

# Hip Hop Generation Next: Beyond Barrier

by Sung, Kiwan (Korean poet and musician).

## Part I

### 1. From the completely raw to the international

Can we find any language which there is no rap of their own? I'm sure it's possible, but it will not be easy. This is the extent to which hip-hop has become an international culture. Youngsters around the world feel a common impulse when they discover hip-hop. The impulse is "I think I can do that. I want to try."

This is the power of hip-hop. The simplicity! The message of hip-hop does not depend on the power of melody. It eliminates all ornaments. All it needs is the spoken word, on the beat. At first, this type of music was regarded as 'terrorism against melody'. It is true. In this sense, hip-hop is a cultural terrorist terror. But instead of terrorizing, hip-hop has made people around the world dream of rhymes. Even people who cannot sing want to tell others about their situations or emotions. In that moment, hip-hop can become a tool, or even a weapon. Hip-hop is the raw truth.

The origin of this 'raw truth' goes back to the late 1970s, to the African-American residential districts in large US cities. The conditions were terrible. The areas were drug-ridden, violence prevailed the streets, and the dreams of the youngsters were broken. In the 1980s, so-called 'Reagonomics' poured gasoline on the fire. As a result, a culture of the 'raw' was born. Singers cast away melody, and painters threw away their canvases. Musicians chose DJing over playing instruments, and dancers laid out wooden boards in the streets instead of going to the clubs. These have become the elements of hip-hop - Rapping, DJing, breakdancing -b-boying and graffiti. Like that, the cultural life of the back streets became the major elements of hip-hop. This was not because it was stylish, but because there was no other choice. Even when hip-hop is performed on a beautiful stage, it maintains its hunger. This is another source of hip-hop's power! The power of hip-hop comes from need. The need for love, the need for freedom, the need for power ... power to the people. Above all, hip-hop is street culture and life culture. Hip-hop and life cannot be considered separately. In this way, hip-hop penetrates life in all regions across the globe.

This is a vital point. If looked at deeply, hip-hop preserves the essence of African American culture. It contains the powerful up-beat from the oral traditions of Africa and rhythm & blues,

together with the unique physical skills of African Americans maximizing the usage of their joints, and has been absorbed into the living culture of today's youth.

Currently, hip-hop has merged with the local cultures of various regions across the globe, and is continuously developing and branching out further. In addition to areas with African roots, hip-hop is also making inroads into regions with no connection to Africa whatsoever, such as Asian countries like Korea and Japan. Also Hip-hop is developing uniquely in regions such as Bosnia and Eastern Europe, where the roots of its music are found in Gypsy music. In short, hip-hop is evolving into complex and diverse types of music by merging with the youth culture of each region, bringing the power of its roots and the power of the living culture. Hip-hop can be found in all people who lack other tools or methods of expression. They believe in hip-hop.

## **2. Korean Hip-hop**

Hip-hop was introduced to Korea in the early 1980s, and came via different routes. First of all, ironically, the broadcasting for American troops stationed in Korea played an important role in the introduction of hip-hop. From the 1970s to the 1980s, AFKN (American Forces Korea Network) TV broadcast a program called 'Soul Train' every Saturday afternoon. Koreans probably saw 'breakdancing' for the first time on this legendary program. The latter part of each program would feature a dance competition like scene, where people danced freely to the funky music, including breakdancers with amazing technique. Also in the mid-80s, movies such as "Flashdance... what a feeling" with hip-hop culture which had already seeped into the mainstream, were introduced to Korea. The movies also featured dancers on the streets.

Around the mid 80s, hip-hop music with its strong beats and raps became a major part of the repertoire played by DJs in the club scene. Musicians began to buckle to the electronic revolution by using new instruments like the sequencer, drum machine and sampler. However, it was difficult for hip-hop to penetrate the mainstream pop music market. At the time, Korea was under the reigns of a dictatorship. So it was impossible to introduce radical hip-hop music, like the group "Public Enemy." The legendary phrase by Scott-Heron, "The revolution will not be televised," would seem to sum up the situation in Korea at that time. Aggressive but rhythmical music by artists such as Run DMC, Ice T, or the West Coast's NWA was not introduced. The essence of hip-hop culture could only be found downtown or underground, among the enthusiasts.

