

Respect, respect, respect:
when footworkers—like
Light Bulb (this page)
and FROST (opposite)—
slide into the battle circle,
there's only one thing
they're shooting for.



WORKIN' IT

Chicago is home to one of the world's quickest dance styles. Breakneck through the battle circles and blistering bpm's of footworkin.'

Words: Glenn Jeffers Photography: Jamie-James Medina



The music thumps so loud your brain shakes itself into a headache, your teeth chatter, and your bones start to reverberate—that is, if you’re leaning against the wall.

Not so for Jamal Olivier, a long and lanky 20-year-old from Chicago. For Olivier, who also goes by the name Light Bulb, the auditory onslaught has all the impact of a light rain. It flows into his ears, down his arms and legs, and into his feet. And then his feet move—and boy, do they move.

Light Bulb scoots up and down an enclosed space of dancers and onlookers, also known as a battle circle. His feet kick up and down like something out of one of Sammy Davis Jr.’s Vegas acts. His tongue wags and sweat rolls down his face.

Finally, Light Bulb stops in front of a smaller man dressed all in black—jeans, Iowa Hawkeyes shirt and Chicago Bulls cap—and dances right in front of him for a few seconds. His friends on the right side of the circle, the fellow members of his battle crew, Terra Squad, whoop and holler. A challenge has been issued.

The moment Light Bulb steps out of the circle, Brandon Love—a.k.a. Basik, a.k.a. the guy in the black—jumps in with the fervor of a Tasmanian devil. Basik zips across the floor, almost tiptoeing as he moves at an amazing speed before he jumps, crosses his legs mid-air, lands, drops, and touches the floor with his knees (one at a time) before popping back up, all in one continuous motion.

The crowd cheers at the move, a new creation of Basik’s that he calls “The Cat Daddy.” The onlookers nod and smile as they hold up their phones and cameras. This will be on YouTube soon enough.

“That was fun,” Basik, 20, of Chicago, says of the move. But this is just the beginning. “It’s not crackin’ yet. [Light Bulb’s] holding back. I know I am.”

The night’s not about to end. It’s only 11 p.m. on a Sunday evening at Battle

Zone. The 2-on-2 battles haven’t started up yet, not to mention the Mystery battles. This is the Sunday footworkin’ party, and it don’t stop till...

Well, that’s the point. It doesn’t stop, because it’s here in this sweaty backroom of a South Side kindergarten school that footworkin’ lives.

From the South Side of Chicago to the high-gloss production studio of “America’s Got Talent” a few years ago, to a recent documentary on the scene, footworkin’ has carved out a conspicuous position for itself in the fragmented landscape of popular culture. Its arc has recently taken it across the Atlantic, where British dance-music label Planet Mu released “Bangs and Works Vol. 1: A Chicago Footwork Compilation” in December, and footworkers took part in *Juste Debout*, a global dance competition featuring acts from Europe and Asia.

“This particular dance style is articulate and complex,” says Rich Talauega, one-half of the brotherly duo who have become some of the world’s most sought-after choreographers. “It may take a while to learn. But if you’re talking about a mainstream style like the ‘Dougie’? Yeah, it could possibly be as big. We just don’t know yet.”

