

Hip Hop: As Judges See It

by Jenny Durbin-Smith, Ahjalia Hall and Shannon Gregg

Hip Hop dance continues to expand across the globe; the USASF is pleased to report a high level of global competitors in the Hip Hop category that demonstrates this genre of dance shows no sign of slowing down!

While this level of growth is exciting, as new competitors, coaches, and choreographers continue to push the boundaries and explore and infuse new styles, how can you be sure that your approach will resonate with the judging panel? Is the nae-nae required? Is the heel-toe passé? What is a “groove,” and how do I know if I have one? We asked judges with international experience to talk about the current state of Hip Hop dance today.

What are you looking for when adjudicating Hip Hop technique? Our panel of experts was clear: they are looking for proper technique and choreography execution from dancers. Jenny Durbin-Smith is specifically looking for “knowledge, understanding, and proper execution of the chosen Hip Hop style or styles. “I also look for the use of resistance, control, isolations, texture, and levels along with ease of execution, quality of movement and proper intensity,” says Jenny. Ahjalia Hall agrees. When she’s judging, she’s “looking for dancers that can execute the choreography as intended by the choreographer, while incorporating personal Hip Hop style. The routine should be filled with strong *Hip Hop* dancers complemented by strong choreography, instead of just strong dancers complemented by strong Hip Hop choreography.” So, when you’re setting your routine, look for ways to allow the style of the choreography to complement the team and showcase their particular strengths and style.

How can you condition dancers to master “swag”? Swag is certainly important in Hip Hop. We’ve seen pieces with strong performance leave an indelible impression on their audience. Judges often talk about “selling” the routine, and a lot of that certainly revolves around the swagger that the individuals and the group possess and showcase. According to our experts, training is the key! Durbin-Smith says, “Taking classes in different Hip Hop genres and foundations definitely expands dancers’ catalogues and confidence. Freestyle cyphers, performing facing a partner, and performing in mini groups for peers are also great exercises for dancers to explore their personal style and performance quality and develop confidence that they can bring back to their team performance pieces.” Hall agrees that training is the key to swag: “I teach dance all over the country and the world. The large majority of groups that I have choreographed for want a winning routine but the dancers do not train in Hip Hop. They train in ALL other styles of dance regularly and they work on technique in all other styles. I believe the first step for dancers to up their Hip Hop ability and ultimately their swag...THEY MUST TRAIN IN HIP HOP. If your choreographer is strong enough at communicating their vision and they are working with the dancers weekly they may be able to have the dancers

mimic their movement. But dancers that train in Hip Hop will not just be mimicking; they will be executing their Hip Hop technique.”

How can you condition dancers to master skills? In terms of skill mastery, our panel recommends a holistic group approach that is also personal to each dancer. Hall recommends having a set warm up that incorporates popular dance trends combined with traditional Hip Hop movement. This requires dancers to repeat movement that can then be dropped into their Hip Hop competition routines. In Hip Hop, the WARM UP is where dancers can learn a lot of their fundamentals. “I also feel like most dancers should do Hip Hop across the floor so they can repeat movements and technical skills that they might find in future dance routines. Practicing their grooves will also help them to develop their own personal style,” says Hall. “Freestyle is IMPERATIVE to developing yourself as a Hip Hop dancer. All Hip Hop dancers should practice freestyle movement at some point during each of their classes in order to improve their confidence in movement and also to help them discover what their Hip Hop personality is. When each dancer develops their own style, they come together as a group. Instead of a dance just being clean, it is FILLED WITH SWAG,” she continues. Shannon Gregg advocates using mental and physical practice to ensure that the whole dancer is conditioned. Dance starts with good nutrition, good attitudes, good role models - an overall solid approach both physically and mentally. Skill mastery comes from repetition. Muscle memory will take the practiced dancer through the steps so that *knowing* the choreography isn’t the challenge, *performing* the mastery of the skill is the challenge. Each motion, each placement must be precise. Every single skill and movement should have an accuracy of attack that is founded in a solid approach, allowing the skill to be executed at a high level of mastery that comes across in performance.

How can you condition dancers to master technique? Technique is developed via practice and repetition, and with careful evaluation. Durbin-Smith advocates for dancers to step into the role of a judge and/or audience member and define and openly discuss what they think is important to see in both technical and performance areas. When dancers can correctly understand and intellectualize proper Hip Hop technique, executing it successfully is a natural progression. Some valuable conditioning exercises to master technique are proper explanation and thorough demonstration of the correct versus incorrect movement by a coach or choreographer, hands-on critique and corrections, and video recording/playback and discussion during rehearsals. Gregg agrees that technique mastery involves the dancer’s self-esteem. It’s important for the dancer to first believe that they can master technique, to apply methods learned in their classes, and then to evaluate their approach. When competing on a large scale with bigger stakes, good technique always stands out. Competitors who have evaluated their own technique, especially via watching their own form and self-critiquing with a high level of self-esteem, are able to pinpoint exactly where their arm “breaks,” their stance isn’t wide enough or their ankles are disconnected in a way that isn’t consistent with the demands of that particular skill.

What are some new Hip Hop styles or techniques? It's clear our experts aren't evaluating choreography or dancers on current trends. Hall states, "I wouldn't say there are NEW Hip Hop styles or techniques, more so there are TRENDS that come and go. Most of the popular movement these days are just repeats of old movements from 10-20+ years ago. Dancers should train in traditional Hip Hop movement as well as learn popular dance movement and trends from TV, music videos, YouTube trending songs, etc. Hip Hop music and movement comes from a constantly changing culture, so staying in touch with that culture starts with staying current with popular music and media." Gregg says, "It's interesting as a judge to see how styles and techniques can vary across geographic locations, competition companies, or competitive circuits. Several years ago, it was easy to identify which circuit a group was on based on their inclusion of specific trends. One style that never goes out of fashion is a fully conditioned dancer. It's easy to pick out trained dancers who have complete control of their center core while they're performing. I never look to see if someone has included the skill or trick of the day, but I'm always looking at their physicality, attack, and approach to demonstrating solid mastery and technique."

What do you mean by "musicality"? This is a comment that often appears on score sheets and in verbal evaluations of routines and choreography. Durbin-Smith says that "musicality is showing the audience what the music looks like! Strong technique and creativity can be demonstrated by the use of movement to recognize and showcase particular musical elements." (a melody, lyric, sound effect, bass line, hi hat, etc.) Gregg looks at musicality as a continuation of the music via the dancer's body. There's nothing more thrilling than watching a specific movement that showcases the intricacies of the chosen music. For example, during the bridge, watching the dancer's body respond to the BPM (beats per minute) by going from using 'and-a' counts to dragging out a movement across counts. "That visual exploration really is attractive to those viewing your performance, and that's what musicality exploration is all about," says Gregg. Hall defines musicality as letting the MUSIC write the movement. Oftentimes dances look as though the choreography could really go with any music. Great musicality means the movements are so clearly defined in the song that it could NOT fit as well with any other music. Since some Hip Hop dance comes from a 'battle style' of movement (just like freestyle rapping), the movement often uses musical cues to emphasize certain words, accents, or a change-up in the beat. When these moments are utilized in a dance, it increases the excitement of the dance. Hall also says, "When these moments in the music are not used, they are missed by the audience (although they may not know what they are missing) and they are definitely missed by other dancers, and, of course, the judges."

The USASF continues to focus on making sure that Hip Hop dance continues to be a driving force within our industry; dance is a celebration of style, form, attack, and overall performance, and Hip Hop is a continuously evolving genre that deserves our attention. We wish you a successful season of conditioning, mastery and skill-building!