In the late 1980s, Korea's first hip-hop artists began to emerge. Although it was not defined as hip-hop, the 'robot dance' (at the time called break dance in Korea) and dance music with its

minimal electronic beats and sounds were introduced. Jae-min Lee's dance song "Alleyway ('Golmokgil' in Korean)' was a massive hit in 1987, and stands as a major milestone in the history of Korean dance music, as it was the start of Korean house music. Also, Jin-young Hyun - who brought hip-hop culture from the underground to the mainstream and is still remembered by fans for his brilliant breakdancing - formed a team called "Hyun Jinyoung and Wawa," which showed off some powerful moves. Even today, he is regarded as a legend by many b-boys. Through these artists/dancers, hip-hop slowly began to rise above the water.

In the early 1990s, "Seo Taeji and Boys" who led the 'X-generation' cultural revolution, entered the scene. Their appearance was a massive cultural event, not unlike the debut of the Beatles. In fact, it is probably not too much to say that there are no later-generation hip-hop musicians who were not influenced by "Seo Taeji and Boys". They took the nation by storm with their strong hip-hop beats, sampler-based heavy metal riffs and Korean rapping. Their powerful breakdancing earned them many followers, and Ju-no Lee, one of the team members, is regarded as a pioneer in Korean b-boying.

During the same period, a group called 'Deux' (pronounced 'dyoo-ce') also contributed to the establishment of Korean hip-hop. They provided uncontrived rapping, soft but intense rhythms, and impressive choreographed dancing that aroused the response of the masses.

After the mid 1990s, hip-hop developed in diverse directions. With the arrival of overseas Korean musicians (mostly those who had resided in L.A.) the so-called 'orthodox' hip-hop took over. Among these, artists such as 'Drunken Tiger' and Tashannie from the group 'Uptown' have retained their popularity.

In addition, centering around the Hongik University area in Seoul, the Korean underground hip-hop scene began to develop as part of the growth of an independent culture. Hip-hop clubs like 'NB' provide hip-hop rhythms to many young people, even to this day. With the growth of the underground club scene, many hip-hop concerts were held. Rappers battled, and b-boys did head spins to the beat provided by the DJs in the dark basement clubs.

The explosive increase of internet usage also influenced the hip-hop scene. Many internet hip-hop lovers' clubs, African American music and African American dance lovers' clubs began to emerge. Even today, internet clubs are playing the role of a gateway, guiding amateur members into the world of hip-hop.

Currently, Korean hip-hop spans a diverse spectrum, from the mainstream dance music scenes, where large amounts of capital are invested, to the independent hip-hop scene, where individuals record their own rhymes and sell their music to small groups of fans. Here, you can find some technicians who make music with irresistible beats that can succeed in the clubs,

musicians who recite poetic lyrics to a simple beat, and even some DJs who remix samples from Korean old-school music (funky LPs from the 1970s). Hip-hop merges all of these together. If we consider hunger to be one of the main elements of hip-hop, Korea's hip-hop could be said to have this fundamental element.

## Part II

### 3. The leap of Korea's b-boys

One of the most noticeable success stories in Korean hip-hop is b-boys. Today, there are many professional dancers who are influenced by hip-hop dance. These run the gamut from beginning b-boys who dance on wooden boards on the streets of Daehakro (Seoul), to hip-hop dancers who get paid huge sums to create choreography for popular singers. There are b-boys who are in charge of choreography for glamorous musicals, and those who start off as b-boys but go on to the academic arena to change the scene with their hip-hop spirit.

What are the characteristics of Korea's b-boying? They are like the rappers who rap in Korean, they make the most of the Korean physique, which is not so masculine, and show a unique and delicate b-boying technique.

The history of Korea's b-boying goes back to the mid 1980s. From late 1970s to early 1980s, the so-called 'Hustle' group dance was the main trend. Young people played disco music such as Quincy Jones' 'Ai no Corrida,' and danced in line like scenes from John Travolta's movie 'Saturday Night Fever'. During the mid 1980s, the influence of Michael Jackson's unique moonwalk was felt in Korea as well. It was after the mid 1980s when break dancing was introduced to Korea.

Since the mid 1980s, dancers have gathered in a legendary club called 'Moonlight,' located in Itaewon (Yongsang, Seoul). Ju-no Lee of 'Seo Taeji and Boys' and Jin-young Hyun of 'Hyun Jin-young and Wawa' were also regulars in the club. Starting with the club Moonlight, other underground clubs also played a role in creating Korea's b-boy culture. However, the term b-boy was not known at the time. It took another 10 years for the term to take root.

