



Photo by Jody Frank



Photo by Mindy Vaccino

JIMMY TEACHING JAZZ

## ABSTRACT:

[Jimmy Locust](#) has worked with top entertainment industry stars such as Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, Paula Abdul, Quincy Jones and Debbie Allen. He has been featured in iconic music videos and films including *Rhythm Nation 1814* and the wedding dance sequence of *Coming to America*. He has performed at the Grammy Awards, Academy Awards and MTV Video Music Awards. Mr. Locust was one of the head choreographers for the [1996 Olympics](#) in Atlanta (opening and closing ceremonies) and was nominated for an American Choreography Award in 2001 for his work on the Warner Brothers' network television show *Nikki*. Locust has [choreographed](#) commercials for both international and national companies, including Sanyo in Japan with Nicholas Cage and most recently, Rapid Advance in the U.S. He worked on the Justin Bieber Tour in 2010 and choreographed for the CW Television Network's *The Next* with hosts John Rich, Joe Jonas, Nelly and Gloria Estefan. For the stage, Locust has choreographed successful theater and high school productions. He has designed dance curricula for numerous community and private education programs and has been a studio owner and master teacher for over fourteen years. He is Artistic Director/Owner of [Locust Performing Arts Center](#) in Stamford, Connecticut and [Locust Dance Academy](#) in Miramar, Florida. Locust is Founder and Director of [Harmony Nation](#), an educational anti-bullying program that performs for schools and youth organizations. He also directs *Locust Contemporary Dance Works*, a youth company which performs in New York City, as well as [Hip Hop's Finest](#) and *FOCUS Hip Hop* pre-professional groups. Locust was appointed by the renowned Boca Ballet Theatre in Florida as a returning faculty member for their summer residency program. Locust was also selected to be an adjudicator (2015) and Artist-in-Residence (2016-present) for JCC Maccabi Games Artsfests across the country. Locust's multi-faceted lifestyle is chronicled in his series [Locust Under 5'](#).

## EXTENDED BIOGRAPHY:

Who could have imagined that a 4'9" African American man from Dayton, Ohio, with no formal dance training in his youth, would end up as a sought-after choreographer, master teacher, dancer and actor performing with major celebrities in the music, dance and film industries?

Jimmy would face challenges that would strip most people of their confidence and dreams. His diminutive height, caused by an acute case of jaundice as an infant, resulted in much ridicule and bullying in his early years. The youngest of seven children, he was raised in a strict, working class family. His father, Walter L. Locust, was the minister of their Pentecostal Church and passed away when he was only three years old. Within a year, he would also lose his older brother Walter, Jr., to cancer. His mother, Cora Locust Murphy, would work fourteen-hour days as a cosmetologist, in what was then the pioneering days of hair weaving, to raise six children and put them through college. Jimmy recalls his mother as a strong, resilient woman who headed several church organizations and whose faith overcame the financial and emotional burdens in their lives. She would serve as a role model for Jimmy to consider his physical limitations not as a handicap, but as a unique trait that could develop into an asset.

Although his religious upbringing frowned upon dancing and secular music, something in Jimmy's very core beseeched him to dance. After earning a scholarship to attend the Scattergood Friends School in West Branch, Iowa, he began taking dance classes at Mary Lea Leitch School of Dance. At age sixteen, he knew dancing was his calling and announced to his mother that he wanted to become a professional dancer and not attend college. In an unprecedented move, Jimmy's mother refuted her church and gave him her blessing to follow his dream.

During a summer workshop in Chicago with the world-renowned Gus Giordano, he auditioned for the Gus Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago and received a principal position. He moved to Chicago where he trained for an average of ten hours a day. "I've always felt blessed that Gus discovered my talent and encouraged me not to settle for less. He saw my art, not my height, and with that he planted the self-esteem in me that I cherish and have today," he explains. Jimmy co-choreographed with Giordano his first solo entitled *For You*. While the company was on tour in Lima, Ohio, Jimmy had the privilege of premiering in a duet in one of Gus Giordano's new works, *Taxi*. Jimmy's mother and his entire family attended this memorable night. At the end of the show, Jimmy handed his mother the performance bouquet he received on stage that evening as an acknowledgment of her unconditional support for his career. Jimmy knew that in her eyes he had made it as a dancer and all her sacrifice and difficult decisions had led to what would become an accomplished, award-winning career. This was the last performance she would see Jimmy in before she died.

Jimmy's classical training in ballet, jazz and modern dance along with house funk and hip-hop influence would form the basis of his signature style. From those styles he created and trademarked Tech-Hop which he teaches on his master class tours. In Minneapolis, he formed his first dance company, Final Stage, and received an endowment grant that enabled them to perform in local theatres including the Ordway Theatre. After a couple of years in Minneapolis, Jimmy moved to Los Angeles. Audition after audition, his short stature kept him from being hired, particularly with partner choreography. That is, until Paula Abdul who at 5'2" herself, picked him from a line up, and had him star in her videos *Knocked Out* and *Forever Your Girl*. The next year he was booked in a series of three videos for Janet Jackson's *Rhythm Nation 1814* film short. He choreographed two of his own dance solos and a female duet for *Rhythm Nation* and *Miss You Much*.