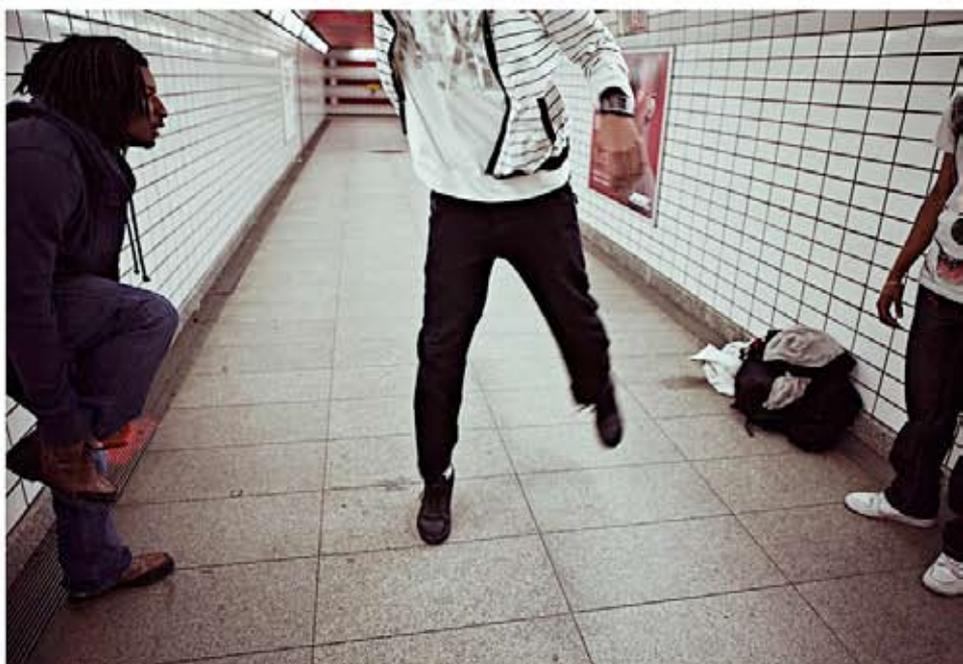
It was Talauega and his younger brother, Tone, who brought footworkin’ to a global stage, hiring Chicago locals King Charles and Iron as dancers during Madonna’s global “Sticky & Sweet” tour. The footworkers reminded the brothers of themselves when they were younger, freestyling in the streets and nightclubs of Oakland, Calif.

“Look at break dancing,” says Tone, 33. “It was difficult to dance to, but now, 35, almost 40 years later, break dancing’s more sought out than ballet.”

For the time being, footworkin’ remains what it’s always been: a street culture played out in rec centers, house parties and roller rinks, an amalgam of sound and sample, played while young men and women flit about as if their feet were on fire—all to earn respect. It’s a dance style that screams aggression and speed, competition and pride. Feet kick up and down; heels skim the floor like

An intricate street-dance style with its roots in Chicago house music, footworkin’ consists mostly of battles between two dancers, which can take place anytime and anywhere, including in one of Chicago’s subway stations.







Footworkin's pioneers, like A.G. (top, center) have been instrumental in bringing up the younger guard. The Panic Room (middle and bottom) is one of the Chicago hot spots for the new generation of dancers.

flat stones across a brook; knees rotate left and right; shoulders and hips twist back and forth.

The music that accompanies footworkin'—called footwork music—pulses at about 160 beats per minute (bpm) in a continuous mash of warped bass, drum kicks, claps and synth, wrapped around samples that have been cut up, stretched out, and slowed down to the point of anonymity. Music and dance work together to create footworkin'—one does not exist without the other.

“The music... it has a lot of soul at the center of it,” says Light Bulb. “It brings out your creativity when you’re dancing.”

Both music and dance have been around for more than 20 years, says Nephets Giddens, a DJ and radio host on WPWX-92.3 FM in Hammond, Ind., just south of Chicago. They originated from Chicago house music in the early '90s, when DJs would speed up the tracks to 140 bpm. This style of music later became known as ghetto house (Ghettotrax). As the music quickened, so did the dancing.

