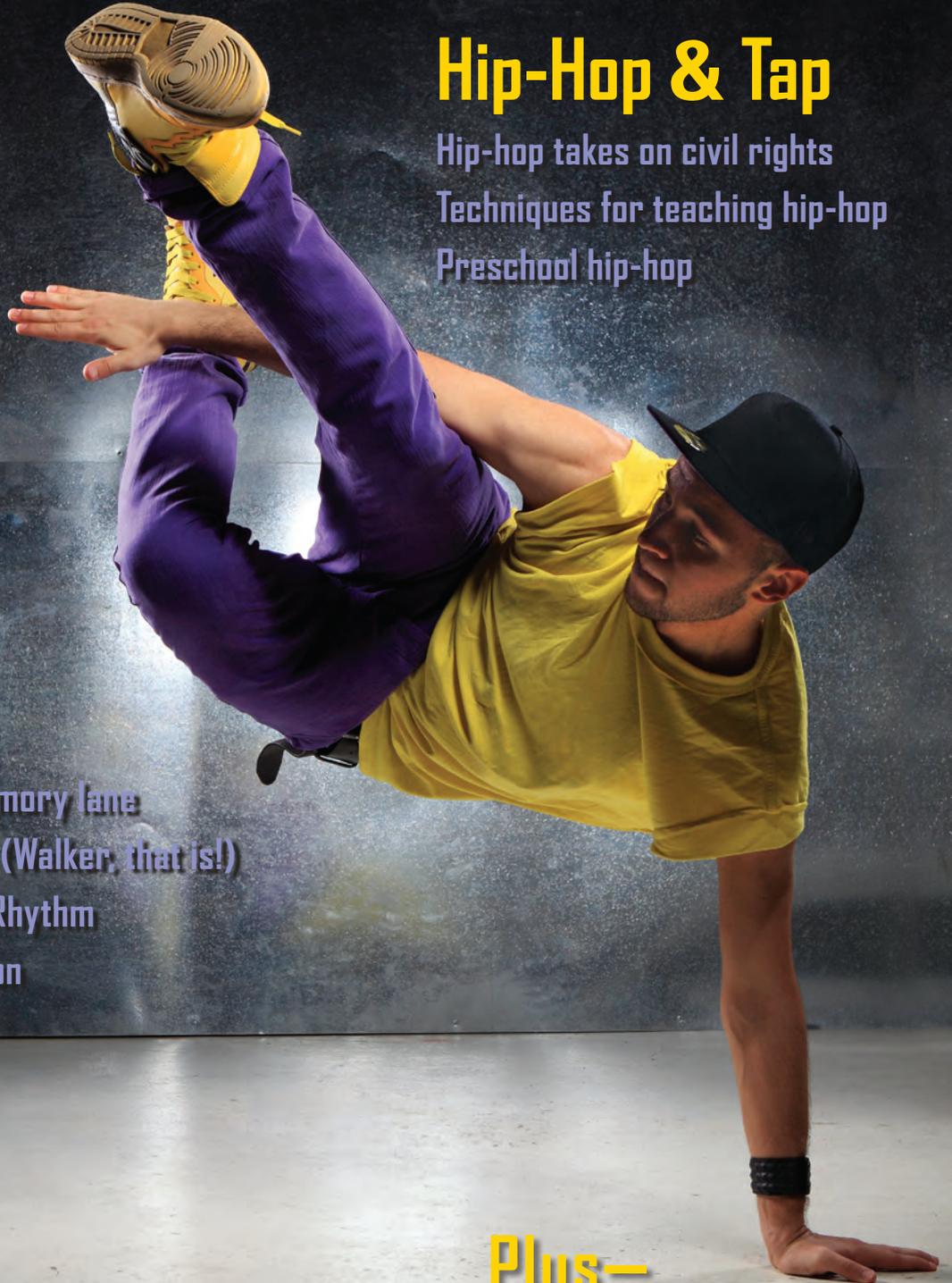


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# DANCE *Studio* LIFE

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# FUNDAMENTALLY

3 arts activists speak to schoolchildren



Dancer-educators Mark “Metal” Wong, Steve “Believe” Lunger, and Aaron Troisi are three arts activists who decided to change the message being sent to K–12 youth. In too many instances, the message sent to schoolchildren in Pennsylvania, the region, and across the country, early in their academic careers, is that they have

little worth and just as little power to do anything about it.

In September 2013, as the school year was about to begin, news of Philadelphia’s cutbacks to public education hit the airwaves. The city’s elementary, middle, and high schools were slashing essentials, including teachers, counselors, arts classes,

sports programs, and even assistant principals.

