

## Spontaneous Lux: Freestyling in Hip Hop Dance and Music

MARY FOGARTY

Department of Dance | School of Arts, Media, Performance and Design, York  
University | Canada\*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay and the accompanying video documentary explore "freestyling" (improvising) in hip hop culture, focusing in particular on a Canadian b-boy (breaking) crew called the Albino Zebrabs, which distinguishes itself through improvisational tendencies and choices. An ethnographic analysis of their approach to b-boying reveals that the values and processes behind freestyling involve more work and intention than most outsiders imagine.

Through a comparison of West Coast freestyling (a form of rap) and the breaking (dance) styles that developed near Toronto, Canada, this video documentary reveals that these particular local traditions of freestyling, as improvisation, in rap and dance grew, in part, out of participants' imagining of what was happening in other locales. Through the assumptions that new participants made that what they were seeing and hearing were improvised, improvisative practices emerged that borrowed not only from jazz traditions and influences, but also BMXing and other physical lifestyle cultures. This process, arguably, was quite different from the practices that came before and demonstrates a spectrum of improvisational practices that requires further investigation within the burgeoning field of improvisation studies.

The film was shot in March 2012 in Toronto, Canada and features members of the Albino Zebra crew including Lance "Leftelep" Johnson, Jesse "Jazzy Jester" Catibog, and Damian Matthew, as well as Riddlore, a rapper who now resides in Austin, Texas.

\*ACE 319, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a number of documentaries and books have examined the West Coast freestyle rap scene in the 1990s, a scene that featured predominantly African American participants living in South Central Los Angeles. The 2008 documentary *This is the Life: How the West Was One* (DuVernay), chronicles the emergence of a rap scene centered on the live freestyle performances at the Good Life café, featuring artists such as Freestyle Fellowship and Medusa. Likewise, in *The Real Hip Hop: Battling for Knowledge, Power, and Respect in the LA Underground* (2009), author Marcyliena Morgan examines the freestyle scene that developed in Los Angeles in opposition to West Coast gangster rap that was hitting mainstream audiences around the same time. Through incisive ethnographic research, she documents the freestyle scene from within the participants' own aesthetic and knowledge frameworks. The West Coast underground freestyle scene fulfilled the community's needs for conscious rap, and provided a powerful model of spontaneous lyricism and musical production that circulated across the globe. These examples demonstrate the power of two forms of knowledge production—documentary filmmaking and ethnographic research—to examine complex cultural practices, the depth and subtlety of which often escape the discourses of more normative forms of academic scholarship. But they do so while remaining true to the fundamental tenets of scholarly research: using evidence to create and disseminate knowledge and understanding.

In 2006, Kyra Gaunt called for more academic studies that consider not only African American musical practices that include improvisation, but also how these practices have been taken up by diverse cultural communities, including white audiences. In response to Gaunt's critique, and following the trenchant examples set by *This is the Life* and *The Real Hip Hop*, I have used a video documentary format to provide an ethnographic case study that examines how African American musical practices, that developed in Los Angeles in the early 1990s, have inspired predominantly white and Filipino dance participants from Southern Ontario. Titled *Spontaneous Lux: Freestyling in Dance and Music*, the documentary explores "freestyling" (improvising) in hip hop culture. It was shot in March 2012 in Toronto, Canada, and features the Albino Zebra crew. Although this crew was formed in London, Ontario in the late 1990s, many of the crew members now live in Toronto, Canada. The b-boys featured are Damian "Demon" Matthew, Lance "LefteLep" Johnson and Jesse "Jazzy Jester" Catibog. The two latter crew members lived with me, the producer and director of the film, during the period in which the film was made. The other featured b-boy, Damian, lived just a few blocks from our place at the time. The film also features Mindbender (a Toronto-based rapper), American rapper Riddlore, other members of the Albino Zebra crew, and some of the people with whom they dance regularly. The camera work and post-production were done by Skot Deeming, a graduate student in York University's Communications and Culture program, who also grew up in London, Ontario.

## "YOU ARE WHAT YOU DECIDE TO BE...SUPPOSEDLY"<sup>1</sup>

My introduction to the Albino Zebra crew came when I attended the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario in the late 1990s and early 2000s<sup>2</sup>. Coming from a small city in Northern Ontario, and having grown up in Brandon, Manitoba, I felt alienated in London at first, and certainly felt that my subcultural interests were at odds with university life in a city known for attracting rich kids. Although it was a mystery to me how people my age could afford the latest fashions or even afford to drink alcohol while making ends meet, I did find a fun, free Wednesday night of dancing at a club night called 'Mo Gravy,' at a venue named Call the Office in the downtown core. A female DJ, Andrea "AJ" Fashbaugh, originally from California, would spin funk music mainly from the era between 1974 and 1978. It was here, among other local venues, that I witnessed live breaking, and I decided that it was a dance practice I would like to investigate further as a practitioner. I was moved by both the abilities of the local b-boys I saw and by my desire to show them up.