In 1997, with the establishment of a team called 'Expression,' the concept of 'b-boy' began to emerge in Korea. The team was led by first-generation b-boy Woo-sung Lee (now aged 30). The team was also an underground team that flourished in the club scene around Hongik University.

'B-boy Unit', which began in 2001, originally had the purpose of promoting sports equipment. This competition gathered all of the Korean b-boys together for the first time. The winner of the first competition was a dance team from Busan called 'Obo King ('Obo Wang' in Korean)',

and they were the origin of 'Extreme' dancing in Korea. It is said that the name of the team came from 'Come and see, we are the king ('Oiso and Boiso, we are the King' in Korean)'. The team was also an underground team that flourished in the scene of the clubs around Hongik University. This team became the vanguard of b-boy culture outside of Seoul.

Through the dance competition, 'Visual Shock', which was regarded as the national b-boy team, was formed. In the same year, they participated for the first time in the 'Battle of the Year' in Berlin, Germany, winning the prize for best performance. Since then, Korea's b-boys began to make a name for themselves in the international dance scene. (Refer to article by Min-woo Choi, Joongangilbo)

#### **4. Characteristics of Korea's b-boying**

There is no home for hip-hop. The streets are home for hip-hop artists. They draw on the streets (graffiti), they turn on their music in the streets (DJing) and they dance in the streets. This is b-boying. Why do they do these things in the streets? Of course, it is because they have no house to do these things in. The birth of hip-hop reflects the poor cultural situation of African Americans in the back streets of the US in the 1980s. During that time, the concept of the 'block party' emerged, in which impromptu parties were held by blocking each side of the block. In the early 1980s, the block parties held in the streets of the African American residential areas showed a fundamental source of hip-hop power. In the streets, everyone was a stranger, while also being a 'brother'.

Now on the weekends, we can see highschool students dancing on wooden boards in areas of Daehakro, Seoul. The equipment for their dance stage near the Marronnier Park is a simple wooden board and an audio source. After watching their dances, which show off their physical strength, endurance, agility and flexibility, we might ask them where they are from, and mostly they are from Seoul or areas near Seoul, such as Sunghnam and Anyang, or places like Yeongdeungpo's all working class area

It seems the focal area of b-boying in Korea is this kind of impromptu 'street dances'. The b-boys show the rhythm of their youthful bodies to the fullest. The bodies that show this kind of dance are beautiful as well as sad. It looks like the struggle of people who have nothing more to reveal but body.

B-boying is like rapping with your body. Not unlike the breaking, cutting and speedily connecting the keys with your mouth in rap music, the flexibility of the body that breaks and rotates would make anyone shout their admiration.

As stated above, rap is considered to be a 'musical terrorism' as it stripped away the melody, leaving only the rhythm and tone. B-boying is very similar; it is 'dance terrorism,' expressed through the body. It overcomes the normal and common state of the body, and shows grotesque bends, breaks and bounces. It is a sort of rebellion against the body of tedious middle class, sitting and studying in their chairs all day. For the young, the revelation holds great power of propagation.

Of course, b-boying started in the back streets of African American residential areas. So is Korean b-boying just a copy of their culture? It would be simplistic to think along these lines. We need to think about the social conditions that gave birth to the rebellion of these youngsters.

Korea's unique 'club culture' contributed to the spread of b-boying. Hip-hop developed based on the stronghold called 'family'. 'Family' is the central point of a style, and as by using the term 'family', a great importance is placed on the relationship between the members of the hip-hop group. Contrary to what some might believe, African Americans place a great importance on family relations, and our hip-hop culture does not go far off from a similarly deep-seated cultural attitude. Whether online or offline, the networking culture of teenagers includes hip-hop family and b-boying crew as one of their main window of communication. For Korean teenagers, who have almost no opportunity to communicate through their bodies, this culture plays a crucial role.

Some dances are learned, while some dances burst out spontaneously from the body, like forces that cannot be contained. Why do they dance? At a glance, it may seem that they are just playing around, but they are not. The dance is the meaning of their life.