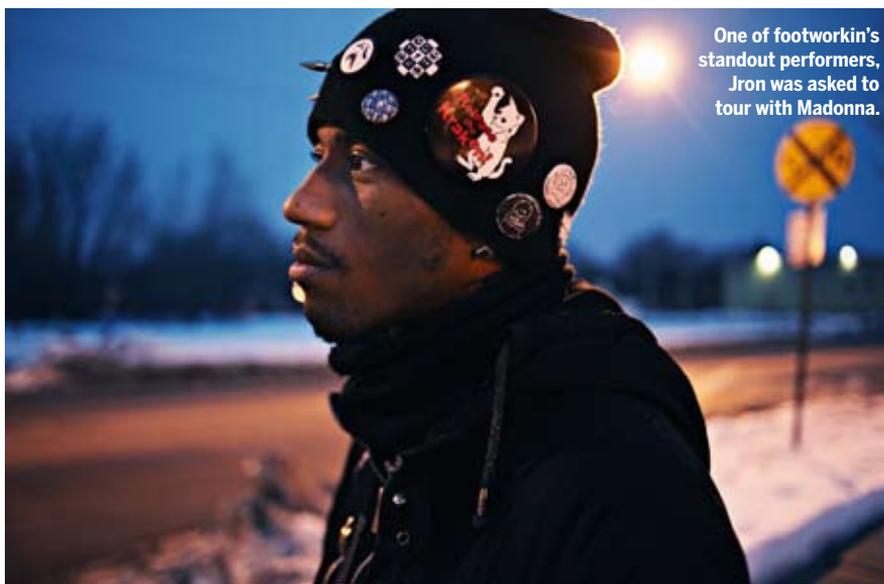
At about 150 bpm, the music evolved into what is considered juke music, a high-tempo style meant to get people on the floor. In the past 15 years, juke has been the mainstay at most parties in Chicago, from the high-school prom to your run-of-the-mill basement party.

“Normally, you’d play juke or Ghettotrax 80 percent of the night,” says Giddens, who plays a weekday Juke mix on 92.3, the most youthful and cutting-edge of Chicago’s soul stations. “You’d only play hip-hop for the breaks.”

In the late '90s, DJs started pushing up the beat again, this time to 160 bpm. That’s when most people headed to the sidelines. But a few dancers kept pace, their feet shuffling up and down the floor. There were bits of rave dancing in there, some hip-hop bounce. At times, the moves looked like a mix between a Gregory Hines tap-dance demo and your grandpa’s stepper set.

But it had all the fire of a street fight. This wasn’t a cheerful exchange; it was a battle. Win, and you gained respect; lose, and you were clowned. The circle was born. So too, was footworkin’, both the dance style and the music.

“You get a certain level of respect for being able to do it,” says Christopher “Mad Dog” Thomas, 26, of south suburban Dolton, a member of the Creation battle crew and all-star dance group FootworKINGz. “No matter how you look or dress, you’re respected if you know how to do it,” he adds.



One of footworkin' standout performers, Iron was asked to tour with Madonna.

“YOU’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO LOOK LIKE ANYONE ELSE... IF YOU’RE A ROBOT, THEY WON’T REMEMBER YOU.”

While footworkin’ music and its older cousin, juke, continue to gain respect throughout Europe—through big features in both music and mainstream press, and stylistic nods from U.K. acts like Ramadanman and Night Slugs—it remains an underground culture in Chicago, where it has been relegated to black neighborhoods on the South and West Side. It is also scattered between dozens of crews and DJs, who find it difficult to work together, let alone collaborate.

Competition is one reason for the lack of unity. As most footworkers learn early on, the moves are merely a template, like learning the notes of a chord progression. Footworkin’ in its most honest form is a freestyle dance. And like freestyle rap or a jazz solo, the dancing extends from the dancer’s personality. No two styles should be the same.

“You’re not supposed to look like anyone else. You’re supposed to look like yourself,” says Charles Parks, one of footworkin’ most accomplished performers. “If you’re a robot, they’ll remember the team—they won’t remember you.”

The same thing goes for the DJs, whose competitive natures have kept them from organizing, pooling resources, and releasing music commercially. That a U.K.-based producer had to release the genre’s

first major-label album testifies to that.

“It’s bigger in London than it is here,” says Jerome McCune, 26, otherwise known as DJ Ro, a footworker and DJ who has been involved with the scene for more than 14 years. “If we worked together, it would mean more here. But there are too many people saying, ‘I’m better than so-and-so.’”

