

BREAKING



By GRAHAM FLASHNER

Jabbawockeez paved the way for dance-only performers with their cohesive fusion of hip-hop, modern and jazz choreography.

GROUND

On any given night in Las Vegas, choosing among the A-list comedians, pop stars and theater acts that populate The Strip can be a daunting task. But if you're looking for something truly original, visit the Monte Carlo Theatre for the groundbreaking show "MÜS.I.C." from the hip-hop dance troupe Jabbawockeez.

In an age when films such as "Step Up 3-D" and TV shows such as "Dancing With The Stars" and "So You Think You Can Dance" have become pop culture phenomena, Jabbawockeez (or JBWKZ, as they're known) are on the cutting edge of a dance craze sweeping the country. They incorporate hip-hop, "B-boy" (break-dancing) and intricate synchronized movements into an exciting live show that fuses theater and dance.

With footwork that recalls 1980s-era Michael Jackson and physicality that echoes the acrobatic grace of Cirque du Soleil, JBWKZ have permanently impacted the landscape of Las Vegas entertainment. As choreographer Napoleon D'umo said, "It's great for Vegas and great for the dance community that people are excited about a dance show. Americans are realizing that it's really entertaining and not just about backing up a singer."

Audience connection is a vital part of the JBWKZ stage show, which feeds off the energy of the crowd. "Our aim is to inspire the world through music and dance," said dancer Chris "Chris Style" Gatdula, who joined the group in 2003. "We're trying to pay it forward...people get touched by our show and hopefully, it inspires them to push something forward in their own lives."

Named for the mythical dragon in Lewis Carroll's book *Through the Looking Glass*, Jabbawockeez' roots can be traced to San Francisco, where two members of the Mind Tricks crew, Gary Kendall and Randy Bernal, formed a Southern California version, which began performing in Los Angeles Street Dance competitions.

By the mid 2000s they expanded their reach into the burgeoning reality TV industry. "At first, we were opposed to dancing on TV," Gatdula recalled. "As a hip-hop group, we were worried about the way we might be portrayed. Gary pushed us to do it - he said it would take us to the next level."

After being eliminated from the second season of "America's Got Talent" in 2007, Kendall positioned them for a tryout for a new MTV show, "Randy Jackson Presents America's Best Dance Crew." Sadly, Kendall died a week before auditions

began, but his vision for the group turned out to be prophetic: Jabbawockeez took home the top prize, instantly elevating them into the national spotlight.

There were commercials for Gatorade and Pepsi and appearances on "Dancing with the Stars," "So You Think You Can Dance," "America's Next Top Model" and "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" among others. In 2009, they performed with Shaquille O'Neal during the NBA All-Star Game pre-game festivities and were the opening act on the "Full Service Tour" with New Kids On The Block. In May 2010, the group debuted their Vegas show "MÜS.I.C.," a live stage spectacular at the MGM Grand Hollywood Theater.

August was a banner month. The group returned to MGM Grand for a week-long encore run of "MÜS.I.C." and released their first single, "Robot Remains," recorded with their hip-hop producing partners, The Bangerz. Jabbawockeez celebrated the single's release with a party at HAZE Nightclub inside ARIA Resort & Casino at CityCenter, one of the group's favorite Vegas hotspots.

As if their plates aren't already full with performing engagements, the group also has launched a clothing line through their website, jbwkz.com.

Onstage, Jabbawockeez' 90-minute show is a symphony of fluid movement and emotion, expressed through music. "Once we're on stage, that's when the fun starts," said Gatdula. "It's like a roller coaster ride."

Choreographer Tabitha D'umo said, "The styles are constantly evolving; it's not the stereotypical dancing you might see on the street. With Jabbawockeez, you see the music through their bodies."

The group's eclectic musical tastes take them through rock, hip-hop, jazz, R&B and contemporary pop. And there's another element that adds to

the mystique: the dancers' faces are concealed by white masks. "Everyone gets a highlight moment," said Napoleon D'umo. "But you're forced to look at them as a group, not individuals - that's the brilliance of the masks."

For Gatdula, who grew up in Las Vegas, returning to his hometown is a dream come true. "Performing on The Strip is amazing," he said. "To have this opportunity is very humbling. I couldn't ask for anything more." And Gatdula said it's only the beginning of a plan for global domination. "First Vegas, then the world," he laughed. **M**

For more information or to purchase tickets, please see *The Guide* on page 124.

