

From Train Tracks To Times Square : Inside The K-Pop Dance Crew That Transformed NYC

By Tatiana Alejandra

The shiny marble flooring makes for easy sliding, and the long low-ceiling hallway – brightly lit with endless rows of fluorescent lights – produces the perfect acoustics for loud music. For a group of amateur dancers, this area acts as a full-functioning dance studio, however, for New Yorkers, this is a tunnel that connects them to a way back home.

For [Not Shy Dance Crew](#) (NSDC) – young street dancers dressed in baggy t-shirts and neutral-colored sweatpants – spends weeknights rehearsing, amid the sounds of trains coming in and out of Moynihan Train Hall. Surrounded by pure commuter chaos, dancers pay painstaking attention to choreographic detail and learn how to properly enunciate Korean lyrics.

Sarah Baker's voice echoes throughout the glossy hallway as she abruptly stops the upbeat music to give the dancers feedback on their performance. A group of nine female dancers, ranging between their late teens and early twenties, wipe the sweat off their faces as they await Baker's notes for improvement.

It's an unlikely mish-mash of K-Pop enthusiasts, many whom come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, work tirelessly in hopes of becoming something bigger. While most are not Korean, NSDC's mission is to incorporate diversity in a world that's exclusive to those who look like them – one Cover Dance video at a time.



Not Shy Dance Crew spends multiple weeknights rehearsing their Cover Dance videos in the halls of Moynihan Train Hall.

For those unfamiliar with Korea's evergrowing pop culture, a [K-Pop Cover Dance](#), also known as a 'Dance Cover' in the Western world, is a term used to describe the imitation of a K-Pop artist's dance choreography. A dancer involved in a Cover Dance not only focuses on perfecting the choreography, but also emulating the K-idol's – a more popular term to call a K-Pop artist – facial expressions, body posture, and hand gestures that appear in the original performance.

Baker, 23, a native New Yorker from the Upper East Side, is the week's dance coordinator for the group's cover of [\(G\)I-DLE's 'Uh-Oh'](#) – a bubble-pop song from one of Korea's newest girl groups. "It can take upwards of two hours to put formations for a nine-member group," says Baker, who spends her time with NSDC after her days of working as an administrator for a radiology department.

For NSDC to achieve maximum perfection, the week's director will record a full run-through of the performance on their phone and watch it back to ensure accuracy. The closer to the original, the higher the chances of NSDC's video going viral – one of the group's goals.

Baker, who recently graduated from NYU with a degree in East Asian Studies, becoming a viral sensation isn't her main motivation. Having grown up as a Jamaican-American in a predominantly white neighborhood, Baker says she often felt like "an outsider" and found a sense of community in the group. "It really unlocked something that I didn't know I was missing," she said.



Sarah Baker (center) is all smiles during Not Shy Dance Crew's filming of TWICE's 'Heart Shaker' Cover Dance video filmed in Times Square.

Starting with five friends who were avid K-Pop enthusiasts has now transformed into a massive dance crew with over 150 members. “When we first started in 2020, we wanted to keep it a close-knit thing,” says founder Nate Jenkins, “now it’s become such a big thing where we’ve made our pocket in the K-pop dance community.” As the main leader for NSDC, Jenkins aims to break barriers to become one of the first Black queer creative directors in the music industry.

The dance crew’s name pays homage to ITZY, a South Korean girl group, who shares its name with one of their singles. [*‘Not Shy’*](#) talks about the fearless confidence that can come with loving someone; yet for NSDC, the title just makes for a funny oxymoron. “We can be shy sometimes, but then once we’re performing in front of the camera or an audience, we’re not shy at all,” says Jenkins.

Even though virality may be a goal for NSDC, opening the door to diversity and inclusion into the world of K-Pop – an industry that’s not generally accepting of those who don’t meet East Asian beauty standards – means everything to NSDC. “Being the keepers and protectors of this niche, to create a safe space for K-pop dancers and enthusiasts, is something I’m really proud of,” says Jenkins.



(Left to Right) Adrian Richardson, Ashley Hernandez, Matthew Mendoza, Gloria Chen, Felix Tavarez, Macy Tang, and Nate Jenkins pose after a two-hour filming session for their Cover Dance video of NMIXX’s ‘Dice’.

Dancers head over to Moynihan Train Hall for weeknight practices that last three to four hours at a time, and in most cases, rehearsals can go until 10 P.M. Each week, NSDC holds rehearsals at least two times a week within the glossy halls of the commuter hub that later leads them to perform at the iconic Red Stairs at Times Square on the weekends.

