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**FROM MEDIA TO THE STREET AND VICE VERSA:  
HIP-HOP DANCE IN BELGRADE TODAY**

**Introduction**

Hip-hop culture, originating in the United States, is now spread worldwide. In this research I focus on the representation of its dance aspect in Serbia, on the example of Belgrade. The paper is based on my own field research that I conducted in Belgrade during 2008 and 2009. Hip-hop dancers, dance instructors and dance judges were included in interviews. I would like to give special thanks to the Belgrade DJ (disc jockey) Darko Coldie Jovanović, break dance instructor Vojkan Todorović, b-girl<sup>1</sup> Marija Sindelić, dance judge Milenko Vujić, for cooperation and providing necessary information for writing this paper.

**Some general information about hip-hop**

Hip-hop is a cultural movement incorporating breakdancing (b-boying),<sup>2</sup> music, graffiti writing, DJing and MCing.<sup>3</sup> Other elements include beatboxing, hip-hop fashion, and slang. It originated in the African American, and Puerto Rican communities of New York City (with the South Bronx as the center) in the early 1970s [Du Noyer 2003:334].<sup>4</sup> Afrika Bambaataa is the legendary grand master DJ whom history has marked as the man most responsible for the successful growth of break dancing [ukhh.com 2000: online]. Hip-hop dance includes a wide range of styles notably breaking, locking and popping.

The purest hip-hop dance style, breaking, began in the early 1970s as elaborations on how James Brown danced on TV. In 1969, he was getting down with his big hit "Get on the good foot". People mimicked these moves in their living rooms, in hallways, and at the parties. The "good foot" became the new dance style and soon was renamed the "B-Boy" [Chang 2008: online].<sup>5</sup> The actual break dancing has evolved considerably from the old-style due to the addition of new ideas and techniques. It involves moving the feet sideways and onto the toes, spinning on the knees, head, elbows, hands, and mocking fighting moves (that is, kung fu). There are hundreds of moves but 10 of the more frequently used are listed below: 1. Headspin 2. 1990s 3. Handglides 4. Backwallovers 5. Flare 6. Crab 7. Six step 8. Windmills 9. Backspins 10. Freeze.<sup>6</sup>

Locking (originally Campbellocking) is a style based on the concept of *locking* movements, which basically means freezing from a fast movement and "locking" in a certain position, holding that position for a short while and then continuing in the same speed as before. It relies on fast and distinct arm and hand movements combined with more relaxed hips and legs. The movements are generally large and exaggerated, and often very rhythmic and tightly synced with the music. A dancer who performs locking is called a *locker*. Lockers commonly use a distinctive dress style, such as colorful clothing with stripes and suspenders.<sup>7</sup>

Popping is based on the technique of quickly contracting and relaxing muscles to cause a jerk in the dancer's body, referred to as a *pop*, *tick* or a *hit*. This is done continuously to the rhythm of a song in combination with various movements and poses. *Popping* is also used as an umbrella term to refer to a group of closely related illusionary dance styles and techniques that are often integrated with popping to create a more varied performance, but it is distinct from break-dancing, with which popping is often confused. A popping dancer is commonly referred to as a *popper*.<sup>8</sup>

What separates hip-hop dance from other forms of dance is that it is often *freestyle* (improvisational) in nature and hip-hop dancers frequently engage in *battles*—formal or informal freestyle dance competitions. Informal freestyle sessions and battles are usually performed in a

*cipher*, a circular dance space that forms naturally once the dancing begins. These three elements—freestyling, battles, and ciphers—are key components of hip-hop dance. Parallel with the evolution of hip-hop music, hip-hop dancing evolved from breaking and the *funk styles* into different forms: moves such as the *running man* and the *cabbage patch* hit the mainstream and became fad dances [Chang 2005:113–116].

The dance industry in particular responded with studio/commercial hip-hop, sometimes called *new style* or *L.A. style*, and *jazz funk*. These styles were developed by technically trained dancers who wanted to create choreography for hip-hop music based on the hip-hop dances they saw being performed on the street. Because of this development, hip-hop dance is now practiced throughout the world, as well as, in Serbia, both at studios and outdoors. To some hip-hop dance may only be a form of entertainment or a hobby. To the others it has become a lifestyle: a way to be active in physical fitness or competitive dance and a way to make a living by dancing professionally [Wisner 2006:74–75].

