Break dancing is a style of competitive, acrobatic, and pantomimic dancing. It began as a kind of game, a friendly contest in which black and Hispanic teenagers outdid one another with outrageous physical contortions, spins, and back flips, wedded to a fluid, syncopated, circling body rock done close to the ground. Breaking once meant only dancing on the floor, but now its definition has widened to include electric boogie, up-rock, aerial gymnastics, and all sorts of other fancy variations.

Although breaking is the newest part of hip-hop culture, it's the part that has made hip hop a media obsession. Five years ago the only people who had ever heard of breaking were the kids in New York's ghettos who did it. They didn't even have a definite name for the form—they sometimes called it "breaking," but they also referred to it as "rocking down," "b-boy," or just "that kind of dancing you do to rap music." By 1980—when the form had already been around for a few years—they weren't even very interested in it anymore. This kind of dancing was a passing fad, they felt, that would soon be replaced by roller disco. But history was to prove them wrong. Not since the twist, in the early sixties, has a dance craze so captured the attention of the media.

By 1984 only a hermit could not have known about breaking. It had arrived, not only in the United States but also in Canada, Europe, and Japan. Breaking had been featured in the 1983 Hollywood film Flashdance, the independent hip-hop musical film Wild Style, and the documentary Style Wars (which aired on PBS), served as inspiration for the 1984 films Breakin' and Beat Street, and was rumored to be the subject of fifteen forthcoming Hollywood movies. Countless how-to books and videos had hit the market. Breaking had been spotlighted on national news shows, talk shows, and ads for Burger King, Levi's, Pepsi-Cola, Coca-Cola, and Panasonic. One hundred break dancers heated up the closing ceremonies of the 1984 summer Olympics in Los Angeles. And Michael Jackson had given the form national currency.

Breaking made the cover of Newsweek in 1984. Newspapers all over the country regularly carried stories on its latest ups and downs. The paradox emerged, as you flipped the pages of the Washington Post or the Los Angeles Times, that break dancers who'd come up in the ghetto were banned from city streets and shopping malls for causing disturbances and attracting undesirable crowds, while at the same time middle-class housewives and executives could learn to break dance in their spare time at classes proliferating throughout the suburbs. Doctors added to the form's acceptability by giving medical advice on how to survive it unbruised. And the New York Times began using breaking as a metaphor even in articles that had nothing to do with hip hop.
By now, break dancing was happening at bar mitzvahs, children’s dance recitals, high-
school proms, college dances, in prison talent shows, at ballet galas, and on Broadway, as well
as in clubs and discos—and, in a second-generation revival, in city parks and on the streets
once again. Even President Reagan was delighted by breaking when he saw the New York City
Breakers perform in Washington, D.C., at a Kennedy Center gala.

The media hype about break dancing has changed both its form and its meaning. So to talk
about break dancing you have to divide it into two stages: before and after media. Before the
media turned breaking into a dazzling entertainment, it was a kind of serious game, a form of
urban vernacular dance, a fusion of sports, dancing, and fighting whose performance had
urgent social significance for the dancers. After media, participation in break dancing was
stratified into two levels: professional and amateur. For the pros, break dancing had become
a theatrical art form with a technique and a vocabulary that, like ballet’s, could be refined and
expanded. On this level, competition took on new meaning. It was no longer a battle for
control of the streets, for neighborhood fame, or to win your opponent’s “colors” (tee-shirt with
crew insignia). Now cash prizes, roles in Hollywood movies, and European tours were at stake.
For the amateurs, the element of competition had diminished. The appeal was a mixture of
getting physically fit, tackling the challenge of breaking’s intricate skills, and even becoming
more like street kids, who’ve suddenly become stylish thanks to the meteoric vogue of hip
hop.

Breaking first entered media consciousness when Martha Cooper, a photographer who had
for years been documenting graffiti, was sent by the New York Post to cover “a riot” and found
some kids—members of the High Times Crew, friends and relatives from West 175th Street—
who claimed they’d been dancing, not fighting, in a subway station. One kid demonstrated
some moves to a policeman, who then called in the others one by one. “Do a head spin,” he
commanded as he consulted a clipboard full of notes. “Do the baby.” As each crew member
complied, performing on cue as unhesitatingly as a ballet dancer might pirouette across a
stage, the police had to admit defeat.

