

A Dance Class, a Drag King, & the Pedagogical Possibilities of Performative Hip-Hop

An Interview with Carmen Morrison & Alex U. Inn

Scott M. Schönfeldt-Aultman & Carmen “Alex” Morrison

Introduction

Alex U. Inn is the co-founder and one of the two MCs of the hip-hop drag king group, Momma’s Boyz. Momma’s Boyz celebrated their tenth anniversary in 2014. Carmen Morrison is the offstage name of Alex U. Inn, though “Carmen” now goes by Alex offstage, as well.

Within the interview, we have used “Carmen” and “Alex” to suggest the fluidity of identity and to roughly distinguish activities related to (being in) drag (Alex) or out of it (Carmen). The core of the interview is rooted in exploring how Carmen/Alex employs hip-hop in varied contexts (e.g., afterschool program, performing in drag) for educational purposes, and often with underlying social justice objectives.

The Interview

SCOTT: So Carmen, Alex, can you talk a little about your use of hip-hop in educational settings?

CARMEN: I started an afterschool hip-hop program at Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy (in San Francisco, California) almost 11 years ago. It started with kindergarden to fifth grade and I had all of the kids, and I had an average of maybe 45, 50 kids in my class, and I had one assistant. And that was all the ages. And then it grew so much that we divided it up, and I ended up taking the kindergarden to second, and then the third to the fifth went to another teacher. We hired somebody else.

And so, I think Harvey Milk Civil

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Alex U. Inn is featured in a recently completed documentary, “Momma’s Boyz: Alex U. Inn,” directed by Carlos Torres (canadiamedia@ymail.com).

Rights Academy was the early adaptor of that program because I don’t think there were any other hip-hop public school programs in the city at the time that were specifically for those age groups. I know there were older kids having dance in school but not there. The Friends of Harvey Milk, who were the fundraising arm for the academy, are the ones who paid for the program. There was a stipend that I got, but I pretty much did it for free.

As a volunteer I was there once a week for two or three hours. It was my passion. I felt that they couldn’t afford the money that I would get normally if I was just doing it from a dance class perspective. So most of the money that I got went right back into the kids. We were buying discs, and outfits, and all that stuff for the performances.

SCOTT: So what did the program look like? What would you do in there?

CARMEN: Well, at the very beginning of any semester, I would break down how to listen to music. So, the beats and the bars, and trying to get them to understand how any music that you listen to . . . has some sort of count of eight beats, right? And in hip-hop everything is eight beats, no matter whether it’s ones and twos or ones through eights but everything has eight beats. And usually, like an introduction, has four bars, which is each bar is an eight beat. And the middle part using anywhere from 16 to 32. And then the ending anywhere back to four and sometimes eight bars.

Those kind of things—and to really teach them how to break down music. And when you break down that music, then you can really understand the choreography that you’re doing. It’s like if you know that you’re gonna go four steps to the left and four steps to the right and that you’ve been through one bar of that music and you can hear the beat of the music change.

And they were so good at it that I



Alex U. Inn

could put on country or something slow, a waltz, and they would do their routine to that music. And I would do that sometimes. Just throw some music in there so they can really understand that choreography can be applied to any music. It’s just the way that you’re listening to the beat. Listen to the beat. Apply the same movements. It’s a whole different technique.

Some of the other things I would do for them is have them close their eyes and sit on the floor and go through their routine by moving their body. You know, if you had to kick out your leg and move it to the side, if you’re moving to your arm, and those kind of things. The other things I had them do is once they were more confident about their movement is they’d close their eyes as they’re doing their movement. Another thing I would do—it was more of a meditative piece—is they would close their eyes, they would listen to the music, and they would meditate on what their choreography was.

And they could not move one inch of their body. They had to stay within. And I have that on film. These little tiny babies just with their eyes closed and just listening to the music. And then I would yell out

like, “What are we doing here?” And they would yell back at me, “We’re going to the right.” “What are we doing here?” “We’re going to the left.” What are we doing here?” “Spinning.” “We’re breaking out.” You know, those kind of things.

