

HIP HOP

DANCE ALMANAC VOL.1

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FEATURING:
Frankie J

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FRANKIE

J

IA: Hey Frankie. I'm interested in clubbing and social dance because it feels critical to the scene. Clubbing as a time period is often hours and hours of musical experience, whereas the battle scene is bursts of one to five minutes. Can you talk about when you dance in these spaces?

FJ: Battling has always been a really fun and exciting part of the culture. It was like being involved in a game. If I summarise it in a phrase...it's a game. It taught me a lot of things. It taught me about my dance and how I express my dance in those 30, 45 seconds. Through growing in the dance scene and being more mature in my dance, I thought at the beginning that battling was the only reason I was dancing. I saw the benefits of battling...I saw that it gave people names and that you could win things like money and prizes and for any young dancer that's an attractive thing. The more mature I've become, the more I realise it's less what I want to do. I still love the battle and I still love the jams but it's helped me to learn that dance is a much more bigger thing for me. One of the things that is awesome is you can find a jam nearly every one to two weeks throughout the whole year, depending on where you're travelling. The opportunity for something like that, compared to five or 10 years ago is, it's

crazy. I think Renegade put up a status saying about 10 years ago there was only about three jams a year and one of the things he mentioned which was really interesting, it's one of the qualities he feels is missing is the idea of a real champion, or the idea of working towards a champions title. The champion being someone who is at the top of their game at that moment. Is the quality taken away if you have 10 of those events a year, instead of one? Unless you have the same person winning all 10 then it would be OK, but it doesn't happen like that and I agreed with him. It creates an avenue and a gateway for people and they're not so underground any more. They're being more exposed and people are being more credited for the work. People are being more, what's the word, not reciprocated...

IA: Acknowledged?

FJ: Acknowledged. People are being more acknowledged for the work, for the blood, the sweat and the tears that they're putting into their skills. Before that people didn't really give two cents for dancers breaking their bodies on concrete, practicing day in day out but now, it's being rewarded. That's what's been really awesome about how competitions have grown over the years. Going back

to the responsibility thing, people who understand the difference between a jam and clubbing, and the root of street dance came from, it's important that people still clarify that. It's important that you understand the jam - it is about that - but it's not the be all and end all. One thing I was taught by a dancer before is the jam or the battle is the size of your pinkie nail and the dance is the rest of your body. This is how worthy a jam or a battle is in relation to the rest and I was like now I get it. There's so many jams it doesn't matter if you lose one, because next week there's another and another. If you solely focus on the competition you don't focus on your dance...if younger dancers want to have longevity in this thing, and for them to continue loving this thing and their dance I think they focus too much on the battle because it takes away from the enjoyment, the discovery and the really important aspects of dance. Competition almost becomes a sport. Dancing becomes a sport and then they're training for sport...it becomes no more a dance, it's more how to outdo your opponent. Of course you want to do that when you're entering a competition but what is this dance about really. It doesn't just represent the battle. For me it's to share and teach that information to dancers, it is this one tiny

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aspect of this culture.

IA: Can you describe - you recently got through to Juste Debout - the idea of multiple rounds, saving things for later rounds? How do you manage that process? To give enough and keep some in the tank?

FJ: It comes from experience, learning how to play the rules, being a game player. But you don't really know at the same time. Because the way that the

to practice, you still have to train. If you understand those things you'll be alright. If you're someone who can't get past those things you're gonna struggle. You're really gonna struggle. Those things taught me how to preserve and win a battle or get to a final. If you don't get those things, you won't get to the point you wanna get to. It's about accepting who you are, what you can deliver on the dance floor and if you accept all of those things, nine times out

I learn from it, how I gain from it, it's never a loss it's always a gaining experience. From this new experience being in the Juste Debout finals, being on that stage, has been a great experience for me. I've come away from it not sour that I didn't win in the finals, because I got to show who I was on an amazing platform. It's given me more drive and perseverance to win next year.

IA: Can you talk a little bit about the difference between a solo battle and a duo? How does your relationship to your partner(s) works?

FJ: Solo is really about understanding what you're doing, why you're doing it for yourself. But the duo...the duo for me is about showing why you two have a connection and why you two dance together. What is it that you create and represent together. How you harmonise. For me this is where Juste Debout can go either way for me - I say Juste Debout because it's probably one of the most well-known duo competitions on the planet right now - it's about the perfect couple and the perfect combination right now. It's a representation of teamwork. It's not about two great dancers and you put them together and see what happens. It's about trying to utilise them to the best of your abilities, showing that and getting that across to the judges. My partner Toyin, for one she's my girlfriend and secondly a lot of people have said how do you two dance so well together. When you two are in a relationship and when you mix something like dance - which for both of you is business - you are in a different kind of relationship. Is that a struggle? Of course!

