

“Country Boy, B-Boy: Renegotiating Southern and Hip-Hop Identity in Rural Upstate South Carolina in the Mid-1980s.”¹

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It’s winter 1984—a watershed year for rap music, electric funk, and hip-hop culture. It’s also around 9:30 p.m. on a Friday or Saturday night. The club has been hopping for hours. Approximately six break dancers have already formed their makeshift semi-circle on the dance floor, which has been illuminated by a variety of colored, directional spotlights. The crowd of cheering tweens and teens completes the circle while adding a few layers to its outside. The music is loud, almost deafening, but it doesn’t matter; you can’t play Twilight 22’s Top Ten hit “Electric Kingdom” (1984) loud enough.² The dancers are in their own zone, each taking a half-minute solo at circle center, trying to outdo or at least intimidate their predecessor, and using whatever combination of moves fits the beat. Some of their “toprock” favorites include the moonwalk, locking, or popping, before they continue with some staple “downrock” or floor work: a knee spin, the centipede, the back spin, the helicopter, the hand spin, or the foundational six-step, climaxing with the ultimate finisher: the windmill, all before passing “the groove” off to what will hopefully be the dancer’s next victim. The session might go on for twenty minutes or more before the DJ moves on to another pop style of dance music for the rest of the crowd to enjoy. But this also doesn’t matter. The dance victors have fed their respective egos and proven their worth tonight for each other and the crowd while leaving the less fortunate dancers to practice their moves until next week’s battle.

The above narrative could easily describe a variety of locales in urban centers across the country in the early to mid-1980s. And the folks therein could plausibly be from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities, including Black, Latinx, and white. But yet, this scene did not take place in an urban center, and the club’s clientele was not diverse, but rather comprised almost exclusively lower- to middle class rural and suburban whites from York, South Carolina, a small upstate township of c. 6,400 folks at the time and known primarily for

¹ This paper is dedicated to the memory of Gerald Kemp, Jr. (1935-2018), who provided the children of York our first “safe space” long before the term came into widespread popularity.

² “Electric Kingdom” peaked at Number Seven on the *Billboard* Black Singles charts in winter 1984.

antebellum plantation houses, nearby Civil War battlefields, textile mills, rednecks, peach orchards, and oddly enough, getting married.³ I know the area well. That was my town, and one of those break dancers was me.

For context, hip-hop culture had emerged onto the national scene in 1979 with the release of “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang and, by the mid-1980s, had transformed into one of many dominant components of the American cultural soundscape. Hip-hop culture, which had been initially associated with urban African-Americans in NYC, had been disseminated to and adopted by people of diverse backgrounds in the 1980s via the mass media, namely television, film, and audio recordings. However, less prominent in the literature on hip-hop’s reception is its appeal among white audiences, particularly in the rural South. In this paper I examine the role of hip-hop culture, specifically break dancing, in the mid-1980s among southern whites, using as a case study the local music scene in York, South Carolina, and at the town’s only night club for teens, The Upstairs. Drawing upon the work of Mark Slobin, Sheldon Stryker, and Peter Burke, I explore rural southern identity, including whiteness, vis-à-vis one’s affinity for historically non-white and non-southern musics such as rap and electric funk. I also engage my own cultural hybridity as a rural southern white whose favorite pastimes in the mid-1980s included listening to Hank Williams Jr., shooting guns, horseback riding, motorcycle racing, camping, and fishing, in addition to listening to pop music and break dancing each weekend at the only club in town accessible to teenagers. I posit that the symbiotic interrelationship between the American superculture and its various subcultures plays a prominent role in the ongoing re-negotiation of a Southerner’s hierarchy of social identities.

The City of York is located in the western part of York County in upstate South Carolina between I-77 and I-85 about forty-five minutes southwest of Charlotte, North Carolina. Its ultimate transformation into a small but successful commercial center started to take shape in the late 1700s at the intersection of two stage coach routes.⁴ Although the town thrived in the early

³ York is regionally known as a popular nuptial destination, having earned its nickname, “the marrying town.” According to the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control, among York County’s 4,794 marriages that took place in 1988, 72% contained non-residents, i.e., neither bride nor groom were residents of York County. S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control, Division of Biostatistics, Office of Vital Records and Public Health Statistics, October 1989. Cited in *South Carolina Statistical Abstract*. 1990. South Carolina Division of Research and Statistical Services. Columbia, SC: 345.

