

C.P.: A Black Martial Art of N.C.

By

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All the elementary kids that live in Idle wood, Farmington, and on Creech Road ride the #5 bus to school. A fight ensues. It's a Kindergartener against a 4th grader. The kids are gathered around the seats chanting, "Fight, fight!" "Hit em!" The six year old, a hot tempered boy is ready but nervous because the 8 or 9 year old boy is bigger. He swings a rough jab but misses. The older boy pushes him followed by a swing of his own. The six year old is thrown off balance but is still able to evade the nine year old's haymaker. The younger boy uses the seat to push off and get more power to kick the older boy in the stomach. The older boy blocks the kick by wrapping his arms as if to hug himself. The older boy grabs his foot with his forearms and begins trying to sling him down. The younger boy bends the knee of his grabbed leg pulling himself in toward the body of the older boy. The older boy tries to throw a street rough hook but it's too late as he realizes the fight just went wrong for him. The crowd, meanwhile, is now giving tips and pointers saying, "Use your elbows!" "Don't let him grab you like that!" Some are even saying, "Y'all don't need to be fightin." It's too late to say that now. The older boy knows he's in trouble because he's now in a Front Half Nelson and the little boy has also wrapped his free leg around the older boy's legs making the fight go to the ground. The older boy tries to punch with his free hand but has no power. He's in a headlock with an arm also trapped. Some of the other boys break it up. They want to see another round.

They start immediately engaging in a "Toe to toe" style boxing game. Street rough bolos, haymakers, body blows such as jabs to the ribs, open hand slaps to the face. Then, "Bam!" the younger boy shoots a knee to the groin area while slipping his arms under the older boy's arms and clasps his hands as he slips a head butt to the older boy's face. The crowd says, "Ooooooh!!!" Then with a lift and a twist, down between the seats they go while the little boy is on top still throwin' head butts. Then the other boys in the crowd break them up. The older boy pinned between the seats and on the bottom is defenseless from the head butts. The fight is decided by the crowd saying, "Dayum, you let that little boy get you!!" Others exclaim, "He can fight!" and still others saying, "It was luck!" Whatever it was had worked. He won this one.

He used what he had learned from his father, uncles, cousins and peers. Each one had shown him random techniques varying from grappling, boxing, kicking, slapping to using head butts. They also taught him defense and evasion called by various names like Squabblin, Scufflin, Prison Style and Central Prison. In this article I will focus on Central Prison - the name most commonly used by my uncles, cousins, and peers.

Central Prison is the main, local prison in Raleigh, North Carolina. Since the 80's, this name has been utilized to describe techniques utilized by street fighters within the Black community. Though it is considered to be a distinct martial art by most people who use the terminology, I will attempt to show here that it is. Indeed, Central Prison, from here on called C.P., is a unique Black Martial Art with African roots that was born right here in the United States.

During the times of African Enslavement, Africans were brought to the Americas to work on the plantations in the south, especially in the Carolinas where cotton and tobacco were the main crops. Slave traders brought Blacks from all over the African continent - from the north, south, east and west. Women, men and children were forced to labor in the fields and in the slave owner's homes. Most of the men were traditionally a part of the militaristic and warrior societies of their cultures. They were also tradesmen as seen on the continent of Africa today. They were farmers, blacksmiths, builders, fishermen and hunter gatherers. Most often being from one of these groups meant they had special skills in armed and unarmed combat. Africans to this very day use spears and shields as weapons, and in their training - depending on what part of Africa they are from - they are taught to be adept with swords, clubs, staffs, blow darts, bow and arrows, axes, throwing knives, and hunting knives as well as various styles of unarmed combats like boxing, grappling and kicking. This knowledge crossed the waters and landed on foreign soil with the new arrivals.

Upon arrival, these Africans were given tools that resembled their weaponry and as a result, a very dangerous advantage was placed in their hands. They would sometimes sneak out of the slave quarters and cross train each other in their ways of fighting. All out rebellions and insurgencies have been documented on ship logs as well as on the plantations. Indeed, there are even several places in the U.S. that are documented as historical maroon societies in the south as well as other parts of the U.S. Also, on the plantations, the owners conducted fights pitting Black men from one plantation against those of another and even some of the slave owners went so far as to participate in the events. These Slave Bouts turned out to be yet another way for Africans to further develop their combative skills in their new environment. Utilizing the tools in the fields and during hunting was another way to keep enslaved African's skill honed.

Before the major slave rebellions occurred, there were certain liberties permitted them such as harvest festivals, spiritual and religious ceremonies and other rites. Some were even able to learn to read and write as the slave owner saw fit to use them in commerce. Some enslaved Africans were even impressed to do military service.

After the Civil War and the emancipation, free Black people had to fend for themselves with neither land nor capital. Jim Crow Laws were passed declaring any Blacks caught wandering the streets would be charged with vagrancy and imprisoned. This led to the further development of fighting skills to protect one's self while imprisoned. Because they were no longer able to carry knives and axes, they made improvised weaponry such as shanks and other stabbing utensils. A code of secrecy was also developed among black prisoners who were taught this art.