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judging is done is completely based off of their opinion. So you never know. One of the things to your advantage is understanding how that game works and how you can gain control in a battle scenario. I've learned that through a lot of battles and I still don't really know how the game works. I've gone through the experience of losing a battle and not really knowing why and I think most dancers will experience that. They'll lose and go 'Why did I lose that when everyone told me I won? Or it felt like I won?' Again it's subjective whether you're a good judge or a bad judge, it's their opinion. You learn to overcome the feeling of loss and the feeling of winning...you have to persevere until the end of the battle. You still have

10 you will be successful. It's about showing who you are in the moment. It's a very, very personal moment for yourself. You realise you have a lot of eyes on you, you have a lot of people watching you. You feel very alone in that moment...for me one of my most powerful tools when I'm in that moment is remembering why I'm doing this. Why am I here? Why did I to enter this? It's because I want to and I want to show the world what I'm capable of doing and what I represent. This has always given me my drive and to know that no matter what happens, if I lose or if I win, I always win because I've learned something from it...it's only going to make me go to the next level, it's always going to take me further forward. That would be my reason, how

It's like anything we bicker, we argue, we discuss everything whether it will work or not. We have two different views on dance. But we remember why we are powerful together. We've shown we are powerful together when we dance, because we both represent something that is important to both of us. That is the thing that unites us. That is the thing that makes us successful in a competition that is 2vs2. That is what 2vs2 is about. It's not about two great individual dancers - because you might as well have two soloists - it's about what are you able to create together. How we become an image together... you're trying to create a picture for people to remember why you come as a package. In a solo you're trying to portray a soloist and how you represent this movement or this culture.

IA: How critical are you of each other as a duo? Are you thinking we're here for the game? How do you build that presentation?

FJ: It comes from learning to listen to each other, vocally but also learning to listen to one another bodily. It's not something you can teach, but it's something you can learn. For me I learned it from going to a club. I learnt this by not being in a class but going back to the roots of this dance. It made me understand why this dance came from the club and when I experienced that I was like this is something you need to come and experience rather than just listen to someone try and tell you about it...or listen to someone try and teach you through a class. We have both had that experience, together and separately. For us when we are connecting via our dance it's not something we even have to prepare, we

instantly just go and we know.

IA: Like a tessellation?

FJ: It is. It's like a tessellation. We just know. It's about the moment and that comes through learning about the spirit of this dance. House is about uniting the feeling, uniting the moment and resonating off one another. When I'm in a club I can feel when people are really trying to speak something and when people are just throwing the moves out. There's a difference. You can tell. You can see when people are in the moment and when people are not. It comes from a deeper understanding of experience. This is something I say to students...be involved more in than what it is that you're practicing. People always ask 'Frankie what can I do to become a better dancer, a better freestyler?' I say you have to go to these things, these places and you have to experience it. There's things as a teacher I cannot teach you. I was never taught it, I was told to go and experience it. There comes a level where we can't always spoon feed. We can't put a silver spoon in your mouth and give you the answer. There's things I never got told because when I went to the place to feel it...I found it. I found it and I had to digest it. Depending on who you are and whether you're a fast learner or not you'll have a different rate of digesting that information. It's about patience and learning that this is about self-discovery. Dance is about self-discovery. It's not just this external thing that you're putting onto your body. It's a movement, it's a culture, it's an experience and hopefully it becomes life for you. If you're serious enough it's something that becomes

embedded into your system.

IA: What is your strongest memory of dance?

FJ: My strongest memory of dance? There's a few. The first is the very first performance experience when I was 10 years old. I was part of a contemporary dance project at primary school and I was invited by a dancer called Julia Thorneycroft. She was probably my first ever dance teacher and I used to work with her at the Bristol Dance Centre. She was my first dance teacher and she showed me the world of contemporary dance...or movement, just movement. That is what gave me the dance addiction to find out more about dancing. Another moment would be when I won Summer Dance Forever last year. That's probably the biggest achievement competition wise.

IA: What was that feeling like then? When the judges announced...

FJ: It was actually a crowd vote. So the crowd screams for me to win and the feeling I had was...it was a moment of being really overwhelmed but I felt so at peace. A very tranquil feeling because I feel like I had really stated my identity and I was showing people I was really serious at what I was doing. I'm not just this excited new generation dancer who is bopping around trying to make a name for myself. This thing is who I really am. It was really quite an emotional moment for me because it was around the time when my grandmother was really ill and not long after that she passed away. My grandmother was one of those who really motivated and inspired and pushed me

to do something in dance. Some of my first memories of seeing something in dance was when she introduced me to Riverdance and she

are important to you and in your orbit. Who are the three people you would go?