Or so the story goes. But, like ballet and like great battles (it shares elements of both),
breaking is wreathed in legends. Since its early history wasn’t documented—the Post never
ran Cooper’s photos—it lives on only in memories and has taken on mythological form.

The heroes of these legends are the b-boys, the original break dancers, black and Hispanic
teenagers who invented and endlessly elaborate the heady blend of dancing, acrobatics, and
warfare that is breaking. Like other forms of ghetto street culture and like the other elements
of hip hop, breaking began as a public showcase for the flamboyant triumph of virility, wit,
and skill in short, of style.

The intensity of the dancer’s physicality gives breaking a power and energy even beyond
the vitality of graffiti and rapping. If graffiti is a way of “publishing,” of winning fame by
spreading your tag all over the city, breaking is a way of claiming the streets with physical pre-

cence, using your body to publicly inscribe your identity on the surfaces of the city, to flaunt
a unique personal style within a conventional format. The body symbolism makes breaking an
extremely powerful version of two favorite forms of street rhetoric—the taunt and the boast.
The razzing takes the form of insulting gestures aimed at your opponent, while the bragging is
expressed through acrobatic virtuosity. Breaking is a competitive display of physical and
imaginative prowess, a highly codified dance form that in its early stages served as an arena for
both battles and artistic invention and that allowed for cracking open the code to flaunt
personal inventiveness.

The High Times Crew told the cops they were dancing, not fighting, and as breaking captured
mainstream attention it was touted in the media as a transfiguration of gang warfare. Breaking may
be a stylized, rhythmic, aesthetically framed form of combat—but it still escalates, at times, into
actual violence. Peace is volatile when honor is at stake, and the physical heat of the form itself makes for situations that are highly combustible, as scenes from both *Breakin'* and *Beat Street* show.

Until breaking became frozen and legitimated by media hype, it was, like much of kids' culture in our cities, self-generated and nearly invisible to outsiders, especially adults—who just didn't want to even think about it or know about it, much less watch it. It was both literally and figuratively an underground form, happening in the subways as well as in parks and city playgrounds, but only among those in the know. Its invisibility and elusiveness had to do with the extemporaneous nature of the original form and also with its social context. Breaking jams weren't scheduled; they happened when the situation arose. You didn't get advance notice of a breaking "performance"; you had to be in the right place at the right time. In other words, you had to be part of the crew system that provided social order among the kids of the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn ghettos.

Since May 1981, when Henry Chalfant presented the Rock Steady Crew at Common Ground in SoHo as part of a graffiti rock show, breaking has taken to theatrical presentation like a duck to water. The first article on the form, by Sally Banes with photos by Martha Cooper, appeared in the *Village Voice* just before the concert, giving breaking instant visibility. By the end of that summer, break dancers had appeared outdoors at Lincoln Center and at other festivals, and endless filming had begun. The Rock Steady Crew signed up for an appearance in *Flashdance*, and kids were already learning to break not from older brothers and cousins on the street, but from watching Rock Steady on TV. Breaking had entered the public eye and left the underground for the mainstream, and this new theatrical context, with a style largely disseminated by the Rock Steady Crew, quickly crystallized the form for spectators.

Through breaking, in its original form, all the pleasures, frustrations, hopes, and fears of adolescence were symbolically played out in public spaces. Breaking was inextricably tied to rapping, both in terms of its style and content and because the rap provides the insistent percussion that drives the dance.

The format of the dance was at first quite fixed. The dancers and onlookers formed an impromptu circle. Each person's turn in the ring was very brief—ten to thirty seconds—but packed with action and meaning. It began with an entry, a hesitating walk that allowed him time to get in step with the music for several beats and take his place "onstage." Next the dancer "got down" to the floor to do the footwork, a rapid, slashing, circular scan of the floor by sneakered feet, in which the hands support the body's weight while the head and torso revolve at a slower speed, a kind of syncopated, sunken pirouette, also known as the helicopter. Acrobatic transitions such as head spins, hand spins, shoulder spins, flips, and the swipe—a flip of the weight from hands to feet that also involves a twist in the body's direction—served as bridges between the footwork and the freeze. The final element was the exit, a spring back to verticality or a special movement that returned the dancer to the outside of the circle.

