

“As life-affirming as it gets, this is a truly Kiwi can-do story full to the brim with personality.”

Kate Rodger, TV3

hip hopperation

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF THE WORLD'S
OLDEST HIP-HOP TROUPE AND THEIR
INCREDIBLE JOURNEY FROM

Hip Hopping & Serendipity with The World's Oldest & Coolest Dance Crew

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

On paper, it looks like the script to a mawkish Disney comedy. An incongruous elderly dance troupe from a sleepy island in the South Pacific head to the bright lights of Las Vegas where their imaginative take on the art of hip hop dancing raises smiles, eyebrows and the roof. In reality, this true life tale is one of the most moving, uplifting, life-affirming films that you will see not just this year, but ever.

“It wasn’t until six or seven weeks ago when the group first saw themselves on the big screen that they properly realised this was really all for the cinema,” chuckles producer Paula Jones. “Up until then they had it in their minds that they’d just be on television.”

This year saw the Hip-Operation Crew inducted into the Guinness World Records as the world’s oldest dance group, with an age range spanning from their late sixties to nineties. Four of them use mobility aids, many are deaf and one is legally blind. The crew were initially assembled on Waiheke Island by self-taught choreographer and manager Billie Jordan who then sent them onto the streets of Auckland to dance as a flash mob.

Such was its success they decided to up the ante and a camera crew decided to follow their journey. But why choose hip hop? “Because it was the last thing that anyone would expect an old person to do,” says Billie. “I had to do something to grab attention. To make people see these citizens in a different light. I have no training, no background in hip hop, I can’t even dance. I just looked it up on Wikipedia, watched YouTube and learnt a few moves then adapted them to the body of a 90-year-old, which is far more my ability!”

One of the funniest parts of the film is where Billie tells the ageing groovers that whatever it takes they’re going to Vegas, “even if it’s in an urn.” She then proceeds to run through some street-style moves, and asks them to grab their crotches. “I thought I’d just dive in at the deep end and see how it goes,” she laughs. “I didn’t quite know how they would react, but as it turned out, they couldn’t wait to grab their crotches!” What was difficult, she says, was getting them to fully commit. “A lot were only prepared to put in an hour each week at first, which was very frustrating because they had to learn how to dance. They seemed to think it would just happen, or thought it was something that I should be doing and I could put some kind of spin on it, conjure something up. They’d do an hour, with a cup of tea in the middle, and that was it for the week. After a few months, they got it and were ready to put in the extra time.”

One of many touching moments is when the cast meet a group of real-life hip hoppers from Auckland who would go on to do great things at those Las Vegas World Championships. “They were quite nervous about meeting the younger dance troupe,” says Paula. “We took them out on the bus and they didn’t really know what to expect, but those kids just wrapped themselves round them and celebrated them. I believe that was the point at which the crew realised that they were for real. Up until then, I don’t think they took themselves too seriously.”





Neither did many on Waiheke. Billie and the group were subject to animosity and ridicule, their motives and integrity questioned. "A lot of people on the island were angry with me," says the manager. "They felt I was stringing the old people along, leading them astray. We learned very early on that if people say you can't achieve something, you have to ignore them. Never give them any piece of your brain." At the beginning of their journey, Billie gave each of her crew a red notebook with the instruction to make a list of all the doubters and haters so they could send them postcards from America. "Some of them really did have lots of names in there, but once we arrived, we didn't even want to waste our time. We came to the realisation that it really doesn't matter what others thought."

The bond between Billie and her crew is tactile. "The group has huge confidence and trust in her," says Paula. "They really are a tight little community. If she goes with something, they'll go with it too. There will be lots of questions, but they're really open." And therein lies this movie's magic. The whole dance concept is essentially a vehicle to ferry the tales of some remarkable characters and their incredible lives led. We learn of 1960s walks across America in the name of peace, surviving the Blitz, mastectomies, divorce, deaths and dementia. Secrets are shamelessly shared. Dust is blown from old photo albums as we are invited, tearfully, into people's lives. "The hip hop was something to look forward to," says Billie. "They kept talking about things in the past, their memories, as if their past was better than their future, which is so sad. They had no plans. So I thought, how about having a really big plan. How about aiming for the Everest of hip hop? How about going to Las Vegas?"

There is sometimes a sense of sadness to Billie during the film. A sense that she too, is searching and that she finally finds herself when she finds this new "family". The film comes with a profound sense of serendipity. "I didn't really trust people so much," says Billie. "I have witnessed the bad side of humanity and hadn't really had too many positive interactions with other human beings. Of course I've had friends, but I never thought I'd be able to grab a miscellaneous bunch of people from the street,

and not just trust and like them, but learn to love them too. They have become the centre of my entire life. I feel bound to the group and it has made me feel more connected to the rest of the world. It has changed my perception. They've made me feel valuable and that's a huge gift for me to receive."

Billie moved to Waiheke following the Christchurch quake ("I bought a house on the Friday, the earthquake was Tuesday"). She was in the city centre when the buildings began to crumble, injured in the chaos. "I chose Waiheke because it was the furthest away piece of dirt I could think of that was still New Zealand," Billie tells me. "Plus, it had lots of trees and bushes which help to hold the earth together and there's no big city, nothing to fall on you. I didn't really think about Auckland being volcanic."

Astonishingly – and thankfully – considering the ages of the Hip Hop-eration crew and the length of time for which they were filmed, all members remain from start to finish. It's one of the movie's many hopeful themes, that maybe, just maybe, with a renewed sense of self-esteem, with a renewed sense of vigour, a good dose of laughter, companionship and little bit of dancing, we really can fend off the inevitability of time. "The doctors on the island can't believe the change to their patients in the group," says Billie. "It's reversed the biological clock. They're fitter, healthier and blood pressures are down. Everyone has a fear of dying alone, but we've discussed this and they know it won't happen. There will be a 24-hour bedside vigil. We joke about death all the time so it doesn't feel such a big deal." She intends to set them goals to keep them going. Taiwan is next on the hit list, and then, adds Billie, the dream is New York. "I want to take them to do surprise performances in schools in the Bronx," she says, "where hip hop originated. To show those young kids what their urban ancestors have achieved. How they have influenced and enriched the lives of a bunch of old folk on a tiny little island in the South Pacific."

And now, they too, have enriched ours.