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BLACK MOVEMENT MATTERS

A conversation with hip-hop dance legend Rennie Harris

BY RACHAEL CARNES

According to Lorenzo “Rennie” Harris, the three laws of hip-hop culture are “innovation, individuality and creativity.”

“Hip hop comes from the word ‘hippie,’ which means to either open your eyes or re-open your eyes — to be aware,” Harris says.

Kickstarted in the South Bronx as early as '72 — at jams in parks, schools, community centers and clubs — and led by DJ Clive “Kool Herc” Campbell, Afrika Bambaataa and Pete DJ Jones, the global phenomenon we’ve come to appreciate as hip hop has many progenitors, each adding his or her own original spin to graffiti, deejaying, b-boying and emceeing.

Harris is one of them.

Harris founded his dance company, Rennie Harris Puremovement, in 1992, and in '96 I spent a week driving Harris and his entourage to outreach events around Seattle. Twenty years later, it’s fun to catch up with him by phone all the way from Japan, where he’s currently in artistic residence.

He’s received many honors, including a 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship, a slew of grants from the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pew Charitable Trust and the National Dance Project. Harris

has also been named a creative ambassador, and given the key to the city for his hometown of Philadelphia.

In North Philly at age 12, Harris and a buddy entered — and won — a church talent show. And Harris kept dancing. Forming troupes in his teens, he was soon opening for a venerable who’s who of hip hop: Salt-n-Pepa, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Doug E. Fresh, Run DMC, Sugar Hill Gang, Kurtis Blow and more.

This season Harris brings his latest work, *Lifted!*, to Portland’s Whitebird Dance, and the show features a live choir singing gospel and house music.

“I always wanted to do a live choir — I love gospel-house,” Harris says. “And I thought it would be cool to actually create a work that not only had the music, but had the singers there to sing it.”

Harris would likely shrug off the praise, but it’s humbling to speak to a living legend.

Hip-hop culture had been snapped up by Madison Avenue and Hollywood by the mid-1980s, but Harris pinpoints '81 as the year the form broke wide.

Sally Banes’ influential *Village Voice* piece, “Physical Graffiti: Breaking Is Hard to Do,” in March 1981 — featuring Martha Cooper’s photos of breaking and b-boys — exposed New Yorkers, and soon the world, to what had

already been a thriving and multidimensional cultural scene.

The first print article to mention “hip-hop culture” by name was published in the *East Village Eye* in January 1982, featuring an interview with disc jockey and singer-songwriter Afrika Bambaataa.

“The writer asked Bambaataa to explain what they were doing,” Harris recalls. “And he said, ‘We’re not doing anything, we’re just hip-hopping around.’”

In that same article Bambaataa refers to hip-hop dance as an alternative to the physical fighting, or “jitterbugging” — as he calls it — between warring South Bronx gang members.

“It’s innate to humans to be creative,” Harris says. “When resources are scarce, we then become creative about how we’re going to voice our opinion, how we’re going to survive. Without fear, we don’t survive. It’s the foundation of humanity. Fear is the catalyst for all of it.”

The writer Ta-Nehisi Coates says that, in America, it’s traditional to destroy the black body — that it’s our American heritage. So what is the role of black dance in the face of that reality?

“Dance plays the same role it’s always played — since the beginning of time — and that is communion with something higher than yourself, or a higher being,” Harris says.

“We’re doing what we do,” he continues. “It’s not as if dance is going to say something new for this generation than for another generation or the generation before it. Without movement, you die.”

Ask most “dance people” to tell you about black dance, and they’d mention Dance Theatre of Harlem, Alvin Ailey, maybe Katherine Dunham or Baba Chuck ...

“But those things aren’t black dance,” Harris says. “Those are black people doing white dance. Black dance is social dance, movement that was handed down from generation to generation — since slavery. That’s black dance.”

“Anything that comes out of the African American Community is black dance,” Harris says. “The other stuff is black folk doing Western dance. It doesn’t make it black just because they’re doing ballet and they’re black.”

Think tap dancing, swing, lindy, stepping — or community dances of the '60s, '70s and '80s. Harris notes that these forms have been routinely appropriated — or stolen.

“I wouldn’t use ‘appropriation’ — I’d call it cultural theft,” he says. “That’s basically what it is and I think