### **Part III**

#### **5. Last For One, and other Korean b-boy crews**

Korea's b-boy crews now rub shoulders with world-class b-boy crews since 1997, the year of prelude to Korea's b-boying. The Rivers Crew, with star b-boy Hyo-guk Kim (B-boy Physics) at the center, was established in 1997 followed by the Extreme Crew, which took the winning prize at the 2007 Battle of the Year. Subsequently, the Gamblers Crew was formed in 2002, which is highly appreciated in America, and Last For One, which won the 2005 Battle of the Year, are currently leading Korea's b-boy scene.

Not only has Last For One prevailed in various competitions, but they are also regarded as a team that opened a new form of hip-hop dance with their dance musical 'Spin Odyssey'. This

musical, which was introduced at the Edinburgh Fringe (Edinburgh, Scotland) in 2007, was acclaimed as a 'New form of international art' by the *New York Times*.

Taking the year 2006 as a turning point, Korean b-boying has become one of the representative aspects of teen culture. It has also been one of the main components of the Korean Wave, which spread the pop culture of Korea to the rest of the world. Of course, as the culture emerged on the mainstream stage, it has been introduced through various cultural organizations and the government, so it is getting more difficult to maintain the unique power and strength of its original 'rawness'. But despite these changes, Korean crews are trying to maintain the 'living culture' of hip-hop and reflect it in their dances. For example, Last For One is incorporating Korea's traditional themes with their dances, including the 'four sticks game' and 'feet shuttlecock game' ('Yut-nori and Jaegi-chagi' in Korean) and 'spinning top'.

Although it can be analyzed in many ways, it seems that the speed of urbanization has contributed to Korea's intensive strength in b-boy culture, as b-boying and hip-hop are fundamentally part of urban culture. It shows that the street culture stands tall in the 'urban culture' of our youth, who are adapting to urban life. Also, hip-hop is a spontaneous culture. Hip-hop cannot be achieved by force. Along these lines, it is the reality that spontaneous culture is not easily provided to teenagers in our society, but hip-hop gives them the opportunity to fulfill their repressed need for self-expression through their own messages and movement.

## **6. Hip-hop becoming art, Lee In Soo's dance project**

'The evolution of hip-hop II,' which was the theme for the Seoul International Dance Festival (SIDance) 2008, received a strong response from critics, the audience and the media. 'The evolution of hip-hop II' focused on the body while trying to bring contemporary dance, which has been estranged from the public due to its complex nature, back into the pop culture. Since 2007, the proposal that the power of hip-hop, which can be regarded as an international body language, should be reviewed in a positive light, was one of the main themes in SIDance. One of the dancers who gave an exceptional performance at the festival was Lee, In Soo. Lee, In Soo was a local street dancer who entered the world of academia. He succeeded in killing two birds with one stone by merging hip-hop with contemporary dance in his work, entitled 'Roly-poly'. The versatile hip-hop moves and concepts of contemporary dance melted together excellently, receiving high praise from critics while making a strong impression on the audience, most of whom did not have any prior knowledge of contemporary dance.

Hip-hop dance, which has already taken a place on the art stage through popular musicals such as 'A ballerina who loves a b-boy,' is now on the verge of being reinterpreted through the frame of contemporary dance. After his performance of 'Roly-poly,' Lee, In Soo said in an interview, "The fundamental point was to merge hip-hop with contemporary dance movement, but what I focused on most was the usage of muscles. Hip-hop has an approach to the muscles called 'wave,' while contemporary dance has an approach called 'line.' I tried to complete the performance through the movement of these muscles and usage of the muscles themselves."

From this quote, we can identify the fundamental elements of Lee, In Soo's dance. He went deeply into the dimension of the 'muscles' in the body itself, because hip-hop dance starts from the usage of hip-hop muscles. The reason for Lee, In Soo's unchanging hip-hop dance style, even after his performances to mass audiences, is his fundamental hip-hop spirit.

## **7. Dream of hip-hop, scene of international cultural communication**

Hip-hop does not discriminate by language. You don't have to understand English to rap. On the contrary, hip-hop tells us, "Use your own language to talk about your daily life".

Rap - a simple but unique method of putting messages against beats and a powerful way of giving your body to the beat - has enabled experiments in the genre in every language of the world. It also has enabled every youngster to learn how to breakdance.