FJ: Who have been personally

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showed me a lot of videos on VHS of Wayne Sleep. Those two. Michael Flatley and Wayne Sleep were both...what was nice was they were both male dancers. That's a very, very powerful image instilled from when I was young...that gave me an empowerment to dance. Even when I started to dance, around probably 90% of the people who danced were...I'd get teased especially at school 'Ha ha you're dancing, you're gay.' All that. A lot of boys go through that when they're getting involved in dance at the beginning, but it gave me a huge...it made me not care. It made me want to learn more about dance and I always use that as a tool of being empowered. Even today. That's why I dance...because of people like my grandma who instilled in that into me from the very get go. Julia played one of those roles for me as well. They all play a hugely important factor as to who I am today, they all are part of my make up.

IA: I'm interested in the idea of networks...people who

important to me, or who are just generally important?

IA: Personally and professionally. It might be a crossover...

FJ: Wow. This is tough. Number one I would have to say is Clara. Clara Bajado. One because of how much she's given to me personally, but also her role within the community here. She is the reason there is house dance and freestyle today in the UK. 100%. She's the reason why. Secondly I would have to give it to Robert Hylton and his work Urban Classicism. He is the one who introduced me to street dance culture from the get go and showed me the importance of how this thing is bigger than just dance. Thirdly I say Veronica Lewis, director of London Contemporary Dance School. She was the one who showed me that my vision of dance should not be withheld and that dance should be how I personally want to encapsulate it. She always pushed me and I have always had her support both

in contemporary dance and in street dance. She always gave me a sense of support, that I'm doing the right thing in how I'm representing myself and she was always someone I could go to and talk to while I was studying. She also reminded me of my gran. I have an important emotional relationship with Veronica because I felt very close to her...even though I haven't known her as long as other people. There's many many other people I could name but if it's just three, it's those three people. Veronica, Robert and Clara. Having the support of those people was a massive thing for me, to get their approval and their support meant a dear amount to me.

IA: What's troubling you at the moment about the scene? What's going against the idea of generosity?

FJ: I think it's just a lack of understanding and ignorance. People are very quick to put up walls of separation and say things should stay like this and like that...there's not enough people really speaking their minds about things crossing over and changing who are able to understand and prove they know the root of where all these things lie. There are plenty of people like myself who are trying to cross things over, trying to bring two worlds together who are not always just focusing on 'It should be like this.' Being too political. Being political is subjective...but it's about how you're being subjective because when you're being too stern with something you don't want to kill the passion or discovery for somebody. Discovery is vital. It's the key to being able to know who you are and it plays a vital role in self-identity in something

like dance as well. I've always said and again I think I can't preach enough when I talk to people who are learning from me, that it's important you do your own self-discovery and that you give yourself more than one option to learn from something.

IA: You mentioned earlier you had those from London Contemporary Dance School and the street dance community...

FJ: You know this is not bragging at all but I feel I am that physical representation of a success when you are learning from multiple sources. I will always want to be that representative and want people to be able to do the same as me...I want people to be more open minded, more informed and more experienced as a professional in an industry like this. I can't emphasise enough how important that is, how important that is for me and how important that is for the future of my work within this industry.

IA: Are you the first person who had that training and has brought it into house?

FJ: I'm definitely not the first but I'd say I'm one of the leading role models of this generation. I'm definitely not the first...far from it actually. People like Robert Hylton is that person, he is a...

IA: Pioneer...?

FJ: The person in the UK that I consider as a pioneer of contemporary dance and Hip Hop dance culture is Jonzi D. Jonzi D was also a student at London Contemporary Dance School, and he was the one who pioneered Hip Hop dance

theatre. He was the one who really pioneered a generation of artists to bring aspects of Hip Hop onto the stage. I think Robert Hylton came after...he was a contemporary of Jonzi but Robert was a student of Northern School of Contemporary Dance and not long after was doing a lot of freelance work with many many dance companies. He created his own company Urban Classicism which was a crossover between contemporary dance and Hip Hop. Having someone like him mentor me has definitely influenced my vision of Hip Hop, contemporary and the use of fusion within that. There aren't many people who have done this crossover, the idea of Hip Hop and contemporary together but I would say I am somebody who is a leading role model for a newer generation of dancers who are coming up now. In specifically house dance and contemporary dance training. A lot of the people I graduated with - who graduated in the same year as me - haven't stayed working in dance. This tends to happen because when you're graduating from something like that, it's tough to find your reins and it's tough to find the reins that's gonna steer you into something. I think for a lot of graduates in any profession, it's hard to get the ball rolling after you graduate. But dance is more difficult because it's not recognised the same as a regular kind of job...so finding work in dance as soon as you graduate is tough, so a lot of people give up after. A lot of people don't have the time, the patience or the self determination to stick with it. But myself and others, who did stick with it, are going to make an impact on the dance scene. That in itself is an indicator of what it takes to