There are series of sub-styles within the new style hip-hop: krumping, harlem shake, chicken noodle soup, snap dance, c-walk, jiggling, tone wop, freaking and hyphy. The new style hip-hop is characterized by a standing straight dancing, whereas breakdance is oriented towards dancing on the floor.<sup>9</sup>

Krumping originated in Los Angeles, California during the 1990s. It is a type of street dance that is characterized by free, expressive, exaggerated, and highly energetic movement involving the arms, head, legs, chest, and feet [Paggett 2004: online]. The root word *krump* is a acronym for *Kingdom Radically Uplifted Mighty Praise* [Rap Basement 2009: online].

From the point of view of someone deeply immersed in hip-hop culture, anything that looks like hip-hop dance that did not come from the streets is not a true hip-hop dance form. Many people echo this sentiment, as stage performance can restrict the free flowing process of improvisation that defined hip-hop dance early in its development.

This work is focusing on the break-dance hip-hop form since this is the style which can be seen in the streets of Belgrade where it has arrived through media, and where it has returned and appeared in the theatre, too.

Since first emerging in the Bronx, the lifestyle of hip-hop culture has spread around the world [Rosen 2006:32]. The music video for *Planet Rock* showcased the subculture of hip-hop musicians, graffiti artists, and b-boys/b-girls. Many hip-hop-related films were released between 1982 and 1985, among them *Wild Style*, *Beat Street*, *Krush Groove*, *Breakin'*, and the documentary *Style Wars*. These films expanded the appeal of hip-hop beyond the boundaries of New York. By 1985 youth worldwide were embracing the hip-hop culture.

Frequently a musical response to political and/or social injustices, the face of hip-hop varies greatly from nation to nation. Internationally, hip-hop dance has had a particularly strong influence in France and South Korea. Television, film, music videos, international performances, dance classes offered abroad, and the internet have contributed to the spread of hip-hop dance across the world. Although these styles first appeared on their own, independent of each other, they are all now accepted within the bigger hip-hop dance schema [Chang 2008: online].

### **Hip-hop dance in Belgrade**

Serbian hip-hop first started in the early 1980s, with the birth of b-boy crews. A question is raised, how this genre of contemporary popular music/dance originated from the West was so well received in a socialist country in the Balkans. The reason for that was that SFR Yugoslavia wasn't a part of the Eastern block. It was a non-aligned country opened to the West and therefore receiving influences of western culture. For example, that it was the only socialist country participating at the Eurovision Song Contest. It joined Eurovision in 1961, even before some Western and NATO

nations, such as Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Turkey, which joined in 1964, 1965, 1974 and 1975 respectively [Eurovision 2004–2010: online].

With the film *Beat Street* in 1984 in the SFR of Yugoslavia mass interest in those great movements appears and more and more people began to practice a modern dance. In the 1980s break dance was played in the whole city. Borča, for example, had a few shelters, since it was rarely danced in the open. It was danced a lot in Novi Beograd, as well. One break dance group from Karaburma played from Kalemegdan to Slavija (and back). They played the music from a tape recorder and danced for the tips. At that time they were not able to earn enough money because they were spending everything on batteries for the tape recorder, which did not last long [Jovanović 2009: interview].

As stated earlier, a dance crew is a group of street dancers who get together and create dance routines. Forming and participating in a dance crew is how you practiced, improved, made friends and built relationships. In the beginning, crews were neighborhood-based and would engage in battles in their respective cities. Today, crews can battle in organized competitions with other crews from around the country and around the world. Crews still form based on friendships and neighbourhoods. They also form for a variety of other reasons such as theme, gender, ethnicity and dance style. Crews are not exclusive. It is common for dancers to be involved in more than one crew, especially if one particular group is style specific (popping-only for example) and a dancer wants to stay well-rounded [Wikipedia 2010c: online].

Belgrade DJ Darko Coldie Jovanović became hip-hoper at the age of eight. He actively went through b-boying, graffiti, DJing and MCing. In the second grade of primary school (1983) was reprimanded because of the break dance when he danced with a friend in the school corridor. The school management reacted in this way fearing that the children might hurt themselves. Three years later he organized a break dance group named *LB*, which was one of the founders of hip-hop culture in Borča, Belgrade suburbia in which he lived. He drew on the school walls, so that school authorities did not know what to do with him and eventually they bought him paint. His parents looked at it positively, because they themselves listened to similar music and had a lot of records.

