



STEP UP

The breakdancers of Kabul: Afghan youth busting moves

A Madrid exhibition offers an in-depth look at the late Moroccan photographer's chronicles of "disappearing traditions"

AFP | Kabul

In the land of suicide bombings, burqas, and unending war, a group of Afghans have turned to breakdancing for stress relief and self-expression -- even as fears the Taliban could yet return to power fuel worries of a renewed crackdown on the arts.

At the French Cultural Centre in Kabul, the group takes turns practising the basics -- toprocking, headspins, and freezes, while watching YouTube videos on their phones of famous b-boys like Lilou and Hong Ten for inspiration.

"Breakdancing keeps us away from stress and war. It gives us freedom. It frees our minds from the stress of living in Kabul and we forget about the war and killings," explains Murtaza Lomani, 23, from the Top Step crew.

Still, breakdancing is a rare sight in the fiercely conservative Islamic society, where traditional folk music mostly dominates the radiowaves and dancing takes place mainly at gender-segregated weddings.

The cultural centre is one of the few places in the Afghan capital where the mixed-gender Top Step crew are able to practise and feel relatively safe, Lomani says. But even here there are risks.

Just five years ago, the centre was attacked by the Taliban as it hosted a play about suicide bombings, where Lomani was among the injured.

Breaking barriers

For Heja Aalia, who says she is one of just four female breakdancers in Kabul, there are other worries.

"If I train outdoors in our society, people insult you," says Aalia, adding that many young women are interested in breakdancing but are unable to get permission from their families to try it out.

"It's really difficult for a girl to practise breakdance, especially in Afghanistan where people think dance is against Islamic culture."

The sport first originated in New York's Bronx borough in the 1970s, where "breaking" along with rap music and graffiti art formed the pillars of hip hop



Dancers during a practice session at the French Cultural Center in Kabul

culture that has gone on to dominate everything from pop music to fashion worldwide in the ensuing decades.

But while the rest of the world was

quick to embrace that culture, decades of war and hardline Taliban rule in the 1990s prevented the phenomenon from taking root in Afghanistan.

"Afghan society has changed a bit in recent years, the generations have changed and people are thinking positively," says Lomani, who admits that many laughed at their dance moves when they first started in 2011.

"But we have convinced some youth and now it is really good that we practise," he adds.

Fellow Top Step member Obaidullah Koofi, 24, says he first got interested in breakdancing after seeing videos online.

"We learn our new moves from YouTube, and YouTube is our mentor because we do not have any trainer here to... teach us," he says.

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MURTAZA LOMANI



Afghan breakdancers pose for a photograph at the French Cultural Centre in Kabul



Alaoui

archival work on the aesthetics of traditions through contemporary photography."

ghtful artistry, Alaoui showed an otion to storytelling, even in the nt settings, offering hope not just rations of photographers, but, in egion as well.

sents something very positive, e need to demonstrate in front in Europe," said Nuria Medina ultural programs coordinator at 'She was cultivated and had a to her society and intellectual odyng many positive values. For ution, it's very important to give ple like Leila, who really contra- egative images that are coming ntries at the current moment."