

The Hip Hop Journey of Gabriel Francisco

by JEAN WASP

YOU WILL FIND NO COMMERCIAL MUSIC IN THE HIP HOP classes of Gabriel Francisco. Even gangsta rap holds no sway against the chest-rattling bass, the tight, unpredictable kicks, and the uplifting synthesized rifts that comprise the new sound of hip hop.

Listening to the 28-year-old SSU dance teacher talk about hip hop is like listening to a man who has found his spiritual calling.

"The core of hip hop is socially, racially and economically blind," he often says. "On the dance floor we are all equals, we are all students. It is a matter of sharing, a lesson in community."

Since he signed up for the first-ever class of hip hop at Santa Rosa Junior College taught by Debbe-Ann Medina in 1997, Francisco has pursued dance of all forms.

"He has developed himself, through fierce determination, into a wonderfully passionate professional dancer who travels the world

doing exactly what he loves. How is that for a job?" Medina asks.

Francisco launched SSU's first hip hop dance class for credit in 1999. In the first semester, the class drew 100 people and had to be split into two classes of 50. Many of the students who registered for this new class were men who normally would not be interested in dance.

His passion for hip hop, a dance style that was born on the streets of the Bronx among Blacks and Latinos in the 1970s as street dancing, lies within its apparent lack of limitations. "Within the world of hip hop there are no rules, no guidelines, and while dancing you are the instrument, limited only by your own endless imagination," he says.

Self-described as "goofy and white" when he first entered the world of hip hop, early salvation was found in the basic coordination that

years of martial arts and soccer provided. Hooked on hip hop, he strived to master the dance style, making it his own with a focused intensity.

In the beginning he says he was "like lava, blazing with white hot potential, rolling over and absorbing everything in my path. I didn't know what I wanted, I just knew what I needed. I spent hundreds of hours commuting to classes."

He did everything to locate the founders of hip hop and learn from them, becoming friends in the process. By 2000, Francisco had auditioned for and entered Culture Shock San Diego, a hip-hop dance troupe dedicated to cutting-edge entertainment, dance education and outreach to diverse communities. Founded in 1993 by Nike Dance Trainer Angie Bunch, its primary goal is to offer children an alternative to street life. It was at this time Francisco was also accepted into California State University, Long Beach, which has one of the top ten dance departments in the nation.

In 2001, the president of Culture Shock saw his potential and teaching ability and invited him to present his style in Europe. He became the international ambassador of hip hop for Culture Shock in Europe, offering high-level hip hop choreography and performances to people who had no previous exposure. He was one of the first white hip hop teachers from the United States to teach in Japan and Europe. "Hip Hop led me by the hand from one country and culture to the next," says Francisco.

"Hip Hop is more diverse, profound and subconscious than any other dance style. It dates back to ancient Africa, yet it is a fledgling American subculture. It is heard on the radio, stitched into our clothing, seen on TV, it has changed the way we talk, the way we walk, the way we communicate," says Francisco.

Whether it is a private training for an artist or group in Los Angeles or a workshop inside an airplane hanger with 600 Russian or Brazilian dancers, Francisco imagines that "we are all together on a mystic and magical adventure."

Over the years, his dance training has widened to include ballet, modern, Latin and even West-African dance, expanding his foundation and vocabulary of movement.



In December 2008, Francisco graduated from SSU with a bachelor's degree in Theater Arts. Taking steps to teach full time in Sonoma County, Francisco will unveil Vibe-Dance in 2008, establishing a place where young open-minded dancers can come to learn, communicate and develop their potential as leaders, listeners and artists. More flexible than a physical studio, Vibe-Dance will allow him to create different "sub scenes" such as elementary and high school performing teams that will tour northern California inspiring their peers. He has already had a start in this direction with the classes he offered at local public schools in 2007 and the choreography for the SSU dance ensemble productions last semester.

"I want to train young dancers to be teachers and choreographers themselves. I want to bridge the gap between theater and hip hop dance, blurring the traditional boundaries between the street and the stage."

To visit Gabriel Francisco's Vibe-Dance and to see him in action, go to www.vibe-dance.com and <http://youtube.com/profile?user=mdorsai>

