

How To Compose a Competition Hip Hop Routine

Part I: The Foundation

By Patty Adams

While there are numerous approaches to the choreographic process, the following is one that can work well within the structure of a dance team comprised of members from a variety of backgrounds. We will outline an ongoing method that is linear in nature – but may be interchanged and/or reversed at any point.

RESEARCH

As with any important project – your choreography should begin with meticulous research and data collection. (*The assumption is being made that proper training has been an ongoing devotion prior to beginning the composition process.*) Even if you choose to hire a choreographer, this research will help you to develop your routine throughout the season.

Begin your research by studying a variety of authentic styles, tricks, skills, illusions, and steps. Make note of what catches your eye and start listing them in a ‘Choreography Notebook’. This ‘notebook’ can be a three-ring binder, a large piece of banner paper in your studio, or an app on your phone. The purpose of this list is to determine your direction and create the best routine THIS season with THIS team.

Continue your research by finding successful patterns. For example, look at past winning routines for the competitions you plan to enter and determine the number of eight-counts between formations, the average BPM, amount of tempo changes, variety of levels, etc. Your goal here should be to become a trendsetter by tracking the successful elements of past routines and predicting an even more interesting trajectory. It is rarely wise to repeat what was successful for others the previous year. (Note: This can be a valuable educational tool for your dancers. Assign different teams/years/elements from which to collect data. They can then report back to the team and learn from each other while developing an important ‘buy in’.)

WISH LIST

The next step is to create a ‘Wish List’. Don’t hold back - write down everything you would love to include in the ultimate routine. Remember to list unrefined original ideas as well as tried and true elements. Obviously, you won’t be able to do everything in one routine, so this is a good time to begin evaluating, assessing and analyzing.

EVALUATE SKILLS

Evaluating skills and assessing style acquisition is an ongoing process, so think of the initial evaluation as a Pre-Test. This pre-test can be used as a base line for individual growth as well as an editing/selection tool. By identifying the skills that your current team has mastered, as

well as their emergent skills, you are on the road to letting your routine reveal itself. Throughout this process assess your dancer's propensity for certain authentic hip hop styles by introducing them to a wide variety. Be sure to watch and listen during water breaks and after practice – the style they have fun practicing in the mirror is probably an indication that it will be a good fit for you and your team.

Go back to your wish list and circle the items you definitely want to include and cross out the items you don't. Consider the length of time before your most important competition and include components that are challenging, yet achievable. Remember that a competition routine is an opportunity to celebrate what your team has mastered. Be careful to not think of this as a compulsory list of skills. More is not necessarily better. Be judicious when selecting the tricks you want to showcase. A perfectly executed L-Kick with great approach and release is much more desirable than a face plant resulting from a failed attempt at a higher-level skill such as a jackhammer.

MUSIC

Now that your wish list has become your 'To Do' list, it's time to focus your attention to the heart of your composition...the music. You simply cannot listen to enough music. Don't limit yourself to one genre and be sure to take this opportunity to discover styles that are unfamiliar to you. This is also a circumstance where many brains are better than one – ask for suggestions from your dancers, colleagues and family members. You'll soon find a direction by noticing the amount of a particular style you have collected. A theme, story, or simply a feeling may begin to emerge. Allow it to speak to you. When you hear a section of a song that you can clearly see movement to, select just that one segment. Out of twenty favorite segments – you may actually only use one, but you can be assured that it will be the best one for this routine. Learning to edit music is a difficult and time-consuming process. It requires knowledge of music theory as well as an intimate knowledge of the chosen editing software. If this is something you can do yourself – you are one step ahead of the game. If not, it is strongly advised that you seek the services of a professional.

If you choose to hire a music editor, be sure to have a written agreement that allows for multiple edits throughout the season. These edits may be measured in a variety of ways so be very clear that both parties understand up front what is expected of each of them. If you don't like something – be honest. It is in the best interest of the editor that you are a satisfied customer.

When the music is complete, you should have a product that is of high quality sound with excellent musical composition. Test the sound on a large system similar to what an event company would use for a competition. Check for a clean bass line (no annoying fuzz) and uniformly equalized tracks and sections. If you hear any bleed over sounds from one cut to the next, if the counts go from five to one (Ex: 1,2,3,4,5,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8) or if something simply doesn't feel right, let your editor know immediately.

Just as in dance choreography, there are numerous pathways to a successful musical composition. Whether using one piece or creating a mix, keep in mind that you have roughly two minutes to take the audience on a journey and tell a memorable story. The script (i.e. music) needs to support, build and guide the actors (i.e. dancers) to a point where the audience is left wishing it would never end. If the foundation is strong – the performance will be powerful!

Suggested Steps:

- Research and Collect Data
- Brainstorm a 'Wish List'
- Evaluate, Assess, Analyze, Repeat
- Turn edited 'Wish List' into a 'To Do List'
- Immerse yourself in a variety of music
- Select workable segments of songs
- Create a high quality mix (or single track) with excellent musical composition.

Also Read:

How To Compose a Competition Hip Hop Routine

Part II: Creating the Meat of the Choreography and Adding Depth one Layer at a Time