And then by the time that they got on stage, it was really part of who they were. And then, they could ad lib. And that’s what they generally did. I would see kids do stuff that I was like, “What? You just, you did what?” You know, and it was also another way for them to have self-confidence. That when they’re up there in front of four or five hundred people or at the county event, which was almost eight hundred people, or when I put them on the stage with me with the Momma’s Boyz, which is thousands of people, they were so confident that they weren’t stage fright. They played with the crowd. They did all these kinds of things that were outrageous.

So, that’s most of the way that I would teach, is like more of getting some self-confidence, really understanding what you can and cannot do as part of who you are in that classroom and what your body is in that classroom, and not getting so stressed out that you can’t dance like him or you can’t dance like her—that you have your own way of moving, and that makes the whole crew one. Everybody in the crew is doing something to participate, to contribute to who we are as a crew.

SCOTT: Yeah. So it builds a unity there?

CARMEN: Totally.

SCOTT: What about other educational settings that you’ve done hip-hop in or been involved in?

CARMEN: Well, I did do a senior citizen movement class that I’d play old school hip-hop at. It was an assisted-living home in San Francisco. I didn’t do a lot of movement with them, but we would do a lot of chair exercises, but we would do it to music. And I had repeats every week that I did it. I did that maybe six months max because it was getting popular and they wanted to change the day so more people could accommodate it, and I couldn’t do that. But I started that.

Let’s see, where else have I used hip-hop? Um, yeah, that was pretty much it.

SCOTT: Well, the Momma’s Boyz have been in college settings before?

ALEX: Oh I totally forgot about that! So



Alex U. Inn performing with students.

yeah! Duh! So, alright, so you know, Alex U. Inn and the Momma’s Boyz have done, you know, college settings. Matter of fact, we’ve sat on panels around hip-hop and racism. We sat on a panel in Winnipeg, Canada, on hip-hop and racism—hip-hop, drag kings, and racism. And that was off the hook! So that was a good thing.

I, as Alex U, was in Saint Mary’s [College of California], and sat in that educational setting. We performed at University of California Merced, and after that we had a panel. At University of California Berkeley, we did a performance and sat on the panel. At Portland State University, we performed there and then were on the Q&A panel afterwards. And we did one up in Eugene, Oregon, the University of Oregon—did the same thing—we were on a panel there.

SCOTT: So, the panels, were they all about the same stuff?

ALEX: No. Some of the panels had more structure where the facilitator had some set questions that were prepared either from the audience that came or from the producer. And then afterwards it was open floor for anybody in the audience to ask us questions. And they did.

And then in Rome, Italy, the same. We were brought there to perform. It was in conjunction with one of the universities there, but it was called EuroPride, and I think they had some money from the government and from an educational setting—the people that throw it on did. I’m pretty sure.

SCOTT: That’s where Momma’s Boyz opened for Lady Gaga, right?

ALEX: Yes. That’s where we can proudly say we were on the same stage as she was. You know, we went on before she did, so we can say we opened for her. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha.

SCOTT: That’s cool. So, given all of your work with Harvey Milk [Civil Rights Academy] and with Momma’s Boyz, what do you see as the greatest possibilities of having hip-hop in the classroom or in educational settings? What emerges out of that?

CARMEN: Well, as far as the elementary setting, lots of different things came out of that for those kids. You know, I had some kids that were super shy, that by the time the program was over, they were spinning on their head and across the floor and teaching other people how to do it. I had kids who were uncontrollable in the classroom, but yet, they behaved themselves and were respectful and contributed in this setting. I had multiple children, but this one child one year who had a stroke when he was in the womb and his whole side was paralyzed. And his mother cried when she saw him do a spin. I taught him how to spin on his bum and do a total turn, and they cried. And she wrote a note afterwards, when he got out of the program, and said this was the best thing for him ever.

Another young guy whose father brought him to the hip-hop class. He was much taller than any of the kids, and he was humped over and just stood there, and

wouldn't communicate and participate. And I just put him in the back, so he could have a full vision of everybody in the front. Then I just started watching him move, and partnered him with people and he became really good friends with another guy. He was Caucasian, of European descent, and the other young guy who I paired him up to was of African descent, and they became best friends 'til the time they graduated. By the time he graduated in fifth grade, he had all the girls all over him at the dances because he was off the hook. He just was a sponge. He picked up every single move that this other guy could do. This other guy was the bomb. He could dance. He could dance his butt off. And so, this guy would just imitate him all the time to the point where one year, he was just surpassing the other guy with the moves that he could do.

