

Reflective Essay

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How do you define Hip Hop? To many, it's simply a genre of music – but in truth, Hip Hop exists is much deeper. It's a culture, born in Brooklyn, New York, that now spans the globe. *'British on the Break'* is my investigative documentary exploring UK Hip Hop through one of its most relevant elements: dance. I have engaged in extensive research that looks at Hip Hop through the eyes of breakers, pulling together the stories of a dozen bboys/ bgirls into a cohesive narrative that tells the story of UK Hip Hop. Immersing myself into the niche scene of bboys and bgirls, honing my skills and deepening my knowledge, I took a deep dive into the competitive, political but deeply communal family of UK breakers. This has been a captivating experience that has led to significant personal growth and my ability to bring a creative vision to life.

The idea to create a documentary stemmed from my growing interest in breaking. I long been passionate about Hip Hop, but always found that its core elements - Graffiti, Music, Dance, and Deejaying – are difficult to be authentically represented through literature. These are visual or audible art forms, therefore unable to be translated onto paper and capture their essence. *'Today, YouTube is a primary platform for watching B-boying on an international stage. The use of YouTube and other social media platforms for isolated viewing of B-boy performance demonstrates a break from traditional viewing practices.'* (B-Boys and B-Girls – Subcultures and Sociology, n.d.) Thorough research showed me most deep investigations into Hip Hop and Breaking, are in the format of film. My goal was to add another valuable investigation to the growing body of documentaries that aim to capture and contextualise Hip Hop culture online. By focusing on the voices of breakers themselves, I hoped to offer an authentic contribution to a tradition of grassroots storytelling within the culture (*B-Boys and B-Girls – Subcultures and Sociology*, n.d.). Already being a passion of mine, I knew I wanted to delve into the world of Hip Hop, whereas breaking itself was something new to me. Only recently have I begun to train this style rigorously. What initially stood out to me was the incredible athletic elements, but as this project progressed – the culture of Hip Hop began to take over my interest. My initial ideas were surface level – an exploration of breaking from a purely athletic point of view. As I spoke more to my lecturer, Jamie Berry, I stepped into a greater understanding of the cultural elements of it. This is when I realised that Breaking would be the perfect lens to take a deep dive into the culture of Hip Hop. Considering, in order to break, you must be aware of all the elements of Hip Hop. You cannot break without a DJ; a breaking event cannot happen without an MC; only graffiti is not directly tied to breaking. This realisation gave birth to the main goal of the documentary: *'to dive into UK Hip Hop culture through the eyes of the breakers living it today'*. Practically I envisioned this as a dozen interviews intertwined with frantic b-roll of battles and cyphers.

This is where the rigorous research began. I had my idea; now I needed to back it up. My understanding of Hip Hop culture at this point was limited to the basic facts. My lecturer persisted that the best research I can do is practical, and on-the-ground, with our first meeting ending with "Have you got transport? We're training in Bristol tonight". I was instructed to take mental note of everything, from the smell; to how the mirrors steamed up from the sweat; how the floors began to slip and the attitude towards the cypher. Alike Hip Hop, breakers train

differently to other dancers; mostly within what is called the 'cypher' – a freestyle circle as a form of training. I instantly noticed a difference between the breakers cypher and the cyphers taken place in other dance scenes. It wasn't a performance. The mindset was not to impress but to improve. Cyphers in university often were tense, with dancers restricted to comfortable combinations and treated as a showcase. In contrast, these cyphers were relaxed and fun. Jamie encouraged me to 'play' – to explore in the space, to reach my limits in creativity, slow down and figure a way out. This forced the borders of my creativity to expand. I also began the process extremely nervous, mostly in awe of the skill of these bboys and bgirls. By taking the mindset of play and exploration, the nerves evaporated instantly, and my dancing improved more in one session that it had in the last few months. I gained great notes from my fellow breakers, ideas on small things, namely looking forward when dancing, to bigger things such as tips on moves. A huge takeaway from this experience is how giving the breaking community in Bristol was. Everyone wanted to know everyone. I couldn't possibly remember the names of everyone who had introduced themselves to me, for it was dozens. It wasn't solely elite either, there were beginner breakers all the way to dancers who are considered the best in the area. Through this on-the-ground exploration of training, I gained what literature could never give me: raw, authentic exposure on the deepest possible level. This is the first time I have felt Hip Hop as more than just a dance but as a community and as a culture. *'These community-defined practices allow for significant levels of mutual support and catharsis'* (Levy, I. et al. 2017). I felt the supportive environment expressed grassroots core of the culture,

I continued this style of research, taking breaking classes in Barry and Cardiff. I began to train regularly with my local scene in Cardiff, meeting breakers like Bboy Kai and Tommy Boost. Training in Cardiff has opened my eyes to the differing methods and attitudes towards training among different bboys. In Cardiff there is a much more competitive focus, with greater emphasis on the athletic. Here I began to learn power moves; Windmills; Head Spins; touching even on Flares and Swipes. With less of a focus on play and artistic expression. This style of training speaks more to the battle culture and 'burning' your opponent. The idea of humiliation and battle mentality of outshining *'the other with their prowess, creativity, and flair'* (Linh, T., 2024) calls for the learning of impossibly difficult moves to out-dance your opponent. This research greatly inspired the questions that I began to formulate for my interviews, as I questioned how those within the Hip Hop scene balanced the competitive nature of all the elements – DJ, MC, Dance and Graffiti – with the community aspect.