⁴ York County Economic Development: <https://www.yorkcountyed.com/live/york-county/york>. Accessed 8 March, 2021.

19th century, York experienced considerable social and economic upheaval during the Civil War and Reconstruction era amidst the presence of federal troops and considerable racial tension. York's economy regained momentum in the late 19th and early 20th centuries due to the growing global importance of textiles from the Carolina Piedmont. By the early 1900s, four major textile mills were operating simultaneously in York, bringing 1,200 to 1,500 people—about one-third of the town's population—to York's four mill villages.⁵ However, it was the specific presence of Cannon Mills, which had been founded by James W. Cannon in 1887 in Kannapolis, North Carolina, that provided the longest lasting economic stability to the town, while, at the same time, perpetuating a generational working class culture.⁶ By the 1980s, when a new global economy was transforming small towns all over America, York had remained, according to local historians, “A small town with traditional principles and conservative business practices.”⁷

According to the U.S. Census, the City of York had a population of 6,412 in 1980.⁸ However, because most folks lived outside the city limits, myself included, I expand my data pool to include York County that had a population of 106,720 residents in 1980, approximately 76% of whom were white and 22% of whom were Black.⁹ Approximately 7% of York County's population received food stamps in 1986.¹⁰ The unemployment rate for the mid-1980s in York County varied between 11.2% in 1982 and 5.6% by 1987.¹¹ In 1980, 30% of York County's

⁵ Wagoner, Paige, et. al. 2008. *Historical Architectural Survey of the City of York*. Prepared for the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Brockton and Associates, Inc.: 28.

⁶ Cannon Mills owned and operated two plants in York: #3 and #19. Cannon Mills Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University. Accessed 9 March, 2021.

⁷ Wagoner, Paige, et. al. 2008. *Historical Architectural Survey of the City of York*. Prepared for the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Brockton and Associates, Inc.: 38.

⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Local Population Estimates, Series P-26. Cited in *South Carolina Statistical Abstract*. 1990. South Carolina Division of Research and Statistical Services. Columbia, SC: 305.

⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, General Population Characteristics, PC80-1 · B42, Table 53, 1980; Social and Economic Characteristics, PC80-1 · C42, Table 59, 1980. Cited in *South Carolina Statistical Abstract*. 1990. South Carolina Division of Research and Statistical Services. Columbia, SC: 289.

¹⁰ South Carolina Department of Social Services, Division of Planning and Research, 1989. Cited in *South Carolina Statistical Abstract*. 1990. South Carolina Division of Research and Statistical Services. Columbia, SC: 222.

¹¹ South Carolina Employment Security Commission South Carolina Labor Market Review, 1989. Cited in *South Carolina Statistical Abstract*. 1990. South Carolina Division of Research and Statistical Services. Columbia, SC: 152.

population rented housing, and 70% of residents owned their own home, whose median value at the time was \$35,100.¹² Among all homeowners in York County in 1980, 12.3% lived below the poverty line, and among home renters, 29% lived below the poverty line.¹³ The median annual household income for York County residents in 1979 was \$17,075.¹⁴ In brief, York County was generationally poor, mostly rural, and largely white, and it retained close ties to its agricultural and commercial roots.

And yet, the area's residents supported a nightclub for young folks called The Upstairs that was a hot spot for popular music every Friday and Saturday night from 1982 through 1989. The Upstairs had been the dream of local entrepreneur Gerald Kemp, Jr. (1935-2018), who had wanted to create a safe space for young folks to hang out and enjoy popular music.¹⁵ Gerald had gotten the idea for The Upstairs in the early 1980s on a trip to nearby Gastonia, North Carolina, with his wife Lilian (1935-2020) and twelve-year-old son Mathew, where the three had visited a teen center called My Place. Mathew remembers that day well:

I remember walking into [My Place], music blaring, video games everywhere and GIRLS [sic]! Dad sat my mother and I [sic] in a booth and said "Let's do this in York"! Of course, I was thinking to myself, "Hell yeah!..." I don't know how Dad found out about My Place, but I knew he felt like he needed to give back to the kids in York. He wanted a place where kids could go to have fun and feel safe but also abide by the rules and be held accountable for their actions.¹⁶

¹²U.S. Bureau of the Census, Summary Characteristics for Governmental Units and Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas, PHC80-3-42, Tables 1 and 2; General Housing Characteristics, HC80, 1-A42, Table 1, and Correction Notes in both publications, 1980. Cited in *South Carolina Statistical Abstract*. 1990. South Carolina Division of Research and Statistical Services. Columbia, SC: 234.

