

5 HIP HOP

The dances would consist of my group of friends talking amongst ourselves and watching the girls as the girls talked and watched us. I had no idea how to dance with a girl, especially not to a fast song, I'm pretty sure most of us didn't. But what we all knew how to do was B-Boy or breakdance and pop-lock. We would spend hours practicing almost every day, lugging big pieces of cardboard boxes downtown with us. Someone would always have a boom-box with them, a huge radio that they would carry on their shoulder, Run-DMC blasting out of the speakers. We would put the cardboard down on the ground, while someone would hold the radio, rarely putting the radio on the ground because everyone thought that contact with the ground would drain the batteries faster, and then all of us would take turns showing off our moves.

The break-dancers, we called B-Boys, would bop to the beat and start to showcase their legwork as they eventually made their way down to the ground. Some B-Boys were known for their footwork, using intricate moves to kick one foot up in the air while the other one stayed on the cardboard and their hands would move in unison to the music. Some B-Boys were known for their ability to incorporate their legwork into elaborate routines where they would do flares and moves that made them look like Olympic gymnasts. Others were known for their ability to spin on their backs, round and round, over and over and then turn their back spins into what we called windmills. They would grab their crotch with their hands, spin off their back and shoulders and flip themselves from their back to their front, over and over again. Some B-Boys even had head spins in their repertoire and would go from a headstand into a series of spins on their head until they eventually removed their hands from the ground and would literally spin using nothing but their head and neck.

The best B-Boys could incorporate all the elements into a routine; legwork, backspins, jump up to more legwork, then bust out a few flares into some windmills and end in a B-Boy pose and the crowd that would always gather to watch would go wild! Then there were the pop-lockers, dudes that would move their bodies stiff like robots or look as if their arms and legs were liquid, with no bones or joints in them. If you could pop-lock and breakdance, you were truly the shit, especially if you could do it with your own style, unique to anyone else's. Originality was the most important aspect of B-Boying, anyone seen duplicating the moves of another one was deemed to be a "biter" and biting someone else's moves was considered to be a crime punishable by serious ridicule or sometimes even an ass whipping. But most of the time, if you had an issue with someone, you would simply battle.

Battling was how everyone earned their reputation as a B-Boy with the crowd's response determining the winner. The breakers each took turns on the cardboard or floor, showcasing their moves and pointing out their opponent.

Sometimes, entire crews would battle each other, with members of each of the crews taking their turns to come out into the center of the circle that would form around them, and give the audience their best moves. Pop Lockers would usually battle other pop-lockers. Someone busting a windmill from one crew meant the breaker with the best windmills from the other crew would come out and show their best moves.

The biggest battles always took place at the roller skating rinks. Skating rinks were where everyone went on weekends and each side of town had their own respective rinks. Friday nights were usually spent at USA Skates on the Eastside of town and Saturday nights were for Olympic Skates, on the Westside of town. People went skating for three things; so that guys could meet girls and vice versa, to breakdance or battle, or to fight.

Everyone would be dressed in their best outfits. Girls would wear skin tight Jordache Jeans, suede boots and sweatshirts with their names or their boyfriend's names on the back. Dudes wore fresh suede Adidas with fat colored shoe-laces, breaker belts labeled with their names or nicknames across the front on the belt buckle. In the winter time everyone wore Shearling sheep skin coats or bomber jackets with fake fur linings around the hoods. The breakdance crews would have on matching sweatshirts with the name of their crews on the back and their nicknames on the front or down the sleeves of their shirts. It seemed like everyone called themselves "Ski," Jay-Ski and Tee-Ski or they would take their first name and just use their last initial, like Billy B. or Sam T. The really cool dudes would have original nicknames, like "Cheese" or "Big Bully" or "Smash" and everyone would be strutting around like they were the "Baddest" thing to ever walk the earth.

Most of us didn't go to actually skate, we went to socialize and wait for the fights to break out so we could all watch. There were however, some serious skaters, girls and guys that moved smoothly on skates. They would weave in and out of the slower moving skaters, perform tricks and skate backwards or do the latest dances, all while going as fast as they could around the rink. They made it look so easy that every once in a while, after watching them, I would be convinced that I could skate and I would grab a pair of rented skates and hit the rink. Usually not soon after, my ass would end up hitting the floor! Skating was definitely not my thing so I stuck to just hanging with my crew and watching the older kids talk to girls and fight.

