

If jazz is the broom Africans jump over to become Americans
Then what is hip hop? . . .

—Marc Bamuthi Joseph, *the break/s*



the break/s

by Marc Bamuthi Joseph

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In the 1970s, in the Bronx, gangs brought a sense of order to the chaos—a belonging, a definition. They fought each other, killed each other, killed drug dealers and thieves. They very nearly brokered peace. Gangs tagged their turf with graffiti, claiming colors as their own. Hip-hop was forged in the crucible of the gangs' territory. Its birthday is 1973. For the ten years previous, and the thirty-five years since, there's been a scene swimming and swirling in the undertow of urban decay, especially in New York City, especially in the Bronx. In *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, Jeff Chang calls this time "The bottom point of the loop between Malcolm X's assassination and Public Enemy's call to arms...a loop of history, history as loop—calling and responding, leaping, spinning, renewing."

Hip hop is folklore
Is gospel
Is order
Is ocha
In orbit
No bullshit
No doubt

Competition for the best (loudest) sound systems and best (boldest) dancers

flourished under and behind the poverty and dislocation that had led to lost youth, drug addiction and abject warfare. There was a house party in the summer of 1973. Clive Campbell's sister was throwing the party, and he was hired to DJ. His sound system blared through the rec room of their apartment building. DJ Kool Herc—as Campbell was known then and has been known ever since—repeated, cycled back, called to the audience, extended the instrumental, rhythm-driven breaks in the music, switching back and forth on his spinning turntables. In the breaks, the dancers stormed the floor, and DJ Kool Herc grabbed the mic and bent the crowd to the will of his words. Hip-hop was born here, a movement was born here. A fusion of rock, reggae, rhythm, and the DJ, MC, graffiti and dance coalesced and took hold of a generation and spread throughout the world.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph has traveled the world as a hip-hop theatre artist, and found that hip-hop is literally everywhere. That it dominates the perception of African Americans at home and abroad is profoundly exciting and inspiring, but also disconcerting. "I see that total cycle, I see that complete cycle, how I am of hip-hop, this little regional music and dance

and visual art-based culture. I've been able to recognize that this thing we did as kids really inspires billions of people all over the world," marvels Joseph. "And I've been able to visit different continents and different islands as an ambassador for this culture. My experiences in Bosnia or in Madison, Wisconsin, or in the Philippines are all connected and all made possible because of hip-hop. I'm an ambassador for the culture, and yet I reflect it, I think, in a specific, non-stereotypical way. It's that tension that I'm really trying to navigate through *the break/s*."

This story begins in the middle
Halfway across my childhood
I think that I'm awake...
I'm up...
We're all perched
around a radio
Like an audio campfire
Listening to Public Enemy

Joseph began to think about the piece that has become *the break/s* while in France. Every day was a combination of reading Chang's award-winning history of the hip-hop generation and checking out an exhibit at the Pompidou Center

called *Africa Re-Mix*. “The confluence of ironies and multiculturalisms, reading a Chinese Hawaiian’s account of hip-hop while roaming through a Parisian institution’s survey of African art which in turn was called a RE-MIX, I mean, whoa!” he remembers. This collision of context, history and the very present tense—understanding that he was part of a defined generation and movement—gave him the inspiration to think about his autobiography in a broader sense.

In the juxtaposition of representing America, Black America, hip-hop in places as far-flung as Wisconsin and Senegal, Joseph has found himself more aware of how he is perceived and how he perceives others. When a teenager following him in Bosnia was not a neo-Nazi, but a bboy; and when African choreographers presenting in Paris left him without the feeling of affinity he had expected; and when he turns out not to be the gangsta that some might expect a hip-hop artist to be—his lingering sense of dislocation demanded and still demands to be explored. Whether with family in Miami, working with young adults in San Francisco, or dancing in Japan, hip-hop, the beats, the breaks provide a way for him to enter any conversation, but is it really a common language? As an ambassador, Joseph embraces the responsibility of representing his community even as he knows the community is not one thing, but that its history is rich.