Both of them liked to break, so they were really incredible break dancers. And all I had to do is teach them, just refine some of the things that they did, and they just took it to places I could never teach them. Anyway, at his graduation I got this letter from his father, and I opened it when I got home, and I just cried like a baby. It was like this two-page letter that said, "I don't know what I would have done raising my son without you and this class." He said, "You changed my son's life." He said he got a full scholarship to some ridiculous private school. Full scholarship—from sixth grade on. He said he just became a whole different person by being integrated with this. So those are success stories.

I had one little kid that was adopted from India. And she felt different and was different. She was very shy, very introverted, didn't know this culture. . . . everything was overwhelming for this kid. And so her two moms put her in hip-hop, and she just blossomed. She couldn't wait to get to my class. She bonded with me. I bonded with her. She couldn't wait to get to my class. One year I picked girls. The next year I picked boys.

And we performed at the Dyke March. Fifty thousand people. And I put my girls up on the stage. Then the next year I put the guys up on the stage. And she was one of the ones. I told the kids during rehearsals that, "When the crowd screams for you, you're gonna feel like your chest is caving in. All this pressure is gonna come at you, and you're this little. And it does me, and I can imagine what it's gonna do to you."

So, I did a couple of techniques where I would hold their chest and have them do the movement and just say, "You gotta

work through it because if you let it bother you, you're not gonna be successful up on stage." So sure enough, they come out, and we did this routine where no one saw them because they were behind the big people. And so when we let go, there they were. And the crowd just roared, cause they're little. They're tiny. And the crowd just roared. And so when they roared, I could see the fear on their faces because it really hit them the way I was telling them it would. Then they just took a breath like I taught them, and then they moved into their movement, right?

Well, at some point, I introduce their names and they go out and they do individual stuff. And when I introduced her, the crowd was just like chanting her name. So, out of nowhere they just started chanting her name. And she started doing these moves that I never ever saw her do. She took over the stage. She just like, it was like, something took over her and there it was. And her mother said that she has been a whole different child ever since.

SCOTT: Wow. So it's transformational?

CARMEN: Totally. Really, I think so. I think the younger you get them and you show them an art with music that applies to it, that can be your lifestyle, that can move you into being an artist, opening up as your artist, and being free as your art, in your graffiti and whatever. Being an open and interpretive dancer because this is freestyle dancing. You know, nobody pop locks like you because we're not in the same DNA. And not even your twin brother or sister is gonna pop lock like you. That is you. Right? Or spin or do the snake or do any other movement that comes in the hip-hop world. They're not gonna, it's you.

I saw one of your questions was like what is the difference between hip-hop and rap. Rap is not a lifestyle. For me, rap is not a lifestyle. Well, I'll take that back. Rap is a lifestyle 'cause a lot of the music that's coming out of rap is what they live or what they want to live when they're faux criminals. Right? And so, you know, I guess it is part of your life, but it's more of . . . I'd compare it to country-western music—it comes from your gut. They write it from your history, from your being. And blues, you know, the same. I see rap in that kind of genre where it's coming from this guttural place of pain, you know, right? Or somebody's done me wrong, and I'm gonna blow you up, right? That kind of thinking, and I don't care if I'm going to jail.

Whereas, hip-hop, even the beat is lighter and different. Just the story it tells is about being funny, and being loving, and coming from a place of, you know, it's me and you, like it takes two, "it takes two to make a thing go right," you know. Or "Baby got back"—"My anaconda don't wanna." I mean, you laugh, when you hear these lyrics. And the same with, you know, like, Kanye's a little heavy, and so is Dr. Dre and those guys. But they still tell a story that you see some sort of success out of it. Rap, you tell a story out of it, and you're dead or in jail. You're riding high and somebody's taking your stuff. Or it's, you know, b's and hoes.

I see my kids come in the class, and they're doing these adult dances, and they're saying these rhymes. I'm like, "What are you saying right there? What does that mean to you? Tell me. You can say the bad word to me. What does that mean?" You know? And they're like, "I dunno know." I'm like, "Well then we're not gonna do that here. And that move you were just doing, that's an adult move. We're not gonna do that. Let me show you a different way of doing that same move."