I was shy around crowds or people I didn't know, and lacked the confidence to get involved with the larger B-Boy battles that took place. We were still younger than most of the serious B-boys so most of us would just watch admiringly as the really "fresh" breakers got busy. Fresh was a term we used for everything, but mostly to describe something we thought was trendy or stylish or just plain cool. We would say, "Yo, that outfit is dumb fresh" or "Damn, did you see his windmills? They were fresh to death." And if something was not up to par or we felt that a move was weak, we would say, "That shit is whack." Many fights were started because someone called someone else whack, or

accused someone of biting someone else's moves or rhymes.

We did not know it at the time, but we were in the midst of a cultural revolution. The Bronx had just given birth to Hip Hop a few years earlier and the brand new Hip Hop culture associated with it, permeated every aspect of our life, from the slang we spoke, to the music we enjoyed, to the rhymes we all wrote and practiced, to the B-boy battles we participated in. Hip Hop became embedded in our DNA. It was not a way of life for us. It was life itself!

We lived by the principles taught by the culture and spread by the lyrics in many of the songs we enjoyed. Hip Hop consisted of five basic elements; Emceeing (and Beatboxing), DJing, Graffiti art, B-Boying, and knowledge of culture. My first real introduction as a participant in the culture was through B-boying, but I soon discovered Graffiti and my life was dominated by practicing breakdancing and creating new drawings, called "pieces," in my art books.

Graffiti and witnessing a school bully get his ass beat while at #3 school, led me to meeting Reggie. Reg was short and thin, medium complexioned with a smile that you could see coming all the way down the hallway. His homeroom was down the hallway from mine and we would see each other in passing but never really hung out or spent much time socializing.

One of the older bullies who was about twice the size of Reg, took things a bit too far and pushed him into a locker. Reg spun around off the locker so that he was standing directly in front of the older student, and snuck him in the eye with a left hook that was so fast that no one saw it coming! The older dude fell back, slumped over and slid down the locker to the floor, holding his eye with a totally surprised look on his face. The only one that looked more surprised was Reggie. He kept looking down at his left hand, which was still balled up in a fist, and looking at the older student's eye, as it grew more and more swollen until it completely shut in just a few seconds.

There were only a few people in the hallway when it happened but everyone let out a collective, "Daaaaaaaammnnnn" followed by finger pointing at the dude's grossly disfigured eye and loud laughter. Reg, having no idea what to do next, just shrugged his shoulders and started smiling his regular, big ass goofy smile, bopped down the hallway and headed straight for the principal's office. I had to go to the office for something unrelated and when I saw him in there I slapped him a high-five and we both looked at the older student as he sat across from us and laughed. He looked up, holding a bag of ice on his swollen eye, and said "What the fuck are you laughing at?" Without missing a beat, Reg said, "Laughing at you, you one-eyed Cyclops looking sucker," and we busted out laughing some more!

As I waited for my turn to see the principal, I was doodling on a piece of paper, nothing fancy, just drawing my name in some graffiti style letters. Reg looked over and said, "That's fresh. I write too." "Writing" was what we called creating graffiti style artwork. Soon after that we started hanging every day, writing graffiti, drilling on people and just hanging out in general.

We also shared a love for Hip Hop music and we would spend every

Saturday night listening to WRUR, the local college radio station, which showcased Rochester's only true underground Hip Hop radio show. DJ Rondell Claiborne had a show on WRUR and we would get blank cassette tapes ready and tune in so we could record our favorite songs. Listening to those radio shows was more like an event, something that we would look forward to all week. We would sit down, listen to the show, talk and design new graffiti pieces. Hip Hop bonded us for life. Our similarities strengthened that bond and our differences seemed less significant because we shared the same passion for a culture that we were helping spread and develop.