It needs to be stressed that although there is a hip-hop musical scene in Serbia, Serbian dancers usually dance accompanied by foreign hip-hop music. Dancers' reasons for this are mainly of aesthetic nature—they like foreign music better. Apart from this, the lyrics of these groups are mainly sociopolitical critique of contemporary society.

The first Serbian hip-hop record release was the *Degout EP* by *The Master Scratch Band*, which was released by Jugoton in 1984. But the hip-hop scene in Serbia was not open and popularized until the demo band of teenagers *Budweiser* has arrived in 1987 and became extremely popular. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, bands such as *Green Kool Posse*, *Who Is The Best* and *Robin Hood* came into being all together starting the first Hip-hop scene in Serbia and Ex Yugoslavia [Academic dictionaries 2010a: online]. The album *Do you have the right?* by the *Gru* band can be considered as the beginning of the first wave of Serbian Hip-hop. This wave had its peak in 1997/98 when new groups appeared, such as: *Voodoo Popeye*, *Ding Dong*, *Full Moon*, *Straight Jackin*, *Sunshine*, *Bad Copy*, *Belgrade Ghetto*, *CYA*, *187* [Academic dictionaries 2010b: online]. In 2002 the *Bassivity* label was found, which made Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian hip-hop widely available in record stores. Their first release, V.I.P. - *Ekipa Stigla*, was one of the two albums which marked the beginning of the second wave of Serbian hip-hop. The other was *BSSST...Tišinčina* by the Belgrade group *Beogradski sindikat*. The same group released and then the thread of albums which greatly aided the popularisation of hip-hop in Serbia. In 2003 Marčelo's debut album *De Facto*, also released on the *Bassivity* label, came out to both public and critical acclaim, and he was branded as the voice of a new generation [Bebo 2010: online].

As for dance, when the crisis began in the 1990s break dance culture started to fade away. There was a gap in the generations. When the young people in 1998 started to dance again, they

had to start from scratch. The dance group called *Break zone group* was formed in 1999. This crew existed until 2004 when some members, including present hip-hop instructor Vojkan Todorović separated and formed another group *Recognize Crew* that is active today. They were in high school then (1999) and they were between fifteen and seventeen years old. They learned break dance by watching music videos and then tried to imitate steps, that is, to perform the same. Boys practiced in the school hall during breaks. They also had rehearsals outside the school. Quiet places with the floor where they were able to whirl were suitable for practicing. Among other things, economic factors influenced how to deal with the break dance. Trainings for other types of dances included monthly membership fees. In case of break dance, dancers practiced irrespective of the hall: *We were like tramps. Where we found the free place, we whirled. For example, during one period we practiced on the shopping centre terrace, because floor was covered with very good ceramic tiles.* The most important thing to them was the company. Except for the permanent members of the group, about ten of them, there were temporary ones that stayed for two to three months. Apart from the high school students, children from primary schools also came [Blagojević 2009:21].

In the course of research I came to the data that the dominant position of the break dance is that it is a primarily male game, which expresses manhood. This was certainly contributed by showing this dance in the media where male dancers, in Belgrade slang known as "*alpha males*", appeared as main actors. Analysis of a life story narrative of a Belgrade break dance dancer showed that in the minds of people in Serbia there is a split of, conditionally speaking, *men's* and *women's* dances. However, ever since this dance appeared in Belgrade there were girls that dealt with it, and deal with it today. In one of my previous papers I researched which factors influence a girl to start dancing, so to say, a *male game*. On the example of a Belgrade break dancer Marija Sindelić I tried to answer the questions how men view the appearance of such girls in *their* world, what are the reactions and acceptance in a wider community [Blagojević 2009:19–24]. Marija tried to overcome the gender prejudices and push the limits by dancing break dance. She had a great support from her male colleagues. Her female friends respected her, although she was different from them. The audience had a very positive attitude and gave her more credits than to male dancers. Therefore, this girl's crossing in the world of *men's* dance was well accepted socially. Expression of *manhood*, agility and skill is preferable.

