

## *Meet Melvin A.C. Howell, Showstopper's First Dance Battle Champion*

By **Veronica Good** - January 25, 2021



*Tanja Kuic Photography, Western North Carolina*

At the Myrtle Beach Sports Center, dancers spent the second weekend of January spread out across eight basketball courts learning hip hop, ballet, jazz, tap, and more from esteemed teachers and choreographers at Showstopper's final convention of the season. COVID-19 precautions weren't the only thing shaking this convention up. For the first time, Showstopper was also holding a dance battle hosted by hip hop star Fik-Shun and costume designer and hip hop teacher Angel Roberts. The winner would take home a trophy and a \$500 cash prize.

Dancers lined up to take turns, showing off for the panel of judges before making it to the battle rounds where they went head-to-head with other dancers. Over the course of two hours, the group would go from 42 to one.

“I started dancing around, started dancing deeper, around the age of nine and then it really gained a purpose for me around age 13.”

Melvin A.C. Howell is a 26-year-old dance teacher and choreographer from Asheville, North Carolina. His journey into dance started solo when he taught himself dance at a young age. His family couldn't afford studio dance classes, but that didn't stop him. “I actually danced out in the hallway of the apartment building that we lived in, and I used the reflection in the window as my mirror,” he told us. “I would search up some of the pioneers and the OGs of different dance styles on YouTube and I would just train for hours on end, bettering my technique.”

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FEEL CONFIDENT, STAY STRONG.*

In the final round of the dance battle, Melvin was up against 11-year-old Matty Googs, a dancer from New Jersey who is already making a name for himself as a professional, dancing with stars and even making it on the USA National Hip Hop Team. When they started, Matty was quickly hitting every beat in the song that played while Melvin moved fluidly through them. It wasn't long before they started to mesh their styles, though, grooving together. Any difference in age and experience fading into their freestyling.

As a kid, Mevin practiced and practiced, but he wasn't working toward a competition or moving up in a dance class or trying to impress a teacher. He danced for himself. “[Dance was] something to help me stay positive, feel confident, stay strong, when I felt like an odd one out in a lot of different situations,” he reflected.



Michelle / Arcangel Photography, Asheville, NC

In fact, Melvin didn't compete until he was a teenager. In high school, his family moved to New Jersey where, for the first time, he attended a school with an arts program, a program that included dance. At that New Jersey high school, Melvin competed in a "Battle of the Classes." Each year in October, each of the grade levels worked to choreograph a routine and perform it. This was Melvin's first dance battle.

"It was kind of like *America's Best Dance Crew* where all of the classes come together, dance their pieces with customized music and all that, and there would be judges who would decide who won," Melvin told us. "When I heard about this, I was extremely eager to get into it...That was an opportunity that I definitely didn't want to pass up."

He was a bookworm and had been kind of a loner as the new kid in school, but once he jumped in and started choreographing, he found that many of his classmates were just as eager to share their ideas and create something. After the battle took place, it was apparent that Melvin's excitement and motivation had paid off. It was then that he received his first dance crew invitation.

"That's where my skills really started to grow," he told us. From there, he went into professional dance, performing at universities and auditioning for TV shows.

Melvin and Matty weren't on TV, but they performed for the judges, the students and parents watching from the sidelines, and for each other. While most of the pairs that went before them only went long enough for each dancer to spotlight their skills once, the final two dancers went for two rounds, grooving and bouncing off of one another's choreography for several minutes. Their moves radiated the kind of passion and creativity that come with dancing for the sake of it, even with a prize on the line.

"Authenticity in hip hop and street dance culture, a lot of it is about telling a story, showing facial expressions, showing emotion. It is about vulnerability," Melvin told us. "I think a lot of the time there's this misconception that hip hop is about levels and a certain amount of bounce and rock but that's just the tip of the iceberg...When you see hip hop culture, where hip hop started back in the day, a lot of dances started in the streets and they started as dance battles and if you watch these dance battles they are conversations from one dancer to the next and one artist to the next...There is an extreme amount of vulnerability in that, in letting your guard down and putting it all out there."