CHAPTER 5 PART II

While we spent most of our time doing graffiti and practicing breakdance moves we also started to make some time for our growing interest in girls. My experiences at the school dances and skating opened my eyes to the fact that girls were really starting to occupy much more of my thoughts. Actually, they were starting to dominate all of my thoughts. It seemed girls that I previously never really noticed before, had developed breasts and hips overnight. Now the tight designer jeans that they wore really accentuated their hips and thighs, and I started to really notice the way the jeans would hug their behinds and the way their t-shirts now seemed to be completely full and form fitting. It was as if I went to sleep one night and woke the next morning dead smack in the midst of puberty. Most of my friends were going through the same thing. Our conversations were now dominated by discussions about which girls had the best bodies and rumors about which girl was known to be sexually active or who had given who a blow job behind the bleachers on the football field. It seemed like every conversation would eventually lead to some sort of sexual discussion, that every single one of our thoughts was somehow focused directly on our growing sexual desires.

It was around this time that I started to become more self-conscious about my clothes and how my hair looked. I distinctly remember starting my 7th grade year with a pair of plain Levi jeans, a pair of sweatpants, a couple different T-shirts, a sweater and one pair of Kangaroo sneakers with the zipper on the side. I created a schedule for myself so that I could mix and match my clothes to create the maximum number of different outfits throughout the week. This system was working fine for me until I found myself engaged in one of our daily drilling sessions during lunch time. I was drilling this dude about this raggedy wig his mother would always wear and everyone was dying laughing. Just before the bell rang to signal the end of the lunch period, he stood up and said loud enough for the entire lunch room to hear, "Ah nigga at least my momma can change her damn clothes. You just mad because all you have to wear is those same dusty ass sweatpants with that same ugly ass T-shirt every day!" Everyone from my table, the lunch table behind mine, and what felt like the entire lunch room started cracking up laughing and pointed at me saying, "Damn, Jason's sweatpants are dusty!"

Normally I would have a comeback for any drill that anyone could throw my way, but I just looked down at my sweatpants as I could feel the embarrassment rushing over me knowing what he said was true. I felt exposed, like everyone was now aware of my secret, the fact that I only had two pairs of pants, and that now all eyes were on me and my clothes. I had been drilled before for many things, my hair, the fact that I was knock-kneed, my mother's station wagon, and sometimes I would think about those things. I would usually try to just laugh at myself and accept the humor in what was being said, but this was different. Puberty and hormones coupled with the insecurities associated with that time in a young person's life made those words stick to me and I became so self-conscious that I didn't wear those sweatpants again for at least a month, which meant that I had to wear my same pair of jeans every day.

Patrick was in the same boat as I was. He had only two or three pairs of pants himself, so we started sharing each other's clothes so that we could make it seem like we had more options in our wardrobes. It worked out great for Patrick, I was taller and heavier than he was so he could put on a belt and roll up the bottom of my pants to make them fit him perfectly. I, on the other hand, had to squeeze into Patrick's pants and wear boots to cover up the fact that the bottom of the pants sat about 2 inches above my ankle, creating what we called "high waters" and definitely drawing unwanted attention that would lead to someone else drilling me about my pants. This was the first time that we were forced to confront the fact that our families didn't have much money and that there were things that we now wanted that our families were unable to provide.

My insecurities led to me avoiding that lunch table at all costs for at least the next few weeks, and it wasn't until a girl that I had a huge crush on asked me why I didn't sit at the table anymore during lunch, that I finally got up the nerve to go back and sit there again. She told me she would save a seat for me and that she had something she wanted to tell me. For the rest of that day all I could do was day dream about what she would say to me. I envisioned myself sitting next to her and her wrapping her arms around my neck as she pulled me closer to her so she could whisper her secret into my ear. Just that simple thought was enough to make me completely forget about any of the embarrassment from before and my imagination started to really run wild, with me daydreaming about kissing her and touching her plump, firm breasts.

When I finally made it to lunch, I looked towards the table and saw her sitting there with a few of her friends. They were all looking towards the door and when I entered they all started to giggle and whisper to each other. My heart beat faster and faster the closer I got to the table. She moved the lunch tray she was using to save my seat and looked at me with a shy confidence as I sat down next to her. My heart was now beating so hard that I could hear my pulse throbbing in my ear-drums, my mind was racing with thoughts of what she was planning on telling me. She said, "Hi Jason," and all her girlfriends started to giggle and whisper among themselves again. I was not the type to be at a loss for words, but I was so uncomfortable that I did not know what to say, so I just looked at her, and for the

first time, I noticed how unbelievably beautiful she was. Her skin was the color of light brown sugar and her lips were plump and perfectly shaped, her eyes twinkled as she smiled at me and I found myself once again day dreaming about her, only she was sitting right there, right next to me.

