

# Why Ballet Teachers Shouldn't Teach Hip Hop

And other ways hip hop should be respected

by Madelyn Duesler

When I was growing up at my home studio, our training was primarily focused on ballet and jazz, but I was lucky enough to start taking hip hop at a pretty young age. We had two different teachers, one who grew up as a b-boy and was well-educated on hip hop's history and culture, and one who taught all ballet classes and had most likely never taken a formal hip hop class in her training. Even as a child, before I knew much about dance, I could just tell the difference between each class from the way it was taught and the attire we were told to wear. Now I don't mean to put down this teacher, because they taught me so much in other techniques, but I mean we were wearing tights and leotards with sneakers to class straight after she had just taught us a formal ballet barre.

With the dance education I have now, it seems silly that we were ever able to call that class a hip hop class. The only thing hip hop about it was the music she played, but you can't just have kids do any movement to a rap song and all of a sudden call it hip hop.

I only really reflected on this part of my dance training once I saw a video come up on my TikTok feed, where I learned that this experience was common for young dancers. I was unsurprised when I saw how many comments complained about how casually the technique gets cast aside. How, instead of hiring educated folks who know hip hop and can teach it, it seems that ballet teachers are teaching an "interpretation" of what they think hip hop should be, or how they would do it if it was one of their other techniques. I think this was very common during summer intensives, when I always looked forward to the one or two hip hop classes that were offered and was always left wanting more.

Why does this happen with hip hop dance? Surely you can't call a dance ballet just because some dancers are moving to Tchaikovsky in pancake tutus on a stage, because that's not what makes it ballet. The technique, the intricate and detailed aesthetic, and the discipline is what makes it ballet. Just as much as ballet has a technique and a history, so does hip hop. Why does this issue only happen with this one style? No one is trying to create their own tap or jazz dance where it isn't supposed to be. So, what makes hip hop the scapegoat when it comes to studio settings and new styles? Perhaps because of its ties to social dance, so it becomes easier to disregard the idea of technique in a codified studio class setting. Many teachers may just not know that hip hop has so much history and its own set of techniques. Maybe it's not that they're trying to impose their own ideas onto it, but that they just don't know much about dance forms outside of their own training.

Unfortunately, because hip hop is the youngest dance form (turning 50 this year!), it's already at a disadvantage to be taken seriously in a studio setting. Other dance forms have had formally codified technique classes for decades before hip hop was born. For context, hip hop has only been around for a tenth of the time that ballet has. What this issue really needs is time for the style to be appreciated for its difficulty, and then technical classes can be implemented into college programs, summer intensives, and studio classes. It's also important to note the inherent racism against many Black dance forms and how they are regarded in the dance world. Dance styles that don't come from a wealthy, white, European background, took a lot longer to be respected in the United States and taught in more dance classes (Zheng). Because of this, there were already disadvantages for hip hop within the dance community, but with time and the constantly evolving nature of the art form, it has slowly been making its way into more schools and studios.

Becoming increasingly popular in commercial dance and on social media has been an advantage for hip hop. In the new age of technology, for young dancers and upcoming choreographers, branding yourself on social media is like the new LinkedIn. Popular apps like TikTok and Instagram are completely saturated with hip hop content, with the newest and coolest studios always on the top of the explore page. With traction, comes money and funding that the dance industry always desperately needs to keep the art alive and the dancers fed. So really, all that it's going to take to get more serious hip hop-trained teachers into studios is time to catch up with the market. As the increased demand for hip hop dancers grows, eventually studios will have no choice but to produce more educated staff and dancers.

In the future, having well-educated and passionate teachers in studios for young dancers will help this issue. It's up to our generation as we enter the teaching field to emphasize it, and most importantly educate where it is needed. Especially with the recent addition of hip hop technique classes in many collegiate dance programs across the country (Nolan), and having it alongside other main classes like ballet, jazz, and modern, we have the tools that we need in order to move forward and make positive change—and to find teachers who are educated where we may be lacking.

*Madelyn Duesler graduated with a BA degree in Dance and Business Economics in the spring of 2023 at the University of California, Irvine. She plans on auditioning for dance opportunities to pursue her dance career, and is eager to explore economics and finance within the dance field.*

#### Sources

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