

Wedge Gallery presents
JAMEL SHABAZZ: BACK IN THE DAYS
May 4 - 31, 2003

THE OFFICIAL ADVENTURES OF FLASH by Cameron Bailey

Flash is--

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Flash is the pop of a bright light on a dark subject, the pop that lights up the style of a brother, the flash.

Flash is that moment right there, just now, just then, when you lock your body in a pose that says "Yes. I am. Check me."

Flash is a grandmaster from back in the day.

And flash is a method.

Hiphop has many roots, from Yoruba subjectivity to Jamaican deconstruction, but no root goes deeper than the primacy of the frozen moment.

Why does a graffiti artist paint motion into still images?

Why does a DJ break the flow with flurries of scratched sounds, discrete bits of information that interrupt the present with stabs of past music?

Why does a breakdancer turn, spin, then freeze?

For the camera. The camera that's not there.

Hiphop, in its music, its images and its movement, is built on a constant flow of freeze frames -- sonic, visual and even cultural.

That's why we need Jamel Shabazz.

In the early 1980s, Shabazz took his camera to the streets of Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens. This was the era of now-mythic street parties that gave birth to rap. It was the era of the New York subway's wild, graffitied whole cars, canvasses that carried pictorial hiphop through four boroughs. It was the era of Sassoon jeans.

From the beginning, hiphop culture developed complex and constantly evolving styles of expressing the most elemental of human thoughts. Most graffiti tags said nothing more than "I am," but the style of that expression could be as eloquent as Langston Hughes. The same could be said for most early rap lyrics. And all hiphop fashion. Hiphop began as an elaborate, euphoric way to express your place in the world.

*I'm six foot one and I'm tons of fun and I dress to a T.
Ya see I got more clothes than Muhammad Ali
And I dress so viciously.*

So went one line in The Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," which, like many of my generation, I happen to know by heart.

"Viciously" isn't just a convenient rhyme here. It's a key to the style and gesture in Shabazz's photographs.

Time after time, his subjects adopt two stances: cool, an attitude which scholars suggest has its roots in present-day Nigeria, and hard, a warrior stance common to most cultures, but taking on particular forms on the streets of 1980s New York, and in front of a camera. The aim, especially for young men, was to look "vicious" -- simultaneously hard, cool and clean.

Certain poses recur. You stand with your arms crossed. What could that mean? Aggression, no doubt, a visible sign of a body closed off, hard. But there is also in this pose, perhaps inadvertently, anxiety. The visible sign of a body holding itself in. It's a uniquely urban aggression, an urban anxiety and I think, it

emphasizes the limits of the space one body occupies. It would be ridiculous to stand so tightly on a dirt road, or in a field.

Or you crouch. Why crouch? Again it looks like a warrior stance, but from what war? While the sources are varied and fluid, the strongest visible cues come from Asian and Brazilian martial arts, where a crouching pose connotes preparedness to strike or defend. The hip-hop crouch in Shabazz's photographs is most likely a gestural snapshot sampled from capoeira, from kung fu, and crucially, from kung fu movies. There's also a trace of the portrait style often used with sports teams, where players crouch in the front row. These are poses made for the camera, whether or not the camera is there.

And as they confront the camera, Shabazz's subjects also seduce. The aggressive pose says not just "I'm a badass nigga", but "Look at what a badass nigga I am. Come, look." Sometimes Shabazz also captures a kind of giddy glee in a brother's expression: "Look how fresh I look!" This is just one of the points where conventionally masculine and feminine gestures blur boundaries in these photographs, and in hip-hop generally.

His photos of women display the same cocktail of seduction and aggression in their poses, with one important exception. Sometimes, the women pose with their backsides to the camera. The pose says, "Check my black ass," yes, but also "Check my jeans." Check the brand. Sassoon. Jordache. There's a turn here. This pose surrenders to the viewer's presumed sexual interest: it offers a look at her ass. But it also shows what she wants: I'm wearing the freshest jeans on the block, I can afford it, and I look good. Check me.

Shabazz's photos fascinate not simply for their artistry or their historical value, although each is considerable. What's most remarkable is the encounter between his camera and subjects so primed to be photographed. Consider the fact that these photographs take place on the streets and subways, and feature people Shabazz happened across, not models or people who set out that day to be photographed. And yet they look like posed, studio shots. Why? The answer lies somewhere between the deep-rooted, performative nature of black style, and the then-new currents of hip-hop's visual culture.

The subjects in Shabazz's pictures walk the streets with a pre-existing awareness of their photogenic appeal. Like many urban folks, they dress for photogenic appeal. But beyond that, hip-hop style dictates that one move in gestures and facial expressions sampled from other photographs, or from movies. You become your own fluid portrait, ready and willing to "freeeze" at any moment, like a breakdancer. In critical ways, these subjects are co-creators of their images.

I got a big long Cadillac like a Seville
And written right on the side
It reads "Dressed to Kill"

So rapped Run-DMC, who pioneered so many of hip-hop's central tenets, including brand faith. This was the first music to begin from such clear immersion in late capitalist consumption. Not no logo, but mo' logo. Turntables had to be Technics. Shoes had to be Adidas. Names of things remain crucial in hip-hop, and naming takes on sacred force: Moet, Fendi, Cristal. The subjects in Shabazz's photographs display this intense brand consciousness, and his camera responds. The human face is typically where portraiture finds its meaning, but in Shabazz's portraits the posed form of the body and the clothes worn by it signify easily as much as the eyes or mouth. So his frames usually include the whole body, and arrange group shots to render each body visible.

There's another pose you often see in Shabazz's work. A subject stands (or crouches), arms outstretched, hands splayed open as if to say "See." That's all, "See."

It's what each sharp stab of a scratched sample says: See.

It's what graffiti says, whether it's a simple tag or a whole-car mural on the D Train: See.

It's what each flash-frozen moment of a Shabazz portrait says, speaking the vernacular of hip-hop with the grammar of studio photography: See. Check it. Look.

How you like me now?

Cameron Bailey is a Toronto-based writer and film critic.