



Jabbawockeez.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JBWKZ.

from subculture to popular culture:

The New Rhythm Nation

▷▷ The hit television shows *America's Best Dance Crew* and *Dancing with the Stars* have helped propel such crews as the Jabbawockeez, Kaba Modern, Quest Crew and Poreotix into the spotlight, and rewarded the undeniable grace of Olympians Kristi Yamaguchi and Apolo Ohno off the ice. Asian American dancers and performers have also been seen in prominent roles on the big screen in *Take the Lead* and *Step Up 2*, as well as the upcoming sci-fi dance film *Boogie Town*.

Arnel Calvario, founder of Kaba Modern, couldn't be more pleased by the visibility Asian American dancers have today. During the '80s and early '90s you could pretty much count on one hand the number of Asian American dancers appearing in mainstream media. He mentions Nia Peeples from *Fame* and then-unknown Carrie Ann Inaba as one of the Fly Girls on *In Living Color*.

It's not that Asian Americans weren't actively involved in the dance scene then. "Asian Americans had such a strong presence in underground street dance," adds Calvario, "with so many poppin' and breakin' crews comprised of many Filipinos and other Asian ethnicities since back in the '70s and '80s." But as far as the average American was concerned, there was no such thing as an Asian American urban dance culture, and in a sense that was true.

Before Calvario started Kaba Modern at the University of California, Irvine in 1992, formalized Asian American college crews didn't exist. "Other Southern California college dance companies such as PacModern, Team Millennia and CADC popped up years later," he says. "Culture Shock as a national dance organization was growing, and there were several other notable crews such as Jedi and Chain Reaction up in Northern California."

This movement continued to thrive as more crews started to form, develop their choreography and showcase their dancing prowess at competitions throughout the country.

The Tube Effect

Couple the development of this surging community with the arrival of video-sharing sites in the new millennium, and the scene suddenly — like so many other subcultures — found a virtual venue and forum that connected them in an unforeseen way. "Visibility and networking between Asian American dancers exploded not only nationally, but internationally," says Calvario.

His friend, renowned dancer and in-demand choreographer Mike Song, agrees. "I think TV dance shows and YouTube are the two hugest things that didn't exist before that have given so much opportunity to Asian dancers." And the young Tor-

rance, Calif.-based resident should know. Video-sharing sites and *ABDC* launched a busy career that has him flying all over the globe from Mexico and London to Beijing and Australia teaching, choreographing or performing.

Clips of Song are all over the Web, garnering thousands to millions of hits, especially for his priceless "Nintendo Wii Tutting Routine." And who could forget how he charmed MTV fans with his humor and tricks on the debut season of *ABDC* as a member of Kaba Modern?

At the time, he was still attending UC Irvine and was a member of the dance group on campus. That dance group has now transcended its status as mere college club to an internationally known force since winning first place in the United States — and second place in the world — in Hip Hop International in 2007, and its subsequent appearance as a crowd favorite on *ABDC*.

Song talks about how unexpected all the attention was, especially since his crew didn't even want to appear on *ABDC* at first. "We had no idea what that show would be like at all," he says. Howard Schwartz, producer of Hip Hop International, told them about a new dance show he was producing. He thought they'd be great for it. The truth was, says Song, "We worried it was going to be a really stupid dance show. We really didn't want to do it."

It was Calvario who pushed them to audition, realizing what an amazing opportunity it could be for the young dancers and the Kaba family, hoping they would just make the audition episode for "a brief window of exposure." What happened next, no one could have predicted.

ABDC became a huge hit. And MTV, the bastion of all things cool and trendy, saw its viewers overwhelmingly embracing the Asian American crews that first season. Jabbawockeez became the first *ABDC* champions and Kaba Modern was voted into the top three.

The View from the Top

Since then, Asian Americans have been represented in every winning group on the show — that's five seasons in a row — as well as among the serious contenders, generating some serious Asian pride. "Yeah, Asians are throwing it down, breaking stereotypes," says Ben "B-Tek" Chung of the Jabbawockeez. "*ABDC* has been giving a lot of Asian Americans exposure that the media hasn't ever really given us before. I wouldn't even just say Asian Americans, I would say just dancers in general."

And that media attention went far beyond our country's borders, with *ABDC* entering the homes of people on several continents, including Europe, Latin America and Asia.

Millions of people are embracing Asian American dancers in a way like never before, as numerous groups and individuals are making their mark in the industry as bona fide stars, renowned choreographers and leading innovators.



Arnel Calvario.



Mike Song.

PHOTOS: ARNEL CALVARIO PHOTO BY JIA TECSON; MIKE SONG PHOTO BY MICHAEL HIGGINS; ASAKO HARA PHOTOS BY YURI HASEGAWA.

Los Angeles native Chung recalls that when his crew first appeared on the show in 2008, many people were thrown by their ethnicity. “We had a lot of people telling us, man, when you took off the masks and saw that you guys were like Asian, we were so surprised.”

