





BUCKETS

Who is Lil Buck, and why is he leading this *Dance Gazette* special issue about gamechangers in the world of dance? Lil Buck is, first and foremost, a superlative dancer. Jookin, a style born in his home city of Memphis, USA, is an especially intricate and elegant form of street dance. Buck has moved it forward and brought it to a whole new audience, via innovative collaborations and performances from Las Vegas to Versailles and the White House.

As an ambassador for dance, he has an unaffected commitment to education and experiment, forming richly productive partnerships with other artists. His collaborators include Mikhail Baryshnikov, Madonna, Cirque du Soleil and the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who describes him as ‘a genius’ and calls working with him on *The Dying Swan* ‘one of the greatest experiences of my life.’

Ballet can seem a forbiddingly closed world – Lil Buck has helped throw the doors wide open. Katie Smythe, an RAD-trained teacher in Memphis, recognised how his lyricism could speak to classical ballet, and invited him to train with her New Ballet Ensemble, where he developed his breathtaking signature solo, *The Dying Swan*.

Finally, Lil Buck is determined to challenge and extend his own artistry. ‘I battle myself in my head,’ he has said. ‘I have an alter ego, when I go to sleep. And he always kicks my butt, because he’s doing some impossible stuff.’ That’s inspiring. That’s gamechanging.

Lil Buck has taken jookin from the Memphis streets to a wider world, including unique collaborations with classical ballet. *Dance Gazette* celebrates this sublime dance gamechanger, and *Zoobs the Artist* captures him in an exclusive photoshoot in New York.



HOW DID CHARLES RILEY BECOME KNOWN AS LIL BUCK?

Lil Buck There are two styles within jookin: bucking and chopping. Bucking is more the explosive style and chopping is more chop-chop-chop-chop. You break it down more. I was always known as a buckler because all of my moves were explosive. I was super short when I was 13: I was this little kid doing all these crazy explosive moves, so they called me Lil Buck.

HOW DID HE BEGIN JOOKIN?

Lil Buck I've been dancing around like a little fireball since I can remember. I really took it serious when I was 12, when I saw my sister getting down in the living room: a style of dance I'd never seen. I used to stay up all night practicing, until sun-up.

WHAT IS MEMPHIS JOOKIN?

Lil Buck Memphis jookin has been around for a long time, but a lot of people haven't heard of it because it's been underground for so long. You would see it being done in empty parking lots and skating rinks. It came from the streets of Memphis and underground rap. The magic of it is that it's a freestyle-base dance style. Jookin started out as the gangster walk. It was this line dance, [with a] bouncy feel and it evolved to what you see right now.

You can't learn it all in a class. It was always learned on the street by sight and by just being inside the aura, the energy of the style. It has a spirit. You would see some moves that you're familiar with, like the gangster walk or the L step or the surf boy. But you don't really see the true essence of jookin unless you see the bounce in the shoulders. I created my own style within it. It's 40% originality and the rest is all your creativity, whatever happens in your mind. It's all in how you feel in the moment.



'YOU'LL FIND A WHOLE NEW WORLD OF WAYS TO MOVE'





HOW HAS MEMPHIS JOOKIN EVOLVED?

Jas Pro, Lil Buck's manager When jookin first started in the early 1980s, it was called gangster walking. It has evolved a lot since then – people got better, more moves are made. At first it was just stepping, then it changed to slide, and now a spin. It's grown and evolved. Memphis had its own underground rap scene, and before the internet and smartphones, you just had to see it. The first step is listening to the music: there's a certain bounce that you have to get on and feel the rhythm. It's always about pushing it to a new place, but keeping that foundation.

HOW DOES A DANCE CRITIC VIEW LIL BUCK?

Alastair Macaulay, New York Times The word 'genius' should be applied sparingly to performing artists. Lil Buck has joined a list that, for me, includes Mikhail Baryshnikov, the skater John Curry and the former Merce Cunningham dancer Foofwa d'Imobilité. It's said that Anna Pavlova, the most legendary exponent of the ballet version of *The Dying Swan* never did it the same way twice; I'd guess from the few times I've seen Lil Buck that the same may well be true of him, [though] he always ends, on the floor, wrapping his bent legs like hooks around his shoulders. If there was one feat I hope I never forget, however, it occurred in an earlier solo, in which, with his torso angled toward the audience, he moved his shoulders in seeming orbit around his head as if they were a loose loop, an amoeba anchored only by his neck.

HOW DID BALLET DEVELOP HIS STYLE?

Lil Buck I took ballet for two years, from 17 until I was 19. The knowledge of how to really use your core strength, I got that from ballet. And I got a lot of flexibility from ballet, a lot more elegance, though my style was already elegant. Katie Smythe, artistic director for the New Ballet Ensemble and School in Memphis, was my teacher. She saw the grace in my style and all of these characteristics that you can compare to ballet. We do a lot of spins that relate to ballet pirouettes; we're in fifth position a lot. I'm on my toes a lot. I enjoy being on my toes.

WHAT DOES A BALLERINA MAKE OF LIL BUCK?

Lauren Lovette, New York City Ballet He has something that you really can't teach. He has this connection with his body – he understands it so well, he can really get it to do anything he wants it to do. Most people don't have that kind of mind-body control, that coordination. I only know this because I've tried to do a lot of what he does. It's not just the moves that he's doing, it's his musicality. He's hearing stuff that not everybody can hear, and then he translates it so quickly into movement so it looks like you're watching music.

WHAT CAN JOOKIN TEACH OTHER DANCE STYLES?

Lil Buck You'll find a whole new world in your mind of ways to move. Dancers will find themselves doing way more with their minds and bodies. You learn you can control each and every part of your body, down to individual finger joints. It gives you so much freedom to be able to use any part of your body to express yourself. I can control every part of my body. I just play with it. That's the fun of dance. I learn my body a lot, mess around to learn what I can move what ways. I'm obsessed with my own anatomy.

HOW IS DANCING WITH MADONNA?

Lil Buck Madonna caught on fast. She has dance background. I taught her to buck jump and to glide, and she just does it like it's nothing. She's a sponge for dance.

WHAT DOES HE WANT TO DO FOR DANCE?

Lil Buck I love being an ambassador for the style. Dancers used to be seen on the same platform as actors. Especially triple threats like Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire. They looked good. They dressed nice. They had a passion for what they were doing and went full out 100 percent. I want to bring that back. That level of respect. If you have the gift to affect people in a good way, in an artistic way and in an inspiring way, then I believe that's a responsibility.