

How To Compose a Competition Hip Hop Routine

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

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Note: This is simply what has worked well for this author and should be considered a starting point for your personal choreographic journey. There is no creative process that should ever be set in stone. If it were, it would be called science, not art. We are artists, and our paintbrush is a living, breathing, ever changing beast that often has a mind of its own. Let the beast out – and see where it leads you!

You've done your research, evaluated your team and have your music in hand...it's time to dance... well, almost...

LISTEN

First we must read and reread the script. Then we ask someone else to explain it to us from his or her perspective. As choreographers, the script is one part our story, one part everyone else's story and one hundred parts music. Before we share those thoughts with our movement – we must understand it with an intimacy we typically reserve for someone whom we care for deeply. We must memorize not only every laugh line and dimple, but the smallest freckle that others often overlook. This is why we chart music.

CHART

By charting your music, you will be able to identify patterns, visualize natural formations and transitions as well as see opportunities to include items from your choreography wish list. The more you chart, the more you hear. The more you hear, the more you see. From the basic total number of eight counts, to the exact moment when a primary beat takes a backseat to a grace note, charting is a choreographer's blueprint. Find a method that works for you and don't succumb to the temptation to skip this step.

VISUALIZE

With your music in one hand and your chart in the other, it's time to watch the final product on stage! What?! We haven't even choreographed it yet! No, you haven't consciously, but your sub-conscience, the part of your brain that plays dreams in your head nightly, has some ideas of its own. Turn off the lights, lie down on the floor, close your eyes, relax your brain, and let the music play. Picture yourself in the audience, visualize the stage...the performers...the dance. When it's over, reflect on what you just saw. What was your favorite part? How did it begin? How did it end? Were there any fantastic surprises? How about some humor or maybe even a tragic section that gave you chills? Write these thoughts down quickly before you get up and...

DANCE!! Pump up the volume, hit 'record' on your camera and get to work on **LAYER 1!** There is absolutely no need to start at the beginning and work your way to the end. Find the section that inspires you, give it movement and write it down. Thorough dance notation will not only help you to remember your sweet moves – but will clarify questions that your dancers may have when they are rehearsing alone. Your first goal is to put full body authentic hip hop movement to every eight count you have. The

reason for this is that it will give you a library of thoughts to work from. Even if one section of the music dictates a huge group build, the attempt to give it movement will allow you to hear it from a completely different part of your brain, thereby opening the door to yet another layer of choreography.

LAYER 2

After your initial layer of choreography is somewhat complete, go back through with fresh ears. Ignore the strong beats and melody and listen to the secondary voices and backbeats – better yet – ask others to count out what they hear (words, beats, sound effects, etc.). Sounds that you never heard before step to the front of the stage when you give them their own movement. This is the point where you find the flow: ‘Flow’ is to hip hop what ‘Swing’ is to Jazz. If you’ve ever had a judge tell you to pay attention to the backbeat – this is the step that you may have missed. Explore interesting ways to communicate the beat rather than just expressing it in a predictable and straightforward manner and your piece will not only have advanced musicality, it will have Flow!

LAYER 3

Let’s move on to the exciting layer of tricks, illusions and group builds. You’ve probably already seen these in your head, they are on your “To Do” list and your team has been devoting their time to mastering the required skills and progressions. Incorporating them into your routine should appear natural, effortless and above all have purpose. Whether it’s a head slide that gets a dancer from one spot to the next or a pair of opposing inverts that create a bookend for a group build...it must fulfill a need. Throwing in random tricks just because one of your dancers has the skill is a quick way to ruin a perfectly good routine. Don’t feel like you need to do this all on your own time. One of the most effective methods of developing and implementing this layer is to create it on your dancers. You can even include them in the process: Break the team up into small, odd numbered groups and give them their challenge. Ex: “You have four minutes to find a creative way to exit the shoulder stall.” Not only will the dance mean more to them, you will no doubt find a more unpredictable release from the skill.

LAYER 4

In a perfect world, every member of your team is created equal and can execute all skills with ease. In the real world, you need to have strong bases in a build and that kid with a sick hollow back has to get to a particular spotlight within the formation. This is why it works well to wait to incorporate formations and transitions until after the initial three layers have been laid. Remember how we put movement to ALL counts of eight? Now your task is to go through each count of eight and find natural points of movement – both musically and kinesthetically. Ask your dancers to do each step moving forward, backward, left and right. If they can move in all directions a minimum of two steps you have found a perfect transition move. Use as many of these opportunities as possible and always think ahead at least three counts of eight. (Tip: Using two-inch square cards with your dancer’s initials on each side can be a great tool for creating formations. Color code them to represent dancers who have mastered particular tricks and/or skills and as you move them around on a flat surface, remember to take pictures of each ‘formation’ so that you know where you came from, where you are going, and where you need to be three eight counts from now.)

LAYER 5

Our final layer can really prove to be the icing on the cake! By adding visual interest you are covering the entire canvas of the stage. Look at each movement and try to find ways to create something completely opposite. Flip and reverse angles, lines and directions. Mimic movement at all levels by using lifts as well as groundwork. By adding this diversity you are filling in the gaps and creating desired depth to your choreography.

EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

While this may be a lot to take in, be careful to not try and accomplish it all at once. Take breaks often and make a conscious effort to clear your head from time to time. We all experience 'choreographer's block' on occasion. If it happens to you, you may consider borrowing something from the past. In movement, it is difficult to find anything new. The 'Moonwalk' is generally attributed to Michael Jackson, but variations of the move were performed by (among others); tapper Cab Calloway (c.1932), mime, Marcel Marceau (c.1940), dancer Bill Bailey (c. 1955), actor/comedian, Adalberto 'Resortes' Martinez (c.1960) and street-dancer/singer Jeffrey Daniels (c.1970). The point of this brief history lesson is that hip-hop dance borrows from all walks of life, all genres of dance, throughout all periods of time. From the aboriginal drumbeat dances of the Cook Islands to the dub-stepper in his basement, hip hop dance is the history, culmination and future of human movement. So feel free to borrow and be inspired as long as you recycle the movement using correct hip hop technique. Go ahead and incorporate a pas de bourree into the house section – just be sure to keep it grounded and loose, and you'll be over that block in no time.

Having said all of this, sometimes the best moment in your routine is discovered accidentally while playing around during a break or trying to fix a safety violation. So, breathe. Relax. And don't forget to put the beast back in his cage before you go home.

Suggested Steps:

Listen to every aspect of the music

Chart

Visualize

Add Choreographic Layers:

Layer 1: Full Body Movement (Authentic Style, Correct Technique)

Layer 2: Secondary Voices and Backbeats (Musicality, Flow)

Layer 3: That 'Whoa' Moment (Group Builds, Illusions, Tricks, Surprises)

Layer 4: Formations, Transitions

Layer 5: Visual Interest (Oppositions, Counterbalance, Mirroring, Levels)