



The Rolling Stones
in retrospect.
See page 5B.

Friday, May 11, 1984

The Friday Edition

The weekly arts and entertainment newsmagazine

Dancing in, and on the street

"Break-dancing is a phase, a fad," says Michelle Powers, co-director of a local jazz dance company, Powers and Jeans. "Whether people in Eugene know it or not, we're at the tail end of it."

Not everyone agrees — at least here in Eugene, where the word has suddenly become hot. Break-dancing has become a national pastime as well as a recurrent password.

Both break-dancing and pop-locking are experiencing sudden resurgence with the advent of movies like "Flashdance," "Footloose" and Michael Jackson's "Beat It" video, even though the dance form has been around since the 1960's. "Movies make it look like anyone can succeed at it," says Caroline Shell, University dance department head.

Break-dancers not only spin around on their backs and shoulders, Shell says, but they

Story by Jolayne Houtz
Photo by Ken Kromer

also use body-waving and dancing with a backward motion. "A lot of what you see in Michael Jackson's 'Beat It' video is break-dancing," Shell says.

In pop-locking, dancers stand and move robotically, isolating parts of the body and snapping them in ways that they haven't been snapped or locked before. Shell attributes these two dances' sudden popularity to movies, which "open up the imaginations of everyone who enjoys movement."

"It's a natural outgrowth from the music of our time and a natural development of social dance forms for the last 20 years," Shell says.

"I think it's more of an expression. It's a great deal of fun, and people just enjoy doing it," says Tim Ryan, a member of the Eugene Ballet. He recently taught a break-dancing workshop that kept 10 people on the waiting list.

Break-dancing will also be part of University Theatre's upcoming "West Side Story." Cindy Cummings will use her new skills in her role as the young tomboy, Anybodys. Break-dancing may be popular, Cummings says, because it's easy to learn.

"Anyone can do it — it's a street dance. I learned a lot just by watching, and once I started, it was a lot of fun," Cummings says.

Michelle Powers recently used break-dancing in "Azz Izz," a Powers and Jeans dance concert at the Hult Center which was the first Eugene production to incorporate break-dancing.

Powers placed an advertisement for break-dancers in the *Register-Guard*, "not knowing what to expect."



Tim Ryan, virtuoso breaker, is a University student and a member of the Eugene Ballet. He recently taught a break-dancing workshop that had a long waiting list.

'Whether people in Eugene know it, we're at the tail end of break-dancing.'
— Michelle Powers, dancer

The next day, 40 people, mostly local high school students, lined up at the studio doors before they opened. She only used six main dancers in the break-dancing sequence.

Powers' production helped to introduce Eugene to break-dancing and the dancers were asked to continue the phenomenon in local modeling shows and other productions. "We were inundated with calls from people who wanted to learn it," she says.

Break-dancing, however, is more than a dramatic technique. It has sociological impact.

"It's changing the threat of violence in the streets," says Shell. Some street gangs gave up knives for break-dance competitions two decades ago.

"It's now helping us to accept street gangs as loveable kids. Now they immediately set up a challenge for break-dancing, which is really an endurance challenge because it's very aerobic and takes a kind of control," Shell says.

One New York gang, Shell recalls, challenged the U.S. Men's Olympic gymnastics team to a break-dancing endurance test. "It's beginning to bridge a gap — bringing communication, and it's bound to draw all sorts of social groups together," Shell says.

Powers believes the positive social effects of break-dancing may be wishful thinking. "It's up to people to open up to others, but the amount break-dancing is used to do this is questionable," Powers says.

Shell still sees some far-reaching implications of the dance.

"As long as it keeps creating this mental activity as well as a sense of worth, we'll see important changes in street gangs," she says.

Though its origins are humble, break-dancing still requires certain skills, such as body strength, in order to change positions so often.

"The hardest thing is finding your timing. There's no right way of doing it — a lot is you, finding the way your body works," Shell says.

"It's really aerobic," says Cummings, who began break-dancing last fall.

"We started playing around with it and said, 'Hey, I can do this!'" Cummings says.

Although it's easy to learn, Powers says break-dancers have trouble with traditional dance forms because they don't have the necessary training. "I think it requires more strength and rhythm than flexibility," Powers says.

Shell's main concern with the dance is that it can cause possible damage to untrained dancers. "There are a great many knee and back injuries happening to break-dancers and pop-lockers," Shell says.

Another danger comes when dancers spin on the ground and add weight to body parts that are not used to that much weight. Shell says this drills too much force into the vertebrae. She suggests break-dancers stretch and warm up before dancing. Ryan agrees. As a trained dancer, he considers what goes into break-dancing just as important as what comes out.

For experienced dancers the chance of injury is not so great. "We've learned to analyze movement," Cummings says. "It lessens the chance of injury because we know our own bodies."

In Los Angeles and New York, break-dancing is more spontaneous — dancers jam on street corners at anytime. Eugene's most informal studio is the basketball court under the Jefferson Bridge, where most of Powers' dancers practice. Workshops are popping up everywhere. Parks and Recreation will sponsor several this summer, and Powers will teach break-dancing May 18-19, at Hayward Field as part of the Imagination Celebration.

Whether a fad or trend, breakin' has captured the nation's imagination, though few believe it will continue as a lasting art form.

"It will die out in a year or so, or take a new form," Powers says.

Shell agrees, but also believes that it will leave an impact. "It will probably dwindle out as quickly as it came," she says, "but not before we have some far-reaching sociological insights."

Related story Page 8B
"Breakin'" reviewed
Page 4B