Meeting at the giant concrete cinderblocks located between 47th Street and 48th Street has become a traditional meeting spot on filming day. Aside from the dancers who are scheduled to perform, NSDC assigns other members of the crew to volunteer as a videographer, photographers, music manager, and production assistants.

“It’s referred to by everyone affectionately as the ‘Shoulder Breaker 9000’,” says Chan about her giant speaker. Working as the crew’s honorary music manager, they added a black shoulder strap for comfortability, as well as a sense of security, to a 15-pound cylindrical boombox. Working as a baker’s assistant during the weekdays, the 20-year-old Filipino-American reveals that spending their weekends with NSDC has become a “really good passion”.

As the members slowly arrive, the sidewalk transforms into a giant dressing room. Dancers change out of their neutral sweats into vibrant costumes. No matter the weather, dancers change into flowy skirts, bright crop tops, and unique accessories. Due to the number of pieces that are part of a dancer’s costume, sewing kits are kept on hand to ensure that the costume is in place to prevent a wardrobe malfunction.



Cindy Zhang, one of the founder members of NSDC, helps Millaray Salazar pin one of their straps to prevent any fashion mishap during a take of TWICE’s ‘Heart Shaker’ Cover Dance video.

It won't be surprising to hear that the crew has experienced dangerous situations on the bustling streets of Times Square. Chan recalls an incident that occurred back in December 2021 where an onlooker began spurring slurs at the dancers. "This guy just starts yelling as he tries getting in the picture and we tell him to get out," says Chan, "and then he just shoves me and just starts cursing us all out."

During the filming of NSDC's ['Snake' Dance Cover](#), Showtime – a group of male street performers who blend break-dancing and gymnastics – menaced the crew for unknown reasons. This single incident has become infamous amongst NSDC. Baker remembers a single Showtime member "yelling about how we were stealing his livelihood, he had kids to feed, and how we were taking it away." She continues to add that the entire group later began to get "really aggressive and threatening to physically harm us."

According to Baker, she believes the root of Showtime's one-sided beef with NSDC stems from losing their large crowd. Frequently performing side by side, whenever Showtime's crowd migrates over to the crew's side of the plaza, "they tend to get a little upset," she reveals.

It's important to note that NSDC doesn't make any profit from street performance, unlike Showtime. The male street performers have claimed that the amateur K-pop dancers have 'stolen' money from the crowd, yet the crew's mission is to simply record their performance and head home once filming has wrapped.

"We had like a water bottle thrown at us, not directly, but like right next to us," says Millaray Salazar, about another incident that occurred with Showtime. For Salazar, a 20-year-old undocumented Latina living in New Jersey, the crew gives them a sense of freedom – both from stereotypical labels and crippling anxiety.



Millaray Salazar (center) gives it their all during a take for Not Shy Dance Crew's cover of TWICE's 'Heart Shaker'.

Performing on the streets of New York gives them a small taste of what they dream of doing for the rest of their life. "Everyone in my family likes singing or performing, but I'm the one who wants to have it as a career and not a hobby ... I want to make a living out of it."

Aside from building up their skillset that can lead to a professional career, the K-Pop dance crew has presented a platform for plus-size representation. They have received several messages online from strangers saying "you're making me dance again and not care what other people think" and "seeing you dance comfortably in your own skin just makes me want to continue dancing."

Not only does NSDC give the chance for representation, performing on the streets of Midtown Manhattan has also led to professional opportunities. "I got a great modeling gig from a scouter that led me to be signed by my current company," says Adrian Richardson, a 22-year-old from Hillside, New Jersey. Recently, he was contacted by a filmmaker after they watched an NSDC video that led him to star in a short film called "*Hype Boys*" by The Film Shop.

Previously working as a live model and art curator for Alexa Meade's art museum "*Wonderland Dreams*" in Midtown, he confesses that NSDC gives real exposure that can build up his portfolio. "You get so many opportunities from people seeing you on the street, just killing a dance," says Richardson.



(Left to Right) Ashley Hernandez, Felix Tavaréz, Nate Jenkins, Adrian Richardson, Matthew Mendoza, and Macy Tang, go full-out for the final take of their Cover Dance video of NMIXX's 'Dice'.

Once the videographer, music manager, and center point – a person standing with their arm up that assists dancers to know where 'center stage' is during their performance – are all in position for

filming, the show begins. For several hours, the dancers film multiple takes and all vote for the best version to be uploaded to their social media accounts.

Even though each member has their own motivation for joining NSDC, as well as how their involvement will help shift their future, some members can't deny the pure exhilaration that comes with performing on the streets of New York City.

"I hate to say it but I love the attention that we get from pulling an audience," Richardson adds, "my favorite part is getting people just locked on to us and then at the end, when you completely snap out of the performance, you hear thunderous applause."