The Jabbawockeez, whose Asian members are of Korean, Filipino and Vietnamese descent, were likewise taken aback by this reaction. “That’s the weird thing for us, because we all kind of grew up in hip-hop and with hip-hop there are no color lines,” explains Chung. “It’s a culture of its own and I personally never grew up thinking, should I not be doing this hip-hop stuff because I’m Asian? I never thought of it like that. This is who we are, did you expect somebody else?”

On the flipside, he admits that is part of the beauty of using the masks. “We never perform as ‘us,’ as humans.”

Chung speaks about how the masks “strip away identity, strip away color, creed and gender even,” shifting the focus to what is most important to the Jabbawockeez — the music and movement. “People often say that when they watch us, they always forget that they’re watching people, it’s like you’re watching cartoons come to life.” Race doesn’t exist in this sense — it’s just about the dancing.

This is not to say that the Jabbawockeez aren’t thrilled by the significance of their rise. When they were kids, Chung and his fellow members rarely saw Asians on TV, in movies or the media in general. “For us to be able to be the frontrunners, or whatever you want to call it, for Asian American dancers or entertainers or celebrities, it’s definitely a cool feeling.”

The Asian Dance Mystique

Professional dancers like 21-year-old Japanese transplant Asako Hara says ethnicity has never been a disadvantage. Hara came through the ranks in the more traditional way of doing the audition rounds, landing appearances on numerous music videos, tours, movies and commercials with artists such as Snoop Dogg, will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas and Justin Bieber. “Most big artists have a culturally diverse fan base so it makes sense that dancers on stage would also reflect that diversity,” she says.

However, she does admit that there were some classes and auditions in the past where people reacted to her dance skills with shock. “I used to get so many people staring open mouthed at me when I first arrived in the U.S. because they couldn’t believe that I was Japanese yet was moving like an American,” says Hara. “People forget that around the world, wherever you’re from, it’s unlikely that you’ve escaped the influence of major American stars like Michael Jackson, Madonna and Britney Spears. We may all have our own cultural traditions, but nowadays we also all grow up as kids with similar influences.”

This still begs the question, why are Asian dancers having such mainstream appeal now, especially in the urban dance scene? There are thousands of talented Asian actors and singers who haven’t been accepted with as much enthusiasm as the dancers have on *ABDC* or in the dance industry in general.

In the 2008 *Planet B-Boy* documentary, filmmaker Benson Lee covered the 2005 international Battle of the Year break-dancing competition at which the Japan and South Korea crews were among the teams to rise to the top. Veterans of the dance

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— Choreographer Mike Song about his group Kaba Modern appearing on *America’s Best Dance Crew*



Asako Hara.

world commented on the creative choreography of the Japanese team and how the South Koreans “came out of nowhere ... doing power moves no one has seen before” and that “on a technical level, there is nobody who can touch the Koreans,” according to the film’s website.

So what makes Asians so skilled at street-dancing styles? “I have my own random theory,” says Song. “Dance is always connected to music.” He talks about how kids in African American communities and Latino communities are raised with certain genres of music that influence the way they dance. “Asians, we don’t have gospel or funk or salsa, but I feel like there are so many Asians who are forced to play instruments, so many, it’s so common, so part of our culture.”

And it is this knowledge of music, he believes, in subtle ways, that informs how Asians dance as well. “It ties into our style ... I feel Asians are so precise, and it goes along with the music training,” he says. “We learn how to read music ... so I feel like that subliminally affects the way we approach dance, with so much precision.”

Hara, on the other hand, speaks about “a real spirit of cooperation with the Asian dancers,” adding, “it’s not about ego, it’s purely about the team.” Though what she feels is really happening, as with Chung of the Jabbawockeez, is that people are just falling in love with the art of dance. “Dance is a universal thing and people love great dancers. They’re addictive to watch and can easily engage the audience,” she says. “You don’t think about their race, you just think about how outstanding they are, how well they move. There is no real or imagined barrier to understanding.”

Hip-Hop Hooray

One thing Chung, Song, Hara and Calvario certainly agree on is that all this attention, especially on TV, is important on so many levels beyond their respective careers. “Shows such as *America’s Best Dance Crew*, *So You Think You Can Dance* and even *Dancing With the Stars* all had many inspiring, talented dancers and choreographers, which I believe has really diversified the face of hip-hop dance past the previous perceptions that it was an art dominated by just one race,” says Calvario. “It made our place in dance culture much more visible and respected.”

And thinking in terms of the big picture, the veteran dancer raises three other very important consequences of the popularity of these shows. They have helped to “more visibly place hip-hop dance as an art form with history and technique” that should be held in as high regard as more classical dance forms. He also notes that this promotes the “positivity of urban dance” and breaks down negative stereotypes that hip-hop dance artists faced in the past. And finally, it brings “parents and youth together in dialogue and in joint respect of urban street dance as premiere entertainment.”

