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Breakin' in T.O.

Grand Analog's Ofield Williams talks about Toronto's hip hop dance culture and gives tips on how to get in the breakdancing game

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Ofield Williams

By Shazia Khan
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As demonstrated by the Beats, Breaks & Culture Festival this past weekend, there's a growing interest in what's "underground"; the annual Harbourfront celebration draws increasingly large crowds each year with its always-exciting roster of innovative artists in music and dance. Toronto's hidden breakdancing scene, for one, gets to come out of the shadows for the event, with local B-boys and B-

girls giving lessons and throwing down incredible battles -- both on and off the stage. But when the dust settles on Sunday, where does the city's breaking scene go?

"At the moment, [the culture's] still very much underground," says Ofield Williams, DJ for Toronto hip hop group Grand Analog and local breakdancer who teaches to young kids. "The scene in Toronto I find existent; a new breed of B-boy & B-girl on the rise. It's really a question of how they [plan to] preserve it."

Although underground hip hop is a seemingly exclusive and tight-knit culture, there isn't a huge divide regionally, and dancers from many areas often come together for major events.

"I don't think the cultures differ as far as cities. I'd say they differ more according to media 'detention,'" Williams quips, noting how film and television influences, like the successful Step Up and America's Best Dance Crew franchises, can have a negative impact on the dance form's artistic and social statements.

"I find that communities that base their outlook on what has been presented to them on TV suffer more than those who seek knowledge by other means. Those shows not only exploit B-boyin', but other genres; the difference is really how [the genre is] derived from culture stricken with poverty, discrimination, struggle, etc."

For those who really want to learn and be true to the form, Williams says to ditch the So You Think You Can Dance reruns and find real battles, competitions and summits in your neighbourhood, where you'll get an inspiring glimpse of the wildly creative and varied styles possible in the genre. "When you have an art form that thrives on one's imagination and originality, you can't just go to a specific

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class and expect to learn what it is you desire. As Quincy Jones told me once, "You have to go to it to know it."

If you're totally green to the B-boy/B-girl scene, don't fret -- "the culture has become way more in depth and accessible due to the internet," Williams says. To get started, here's a few online resources to find events, workshops and lessons in the city:

Bboyworld forums: One of the biggest and best breakdance forums on the web, with more than 120,000 members. Here, you can search in the "Canadian Events" section for local competitions, and find tons of raw footage from past events.

Backtotheunderground (B2TU) forums: Another forum, but one that's based here in Toronto. B2TU is a B-boy talent and booking agency that's organized several major events locally, and their site features lots of discussion about upcoming battles, as well as info on lessons, workshops and practice spaces.

Street Dance Academy: This dance studio offers a great breaking class for beginners, structured so that people of all ages and experience levels can drop in for any class throughout the year. The atmosphere is totally welcoming, and even encourages people with no dance experience to stop by. The academy also offers instruction in toprocking, popping, locking, advanced powermoves and more.

Andy Pool Hall: This popular College hangout features **24 Carat Tuesdays**, a weekly club night with B-boy-friendly tunes from DJ Serious and Kaewonder. Tons of breakers in the GTA and beyond flock to this regular event, and you'll probably get a chance to battle with local greats, like Benzo from the legendary Toronto crew **Bag of Trix**.

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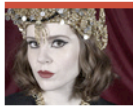
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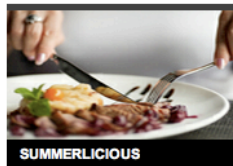
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