In addition to learning on the street, hip-hop dance was taught in dance schools in Belgrade. So-called old and new hip-hop school are represented. In dance schools girls generally learn the *new school* of hip-hop.

Belgrade crews are not nationally selective. For example, there were several Roms during various periods of time in the *Recognize Crew* group. Speaking from his own experience the instructor Vojkan Todorović says that there weren't many more of them because they have a different conceptual approach to dance as well as a motive for beginning to deal with the dance. Belgrade Romani b-boys mostly dance at the age from 17 to 20. Older dancers are rare to find. Their motive for beginning to deal with this dance is to be 'like Michael Jackson' and to attract the opposite sex in this way. When they cross a certain age limit they stop dancing break since dance is never really their goal. The Society of Roms in Belgrade gives support to a crew made of Roms but they do not go to competitions yet. It is worth mentioning that there are three Romani b-boys from Novi Sad (Ćamil, Amuk, Gufi) who dance actively. Todorović thinks that they are excellent.

There are several international hip-hop dance competitions. Most of these competitions have regional tournaments limited to a specific country or continent. These tournaments not only offer crews or soloists a regional title but also serve as qualifying rounds for the final international championship.

In Belgrade there are two types of competitions: those organized in sports halls and theaters, on the stage, as a show for the public; second type are small local competitions bearing more intimate character held in parks or shelters where only dancers appear. According to the testimony

of street dancers, with somewhat improved economic situation they are better accepted in the street, too. As an example, they state a case from 2004 when a hip-hop dance group from France had a concert at the *Dom sindikata* (House of Unions). Serbian b-boys had no money for entry and they wanted to challenge the French team. They performed a street show at the Republic Square where 11 of them earned 1700 dinars, which wasn't enough for 5 of them to enter the show. But they managed to battle with the French crew. Then, when they danced in 2007 in the city downtown they had average acceptance. The following year the audience was delighted. In 2008, one of the dancers said, "It was felt that the town missed us. Although, you know, people look strange at all that is not football, politics, and when you are not the same as the others."

Hip-hop dancers are often used in commercials and video clips of various musical genres. Participants of hip-hop culture in Belgrade believe that media exploited culture and they have nothing of it: "The status of a deejay in Belgrade is a farce. Every boss wants a deejay to bring everything with him, to bring people, to do his job and not to get paid. It is the same with the b-boying, they dance a new move for 20 euros - exploitation. The problem is that dancers themselves are not united to set prices in the market, rather it is often important for them only to appear in the media" [Jovanović 2009: interview].

In 2004/2005 the artistic dance project was realized in collaboration between the Balkans and Nordic Region: *Hard Core Workshop Exchange*. The participants were dancers from Croatia, Macedonia, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Serbia. The project was conceived as an international exchange of dancers in which they realized individual and collective subprojects. The idea of the project was to strengthen relations between artists from the two regions and to develop cross-border artistic collaboration within the Balkan and Nordic countries. The initiative of HWE was split into two phases, the first phase of which - in November 2004 - took place in Belgrade, Zagreb and Skopje, while the second phase - in November 2005 - took place in Bergen, Malmö and Helsinki. Artists from all six collaborating countries were participating in both phases. Serbs were the only b-boys, all others were engaged in modern dance. Group from Serbia headed by Vojkan Todorović made a cooperation with a group from Finland. Dance performances were derived in Belgrade and Helsinki. According to the Vojkan's experience the audience in Belgrade was a little confused by the concept of the dance performance [Performing Art Center Multimedia 2005: online].

Besides commercial use of hip-hop dancers in Belgrade some try to present this dance artistically. With this in mind a theater play was performed in The Belgrade Drama Theater in 2009, *Oh, no!* The choreography and concept of the play signed by Dalija Aćin, dramaturgy by Saša Božić. The performance was given by two b-boys from *Recognize Crew*, Darko Bursać (1985) and Luka Lukić (1986). They have been professional break dancers for many years. Since 2008 they have been running a break dance school in Belgrade. Music was composed by Goran Simonoski and Ivan Antić. The play was made in coproduction with the Station Service for Contemporary Dance and Belgrade Drama Theatre.