¹³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Detailed Housing Characteristics, HC80-1-B42, Tables 62 and 95, 1980. Cited in *South Carolina Statistical Abstract*. 1990. South Carolina Division of Research and Statistical Services. Columbia, SC: 235.

¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, General Social and Economic Characteristics, PC80-1-C42, Tables 71 and 180, 1980. Cited in *South Carolina Statistical Abstract*. 1990. South Carolina Division of Research and Statistical Services. Columbia, SC: 264.

¹⁵ Graham, Gene. 1983. "York Area Teens, Pre-teens Enjoy Upstairs Atmosphere." In *Yorkville Enquirer Newspaper*. Thursday, 18 August (1983): 8.

¹⁶ Kemp, Mathew. 5 March, 2021. Email correspondence with author.

In September 1982 Gerald applied for and received a loan to renovate a property located at 42 North Congress Street in York.¹⁷ He had originally acquired the property in 1977 from local businessman James Wallace and had operated a sporting goods store there until 1979. Subsequent to considerable renovations that began in fall 1982, The Upstairs, a.k.a. The Upstairs Canteen, opened in late summer 1983.

The Upstairs flourished for several years and was run almost entirely by the Kemp family.¹⁸ Gerald and his wife Lilian oversaw operations most evenings, 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. They mostly ran the concessions counter that offered a variety of light snacks, including popcorn, hot dogs, nachos, candy, and non-alcoholic drinks. Seventeen-year-old son Mark served as DJ, and Mark's older brother Jerry served as the bouncer.¹⁹ The cover charge was \$2-3 after 6 p.m. and included access to the 2nd floor club (hence the name "The Upstairs") that contained a c.10'X20' parquet dance floor, a slightly smaller arcade, appropriate club lighting, a sophisticated sound system with an enclosed DJ booth, a small concessions area, approximately ten booths for sitting, and an outdoor standing area enclosed by a tall, wooden fence. According to Jerry:

The first two, three or four years it [The Upstairs] really flourished. He [Dad] opened it for kids (teenagers) to have a safe place to go. My youngest brother Matthew was around 12 or 13 when it opened. His group was the group dad targeted. In the beginning it was kids in their early teens. When my brother Matthew's age group moved on into high school and then graduated, it started kind of a downward spiral...later on the elementary kids started coming and the older kids stopped coming. I don't blame them, but elementary parents saw it as a cheap babysitting service. Hours were 6pm to 11pm [sic], and they could drop off their kids and go out.²⁰

Public records confirm that The Upstairs had been experiencing financial difficulties by the late

¹⁷ Lease and Mortgage records retrieved from the York County Register of Deeds website: <https://www.yorkcountygov.com/174/Register-of-Deeds> . Accessed 4 March, 2021.

¹⁸ Gerald Kemp was also assisted by manager Robbie Smith, a 21-year-old senior at nearby Winthrop College. The Upstairs was officially open Mondays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. and Sundays, 2 p.m. to 8 p.m. There was a cover charge after 6 p.m. each evening. Alcoholic beverages and smoking were prohibited. Graham, Gene. 1983. "York Area Teens, Pre-teens Enjoy Upstairs Atmosphere." In *Yorkville Enquirer Newspaper*. Thursday, 18 August (1983): 8.

¹⁹ Kemp, Jerry. Email correspondence with author. 9 March, 2021.

²⁰ Kemp, Jerry. Email correspondence with author. 9 March, 2021.

1980s in the form of a third mortgage in 1987, two separate tax liens in 1988, and a fourth mortgage in 1989. The Upstairs ultimately closed its doors that same year.²¹

Regardless of The Upstairs' decline in the late 1980s, for my fellow break dancers me, the club was something quite special in the early to mid-1980s. For us, it was an opportunity to hang out with friends, meet girls, and most importantly, dance. We wore a variety of clothes to The Upstairs, ranging from, according to local dancer Michael Wilson, "what we had worn to school that day," to growing trends in break dance attire.²² Another of my dance counterparts Clay Crisp, who later joined the Air Force and ultimately became a truck driver, elaborates:

Some kids [at The Upstairs] dressed up, but most just wore what they would wear to school. Of course, us break dancers would dress appropriately for dancing; usually wearing sweat pants or parachute pants, and shirts ranging from sweatshirts to muscle shirts.²³

Whatever each dancer chose to wear, their ultimate goal was to show off their respective moves, learn some new ones, intimidate their opponents, and win the crowd.