A few years later, I started teaching classes with the Albino Zebrabs<sup>3</sup>, and took trips to other cities to battle and dance with them as friends<sup>4</sup>. I felt a sense of belonging and purpose, and found a physical activity that kept me motivated to stay in relatively good shape, and to express my individuality to music I loved. Now, looking back, I re-examine my memories, seeing insights that I might not have been able to see at the time. On trips to Toronto, questions about my position as a white woman became more pronounced at club venues, where I would be in an overwhelmingly minoritized position: I was usually one of four or five women, and similarly few white participants. Like many practitioners, I fought to be seen as a legitimate performer through codes of conduct, dress, attitude and ability. In many ways, my experience was akin to that of the ethnographer trying to fit in to a cultural practice at the beginning of their study. It would be a couple of years before my academic research would begin, but I had already begun to ask questions as an ethnographer might, long before any formal commitment as a scholar.

At the time, most of the crew members had already been dancing about seven years having started in high school. For b-Boys, freestyling was valued over power moves, which meant that footwork dominated and the real-time interaction between dance and music was the main focus. The music we listened to at practice sessions, and in the hip hop events organized locally, was predominantly West Coast freestyle rap. This was juxtaposed with the funk music we heard every Wednesday night, which gave us a foundation in funk and a space to dance publicly. Fashion was a key component in signifying our identities as b-boys and b-girls, and for a time we got retro nostalgic, and rocked graffiti-painted jean jackets and belt buckles with our nicknames, with jeans as a throwback to 1980s fashions. From those beginnings came the creative practice that is represented in *Spontaneous Lux*, a documentary about a group of dancers who are now in their thirties.

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<sup>1</sup> A lyric from Aceyalone's song, "As Beautiful as You Are" from the album, *Hip Hop and the World We Live In* (2002).

<sup>2</sup> At the time I met Lance Johnson who is one of the featured artist, he was part of a crew with a different name, and most of those members would go on to form the Albino Zebra crew later on.

<sup>3</sup> I taught these classes with Lance Johnson and another crew member, Don Geraghty. Damian, one of the featured artists was originally a student of the class.

<sup>4</sup>Years later, I would date one of the crew members for a couple of years.

## HIP HOP AND THE WORLD WE LIVE IN<sup>5</sup>

The video explores two key questions about the relationship between music and dance, and the role(s) of freestyling therein: what does music afford dance collectives, and what processes or practices prepare a collective of dancers for a freestyled “performance”? The Albino Zebra crew was exposed to the predominantly African American West Coast underground rap scene through a local record shop, Soul Choice, owned and operated by Andrea "AJ" Fashbaugh, the same DJ from the funk night that we frequented. Through this exposure to new influences, the dancers found music that inspired their movement vocabulary and style of improvisation--what they and other hip hop practitioners call freestyling. In the video, the dancers discuss how their crew began to develop a style of breaking that valued freestyling over planned combinations of movements, or 'sets.'

What struck me initially about their emphasis on freestyling was how it drew attention to a little known insight about breaking culture, namely the extent to which breaking performances are usually planned in advance, down to the combination and order of movements. As I continued with my research into breaking in other areas, I attempted to locate the traces of advanced b-boy choreography through interviews with dancers, and through an examination of their "black books", notebooks in which many dancers document their sets so they can recall them at a later date. I also examined the typed notes and video recordings of top performing b-boys and b-girls, who have meticulously documented their sets for the purposes of memory and strategy in dance battles.

Unlike most b-boy/b-girl crews, the Albino Zebras value the art of doing something they have never done before in performance, embracing the messiness that sometimes ensues with this level of risk in experimentation. Having a group of dancers that shared this mentality created its own set of aesthetics and values that came to be quite prominent within the hip hop scene when they lived in a relatively small city (London, Ontario). There, battles were rather infrequent, due to the small number of b-boys. If anything, the "battles" were metaphoric, making room in a club space rather than battling any particular dancer. In that context, the dancers were primarily interested in the sheer pleasure that they experienced when b-boying—that and impressing the fellow dancers in their crew. They felt that the best way to do this was to come up with new material all of the time through the process of freestyling. Although they would occasionally make trips to surrounding cities for battles, most of their practice was done in the context of a cypher--a mutually supportive circle of dancers--in which they would take turns freestyling. The aesthetics and values that they developed within this context were put to the test when the crew members moved to the much larger city of Toronto, where b-boy/b-girl battles tend to be won by those who have a careful plan of attack, including set moves and combinations.