She leaned over to whisper in my ear and I noticed how good she smelled, not like perfume, just clean, and fresh, exactly the way I thought a beautiful girl should smell. I inhaled deeply, really savoring her aroma, and held my breath as she began to speak slowly and softly into my ear, "I just wanted to know if, ummm, if you liked me because I like you and, ummmm, I want you to be my boyfriend." I paused for a moment and just looked at her, saying nothing, trying to gather my thoughts, I wanted to jump up and shout, "HELL YEAH I'll be your boyfriend," but I kept my composure, swallowed hard to keep down the anxiety building up in my chest, put my arm around her and whispered back in her ear, "Yes, but only if you'll be my girlfriend."

As we whispered back and forth, her girlfriends were sitting on the edge of their seats, biting their nails, shoulders hunched tightly as they looked at our faces for any sign indicating what my response was. She looked over at them and showed them a big smile then they all giggled loudly and grabbed her, taking her out of the lunch room so she could share the details with them. Reg and Patrick and a few of my other boys were sitting at the table and Reg came over and gave me a high five and said, "Oh shit, you're the man!" I was riding on a high that I had never felt before and I wasn't really sure why. I had no idea what a boyfriend was supposed to do or what I was supposed to do next, I just knew that one of the prettiest girls in school liked me and let me know it and that was good enough for me.

It seemed that a lot of my friends were getting into girls at around the same time. We were all finding ourselves attracted to girls that just the year before we didn't even realize existed. A lot of the girls had started to "like" boys the year before, but most of us were so oblivious to them, that it was embarrassing once we realized later that they were giving us open opportunities to "like" them back. This was a brand new world for us but the dudes that were older than us had been actively pursuing girls for the past year or two, and they loved sharing their exploits and providing us with tips whenever we were around. There is a huge difference in maturity between a twelve-year-old 6th grader and a fifteen-year-old 8th grader. We would watch the older dudes in awe as they bopped through the hallways, wearing designer jeans, and talking to every girl that walked past.

I started to study them, watch the way they walked and emulate the way they talked, thinking that if I acted more like they did, that I would be able to get with the older girls in the school. A lot of them were fully developed, I mean bodies that put grown women to shame, and the rumors were that a lot of these girls, actually most of them, were more than willing to have sex. Some of the older girls would see me in the hallway and say to their friends, "Oh, he is a cutie" or "If he was older I would show him a thing or two." While I was secretly praying one of them would approach me, I was still far too shy to say anything to any of them, and besides, almost all of them had boyfriends that were 8th graders, and a few had

boyfriends in high school.

That never stopped a couple of my boys from trying to get with them. My boy Peter Campbell, we became close because his birthday is just three days before mine, was confident and aggressive with the girls. Pete was skinny as hell, brown skinned with a long jheri curl and he was always joking around and laughing with or at someone. He would bop down the hallway and bump into one of the older girls, brushing his hand against her breasts or pretend like he was falling down and reach up and grab her ass, acting like that saved him from falling. Most of the girls knew what he was doing and they would either laugh it off or occasionally, one would slap him hard, or invite him to fight. Pete didn't care, either way he would laugh and say, “Damn girl, thank god you had those big ass titties or I would have fallen straight on my face!”

Eventually, everyone started to grab and grope girls in the hallways, especially the girls that didn't protest. Those would be the ones that would be targeted as potential girls to “get with.” The girls that would punch you, slap you or seriously get upset when they were touched would usually be left alone or put in the category of “girlfriend material” as nobody wanted to seriously get with any of the girls that all of us could touch. In retrospect, this was a form of sexual assault at its worst, and was definitely harassment, but I think we viewed it as a physical form of flirting and we used it to figure out which girls would probably be willing to let someone get a kiss, or grind up on, or maybe even have sex. It was a way to thin out the herd, isolate the individuals that we thought we had the best chance of having sex with and then focus our individual energies directly on them.

