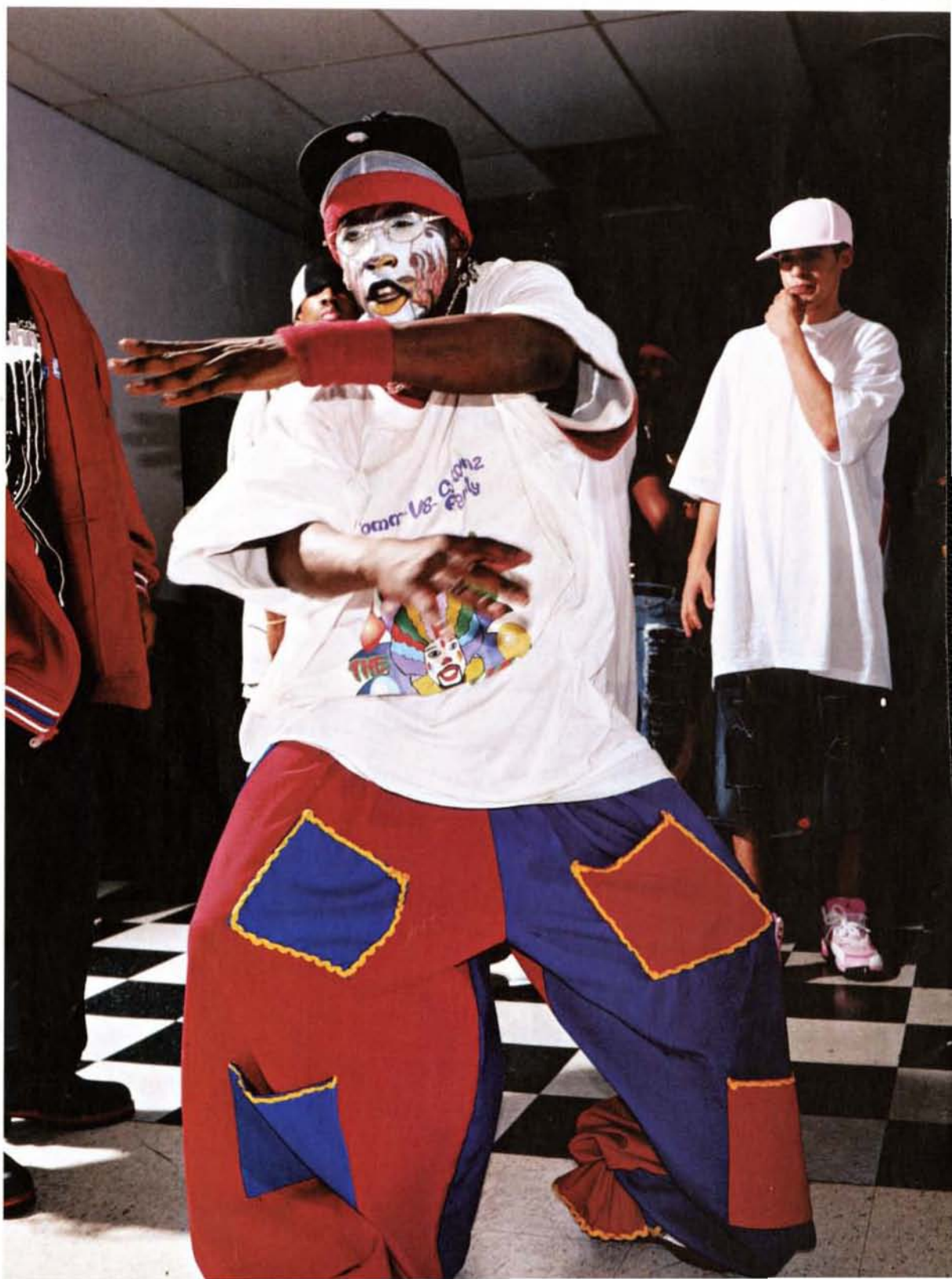


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Ten years ago, an ex-drug dealer from Los Angeles named Tommy turned his life around by performing as a clown at children's birthday parties. When he added some hip-hop dance moves and started showing up at parks and parades, a mini-craze began. Now, with kids in face paint appearing in music videos and films, the scene is on the verge of blowing up. Welcome to the strangest show on earth.