For instance, Abd Al Malik, a French rapper from Congo (Africa), conveys his situation in French. His unique French rap style is called 'deconstructionist rap.' 'Grand Corps Malade,' who performs in Africa and Europe, discuss the lives and situations of Arab Europeans through hip-hop. There are various methods, but fundamentally it is simple. The beat and spirit of hip-hop talks to you.

"This is yours."

Therefore, in the frame of hip-hop, any culture around the world can come together. The father of M.I.A. is a musician from Sri Lanka, guerilla fighting for independence in the Tamil region. M.I.A. raps about her life directly. Her rhymes are rhymes of revolution. Her beat attempts to communicate with hip-hop and the beat of Tamils. In this case, hip-hop has recreated itself through her music and spirit.

Hip-hop acts as a 'module' that merges various cultures together. This is the method of hip-hop's evolution. Accordingly, there is no distinct direction for hip-hop's evolution. It is fundamentally humane and it can be possessed by anyone. We believe in its power. Hip-hop is a venue for communication, where what is yours and what is mine meet. It is an ordinary table, and one that is not in the least unique. We believe in the power of this ordinary table.



## **Sung, Kiwan**

### **▶ ARTISTIC CAREER**

- First anthology of poems "Coming Back From Shopping"? published(1998)
- Musical Director of DMZ 2000(millennium celebration project with Nam Jun Paik held at DMZ Korea )
- Artistic Director of Seoul Fringe Festival 2000
- Producer and VJ for MTV Alternative Nation(1999-2000)
- Participant as a musician for Next Wave 2002(improvising performance 'Mirror' with Makoto-Japanese Dancer)
- Second anthology of poems Story of Yuri published(2003)
- Musical co-director of movie 'Singles'(2003), animation 'Sky Tree'(2003), drama '3 Sisters' for Next Wave 2003, movie "Mr. Socrates"(2005), movie "Fly Daddy"(2006), movie "Radio Days"(2007)
- Member of band '3rd Line Butterfly'(1999-present)
- President of indie label 'Numb Records'(2002-present)
- Main Columnist of many Korean major newspapers, weekly and monthly magazines including Jungang Ilbo, Donga Ilbo, 'Hangyeorae 21', 'Newsplus', 'Cin 21', Kyunghyang Shinmun etc.

### **▶ .DISQUES RELEASED**

- Tomato(participating as a guitarist and composer), Orange, Seoul, 1993
- One Day Tours(compilation of Korean independent music), Kang A.G., Seoul, 1997
- Yellow Kitchen/99, Kang A.G., Seoul, 1997
- Sketchbook(2nd album of band 99), Kang A.G., Seoul, 1998
- Rub Love, movie original sound track, Sony Music, Seoul, 1998
- To Become a Tree(solo experimental music album), Kang A.G., Seoul, 1999
- Self-titled Obsession(3rd Line Butterfly's 1st album), Numb Records, Seoul, 2000
- Oh! Silence(3rd Line Butterfly's 2nd album), Numb Records, Seoul, 2002
- Time Table(3rd Line Butterfly's 3rd album), Numb REcords, Seoul, 2003
- Mr. Socrates OST(2005)
- Fly Daddy OST(2006)
- Radio Days OST(2007)
- Your Song(2nd solo album)(2008)

### **▶ PUBLICATION**

- Looking For Jazz, Munhak Kwa Jisung Sa("Edition Literature and Intelligence"), Seoul, 1996.
- Alternative Culture and Rock Music(co-writer), Hannarae, Seoul, 1996.
- Ann Kaplan, Rocking around the Clock; Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture(translation), Hannarae, Seoul, 1995.
- Age of Rock(#38 of Discovery Series, translation), Shigong-sa, Seoul, 1996
- Are you Coming Back From Shopping?(anthology of poems), Munhak Kwa Jisung Sa("Edition Literature and Intelligence"), Seoul, 1998.
- Scenary of a Rosy Slaughterhouse(essays on contemporary culture), Munhak Dong Nae, Seoul, 2002
- Sound Deeper than Reality(essays on movie sound track music), Hannarae, Seoul, 2003
- Story of Yuri(2nd anthology of poems), Munhak Kwa Jisung Sa("Edition Literature and Intelligence"), Seoul, 2003
- Elvis::Biography(translation)(Edition Imago)
- Your Text(3rd poetry book)(Munhak Kwa Jisung Sa("Edition Literature and Intelligence"), Seoul, 2008