

Robin Dunn: How I Teach Hip Hop For Beginners

By: Jen Peters

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ROBIN DUNN

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE FROMAN

The moment she walks into the studio, Robin Dunn transforms her beginner hip-hop class into a party. Her adult students at the Ailey Extension in New York City are a mix of first-time drop-ins and longtime regulars. "My agenda is big," says Dunn, a native New Yorker. "It's more than just 'Come sweat and have fun'—I want everyone to feel better about themselves, to feel fit and cool."

The beginning of her 90-minute class is unconventional: Dunn gives a guided meditation that she calls "getting in the room." She wants students to reset and focus on being present. "I've battled depression my whole life, so I encourage others to create tools for survival," she explains. At the end of her class, she repeats three "gifts," or affirmations, she hopes the dancers carry with them when they leave: "You are the best there is"; "Ain't nobody flyer than me"; and "Don't hold your good stuff hostage—your story must be told."

"Hip hop requires confidence, energy and flow—dancing with soul helps students move more naturally and find a groove," she says. By making her class a welcoming, judgment-free zone, she frees beginners of any self-consciousness and allows them to make the movement their own.

Dunn's positive approach has reached thousands of students over the course of her decades-long career. She was the first to introduce hip hop in a studio setting at Broadway Dance Center in 1989, creating a pedagogical approach to street dance, a style typically learned in social settings. "A studio has marley floors and fluorescent lights—it's unnatural for hip hop," she says. "I make the atmosphere more social by dimming the lights and using

funky music. If the beat is poppin', they'll be hoppin'!"

How does Dunn translate that ambiance and ease to her movement? She starts with a bounce, getting students to feel the beat in their legs while keeping the upper body and head relaxed. She leads them through a clear warm-up, a killer abdominal series and seated and standing stretches before teaching a longer combination. She firmly believes that beginner choreography should be attainable, not complicated. "Drilling steps works perfectly for beginners," she says. "They're usually happiest doing choreography on repeat." She welcomes questions and takes time to work one-on-one, as needed, while students absorb the steps.

She also loves to thread nuggets of hip hop's historical roots and movement vocabulary throughout her class. "For example, I'll identify a move as coming from locking, one of the foundations of hip hop," she says. She always recommends her students go out dancing at parties or clubs—something she's noticed people don't do as much today—where movement is personal and less about following directions. For classically trained dancers new to hip hop, Dunn guides them to discover more aggressive energy, to loosen up rigid torsos and to find fluidity and attack.

Humor is the other constant in her class. She uses it as an attention grabber, a muscle relaxer and a distraction from feeling self-conscious. "I find if people are busy laughing at me," she says, "they become less aware of themselves and find a safety net to relax and take chances." **DT**

Jen Peters is a former dancer with Jennifer Muller/The Works.

Robin Dunn is a teacher, choreographer and coach, based in New York City. She has choreographed for Missy Elliott, Jennifer Holliday, "Saturday Night Live" and "Sesame Street," among others, and served as director of Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater. She has taught at Broadway Dance Center, The Ailey School, New York University, Hunter College, University of Wisconsin—Madison and Earl Moeley's Institute of the Arts. She is currently on faculty at the Ailey Extension and Steps on Broadway and developed the F.A.C.E. method, an acronym for Focus, Attitude, Confidence, Energy and Eye Contact, designed to enhance performance for artists and business professionals alike.

Caleb Smith is a hip-hop dancer and student at The Ailey School.



Dunn (right) with Caleb Smith at the Ailey Studios

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Step-by-Step: *Sexy Walk*

Robin Dunn loves to teach the sexy walk in her beginner hip-hop classes, because it's a basic step, yet students can put their own mark on it. Two key things to remember: Maintain a light bounce and relax the upper body throughout. "Another key thing? Put your personality into it," says Dunn.

—Rachel Rizzuto

FIRST, GET INTO THE GROOVE:



Begin with the knees bent and feet close together.



With the upper body relaxed, practice opening and closing the knees, balancing on the balls of the feet.



DON'T let the shoulders get behind your hips—they should stay on top.

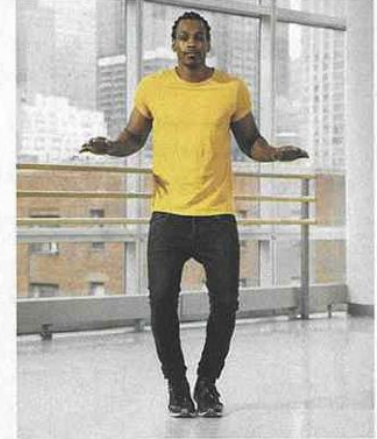
NOW, THE STEP:



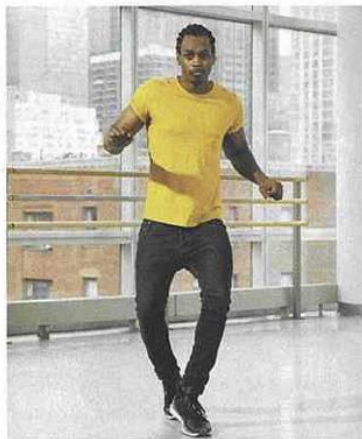
Maintaining a demi-plié throughout, step the right foot forward as you open your knees and move the left arm forward in opposition.



As you take the right foot back to meet the left, bring the knees together briefly.



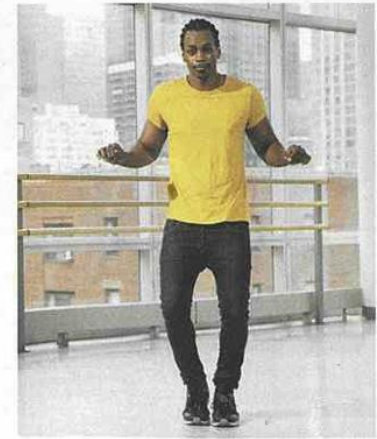
Open the knees again.



Repeat on the other side: Step the left foot forward, with knees out and the arms moving in opposition.



Step the left foot back, bringing the knees together on the way.



Reopen the knees.