According to Sasa Božić's words, by the solemn use of break dance movements (b-boying) *Oh, no!* marks Dalija Aćin's choreographic step out into the territory of a different dance language. In the semantic field, Aćin investigates themes such as masculinity, virtuosity and seduction. Starting from the search for the hidden in a male body, the special attention was given to the exploration of the places of fragility and calmness, the places of the un-shown. *Oh no!* does not run away from the insisting on seduction and skill, while exposing the hidden and the unpredictable in the body. In that way it challenges the wish of the audience who expect to be charmed by the deft bodies of the performers, forced to internalize those same movements. This approach is what takes the performance further into the reassessment of the politics of virtuosity. The author asks: can we replace the concept of desire by the concept of surprise?

The theme of hip-hop culture in broader sense is the backbone of the documentary ethnological film *Ranpresent*, directed by Ivana Todorović. Recorded in 2009, the film was about nineteen-year-old hip-hopper Bojan, also involved in graffiti painting. He lost his father in the war in Croatia, and after his mother's death he lived in a children's shelter until the age of eighteen. Since then, he has been living on streets as homeless and sleeping in wagons.

### Conclusion

Originated on a remote North American continent, hip-hop in Serbia encountered fertile soil. Young people full of enthusiasm copied movements of dancers shown by mass media. For Belgrade teenagers this dance was a good way to express energy and to get together. In addition, examinees say it is a way to creatively express themselves and to show they are different. Indeed, although hip-hop is being shown in media, this style is not common in Belgrade. Hip-hop dancers are rather exploited in media, without being paid. In that sense, it is difficult to predict the future of this dance in Serbia.

The older hip-hop style, break dance, is generally considered a men's dance in Serbia and in that manner is interpreted in media and artistic theaters. Analysis of story narratives of Belgrade break dance dancers showed that dancers themselves wish to express their masculinity and to demonstrate they are *alpha-males*. However, it sometimes happens that a girl is dancing and then she is well received by colleagues. So, girl's crossing in the world of *men's* dance is well accepted socially. Expression of *manhood*, agility and skill is preferable.

So, although b-boys express masculinity by this dance, they are not sexually selective. Girls are well accepted if they deal with this dance style. However, most girls decide to deal with the new style of hip-hop.

The question is what is the reaction of environment in the opposite case: when the public dance shows *femininity* by members of the *stronger* sex. Here I would like to make a parallel with the research that I conducted in 2008 related to the social acceptance of oriental dance in Belgrade (see Blagojević 2008). In Serbia usually female persons are occupied by the oriental dance. It is a taboo in Serbia for a man to dance feminine movements. People usually think that such people are homosexuals, which has resulted in negative social acceptance.

On the other hand, in theater performance mentioned earlier it is break dance movements that had been used to demonstrate exploration of male body and possibilities for expression of masculinity, skill and seduction through the movement.

Information I collected during my research shows that hip-hop dancers in Belgrade are open to all kinds of dances. Most of them can dance the most common form of Serbian folk dance *kolo*. For them hip-hop is a form of art which expresses them best, but at the same time they do not despise other forms of dances. The origin of the dance is not important to them and they do not think of hip-hop as being solely American. They also do not care about the current political streams. They only aspire to express themselves freely through movement and it does not matter if it is in the street, theatre or in the media.



B-boys: Vojkan Todorović and Luka Lukić  
Photograph by Josip Vrandečić in Beograd, 2009.

#### Endnotes

1. B-girl refers to a female who practices breaking, and the term breaker is gender neutral.
2. B-boy (or break-boy) is a male dancer who practices breaking or [b-boying](#), the acrobatic hip-hop dance style, commonly known as "breakdancing."
3. DJing refers to being a disc jockey, a person who selects and plays recorded music for an audience. MCing (emceeing), also known as rapping, refers to speaking or chanting rhymed lyrics.
4. For more background and history, see also Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1993); Tricia Rose (1994); A. Shahid Stover (2009); Jeff Chang, DJ Kool Herc (2005); Melissa Castillo-Garstow (2005).
5. See also Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon (1999).
6. Also see [ukhh.com](#) 2000 for "How to break".
7. See "locking" defined in Wikipedia 2010a.
8. See Wikipedia 2010b for description of popping.
9. See Wikipedia 2010c for description of hip-hop dancing.

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