

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH EMMA HOUSTON - July 2020

Ella Mesma talking to Emma 'Shortbread' Houston- transcribed by

Welcome everyone, I am here with the amazing Emma aka Shortbread who, just so you know, Emma and I go back to 2011 when we met in London on the breaking scene and we were both training in the same space under coach Kev. Emma and I tend to have lots of chats about our journeys on the scene and that's how I invited Emma to be part of the R&D for 'Lady Like', back in the day. It's such an honour to have you here in the space.

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Emma was also one of the women in 'I Am All Womxn' – a video that we made in lockdown and Emma was one of 33 women involved with a beautiful piece of movement. I thought it would be really cool to start hearing about your journey from Sterling in Scotland and how you got into the breaking scene?

So I was always athletic and very sporty and played football so that was kind of my movement outlet and I was always really into music – hip hop and rap music – not limited to those genres but I was always interested in music. There was a phase when I was pretty obsessed with Eminem and Timbaland and I would be there, ear glued to the speakers, trying to figure out what was going on. I would imagine these Match of the Day like scenarios where I would be scoring a goal because I was a striker, and the music could play really loud and I would do this epic celebration – you know, the sort of thing you see on FIFA, like the kind of FIFA computerised celebrations – so I think I was always yearning for this marriage of music and movement, that I would invent for myself playing football and apart from dancing to Five in the bedroom with my sister and her friend, in my all white Reebok tracksuit, I think that was the only dancing I'd ever done in my life. Although that did stand out as a big memory as an 11-year old so I think I knew I was on to something.

So a friend of mine showed me a film 'You Got Served' – a classic street dance film and I tried to do a baby freeze on his carpet and from then I was looking at classes in my area and trying to find things. Being from Sterling, there wasn't much in my area but my first teacher was a man called Martin Robinson who was a martial artist, contemporary dancer and a B-boy, so he could do bits of everything. He had a bit of a claim to fame because he'd been in Kylie Minogue's 'Can't Get You Out of My Head' video. So he was my first teacher and then I ended up going to learn from some Turkish B-boys in Glasgow once a week as well as those hip hop classes. This was when I was 15-16 and I had to distance myself from football because I couldn't do both. It was becoming harder for me to commit to the team that I was in. I was in Falkirk ladies F.C. Represent! It was great times.

Long story short, I went to Scottish School of Contemporary Dance and then from there, I auditioned for London Contemporary Dance School and Laban. I got into Laban and went there to study. I knew I really wanted to be in London because it was so multicultural and it was a hub for so many different things. I knew that there was a bigger world out there that I was just desperate to be a part of. It wasn't just about going to study contemporary dance, if anything that was an excuse to go. I needed a reason to be in London and I didn't feel like I could navigate London without a full-time structure of studying something. Simultaneously, I was asked to be in Boadicea – an all female hip hop crew – which was an amazing experience and I met Renegade early on, and that's where I met you Ella and so many others that are breaking and still on the scene today. I graduated in 2014 and for the last 6 years have been working in the dance industry in various capacities and yeah it's informed the person I am today for sure.

Awesome, we'll talk a bit more about your career later. There's so much more to come and I don't think we've seen all of you yet but I'd love to dive into the breaking scene and your journey in the breaking scene. You have Scotland to talk about as well, but you could share that journey in London and the experience of training under Renegade? We were invited as a collective of womxn for this particular training group, which grew. How was that experience? For me, Emma is just an incredible breaker, I love watching you breaking and battling Emma – I would love to see you battling more and competing internationally... Can you talk a bit more about your experience of the UK scene?

There's a lot in that question and I don't know how much I can unpack right now. I'll try and do my best but I think it's a really complex one. As someone who thrives in the battling scene and the competitive environment, I guess I always felt that I could better that and develop that more in a crew. In a high-level, well established crew that I could learn from. Essentially, I was a novice in a lot of ways – often quite a lone wolf – and I did have interactions with crews in Scotland but at that time I was really a beginner, you know, so I was looking to be taken under the wing of a group where I could be nurtured and really, I guess, thrive even more in battling with a team. I come from being a team player, I've played football all my life, and I know that that's way better than playing on your own. I guess I found that to be a difficult thing to navigate cause I've not had that crew in London. We were training obviously with Renegade. Initially, I was training on my own on London Bridge and Sam Allison was the first guy that was like, 'hey what's up?' I was going to Troc and training with anyone and everyone who was at Troc and that was an amazing place. That was the first time I'd seen Krump - I don't think I'd seen Krump up close until Trocadero time. At that time, I was just so hungry to do and see as much as possible and battle with anyone. Troc days and London Bridge days there was a lot of solo training or training with people. Random people would come in and show me things and I would work on them and then eventually when I was training with Renegade – there was a bunch of us as a female group. There were mixed sessions happening as well around 2014-2015.

