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Rock Steady Crew gets props for their role in art of hip-hop

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BY GREGORY C. WASHINGTON
Star-Ledger Staff

The rain started falling around the same time the Lincoln Park Music Festival was scheduled to ramp back up for its Sunday presentation. Enough audience members carried umbrellas to form a patchwork shield to keep the crowd relatively dry, while rocking to songs and dances over 20 years old.

Among them was a 41-year-old Puerto Rican man from the South Bronx wearing denim shorts, a T-shirt, sneakers, a knee brace and carrying a wooden cane. He injured his knee three days prior to the celebration, and was advised by a physician to stay off of his feet, and to use crutches to get around.

Going against the doctor's recommendation, he spent most of the day on his feet, mingling with the audience, running around backstage and making sure the celebration carried on through the rain as smooth as possible.

"I wouldn't have missed this for the world," the man affectionately known as Crazylegs said.

This was the 30th anniversary celebration of the Rock Steady Crew, an ensemble of artists born from a group of inner-city kids who could move their bodies in ways no one imagined. Since those days the crew has performed on all seven continents, but in the beginning they were just boys from the Bronx, led by a teenager named Jimmy D.

"The retirement age for a B- Boy back then was like 16," Cra zylegs said.

Somewhere between Jimmy D's 16th and 17th birthday he passed the torch to a 15-year-old kid who was B-Boying, also known as breakdancing, with the Rockwell Association. That 15- year-old kid has yet to put it down.

"He respected what I could do and thought I could take it to the next level," Crazylegs said.

The transition to the next level, which included a performance and battle at the Lincoln Center, began in 1981. In 1982 the crew performed at the original Ritz nightclub in front of Afrika Bambaataa. That performance led to a partnership with the Zulu Kings, the most respected B-Boy crew at the time.

After the Ritz performance Rock Steady spread its influence throughout the downtown Manhattan club scene, which led to their inclusion on the Roxy Tour, with stops in London and Paris.

"The tour introduced this dance to the international community," he said.

The tour also introduced the crew to the business community. Their growing popularity interested music executives in the United Kingdom, who signed the crew and released an album titled "Hey You, The Rock Steady Crew."

The release sold over 500,000 copies and was a top-ten hit in Great Britain, but the contract negotiated by the crew left the lion's share of the proceeds with the executives.

"We saw the world," Crazylegs said. "But we also learned about the word recoupable."

The record company who inked the crew was sold to Virgin records, who shelved the Rock Steady deal indefinitely, causing friction among crew members. The tension led to a hiatus, but not before the crew appeared in two documentaries, "Style Wars: The Origin of Hip Hop," and "Wild Style," in 1983 and the 1984 Orion Pictures release "Beat Street."

"There were movies, commercials and major articles in Life Magazine, People Magazine, Time Magazine, the New York Times and other media," Crazy legs said. "That's why we got Beat Street. The buzz was already out there."

The hiatus ended in 1989 and two years later the crew produced "So What Happens Now," a critically acclaimed musical that addressed life beyond B-Boying and performing.

Today, the crew includes DJs, producers, graffiti artists, emcees and has opened chapters in Japan, the United Kingdom and Italy. At the Lincoln Park Music Festival chapter members from Japan took turns dancing while the Soul Sonic Force performed "Looking For The Perfect Beat," "Renegades of Funk," and "Planet Rock."

On the side of the stage, the president watched with a smile.

"It's a natural thing," he said. "It's the same thing I would have done if my knee was on point that day."

Each performer who stepped on the stage, including Grand Master Melle Mel, Biz Markie, Chubb Rock, Dana Dane, DoItAll from Lords of the Underground, The Soul Sonic Force, Naughty By Nature, Keith Murray and show hosts End of the Weak took time to show respect to the Rock Steady Crew and to show respect to the 41-year-old man who helped change their lives, music and dance forever.

"It's amazing," Crazylegs said. "And to think that they all came for free."

Today Rock Steady focuses on preserving hip-hop culture, through music festivals, classes, workshops and everyday conversation on what they think hip-hop is all about.

"It's cool if you can make money doing something that you love," he said. " But people that do this must know that it is art, it is a people thing and not just a money thing."

Gregory C. Washington writes for Newark This Week. He may be reached at (973) 392-7895 or at gwa.shington@starledger.com.