

BRAHM:

Could please just give your name and where you're from?

MH:

Absolutely. My name is Melvin AC Howell, and I'm originally from Morganton, North Carolina and currently live in Asheville, North Carolina.

BRAHM:

Great, and how old are you?

MH:

I am 27.

BRAHM:

All right. So how long have you been dancing?

MH:

I've been dancing, -knowingly dancing- since the age of nine, and professionally dancing since the age of 14.

BRAHM:

Now, do you have a preferred style of dance? Like or certain- I know there's different genres of dance and everything? Or do you have one that really speaks to you?

MH:

As far as dancing the style personally, I would say hip hop is my favorite style, just because there's so many different subcategories and, and styles under the hip hop umbrella, that allow for so much freedom of movement, freedom of expression, that really helps for telling stories, whereas some other styles, although beautiful, such as ballet, are very strict to techniques, and you have to execute it a certain way. And it really, it doesn't give me that same freedom to tell my particular story. And to connect with my audience. So it would definitely be hip hop.

BRAHM:

Now, you said you started dancing at nine, and so could you kind of tell me about your entrance into the world of dance? How did you go from, like, nine years old starting dance and then dancing professionally as a team?

MH:

Absolutely. So it's funny how it started. Me and my family used to have this thing called "family nights" and our family time. And that's when me and my brothers would have to turn off video games and like, come downstairs everybody would watch movies in the living room. Well, we were all fans of the American Idol TV show back then. And I can't remember who it was, but somebody had coined the idea after the episode had ended that we play American Idol as part of our family time. And nobody was volunteering. And I don't know what compelled me to

volunteer because I hate singing in front of people. But I got up there and the only thing that made me feel comfortable enough to actually go along with it, even though it was just for fun, was to actually dance while I sang. And I imitated James Brown and kind of like did his footwork while I was saying *I Feel Good*. And even though it wasn't like me really trying to sing, I just noticed how much more confident I felt and how much stronger I felt whenever I was doing it. And from that point moving forward, I just, I looked a little bit more in depth at other moments in my life. And in that present moment and as well in the past, and how I would always need to be moving to get through the rougher parts of my life. And so that's when I started dancing more, I started watching more dance movies and learning the choreography in those movies. And it made me feel better than I had ever felt playing sports. And so that's when it really took off for me.

BRAHM:

Now, do any of your family members dance?

MH:

None of them dance, I'm the only one.

BRAHM:

That's got to be fun. So now, you said that you got started just through that fun, like the American Idol experience. And did you start attending, like dance classes or anything? Or is it kind of an independent practice?

MH:

It's always been an independent practice, because I couldn't afford dance classes. So it was all self training and things like that, until I got old enough to actually teach at my first studio. And then I would start taking some classes here and there whenever I could. But I didn't really start taking classes and training from other people in person until 2015. And that's when I went to my first convention and started taking classes from other people.

BRAHM:

Now, so that's cool that you're able to develop your own practice of dance strong enough to be able to start teaching. So what stuff? Were you mainly doing hip hop dance between the ages like nine and when you got older to start teaching? Or how was that type of process going for you?

MH:

Yeah, I mainly did, I mainly did hip hop, I did dabble and other things, just to kind of test the waters and see what all there was because I was just fascinated. I've always been fascinated with dance in general of all cells. And so yeah, that's what I started with. And that's what I mainly did. And then when I had the opportunity to take classes from other people, I really grew a strong love for contemporary dance. I love watching ballet too.

BRAHM:

So when you started taking classes from other people, have there been any teachers or like people that have kind of been a mentor to you that you've really taken a liking to or made a big impact on your practice?

MH:

Yes, there have been a few people that I've met in person that have made quite the impact in my perspective of dance and, and my dance career. Dance has always been a strong passion of mine. So I feel like my purpose for dancing has always been the same. But along the way, I've met people who have helped kind of shape that and, and re-strengthen and refresh my motivation and inspiration for that purpose and dance. And one of them, her name is -I'm blanking right now- Mary Ann Lamb, she's an international choreographer, she's performed in countless Broadway productions and, and things like Chicago and, and what have you. And I took her class some years ago. And just her spirit and how she taught was just very, very inspirational. And then, just recently, in November, I went to a convention and I took a class from someone else, who -I'm also blanking on his name at the moment- but it was a combination of the choreographer, and he's the host of this convention, his name is Julian Thorne. He's just the brightest spirit anyone could ever meet, it's like you, come around him and you can't help but to smile and feel happy and feel good. And before I had taken this class, because the choreographer, the instructor had danced with Katy Perry and Beyonce and countless other people. And before I took the class, Julian was talking to me and you know, was just telling me how I need to connect more with the instructor, this one in particular, because it'll help me take my career to that next level, especially commercially. And we were all talking, and they were telling me how, you know, being clean is very important, being clean and sharp and having stage presence. And I took that to heart. And then during that class I just really marinated on what they had told me before the class. And it gave me a whole different experience. Like they did notice me during the class, I got called up to dance on stage with the instructor, which I think was great, but the biggest and most important part about that was, I felt a stronger connection to the music than I had in any of the other classes without that prior connection. I had danced harder. My purpose for dancing -even though I was tired, I was fatigued, and I was having some body aches- I just felt a stronger connection to my passion and purpose. And so Julian Thorne, what's his name? I have to think of his name. I have to, it's a must. It's gonna come to me here in a second. But yes, those three people for sure.

BRAHM:

Yeah, that's great. And it's cool then, I mean, you said it's like your passion and your purpose aligning. And it's that sense, and it's, it's interesting being in those types of conference situations, because it's just this confluence of, there's the professional aspect, right? But then it's like, your personal asset, because it's your art. Right? And it's your, you're expressing yourself and moving in this space, and then sharing that space with others. So that's really, that's really cool. And, and just powerful. I mean, what just one thing you've said that stuck with me too, is that you know, you feel like you're always moving when you're dealing with difficult situations, like you're dancing or moving through that, you know, and a lot of life is kind of like a dance in that respect. So, what, what does dance mean to you?

MH:

Dance to me -I just thought of his name so I wanted to write that down so I don't forget- dance, to me it's about expression. It's about naked expression. What I mean by that is like, the bare center of what you're feeling, and what you're thinking. without filters. And dance, to me, is a very constructive and helpful therapy. Whether you're happy or sad or mad or whatever the case may be, no matter what you're going through in life. Dance is always going to pull out those things that make you vulnerable. And vulnerability is the greatest strength anyone can have. Because it allows you deeper connections and relationships in your life. It allows you a deeper connection with the things that you do. And vulnerability increases the strength of your ability to pursue your purpose. Because if you're not vulnerable, you have walls, you miss connections. Or you're just too afraid to take the risk to make those connections and make things happen within your purpose. So ultimately, dance is vulnerability.

BRAHM:

Yeah, that's beautiful. So, so much of what you've kind of mentioned so far has been like, very just like introspective and deep. And I think it's about how we move and exist in the world. So then it kind of leads into my next question. So is dance part of your spiritual practice at all?

MH:

Yeah, absolutely. I would often do praise dances at my church, to help me connect a little more spiritually, but always, always. I would even with going into dance battles. I would pray before dancing, because I need to make sure that I am aware of my surroundings and aware of why I'm dancing, aware of my body placement, so that I don't mindlessly move and roll my ankle or hurt my knee, or, or whatever. So it really helps me to be more introspective and dig deeper to find a more of a connection to the music, and my purpose for dancing at that particular time more than just performing. And a year or two ago, I had done a performance, and my reason for that performance was just to go out there and just kind of like "wow" people and be entertaining. And even though it wasn't a bad performance, it didn't feel good to me. Because I didn't tell anything about myself or my story. And from that moment moving forward, I had told myself that I would never perform again or teach anything, again, without telling my story or being passionate about it. And so now, that's all I do. So my performances now are like lessons and things are more introspective and spiritual and emotional. Again, keeping that key of vulnerability at the forefront of it.

BRAHM:

Yeah. And just in that brings me back to reflecting on our experience with the Friday Fellowship, when you performed for us and led us through that kind of ecstatic dance practice, to start our day, but you performed a kind of autobiographical piece. And that was cool, because there was music and your narration on the song, but then also, you're illustrating what you're talking about, right? So I'm really like, really, that sense of vulnerability was shining through that sense of getting your story through there as well. And I think it's as compared to, like, dance versus music, or maybe like, the visual arts is

like you really, it's your mind, your body and your spirit all coming together. Because like you're saying, you have to be aware of your surroundings, make sure that you're not just swinging your legs out and rolling your ankle, but like, what's the intention behind your movements? Like, why are you doing this? And what meaning are you trying to convey? So you said nobody else in your family is really a dancer, huh?

MH:

No, not at all.

BRAHM

So, do you remember a particular time where you're like, I'm going to be a dancer, this is what I want to do with my life?