I felt there was definitely a big separation about what was possible for the women to achieve vs the men. However, that being said, a lot of men had been breaking longer but when I saw the new gen of men coming in and the way they were taken into crews and nurtured and helped, I guess I thought, 'what about me? What about all the things I have to offer? What about my growth? What about me getting to be a part of it?'. I think this is where I came full circle about not being good enough. I guess I knew there were things that I could only get better at if I was in these environments.

I love that saying that says 'pressure makes diamonds' and I think that's really true of breaking. I think you need that family that network of people saying you can become that diamond.

I think that's always been a bit of a sticking point for me because it's not really felt like the most accessible route into crews and that could be for a number of reasons but I think gender does play a big part in it and the way that maybe a womxn's value is seen or not seen in the scene from my experience in London. It's hard to say what that would be like in other places or how it's valued. For example, in New York in 2016, I felt more value there from complete strangers than I had felt by people in the UK at various points in my training. It's really interesting to see what level, not necessarily meaning a barrier to potential or to your worthiness to grow but how can you be a finished product if you're not nurtured through that. You only learn from putting yourself out there and it definitely helps being a crew and being quite organised and ready to train and ready to commit. I feel like I had all these things that were ready to go but there wasn't this bridge for me to get over to actually be a part of it. Again, it's like this could be for a number of reasons and I'm not saying it's only because of my gender, but I am saying I've always come up against these invisible glass ceilings because of my biological sex at various points. It's been very prevalent throughout my life and as a positive person I don't wallow in those realisations and I don't like to blame external people or events for the way things go. If anything it's meant I have to be so good that I can't be ignored. Sometimes that's possible and sometimes it's not but you go further together than you can do alone. I think you need a real mix of genuine community and caring for growth. That being said, I did learn so much from Renegade in terms of the fitness, stamina and technique and would have really loved a bit more push from a crew being behind me and seeing my potential as a dancer. It's like a bit of a lone journey.

If we look at you now and see you in Boy Blue's piece – it's almost like you were recognised and you really shone – so it really resonated what you said about staying positive keeping at the grind and persevering. You come through and now you're doing really amazing things. Could you tell us a bit more about your experience of Boy Blue?

As someone who isn't only doing one thing – I also do contemporary dance and choreography – I'm also aware that the requirements of just breaking and being a crew might be different. My path has always been about doing more things and diversifying my skill set. Getting Boy Blue's production was a big highlight in my career because Boy Blue is a company that I've watched over 10 years and I just – I honestly needed that job. Everything about it aligned, the audition process was intense I think we did three separate auditions for it, so I know that I had earned my place. It was a space which was very

vulnerable, we were all very vulnerable and it was facilitated really well so that we could be vulnerable and be there for each other. I had the best time, every single person in that company really enriched my life and I'm really honoured that Kenrick trusted me with the role that I had and being a part of the company.

It would be really cool to take this on a journey - we've been talking about gender roles and those ceilings in breaking. It would be good to talk about that within your career – the gender expectations or gender ceilings that you experienced?

With Boy Blue I never felt like I was seen through any other lens than who I was. I can truly say that was one of the very few roles where I have felt that way and I think that corresponds with how much I was able to give the project and how much I was able to be seen in the project. I think the way Ken and Mikey created that atmosphere to allow us to shine and be ourselves and that is a real testament to them. I guess they saw us for all our powers and potentials.

To answer the other question, yes I have seen the ceilings and the restrictions. It's just like me being judged on my appearance in the wider world and assumptions being made about that. The same goes for the dance industry and different aspects of the industry will have different issues. So, in breaking where I can move like how I want to move – I can largely be free to do all of that because I'm doing a technique of breaking which doesn't have a gender to it – however we are operating in a very gendered scene, a very hetero-normative, very cis male, macho, masculine scene. That also in turn can then treat the women in different ways, and it doesn't always stay consistent for being praised for moving like a boy. It can flip. It does depend on a lot of different factors. There doesn't seem to be a consistency like 'we're going to celebrate you because you move like this' or 'we're going to celebrate you because you move really girly'. I've seen both – I've seen myself being praised for moving the way I do and for doing the opposite but again, that's not gonna change cos the way I break is the way I break and it doesn't have anything to do with my gender.