But there were no break dance teachers and no hip-hop studios in York. Rural and suburban kids like us turned to mass media to learn about hip-hop culture and the latest break dancing trends. Clay, Michael, and I agree that the movie *Breakin'* (1984) was landmark in our learning process along with listening to radio hits like "Axel F" (1984) by Harold Faltermeyer, "Rockit" (1983) by Herbie Hancock, "The Message" (1982) by Grandmaster Flash, "Electric Kingdom" (1984) by Twilight 22, "I Feel for You" (1984) by Chaka Khan, and "Jam on It" (1984) by Newcleus.²⁴ In fact, none of us really knew at the time where breakdancing had started, although Clay admitted to me in an interview in 2020 that he had originally thought that

²¹ The two tax liens were issued on 8 February and 30 March, respectively, in 1988. Retrieved from the York County Register of Deeds website: <https://www.yorkcountygov.com/174/Register-of-Deeds> . Accessed 4 March, 2021.

²² Wilson, Michael. Email correspondence with author. 28 February, 2021.

²³ Crisp, Clay. Email correspondence with author. 11 March, 2020.

²⁴Separate email correspondences with author. Clay Crisp: 11 March, 2020; and Michael Wilson: 28 February, 2021.

break dancing had come from France.²⁵ Nevertheless, we listened to popular Black artists, pairing our love for the music with break dance moves that we were learning from media sensations like Adolfo "Shabba Doo" Quiñones and Michael "Boogaloo Shrimp" Chambers, both of whom had starred in *Breakin'* (1984) and its less popular sequel *Breakin' II: Electric Boogaloo* (1984).

Our tween attempts as white, rural/suburban, working class/middle class youths in upstate South Carolina to master a dance form commonly associated with urban Black and Latinx youths raises several questions. Were we "race traitors," as described by Noel Ignatiev in the 1990s, rejecting our own race in favor of the exotic lure of the "Other?"²⁶ Or were we more in line with James Weldon Johnson's notion that "anybody's music belongs to everybody" as he describes in his 1927 fictional novel, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*?²⁷ Were we demonstrating what Mark Slobin later described as an "affinity interculture,"²⁸ or were we simply creating our own cultural material through *bricolage*, a French term that Philip Bohlman and others have used to describe a collage of culture created from available materials and containing complex musical meanings?²⁹ Were we exhibiting hints of a "crisis of whiteness" that many Southerners had been experiencing especially during the second half of the 20th century, amidst the Civil Rights Movement, global anticolonial struggles, immigration reform, feminism, and deindustrialization?³⁰ Or were we simply small town kids consuming, negotiating, and appropriating popular culture?

As a scholar and cultural insider, I posit that each of these theories, in part, could describe the formation of our respective social identities as break dancers in the mid-1980s. Although we

²⁵ Crisp, Clay. Email correspondence with author. 11 March, 2020.

²⁶ Ignatiev, Noel. 1996. *Race Traitor*. New York: Routledge.

²⁷ Johnson, James Weldon. 1912. *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Boston: Sherman, French & Company.

²⁸ Slobin, Mark. 1992. "Micromusics of the West." *Ethnomusicology* (36)1: 87.

²⁹ Bohlman, Philip, 1997, "The Fieldwork in the Ethnomusicological Past," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, Gregory Barz and Timothy Colley, eds., New York: Oxford University Press: 141. Here, Bohlman uses the French term *bricolage*, which refers to a collage created from several available materials. French anthropologists began using the term in the 1920s.

³⁰ Kajikawa, Loren. 2015. "My Name Is': Signifying Whiteness, Rearticulating Race." In *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*, Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015: 120 (118–142).

were white Southerners growing up in a relatively conservative small town, we were aware of our privileged past and our community's ongoing racial tension, including discrimination that continued to exist among our county's population. This was largely owing to our engagement with growing trends in education, globalization; racial tolerance/acceptance; the increasing popularity of Black culture in the media; and racially sensitive linguistic changes. But I was also aware that my Black friends were not allowed to come to my house, and I was likewise not permitted to go to their houses.