clowns
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clowns
umop
g'z



By
Anthony
Bozza
Photographs
by Jeff
Minton

It's a clown thing. You
wouldn't understand:
Two dancers face off
at a beauty shop in
Inglewood, California



And you thought *Baywatch: Hawaiian Wedding* was wacky: Tommy the Clown and family on the street outside Pamela Anderson's house

It's midnight on Valentine's Day in Los Angeles, and the NBA All-Star 2004 weekend is in full swing, with thousands of celebrities, athletes, and fans partying in the posh clubs of Hollywood. But just a few miles away, in a cramped beauty shop in an unnervingly quiet corner of Inglewood, a different sort of party is jumping off.

A DJ in an enormous wig plays Busta Rhymes' "Call the Ambulance" for a tightly packed crowd while refereeing a battle between two groups of dancers. Before him, two teen boys face each other on the cracked black-and-white linoleum floor. One, dressed in baggy red pants, a huge white T-shirt, and a blue cap, stands stone still, staring into the face of his opponent, who is dressed in a tank top, dark pants, and work boots. Suddenly, the second boy jerks his arms like he's in the throes of a seizure, shouting taunts and glaring intensely at the other young man. The first teen sways to the music, and starts to shake his shoulders, alighting on his toes, and executing a nimble side-to-side shuffle. As his opponent mocks him with twisted facial expressions and erratic upper-body heaves, the boy drops to the floor, then leaps up and lands in a wide split before propelling himself forward by swings of his arms. The two eye each other with cocked heads, and bump chests, as if fists are soon to follow. The audience shouts out their names, cheering to determine a winner, but this round is a draw. The dancers hug and fall back in the ranks.

For the past four years, events like this have taken place every weekend in backyards and parking lots all over Inglewood and South Central Los Angeles. Known as "clown dancing," "clownin'," or "krumpin'" (a harder, more violent version), the scene is made up of rough-and-tumble dancers who compete while wearing, yes, clown makeup. At "battle zones," or "krump sessions," dancers—with balloons, rainbows, stars, and multicolored tears painted on their faces—bust moves that are as breathtaking as those of the 1970s B-boy legends Crazy Legs, Jimmy D, and Frosty Freeze of the Rock Steady Crew. Clownin' and krumpin', like breakin', encompass numerous elements of dance, from backflips to high kicks, slow-motion pantomime, and a sort of spastic visual karaoke

in which a song's lyrics are acted out. The footwork is astounding—a blur of limbs and leaps that ferry the dancers over the floor with bodies rippling in different directions. At times, the dance resembles capoeira, the acrobatic Brazilian martial art. At others, it looks like the craziest booty-quaking lap dance known to man.

"There's an energy that is like Mardi Gras or Carnivale," says Tone Talauega, 26, a choreographer and hip-hop producer who has become deeply involved in the scene. "But there's a spiritual vibe to it too," adds Rich, 28, his brother and partner. "It's like those churches in the South

where people catch the Holy Ghost. There's a spirit calling on people through the art of dance. It's beyond all of us at those times."

This homegrown underground scene is starting to emerge in the mainstream—both clown and krump dancers have appeared in videos for the Black Eyed Peas' "Hey Mama," Missy Elliott's "I'm Really Hot," and Christina Aguilera's "Dirrty." "I was working on a Coke commercial two years ago, and I saw two girls at the shoot dancing real different," says Tone. "I didn't know what they were doing, so I asked them where people danced this way. My brother and I ended up following the style all over South Central L.A."

When Tone and Rich were choreographing the "Dirrty" video in late 2002, they introduced the dance style to director and acclaimed celebrity photographer David LaChapelle. "I've never seen that much intense energy in one room," says LaChapelle of his first krump session. "It was better than anything I've seen at any club in Los Angeles or New York." The trio kept in touch, and later that year, LaChapelle decided to make a film (his first) about the scene, with Tone and Rich as music supervisors. Last January, LaChapelle's arty but extremely moving 24-minute documentary, *Krumped*, was screened at Sundance, and was so well received that both independent and major studios offered to finance a full-length feature.