The chain gang period for the African brought on even further developments of an Art that would come to have close ties with Blacks and the penal system. On being released from a grueling prison sentence, these men would begin a long and turbulent life on the streets. Often times, they would make a living shining shoes, as barbers or wandering blues musicians. It was not uncommon for these men to carry straight razors and use them with very deadly skill. Even to this very day black prisoners are known to conceal razor blades in their mouths.

Since this art developed in secret, it was only known by a selected few who were probably chained together as they worked or trained together in their cells.

C.P. is an art that uses the head, hands, elbows and knees as weapons of attack and defense. Kicks such as foot stomps, shin kicks, groin and stomach kicks and knees to the thighs and ribs are utilized as off balancing techniques. The hands are held mainly in a street boxing style and attacks are replete with elbow blows and finger jabs to the eyes and throat. There are a number of slaps including: the pimp slap - a back slap with the knuckle side of the open hand; the slap to the ears with a slightly cupped hand; and the raking slap which is executed with spread fingers .

In C.P., the knees are used to guard and attack the head, ribs, stomach, and legs; elbows are used to guard and attack the head, neck chest, back, ribs, kidneys, stomach and legs. Grappling techniques consist mostly of chokeholds such as the half and full Nelson, arm twists, wrist locks and various body slams and scoops.

It must be stressed that though C.P. is closely related to other Black American Martial Arts such as Scufflin, Jail House Rock, Knockin and Kickin, Pushin and Dancin, Wrasslin, and Side Hold it is not the same. Knockin and Kickin, utilized head butts, knees, elbows and leaping and sweeping kicks. Side Hold and Wrasslin were grappling arts. These latter traditions would later fade into very small communities with its practitioners never passing the arts down to outsiders; but may very well have played a role in the development of the particular style known as C.P. I hypothesize here that C.P. is a form of these arts that emerged in the setting of Raleigh's penitentiaries.

While Knockin and Kickin, Pushin and Dancin, Side Hold and Wrasslin were the arts known to Blacks that weren't in prison, C.P. developed and flourished within Raleigh's prison settings. It is probable that Knockin and Kickin particular to the Raleigh area would be known by its redeveloped style of C.P. The C.P. style would later trickle into the street scene to influence the techniques of Black street fighters. They would know these techniques and engage in fights using them. Whether being shown directly or learning indirectly, C.P. exists as a very fine thread of Black Combative heritage in today's modern street scene.

Links between C.P. and the dance style of Breaking can be seen developing but not limited to the 1980's. C.P. in its many years of existence can be tied to the social circles of the streetwise, wandering blues men of the 1930's and before. These men would be closely involved with Juke Joints, Jump Houses and other gatherings of Black folk. Juke Joints were notorious for having fights break out over women and for men to prove their manhood and toughness. In those days both men and women were known to protect themselves with straight razors. You can read the testimony of some of these performers who admit to carrying pocket knives and straight razors for protection. Son House, a blues man of the 1930's is just one of these men. He served time in prison for killing a man with a razor for reasons unknown.

With respect to C.P.'s affiliation to dance, it is not uncommon for Black men to prove their virility and manliness through combative dance movements. Indeed, there are many examples of such Black combative Dance Arts such as: Capoeira and Samba Duro (Hard Samba) in Brazil, Congo (which is a sensual art between men and women but still asserts the man's masculinity by having moves that represent possession and penetration.) in Panama; Mani in Cuba; and Broma in Venezuela. They are all Black Martial Arts that have their own unique culture of singing, drumming and other instruments.

Moreover, on the African continent, there are several combative ceremonies that utilize drums and other instruments as key components. For example, in Sudan during the Donga (Stick) Festival of the Dinka, the combatants wear bells and ankle rattles that they jingle as they rapidly stomp their feet in an intimidating manner as they fight. They also blow horns during the fight to excite the combatants and the audience alike. In Ethiopia, the Oromo and Amharic stick art of Dulag and the grappling art of Tegil are done during the Ethiopian Christmas Festival which is performed to the accompaniment of drums. As one can see, dancing and rhythm are key elements in their combative games .

Breaking (as in Break dancing) comes from a forging of several Black dance styles into one continuous movement. Dances like the Jitterbug, Swing dancing, Tapping, the Shuffle, Hambone, and the two step Jigs were forged into a unitary dance style with traditional African dances and Freestyle. These dance elements can all be seen in Breaking.

All these dances have battle elements as well. With the Jitterbug, men would try to show each other up with improvised steps that would go with the rhythm of the woman that they were dancing with. It is the same with the Swing as they would have the women going through their legs, twirling around their bodies, throwing them in the air etc. Tapping always had the Tap battles with men that would improvise slides, skips and splits. The Shuffle battles had the same improvised movements that came right back to the two step movements of the Shuffle. Hambone had very intricate rhythm improvisation being passed back and forth between the two battlers. African dances have always had an element of improvisation that would allow men to show their agility and coordination.

