

Old-school rap enjoys a revival

By Brian Bergstein
The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A circle formed in the crowd of rap enthusiasts and slowly widened as a DJ played the mechanical beats of Herbie Hancock's "Rockit."

Eyes darted around the ring before an athletic 19-year-old guy who goes by the name of Juice, wearing a tank top and nylon pants, finally stepped in. Juice swayed his arms and began to step left, then right, then left again, in time with the rhythm. Suddenly, his legs shuffled, kicked, dipped, fluttered, twirled and kicked again, and with one athletic move, he dropped to the floor and spun around on his back.

It was like recalling a lost rite of an ancient civilization. He was breakdancing.

Remember breakdancing? That hip-hop pastime of the early 1980s when kids everywhere were spinning on their parents' linoleum floors and exuberantly trying the Moonwalk?

Breaking is making a comeback, part of a recent surge in interest in rap's innocent early days among the generation raised on harder, harsher "gangsta" rap. Performers who've been out of the big time for almost 15 years now find themselves playing reunion shows at clubs that don't book contemporary hip-hop acts.

They're the pioneers of rap and they're finding a whole new generation of fans.

"Once again we have a whole crop of kids 20 and under that are discovering breaking, discovering graffiti, and rap, and saying, 'Yo, I can be a part of this, I can contribute,'" said longtime rap producer Fred Brathwaite, better known as Fab 5 Freddy. He was the original host of "Yo! MTV Raps".

"The young crowd is really embracing the history of it all, because it was so pure," he said. "Nobody that invented the stuff was really thinking about making a lot of money. They were really just trying to have fun."

The Wild Style Reunion Jam drew about 350 people, mostly hip-hop fans in their late teens and 20s. They watched a screening of "Wild Style," the seminal 1983 movie about rap and hip-hop culture, and heard some of rap's earliest stars perform. Grandmaster Flash was on hand, along with Buzy Bee and legendary breakdancer Crazy Legs from the Rock Steady Crew.

The show's promoter, Tony Harris, 25, says old-school rap is one in a long line of musical forms to enjoy a retro revival in a culture endlessly fascinated with its recent history.

But there's another reason for this nostalgia trip: Many hip-hop fans, turned off by the violence and negative images in much of contemporary rap, like old-school rap for its boastful exuberance and emphasis on clever rhymes.

"The essence of it is, let's have a good time, let's party, let's create, let's vibrate with it, without all the extra stuff thrown in just to make it sell," said 38-year-old Curtis Brown, known as Grandmaster Caz, who got started in rap in 1974 and now is enjoying a second career performing and promoting old-school culture.

Frank Nunez, 19, who came to the Hollywood Athletic Club for the Wild Style Reunion Jam from suburban Montebello, especially likes breakdancing because of the feeling he gets when he steps into a circle and shows off his moves.

His friend, Juice, who's so serious about breaking that he has a tight blue helmet to wear when he spins on his head, adds: "It's an element of hip-hop that never should have died. It's the art of the streets."

Grandmaster Caz celebrated his 22 years with the Cold Crush Brothers at a July show at Wetlands, a club in lower Manhattan. Other old-school names like Doug E. Fresh and KRS-One were also there.

Caz feels that unlike most rock or country musicians, who embrace their elders, few modern hip-hop artists show respect for

the old-school performers who invented the genre.

"There's nothing wrong with making money by selling records. Believe me, I'm in this to sell records," said Caz, who still lives in the Bronx, near where he and other early hip-hop artists started. "But when it dictates the process ..."

Groups like the Beastie Boys kept alive many classic elements of early hip-hop with references in their lyrics and musical samples. That has made it easy for some hip-hop fans in their teens and 20s to feel connected to music that was big when they were babies.

Even so, that doesn't mean they can breakdance. Fortunately for them, Crazy Legs gives lessons.

As a boy in the South Bronx in the late 1970s, Ritchie Colon wanted nothing more than to be a baseball player. But that took money and equipment. So like many of his friends who were left to their imagination, they made their tattered neighborhood into a playground.

Ritchie invented so many breakdancing moves and did them so well they called him Crazy Legs. He showed his stuff in "Flashdance" and other movies, and still has a large following, especially overseas. He answers the phone himself at the Rock Steady Crew headquarters in Jersey City, N.J.

"This is called a continuous backspin," he tells a class of 12 as he introduces a move on the Wetlands floor one Monday night. "Some people call it the windmill, but it's not. I know because I made it up."

Many of the teen-agers in the class seem preoccupied with getting the moves down exactly right. Legs reminds them they shouldn't be afraid to let themselves go with the music, because breaking is a celebration. Each turn in the circle should be its own show, its own good time.

"There's always an intro and an ending," he says. "So no matter what you do, end up nice."

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