the medium as a vehicle to boast of their money, possessions and sexual prowess, Ryan said.

"It's definitely a negative for the culture," Ryan said. "It takes the uniqueness away from it. You had breakers in the early 1980s who would do routines about not doing drugs. That's unheard of today. You're not going to see that."

The girls in DeCamella's classes are decidedly not urban gangsters. Most are white. They're from middle class families. And they shell out \$50 a month for a weekly class in hip-hop dance.

It's a sign of the growing diversity of hip-hop, DeCamella said.

"I don't think that because I am not of a certain background, that I shouldn't dance a certain way," she said. "And I wouldn't tell anybody else, 'Say, listen, you're of this background, you really should do ballet.' If hip-hop is what they want to do, then just do it."

Anything goes in hip-hop.

DeCamella describes hip-hop as a free-flowing, rhythmic, urban-style street dance. She has her own names for certain steps, such as the hip-hop walk. The best hip-hop dancers use every part of their body that they can, she said.

Lauren Brooks, 17, a student at St. Petersburg College, has only taken two hip-hop dance classes, and already she's in love with it. She tried similar classes at other studios but found they were more like jazz dance. She wanted to dance like Britney Spears, not Bob Fosse, who did the original choreography for Chicago.

In DeCamella's class, you're allowed "to take it where you want it," said Sacha Cabral, 17, a student at Berkeley Prep. "We can all look very choreographed, but also we're able to twist the dance to our own personalized style."

DeCamella uses cleaned-up versions of the music, that deletes obscenities and references to violence, drugs and sex. And she doesn't just instruct her students on how to do the moves. She dances with them.

She says anyone can do hip-hop, even those who have no rhythm. She even has hip-hop classes for adults ages 18 and up. No previous dance training is required.

"I have a lot of people between 16 and 25 that have never taken a dance class up until now," she said. "I explain to them how to listen to the music, how to listen to certain beats and when to hit harder. You have to learn it from the beginning to get good."

And the girls are getting pretty good. Some recently performed at an Orlando Magics game. And after an hour of hip-hop, they're exhausted. They crowd around the fan and drink from bottles of water. Next week, they will start learning a new routine.

Let's go, ladies!

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