You know, so it's more child-appropriate. Those kind of things. It's like, bring it. It's still educational. This is what you're learning at home. How can we tweak it a little bit so it's more in your age group, until you get to be that age and you can start doing that. And by the time you get to be that age, there'll be a whole different movement. So let's not teach that to you now. You know?

SCOTT: Yeah, absolutely. There's all kinds of stuff that you're doing in the classroom that's got all these educational components to it.

CARMEN: Totally. And what I love to see is that it's cross-cultural. You know? . . . It's very diverse. That whole school is very diverse. And then, you know, as we started getting more programs at the school. Like they got karate, and they got art, I mean, theatre and stuff like that, these kids felt more confident to go and try these other areas. I mean, I was pleased.

One of my last classes that I taught there, we only had like ten kids in the class—which was great for me because then I could do more with them. And I think I didn't have any second graders. I had only kindergarden and first. The second graders went and played sports and were doing all kinds of other stuff that

they were incorporating into the program, which was great, you know?

SCOTT: What have you found to be the most effective thing in terms of using hip-hop?

ALEX: Well, I can answer it in a way. Because how we started the Momma's Boyz, why we started the Momma's Boyz, was that we performed in drag at school, and then we took our makeup off and talked with them about what they saw and what they didn't see. That's how we started, you know? Then we started being asked to do certain shows and then we just grew out of . . .

SCOTT: So, what was that first moment there in terms of how that actually happened?

ALEX: Well, the thing is when they first saw me in drag they'd go, "Oh, it's Ms. Carmen. Hey, Ms. Carmen. Why do you have that stuff on your face?" You know, that kind of stuff. And I was like, then I explained what drag kings were, you know. I couldn't take much time because we were going on the stage to perform for them [for a benefit, for their annual spring silent auction at the school].

And then afterwards, they had a lot of questions, and so we just sat there and answered all their questions. And then at some point, one of us took the makeup off and said, "Let me talk to you now." You know, like, "What do you see now" or something. I can't remember what happened where we took the makeup off. And then it became a whole different dialogue. Right? Because they're little, and they have no apprehension about asking you questions. They are in your face.

SCOTT: Yep, they just say what they think.

ALEX: They say whatever. "Why do you wanna be a boy?" "Isn't that a boy? Why do you wanna be a boy?" Those kind of things. And, so, we felt that that—you know, the output of that—was really beneficial because it allowed a dialogue that, even if they were being silly and wanted to impress the other ones, they were asking what was in their heart. And it gave us a chance to really explain an art. You know? And they'd seen drag queens 'cause they have drag queen shows at the school, but they'd never seen drag kings.

SCOTT: And so then, you got together with people you knew from the school, or somewhere else?



Alex U. Inn

ALEX: You mean, how we formed Momma's Boyz?

SCOTT: Yeah.

ALEX: No. We formed Momma's Boyz because we all used to do lip-sync together. We were a crew that did lip-sync. And I was like, "You know, I'm tired of lip-syncing. Why don't we use our voices?" And then that's how that started.

SCOTT: And you went from there and did Harvey Milk, on stage. Then the kids saw that, and they were like . . .

ALEX: Yeah, "Why are you doing that?"

SCOTT: And so then it came into the classroom?

ALEX: Yeah.

SCOTT: Wow. That's cool. That's really cool. So that means that if they're asking you questions like, "Why do you wanna be a boy?" and all that, then that provided a forum for talking about gender, sexuality, and all that . . .

CARMEN: It totally did. Yeah, because what happened was that I've gotten in conversations with them about like, "Why are you with a girl?" You know? "Why do you call her your wife?" You know? If I kiss her hello when she comes to pick me up, they giggle or "Oooh, you kissed her!" You know, that kind of stuff. . . . So, there were those kind of questions that come out. And they feel comfortable to ask.

I mean it's a civil rights academy. So, you're setting up potential leaders, right? So they need to know everything that they're gonna go up against, and if they're

gonna fight the battles of others—what that looks like, who that is.

SCOTT: Yeah. So, any challenges you've encountered, in terms of like practical, political, ethical, when teaching or when you were doing the hip-hop there?

