

Bryn Kelly

May 21, 2021

Mr. Greco

English

The Power of A Smile

After teaching his teen intermediate hip hop class, 19-year-old dancer Zack Jot decides to do one last dance before locking up. Music echoing through the speakers of his home studio in Santa Cruz, California, Zack locks into the song. Watching him dance, I can only imagine what's going on inside his head. The music which is a tangled, multicolor, blended ball of yarn in my own mind untangles as I watch him move. He pulls out each strand — the beat, the vocals, an accent, a word — at just the right moments, making me see the skein in a whole new light. Watching him dance, I feel enlightened, let into a little secret, able to see with a clarity I do not normally possess. I am enraptured.

After, I ask him if he can dance one more time so I can get some footage from a different angle. This time, the studio is silent; the sound of his shoes on the wooden floor reverberates through the room, distinct and intentional. He snaps into full-out dance mode with no music, with me standing awkward and amazed behind my tripod. I say something intelligent like “wow you are really good at dancing,” and he replies with a laugh saying, “But that was just choreography!” — like I am being too generous with my praise. And then he humbly helps me pack up my equipment.

On Memorial Day 2020, Zack posted his very first TikTok. Like many of the rest of us, Zack joined TikTok on a boring day during those long COVID months, that tense, dull period in which everyone silently and collectively agreed to set aside their prejudices and embrace the app

that was not long ago viewed as a hub for middle school girls. While making that video, Zack thought: “I have nothing better to do, it’s quarantine, I’m in my room, and I don’t want to work on my homework” (Jot). Thinking only his friends and maybe a few other bored teenagers would see it, Zack posted a video of himself in his bedroom doing some “classic hip hop moves to an indie song, from I think 2003, called Fidelity by Regina Spektor.” In just a week, that video amassed around a million views.

When I came across the video on my own “For You” page on TikTok, I was not shocked to see that Zack, a dancer I knew through the community, had blown up. Quite the opposite: I was elated to see his talent being recognized. As David Bortnick, Zack’s dance teacher, mentor, manager, videographer, crew director, etc (the list goes on) said to me, Zack’s individuality, creativity, passion, and keen understanding of music made him stand out in dance classes as early as the age of six (Bortnick). And even in just one 15-second video, that gift shined through, and other people recognized it.

Looking at viewer comments on the video, I could see that fellow TikTok watchers felt the same way. TikTok has not earned a reputation for being a positive app. Rather, it has been regarded with a mixture of surprise and revulsion due to its toxicity, as evidenced by “cancel culture,” cyberbullying, and biting parodies at the expense of creators’ mental health and well-being (Blanchet). But even on social media there are rare communities that foster inclusion and positivity, and with just one video, Zack had created his own on TikTok. Happy, carefree energy radiating through the screen, Zack was a bright light in a time darkened with images of face masks, hospitals, hand sanitizer, Zoom meetings, tweets from the president, and toilet paper shortages. His comment section was filled with smile emojis.

Zack describes that initial success as luck. There's a certain threshold of skill and charisma that is necessary to attract an audience on TikTok, but there is also an element of chance, or rather, fate. The day Zack posted his video, the TikTok gods smiled down upon him, illuminating him with a golden light. He was one of the chosen ones (Tiffany).

As David explained to me, the success of any given TikTok video largely depends on the immediate interaction of the first viewers. The first five minutes determine its fate: not five minutes of fame, but five minutes to earn a ticket to that ride. Zack hit the threshold level and was anointed. His very first video. Fate.

Energized by his beginner's luck, Zack started putting more time into TikTok, trying to create dances for others to replicate while still staying true to his own unique style. His fifth video was original choreography to the 2006 hit "Smile" by Lily Allen. And that was the one. Zack still marvels at its success: "I didn't think it could get any better than the first one!"

You've probably seen the video. Your little sister has probably performed the dance in front of you while you're standing in line at the grocery store. And maybe you rolled your eyes and looked away in embarrassment, or maybe you said "Hey! That dance is pretty vibey!" I'm going to guess the latter.

Zack's full-out, full-body movement dance to *Smile* was so vastly different from the quintessential TikTok dance that had dominated the app for so long (Burke): limited, overused arm motions backed by yet another Doja Cat song. Zack's cheeky caption, "me watching all these racists getting exposed," in reference to Allen's lyrics, "when I see you cry, it makes me smile," was a funny, honest glimpse into Zack's adherence to his morals and his beliefs. And above all, his smile made others smile too.

Within a day, the video had amassed a million views. Then a million likes. Then, people started recreating it. Big creators and big dancers. Emma Chamberlain. Bailey Sok. Then Lily Allen reposted the video on her own Instagram story.

And now? The video has a staggering number of views. “42...43 million?” Zack laughs. “I don’t know, it’s really - whew!” And then jokes, “Not 43 million likes though!”