The entry, the footwork, and the exit were all pretty formulaic, with very little room for showing off personal style, although some dancers created special versions of these elements—Frosty Freeze, for instance, often exited "on point," walking on the tips of his sneakers. The entry, the footwork, and the exit were like the stock expressions and nonsense syllables that sandwich narrative content in a rap. They provided a rhythmic frame for the freeze, an improvised pose or movement, which broke the beat. They also provided a nicely textured, comfortably predictable backdrop against which the freeze stood out in bold relief. And besides their aesthetic function, these segments were a way for the dancer to "tread water" between strokes, to free the mind for strategizing while the body went through familiar, un inventive paces.

The simplest combination of a breaking sequence was entry-footwork-spin-freeze-exit. But turns in the center could be extended by inserting more footwork-spin-freeze segments.
In other words, you might get: entry-footwork-spin-freeze-footwork-spin-freeze-exit. And so on.

The entry, the footwork, and the exit framed the freeze, a flash of pure personal style, which was the most important part of the dance. The main thing about the freeze was that it should be as intricate, witty, insulting, or obscene as possible. "You try to put your head on your arm and your toenails on your ears," explains Ken of the Breakmasters crew. "When you spin on your head," says another b-boy, "When you take your legs and put them in back of your head out of the spin." A dancer might twist himself into a pretzel, or strike a cocky salute. He would quote the sexy poses of a pinup girl, or perhaps present his ass to his opponent in a gesture of contempt. Through pantomime, he might extend the scatological insult even more graphically, pretending to befoul his opponent. Or he might hold his nose, telling the other guy he stinks. He might put his hand to his spine, signaling a move so good it hurts. Sometimes the dancers in the opposing crew joined in, razzing the performer from the sidelines.

Some of the freeze motifs prophetically rehearsed possible futures for the b-boys. Several images quoted sports actions—swimming, rowing a boat—and even more suggested the military. The freeze celebrated the flexibility and budding sexuality of the gangly male adolescent body, and looked forward to sexual adventures or commemorated past ones. The gun imagery of the military pantomimes doubled as phallic imagery. A dancer would often grab his crotch or hump the floor for a memorable finale.

Another important set of motifs in the freeze section was the exploration of body states in a subjunctive mode—things not as they are, but as they might be—comparing and contrasting youthful male vitality with its range of opposites: women, animals (dogs, horses, mules), babies, old age, injury and illness (e.g., a heart attack à la Richard Pryor's routines), and death.

Various dancers had their specialties, especially in the freeze, but also sometimes in the other sections of the dance. Crazy Legs got his name from his rubber-legged way of walking into the ring, a move descended from the Charleston, and he also takes credit for the W, both face-up and face-down. Kip Dee claims he invented the elbow walk. As breaking moved from the streets to the stage, dancers teamed up to make group freezes, a development that has been elaborately extended over the past two or three years.

In the broadest sense, freezes were improvised. Few were devised on the spot; they were imagined and worked out in advance. But they allowed for the greatest range of individual invention, and the choice of which freeze to use at a given time was often an extemporaneous decision. The b-boys used a variety of methods to create new freezes, including techniques, such as accidents and dreams, preferred by shamans and by the Dadaist and Surrealist painters and poets. Not all freezes have names, but to name your specialty—and to write it as graffiti—was a way of laying claim to it, a kind of common-law copyright.

In breaking as street competition, the freeze was the challenge that incited, a virtuosic performance as well as a symbol of identity. As each dancer repeatedly took his turn and, through a series of strategic choices, built excitement with a crescendo of complicated, meaning-packed freezes, he won status and honor for himself and for his group.

The b-boys organized themselves according to neighborhood or family ties into crews, which were networks for socializing, writing graffiti, and rapping, as well as dancing, held together by a strict code of ethics and loyalty. Crews performed in a spirit of friendly competition at jams where the crew leader directed the group's moves. One kid would set up a challenge, and a b-boy from the opposing crew would try to top him, or "burn" him. The crew leader was in charge of sending in new players to spell someone who had run out of moves. Onlookers—more friends, relatives, and neighbors—would judge the contest by consensus. B-boys learned to dance in a system of master-apprentice, referring to each other as father
and son—even though the “father” was usually only a few years older than his “son”—and even chose names that reflected their relationship, like Ty Fly and Kid Ty Fly.