As much as on-the-ground research was enlightening, I felt I would never truly understand the culture if I didn't have solid understanding of the roots of Hip Hop; DJ Kool Herc, Brooklyn and the poverty at the time; *"Coming from the ghetto, where everyone thinking so negative and we're doing something positive"* ('The Freshest Kids', 2002). The process of online research was difficult, considering Hip Hop history is so widely debated. This challenge inspired the idea of conducting interviews, as I would be able to piece together only the coherent elements to form a consensus among all the breakers. This would turn out to be a great challenge, with me slowly realising this the more I trained within the scene. In hindsight, if I were to research this differently, I would aim to get bboys from 70s, 80s Brooklyn in interviews, in hopes of getting as close to the source of Hip Hop as possible.

Taking on the project of a documentary asked for more research than that solely into the subject; it asked for a study of filmmaking. Having good experience in filmmaking this was not unknown territory to me. I have good experience in camera work, video editing and filmmaking in general, but for this project my vision pushed the limits of what I knew and asked for me to

learn more. I began by sourcing equipment. First by email, I requested equipment from the university, mentioning that equipment such as gimbals are necessary to film dance, and even outside of my project would be an invaluable investment into the universities equipment and bolster any video content. Unfortunately, my request was denied but I was enlightened to the Course Cost Bursary. Applying for £250, I was able to buy a wide angle 10-18mm lens as well as a DJI Ronin RS3 Mini Gimbal. After thorough research into dance filmmaking, I noticed that Hip Hop is often filmed with a wide-angle lens, sometimes even fisheye. The gimbal allows smooth camera movement that accentuates the dancers' movements. These two pieces of equipment skyrocketed the potential of the documentary, allowing me to achieve a cinematic and professional look. I researched techniques such as 'the Ninja Walk' – a method of walking with bent knees to greater stabilize the footage. After spending many days practicing it became clear that *'the difference between shaky, amateur-looking footage and smooth, cinematic shots comes down to movement, control, and practice'* (Camera Guide Pro, n.d.). With no prior experience with gimbals, stepping into the world of specifically dance filmmaking was both intimidating and exciting. It forced me to learn a skill that would in the long term will greatly benefit my career as it opens up a multitude of job opportunities.

Producing a documentary of this scale, was a much bigger task than I first anticipated. One of the most difficult but rewarding aspects of this process was the interviewing. Speaking to a dozen breakers, with greatly differing schedules, proved a challenge to organise. There was also a careless attitude to some of the breakers. I would organise interviews with them, but without warning they would be on a dog walk or driving home. I predicted this would happen considering I was receiving these interviews for free, of which I could not be more grateful. The willingness to engage with the project from many breakers was incredible.

As I began to gather my findings, I came to the realisation that most of the footage revolved around breaking as a sport, less so the Hip Hop scene. Jamie warned me of this, saying that I needed to be careful of my pool of interviewees as there are a select number of breakers do not emphasize the Hip Hop culture. Whether for better or for worse, this wasn't my issue, I was at a crossroads of decision; change the intention of the documentary to explore breaking as a sport or go back to the drawing board and double down on the questions directly tying to Hip Hop as a culture, community and movement. I chose the latter. In hindsight, I've realised that a big reason why some of these interviews went down the angle I didn't intend was due to my questioning. This was also always going to be a risk as I wanted these interviews to be semi-structured and allow for open conversation. How the UK could elevate to the next level; was a question I often asked. What I now see is that this is too vague, as it leaves the interviewee to interpret what the UK should elevate in. This question often became political, leading breakers to go down a rabbit hole of biases and conversations about specific corners of the breaking scene. It would also lead breakers to talk about elevating in ability, skill and competitive edge, of which I wasn't focused on. I want to know how the UK Hip Hop scene can elevate to reach the values that it is said to encompass; to reach a point of what many would call *'true Hip Hop'*. Looking back, I would change by specifically referencing 'elevating in Hip Hop as a culture and movement', not necessarily as a dance. I managed to adapt to this, pulling it together in the edit, as there was an overwhelming narrative that the UK is separated and that the scene needs to come together in order to reach the next level.