MH:

Let's see. I'm sure I remember that moment. I wanted to do so many different things. Whenever I was younger, at one point, I wanted to be a rapper, just because I liked books like Dr. Seuss books that had rhythm and rhyming, and I was like, oh, well, I can rhyme. But I was no rapper. And I figured that out pretty quickly. And then, you know, there were sports and everything, which I was good at. And it was a lot of fun. But it just didn't connect with me in the same way. And it was just more of a competition kind of a thing. When was it? When was it? I would say it was my freshman year in high school when I was 14. It was my first time auditioning for a TV show. And that was America's Got Talent. And then I had also been recruited by my first dance crew. And that was in 2008. And then that's when I really started. Well, I'd always have always danced hard before then. But I think that's when I started dancing the hardest. Like, any time I have, like, after homework, before homework, after school, before school, just out in the hallway dancing in my reflection in the window. So I would say that it was in 2008?

BRAHM:

Yeah, it seems like some big, you know, big moves were happening. I mean, you're putting yourself out there with America's Got Talent, and then joining that dance crew. So when you say that you would like to dance hard? Like what do you mean by that?

MH:

Well, whenever I first started, like getting into dance, pretty heavy, like early 2000s, around age 19 with all these dance films coming out. It was a fun thing. It did make me feel good. It made me feel confident and made me feel like I could do things that maybe other people around me couldn't do. And knowing that I was the only dancer in the family that made me feel extra good and confident. But then going into high school, it had gained a little more purpose. For me, that's when I really started to understand the impact it was having on my life and my path in life. And, you know, kept me out of trouble and kept me from hanging out with the wrong people because I was just so focused on training and learning new things and researching the history of dance styles and popping and locking and different foundational techniques. And so that gave dancing

hard, like a totally different meaning for me. And I started dancing more, dancing longer, training and learning new dance styles. So yeah.

BRAHM:

Yeah. And it's like that focus and that drive behind it. And it's cool. So I mean, you said that sports are more of a competitive thing. So is dance just more expression for you?

MH:

It's a little bit of both. And it just depends on the setting of it. If I'm at a dance competition or something, it is still emotional, but it also has a competitive aspect to it. Whereas if I'm just performing, although there's athleticism involved, it's more of an emotional, it's more about connecting to the audience. There is one sport in particular though, that kind of gave me that same feel, and that's track and field and I started doing that. I started doing that my freshman year of high school, but it didn't really gain purpose or like the strength that dance gives me until my senior year in high school. And that's when I went the furthest with it but it pushed me. And it made me kind of reflect over my life and different things that I've been going through. And it gave me a similar feeling of that.

BRAHM:

And then I mean, but with that solo type of thing, I mean, most track events are solo, a lot of dances are solo. So it's kind of like that personal mastery, right? Like, you're competing with yourself, right? Like, you're your own critic, and you're setting your own bar, those expectations that just reminds me of some people I've talked to that are Olympians. And it's like, that's all they're worried about, right is their own records. They don't care about what anybody else is doing. It's like, what is meeting their own standards and their own goals. So I think having that drive is something really special. A lot of people don't have that. So been dancing most of your life now and been doing it professionally now, do you teach dance at all?

MH:

I do. I teach at WNC Dance Academy and Asheville, I also teach at art of dance in Flat Rock, North Carolina. And then I do private lessons. And when given the opportunity, I know with COVID and everything, these opportunities have diminished quite a bit, but, every now and then I'll get the opportunity to go teach at elementary schools or middle schools, high schools, or even universities and colleges. I'm really big on teaching it. And I just love passing the knowledge that I have that I've learned from it. But I think it's more even, it's even more so about passing on the strength and confidence that dance allows while working on techniques stuff too.

BRAHM:

Yeah, it builds physical conditioning and endurance, but then also this type of personal inner, emotional and personal confidence and greater sense of yourself and like what you can do. And so do you have a favorite type of, age group or demographic or style of teaching?

MH:

I would say my favorite age group is the tweens. So they're just -and it depends on the group too- I teach a group of them at WNC Dance Academy. And they're just like, so vibrant in spirit and energy. And like, they want to learn to but they also want to have fun. So it also challenges me to mix things up. And it makes me keep my energy up, too. I like teaching older kids, teens and high school students. But it depends on the day, because they're in the age where, you know, sometimes they're like, too cool, or like, sometimes they just don't feel like doing anything. And, and that's cool, too. But I would say the tweens are definitely my favorite to work with.

