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The Massive Monkees' Path to a World Breakdancing Championship, Now on Film

A new documentary celebrates Seattle's famed breakdance crew Massive Monkees and its impact on youth

By Gemma Alexander

If your knowledge of the Seattle hip-hop scene goes no deeper than Macklemore's "Thrift Shop" or Sir Mix A Lot's "Posse on Broadway," you could be forgiven. Hip-hop might be the most underground scene in a city famous for underground music. But it's a scene that deserves more attention. In a genre famous for glamorizing drugs and misogyny, Seattle's hip-hop culture has always been notable for social consciousness and hometown pride.

There has never been a better time to get familiar Seattle's hip-hop history than now. The newest installment in the Seattle Channel's Emmy Award-winning series *Community Stories*, **Massive Monkees: The Beacon** premiered at MOHAI on Thursday, March 3. The 30-minute documentary (which also screens Monday, March 7, on the Seattle Channel Cable 21 at 7 p.m.), shows the Massive Monkees' path from

the after-school programs of the Jefferson Community Center to international fame as a world-champion breakdance crew.

Now adults, the original Massive Monkees have become community leaders, including, several years ago, opening **The Beacon**, a dance studio in Seattle's International District. The Beacon is an inclusive community offering a free after-school program, dance and music classes for all ages, and community events.

The documentary, produced by Shannon Gee, is a balanced blend of heartfelt interviews, high-energy performance videos and kids' dance classes. The Beacon's **Mini Breaks class** for preschoolers (held Saturdays at the Beacon) is unique in the world, and unsurprisingly, the documentary proves nothing is cuter than a preschool break battle. It's a testament to the quality of the Mini Breaks program that the toddlers are not only cute, they are recognizably breaking.



Mini Breaks class. Photo credit: Anna "Banana" Freeze

In interviews, founding members of the Massive Monkees talk about the positive influence hip-hop culture has had on their lives, and speak passionately about hip-hop's ability to unlock the potential in youth. Younger members talk about the impact of being a student at The Beacon or participating in one of its school outreach programs today. Note: The documentary is appropriate for all ages, though you might lose younger kids in the interviews (luckily, there are many compelling dance sequences).

Exploring hip-hop at MOHAI

It's fitting that the documentary premiered at MOHAI, which is hosting ***The Legacy of Seattle Hip-Hop*** exhibit through May 1. This interactive exhibit, curated by Seattle arts promoter Jazmyn Scott and music educator Aaron Walker-Loud, explores many facets of hip-hop culture in Seattle: graffiti, deejaying, break dancing and the music itself. Much of the exhibit space is dedicated to forgotten and overlooked artists of the early and mid-90s when most eyes were still trained on the dying grunge movement. *The Legacy of Seattle Hip-hop* explores the connections between Seattle's scene and the wider world of hip-hop as well as the characteristics that make Seattle's artists unique.



MOHAI's hip-hop exhibit

Placards explain basic concepts to the uninitiated (what is the difference between a DJ and an MC?) while the interactive elements give visitors a chance to try their hand at producing. The exhibit is filled with show posters and memorabilia from local artists. From experimentalists Shabazz Palaces to the Moor Gang's queen, Gifted Gab, there's something for everyone. Even if everything else is unfamiliar, you'll get a spark of recognition from Macklemore's scooter in the "Thrift Shop" video. Be sure to grab a free copy of the Fantagraphics comic book *Hip-Hop Family Tree* before you leave.

If you watch ... if you go ...

Watching the documentary: The documentary *Massive Monkees: The Beacon* will air on [Seattle Channel Cable 21](#) at 7 p.m., Monday, March 7. It will be available [online](#) at for viewing any time after it airs.

Massive Monkees classes: The Beacon's **Mini Breaks classes** are open to children ages 2 to 6 on Saturday mornings. All other ages can choose among [break, funk, house and vogue classes](#). A five-class package at The Beacon costs \$65.

The Legacy of Seattle Hip-Hop: This exhibit at MOHAI is on through May 1, included with admission (\$14-\$17, kids 14 and under are free). First Thursdays are free for all ages.

Special hip-hop events: MOHAI is also hosting several events related to the exhibit. On Saturday, March 12 and April 9, DJs will [spin vinyl in the exhibit area](#) from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Free with museum admission.

On Tuesday, March 15, at 7:30 p.m., hip-hop artists will lead a community discussion on **"Hip-hop as a vehicle for activism."** Admission is \$5.

Closing out the exhibit on Saturday, April 30, **Fresh Dressed Jam will incorporate music, art and style from the beginnings of hip-hop through today.**

March 7, 2016

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