The dance world had taken notice of Jimmy and his talents propelled him into performing dances on stage, film, television, video, and theater. He worked with superstars Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, Quincy Jones and Debbie Allen. For Arista recording artist Monica, he was appointed by Grammy award-winning producer Dallas Austin to groom and choreograph her first promotional tour. He also staged the U.S. Tour for the young actress/singer Raven Simone. Jimmy served as producer, choreographer with Reebok on *NFL Onfield* and Reebok's Global Summit Industrial Shows. He choreographed the television promo commercial for the *Andy Dick Show* that ran on MTV. In Atlanta, he was one of the head choreographers for the opening and closing ceremonies produced by the 1996 Olympics Emmy award-winning choreographer Kenny Ortega (choreographer for films i.e. Disney's *High School Musical*). He also worked with director/producer Don Mischer as well as choreographed the NBA's Atlanta Hawks Dance Team for four seasons.

From there, Jimmy landed a myriad of jobs in the sports and fashion world as artistic director and choreographer for Fila, Avia, Diadora, NBA Sportswear, and New Balance. He choreographed the Speedo 2007 Fall Fashion Show in Miami with the U.S. Olympic Bronze Medalist Synchronized Swim Team and served as producer/choreographer for Reebok's 2008 Sales Meeting. Internationally, he staged projects such as Chile's International Choreography Conference in Santiago, Chile, and a top Americanized show titled, *The Show* in Beijing, China.

Jimmy received top honors from the Inland Theatre League of Los Angeles for his choreography in the hit musicals *Sweet Charity* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. He was also nominated for an American Choreography Award 2001 in the television category for his work on the WB's *Nikki*. Jimmy went on to choreograph a Japanese commercial for the Sankyo Company of Tokyo featuring Nicolas Cage. He also worked in feature films including being assistant choreographer and actor in *Lambada*, and acting and dancing in movies like *Coming to America* and *She's Out of Control*, among others.

After living in Chicago, Los Angeles, London and New York and traveling the world, fate would bring Jimmy to an unlikely setting in suburban Connecticut. What seemed like just another job would turn into a greater purpose while working at dance school in Stamford. Although Jimmy was living in Manhattan at the time, he grew to love the Stamford area and people. The time had come for him to give back to others and pursue his vision of opening his own performing arts school. To accomplish this, he realized he had to partner with individuals who shared his love and devotion for the arts as well as his vision to open a school that would reach out to the community. Together they founded Stamford Performing Arts Center in September 2005. In just two years, their investment would result in a three state-of-the-art studios generating over 400 students ages three to adult, employing more than a dozen highly-trained instructors, and offering over 90 classes a week.

Jimmy's dream had found a home from where he could reach and inspire people through music, acting and dance. The school would award thousands of dollars in scholarships to high-risk, inner-city children whose families live at or close to the poverty level as well as existing school students. Jimmy's efforts would include participating in national charities, forming flourishing youth dance companies, representing young talent, volunteering in churches, and continuing to succeed as a dancer and choreographer. His lifelong experiences with bullying would drive him to become the founder and director of Harmony Nation™, an anti-bullying, anti-hate school educational dance and acting project that has taken on a life of its own, sparking agent interest as a reality show/documentary.

In 2010, Jimmy's vision became more defined as he founded Locust Performing Arts Center of Stamford, LLC. The opportunities for students at Locust Performing Arts Center go beyond the traditional dance studio. The staff credits reads like a Who's Who of teachers with experience in industrial performances, network TV shows, film, recording artists, fashion shows and the like. The

school offers a variety of techniques including Hip Hop, Ballet, Jazz, Tap, Contemporary, Modern, Musical Theatre and performance coaching.

Advanced in-house dance programs include Hip Hop's Finest, Kool Kidz (a junior Hip Hop troupe), Locust Preparatory Company, Musical Theatre Company and Locust Contemporary Dance Works (LCDW) I & II (a touring jazz company with a ballet/modern influence). Locust Contemporary Dance Works has toured and performed in New Hampshire, New York City and Connecticut. They audition and add dancers annually who participate in rigorous dance classes, attend master classes and rehearse locally and in New York City. Amy Sato, former Director of Marketing at Capezio, said of Locust Contemporary Dance Works, "This dynamic new dance company blends technical precision with artistic expression, delivering a diverse repertoire that's sure to captivate audiences."

In efforts to help the needy in poverty-stricken cities, Jimmy supports and donates to the non-profit organization Urban Farming. Founded by his friend, Taja Sevelle, Urban Farming teaches and motivates the youth and elderly to eradicate hunger by planting gardens on abandoned/unused land as well as searching for new alternative fuel sources.

Jimmy takes in stride the accolade of being labeled one of the hottest choreographers in the business today. His universal outlook on life and strong Christian upbringing and faith are his true motivators as he reaches out to his community with projects that are striving to make a difference. Inspired by his own spiritual life experiences, Jimmy has completed writing his first play with music entitled, [The Gift](#). Of all his experiences, he counts his involvement in the church as his greatest privilege.

"Jimmy is totally different," expresses Lucille DiCampli of the prestigious McDonald/Selznick Associates of New York City and Los Angeles. "Jimmy completely blends old school techniques with a fresh, current style that is very versatile and able to cross over in film, video, industrials and live performances. Whether it's young or seasoned dancers, I know when I send them to a casting call with Jimmy, they will be learning a lot more than just doing steps. He encourages and teaches them the good values and work ethic that will make dancers' careers last."

At a time when the media headlines seem inundated by the moral decline in the entertainment industry, Jimmy's approach to the arts defines his mission to promote a code of ethics, hard work and compassion that has become his dance of life.

- Written by Barbara Occhino



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