work in this industry. You need to be gussy, you need to take a little bit of risk and you have to break some boundaries to make something of it. People like Robert and Jonzi have inspired me to take risks, to break certain boundaries, to look at different ways of putting things together and not to just stay safe and think it has to be like this or like this. They've created a movement. They've created something that is far more original and far more exciting. They didn't just stick with something that's already been done. For me dance is bigger than that, it's about trying to create your own ideas, be creative with them and being creative with your reality. Putting your ideas into the real world.

IA: You mention performance for theatre - you've done some work with Neon Dance - what are your thoughts when you're in that space? What energies do you bring to that environment?

FJ: For me I see it as one now. Nowadays I see it as one. A lot of people who know me will know I have formal training in contemporary dance and also in street dance. But for me, I really see this all as one movement. My theory comes from the amount of effort and training I've put into my contemporary dance training and my street dance training come from the same place. It comes from the same determination to grow, and from the same skill sets. For me movement is movement. It's just your own interpretation. I understand the root of both of those things and if I have an understanding of the foundation in this and understanding of foundation in that then I know where both of those roots lie. When I'm

working with Neon Dance, I think Adrienne gives me the most opportunities to really utilise both of those things. Just because Neon Dance might be portrayed more

looking for you to do within the moment. But my vision of the movement and the dance, it's always the same now. It's about trying to push the boundaries of what I can do

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as a contemporary dance company doesn't mean I have to make what the world thinks contemporary dance is. What I do and what I represent, for me is contemporary, because what I am creating is through my body. I don't just consider myself a house dancer, because what I do isn't just house and I tell people that. I say I'm not just a house dancer. House is my love. It's my passion and my love for the movement, the music and the culture... but the movement itself isn't just house, it's a mixture of everything I've learned over the years - contemporary, locking, popping, B-Boying, waacking - everything. All of these things. All of these styles I've experienced are all in my body. This is why I consider myself just as a dancer. Period. That approach of what I think of myself as a dancer goes into the work whoever I'm dancing with. Whether that be Neon Dance, London Contemporary Dance School, Boy Blue Entertainment or when I'm working with In Da House. My vision stays the same. The only thing that's different is when I'm given a brief. Of course you go with the brief and what they're

with my body, and that is fuelled by my understanding of street dance and my understanding of contemporary dance.

IA: Is there anything that we've not covered that you would want to put down? Music, dance, personal history. This is a space for you.

FJ: I think one important thing I wanna say mostly is...just for dancers who are thinking of branching into different areas of work...really think about where your movement lies. Be that in the Hip Hop community or be that in contemporary or whatever style you are interested in. There is always room and there is always potential for you to take it further than you think you can. It's about always staying open minded and trying to create as much opportunity as you can for yourself. To showcase what it is you are about. Even if you think you lie in one of these niches, or you lie in this or you lie in that, there is more room for you to innovate in those things than you think. That's the one thing I'm learning more and more each day. You can use those tools to empower you

as an individual and take those things further if you really try. Whatever you envision can come with those things...it is possible. There's so many things I have experienced that I never would have imagined I would have done. Travelling to all these countries, teaching and judging, and this is one small aspect of what I do. I never in a million years would have imagined I would go to places in Asia, Eastern Europe, South America and North America. I never would have imagined I would go to places like that. Things like this are proof that through hard work and determination, and what it is you achieve to do, and showcase of yourself, we all create those opportunities. It's about hard work and dedication because there's no easy way around it...there really is no easy way. Dancers have it hard because there is more to prove what it is they can provide for the world, and what it is they can provide for the community. People don't understand what dance is. How can you make dance understandable for people is what most of us are trying to do. Most dancers, most choreographers, most people who envision dance into their lives, want other people to see and understand. Dance is a completely different reality. When you're so involved in dance, it creates another reality to somebody else who doesn't really understand dance. It's making people understand the beauty that you see when you are so involved in art, and when you are so involved with dance. Because for me it's just so involved in my life it's about trying to empower people to do the same. To make sure they understand the enjoyment I get from something like this. That would be my last message.

