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Hittin' The Streets With The NYC Tranzformerz

BY ELIZABETH A. BURBACH

For almost four decades, b-boying, otherwise known as breaking or break dancing, has been a staple of New York City street life. B-boying is an artistic and improvisational mode of non-verbal communication and competition between individuals and groups, usually in relationship to music. It arose out of the streets of the South Bronx in the early 1970s and, at times, became an alternative to gang fighting: that is, a non-violent resolution to the problems of the street through the creative use of the body, mind, and space without weapons. As b-boying developed, it gained legitimacy as dance and, today, many consider it a sport. B-boying continues to be used to assert rights, defend turf, mediate conflict, build community, entertain, garner attention, and gain respect.

In the context of street performance in Manhattan, b-boying has been a means of socializing and earning some extra cash for b-boys, such as Zone TDK of the NYC Tranzformerz, since the mid-1970s. From its roots in the materially grounded turf wars among gangs of teens in the 1970s–80s, to the metaphorical “turf” of dance-space domination between b-boying crews, to commercial viability in the “break dance” phenomenon of the mid-1980s, b-boying is a successful form of street commerce today.

Zone TDK, aka Mark Schell-Pickett, grandson of musician Wilson Pickett, is a *street hitter*—a breaker who works the street. An original b-boy from the first wave of

breaking in the early 1970s, Zone began b-boying when he was nine years old, learning it on the streets of the South Bronx where he grew up. Zone was one of the first b-boys to hit in Manhattan. He is one of the few original b-boys who still do.

You may have never heard of Zone, though you most certainly have seen him. *A lot*. His career in hip-hop began with the Bronx-based “performance gang,” TRNation (Talented Rascals Nation), a transition between street gangs and b-boy crews. Later, he toured with the Bronx Floor Masters crew, reconfigured and renamed the NYC

Breakers by promoter Michael Holman of *Graffiti Rock* fame. In addition to breaking, Zone has made a living as a writer of rap songs, commercial jingles, and children’s songs for *Sesame Street*. In 1989, he formed the duo rap group, The Next School, with Ali Dee. In 1990, they released the album *Settin’ an Example* with the popular single “Prophets of Unity.”

Not a brand name notable, Zone is nevertheless credited by many New York street hitters, past and present, as instrumental in keeping b-boying alive. Countless breakers insist that Zone is always “keeping it real”



With an audience in place, the show formally starts. Zone TDK, the crew leader and MC, begins his spiel, the longest phase of the show and its organizing force. The spiel introduces the crew, describes the event, and sets the rules of the performance. The New York Public Library, 2007. All photos here by Elizabeth A. Burbach.



Zone TDK and Rasheem perform the Two Man Spin and entertain the crowd in front of the New York Public Library, 2007.

by “bringing it back to the streets.” B-girl Ana “Rokafella” Garcia said it best. During a live celebration of street dance at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2009, Rokafella paid tribute to Zone and to other early, formative street hitters:

Normally when you think of breaking or popping or New York City dance, other names come up in your mind.

Never the names of the Tranzformerz, the Breeze Team, USA, the Float Committee... But after today, we hope that we have done our job by bringing them here to impress upon you that they were a part of the NYC dance history like no other. They never stopped believing in hip hop. [Garcia 2009]

Zone TDK is looked up to as a tradition bearer and a leader of the community among b-boys invested in their cultural and artistic heritage.

Zone established the NYC Tranzformerz crew in 1985, with the aim of building a lasting community, a family of b-boys. The crew performs *street showcase break dance*, an aesthetic outgrowth from breaking’s origins in gang, then crew, battle. Street showcase, a genre conceived by Zone, is team b-boying organized around integrated segments of dance, which include individual solos as well as group work. More than dance, the crew provides an entertainment event: a variety show of comedic bits, staged acrobatic routines, and audience interaction and participation.

The crew is unique among New York street hitters. Mirroring the heterogeneity of the City, they are a multiracial, multicultural,

and multinational crew. Zone also includes women, or b-girls, in his crew, a rarity in the male-dominated genre, especially among street hitters. Also unusual, the crew consists of classically trained dancers who came to b-boying later in their lives, as well as those who learned their craft more traditionally—on the street.

