

Foreword

MUTANT GIFTS: I AM HERE JUST BECOMING SOME STRANGE KIND OF LOVE

by Jonathan Matthews



In the current stage of the pandemic, I will run into people and play the same game: “When was the last time I saw you?” It seems silly, but the COVID brain fog really screws with social memory. Lately when I play the game I have to separate out – when was the last Zoom call? When was the last face-to-face? Which came first?

My working as a Production Assistant for Alison Clancy’s May 18th shoot for her SMUSH Gallery Curatorial Fellowship project, *Mutant Gifts: I am Here Just Becoming Some Strange Kind of Love*, may very well have been the Olympics of this very game. From our cohort, Maranda Barry and SMUSH’s mighty intern Anne Tantuico showed up to lend Alison a hand. What took too long to realize was that, having been meeting virtually since October 2020, this was our first time meeting in person (Iman – we will have our moment!). On top of this, we would soon find out most everyone working on Alison’s project was working together in the same room for the first time.

Dancer and Musician Clancy and Video Director Max Louis Miller hail from the same town of Nevada City, California and have admired each other’s work, but had never actually worked together. Projection artists Dan Tesene and Serena Stucke of Testu Collective came as a recommendation from another projection artist who didn’t feel that their colorful imagery could satisfy Alison’s dark and moody atmospheres. And the centerpiece of *Mutant Gifts*, Bruk Up dancer Albert Esquilin, Jr., aka “Ghost,” had come in at the last minute when Alison’s intended performer, Flex dancer and longtime collaborator Jay Donn could not make the shoot.

What emerged was that while many of these connections were physically fresh, they were by no means random. Alison had previously seen and admired Dan and Serena’s work but was

too intimidated to reach out to them. After the intended projection artist recommended them, Alison learned that Dan and Serena had seen her perform previously and had been following her work in what Alison calls “a mutual art crush.”

In the absence of Jay Donn, Alison searched the Instagram account of a street dance organization called BattleFest for Flex or Flex-adjacent movers who similar inspired her (no easy ask). It was there that she chanced upon Bruk Up dancer, Ghost, who immediately fulfilled her attraction to “deep emotional presence” over flashy tricks, so much so that, on a cold call, Alison felt permission to ask Ghost, “I wonder if you could come and share your soul with us?” As it turned out, Alison and Ghost had many dancing connections in common. Ghost had been the teacher of a Flex dancer Alison worked with as part of a show in Copenhagen. Another acquaintance of Alison’s, a Flex dancer who goes by Storyboard Professor, works frequently with Ghost. The fact that they had not already met was due to Ghost practicing a related, but different form of dance (Bruk Up), as well as running a parallel dance battling organization.



I sat down with Ghost for one of the most mind-expanding conversations on dance I’ve ever had. A leading figure in his form, he is a fountain of knowledge, insight, and candidness.

Bruk Up originated in the late 1980’s to early 1990’s in Jamaica, originally danced to Reggae and Dancehall music. The term “Bruk Up” is derived from the Jamaican dialect of describing something that is “broken.” On a poetic level, there is an aspect of using one’s own brokenness to heal oneself; however, on a practical level, Bruk Up was founded on the premise of trying something you don’t know how to do – essentially, practicing a broken version of something else, and making the result of that fully your own.

Bruk Up is attributed to George Adams, a Jamaican entertainer who wanted to develop a form of movement expression for men that was just as imaginative as female Dancehall performers. A lot of Dancehall at the time was very choreographed; Adams was additionally interested in devising a mode of expression rooted in improvisation.

For Adams, the thing he wanted to learn and ended up “breaking” into his own was West Coast “Popping.” Ghost puts it simply – Adams was a “guy who wanted to do popping but didn’t know how to do it.” Through imaginative emulation, however, Adams created a movement vocabulary that worked for him, in a structure where he could fully be himself onstage with no need for an ensemble’s support.

Ghost noted that in Jamaica, dance and gang culture are tightly wound. If someone becomes too renowned for their dancing, they might become a target for termination. Knowing this, Adams moved to New York where he was quick to become featured in the 1997 music video for Busta Rhymes’ “Put Your Hands Where Your Eyes Can’t See.” From this point on, Bruk Up became widely consumed, emulated, and elaborated. As Ghost notes, “Bruk Up is about developing one’s own movement language within a physical framework.” This allows many influences to become infused with the base vocabulary – and at a time such as the 80’s and 90’s, when media was exploding and becoming more accessible and stratified, references to cartoons and Kung Foo movies were quick to enter into Bruk Up’s physical equation.

In the late 90’s, Flex Dance developed as a spinoff to Bruk Up. Flexing much more directly incorporates West Coast forms such as Popping (a primary catalyst for Bruk Up), as well as Tutting (sharp angular hand gestures), and Contortion. Aesthetically, Flex Dance is a way of expressing the imagination by way of indicating. Battles can be like intense games of charades, with dance mixed in, the goal being to clearly show what you are doing, almost like mime. The winners are the best performers who are also the most believable and realistic. Flex dancers additionally are known for intricate tricks with their hats, which, for Bruk Up dancers, is too gimmicky in what, in Bruk Up, is a search for pure movement and character (though with a bit of contortion thrown in). As Ghost puts it, “Flex uses tricks to create an illusion; Bruk Up dancers aim to BE the illusion.”