Combine all of these dance movements and you have one rhythmic groove that can't be classified in any of the said styles but its components can easily fit. The combination of Jigging, Shuffling, Tapping and Swing would create the footwork that would come to be known in Breaking as "Floating" and the "Heel-Toe" stepping that's done while moving from one spot to the other. The Heel-Toe represents the Tap dance techniques but with no "taps" in the heel or toe of the shoes. The Hambone body rhythm as well as the Shuffle would create a "popping" and contorting like of movement as seen in the Pop Locking. Just as the hands are used to slap and tap the rhythm on various parts of the body, the hands in popping are used to trace the sequential "pops" of the body as if the hands are producing the body's response to being in the area.

All of these dances are very familiar to Traditional African Dance movements. Everything from the “stutter step” shuffling and jiggling to the swing and rock motions of the stomps and slaps of the Hambone are included in this genre. Put these together with an Urban Black Sound and you get the essential elements of Break Dancing.

The “Breaking” in Break Dancing needs clarification. It is stated by well known Capoeiristas from Brazil that breaking comes from kids in New York City imitating what they saw in a Capoeira demonstration in the early to mid 1960’s. I will have to respectfully disagree with this claim. The reason Breaking looks so similar to is because the Black ancestry of the all the Americas are tied to the same areas within Africa. Whenever Africans were taken from continent by Spanish, Portuguese and English invaders, they would buy and sell captives to each other in the “New World.” For this reason, you have populations of the same tribes in different parts of North, Central and South America. The only difference would be the proportionate size of a particular African population within the total Black population thus producing nuances between one group to another.

Hoodoo (one of the African American versions of the Vodoun) is another aspect of C.P.. In the U.S. Vodoun went through a period of redevelopment as a result of its exposure to Christianity and Native American religious thought. It is not uncommon to hear street fighters in the Black Communities say, “I’m gonna put this Hoodoo on ya.” in reference to fighting. Just like other Black Martial Arts, the C. P fighting system has links with the religious and spiritual aspect of African American Culture. What White Americans typically call “Black Superstitions,” has its roots in African religious and Spiritual Thought. Hoodoo is not just some sporadic words “thrown” at someone in the heat of the moment for its wordplay can be likened to that of the word play or “Brincaradeira” of the Capoeiristas and to the Kirari of the Hausa (an ethnic group of Northern Nigeria) combatant. These words are meant to conjure fear in one’s opponent and to incite one’s own fighting spirit and courage. In movement, Hoodoo is introduced as mesmerizing techniques to daze or stun the opponent momentarily just as the Ginga of the Capoeirista employs mesmerizing footwork to the same effect.

Some aspects of Hoodoo in the everyday life of Black Americans include: 1) pulling apart of the “wishbone” of a chicken breast to see who gets the piece of the bone where it connects. When this has been done, the person with the longest piece is said to have their “wish come true;” and 2) placing the penny head-side-up in the slit of the tongue of the dress loafers believed to bring good luck and ward off the evil eye!

An even more intriguing occurrence is the time I was told about how a guy from Mississippi was at a bus station waiting for his bus when this other gentleman that he did not know engaged him in conversation. This man kept fiddling around with a button on his shirt and fixated the first man’s attention on it. The man who was waiting for the bus became unaware of surroundings and had it not been for the loud sound of a bus beeping its horn he would have remained in this entranced state. Luckily, the sound of the bus horn jarred him out of his entranced state soon enough for him to avoid possible harm at the hands of the “button-fiddling” stranger.

Most of the time, subtle things such as described above are trickle downs from much older and more in-depth systems of African spiritual practices. The evil eye which is known throughout the continent of Africa is also an example of Black Spiritual Thought that is included in the grouping of “Black Superstitions” by white Americans.

Deeper elements of this tradition can be observed particularly in Louisiana and other southern states in the U.S. Secular aspects of Hoodoo can be seen in the dance structure of Black Americans in much the same way that spiritual dances have secular variations in Africa. Indeed, most of the cultural aspects of Blacks in the Americas can be linked to some form of African Spiritual Thought even in the most Christian of Blacks. Whether known or unknown, it is the core of Black Thought.

In conclusion, it can be said that C.P. is a Black Martial Art with African roots that first developed in Raleigh’s penitentiary system and then settled into the streets where it became a unique fighting style. Nevertheless each individual (whether he knows it in its entirety or in parts) typically makes his own modifications. This article is not meant to be instructional, but rather to make the reader aware of the existence of C.P. and other Black Martial Arts in the US. I plan to write a book in the near future which will describe C.P. techniques in detail accompanied by photos and illustrations. Reader’s comments and suggestions for things to include in this book are welcome.

Switching and Foot Tripping