Here, an emic perspective provides insight. We were not trying to be Black; we were trying to be break dancers. Our interest was based upon many factors, including our fascination with the music, the technicality of the dance moves, our tween urges to impress girls, and our respective drive to forge dominant masculinity. However, we were also creating our own bricolage with the cultural materials available to us, especially those pop cultural elements that we consumed via the mass media, including, 1) watching Michael Jackson do the moonwalk for the first time on television on 16 May 1983, 2) the aforementioned movie *Breakin'* and its sequel, 3) growing fashion trends that included parachute pants, 3) and a plethora of landmark music releases by Black and white artists.³¹ It was our popular culture, too.

However, it would be naïve of me to imply that whiteness hadn't played a dominant role in our success as break dancers at The Upstairs. It was our very whiteness, specifically white privilege, that facilitated our success in borrowing and appropriating cultural material from historically non-Southern and non-white sources without fear of cultural dissonance. Had the tables been turned, I doubt that the opposite would have been socially accepted. For example, had one of my Black friends come to The Upstairs and participated in a clogging battle with cowboy hat, boots, jeans, T-shirt, large belt buckle, and country music, I suspect that there would have been considerable social dissonance, if not outright social rejection, especially if my friend had demonstrated superior clogging skills over those of his white counterparts.³²

Within context of our break dance scene at The Upstairs in the mid-1980s, I posit that the identity theories of sociologists Sheldon Stryker and Peter Burke are particularly relevant, who,

³¹ The first major televised occurrence of the moonwalk was when Michael Jackson performed the move during the solo section of "Billy Jean" as part of the show *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever* that NBC aired on 16 May, 1983.

³² During my several years' patronage at The Upstairs in the mid-1980s, I witnessed a clogging battle only once.

like their predecessor George Herbert Mead, emphasized the social context rather than the psychological in developing the individual mind and self.³³ According to Stryker and Burke, the notion of identity involves internalized role expectations, resulting in as many identities as distinct networks of relationships in which one occupies social positions and plays roles.”³⁴ Put simply, Stryker and Burke viewed identities as internalized social roles. The social networks, to which Stryker and Burke refer, can include race, gender, class, family, livelihood, religion, politics, and geography, and almost always refer to one’s self-identification within a social construct. I expand upon this notion and posit that one’s various identities are ordered hierarchically and that the hierarchy is capable of reordering itself instantaneously according to any given social context such as ours at The Upstairs.

For example, as tweens and teens engaging our world in the mid-1980s, we were constantly interacting with what Slobin has described as the “superculture,” other subcultures around the U.S., and our multiple “intercultures,” especially those within our own respective hegemonies.³⁵ We were also creating and re-negotiating our individual and collective social identities, respectively, based upon a myriad of factors, including the chart successes of popular music artists, the crowd’s reactions to our respective dance battles at the Upstairs, and our exotic fascination with a dance subculture that had been historically non-Southern and non-white. Our respective identity hierarchies reordered themselves instantly when we entered the main door of The Upstairs and again when we stepped onto the dance floor. We were no longer primarily rural or suburban Southerners in poor area of upstate South Carolina. We were modern kids engaging with contemporary music and American pop culture, and we were good—at least we thought we were.

After three decades of reflection and engagement with my own “ethnomusicological past,” I continue to be fascinated with identity formation and music’s role therein. But as Philip Bohlman has pointed out, “The ethnomusicological past is not one past, but many, existing on

³³ For further reading see Mead, George, 1934, *Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, edited with introduction by Charles W. Morris, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³⁴ Stryker, Sheldon, and Peter Burke, 2000, “The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63:4 (Dec.), 286.

³⁵ Slobin, Mark. 1992. “Micromusics of the West.” *Ethnomusicology* (36)1: 15-49.

different levels.”³⁶ Perhaps this study of break dancing among rural and suburban whites in upstate South Carolina in the mid-1980s will contribute to similar research of national music trends and their respective local reception. Equally fascinating would be a comparison study on how my Black friends initially viewed our appropriation of and competency level with break dancing back then. Dare I broaden my ethnomusicological past even more, I would likewise be intrigued to study what local parents *really* thought of our break dancing interests, but these are topics better served in another paper, another time.

³⁶ Bohlman, Philip, 1997, “The Fieldwork in the Ethnomusicological Past,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, Gregory Barz and Timothy Colley, eds., New York: Oxford University Press: 141.