In those days, although there were some girls who joined in, most of the break dancers were boys from the ages of about eight to sixteen. One reason that girls were the exception was that breaking was a specific expression of machismo. Part of its macho quality comes from the physical risk involved—not only the bruises, cuts, scratches, and scrapes, but also the risk of real fighting that might erupt. And part of it is the deliberate attempt to impress the girls.

Breaking was one kind of “rocking,” which also included up-rock, a more pantomimic, narrative style of dancing done jumping down and up to standing level, kicking, jabbing, and punching right in a rival’s face, without actually touching. In up-rock every move is intended to insult the opponent, and besides actual fighting gestures, a dancer might mime grabbing his rival’s private parts, smelling his hand, making a face, and then throwing the offending odor back. Up-rock is funny, but like a rapper’s boast it has a mean edge.

The break dancer’s “costume” was born of necessity as well as style. Tee-shirts and net over-shirts provide traction on the spins, and sneakers are important to the footwork. Their critical role in the dance is emphasized by making the feet look gigantic and by nearly fetishizing the shoes with embellishments like wide, bright laces loosely tied so that the tongues stick out. The insignia of the crew, as well as colors and outfits that coordinate with those of fellow crew members, play a part in intensifying group solidarity. And the overall look of militarized athleticism creates an image of power and authority. The other accessory for break dancing is a mat, made of cardboard or linoleum, that originally protected the dancers from scraping against concrete.

For the current generation of b-boys, it doesn’t really matter that the breakdown is an old name in Afro-American dance for both rapid, complex footwork and a competitive format. Or that a break in jazz means a soloist’s improvised bridge between melodies. Or that break is a technical term in Haitian voodoo, referring to both drumming and dancing, that marks the point of possession. Katherine Dunham defines the term as “convulsive movements and sharp temporary changes in a ceremonial…rhythm.” Or that in a different Afro-American culture, in French Guiana, there is an old dance called, in Creole, cassé to (translation: breaking the body). All these connections have obvious links with break dancing as we now know it. For the b-boys, memory is short and history is brief; breaking started in the mid-seventies, maybe in the Bronx, maybe in Harlem. It started with Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulus. Or with Charlie Rock. Or with Joe, from the Casanovas, from the Bronx, who taught it to Charlie Rock. “Breaking means going crazy on the floor,” one b-boy explained back in 1980, “It means making a style for yourself.”

As Fab Five Freddy (Fred Braithwaite), the musical director for Wild Style, remembers it, breaking began when rapping did, as an intuitive physical response to the music. “Everybody would be at a party in the park in the summer, jamming. Guys would get together and dance with each other, sort of a macho thing where they would show each other who could do the best moves. They started going wild when the music got real funky—music by groups like SuperSperm and Apache. As the beat of the drummer came to the fore, the music let you know it was time to break down, to freestyle.” The cadenced, rhyming, fast-talking epic mode of rapping, with its smooth surface of sexual braggadocio, provided a perfect base for a dance style that was cool, swift, and intricate. The structure of the rap, with its play of quick, varying rhythms going on and off the beat within a steady four-square pulse, is like the off-balance, densely packed, lightning-speed pace of the breaking routine. The sense of inclusiveness, of all being in on a fun time together (“Everybody say ho!” “This is the way we rock the house!” “I am! We are!”), of turn-taking, is there both in the rap and in the dance. At times the lyrics of
the rap even dictate the break-dancing moves, as the MC calls out the names of the dancers and the steps.

For the current generation of b-boys the history of breaking may reach back only to recent memory—and even those stories conflict—but of course in a broader sense the history of breaking goes back to the slave trade, when Afro-American dancing was born. Breaking is something new and original, born of American ghetto culture in the seventies and (in its latest manifestation) in the eighties, but its basic building blocks are moves from the Afro-American repertory, which includes the lindy and the Charleston and also incorporates dances from the Caribbean and South America. Capoeira, a Brazilian form of martial art that, since slaves were forbidden to practice it, evolved as a dance to disguise itself, bears a striking resemblance to breaking, with its crouching, circling, cartwheeling moves. And, as the Africanist Robert F. Thompson has pointed out, capoeira is a pretty direct descendant from Angolan dance. But while breaking is not capoeira, but something unique, and while breakers may never have seen capoeira until others pointed out to them the similarities of the two forms, the two dance/sport/fight forms have the same roots, just as rapping and the collage of music that comes with it are new and at the same time firmly rooted in a tradition of black and Hispanic music and verbal style.