The basic movement vocabulary of Bruk Up is a living document, with core tenets, subject to additions and embellishments. A sought-after teacher, Ghost outlines five fundamental elements of Bruk Up:

The first is the **Shoulder Pop** – this is exactly as it sounds, and is a way of keeping track of the primary beat of the music. Once mastered, the second element is **Framing** – a stop-motion-esque way of cleanly shifting between poses with none of the impact or reverb one might see in Pop/Lock work. These postures track accented beats that branch off from the bass, and may be done in isolation or with the full body.

The third element exists largely thanks to Ghost. **Pivoting** is a footwork focus. As with George Adams and West Coast Popping, Ghost was enamored by Gliding, a fluid form of footwork in street dance not dissimilar from Michael Jackson's famous Moonwalk. As a boy, when Bruk Up came to New York, Ghost could not quite get the upper torso aspects of Bruk Up into his body. He had additionally been in a major accident that left him in a leg brace for years (which he credits in developing stronger legs and balance). The combination of these two factors, as well as a love for this hypnotic footwork becoming popularized in the media led Ghost to learn Bruk Up from the feet up. Today, he describes Pivoting as an element in terms of developing a connection between the heel and toe to develop a fluency in a coordination of stepping, arching the foot, and kicking back the heel, as well as shimmying the foot flatly against the floor left to right, and exploring all the possible combinations thereof, allowing more ingenuity in the development of more original footwork styles.

Further into the upper body work is the fourth element, which is Bruk Up's only advanced contraction – the **Neck Lock** – a sharp pulsating of the neck which is meant to be done in counterpoint with the fifth element of **Liquid Motion**. As he is sure to call the footwork "Pivoting" instead of "Gliding," Ghost is just as well careful to not call this element of Bruk Up "Waving," which, too, is its own category with its own lineage. This is largely because Liquid Motion is not about any certain move, but it is a stage of artistry in which one emulates the elements specifically tied to their character. For someone like Ghost, he focuses on embodying mist and smoke; other dancers with other characters must find equally representative elements to physicalize. Ghost speaks of the stage as "surrendering part of our body to the music," and, "Living in the concept."

It is the combination of Neck Lock and Liquid Motion that gives Bruk Up dancers a sense of animatronics, against Flex dancers more robotic presentation. In learning all five, Ghost teaches each element separately, with the goal of eventually practicing them in different simultaneous combinations at varying degrees of embodiment. Honoring the lineage and legacy of Bruk Up as an attempt at something else becoming yet another something else, Ghost insists that the key to mastering this form is to "turn your natural vibe to music into your own template for your base movement." He recognizes the rite of passage of being ugly before becoming beautiful through trial and error, and encourages that in Bruk Up there is no right or wrong, other than to be on beat.

Musically, Bruk Up functions similarly to how it is able to be filled with all sort of influences and references. Ghost defines Free Form being a state at which one "masters the components and does them how they want to, to the music they want to do them to." Having enhanced the inherently fluid quality of footwork in the form, Ghost was already breaking from dancing strictly to reggae and dancehall music, and incorporating smoother R&B sounds; translating it a few steps further to Alison's ethereal indie rock has been no ordeal.

The character aspect of Bruk Up is where the artistry truly thrives. Ghost notes of a proverb in his community – “The stronger the belief system, the stronger the character.”

Ghost is very clear about who he embodies. He grew up with comic books and loving all things supernatural. Zombies, vampires, and, of course, ghosts all inform his movement sensibilities. His character is particularly informed by X-Men and Marvel comics, old animes, cartoons, and horror films like *Lost Boys* and *Innocent Blood*. His footwork and costuming are directly inspired by images of Druids and other ecclesiastical cloaked figures. The specificity and richness of his references come from constantly asking himself how he would be if he were to have supernatural abilities, and drawing them by hand. His most potent influence is an anime in which a character, on life support, is strategically taken off life support because “his soul is so pure, when released, it kills all evil.” If that doesn’t exemplify Bruk Up, I don’t know what does.

When asked if he was a good guy or a bad guy, Ghost replied, “Ghost does bad shit for good reasons, and does good shit for bad reasons. He’ll do some shit, it will seem bad, but then later you realize there’s a reason. Ghost does what’s reasonable, and lives on the in-between,” citing *Deadpool* and *Venom* as influential archetypes for the sort of antihero he is (perfect for Alison’s “dark and moody atmospheres, am I right?”).



Alison’s relationship to street dancing began with a performance at a fundraiser for a 2012 documentary on Flex dancing called *Flex’s Kings*. Alison performed as a singer with a band amid a group of Flex dancers surrounded her and swept her up in a crowd surf. In this moment, the necklace Alison was wearing broke, prompting Jay Donn to work returning the necklace to Alison into the choreography, leading to an instant connection – “We literally met onstage as he brought me my broken necklace.”

