




POSITIVITY NOW: Melvin AC Howell spreads the joy of dance at LEAF Downtown in 2021. Photo courtesy of the artist

Dance changed **Melvin AC Howell**'s life for the better, so he naturally wants others to experience the joy and confidence he feels through that art form. At the same time, the Asheville-based choreographer, performer and educator understands the barriers many people face in approaching dance.

"In Asheville, no one's really teaching accessible classes for adults or for teens who age out of studios," he says. "And on top of that, it can be intimidating. People want to dance, but sometimes taking group classes are very intimidating, even if the class says 'for beginners.'" 

dancers of all levels and ages can succeed at a sustainable pace.

The prodigy

Howell grew up in the small North Carolina foothills town of Hartland. Not only did his family live below the poverty line but he was also raised to not talk about his emotions and bottle up whatever he was experiencing.

“It ‘worked’ for a while — until it didn’t,” he says. “I was 12 or 13, and after all those years of just holding it in, I just blacked out and I didn’t feel good. It scared me because it was like, ‘That wasn’t supposed to happen.’”

Several years earlier at age 9, Howell first discovered dance through films such as *You Got Served* and *Step Up* and started learning the art through YouTube videos. While he describes those movies as “inspiring and entertaining,” it didn’t register how much he connected with dance until he hit that low emotional point.


“After the blackout, I realized I need a way to deal with [my emotions], and I started to pay closer attention to my dancing,” Howell says. “I realized that whenever I’m feeling upset or even when I’m not feeling upset, I dance, and it always makes me feel more confident in myself. It makes me feel safe. I feel more myself when I’m dancing than any other time, so I ran with that.”

He then moved to New Jersey to live with his mother and was welcomed by a larger, more passionate dance community. Howell says these connections put him “in the right places at the right time,” and while performing at such colleges as Montclair State University, he was noticed by school staff who began inviting the teenager to perform, present and teach independently. After moving back to North Carolina and graduating high school in 2013, he started Heart and Soul Dance Company.

“I was like, ‘This is what I want to do. There are more people out there are dealing with what I’m dealing with who don’t have the support or have those resources,’” he recalls. “People want to dance, but they don’t feel like they have permission or feel safe to dance. So I want to change that.”

‘It’s got to make an impact’

Howell moved to Asheville in early 2019 and that December performed a showcase at The Orange Peel. While he says he and the audience had fun, he also had a gnawing sense that he didn’t do his part as an artist.

“I felt like I entertained them, but I didn’t feel like I had impacted someone’s life. I didn’t feel like I had done something that was going to make a change or that gave a particular message,” Howell says. 

“Dance is already looked at as just a speculative piece of entertainment. It’s not really valued so much, and it has so much to offer. So, at that point, I was like, ‘Moving forward, any time I teach




SKY'S THE LIMIT: Dance has taken Melvin AC Howell, center, around the world. Above, he performs as the lead dancer on the Royal Caribbean ship Symphony of the Seas, which toured through Spain, Italy and France in October. Photo by Katherine Richardson Photography

Howell points to that moment as his biggest professional turning point and the seed of HASdance.com. He describes the website as the more global version of his work over the past few years, which has seen him doing more in-person classes — locally and internationally — and connecting with the worldwide dance community, physically and online. He adds that through these interactions, he more fully understands what people want from dance instruction, and he's elevated his teaching skills out of necessity.

"Teaching online is way more difficult than teaching in person. You can, like, get a vibe of a room. You can look in the mirror and see what people are picking up," he says. "But online, you have to assume that all the questions that could be asked are being asked and figure out how to put those into something where people feel like they're supported, even from the other side of the screen."

While Howell notes that the large number of online dance instructors make entering that world intimidating, his dedication to making a difference outweighs his fears.

"I really don't have anything to lose, but there are so many people that have a lot to gain," he says 

Star pupils

learning techniques such as popping and a range of styles within hip-hop (e.g., tutting and animating). Looking back, Marsh notes that the experience gave him a more positive outlook on life and made him feel connected to people around the world who partake in the art form.

“Dance helps express how you feel and helped me let go of a lot of negativity,” he says.

Former Asheville resident **Holly McCoy** likewise had a transformative experience working with Howell. Two years ago, she studied hip-hop with him at WNC Dance Academy twice a week for a month.

“I had always wanted to give dance a try but never had the courage to take the first step, so to speak,” McCoy recalls. “Then in 2022, I was on a journey to better health when I decided to give dance a try. My vision was a huge dance party with all of my close friends, celebrating reaching my weight-loss goal. I wanted the event to feature a surprise choreographed dance, but I didn’t know any dance instructors personally.”

McCoy’s personal trainer, **Cynthia Sims**, recommended Howell. And though an unexpected move to Limestone, Tenn., negated McCoy’s dance party plans, she says the time spent under Howell’s tutelage continues to enhance her life.

“At times, I had to dance through the fear, but it turned out to be an experience that taught me one of the most valuable lessons I’ve learned to this point,” she says. “Fear doesn’t keep me safe — it keeps me stunted. My best life is on the other side of fear. So now, when opportunities arise that stretch me outside of my comfort zone, I don’t retreat in fear. Instead, I remember the fun, fulfillment and freedom I found on that studio floor, and I dance, right on through to the next adventure.”

McCoy continues, “Dance was the perfect teacher for learning this lesson because the only way to fail at dance is to refuse to try.”

Let’s get it started

Howell’s HASdance.com work so far is focused on beginner adults who have some or no dance experience but want to feel more confident and comfortable in their bodies. The current core styles he’s teaching revolve around hip-hop and commercial dance, the fundamentals of which, he says, are adaptable to numerous occasions.

“They’re styles that they can take when they go to a wedding or go out dancing — or maybe they’re just dancing at home and they want to feel more rhythm,” he says. “It allows people that freedom of dancing to virtually any music and taking these same foundations. It helps them build a mind-body connection around rhythm and understanding beat patterns and learning how to control your movements to flow better with that music.”

As the website grows and more people begin requesting other styles, Howell plans to collaborate with experts in other areas, such as local tap dancer **Amanda Hoyte**. But now and in the future, it’s important for him to keep access affordable.



advantage of dance, and they can dance at home or they can take it to school. It's easier to learn, and it teaches things that they can take and make their own."

The \$9 per month membership includes access to all existing classes – Howell adds at least five new ones every month – live classes via Zoom and access to the HAS Dance global community via various online platforms.

"You can reach out to these communities and share videos of your progress or ask for tips," he says. "I think that's a huge thing because dance is a language of community storytelling, so to have that community sets me apart from other online classes. You just feel so much support from all over."

Howell says he intentionally goes at a "superslow" pace in the classes, sometimes breaking one choreography piece into two or three videos so it's not overwhelming for students. And regardless of where dancers are in their progress, they also have direct access to their teacher – at almost any hour.

"It could be someone across the world and it's, like, 3 a.m. and they send me something. If I happen to hear that 'ding' and happen to look at my phone, I'll probably reply right away because I get so excited about sharing the wealth of knowledge I've gained with other people," Howell says.

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MELVIN AC HOWELL



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About Edwin Arnaudin

Edwin Arnaudin is a staff writer for Mountain Xpress. He also reviews films for ashevillemovies.com and is a member of the Southeastern Film Critics Association (SEFCA) and North Carolina Film Critics