Looking back, it is easy to see how a young girl with insecurities would allow boys to touch her under the guise of playfulness. Adolescence is a confusing time for everyone, and a young girl who is unsure of her self-image may welcome attention from boys, even if it is inappropriate or harmful. Reflecting back to this time in my life has reminded me of the importance of raising strong minded, confident and self-assured young ladies and making sure that they are aware of their true value and that their bodies should be respected at all times, by everyone. As a father, I know that if I saw one of these little dudes grabbing my baby's body parts, I would seriously have to restrain myself from breaking his little ass down!

Most of the older dudes would talk about how fine “red-bone chicks” were, and make fun of the darker skinned girls. There was a clear preference for red-bones, light skinned girls, over darker skinned girls. This was usually the case with the girls as well. They would openly make fun of each other or boys for being “dark as the night” while they would talk about how fine this light skinned boy was or how cute this yellow dude was. The racial preferences of most of my peers placed me at the top of this racial hierarchy with the girls, and made me a target for the dudes. This skin color preference was not just present in my peers, it seemed to permeate most of the Black and Latino neighborhoods, and it was not uncommon for darker skinned Puerto Ricans to be called “Niggers” or “Darkies” and treated as if they were second class citizens within their own communities.

Girls also introduced us to the concept of “good hair,” hair that was curly and

not thick, tight, kinky or “nappy.” Every day a girl would ask me if they could touch my hair or they would comment about how I had good hair, sometimes calling it “baby hair.” Of course, I loved the attention and never objected to anyone running their fingers through my hair, but I also noticed all the dirty looks I would get from the dudes with natural style hair, what many would have considered to be nappy. I soon found that the fascination with “good hair” went beyond the girls in my school and extended to their mothers and grandmothers. On more times than I can recall, a girl would introduce me to her mother or grandmother or older sister and the first thing that they would say was, “Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm, you have some good hair!”

All the importance placed on hair contributed heavily to me wanting to get a jheri curl, a popular style at that time worn by both black men and women. A jheri Curl was a chemical perm that gave hair long, loose curls that would be moisturized with curl activator products like CareFree™ Curl Activator. CareFree products came in a plastic yellow spray bottle, labeled with red lettering, and would be sprayed onto the hair to make the curls appear shiny and give them a moist, greasy feel. Curls were so greasy that they would leave greasy marks on furniture, clothing or anything that the hair came in contact with. Even though it was expensive to get the perm itself, and the products to maintain the curl were also costly, artists such as Michael Jackson, Lionel Richie, and later Ice Cube, made the style fashionable with black folks throughout the country.

My hair was naturally curly, slightly tighter than most Jheri curls but I didn’t need any chemicals to maintain the look. Of course I wasn’t satisfied with my curly hair, I wanted my hair to hang similar to the way Michael Jackson’s hair would hang down over his forehead and dangle as he moved his head. I convinced my mother to let her sister, my Aunt Sandy, to give me a perm so that my hair would dangle like Michael’s hair. I spent many mornings soaking my hair with activator and every night was spent sleeping with a plastic cap on my hair. Some of the older dudes would wear their plastic caps all day long, taking them off only occasionally to spray more activator in their hair and shake their heads so that everyone could see their curls fling around their heads.

If you had money, you would go to the salon to get your perm done professionally, but most people couldn’t afford to go to the salon so they would buy a box kit which enabled them to do their perms at home. Now some box curls, if done correctly, would look just as good as a professionally done perm, but far too many ended up with patches of hair either not permed, over processed, or simply all dried out. If you came to school with a bad box perm, you would be drilled endlessly for months, as you either had to cut your hair or wait a few months for the perm to grow out before you could attempt to try it again. Chemical perms damaged hair, led to split ends and even caused some people to lose their hair all together. Yet people would still scrape together the \$80 or so it cost to get them done, spend five or six hours in the hair salon and come out with a head full of greasy curls, swearing that they were doing something big.

