

...DANCE. Hip hop culture features strange mix

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said Pat Arredondo, 19, a breakdancer from Fluid Intelligence. But he also believes "there are actually more hip-hip heads finding religion."

In April, Seeking Heaven Crew and New Born Teens performed in front of hundreds of their fellow students in a mock "battle" of miming, "popping," or isolating parts of the body in movement, and spinning moves. They pretended to spank each other, to wild cheers of approval from the crowd. Fluid Intelligence performs at parties and churches around town.

Despite these performances, breakdancing is still not readily visible in Bakersfield; one has to hunt it out. Nowadays, people don't see b-boys on street corners, although some did bust moves outside of Jerry's Pizza after a punk show one night last summer.

"A few of the punkers came and kicked it with us," Arredondo said.

Mostly, Fluid Intelligence saves its practice for an indoor basketball court at What a Racket gym. "Real hip hop culture is still underground," said Matt Hodges, 25, of Fluid Intelligence.

Yet the group, like the Foothill High School breaking crews, wants its message of peace and Christianity to spread. Arredondo even believes this is part of hip hop culture, too. He calls it "cultivating." Like MCs on a street corner rapping a story or breakdancers attracting attention with their moves, Bakersfield crews say they hope to spread an appreciation for their styles and values.

The sessions are often an unusual mix of street culture and evangelism. It's in phrases like "Bangin' for Christ, the Devil's Our Number One Enemy," as spoken by Michael Rodriguez, 17, a member of NBT, or New Born Teens. The letters originally stood for Nothing But Trouble. But now, Rodriguez says, he has dedicated himself to incorporating something he loves - breakdancing - with a new-found appreciation of God.

New Born Teens, supervised by an adult, sets up a mat on the basketball court at Martin Luther King Jr. Park every Sunday, handing out food and drinks and showing moves to whomever will watch, occasionally sharing Christian testimony. Recently, they chose music that sounds like West Coast gangster rap - the same rolling, fuzzy bass, the same electronic wail. But the lyrics are about a gangster who turned to God, with songs like "Saved to Da Bone."

Members of NBT, like Joseph Hernandez, 17, have criminal back-



JEFF CHONG/THE CALIFORNIAN

Christian Janson of Fluid Intelligence wears his faith.

but you gotta understand something about it. It originated in the inner city, where the only recognition a youth could get is their name all over the city," he said.

Parents of breakdancers see the positive aspects of the culture, saying they appreciate what their children are doing. "I think it's good, because there's kids out there that are doing negative stuff on the street," said Rachel Arredondo, Pat's mother. "I think my son's on the right track, because he goes to church and breakdancing takes up a lot of his time."

"I think it's great. There's a lot worse things they could be doing. It's just a way to express themselves," said Randy Sanchez, father to Felipe, 13, who breakdances with NBT at the park.

That's what it comes down to - self-expression through a scene that doesn't just include music and dancing, but a whole way of talking and behaving.

Hip hoppers reflect their styles in many ways - like at the Radio Invasion studio in downtown

Bakersfield, where Garcia and Patrick Jimenez spin records on turntables for their Internet broadcast.

One night, Cisneros drops a spontaneous rhyme over the air, "leavin' MCs dizzy 'cause Cisko's like that. Never whack, brother, never lack." When he's done, Jimenez tries to DJ while a friend jokes around and holds one of his arms behind his back.

The hip hop style comes through as NBT dances on a Sunday afternoon at Martin Luther King Jr. Park, where there is cheese-flavored popcorn and soda and kids lying stomach-down on skateboards, zooming across the basketball court. There are bikes, yo-yos, and a string trick with a God message to go with it.

And hip hop is the atmosphere before, as well as during, a Fluid Intelligence Show at Westbrook Chapel, when the group joins hands and prays on the lawn outside the building. The conversation had been about MCs and DJs, but the mood turns serious as Cisneros asks "Father God" to watch over them as they perform. Inside, the air smells like cologne, and crew members as well as the Christian rap group Royal Ruckus are warming up, stretching. There's lots of handshaking and moving around, even a genuine bear hug or two. "We may look rough. We may sound rough," Arredondo tells the small crowd before the group performs. "But we're gems. We're beautiful in God's eyes."

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