Chung’s longtime passion for dance and eventual, unprecedented rise to fame because of it is an inspiring case in point. Today his parents are definitely proud of what he and the Jabbawockeez have achieved, but they, like most parents, didn’t expect this from his childhood pastime. “It was definitely hard growing up as a kid and dancing. My parents just thought it was just something I was into as a kid, that it was a phase and I was just going to grow out of it,” he says. But Chung continued dancing in college

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and after he graduated. “Then the question came up, ‘When are you gonna stop?’ When are you going to get a real job?”

Early on, Chung knew that dancing would be his life and did his best to reassure his parents. “I told my mom, ‘This isn’t something I’m just doing for fun, this is something I’m really passionate about ... this is gonna turn into something. Just watch,’” he remembers. “And she said, ‘OK, I trust you,’ and lo and behold, we won *ABDC*, and that was the launching pad for Jabbawoockeez and it’s taken off ... this whole dancing thing.”

Of course with this new exposure, comes some added pressure for the most prominent Asian American dancers, especially the Jabbawoockeez, who are admired by millions of kids. “For me, personally, I looked up to a lot of dancers and entertainers and they kept me out of a lot of trouble,” says Chung. “So when people tell us we’re positive role models ... that makes us feel really good, because somewhere down the line someone did that for us. We’re just doing what we love to do and we’re just trying to encourage kids to follow their dreams and stay positive.”

Living the Dream

The Jabbawoockeez are achieving goals they set out to do in record time, and it seems like there isn’t a venue that isn’t open to them. When asked if they’ll ever share the stage with Blue Man Group, the successful performers who also strip away any racial or human identity when they are on stage, Chung laughs. “We always joked about it years ago to each other,” he says. (The Jabbawoockeez were prepping for the launch of their show “MUS.I.C (muse-i-see)” for a three-week stint at MGM in Las Vegas in May at the time of this interview.) “Man, we’re gonna be the next Blue Man Group. We’re gonna get our own Vegas show. And that time has actually arrived.”

While Chung and Hara are embracing their career paths as dancers, Kaba Modern’s Song has different aspirations. “I’m more of a choreographer than a dancer,” he says. “I’m not really super interested in going to auditions to learn other peoples’ choreography, I’m more interested in developing my style and molding my style as opposed to being a dancer being molded into other people’s style.”

As audiences continue to tune into dance shows and attend performances and competitions around the world, the opportunities for dancers to chart new career paths, especially in terms of the urban dance scene, are as exciting as ever. “Before *ABDC*, the highest thing you could get as a choreographer is to be the choreographer for a big artist, like Justin Timberlake, the most famous street dancer,” Song explains. “Then after *ABDC*, Jabbawoockeez became the most famous dancers, so now dancers are the celebrities.”

So what does the charismatic Song hope for in the future? “To choreograph my own dance production.” He got a taste of that being one of the choreographers for the street dance show *Blaze*, currently touring Europe, directed by famous British choreographer Anthony van Laast. “When I was working on that I thought this is what I want to do, produce an hour-long dance production and make it happen here. And the first to do it now is Jabbawoockeez.”

For veteran Calvario, the outlook for Asian American street dancers is definitely “bright” with so many dancers, crews, companies and choreographers making their mark in their communities. And he does his part to bring more people into the fold, by providing classes to people of all ages, such as the master classes the adult entity of Kaba Modern, Kaba Modern Legacy (KMLegacy.com), is presenting in Southern California this summer.

Like Chung, Calvario feels that being innovative and positive is of the utmost importance to sustain this exciting rise of Asian American dancers. “The key to keeping it strong is for all of us ... to stick together in our mission to keep the dance culture positive and ever-evolving artistically.”

Chung of the Jabbawoockeez feels the vitality of the movement also depends on how the media continues to present them. “It can be oversaturated and burn out if it’s done incorrectly,” he says. “As long as people continue to push the envelope in terms of creativity, make it brand new and fresh — not just among Asian American dancers — anything can get tired if it’s done too much.”

But for the time being, Asian American dancers are relishing all the media attention and using it to continue to help the scene thrive. Kaba Modern members are inspiring people around the globe through their performances and teaching workshops. Song’s choreography can be seen on national and international stages as well as the small and big screens, from commercials to films. The Jabbawoockeez not only launched a Vegas show this year, but also have an album and a clothing line called “Wocks” dropping soon.

And let’s not forget that former Fly Girl Carrie Ann Inaba, who as a judge on one of the highest-rated shows on television, *Dancing with the Stars*, has cemented her place in American pop culture history as a leading authority on dance.

No longer is it a question if Asians can dance, but if there are any limits to what they can achieve with that talent. Could an Asian American dance production as big as the Broadway hit *Flower Drum Song*, staged more than 50 years ago, be a reality in the not-to-distant future? We hope so. And it’s clear that Asian Americans are not the only ones waiting for it to happen — the whole world is. ❀

Kaba Modern in Beijing.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ARNEL CALVARIO.