For this hip hop crew, some of the major influences on their stylistic development were musical, and these musical values informed their approach to freestyle dance. In Spontaneous Lux, b-boys Damian Matthew and Jesse "Jazzy Jester" Catibog discuss the influence of jazz education and jazz artists on their understanding of improvised dance movement. Damian was unique in that he attended the University of Toronto

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<sup>5</sup> This is the title of an album by Aceyalone, one of the West Coast freestyle MCs valorized by the Albino Zebra crew.

for jazz, and also played the bass in a local band called Re.Verse. He has since gone on to produce and compose electronic and acoustic music as a solo artist<sup>6</sup>. For him, breaking is a hobby, done on the side of his musical career. In jazz, a premium is placed on musical improvisation, and this approach was a source of inspiration to the dancers who likewise value freestyling over planned combinations.

Similarly, Lance "LefteLep" Johnson reflects on the musical recordings he heard of freestyle rappers from Los Angeles, and how these recordings inspired his approach to dance. In the course of the video, Riddlore, one of the African American rappers who influenced Lance and his crew, visits Toronto and enters into a discussion with the b-boys about freestyling in rap, drawing comparisons between dance and music. Riddlore reveals that the origins of "freestyle" rap were based on a misconception. He suggests that West Coast rappers assumed that New York rappers were always improvising, which was not the case. Due, at least in part, to this misunderstanding, a new subgenre of freestyling emerged within hip hop culture on the West Coast. Similarly, the Albino Zebra crew initially thought that the dancers in hip hop crews such as Bag of Trix, from Toronto, were always improvising; out of this misconception, they began to develop their own version of freestyle breaking in London, Ontario. This misconception was based on a couple of factors. First, when Bag of Trix visited London for performances at hip hop events, the b-boys would dance all night. The arsenal of movements they had at their disposal was sufficiently vast that the local b-boys concluded that the big city b-boys were freestyling. Had they witnessed their dancing on a more regular basis, they would have noticed more patterns and similarities between their sets. Both misunderstandings—that of the pioneers of West Coast freestyle, and that of the Albino Zebra crew, demonstrate how misconceptions can provide the foundation for new developments.

*Spontaneous Lux* challenges the assumption that all hip hop dance is spontaneous and improvised by foregrounding a b-boy crew that distinguishes itself through improvisational tendencies and choices. Similarly, the values and processes behind freestyling involve more work and intention than is usually imagined by outsiders to this dance practice. The members of the Albino Zebra crew are concerned with the politics of collective creativity and collaboration, and in balancing the foundations of the dance form with individual expression, musical tastes, and the energy of the cypher.

In addition, the documentary shows the range of responses to the question: "can freestyling be taught?" That range reveals the tensions within hip hop between individual talents and impulses, peer to peer friendships (contested and collective agreements), and, finally, the encounter with the formal dance studio. Jazzy Jester, who teaches in a dance studio setting, describes his navigation of the "trained" bodies of his students, and his encouragement of students to attempt moving without "dancing." He asks them to imagine how those who have not been dancing for their entire lives might experience movement. This is likewise a concept foreign to all of the b-boys and rappers featured in this documentary, who--from a young age--have developed the art and craft of "freestyling" to a high skill level.

<sup>6</sup> soundcloud.com/d-matthew [Accessed July 21, 2015]

## DANCING ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnographic research and participant observation were a central part of the methodology that led to the creation of *Spontaneous Lux*. In 2011, I moved back to Toronto after years of moving countries for my PhD (Scotland, and a short stint in Germany) and for work (England). Before I returned to Toronto, I had sent a message to old friends indicating that I was looking for a place to live. Luckily, one of the b-boys that I had known from my time living in London, Ontario—Lance "Leftelep" Johnson—responded, letting me know that a room would be coming available in the apartment that he shared with fellow b-boy Jesse "Jazzy Jester" Catibog. The price of the room was right for a b-girl academic recovering from years of student loans who had ambitions to finally pay off the debt of student life in full. Coincidentally, Lance and Jesse were two of my favorite b-boys that had inspired me years earlier. Upon moving in, we removed the furniture from the living room to create a practice space that was utilized for dance most nights<sup>7</sup>.