"These kids are creating something from nothing, with all odds against them, in a really depressed area," says LaChapelle. "In the face of all that negativity, they created their own art form."

Everyone agrees that the scene began with one man, the DJ and host of the beauty-shop session—Thomas Johnson, a.k.a. Tommy the Clown. In the early '90s, Tommy took traditional clowning—magic tricks, balloon animals, mime—and added dance moves he'd learned from watching Michael Jackson (a childhood hero) and early B-boys. Wearing a rainbow Afro wig and outfits that ran the gamut from a yellow leather M&M jacket to a baggy jumpsuit, Tommy painted his face white and dotted it with red balloons. He was part Bozo, part Parliament-Funkadelic.

He's also a businessman: the founder of Hip-Hop Clowns & Entertainment Inc., an Inglewood company that caters to children's birthday parties, church picnics, and parades. Auditions are under

way for a second team to join his main company of 12 dancers. Tommy's "family" arrives at a party in a fleet of clown cars, including their mentor's green Mustang hatchback—a ride that's got a massive speaker in the trunk that pulls his bumper low to the ground and pumps a thumping soundtrack of hip-hop hits. The hood of a clown-painted Suburban is riddled with softball-size dents left by back-flipping dancers.

Born in Detroit, Tommy, 35, moved with his mother to East L.A. when he was a teenager. Before long, he got caught up in peddling drugs. Then he was arrested. And after violating the terms of his probation, Tommy was sentenced to California Youth Authority prison for five years. "I realized, 'Man, I don't want to do this with my life,'" he says. Released in 1991, he got an office job with Transamerica, a medical-insurance firm.

Tommy also got involved with his local church, where he met two girls who entertained as clowns at congregation picnics. "I saw them and thought, *Wow, I should be a clown!*" Tommy recalls. "I act crazy like a clown anyway." He picked up some tricks from a local magician, and a coworker asked him to work a party for her children. "I went to church that Sunday and the girls painted me up," Tommy says. "I was all pumped, and stayed [at the party] for three hours." To build his clown business, Tommy changed into his costume in the insurance office's bathroom after work and drove home, music blasting out of his Mustang, stopping at street corners to dance for kids. "I became known as Tommy the Hip-Hop Clown," he says. "I'd go to parties, parks, parades, passing out business cards. I was getting so many calls that I quit my day job."

He was a one-man show until 1998, when he pulled a little girl out of the crowd at a parade. "[Everybody] went crazy," he says. "I started taking her with me and called her 'Little Tommy.'" Other kids begged to join them—so many that Tommy was forced to turn some away. Other groups like Tru Clowns and Cartoonz Family formed, and what began as a feel-good form of breakin' evolved into a competitive style that reflected the music of the times—more manic, more sexual. Clowns started doing the "Stripper Dance," an exaggerated shoulder-shuffling, booty-shaking routine that included pelvic grinds on the floor and abs-rolling belly dances.

For years, the L.A. gang the Crips had been known for a swaggering, territorial dance called the "Crip walk," or "C-walk," in which members used footwork to threateningly spell out a rival's name (and then erase it). By 2000, the C-walk had crossed over into pop culture via rappers Snoop Dogg, Ice Cube, Xzibit, Bow Wow, and others. "Crip walk-

ing had been out for a while," says Tommy. "Clown walking started when we were doing a lot of parties. We didn't want to be associated [with the Crips], so where they did the dance with a gangster style, we made ours all crazy."

"Everybody knows Tommy the Clown," says Officer Bruce Stallworth, a 14-year veteran with the LAPD, who lives in Inglewood and specializes in gang activity. "He's an entertainer, and he's not affiliated with any gang. Every time I've seen him, he's in his clown outfit in his Mustang, doing his thing. From the start, he got the green light from everyone. If the gangsters know a kid is into dancing, they don't mess with them because they know they're a little bit different. My daughter is 15 and goes to parties where kids are doing the clown walk."