CARMEN: Yeah, I came up against some parents who were like, "Oh, I'm not putting my kid in hip-hop." Matter of fact, I had a conversation with one of the parents about why she wasn't gonna put her kids in hip-hop, and she confused hip-hop with rap. "I don't want them listening to that music." That kind of thing. "I don't want them dancing those moves." Those kind of preconceived ideas of what it is without even knowing.

And there's that judgmental take that they, . . . you know, she might have been thinking, "Oh, it's too Black." I've been in situations where I've heard that—"Don't put that Black music on." Like even in the clubs. And so, you know, it could have been something like that. And that transcends across all of those areas that you're talking about.

You get a strong dialogue about asking why don't you want your kid in hip-hop. What if it wasn't called hip-hop? Would you want her in there then? I'll do the same thing. I just won't call it hip-hop. I'll play the same music. I'll show the same choreography. We'll perform the same performances. Should I call it . . . , what do I call it? Because, you know, it can be benign that way—and still make a statement. So, my whole dialogue with her was about . . . everything she said was about rap. You're confusing the two.

So that time, and then just the whole way some of the kids listen to hip-hop at home that is more of that, because they listen to more rap but they think it's hip-hop, and they get confused. They come in with the movements I was telling you about because they're watching YouTube and other things that they watch on TV or on their computers.

So, that in itself is a political twist that I have to handle because I'm not sure what their parents are approving at home. And so I have to take a risk that I'm changing their thinking and maybe their parents don't want that. So, I'm taking a risk with what my belief is around what you should not be doing with your body at five years old.

SCOTT: Sure.

CARMEN: Right? So, it's interesting that way. And for me as an instructor, even as them seeing me as their teacher, I have to be really politically savvy when it comes to working with the parents and being diplomatic around how do you sell this to a parent who's saying, "I don't want my child doing this." . . .

At the same time, they're used to so much diversity at that school. . . . The kids are really exposed to a lot of different types of people at that school. And their own playmates and their own classmates and stuff.

SCOTT: You can only speculate what it would look like if you were doing a program like that somewhere that wasn't like that.

CARMEN: Right. Now get this. I was asked to do a program at another school. They approached me, and they wanted me to do a program for them. . . . And not all the parents wanted their kids in the hip-hop class. And it was predominantly White. So, there you may have had a racist element. You had someone who wasn't educated about the hip-hop movement.

You know, you had all these things that were butting up against that decision of "no." So when they told me how many kids I would have, and what their ages were, and what their ethnicity was, and all that stuff, you know, I pretty much said no because I don't wanna be battling with parents around why your kid is in hip-hop. I don't want your kid to be sad because they wanna be in hip-hop, and you won't sign the paper to put them in it. And I wasn't having any kids of color in my class—it was mostly all White. And I wasn't doing it because of that. It was just that it wasn't represented well.

So, I said no. And they were gonna pay me what I wanted to be paid, and I was like, "no." So, that was something I gave up because of the way that they handled that.

SCOTT: Wow. So, you wanna throw something else out in terms of anything around hip-hop and teaching or the value of having hip-hop in the classroom?

CARMEN: I think that it gives them discipline. There's structure around music, and that they don't have normally. See, the thing is, at that time there was really nothing, not a lot of programs in the school. There was hip-hop and a couple of other things at that school, but it wasn't the broad selection they have now.

But what I was getting at is that for

me to be a conscious instructor or teacher there, I wanted to give them more of a broader thinking. So, I wanted to give them the math around the counting in music. I wanted to give them the movement and the theatrics that you would have when you are on the stage. And I wanted to give them the sport of it, like this is something that is going to make you strong mentally, physically, to show you how to be more of a partner or a crewmate, you know, to show that respect and compassion for others.

So, I wanted to make it a little bit more in depth for them because they weren't getting those other sensories bumped up against otherwise. In the classroom, everything was more strict, more rigid, more you know, "Here's the things you have to learn because you're gonna be tested at a certain point." So, it's not as free flow. Dance is free flow. I can show you some things, but you're gonna interpret it the way that you want to, you know?