Dance ethnography has become an amorphous category. Students are quick to explain they are doing dance ethnography if they interview a few practitioners, or attend some events. Academics in popular dance studies tend to do short stints (often less than a year) in a location, attending dance events and doing some interviews, and writing about the dance that takes place there as an 'ethnography.' Since I had been trained by a cultural sociologist<sup>8</sup>, I had a sense that ethnography was more about observing everyday conversations, living with people, eating with them, practicing with them, for more than a year. To this, there was now the added dimension of living with people I had known for over fifteen years—people who had informed and shaped my understanding and inspiration of what the dance could be.

My new living arrangements were at once beneficial and challenging. The participants not only knew me, they had known me before I became an academic. So in some ways, it was a bit like when you see old friends that you haven't seen since high school, and you fall into old ways of being yourself. I had witnessed this phenomenon previously: in one research trip to New York City, I watched as Ken Swift, one of the most iconic b-boys in the history of hip hop culture, transformed from an articulate and well-spoken ambassador of breaking when he was in conversation with me, to a fun-loving jokester when his childhood friends showed up. It was like watching the transformation of a middle-aged adult into a teenager, and this is precisely how I felt returning home to a group of friends who had not witnessed the growing pains I had experienced as I became an academic.

My relationship with the participants also posed certain challenges from a research perspective. What is off limits when you have known the research participants for a very long time? We had already established a level of trust, but did that trust limit my ability to see aspects of our experiences and document them truthfully? I wanted to record and document a crew that I had known for a number of years because their

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<sup>7</sup> A video archived at <https://vimeo.com/14936403> captures the living space of the apartment where we lived. It was shot by Lenny Len of the Albino Zebrabs in 2011, shortly before I returned to Canada. The apartment was fondly referred to as "the SERENGETI" which is also the name of this short film.

<sup>8</sup> I studied with music sociologist Prof. Andy Bennett during my MA producing a thesis entitled, "'Whatever happened to breakdancing?': Transnational b-boy/b-girl networks, underground video magazines and imagined affinities" (Fogarty 2006).

collective knowledge about the form, and the relationships between dance and musical influences raised interesting research questions. At what point does the research become self-indulgent and its relevance to contemporary debates compromised?

I decided to set up a mediator between the dancers and myself, namely media artist Skot Deeming, who filmed the dancers and interviewed them. Because of Skot's involvement, the participants were speaking to an outsider about their practice. I had hoped this would do two things: on one hand, they would not assume knowledge on the part of the interviewer and would thus be speaking clearly to an outside audience while being documented. On the other hand, Skot would be a selector of sorts, choosing the things that would be interesting to an audience beyond the practitioners or myself. Although I prepared him and the dancers with a list of questions, I also encouraged him to find his own way through the materials. In the end, the footage that was gathered did not look like ethnography so much as a performance for a non-specialist audience. Nonetheless, the footage yielded some interesting information about freestyling and improvisation as well as some more predictable accounts.

### WHAT'S SO FREE ABOUT FREESTYLE?

Some of the literature on improvisation seems to assume that improvisation is always an expression of unbridled creative freedom. I am inclined to raise critical questions about such assumptions, particularly in narratives that posit Afrological forms as a source of expressive freedom for white (or other non African-American) artists whose engagement with/appropriation of Afrological forms supposedly allows them to truly express themselves. Such narratives smack of white entitlement. Similarly problematic in my view is the literature on hip hop culture that assumes that all hip hop dance practices are improvised, even when there are clear examples of choreographed routines, tandem routines, and rehearsed sets that consist of highly intricate and physically demanding combinations of movements that are planned in advance and executed very similarly in each performance. A search for 'signature moves' of b-boys online reveals many of these planned and similarly executed combinations of movements (i.e. choreography) that pose key challenges to hip hop dance scholarship that claims the forms are improvisational in performance. Added to this, it is almost as if some writers assume that that hip hop dance is impervious to training, practice and structural planning.

When the b-boys in the Albino Zebrabs crew started dancing, information about breaking was hard to come by. There were a few videos circulating, some old movie clips from the early 1980s, and visitors who brought dance styles from other places to live events. One of the primary conduits for the transmission of hip hop cultural capital was Soul Choice, the small hip hop shop owned by AJ and her brother. The owners had first hand knowledge of what was happening in the West Coast freestyle hip hop scene, knowledge that they were happy to share with the members of the Albino Zebra crew. How all of these practices came to inform a dance practice in Southern Ontario, where b-boys created their own meanings collectively and individually to make sense of their experiences, became a key point of interest for me.