BRAHM:

And it's great to be able to get them at that age too, a lot of change is happening, you know, they're going through a lot of stuff growing. So having something that can kind of instill the sense of confidence that "I can", right, to do something that is powerful and beautiful at the same time. Right? It's yeah, definitely cool.

BRAHM:

Well, yeah, we've kind of gone through all the questioning. So I'm interested now- when you're kind of wrapping things up when you're practicing and like developing a routine or something or doing your own training; so what do you do for your practice? You can't just go and freestyle dance all the time? Right?

MH:

Yeah, I make sure to freestyle every time I train, because it helps maintain a base level of where my freestyle creativity is. And it does help me grow whenever I freestyle frequently and it builds on creativity, but it's bread crumbs after a certain while because it plateaus. So I always work on all the foundational things like groove and rock and rhythm and bouncing. But I do a lot of really tedious training. For example, I'll pretend like I'm standing inside of a square, and this is how I work on my foot work. So, I might step, you know, to the front line of that square, or the back line or one of the sides or step in the corners. And it's just finding different creative ways to step in those corners, where I'm like, hopping into one of those spots, or stepping one of those spots or sliding my foot to one of those spots, helps me get creative. Not only with movement patterns as my feet and what I can do, but also connecting that with the musicality. That's one of the tedious trainings that I do, but a lot of it is really laser focused on basic concepts, and then building on those to make for more in depth and complex concepts.

BRAHM:

Yeah, definitely. It's like scales and chords with an instrument, you know, and building from there. And that's great. So even somebody that's been doing it, as long as you know, you're still working in like honing and refining. Consistently, you know, it's not like this is the only way you can grow, right? So you said earlier, you found the name of the person from the conference?

MH:

Yes, his name is Mark Villover. He's an amazing guy, and an amazing dancer, and teacher. And when I took his class, it was just so powerful. That made me want to cry whenever I was taking the class, because it was so clear my intentions. With dancing the peace, it was so clear what my intentions with that purpose for dance was. And it just kind of reminded me why I started dancing, and that I'm not just dancing for myself, but I'm dancing for other people who need the extra inspiration, or need to see someone doing it that came from where they came from. And it was just such a surreal experience. Such a surreal experience.

BRAHM:

Yeah, it's one of those moments, you're like, I am in the right place. I'm like, I'm following my path. You know, so one of the things where like Dharma comes to mind, you know, like, what is our purpose? What, what are we doing? And then when you find yourself in those situations, like it's very, very beautiful. So yeah, the last thing I've got- what do you like doing more? Do you like performing more? Or teaching more?

MH:

Hmm, that's a good one. That's a great question. Ah, I guess it depends on the day and who I'm teaching. But I really do like performing. Because it allows me to connect with a larger audience. And not think so much about what I'm teaching or a lesson plan, but it allows me to just connect with my story and tell that story. And on top of that it allows me to connect with other people by just telling my story, not having to think too much about it, not having to explain certain things with words or like wanting to do something a certain way, but just doing it, and allowing them to kind of take that in. So performing.

BRAHM:

Yeah. And then when you perform, is it primarily solo? Or do you do group performances, too?

MH:

It's primarily solo. But the main reason for that is that the dance community up here is very slim. And so a lot of the opportunities I do end up having to take on myself, but I'm always actively looking for other dancers to kind of recruit into an audition into my dance company and dance crew. Because I'm a firm believer that I'm blessed with these opportunities, and this gift and this drive for this gift to benefit others, and not just myself. And I've been, you know, blessed enough to meet a lot of people who are -and have been doing for years- what I'm aiming to do, and I want to be able to, you know, funnel those connections and networks down to other people and opportunities, because I feel like there are a lot of people who feel like they, their purpose is in dance, but they're always people telling them that, you know, what, get a real job, you know, or this and that and there I have met people who can, you know, change that perspective or change someone's position and give them an opportunity now so it's just finding those people.

BRAHM:

Oh, yeah, that's great. And I mean, it's just wonderful that you know that you do work with youth and you teach so much, because then you can kind of inspire them like that. You know, like you said, you have other people that inspire you. Seems like so often in our society, we're taught XYZ, like you can be this, you can be that or you can do that. But we should be teaching people "ABC that anybody can", you know, as long as you'd like you put your heart, right, and you train and you practice like that. You can do it. Don't let somebody tell you that you can't. Well, Melvin, I've really enjoyed this conversation. It's been wonderful learning about you and your practice and your dance. And I appreciate your time here today. And just so I'm going to end it here.