"It just went off the chain so fast," says Tommy. "Then one group came to me and wanted to challenge us. I said, 'You know what? I'm going to come up with a show where the crowd will judge who is the hottest clown.'" The result was Battle Zone I, held at Los Angeles Southwest College in 2000. There have been five Battle Zones to date, most of them at the Great Western Forum, each attended by more than 4,000 people. Tommy earned enough money from ticket sales to found the Hip-Hop Clown Academy, a school for kids, in 2001. Somewhat ominously, the academy was located in a strip mall next to Payless Caskets, a store that specialized in discount caskets because so many young people in the neighborhood were dying.

At the Academy, Tommy taught anyone interested in his moves, and attracted a horde of followers ranging in age from four to 24. "So many kids end up in a gang just because they want to represent something," he says. "Now you can be a Crip, you can be a Blood, or you can be a Clown. I've [performed] in every neighborhood all over this city, and I've never had no problems with gangs."

Tommy chose the Academy's best dancers to join his team of entertainers; other students went on to form copycat clown families. Some emulated Tommy's business plan; some bonded together just to dance and hang out. Virtually every dancer in the scene has, at one point or another, been taught by Tommy or been a member of Tommy's crew. "Tommy the Clown started the whole movement," says Rich. "He started the whole makeup thing, he brought back dance battles." Says 19-year-old Rocco the Clown, a new addition to Tommy's crew: "Tommy is the main reason I started dancing. I saw him and I thought it was so cool."

"Everybody in Tommy's organization has a different style," says Bop the Clown, also 19. "Clown walkin' is my style. I get up on my toes and spin around in a circle—that's the 'Tic-Toc.' I see stuff we do in videos like Missy Elliott's. I'm not offended, but we were the ones that brought it out. We started the 'Wobble,' we started the 'Twist Walk.' We started all that—Tommy and the Clowns."

In early 2000, a clique of clown dancers in Tommy's crew—Christopher Toler, a.k.a. Lil' C, Ceasaraé Willis, a.k.a. Tight Eyes, and Jason Green, a.k.a. Dragon (collectively known as the Bad Boyz Family)—began to push the dance toward a darker, more aggressive style now called "krumpin'." In the clown scene, the phrase "getting krump" (also "getting buck") describes dancers in the heat of competition, at the limits of their ability and expression. It's a transcendent state of mind, when the dancers emotion rules supreme, urging them to defy gravity and the bounds of natural human motion.

"Clownin' is what all of us *used* to do," says J.R., a.k.a. No Good, 20, a dancer for Rice Track, an all-Filipino L.A. crew. "Clownin' is more sexual, you shake your ass, you bobble. Krumpin' is more rough."

Krumpin' captures darkness, translating the dancers' frustration and anger into avant-garde, rapid-fire movements. Krump dancers eschew clown garb for street clothes, but many wear the clown-inspired makeup, albeit altered for a more sinister effect: Balloons are replaced with bar codes, candy colors with camouflage. While clownin' is about community (all the dancers are members of a clown



"Forget that pimp shiznit, now it's all about Clown My Ride": Tommy's legendary Mustang whip



Dis and makeup: Homeboy the Clown and Cisco, and Dragon, during the filming of David LaChapelle's documentary *Krumped*. Photographs by LaChapelle

family), most krumpers are loners. "The majority of the krump dancers are on the solo tip," says Tone. "They like the battle. They like proving to everybody who is the best."

The mood at a clown-dancing event is inviting, with a cross-section of the community attending, from toddlers to grandparents. The music spans everything from hip-hop to funk to gospel. A battle zone—the forum set up by Tommy—is almost like a recital, with dancers taking turns and giving each other room to execute nuanced moves (which are judged on skill and routine). Krump sessions are more like unruly playground football games, with dancers interrupting each other, showing, kicking, and often squaring off in the middle of another's routine. The music is rugged hardcore rap, predominantly East Coast MCs like DMX and Noreaga. "Krumpin' is the R-rated version of clownin'," says Tone. Adds Rich: "It's like a mosh pit meets a fight club."

"Clownin' is more happy, smiley, sunny, energetic," says Ron, 16, a.k.a. Solo, of Rice Track. "Krump is mean-spirited. You go at it like you want to punch people. It's like fighting without touching each other. You can touch, but you're not going to give someone a black eye."