I remember being told in that training space 'Ella, stop dancing like a girl' and it used to piss me off so much. First of all already, the word 'girl' – I was an adult at the time – there's so many layers in that. To be told 'not to be who you are, is not right' and 'to be in the body that I'm in, is not what I want to be in' – was such a head bang of a space.

Personally I chose breaking because previously, I had a career in Latin dance – I was doing a lot of salsa and a lot of samba and I wanted a space where I didn't have to be judged on my gender or on my body. My body wasn't becoming an exotic thing or a thing on display – I was just dancing. But to be told, 'not to be dancing like a girl' just used to make me think... 'so who am I supposed to be?' I definitely know which body parts I have but how am I supposed to express myself?

Maybe for me it's been the opposite because I would just break like a guy and that for me, I probably was happy about because I was just breaking the way I was breaking and that

was seen as a positive, then great. But then that also can really turn on its head really quickly and then be used against you as well. I think this is maybe more a commercial dance industry issue but one of my first experiences was doing a workshop with Rudeye Agency – they had a male and female come out and lead these workshops in Edinburgh. It was advertised as a popping and locking workshop so I thought I'd be doing popping and locking and I was wearing a baggy t-shirt and some basketball shorts. Also, I was 16 so I was a child essentially, and at one point in this class, he leads a mock audition where he eliminated us. First of all, coming to a workshop I was like, 'holy s***, this is scary'. I was very new to dance – I'd done bits of breaking in my living room you know and I just remembered getting down to the final four and him basically telling me you're not going to get any further because you're not dressed sexy enough and it's like – to look back at that now, I had no desire of appealing sexually. I was like, this is not why I'm dancing. I'm not dancing to appeal sexually to you – I mean that blew my mind at the time. At the time, I was like 'what?!' That could have really negatively affected someone else to the point where they then...I mean look at what's happening now with the hyper over-sexualisation of young people, young girls that are dancing and this crossover into the commercial dance world and look at all the grooming that's happening in the dance industry. You look at this through line of over-sexualising young women and making them seem like their value directly correlates to that sexual appeal. I was told that I was cut from this mock audition because I wasn't sexy enough – which was nothing about the dancing we had just done. This was directly about sex appeal.

These things can't be ignored because they all feed into each other. This notion of dancing like a boy or dancing like a girl – it comes with so many other things. I'd guess if I had to choose, I'd always felt like I wanted to dance like a boy, then, if I have to choose because dancing like a girl meant dancing sexy or dressing a way that I wasn't comfortable dressing, or presenting my body in a way that I wasn't comfortable presenting my body. I had come from a skill purely about playing football – it's a game, it's a sport, we just want to win. Translate that into dance – I just want to dance – I want to get better. Realising all the politics that come with that – that I can't just be me in this body and progress without having that pressure that I have to be sexy, or I have to do this shoot in heels or all women have to come to this casting like this.

I'd been at a B-girl casting for a big commercial show recently – a lot of money – looking for B-girls. I'm basically being told, 'why didn't you wear your hair down?'. I was like, 'what has that got to do with anything?'. The womxn that told me was trying to do me a favour because she's like, 'I know what these casting directors want, they want a feminine girl – you have to make yourself more feminine so the casting director's going to choose you'. The quota for the B-Boy was already filled so if I'm too much like a B-boy, I'm not going to get that job because they need a really feminine girl to be the B-girl and the B-boy can be whatever the B-boy looks like. The B-boy can be themselves. At least it wasn't specified on the brief, so if there is a real need for the B-girl to look a certain way, that must be specified. It did feel like a big waste of time, of course I didn't get the job and the person who did get the job is an incredible B-girl, so all credit to her. However, I do know that she is very girly, which is no discredit at all, but it is interesting that there seems to only be that option available. I can't be the B-boy and I can't be the B-girl, so who am I in these situations if I don't fit into either category? What that results in is not being seen. I think that's why,

ultimately, the diversity and representation needs to be widened so that you see so many more people.

We've talked a lot about voices and spaces where we've been silenced. It's really important what you said about not being seen, is there a way we address this? How do we continue these conversations so that we create spaces where everyone can be seen and it's not that you have to fit into these boxes? What does the word 'B-girl' imply? Do you have any wisdom about how we continue to enable voices?