The main source of the movement in breaking is black dance, but like the rest of hip hop, breaking is an exuberant synthesis of popular culture that draws on everything in its path. Some moves can be traced to the Caribbean, some to the black church, some to the Harlem ballrooms of the twenties and thirties, some to such dances as the lindy and the Charleston, and others to such diverse sources as kung-fu movies—which were immensely popular in the seventies—Playboy magazine, French pantomime, cartoons, comics, and TV.

Like any form of dance, breaking is more than the sum of its movements; it is also the way movements are combined, as well as the costumes, music, setting, audience, and the interaction between dancers and spectators. And its context. As an integral part of hip hop, breaking shares many stylistic features with graffiti, rapping, and scratching. Like wild-style graffiti, it emphasizes flamboyance, and the embellishment of the tag finds its parallel in the freeze. The act of writing graffiti is, despite its acceptance on canvas at the Fifty-seventh Street galleries, an act of defiance, and breaking, in its days before media hype, was an act of obscene gestures, a threat. In both graffiti and breaking, each piece or freeze is a challenge, a call to rivals to try to top this, and at the same time a boast that it is unbeatable. Graffiti, rapping, and breaking alike celebrate the masculine heroes of the mass media—Superman and other comic-book heroes, the Saint of detective book and TV fame, athletes, kung-fu masters, and great lovers. The obscure gestural ciphers of breaking find their parallels in the (deliberately) nearly unreadable alphabets of wild-style graffiti, the (deliberately) nearly unintelligible thicket of rap lyrics, and the (deliberately) barely recognizable music that is cut up and recombined in scratching.

Graffiti writers make up new names for themselves, choosing tags partly on the aesthetic grounds that certain letters look good together; break dancers, too, rename themselves, either after their dancing specialty or style—Frosty Freeze, Kid Glide, Spinner, Little Flip—or, like rappers and DJs, with an alliterative name that sounds good—Eddie Ed, Nelly Nell, Kip Dee. And they name their crews in a similar fashion: Breakmasters, Rock Steady, Dynamic Breakers, Magnificent Force, Rockwell, Fieremasters, Rockers' Revenge, Supreme Rockers, Furious Rockers. Just as graffiti writers mark off city territory and lay title to it with their tags, breakers claim space by tracing symbols on the streets with their dancing and penetrating public space with their ghettoblasters. To write on subway trains, to strike obscene poses, to wear torn clothing, to scratch records, to talk in secret codes, and to sing one's sexual exploits and other praises are transgressive acts. But it is a mark of our times that even such acts, vivid, proud, and aggressive, transmuting destruction into imaginative creation, can be defused as main-
stream culture adopts them. Instead of dreaming of becoming revolutionaries, as they might have in the sixties, in the eighties the b-boys aspire to be stars. And at least for some of them, the dream has already come true.

After media exposure, the form of break dancing immediately began to change as theatrical and other experiences—such as a panel at a conference on the folklore of the Bronx—were brought back to "home base." The folklore conference arranged a jam at a roller disco in the Bronx, and soon after, Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver, the directors of Style Wars, shot a battle between the Rock Steady Crew and the Dynamic Rockers (later Dynamic Breakers) at a roller disco in Queens. The stage was set for the scene at the Roxy, a roller disco in Chelsea, in Manhattan, that soon replaced the Negril as the venue for Wheels of Steel hip-hop nights. When Style Wars was being filmed, the owner of the Queens disco kept clearing out the circle so the cameramen could get in. The next time Rock Steady was break dancing in the park, the crew's president, Crazy Legs, was walking back and forth saying, "Open up the circle."