The core of the crew, Zone, Professor Pop, and Rasheem are African American men who share the experience of growing up in the ghettos of New York, specifically Harlem and the Bronx. They came together through breaking and have stayed together two decades. During the summer of 2007, when I began research with them, the crew was filled out by Reflex, of Puerto Rican descent and from Spanish Harlem; Sicilian Tommaso; and b-girls Nadia, from Italy, and Ill Jill, from Michigan, who are also classically trained ballerinas and aerialists. In 2012, most of them remain. Nevertheless, and true to their name, the crew’s composition is always transforming while remaining familiar, as b-boys come and go and return again. Zone welcomes former crew members, new b-boys, and friends of the crew to sit in, or *bit*, with them, a testament to the familial community that Zone encourages and demands.



Nadia and Ill Jill are professional ballerinas and aerialists who bring art off the stage and into the street where everyone can access it. The New York Public Library, 2007.



Rasheem somersaults over a line of three children volunteers from the audience. A big crowd pleaser, you can almost hear the collective gasp. The New York Public Library, 2007.

I have been watching the NYC Tranzformerz since the early 1990s. I was immediately drawn to their skills as dancers and the way they used the environment. They don't just work *on* the street; their work is made *of* the street. Whether it is cops, cars, or the cantankerous, the crew takes it and makes it part of the show. The crew jokes, flirts, and sometimes taunts pedestrians as they invite and encourage them to stop and join the fun. They are especially good at incorporating children, who love them, and who seem unable *not* to dance. The work of the NYC Tranzformerz is an important part of what makes the big city sometimes feel like a small community.

Community is the key to their philosophy. For Zone and the crew, b-boying is a way of life, centered on community and teaching—stay together, remember where you come from, pass it on, and give something back. So, while the crew does private gigs, Zone keeps bringing it back to the street—

“so people can *see* it,”—where he considers breaking should be seen and how it should be experienced. Live, face-to-face, community-oriented interaction grounds b-boying in its traditional context as it allows the crew to present it and to teach it to others who might not otherwise have knowledge of b-boying.

Each b-boy/b-girl has his/her own motivations as well. Up close and personal, Pop aims to make you laugh. Rasheem wants to astound. Jill and Nadia are invested in bringing art to the streets where it is freely accessible to everyone and at a price anyone can afford. The crew as a whole hopes to inspire, to spark our dormant creative potential—if not in breaking, then in the simple ways we go about our daily living.

Working the street, the crew gets free rehearsal space, a place to be sociable, and, of course, a way of making some cash. They are typically out seven days a week, from early afternoon until the sun goes down, or



Rasheem's physical prowess and feats of daring attract and captivate people on the street. The New York Public Library, 2007.



The NYC Tranzformerz extend their community to anyone who is interested and incorporate the audience into the show, encouraging children to participate. Columbus Circle 2007.

when pedestrian traffic slows. Rest assured, the crew will continue to entertain as long as there is an audience willing to donate money. Donations are important—for some b-boys, street hitting is their major source of income. For others, it is supplemental. Either way, b-boying on the concrete is really, really hard work.

New York City is distinguished by the life of its streets. The people who stop to watch the NYC Tranzformerz are native New Yorkers and the recently immigrated, as well as tourists from the US and abroad. The general consensus among them is that street performance, in quantity and quality, sets New York apart from other cities around the globe and is integral to the vitality of the city. They also agree that the NYC Tranzformerz provide some of the finest performance on the streets today.

This is important. Public space in New York City is increasingly policed. Street art is monitored and controlled by city officials, because they believe they have the right to decide who we should see, what we should value, and how we should interact. But the life of the street is a gift we of the city give ourselves. That shared life needs to be cultivated. The gift deserves protection. So let's tend to the beauty of the street, our streets,

and support our fellows as they co-create our city with us and for us.

Seek out our street artists, like the NYC Tranzformerz. From early spring until the advent of winter, the NYC Tranzformerz can be found performing throughout the city. Look for them at the South Street Seaport, Columbus Circle, the New York Public Library, and Times Square, among other locations.

Stop and watch. Participate. And don't forget—"It's never too late to donate." ▼

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On the street, we get to meet our superheroes face to face and give them a fist bump. The streets of New York have been understood as a zone of entertainment since at least the early 1800s. The NYC Tranzformerz are an important part of that long tradition. Columbus Circle, 2007.

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