Organising interviews while tiptoeing around the political and ego-driven decisions that often come with the breaking was something that Jamie again warned me of. This project has felt like growth from a naivety, that is entirely justified by my lack of engagement with this culture, to a

deeper understanding of how the mentalities of those within the culture function and the inevitable politics that comes with it. Politics is a deeply human experience, and where humans exist with community, conflict and disagreement is inevitable. My intention—and by extension, the film's—was to explore the Hip Hop community with the aim of bringing people together. This made it deeply incompatible with the internal politics I encountered, so I chose to stay out of them. Being new to the scene, it wasn't my place to get involved. Ego was a difficult element to navigate during the interview process. This is exemplified a clear miscommunication between an interviewee and I. After simply following up to confirm whether our agreed time still worked or if an earlier slot would be more convenient, an unexpected hostile response was received. *'If you can't wait, then I'm not doing it, I don't need this.'* Initially throwing me off, fortunately I was articulate enough to clear the air. In my experience, conflict is often caused not by malice but by miscommunication and inability to articulate intention. It was frustrating catering to the ego of the interviewee despite their ignorance, but it was necessary as they were a big name in the scene. In the end, despite this, the interview went ahead but he was walking his dog, realising he hadn't set the time we had planned aside anyway. This lack of preparation affected both the depth of the conversation and the technical quality, as the audio and connection repeatedly cut out, complicating the process in the editing room.

The interview footage stood as the A-Roll for the documentary, as it consisted of the main narrative. In order to obtain B-Roll I went to Groovenometry in Manchester. Travelling up with four other breakers, mostly from Cardiff, this 2-day experience was a raw and genuine exploration of the element of battling. Hip Hop and Breaking on the battle floor was very different to the cypher. The same hype and excitement were there but it was matched with a competitive and adrenaline-fueled edge. This was another experience and lesson into dance filmmaking. Filming on a zoom lens, I stood within the crowd to get close ups of the dancers. The gimbal stabilised the camera, which was incredibly useful considering shake on a zoom lens is exaggerated and entirely destroys the shot – realising again the value of this investment. The crowd footage gave the viewer an intimate experience, in terms of framing – as a part of the crowd – that I would not been get from standing elsewhere. Difficulty came when the crowd would get excited, and blocked footage. I had hundreds of hours of footage from these two days, of which editing down to roughly 10 minutes proved difficult. Through networking, I was able to interview three young dancers here. This was beneficial as I was able to get in camera footage of breakers from outside of Cardiff, instead of solely on Zoom – increasing the professionalism of the documentary. My research into composition, lighting and audio, also greatly increased the professionalism of the final film. I filmed everything on a Canon EOS 600d, an entry level filmmaking camera. This camera although decent at what it does, works terribly in low light, often causing a colour grain and strobe effect against the lights. Compared to my low level DSLR, a more expensive camera would have allowed for greater creative freedom. Yet on the other hand, filming with my camera forced the boundaries of my creativity, having to think outside of the box, exemplified by taking interviews outdoors instead of indoors. This then posed a difficulty for sound, as the wind and noise were worse. I managed this by recording two separate audio tracks, one in-camera with a shot gun mic covered by a wind shield, and the other on a small audio recorder held by the interviewer, serving the purpose of a handheld microphone.

The footage and audio were able to be successfully cleaned up during the editing process, but the grain served the greatest problem. To tackle this, I delve deeper into the 90s and way in which the documentaries, especially in Hip Hop culture were filmed and presented. There often mimicked the chaos of music videos, which is logical considering. In the editing room, changing

the aspect ratio to 4:3, blurring the borders and colour grading ultimately gave the film a vintage look. I overlaid text, to mimic the timers on VHS players, and lowered the frame rate of the footage, giving it a glitchy effect. By leaning into this I could mask the unwanted noise and instead make it appear a creative choice. For a film exploring Hip Hop culture, it worked, as it paid homage to the films of the past, for example *The Freshest Kids*.

The footage and audio were successfully cleaned up during the editing process, but visual grain proved to be the most persistent issue. To address this, I looked more closely at Hip Hop documentaries from the 1990s. Many of them embraced a raw, chaotic aesthetic similar to that of music videos—which made sense, given the elements of Hip Hop. In the editing room, I shifted the aspect ratio to 4:3, blurred the borders, and applied a vintage-style colour grade. I also overlaid on-screen text to replicate the timer displays on VHS players, and lowered the frame rate to create a glitchy, analogue effect. By leaning into this visual language, I was able to mask the grain as a deliberate stylistic choice. For a film exploring Hip Hop culture, it felt appropriate—it paid homage to the visual history of the scene, with particular inspiration drawn from films like ‘The Freshest Kids’.

Concluding the project, I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about how I would define Hip Hop. For me, it is a grassroots culture—something born and sustained at street level. It’s open to everyone; there are no barriers to entry. Hip Hop is art without the need for material wealth—four distinct, yet deeply interconnected forms of expression. It’s a culture rooted in community, guided by just four principles: Peace, Love, Unity, and Fun.

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