By now, the circular format has opened up so far it's become linear, for greater theatrical legibility. Less improvisation takes place as well-worn popular moves become standard. As is often the case in the development of a dance form, acrobatic transitions are elaborated, while the freeze, which once concentrated personal expression, competitive gestural dialogue, and group style into a single significant image, has dwindled away to almost nothing and sometimes even merges with the exit. What once was a dance for adolescents is now the terrain of young adults, professionals whose bodies are less gangly and whose higher level of skill is commensurate with their years of practice. Group choreography and aerial spins, reminiscent of the spectacular balancing acts of circus gymnasts, have added to breaking's theatrical brilliance, as has the influx of electric boogie, popping, locking, ticking, King Tut, the float, and other moves that are not break dancing per se, into the genre.

Locking is a comic dance that creates the illusion that a person's joints are stuck in one place while his extremities are swinging in wild, rapid circles. It was originally popularized in the early seventies by dancers on the popular black dance television program Soul Train, which spawned a dance group called the Lockers, whose flamboyance made locking and the related popping—where one segment of the body moves while others stay still—nationally known. Fred Berry, star of the seventies television comedy series What's Happening!!, Jeffrey Daniels, ex-member of the pop-funk vocal group Shalamar, and choreographer Toni Basil were key members of the dance troupe. Berry's bouncy body and beefy face were symbolic of locking's comic appeal. Daniels, a willow stick figure with an enormous Afro, not only locked and popped, but did a mean robot (the moves look like they sound)—and, along with Michael Jackson, helped spread the moonwalk, a pantomimed illusion of walking backwards, via Shalamar tours and videos. Basil, a choreographer since the sixties, when she worked on the television series Shindig! and the legendary film The T.A.M.I. Show, worked throughout the seventies and eighties integrating the Lockers' moves into progressive film and video projects, such as her contribution to the Talking Heads' trailblazing "Once in a Lifetime" video. Another noteworthy ex-Locker is the Latin dancer Shabbadoo, who went on to star in the break dance film Breakin'.

The electric boogie is a mimelike movement of the entire body, full of wiggles and robotic head turns, that refined the Lockers' movements into a more fluid, less jerky style. It was inspired by moves seen on a summer replacement television show hosted by mime Shields and Yarnell. Kids picked up on it from TV, as they had locking, and embellished it, though the mime artists' white gloves are often worn by street dancers. Also via television came the King Tut and its kissing cousin the Egyptian after comedian Steve Martin appeared on Saturday Night Live in mock Egyptian garb to perform his hit single "King Tut." With his arms aimed out at sharp right angles, Martin resembled a talking stone carving, and this move was quickly assimilated by youngsters.
All these moves—locking, popping, the electric boogie, the King Tut, and the Egyptian—were similar in that each emphasized arm and upper-body motions, and unlike break dancing, kept the dancers in basically upright positions.

As kids began to learn break-dancing moves by watching the pros on TV or at dance classes, instead of from breakers on the street, the performance style became homogenized. There's now more of a tendency to copy personal style directly instead of making one’s own signature. Amateur breaking still happens—in fact, more than ever, as children as well as adults of all classes and ethnic backgrounds get down at school dances, country clubs, shopping malls, in living rooms, and even on street corners, not in the original competitive mode, but as a money-earning public performance.

The flexibility and resilience of breaking is evident in the way it incorporated electric boogie and other new moves, rather than letting itself be replaced by them. B-boys vow that it will never die out but, like ballet, become an honored tradition. Interviewed by the New York Times, Kid Smooth, sixteen years old, imagined having a son and that son having a conversation someday with his friends: “One kid says, ‘My father is a doctor.’ The other kid says, ‘My father is a lawyer.’ And my kid, he says, ‘My father spins on his head.’”

At a time when youth culture is again taking center stage in America, the rest of the country is fascinated by black and Latin kids’ street life precisely because of its vivid, flamboyant, energetic style. It symbolizes hope for the future—born of a resourceful ability to make something special, unique, original, and utterly compelling out of a life that seems to offer very little. As Fab Five Freddy puts it, “You make a new style. That’s what life on the street is all about, just being you, being who you are around your friends. What’s at stake is a guy’s honor and his position in the street. Which is all you have. That’s what makes it so important, that’s what makes it feel so good—that pressure on you to be the best. Or to try to be the best. To develop a new style nobody can deal with. If it’s true that this stuff reflects life, it’s a fast life.”