If there’s any collaboration, it can be found at the parties, held either weekly or bimonthly on the South Side and south suburbs, in residential neighborhoods pockmarked by vacant lots and storefront churches. Surveillance cameras—the telltale signs of lower income and a higher police presence—hang off electrical poles. And in the South Side’s schools, kids battle anywhere, from the locker aisles to the cafeteria.

Six years ago, Jaron Boyd was having lunch with his friends at his suburban Chicago high school when he watched his first battle. Iron, as his friends call him, was entranced—he’d never seen anyone move that fast.

After the battle, Iron asked one of students to teach him some moves. The two met up after classes, where Iron would start learning his steps slowly and then work up to footwork speed. Within weeks, he was the one in the circle, battling other kids.

Then the challenges came daily. Rather than shy away, he took on all of them. A lithe young man whose groomed



BOUNCE TO THIS

This revolution will not be televised. But, thanks to affordable digital cameras and YouTube, street-dancing styles like footworkin' are being uploaded onto the Web and getting their due. Here are a few more you can check out:

BOUNCE

Point of origin: New Orleans, La.
What is it? A compliment to the music of the same name, bounce consists mostly of shaking or undulating one's... posterior.
History: Bounce began about 20 years ago, once "Drag Rap" hit the streets. It is identifiable by the "Triggerman beat," a synthesized line of sixteenth notes that became ideal for booty-shaking. Cash Money recording artist Juvenile popularized both the music and dance style with his 1999 megahit, "Back that Azz Up."
www.youtube.com: 'bounce dance'

TURFING

Point of origin: Oakland, Calif.
What is it? A fluid dance style made up of sliding, spinning, bending, and contorting in ways that would make a snake jealous. Videos should come with chiropractor's warning.
History: Originally known as T.U.R.F. (an acronym for "Taking Up Room on the Floor"), turfing developed in the 1990s as a compliment to the area's bass-heavy hyphy music, and borrows heavily from both break-dancing and hip-hop dance styles.
www.youtube.com: 'turf feinz'



CLOWNING

Point of origin: Los Angeles, Calif.
What is it? High-energy and frenetic style where dancers pop their hips, arms, chest, and head as feverishly as possible... while wearing makeup. David LaChapelle's 2005 documentary "Rize" focused on "krumping," a more aggressive version.
History: Actual clown Tommy Johnson (below) created the style in 1992 while entertaining children during a birthday party. By 2002, Johnson had more than 60 "Hip-Hop Clown" crews performing throughout the city. Johnson began hosting battles to keep crew conflicts to a minimum.
www.youtube.com: 'tommy the clown'

MEMPHIS JOOKIN'

Point of Origin: Memphis, Tenn.
What it is? Also known as "Gangsta Walking," jookin' is a fluid, gliding style that also incorporates arm locking, spinning, and balancing on the tips of your toes.
History: Originating in the late 1980s alongside Memphis "Buck" music, jookin' gained popularity as dancers started working in moves from other styles, most notably break dancing, popping, and locking—even "The Robot." Jookin' was recently featured in Janelle Monáe's video, "Tightrope."
www.youtube.com: 'evac jookin'



Clockwise from top left:
 New Orleans bounce;
 Memphis jookin';
 Tommy the Clown;
 Oakland turfing.

good looks and smooth voice belie his ferocity on the dance floor, Jron wanted to build a reputation. Shutting up the naysayers was a bonus.

“When I started seeing people copying my moves, I knew I was doing something right,” says Jron, who went on to form the battle crew Havoc.

Three years later, he went to the annual “King of the Circle” competition in south-suburban Markham, considered the preeminent contest for bragging rights in Chicago. Win, and the organizers name you “King”; Jron took second. They called him “Prince.”

The “King” was a young man who had been making a name for himself since his early teens. Like Jron, Charles Parks had glimpsed his first footworker at high school when he was 14. He headed to parties and met others, learning from the old school heads. He quickly built a crew of his own, called Creation. They were featured on MTV and on BET.