First of all, the B-girl and B-boy terminology – it's important to acknowledge the history of where something comes from and why it comes about. Of course, at that point in time it's used to distinguish a boy from a girl, a womxn from a man. Those have now become categories where you battle. The B-boy battles are open for anyone, and the B-girl battles are open for B-girls. I have always been an advocate for having these B-girl battles, and the reason being is because until B-girls are given the same opportunities to better themselves and the same representation, we can't abolish categories. However, that being said, we come back to the binary of gender and this very Olympian 'where does the line of gender cross and intersect?'

The more we look at gender, the more we try and define gender as 'you're a girl until this moment and now you're a man'. The more the Olympic committees have tried to put a bracket somewhere, it seems if a womxn gets too fast on a sprint she must be a dude. Suddenly more tests are needed to establish, 'oh, she's got more testosterone' but then also you can't necessarily link more or less testosterone to better or worse performance because they've done these studies and noticed that in two races that's where testosterone has the bigger advantage, but not in all races. Initially they did it with chromosomes, but then they realised that not everyone has XX or XY. XX is female and XY is male, but now they've realised that some females are XY and some males are XX, or some females are XXY. As they looked at chromosome make up, they realised that wasn't a defining factor.

I would be happy to compete as a biological sex female in the B-girl category if that allows me more opportunity, representation, visibility and chance to battle and progress. Without any category existing, what happens is a lot of people don't get seen. Some of that is to do with level but some of that is to do with unconscious bias and gender bias. I think it's progressing but it's too soon to just abolish a category because we're not yet at a place where women have had an equal footing in progressing.

But also there's no need to keep over-gendering a space. I see so much over-gendering happening to B-girls. 'Look at the lady, she'd doing it for the ladies!' And I'm like, 'will you chill out?'. There's just no need. They don't do it for B-boys: 'they're doing it for all the boys all in the world! Come on boys!'. You don't hear the same rhetoric. Male and female MCs are both guilty of doing this.

There's a film I've recently watched where they reverse the world, so women are in power. I can't remember what it's called, but it's so funny when they point out those alternative world things and you see that it's really messed up.

For me, I'm particularly sensitive to it. All I need is one thing and I'm disengaged from an event. I cringe so much with that, you've lost me. I'm an other in this world, even more because those terminologies don't resonate personally with me. More and more, I'm asking, 'am I really included in this scene, is it something I want to be part of?'. I've come back to those questions so many times, numerous training sessions I've left in tears because I've not been seen, I've not been heard, I've not been helped or valued. I want to go where I'm valued, loved and appreciated. If that's not in the scene, maybe that's where your response is 'bye!'.

This idea that nobody cares is a shame, because why would nobody care about each other? Why is that the rhetoric that is being reminded to all of us? I feel like that is so dangerous and dismissive of all of the hierarchies that exist. The people who are oppressed know what is happening and what it feels like, and they're the people we need to listen to. Right now, across the world we have oppressed women. I think women have been trying to say things for so long and have been so easily dismissed as 'just get better, you're just a piece of ass, you're my bitch' – all this kind of stuff means 'just stay where you are'. It's so dangerous that we do that to any minority group. There are so many marginalised people that need to be listened to, heard and facilitated. They need to do their own work to be better people and make the world a better place, otherwise what is the point? If the scene keeps saying that no one cares, then what changes? What is the scene saying about homophobia, or transphobia? What is the scene saying about accepting non-binary trans identities, you know, there are so many things, it's not just about sexism and misogyny. How does the breaking scene accommodate Black women? There are layers to everything, and without intersectionality you can't look at one thing without looking at the other and start to peel back the layers.

The small act of ignoring relates to the big act of ignoring oppression.

100%. If everyone takes it upon themselves to take responsibility, first be aware of the privileges that they have, then be aware of the people who don't have those privileges, then understand the differences that people face. Able-bodied people for example, the privileges that we have, then you start looking at accessibility in a different way and realise we're not accessible at all.

There's such a journey to being a better human being – empowering of the self but also empowering others. How can you impact the world without taking without permission? How do you continue to help the undoing and see everyone as equal to you?

That's also how much of a voice should I really have in this conversation about hip hop culture as well? I'm aware that I could be overstepping boundaries right now, or taking right now, without knowing. That's where I think I always come full circle to this idea of gratitude and giving back. So much of what hip hop culture is about is giving back and paying it forward. Any time I think I'm lacking in something, also what am I giving? Every time I get stuck – ignoring there's a problem is different to acknowledging the problem but I'm still going to move in this way and give back. There is an element of frustration at what could have been possible, looking back. But then I look at the progress that has been made, and I think 'wow'. So maybe not for me, but for the next generation.