## "WE WILL NEVER FALL THE FUCK OFF WE PROMISE"

Many hip hop practitioners place a great deal of emphasis on the relationship between musical taste and dance practice. It is generally taken as axiomatic that you have to love the music, otherwise your access to the dance will be limited. This popular view seems to hold true for the members of the Albino Zebra crew, who were involved not only in dance practice, but also in musical production and education. For example, the only Black Canadian in the group, Aflex, continues to make rap tracks, with DJ Gripski. All of the members of the crew spent many hours listening to music together, and dancing when the music inspired them. They were keenly aware of the fact that the music they listened and danced to was performed by predominantly African American performers whose life experiences were often quite different from their own. The members of the crew came from a range of class backgrounds: most members were lower class, and some had struggled with the law and education, while others who were middle-class and grew up in the suburbs, were downwardly mobile art students. They had attended an arts high school, but many did not go on to further postsecondary education. When the issue of whiteness came up, most members of the Albino Zebra crew acknowledged that they occupied a somewhat precarious position within hip hop culture because of their ethnic backgrounds. As a result, their level of authenticity was sometimes questioned, even by themselves. Nonetheless, I would argue that hip hop cultural tenets gave them a sense of belonging in their social spaces through the attention and sense of belonging acquired through physical and musical skills.

The crew's love of underground music is a reflection of this attention to skill, and is what prompted them to bring Riddlore, an African American freestyle rapper who was a part of the West Coast freestyle rap scene, to an event in Toronto<sup>9</sup>. *Spontaneous Lux* documents some uneasy exchanges between the Albino Zebras and Riddlore, their invited guest. Part of these tensions are those of strangers; people who are meeting in a context where local participants want to assert their knowledge, understanding and artistry, while making space for the invited guest's insights. In addition to questions about ethnic identity and hip hop authenticity, the film documents tensions between a professional artist and a group of amateur, but nonetheless dedicated, performers who consider themselves artists in their own right. The b-boys were quick to emphasize that the practice was a way of life for them, not an activity that would be abandoned. Indeed, most of them had been dancing since they were fourteen years old, and were now well into their thirties.

On the last track of Freestyle Fellowship's debut album, *To Whom it May Concern*, the group chants that they will "never fall the fuck off, we promise". The idea of "falling off"--of losing one's artistic abilities and/or commitment to the art form--was a significant concern for the underground hip hop scenes of the 1990s and early 2000s. The complex relationship(s) between collective identity, belonging and a shared focus on freestyling formed some of the aesthetic codes that were taken up by the Albino Zebra crew, and these are the central concerns animating *Spontaneous Lux*. Thus, it's significant that these b-boys continued to stay together as a cosmopolitan tribe of dancers, musicians and music producers well into middle age.

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<sup>9</sup> The crew had originally invited Aceyalone, another prominent member of the West Coast scene, as well but he could not attend the event in the end.



Given the amount of time that has gone into their practice, the insights they provide show their experience, gathered over time, and the state of development of their freestyling processes.

### CONCLUSION: "FAMOUS (BUT I'M NOT A CELEBRITY)...."<sup>10</sup>

I began this essay by referring both to Kyra Gaunt's call for more research that looks at how diverse communities engage with African American music, and to the various researchers that have looked at the West Coast underground rap scene. What is perhaps the most engaging aspect of *Spontaneous Lux*, beyond the openness of the b-boys' conversations about their approaches to freestyling, is the exchange with Riddlore. Most of the literature about white and Asian hip hop 'heads,' has focused on their appropriation of African American fashion and cultural forms, and I hope my analysis here complicates this tradition. For the b-boys that invited Riddlore to Canada, Riddlore is famous: he was an integral part of a music scene that helped to inspire the Albino Zebrabs. The face-to-face interactions between them reveal affinities, imagined affinities, and misconceptions, each of which contributed to the Albino Zebra's unique approach.

Why do people dance? In the case of the Albino Zebrabs, there is a shared love of music, and a sense of friendship and belonging. As noted by the b-boys in the documentary, they are always trying to be innovative but also try to fit their style into the larger culture of hip hop. They want to remain relevant and be part of a shared conversation about what constitutes hip hop dance. Finally, their interactions with Riddlore demonstrate some of the complexities and tensions surrounding cross-cultural influence. Yet it is precisely in these sorts of exchanges that the spontaneous possibilities can be expressed, shared, and contested.



"Spontaneous Lux: Freestyling in Dance and Music"  
produced and directed by Mary Fogarty  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10871/18783>

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<sup>10</sup> Lyric from "Famous Future Time Travel" by Myka 9 and Factor (2015)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mary Fogarty** is an Assistant Professor of Dance at York University. She provides programming to empower females in hip hop culture through the Toronto B-Girl Movement ([www.keepprockinyou.com](http://www.keepprockinyou.com)).