**Hip hop’s story is the choice to commit to one side of the line or the other
To get so close to the edge
You can smell the afterdeath
In hip hop it smells like cisco and sulfur
Because if you don’t commit to spinnin on yo head
You will break your neck**

In *the break/s* Joseph explodes his sense of connection and disconnection. His work lives outside a classic structure, bringing us to a new kind of theatre that samples and blends music and rhythm, poetry, video, and dance. “The design of the piece is to reimagine DJ Kool Herc at a party in the Bronx going from one record to the next—as he moves forward, continuing to reference music that he has played before,” Joseph says. “I’m trying to fade back and forth, mix back and forth from present to past, from Senegal to Miami, from the personal narrative to a macro perspective on race and identity. That makes this piece a work of hip-hop theatre. I’m trying to replicate the way that hip-hop acts in the moment.”

—Julie Felise Dubiner

Marc Bamuthi Joseph

“What I do for a living is teach and tell stories, and I do so with this body,” sums up Marc Bamuthi Joseph. Strikingly simple, this philosophy is fundamental to his work, coloring how he redefines and remixes the concept of being a writer, a dancer or a theatrical performer. The sophistication of his mixed-media approach—the precise grafting of his autobiographical words to music, to video, to movement—has become Joseph’s trademark and a source of national attention. *The San Francisco Chronicle* called him “one of the brightest lights in hip-hop theatre.”

Joseph’s early works were in conjunction with the Hip-Hop Theatre Festival, and he embraces the title of hip-hop artist in the widest sense of the term. “The broadcasting apparatus in the United States projects a very particular image of young African American manhood throughout the world,” Joseph explains. “Though I am absolutely of the hip-hop generation, I don’t necessarily fit those types or meet those expectations.” Joseph points to a pervasive myth of self-destruction that is attached to black men in modern culture, a concern that underpinned his widely seen 2001 play *Word Becomes Flesh*. The piece started as a series of letters to his then-unborn son as he processed the unexpected responsibilities of becoming a father and envisioned a world in which he could raise a child.

After the highly autobiographical *Word Becomes Flesh*, Joseph considered making his next piece, *Scourge*—a meditation on the history of Haiti—more abstract. “Originally, I constructed *Scourge* fully as a work of allegory,” Joseph reflects. “But the work became that much stronger when I put myself into it more substantively. I have the most power onstage and am able to stir the pot most effectively when I am implicated personally in the narrative.” *Scourge* began as a tale of dislocation, but eventually took up questions of assimilation, a process that his family—split between Haiti, Miami and Queens—understood viscerally. *The Boston Globe* described in *Scourge* the “rhythmic stomp of feet...fusillade of drumbeats, aching vocals and visual poetry that captures the issues and emotions of assimilation with a potent urgency.” Even as he has developed *the break/s*, Joseph continues to tour both previous pieces throughout the United States and to destinations like Belgium, Italy, Tokyo, Cuba and the Netherlands.

Joseph has built his international profile through a savvy mix of his linguistic virtuosity and his roots in performing. “I started out

in theatre. My first gig was at the Minskoff Theater doing *The Tap Dance Kid* on Broadway,” he reveals. “I did regional theatre when I was a very young person, but I didn’t really have any desire to pursue the performing arts. I began working in education.” After graduating from Morehouse College in 1997 with a degree in English literature, he moved to Oakland to teach. His work with young people drew him toward spoken word as a method of teaching, and through his students’ encouragement, he began performing. His ascent to preeminence in the field was almost immediate. He won the 1999 National Poetry Slam Championship, and the National Performance Network began to help move his work into theatrical venues.

Being an educator continues to be Joseph’s greatest source of pride. In addition to leading workshops at universities nationwide, he holds a Masters degree in secondary education from San Francisco State University and serves as Artistic Director of Youth Speaks, an Oakland-based organization. Working with teenagers, Youth Speaks challenges the next generation to give voice to a world they want to create. “Working here at Youth Speaks, we are ultimately in the business of providing forums for young people to share perspectives and to be celebrated for their thoughts,” Joseph says with pride. “So we’ll set them up on *Def Poetry* on HBO or we’ll have them perform at the San Francisco Opera House—a mechanism for achieving social equity is to democratize voice.”

“I’m hyperconscious of being at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston or Yerba Buena Center or the Humana Festival and being the one, the one time this year that this institution is going to present hip-hop,” Joseph observes. In a modern world that he worries often is too violent or too image-centered, he wants to be responsible for what he speaks into being, and looks at performance as a place for action: “I see this as an opportunity to be able to present an alternative view through alternative media of what is in the hearts and minds of my generation. I do not claim to have any of the answers, but my work represents an unrepentant penchant for asking questions. I seek to engage audiences and leave them moved.”

—Charles Haugland