As if that weren’t bad enough, the historic city, where the Declaration of Independence was signed by Benjamin Franklin and his revolutionary crew, had to borrow \$50 million simply to launch the academic year as planned. Officials didn’t intend to

Photo by Robert Lim



In addition to opportunities for student participation, school visits feature performances by Mark “Metal” Wong and fellow Hip Hop Fundamentals members.

a well-conceived curriculum to give kids an experience of critical awareness and collective action. The men show the students how, by expressing themselves together through dance (hip-hop), rhythm (beats), and rhymes (emceeing or rapping), they can make a difference, whether it’s in their schools, their homes, or their communities.

Forty years after it first surfaced, hip-hop is now a global art form. It remains a vital part of music culture and permeates dance, visual art, speech, and fashion. Most students from kindergarten to 12th grade can relate to it—it’s hip, it’s fun, and it encourages even timid types to rap or toprock. But hip-hop is more than the commercialized fare that dominates music videos and mainstream airwaves.

At its roots, hip-hop is a form of collective street art and activism that arose out of the black and Latino working-class neighborhood of the West Bronx of New York City. During the summer of 1973, the Jamaican-born DJ Clive Campbell, aka DJ Kool Herc, imported a bit of Jamaica’s dancehall magic by rolling out his massive speakers for his now-famous house parties.

This was back in the days of turntables and vinyl, and funk was on the airwaves. During music “breaks”—in jazz, the rhythm segments of a song, when the rest of the song falls away and the drummer, for instance, takes over—Kool Herc began experimenting with prolonging the beats. Then he added a second turntable and began mixing and extending multiple rhythms even further. Before anyone knew it, the dancing met the rhythms, then turned competitive as movers “talked” to each other with their bodies. “Breakers” began dropping to the ground, performing power moves that included gymnastic feats on one arm

open all the schools, however—23 were slated to remain permanently closed this year as part of a now-familiar money-saving measure. As one online news outlet said, Philadelphia had “a public school system from hell.”

The same scenario is playing out in school districts across the country,

particularly in cities with substantial poor populations where the tax revenue that helps fund schools—property taxes—is lowest.

Enter Wong, Lunger, and Troisi. Through hour-long workshops in what they call Hip Hop Fundamentals, the trio uses dance, music, and language shaped around



Steve “Believe” Lunger, Amida “Tha Beatdown” Shofu, and Samuel “Panda” Nakama (left to right) offer lessons that cover everything from particle physics to civil rights history.

and wild head spins. When partygoers gathered in a circle to watch, what quickly became known as breakdancing was officially born.

Overnight a new genre of sound and movement took shape. It involved battling DJs, competing dancers, emcees or rappers, as well as graffiti artists who spoke through spray paint. Hip-hop, ingenious and edgy, frequently spoke out against injustice, poverty, and police brutality, and it continued the venerable African American tradition of competition dance, music improvisation, and unified action.

Wong, who is of Asian and African descent, arrived from Bermuda at 17, clueless about funk music, let alone hip-hop. Sent to boarding school, he became passionate overnight about the new sounds and moves he discovered. He says he “fell into the dance portion of hip-hop and started rolling around on the ground by myself.”

Next, while attending Haverford, a small Quaker-based liberal arts college 10 miles outside of Philadelphia, Wong began trekking to the city to join breakdance practices. That’s where he met Lunger, at the time a student at Temple University. As the white brother of two African American siblings, Lunger lived in

the fluid zone between cultures and racial identities. Soon he and Wong were in a crew together and appearing at jams and competitions. Hip-hop became their passion.

Brought up with Quaker values and the ethos of the Civil Rights Movement, Wong and Lunger cobbled together a dance life mixed

The title “Hip Hop Fundamentals” not only suggests the basic elements of hip-hop but that hip-hop principles deserve to be understood as fundamental to education.

with odd jobs, gigs at bar mitzvahs, busking, and competitions. They got their first arts-education job in South Philly at the Houston Center, where they taught dance in an afterschool youth program being run by a friend.

The kids they taught were from strictly segregated parts of the same South Philadelphia neighborhood.

On one street, “you’d have a whole block of families who had immigrated from places like Vietnam,” Wong says. Then, “one block over, it would be all African American families. Ours was one of the only youth programs in the area to get together this mix of 8- to 16-year-olds.”

In fact it was the first time many of these kids had ever acknowledged one another, even though they passed every day in the halls at school. Not only did the dancing bring them together, but some of them morphed into teachers who now teach kids the same material Wong and Lunger taught them—moves, but also a re-tooled attitude toward community.