This relationship continued when conceptual artist Marco Evaristti created *NineBySeven* (the aforementioned show in Copenhagen). Alison, Cellist Chris Lancaster, and seven Flex dancers (including Jay Donn) worked with a Danish hip-hop producer in yet another environment of Alison being, as she puts it, a “duck out of water,” feeling ill at ease being cast as the white, female centerpiece of a group of expressive, male BIPOC energy she felt was far more interesting and inspiring – so she started going to the battles to see Flex in its own environment, on its own terms. “One person might go up and rip someone’s heart out, and then that person has to battle to get their heart back. It’s really deep.”

Still, the Copenhagen gig allowed Alison to develop a substantial relationship with these dancers, leading to some inter-dance genre cross overs, such as getting Jay Donn to work with Michele Wiles’ Ballet Next, and Alison later casting him to dance in a motion capture work for Luma Projection Arts Festival.

For Alison, common to both Flexing and Bruk Up are the forms’ unique physical textures and emotional connections to lived experience. In Alison’s own artist biography, she states outright that she is an artist “in pursuit of beauty and catharsis,” and she gets just that in droves upon seeing artists like Jay Donn and Ghost do what they do. Alison is clear that she does not attempt to participate in or adapt the forms, but seeks to elevate them as they are.

What these very different artists do share, however, is dedication to craft. “When I was at NYU, I would take my classes during the day and then immediately go off in search of more class, and maybe go to the gym after that. I am obsessed with this notion of training, so much so that my goal when I graduated was to join a company that offered company class...so I joined two...ZviDance and The Metropolitan Opera Ballet.” Having been on tour with Flex dancers and working with Ghost, Alison notes a similar insistence on practicing – how in moments of downtime, these movers would immediately drop into working out physical ideas and inventing new coordinations. “Dancers of Flex and Bruk Up are improvisers who are deeply skilled practiced artists constantly going deeper and deeper to become more and more articulate in a living, breathing craft. They don’t just pull this stuff out of a hat.” Most broadly, Alison and her collaborators share a common ethos – “We’re very spiritual about our practices, but we also work tirelessly to make sure our ideas actually happen.”

This is where we come to Alison’s thrust as Curator for *Mutant Gifts*. From a young age, Alison has experienced herself as a “connoisseur of movement,” eagerly getting her hands on as many forms of physicality as possible, while also developing a reverence for tradition and being able to locate herself in relationship to them. Since her early collaborations with Flex dancers, Alison has felt an unease at being cast as the sole white woman in a group of BIPOC men – in fact, she looks back on what she remembers as a “magical moment” as simultaneously being “not a good performance” on her part; however, while she acknowledges that, without those circumstances, she would never have developed the collaborative relationships she has, it was absolutely likely to continue to be a pattern if she didn’t take some sort of agency in deepening her relationship to the forms.

Similarly, Alison is just as wary of the ballet world’s penchant to exoticize and decontextualize other art forms by inserting one exemplar in an ensemble of ballerinas with little, if any, aesthetic conversation (see Lil Buck and New York City Ballet).

From the beginning, Alison was very clear – whether it be Flex or Bruk Up, these dance forms strike awe in her. They inspire her. They are not to be “worked with,” but to be given an environment in which to be reverently framed and to thrive – to, as Alison put it in a grant

proposal, “draw from the cosmos to manifest in the mud.” Having had the pleasure to operate lights for a few takes of Ghost’s shoot for *Mutant Gifts*, I can tell you firsthand that’s exactly what’s taken place, so much so that, in checking in with Alison on post-production, she told me that the takes were so complete unto themselves, she was hesitant to even filmically meddle with Ghost’s work with much, if any, editing at all.

The other major component of this very unique sort of hybrid artmaking/curating comes from Alison’s involvement in opera. Having a decade under her belt dancing for the Met, Alison has absorbed what it is to “create an image.” The way she has brought together Bruk Up, projection, lights, her own music, and (much more off to the side this time) her performing body is just as valid a “gesamtwerk” (“total art form”) as any large-scale production with chorus, orchestra, ballerinas, and set pieces.

It’s far from bragging when Alison says, “I’ve never seen anything quite like what I’m making.” I’ve seen a lot of attempts at what she is making crash and burn. The difference is, Alison’s intention is clear, honest, researched, and wholly in the service of the collaborators she’s curated, who could so easily have been mere vehicles for the music she has made. *Mutant Gifts* IS a strange kind of love. No one constituent of the process benefits in a stand out way. They all, like some sort of league of comic book superheroes, have combined forces to create something beyond any of themselves, inadvertently combatting the evils of appropriation and exoticism, and I hope they all do it again sometime.

All images courtesy Alison Clancy/MUTANT GIFTS

For more information on Bruk Up, watch this currently streaming documentary for free on RedBullTV –

Lords of BSV: The Birth and Legacy of Bruk Up Dance

<https://www.redbull.com/us-en/films/lords-of-bsv>