You're contributing to that in many ways. The career that you have, but also some of the stuff that you're doing. You are not afraid to speak up for others.

We've still got the unanswered question, how gender roles have come into play? Do you want to answer that? Do you feel like you've been put into gendered boxes, or if you've experienced a ceiling more within the performance and dance industry?

I think there have been a lot of cases when I have been celebrated for my differences. There have also been a lot of cases where I've felt like there's been a regression in environments. I feel uncomfortable in a very binary gendered space, where I'm put in one box as a biological female. That, to me, is where I feel very restricted because it feels like I'm reduced to this one label which has all these connotations – it has to mean all these things that I don't necessarily resonate with.

For me, it's about society's stereotypes of what those boxes have to be. That binary of female is often about certain ways you're supposed to behave and look, but actually hasn't got anything to do with the body parts. This historic creation of gender – we talk about masculine and feminine, we have a percentage of each. Gender is a construct that society has made up rather than it being a thing to do with body parts.

Gender, much like sexuality, is a spectrum. Man doesn't mean this and womxn doesn't mean that. This is about society's views on gender. We say society, but we are society. People make up society and it comes back to individual responsibilities of, if you hold any unconscious bias, it takes an active noticing it around you and think, 'maybe I did look at that person a little bit differently because of XYZ, or because they were wearing this or he

looked like that'. Checking yourself as and when, because it's not going to be as easy as, 'I'm aware of this and now it's never going to happen'. It's undoing all of this, and I think the more that we know our own boundaries, as well as our own privileges and the wider context that we're in – a lot of problems I've come up against is when I've felt like my boundaries were crossed, but I didn't know how to vocalise that, or be in a space where I had the voice or the power to make change. Now I think I've got a non-negotiable set of boundaries, where I know that when a boundary is crossed, this is what I'm going to say. If I'm not respected, or the space is not one where they want to change their views, then I can remove myself from that space. I think that is something that I have wanted to do in certain circumstances before, but I think 'I've worked so hard to be here and it's taken so many years'. Now I think I'm at a point where, even in spite of all those things, I can walk away. Because if it's about making change, then I need to do something that someone else hasn't been prepared to do before, to actually make a point or expose a problem. It's so difficult with micro-aggressions to say 'this is what's going on', because often all you have is a feeling of this doesn't feel right, I'm getting this vibe and then you're made to question your own self to the point of annihilation, where you then lose faith in your own voice and that can spiral so much for anyone who's oppressed in different environments.

About this gendered society, there's a belief that we can't make change, that the world is out of our hands. But we have a certain amount of power within ourselves and our sphere of influence that we can make change within. We're so silenced for different things. My advice upon graduating was 'don't rock the boat'. I've been rocking boats since day one by accident because that's apparently who I am. I don't want to rock any boats that would be detrimental to anyone's mental health or humanity, but I want to rock boats that need to be rocked because there's a problem.

I want to come back around to there are so many wonderful things about hip hop culture that have given me purpose and a drive for my life. None of this negates the other. This specific talk is about addressing what it is like to be a womxn in hip hop, or perceived as a womxn in hip hop. To skim over that and say it's all fine, to me is a disservice to all of the women who are in the scene. I don't want to do that, I want to say, 'this has actually been really hard, but I'm still here'.

Is there anything that you would like people to know about stuff that you're doing, or if you have anything else to say? For example, we're doing our auction soon.

I set up a Just Giving page a few months ago and it's nearly at £4,000 which is incredible. It's for anti-racism charity Show Racism the Red Card. It's a £5,000 target and it can be found on my instagram, which is @ellshortbreaduk. The link is there on my bio, so if you want to spread the word and/or donate, that would be amazing. The money will go straight to the charity, it's for anti-racism for schools. Show Racism the Red Card often uses high profile football players to promote the message, because there is a lot of racism going on in

football. It's more so about the education happening in schools and this need to educate people from young so that unravelling can be started.

Raincrew have been heading along with a bunch of us from the scene, meetings us about tackling racism, sexism and LGBTQ+ issues. They have some workbooks available for us to use, I can pass them on to anyone who is wanting to make change in these areas in our sector. If anyone wants to talk about anything that I've spoken about, feel free to send a message if I've resonated. If I've said the wrong thing and you want to correct me, please anything and everything is welcome apart from saying horrible things.

Thank you so much Emma!