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*by Marc Lagace*

It's a particularly frigid February evening in Winnipeg, but things are getting heated on Higgins Ave. It's Saturday night, and the Graffiti Gallery is packed with people eagerly anticipating the start of 2Raw, a two-on-two breakdance competition. Over twenty pairs of b-boys have registered to compete for a cash prize of \$600. Dozens scramble to find a good vantage spot to watch the battles from up high along the second level of the gallery, while a large crowd forms a circle around the centre of the dance floor, packing in as tight as possible as the b-boys stretch and prep as local DJ MAV1 spins the records.





A battler who wants to be called Rabbitface gets hyped with his partner as they waits for the MC to get the battle underway. He's from the Paranormal Pandas, a fairly established b-boy crew that's trying to best represent Winnipeg in a competition that attracts crews from out-of-province.

Tonight, bragging rights and respect are just as important as the money that's on the line.

For weeks leading up to the competition, Paranormal Pandas have been practicing every Wednesday at a dance studio on Regent Ave. They're fortunate, as many crews aren't fortunate enough to have access to a space dedicated to dance rehearsals. Other crews find space to practice wherever they can.

"The thing about Winnipeg is that we're a very small city, so everyone knows everyone," says Rabbitface during a break from practice.

Recently, there's been an emerging new generation of b-boys in the local scene. For a while, the Winnipeg breakdancing scene was on life support, but renewed interest in the art form has made the local scene as strong as ever.

B-boys are one of four pillars that hip-hop is built upon; that is, DJs, MCs, b-boys, and graffiti artists. Out of those, breakdancing arguably requires the most dedication, perseverance and physical sacrifice. The style is broken up into four general categories of moves; toprock (upright moves and steps), footwork (how you control your legs and feet,

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especially when down on the floor), freezes and power moves (think of any breakdancing move you've seen that's made you say "wow". spins, flares and windmills fall under this category). Unfortunately, breakdancing is often associated with the negative connotations associated with the hip-hop community.

"It was that street dancing — that gang dancing or whatever you want to call it," says

Bob Verula Jr. Bob has been active within the local b-boy community since 1994. He is the programs director for Graffiti Art Programming Inc., and his crew Dangerous Goods have competed in competitions across Canada.

"Now that [hip-hop and breakdancing] makes money, they want to pull it into the [dance studios] because everyone wants to get into it. But there's a difference between a studio teacher and what I know from growing up in the culture."

That's a somewhat ironic statement, considering that Verula and the Graffiti Gallery help to run and organize Studio 393, a dance studio in Portage Place. But you have to understand not only how much of an influence the b-boy culture has had on Verula's life, but also how influential Verula has in turn become within the local scene. As one of the longest-battling Winnipeg b-boy with 20 years of dedication under his belt, he's regarded as 'the godfather' of Winnipeg's b-boy scene. Verula has also earned the reputation of being Winnipeg's breakdance historian, so to understand Verula's perspective, you have to understand

his personal background and how he and his friends got into breakdancing in the early 90s.

As Verula explains it, back then being a b-boy was all about hanging out with friends. You would get together and challenging one another to try new moves, or innovate off of what you already can do. There were no formal classes to sign up for, and the only access to the b-boy community outside of Winnipeg would arrive via VHS tapes of competitions and best-of compilations.

These days, it's easier than ever to find breakdance tutorials online on YouTube. Most dance studios in Winnipeg also offer hip-hop dance classes, which will introduce basic toprock moves. Taking things to the next level and master jaw-dropping power moves requires way more time and dedication than a weekly dance class could ever provide.

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"Winnipeg is really known for original style and creative thinking," said Rabbitface, when asked what sets Winnipeg apart from other cities like Vancouver, Toronto or Calgary. With a community so tightknit and isolated from outside influences, "you have to be as original as possible".

Back at the 2Raw competition, creativity reigns supreme. The crowd pops when someone adds a fresh spin to an already difficult power move. Tonight, Verula is not competing, opting instead to sit

on the sidelines as one of three judges.

As the competition progresses, it comes down to two crews that have battled their way into the finals. Seriously Convincing, a duo who drove in from Saskatoon, is ready to take on Dopey Jumpy, a young Winnipeg duo. Dopey

Jumpy is Ju Young Cho and Marvin Joseph Barawid, two first-generation immigrants who are described as newcomers to the local scene by 2Raw's MC, Winston Minge. But they certainly made a name for themselves on the night, impressing Verula and the other judges and taking down established b-boys like Rabbitface earlier in the night.

Barawid has shone especially bright. His smaller frame has been a distinct advantage, as he's thrown his body around the floor in an almost reckless manner, but still oozing with style and finesse. On multiple occasions, his spins, flips and freezes have caused the crowd to lose their minds.

With everything on the line, the atmosphere is palpable as the two crews invade each other's space and toss out taunts as they throw down moves.

While Seriously Convincing would ultimately head back to Saskatoon with padded wallets and inflated egos, Dopey Jumpy proved themselves to be major players locally, impressing the crowd and more importantly their fellow b-boys, and proving that the art of breaking is still alive and well in Winnipeg.