Leida Villegas, a local choreographer known around town as “Lady Sol,” met Parks and soon began managing Creation, hiring Parks to teach footworkin’ to high-school kids. Having spent years living on both coasts, Villegas knew the genre didn’t exist anywhere outside of the Chicago area. It was singular and unique, as endemic to Chicago as turf dancing is to Oakland, jookin’ is to Memphis, and krumping is to Los Angeles (*see box*).

“It’s been underground for so many years, but that’s because that’s where the kids were doing it,” says Villegas, 36. “They didn’t have that access to leave the city and share it in cities like New York.”

She saw an opportunity. There were dozens of crews across the city: Creation, Havoc, Terra Squad, Heat Squad, and 1.8.7., to name a few. She invited the best, auditioned them, and formed FootworKINGz. Under her management and Parks’ artistic direction, the crew practiced five to six hours a day. New words entered the footworkin’ vocabulary: spatial awareness, transitions. Freestyle battling became an intricate routine of fluid motions.

Television gigs were booked. VH1 needed them for an award show. Verizon called about a commercial. Then came Madonna. It was 2008, and she wanted street dancers for her upcoming “Sticky & Sweet” world tour. Parks was a lock to audition, but she wanted someone else to join him.

Villegas put out a call to the other FootworKINGz dancers, and Jron picked up his phone. The partnership came



Building a rep was about taking on all comers and shutting up the naysayers, says Jron.

“WHEN I STARTED SEEING PEOPLE COPYING MY MOVES, I KNEW I WAS DOING SOMETHING RIGHT.”

together overnight. They headed to Los Angeles for the audition, then to New York for months of training, then off to join the tour, and it’s been like that ever since for the pair.

Parks and Jron just recently returned from Finland, where they took first place in House in the regional finals for Juste Debout, an annual global-dance tournament. They headed to Paris in mid-March where they made it to the event’s semifinals.

“We were just there to teach one class and do one performance, but while we were there in Finland, we thought we could win the whole thing, so we entered—and we won the whole thing,” says Parks.

Back at Battle Zone, Rashad Harden and Morris Harper (a.k.a. DJs Rashad and Spinn) stand behind the DJ booth, watching guys like Basik and Light Bulb do their thing. For nearly four years, Rashad, Spinn, and the rest of their crew—the Ghetto Teknitianz (or Ghattoteks for short)—have DJed the Sunday-night footwork party.

“It’s a decent amount of people,” says Spinn, 30, as he looks out over a crowd of about 80. “The first week we had, like, 100 people.”

Rashad is more amazed that footwork music is being heard outside of Chicago. A longtime producer of all the subgenres

—footwork, juke, even the lesser-known ghetto techno—Rashad, 29, figured he would just play footworkin’ parties and that’d be it. “Now, we all get the chance to go do something bigger,” Rashad says.

For a while now, footworkin’ has long been thought of as the bastard stepchild to juke, rather than a respected subgenre. And the irony that many house producers felt the same way about juke back in the day doesn’t escape the Ghattoteks.

“You know how Chicago is with haters, people who think they [are] too good to work with you,” Spinn says, refusing to name names. “It’d be nice if people could work together.” But “Bangs and Works” is a good first step, he says, even though Spinn, Rashad, and Earl “DJ Earl” Smith all say their contributions to the LP are a couple of years old, at least. “Vol. 2” is apparently in the works, and most of the Ghetto Teknitianz played dates in London, Amsterdam, and Berlin in April.

Right now is a great time for footworkin’, according to Spinn. The dancing and its music is gaining popularity across Europe. Hopefully, the rest of the community can pull together and help put this underground phenomenon on the global map. It’s about time the world saw what’s going on in Chicago.

After all, says Spinn, “It’s still about bringing it back here.”

Slide on over: www.footworkingz.com