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Watching Melvin and Matty compete *was* kind of like eavesdropping on a conversation. As one dancer moved to the music, the other would follow along grooving without stealing the spotlight, an attentive "listener" to the dancer in front of him.

"I know Matty is from New Jersey which is where dance really took off from me, and there's a huge street dance culture and club dance culture and battle culture," Melvin said, "and one thing that I noticed about Matty that was different than everybody else is that he had that culture. It was just in him, and he is so well-versed in so many different styles and I knew that he had the understanding that dance is a conversation between whoever is involved."

Melvin has been attending Showstopper events for years, so like any other convention year, he wanted to work and dance with teachers and choreographers that would push and challenge him. "I didn't want to pass up the opportunity to get out and dance, especially with everything going on. It was much needed," he said. The dance battle was an additional point of excitement. "I was like 'I definitely have to be a part of this one' because since

COVID there hasn't been any battles for me to go to...Something about battles just allows you to have your own spotlight and move how you feel is right..."



*Keith Wright, Wright Creative Asheville, NC*



"I went into it initially just wanting to just dive into the experience and just kind of soak in it and just thankful to be a part of it, so being able to pull out that win, especially against Matty-like, he's really young and of course he has some growth to do, but we all do when it comes to dance. He was amazing, so I knew I had my work cut out for me, and I'm thankful that I did get to battle him because he actually pushed me to reach through my creativity."

Even though the last year has made it harder to take classes and battle, Melvin sees his win as proof that he's still growing and his recent training has been effective. "My training over the last year has just boiled down to really tedious and annoying training exercises," he shared.

One of these exercises consists of "pretending that you are standing inside of a square and you have a spot to your left, a spot to your right, a spot in front you, a spot behind, and then you have the corner pieces that make up that square. It's literally just one step at a time, stepping into each [spot] and finding how many variations you can step into." He does this with and without music. "It feels very ineffective while you're doing it because it is such a simple training technique," he told us, but once you let go and start dancing, that muscle memory will come in with ease.

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Ease and authenticity are what Melvin strives for. He started his professional career at a young age and not long after, started competing in dance battles. "There's a certain excitement about it, and even though dance battles are competition, everyone there is supportive, encouraging, loving. It's like a big family," he told us. "There's rarely any negativity at these events because it's just everyone out there putting their hearts on the dance floor." Dance battles, like the one he entered with Matty, taught him about being humble. You never know who might be at a dance battle and what they might be able to do. Now, he teaches this to his students.

After competing and performing with that dance crew, Melvin found that the excitement of performing made him even more eager to dance. "It did start off for me as like 'I want to be this famous dancer that everybody knows' like some of my favorite dancers and then after a while that wasn't doing it for me and I realized that you can't go after what you love with the thought of money in mind because that really corrupts it and makes it less fun."

And it did. Melvin admits that he started to take dance too seriously and stopped having fun training like he used to. He still spent hours training, but he wasn't progressing. "I lost sight of why I really started dancing." He left the dance crew in 2016. Since then he's focused on being more emotional and intentional with his dance and searching for ways that he can use his art to communicate with and teach people.

"What pushed me to start teaching...was that I knew at least where I came from there were not a lot of dancers, let alone male or black male dancers, because dance was looked at as weak, feminine," Melvin said. He wants to show people the strength and joy that comes with dance, no matter who you are.



As the dance battle came to a close, dancers lined up for selfies with Melvin and Matty. The trophy Melvin won held proudly in a snapshot of him with Fik-Shun who expressed his awe many times as Melvin performed over the course of the battle.

Now that that battle is over, Melvin is back to work. The Showstopper dance battle was one more opportunity for him to improve and learn. He's off to continue spreading positivity and bringing dance to the people that need it most. "Some people just need to move," he said, "and where I'm from there

weren't a lot of people to provide that. There wasn't anyone to provide that." He plans to take his experience and his prize and continue to provide dance and inspiration.

You can follow Melvin's journey on Instagram ([@hause\\_of\\_mel](#)).

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