Before Hip Hop Fundamentals came into being, Wong and Lunger had teamed up with their friend Justin Murta, who created the predecessor program, Hip Hop Handbook, in 2002. Murta emphasized the fun and entertainment of hip-hop as a dance form and as a means “to build confidence in the youth” and “to promote the positivity of the [hip-hop] culture.” By allowing kids to explore breakdancing and listen to music

they regarded as cool, students got to taste empowerment and discover passions they might not have known they had.

But when Murta handed the reins over to Wong in 2010, Wong and Lunger realized that hip-hop not only speaks to kids because of its street cred and its entertainment factor

but because of what hip-hop godfather Afrika Bambaataa (aka Kevin Donovan) calls the form's wisdom. It's through the fierce energy and inventive possibilities of hip-hop that Bambaataa was able to lure the formidable Bronx gang the Black Spades into music and dance combat, with its far deeper payout than drugs and guns. Former gang members quickly spread the gospel by toting boom boxes on their shoulders, strong bass beats accompanying their steps throughout New York's boroughs.

So Lunger and Wong renamed the project Hip Hop Fundamentals. The title not only suggests the basic elements of hip-hop but that hip-hop principles deserve to be understood as fundamental to education. As they quote Kool Herc, "Hip-hop has always been about having fun, but it's

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also about taking responsibility." They believe in hip-hop's potential to promote ideas of social justice, responsibility, and moral purpose, concepts that can help kids think critically and creatively. This is precisely the kind of learning experience that educational theorists say is vital in order for people to develop into true participatory citizens.

With that, Hip Hop Fundamentals turned its one-hour school gatherings into tightly focused teaching opportunities, emphasizing either science or nonviolent direct action, and including a study guide that aligns with national core standards. They call their science module the Breaking the Law of Physics show, and they cover not only Newton's ideas of inertia and friction, but Einstein's concepts of energy and matter. "Einstein presented



Photo by Austin Horton

Race, diversity, and responsibility are some of the issues that Steve "Believe" Lunger and his Hip Hop Fundamentals cohorts tackle in hour-long school assemblies.



Mark "Metal" Wong, Samuel "Panda" Nakama, and Steve "Believe" Lunger (left to right) teach that reflection, action, and shared purpose can make a difference.

the revolutionary theory that matter—stuff—and energy—action—can be interchangeable when matter is sped up to the speed of light times itself," Wong explains. "We demonstrate through interactive dance and crowd participation how particle accelerators speed up matter to make energy."

This year, the crew added a master class that deals with race, diversity, and fairness for all, called Civil Rights Movements: The Power of Youth Engagement Through the Eyes of Dr. King. This was created through the efforts of Troisi, who majored in African American studies at Penn State, got an MA in education, and now teaches seventh-graders.

"I've been personally overwhelmed that race is so present in the school and yet there's no discussion of race," Troisi says of his own teaching experience. This means that students feel it and live it, he noted, but that the schools offer no means of decoding or unpacking the experience. The unaddressed realities of race then become the nameless elephant in the room that consumes enormous space and energy. Troisi sees that, as a consequence, teachers are missing important teaching/learning opportunities and occasions to model community for their students.

During the Civil Rights Movements module, students learn the facts of the civil rights movement; also, in a non-

threatening and non-blaming fashion, they get to experience ways in which people can be discriminated against based on random factors—their hair style, or the color of the T-shirt they wore that day, for instance. In one of the assemblies, Wong singles out the dark-T-shirt wearers and invites them to the front with him. The kids feel special, but only for a moment, because Wong tells the kids that he was using an arbitrary factor—shirt color—to separate one group from another, and connects it for them to racism. He then invites all shirt colors up. A palpable sense of relief and the pleasure

of inclusivity sweep the room.

Hip Hop Fundamentals holds about 250 assemblies a year, and runs more than six after-school programs at different sites in various communities. The group also partners with non-profits in the region, like Philadelphia's ArtsRising and the Asian Arts Initiative.

"Hip-hop gave me a place in the world," Lunger says. "It ties me to the larger world. We're connected locally to experiences that are global." And while he says he "can never really know if the work stays with the children," he does know that he and Wong and Troisi are sharing their transformative experiences with these kids, and that even inspiring a handful of young people and modeling tough lessons in a non-threatening and entertaining way can make a difference.

"We understand that Hip Hop Fundamentals isn't going to change the school system," Troisi says. "It isn't going to revolutionize education in the field."

But what it can do, he says, is encourage action, reflection, and a sense of shared purpose, whether it's performing breaks at a competition, kicking a ball to a teammate in a soccer field, or joining an effort in one's community to help others. ✦



Benjamin "BoxWon" Barnes-McGee leads students at Wilmington Friends School in one of Hip Hop Fundamentals' interactive lessons.