"We separated from [Tommy's family] because we got more and more people who liked to dance harder than usual," says Tight Eyes. "Clown dancing is more for the kids. Krumpin' is an abstract outlet. You have to understand how to get negative."

Krumpin' constantly blurs the line between theater and real violence. "There are times when we've seen it get close to a fistfight, but it never does," adds Tone. "You do see people hitting and kicking each other. That's called a 'krump up.' It's like football players hitting each other's helmets and pads before a game. Dancers do the same thing—except they don't have pads. And like football, two krumpers might get into a fight for a minute and talk trash, but afterward they go back to the huddle and get ready for the next play. All of these kids are friends, they're neighbors, they all go to school with each other."

That said, krumpers *have* taken clownin' to an extreme, and some lose their way. "There are dancers who krump *and* gang-bang," says Tone. "The ones I know are trying to convert over to the entertainment business. Those are the kids I concentrate on, because those are the go-getters. But they get tempted because they see [gangs] every day of their life. Kids might get serious about dancing, but if they're not getting somewhere quickly, a lot of them get impatient, drop out, and go back to the gangs."

"I've been dancing for, like, six months," says Milk, 18, cooling down with a few of his crew members in the parking lot behind the Inglewood beauty shop. "My boys Miho and Trouble taught me." Milk,

a Denver native, is considered by many to be the first white krumper. "I was the only white boy dancing in the clown world," he boasts. "It took a while for me to catch on, but now everybody loves me."

"I taught him how to dance," says Trouble, 17, grinning slyly. "He didn't have no rhythm at all, but now he the stuff. It took a while to teach him, because he was nothing. But he got it, and I just want my credit when this gets big."

LaChapelle's full-length feature should be completed by the end of the fall, and will expand on the year he spent observing the scene as it grew exponentially. It will highlight the lives of Tight Eyes, 19, and Lil' C, 21, who (along with Dragon, 22) traveled to Sundance with the director. The two subsequently landed parts in Hollywood projects like *Be Cool*, the sequel to *Get Shorty*.

Tommy the Clown has mixed feelings about these developments. "All the krumpers came from our organization," he says. "They're going on auditions and getting picked up for different things. I hope we get ourselves a TV show or a movie, but I'm not going to be in a video unless it's our own thing. People don't come to me. I've had every type of idea stolen from me."

Tommy could still get his moment in the mainstream (he's featured in the documentary), and he may have some unlikely help. One day last summer, LaChapelle brought Tommy and his dancers along to a barbecue at Pamela Anderson's house. While Andy Dick and Anderson's ex-husband, Tommy Lee, watched, Anderson and Lee's son Dylan got his face painted by one of the clowns, and his older brother Brandon tried out his best breakin' move, the "Worm." Soon, LaChapelle joined the circle, busting a few krump moves of his own. All around, neighbors watched, intrigued, and perhaps a bit disturbed.

"Tommy and his dancers just threw down in the middle of the street," says Lee. "They're wearing makeup and these crazy red and blue outfits, piling out of two hooptie cars and doing flips in the street. All these Hollywood types were looking out of their houses and driving by in their Range Rovers wondering what the *fuck* was going on!"

The former Mötley Crüe drummer has been a loud proponent of the krump scene, and a symbol of how it may soon become a widespread phenomenon.

"I love hip-hop and I love dance, and this is just the fucking hardest, most amazing combination of both that I've ever seen," he says. "This kind of dancing is like a huge wrestling match. They've got all kinds of dancers with their own styles. Some are big, some are small; there's five-year-olds who throw down as hard as 20-year-olds. There's girls who kick more ass than the guys."

Lee pulls out his Blackberry and starts typing himself a memo. "I'm so inspired by this," he says, with a huge smile. "I'm going to write a song about it. It'll be all hardcore beats and loud as fuck! It'll be a fight song for the krumpers! I can't wait for more people to learn about this. It's going to be fucking *huge*. Once krumpin' gets out there, there's gonna be kids from New Jersey to Japan rippin' it up—trust me. And it all started down in the 'hood in L.A." ■



Battle scene: two dancers (and female fan) in a "krump up" from the documentary *Krumped*