

[Rennie Harris] We truly believe that street dancing started it all.

Without street dancing,
there wouldn't be a ballet,

or jazz, or tap.

[Narrator] Dancer,
choreographer, artistic director,

Rennie Harris founded the first
and longest running hip-hop theater company,
creating new possibilities for dance.

[Kyle Clark] He was the first person
that helped me realize the value
of Blackness and Black dance forms.

[Lee Jones] Rennie was just magic
on the dance floor, so fluid.

[Dinita Clark] He knows
how to bring the true essence
of street dance forms to the stage
and he's a Philadelphia legend.

Hey, this is Rennie Harris
and I'm here with "If Cities Could Dance" in Philadelphia.

[Narrator] Rennie breaks down with us
five major moments in his life.

♪ upbeat contemporary percussion ♪

[Narrator] Rennie's dance story is rooted in North Philly

during the late '60s and 1970s,
a vibrant era of Black culture in the city.

[Rennie Harris] Philly get down in every which way.

I just came up knowing there's a strong culture.

[Narrator] As a student of Catholic school,

Rennie envisioned becoming a priest.

But his gifts in dance were apparent,
even as a young GQ dancer or stepper
with his first crew The Step Masters.

When street dance styles
changed, Rennie started popping,
influenced by West Coast
dancers moving East.

And he danced with The Scanner Boys.

[Rennie Harris] We were taking these
styles and like morphing them
and changing them and shifting them.

There were always parties.

There was always jams,
especially in the summer.

We'll walk from one side of the city
to the next side of city
to go battle somebody.

So, yeah, it was a full on
culture happening and brewing.

[Narrator] After The
Scanner Boys wowed audiences

at a performance on the National Mall,

Rennie and members of the
crew landed an audition

to tour with top rap artists
on the Fresh Festival.

[Rennie Harris] So, after we got off the stage,
we would go into the audience

and battle cats in the audience.

Then I find out like, oh, Whodini's doing this video.

Oh, okay. So I'll jump in it.

♪ Friends ♪

We're going to sing "Friends"

and everybody's going to pow out.

We're still not thinking
this is going to be like

wooo [big].

I'm just watching this,

like looking out your window
and watching everything happen.

[Narrator] After coming off tour,

Rennie landed his own TV show,
recorded in Philadelphia.

Rennie wanted to give
local dancers some shine

and recruited talent from the city's underground club scene

to dance on air.

[Rennie Harris] Yo, yo, yo! I'm Rennie Harris, this is Cathi...

I went commercial with it, my personality.

"Hey, I'm Rennie Harris. Dah-dah-dah,"

you know, that kind of thing.

That was the gig, you know.

I had some problems like for what I was wearing.

I started growing my hair in locks.

[Narrator] Show producers told Rennie they thought

his hair locks would turn off some audience members.

[Rennie Harris] So, you'll notice on those shows,

I have a hat on and that was like the compromise.

We're coming out of a culture that was,

everything is about white is right.

[Narrator] While the show regularly beat out "Soul Train"

and "Club MTV" in ratings, it was canceled a year later.

[Rennie Harris] And that was a major lesson,

like in the industry, you think you're somebody

and then you're like, "No, not yet."

[Narrator] By the early 1990s,
many of the Philly dancers Rennie came up with
had stopped dancing.

But Rennie's purpose only grew stronger.

[Rennie Harris] I realized like dance was my thing and,
through the dance, I was going to see God.

Through the dance, I was going to feel God.

[Narrator] After getting
his first commission

from a local theater, Rennie
created his first solo work,

a timeless piece that he'd continue

to perform for audiences
across the country.

[Narration from "Endangered Species"] No one could tell me
the first time

I would see a,

see someone shot

that I, I would be eight.

[Rennie Harris] I called it "Endangered Species"

because, at that time,
this was the language

that people were using
about young Black men,

which they're still using.

I didn't do anything but pop.

I'm just trying to really feel a vibe

of like what the inside was doing
and how the inside was reacting

and all those moments in my
life, you know, from my childhood to now.

And then, in that journey,

the only thing I could figure out is

that there was two things
I had to do in my lifetime,

and that was to stay Black and die.

It changed me as a choreographer.

It changed the way I looked at choreography.

I'm creating my work for
me. This is my healing.

[Narrator] This marriage of street dance

and theater became the
template for future work

he'd create with his company,
Rennie Harris Puremovement.

Its first full length
work "Rome and Jewels"

restaged Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet,"

set in Philly with rival gangs fighting for control.

[Narration from "Rome and Jewels"] From forth the fatal

loins of these two foes,
a pair of star-crossed homies take their life.

[Rennie Harris] Rome is a homeboy
thug/kind of like a scholar.

But he doesn't know that.

[Narration from "Rome and Jewels"] These men can read and eyes can see.

So long lives this and
this gives life to thee.

[Rennie Harris] He reminds me of me a little bit.

He has one foot in the street

and another foot in the universe.

[Narrator] "Rome and Jewels" was a hit
and Rennie became one of the most sought after
artistic directors and choreographers.

[Rennie Harris] For the first 20 years of the company,
people had never seen anything like it.

They've seen hip-hop in theater,
the acrobatic entertainment part of it.

But they hadn't seen street dance used
in an expressive way with a narrative abstractly.

We were the only cats out
there doing it on that level.

[Narrator] Spiritual
enlightenment, freedom,

and cultural understanding
are dominant themes

in Rennie's work and why he's been dubbed
the High Priest of Hip-Hop.

Whether he's staging his next production,

teaching, or making bridges
between the pioneers

of street dance and the
new generation of dancers,

he spreads a different kind of ministry.

[Rennie Harris] It's not about performing.

It's about being embedded in the community.

I think what we're fighting
for as humans on the planet,

as individuals, just to be
seen, to be acknowledged.

[Narrator] Thanks for watching, y'all.

Check out our other episodes
of "If Cities Could Dance"

and let us know in the comments below
other dance legends we should feature.

See you next time.