

GET OUT

Breaking it down at MIT

BY JOSHUA SHEA
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Several evenings a week, just as the lab lights begin to click off and the sun sets over the Charles River, a high-energy blend of funky hip-hop beats pours out of Building 13 at MIT.

Snack dab in the middle of one of America's most rigorous academic environments, Greater Boston's underground "bboy" scene comes to life. Through the building's floor-to-ceiling windows, passersby can see men and women popping and locking across the giant cement floor on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday nights and Saturday afternoons. The group, called Imobillare, is dedicated to "furthering real hip-hop culture," says MIT junior and Imobillare copresident Stephen Steger, primarily through the art of breakdancing, also known as breaking or "bboying."

Bboys, derived from the term "breaker boys," dance to the breaks in electronic music, throwing down fast, acrobatic moves with complex footwork and hitting the floor to spin and hold contorted poses — then popping back up to their feet again in the blink of an eye.

"By real hip-hop culture, I mean hip-hop as it was at its inception, a cultural movement that was about competition, creative self-expression, and generally feeling good," continues Steger, an engineering major. "We try to distance ourselves from the hip-hop you find on MTV, which is highly commercial, greed-driven, and places a lot of emphasis on drugs, violence, and sex."

And let's make one thing clear: The '90s may be back in the clubs and in clothing stores, but MIT's bboy scene has been going strong, and steadily growing stronger, since the early '90s. Bboying is not a trend on this highly competitive campus. It's a passion.

A recent night brought out dozens of participants: competitive bboys dressed in skater T's and baggy jeans, fashion-forward breakers in Afros posturing like American Apparel models in the making, and nervous newcomers wearing sweats and T-shirts. You don't have to be an

MIT student to participate in the free lessons and dance sessions. Just leave the wallflower tendencies at home.

"We get college students, high school students, people with 9-to-5 jobs, bboys from many different breakdance crews, beginners, experts, and everyone in between, all coming together to breakdance," said Imobillare copresident Frank Lo, a junior enrolled in MIT's Sloan School of Business Management.

Beginners are led by a seasoned pro on one side of the room while the vets show their wares in the center, taking breaks to socialize and analyze the new moves their peers have conjured up since the last session.

On Saturday the best breakers in the city will be performing at Imobillare's "Breakonomics" competition, but it's not the cash and prizes that keep people in the bboy game.

"I dance for the love of it," said Boston native Rafael O. "Juice" Ayala as he took

a quick swig from his Arizona Iced Tea. "I get down whether I'm stressed out of my mind or having the happiest day of my life. You do it for the love."

Without missing a beat, Ayala tossed down the drink and went back onto the dance floor, firing up some fierce footwork in his white, leather high-top Pumas as his consorts cheered him on: "Shake whatcha mama gave you!"

"A lot of people laugh at the thought of a breakin' club at MIT," Steger says. "We may not be the most coordinated people in the world, but it doesn't mean we don't like to get down from time to time."

Imobillare's "Breakonomics" competition is Saturday from noon to 9 p.m. at MIT's La Sola De Puerto Rico student center, 77 Massachusetts Ave. in Cambridge. web.mit.edu/~imobillare/www/. Tickets: \$10, \$5 for college students with ID, \$2 for MIT students.

Bboy 101

Battle/cypher — A face-off between two or more bboys, often used as a verb.

Crew — A team of bboys

Toprock — Dancing that a bboy does before hitting the ground or in between moves. Sometimes resembles a boxer dancing around the ring.

Footwork/downrock — Dancing done on the ground on all fours.

Uprock — Dancing that looks a lot like play fighting in which bboys are swinging punches or wielding fake weapons. Originated as a blood-free way for gangs to settle disputes.

Power moves — Acrobatic moves: flips, spins, etc.

Freeze — A difficult-to-hold pose.

Biting — Stealing somebody else's moves.

Roast — Completely overwhelming an opponent with style and power.

Popping — A funk style, distinct from breakin', that emphasizes body isolation and control.

Sources: Stephen Steger, copresident of Imobillare



PHOTOS BY DAVID KAMENAR/GLOBE STAFF

Imobillare, which is free and open to the public, meets four times a week on the MIT campus. At left, copresident Frank Lo (right) gives Herish Vyes a few pointers. Below, Robbie Beberena (left) and Juane Bradley show off their moves.