Another thing is structure around themselves, their behavior. Teaching them movement. Teaching them choreography because it allows them to watch a show like, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and say, "Oh, I know what they're doing. I know how that was done. I know how that was broken down. I know how that was put together. To make that whole routine." And the hard work it took for them to put that beautiful movement up there, right?

Also, there's the self-assurance that they have. The respect for their crew and for themselves. The courtesy. Learning how to count. Learning about music. And like I was saying earlier, throwing different genres in there and being able to really jam on that. And that it's timeless and limitless. Because it is.

SCOTT: Can you say more about that?

CARMEN: Sure. When I say it's limitless, it's like throwing a pebble in the water, and the water starts to move out. It's like you're learning something, but that's the something you learned. But as you move through it, it becomes your own, and it gets bigger and bigger and bigger, and it is limitless where you can take it. And the movements that you learn . . . I've been dancing since I was eight months old. I was probably dancing moves that were the same . . . I can remember doing a move when I was eight that I do right now into hip-hop. Right?

So, that's why I'm saying it's timeless. You know, my parents taught me how to

swing. I can throw a swing move into hip-hop. Right? So, it's what we were talking about—that all the different types, genres, of music and movement transcends. You know, you can turn it into anything. And that's why I was like, it's timeless. It can go on forever. And because the riffs are being stolen from the original hip-hop music, because they're being stolen and used in the modern stuff, it's always going to live.

I was singing and dancing to one song and one of my kids came up and said, "How do you know that song?" I'm like, "How do you know that song?" "My brother plays it all the time." I was like, "But do you know the original?" So, I threw down the original in class, and I said, "This is what you dance to." And he was like, . . . he couldn't believe it. You know, it's listen to the original. . . . and I was like, "People borrow music from each other all the time."

Oh, and I forgot about Gender Spectrum. Let me talk about Gender Spectrum. Gender Spectrum is a camp that has been set up by this incredible family, and it's grown like crazy, for transgender kids, of all ages. And so, I wrote a program for them, and submitted it. And this year, I was able to have a dance class there with the transgender kids. And their culminating event was this talent show, and my dance class performed. And they were off the hook. And I had two guys, transgender kids, that came out in drag and did this number live because they saw the Momma's Boyz. We performed there two years in a row.

SCOTT: So you did the class during their camp, and Momma's Boyz was. . .

ALEX: Momma's Boyz was performing that night at their show, and then they got up on the stage, and they jumped up there with us. But then the next summer camp they got up and did stuff live themselves because of seeing the Momma's Boyz. So, they put facial hair on. They're going through transition, so they don't have facial hair yet. They're young. . . . You know, I showed them how to do make up, and they put facial hair on and they got up there and they performed.

SCOTT: That's cool. Just like the Momma's Boyz.

ALEX: Yep. Yep.

**Conclusion:
The Pedagogical Possibilities
for Multicultural Education**

This conversation makes clear a range of pedagogical possibilities when employing hip-hop, sometimes in conjunction with drag kinging. Using hip-hop in a dance class can help students learn how to listen to and understand beats in music, as well as about components of choreography.

Students benefit from learning through the body, through the senses, through visualization. Students learn self-confidence, discipline, respect, compassion, freedom of expression of one's self, how to confront stage fright, how to build unity. The hip-hop dance class offers them opportunities to be part of a collaborative group and to teach one another.

Students appear to see their own individuality and uniqueness, as well as their own potential and limits, in addition to their own value as people and as an essential part of a group. The hip-hop dance class allows for the fostering of friendships and collaboration across differences, be that in terms of race, ability, gender, and nationality.

Students are empowered generally, but also to do things they or others may not have thought they could do. Some students are transformed. Students also have the opportunity to talk about their consumption of hip-hop, of media, of the meanings in the lyrics they sing and of the moves they mimic from media.

In essence, an instructor has the chance to begin to teach young people how to interrogate what they culturally

consume. When drag kinging is combined with hip-hop in the educational setting, it can provide a space for children to continue to explore notions of gender and sexuality or can offer for some students a safe space for expression of (gender) identity.

Within college settings, hip-hop drag performance allows for academic dialogue about the relationship of racism, kinging, hip-hop, and gender. These are certainly not all of the pedagogical possibilities of performative hip-hop, but they are the most evident ones emergent in this interview.