Even before he could walk, Zack was dancing. Music playing in the living room, his grandma once scooped her two-year-old grandson up into her arms, and Zack’s floating feet kicked around, tap dancing in the air. As he grew a little older, Zack’s interest in tap dancing did not fade. In fact, he cites the movie *Happy Feet* as “what really pushed it over the edge.” Dancing penguins seem an appropriate inspiration for Zack’s organic and joyful dance energy.

When Zack was six years old, his mother signed him up for dance classes at the same studio as his sister. Even at that young age, says David, Zack was the most focused student in the room, exhibiting also an understanding of music far beyond his years. Zack started choreographing dances of his own at nine or 10 years old, and by 11, his choreography was, in David’s words, “kinda cool.” That year, David gave Zack the opportunity to substitute teach one of David’s classes at Pacific Arts Complex (PAC), Zack’s home studio and the studio that David founded. Zack describes the experience as the moment he “ditched ‘lego set designer’ for dance choreographer.”

Having fallen in love with choreographing and teaching, Zack spent years putting in the hours, the work, and the research that is necessary to rise to the top. At David’s insistence as well as due to his own interest, Zack studied hip hop’s origins, key figures, and distinct styles while also incorporating his knowledge of other genres of dance into his own unique style. He attended

dance conventions and competitions, taught classes at PAC, practiced freestyling with peers, and took classes from a variety of choreographers.

During his junior year in high school, Zack avoided college tours and meetings, set on his decision to attend the local community college, Cabrillo, in order to save money and pursue dance. However, senior year, a counselor convinced him to apply to three colleges from the University of California system. And to his surprise, he got into two.

Suddenly, he found himself at a crossroads. To many others, it would have seemed a simple decision. Attending a four-year university is often seen as the clearest path to success, a paved path through the forest, an easier journey toward the shining castle of security - or rather, money. Attending Cabrillo in order to prioritize dance was a more winding pathway. Unpaved and uncertain, that path through the forest wouldn't be easy. But on either path, there's no guarantee of making it through the forest unscathed. And isn't the winding path so much more exciting? Full of possibilities?

Zack chose dance. And then he blew up on TikTok that same week. It was a beautiful sign from above that he had chosen the right direction.

As of right now, Zack continues to teach at PAC and at On One Studios in San Jose. He is making TikToks. He is attending community college. He is a giant online but just 5'8" in real life. He has become a new kind of celebrity, a new feature in pop culture, but is still living at home, saving his pennies, and dreaming of more.

As for the future, Zack plans to go down to LA as soon as he completes his associates degree. Having accumulated a following of 1.5 million on TikTok as well as attention from people in the industry, Zack hopes to have some opportunities lined up right away so "it won't be a thing where I'm working at Starbucks just trying to pay rent." He names some of his

inspirations — Ysabelle Capitule, Lyle Beniga, Marlee Hightower, and many more — and expresses his hope to collaborate with some of them. He tentatively expresses his dream to teach at a hip hop convention, “maybe someday.” Perhaps teaching at storied dance studios such as Playground...Millennium...Brickhouse? Or internationally?

After being in a music video this year, Zack hopes to work more in the music industry and bring hip hop to a new audience. His eclectic taste in music, from Death Grips to Rihanna, has already attracted people to hip hop dance who may have not loved it before, simply because traditional hip hop music is not their preference.

When Zack blew up, it was not only his dance that had become viral but his presence as well. Dancing to a song literally titled “Smile,” Zack brought joy to millions of people, a counter-virus spreading almost as quickly as corona. By showing his full, complex self — his wide-ranging tastes in music, his blend of dance inspirations, his androgynous style, his moral character, his earnest enthusiasm — Zack is bringing people together in a beautiful way. He is knitting together different threads of the TikTok community, creating a quilt that is expanding larger and larger to blanket the world in much-needed hope and positivity.

For Zack, it’s still just the beginning. He is still just a 19-year-old from Santa Cruz doing what he loves. Only “now I sometimes have people come up to me and say, ‘Hey! You’re that kid from TikTok!’ and then I’m like ‘Yeah! ...Enjoy your coffee!’”

Works Cited

Blanchet, Brenton. "Lil Nas X Trolls TikTok Users Trying to Cancel Eminem With Jokingly

Terrible Freestyle." *Complex*, Complex, 9 Mar. 2021,

www.complex.com/music/lil-nas-x-trolls-tiktok-users-cancel-eminem-freestyle.

Bortnick, David. Personal Interview. 14 April 2021.

Burke, Siobhan. "Some Pros Let It Go on TikTok: 'Is This the Future?'" *The New York Times*,

The New York Times, 29 Apr. 2020,

www.nytimes.com/2020/04/29/arts/dance/tiktok-dance-challenges.html.

Jot, Zack. Personal Interview. 14 April 2021.

Tiffany, Kaitlyn. "How Quickly Can a Girl Go Viral on TikTok?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media

Company, 16 Sept. 2020,

www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/09/tiktok-teens-fandom-mooptopia/61637

1/.