At the end of the day, most of the major players and popular dudes had Jheri

curls, and the girls would talk about whose curl was the longest and who had the best curl. Many of them would say, "I know he will make a baby with some pretty hair," and "You can tell his baby will have some pretty skin." By the ages of 12 and 13, they had already been completely brain washed into believing that attributes that were considered less black and more white were more desirable, that lighter skin was better and that natural, Afro-centric hair styles were unattractive. This was advantageous for light skinned guys like myself, especially if you had "good hair," and at that age, we lacked the self-awareness to understand the deeper meaning in their preferences. All I knew was that the girls loved me, loved my hair, loved my skin tone and I found myself the center of a lot of female attention. For the first time since moving to Rochester, I began to embrace my racial differences, at least with the girls. But as soon as I started to become somewhat comfortable within my own skin, something would happen to remind me that for a lot of my peers, I was simply that "pretty white boy" and was therefore considered a target for attacks and ridicule.

At the same time that my popularity with the girls was growing, I noticed that my friends were starting to spend less time hanging with each other, and more time chasing or hanging out with girls. The boys were becoming much more physically playful with each other. Slap-boxing and wrestling matches became more common and tempers would flair much faster, often leading to real physical confrontations. It was obvious that our growing sexual awareness was also somehow directly linked to our increased aggression. Years later I would understand that this is often attributed to an increase in testosterone, that aggression is a normal side effect of male hormonal changes, but at the time, I could care less why it was happening. All I knew was that my desire for female companionship was at an all-time high and that feeling on the edge and uptight was becoming the norm.

Right before our summer vacation, actually, right before we were all getting ready to get on our buses on the very last day of school, that pretty girl from the lunch table pulled me to the side and said, "I don't think this is working out, I think we should break up." I wasn't too upset with the idea; she had rebuked damn near every attempt I made at any type of physical interaction. I had pretty much already moved on and started hanging out with a few girls that seemed to be a bit more aggressive and open to a more physical relationship, but we just had not made it "official." Her same girlfriends stood around and watched us as we talked, still whispering to them-selves and giggling upon her return. But this time, I noticed one of them really giving me the eye, and she made sure that I saw her staring at me. Patrick said, "Yo, Linda is really checking you out!" I nodded my head at her to acknowledge that I saw her and she smiled flirtatiously and gave me a wave goodbye before she started to walk home. I watched her as she walked, my eyes shifting back and forth with the sway of her hips, noticing every curve in her fully developed body and memorizing her well-shaped legs and short, confident stride. And just like that, I was completely over my lunch table sweetheart and all seemed right with the universe!

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Most of the girls around my age were just beginning to physically develop, but a few of the girls seemed to change into physically fully-grown women, seemingly overnight. One day you're sitting in class next to a girl that you joked around with and looked at strictly as a 'homie' or a friend, and the next day, POOF, your homie is now looking like a curvaceous, grown ass woman. Puberty was rough on us boys, dealing with uncontrollable erections that literally popped up with no warning and at the worst possible times, and testosterone increases that could change harmless play fighting into a full blown “I am going to try to kill you” fist fight in the snap of two fingers. But as rough as the boys had it, the girls had it even worse. Hormonal changes sent many girls into emotional roller coasters. Tears would flow easily and it seemed that the girls were operating on hair trigger tempers that rivaled and even surpassed those of their puberty stricken male counterparts.

Girls were considerably more aggressive than most boys at that age and were already focused on trying to get a “boyfriend” so they would actively compete for the attention of the popular boys and the boys they considered cute. My decent looks, “good hair” and light skin along with my quick wit and accomplishments on the football field, combined to make me extremely popular with the young ladies. My neighborhood was known for having attractive girls and my front porch became the hang-out spot for many of them, while I was still a little shy, I quickly became friends with many of the most attractive girls.

Although our neighborhood was fairly diverse, there weren't many white kids my age so the majority of my friends in the neighborhood were black. Besides the geographic limitations to establishing white friends, I found myself extremely uncomfortable hanging out with the white kids at school because I knew that it would bring on ridicule from others and they would drill me and start calling me white boy again so I made a purposeful effort to keep distance, at least in public, between myself and my white friends and of course this carried over to my interactions with girls as well. While my summer got off to a great start, things would quickly change and take my entire family down a brand new, unplanned course.