

PARRIS GOEBEL

TEACHES CREATIVITY
IN CHOREOGRAPHY



PARRIS, JE T'AIMÉ

All hail Parris Goebel, queen of the Palace Dance Studio, social media sensation, and pop music's most sought-after choreographer

A

t last count, [the music video for Justin Bieber's boppy 2015 hit "Sorry"](#) had more than 3.3 billion views on YouTube. It's

the most popular clip from the site's most popular solo musician. And Bieber isn't even in it.

What the video does have is Parris Goebel, who was responsible for its concept, choreography, and direction (three skills she applied to the videos for every other song off Bieber's 2015 album, *Purpose*). By then, Parris had emerged as pop music's most reliable behind-the-scenes powerhouse, a visionary choreographer and dancer whose fierce style and routines have been seen in sold-out arenas, buzzworthy awards show performances, and viral videos. The "Sorry" video only confirmed what the industry already knew: Whatever Parris touches turns to gold—or double platinum.

Her backstory is just as remarkable. Parris grew up in Auckland, New Zealand, a Samoan kid obsessed with dance and performance. She would entertain family (and visitors) by forcing them to sit through routine after routine. "I knew at a really young age that this is what I was born to do," she says.

But when her parents enrolled her in a classical dance class, the lessons

didn't take. It wasn't until she joined her first hip-hop studio, at the age of 13, that everything clicked. "I knew that it was something that I wanted to do for the rest of my life," she says.

routines and her distinctive choreography style. One of her videos—an expressive piece set to the song "[I'd Rather Go Blind](#)" by 1960s soul diva Etta James—even caught the eye of Jennifer Lopez, who called and asked a then-20-year-old Parris to choreograph an upcoming world tour for her. Parris saw her shot and took it. "After that, it was so surreal: Artist after artist kept calling," Goebel told [DanceSpirit](#). She went on to choreograph live shows for Janet Jackson, Pitbull, Ariana Grande, and Enrique Iglesias, and she shot videos with stars like SZA and Nicki Minaj.

Parris and her various crews (see page 9) have redefined the look and

"IT'S ABOUT LOOKING AT YOURSELF AND THINKING, 'WHAT MAKES ME UNIQUE? WHAT MAKES ME DIFFERENT TO EVERYONE ELSE IN THIS INDUSTRY?'"

Dance consumed Parris's thoughts. By 15, she was discontent and struggling in school. Encouraged by her father, Parris decided to roll the dice: She dropped out to focus on dancing, and she started by forming an all-female hip-hop crew called ReQuest with four friends. In 2009, they qualified for the World Hip Hop competition for the first time and left with a gold medal under their belts. ReQuest's success propelled Parris and her father to open the Palace Dance Studio, an Auckland-based hip-hop company, that same year. Parris was only 17 years old.

With the help of YouTube, Parris was able to document her crew's

movement of pop music, on stage and on camera, around the world. Her moves have backed massive cultural moments, from Rihanna's innovative Savage x FENTY fashion shows (available on Amazon Prime) to J.Lo's 2020 Super Bowl halftime performance with Shakira. She's also scored an Emmy nomination, published an autobiography, fronted a MAC beauty campaign, and been tapped to direct her first feature film, *Murder on the Dance Floor*—all before her 30th birthday. "Whatever you're curious about," she says, "dive into it, understand it, then rip it apart. Dance changes the world. You can change the world."



A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHOREOGRAPHY

For as long as humans have walked, they've busted a move—which means dance has a long and storied history. Here's a quick overview of one of our oldest pastimes

30,000

The age of the cave paintings at the Bhimbetka rock shelters in India, which feature the oldest-known depiction of dance.

1894

The year Martha Graham, the godmother of modern dance, was born.

\$

The median hourly wage for choreographers in the U.S.

22

1936

The first time a formal choreography credit was listed in a program billing: George Balanchine, for the Broadway show *On Your Toes*. (Billings previously read "dances staged by.")

3,360,092,8

'50s

The decade when the word *choreography* first appeared in an American English dictionary, originating from the Greek words *χορεία* (circular dance) and *γραφή* (writing).

'70s

The decade that break-dancing, the earliest form of hip-hop, became a way for several rival gangs in the Bronx to settle disputes.

5678

The number of people who performed “Hard Knock Life” from the musical *Annie* in order to set a 2013 Guinness World Record for the largest song and dance routine. Was it serendipity or stellar planning that resulted in the group’s size coinciding with what are likely the four most common numbers in dance? We may never know.

1927

The year choreographer Bob Fosse was born. Fosse took what was perceived as a flaw—his slouch—and made it his entire style, which completely changed how Parris saw dance. Fosse went on to create smashes like *Damn Yankees*, *Chicago*, *Pippin*, and *Cabaret*.

1589

The year Thoinot Arbeau, a French cleric and writer, published *Orchésographie*. This meticulously detailed instruction book now serves as a major historical record for 16th-century dances.

1.7mil

The number of people who follow Parris on Instagram.*

1700

The year Raoul-Auger Feuillet, a French dancing master and choreographer, published *Chorégraphie ou l’art de décrire la danse*. The landmark text uses written symbols, otherwise known as dance notation, as a way to describe various movements.

8

The number of gold medals Parris’s dance crews have won at the World Hip Hop Dance Championship.

301+

The number of YouTube views for Justin Bieber’s 2015 hit “Sorry.”*



WOMEN OF THE HOUR

Parris is part of a long lineage of female choreographers. Get to know some of her most prolific predecessors

Pearl Primus

A New Yorker by way of Trinidad, Pearl Primus studied under Martha Graham and other notable modern dance teachers of the era. In 1946, she founded her own dance company, staging performances that incorporated traditional African movements. Her work often commented on racial injustice: Primus's Broadway debut was a choreographed performance set to "The Negro Speaks

of Rivers" by Langston Hughes, and she developed a piece based on "Strange Fruit," the famed Lewis Allen poem about a lynching. Extensive studies in Central and West Africa and the Caribbean helped earn her a doctorate from New York University in 1978, and she taught at numerous universities later in her life. She was bestowed a National Medal of the Arts in 1991.



Martha Graham

One of the most influential choreographers in history and an avant-garde icon of contemporary dance, Martha Graham aimed to “reveal the inner man” through her routines. Born in Pittsburgh and raised in Santa Barbara, she founded her own company in 1926, at the age of 34, in New York. Her teaching style, the Graham Technique, is now a cornerstone of American modern dance; for 70 years, she used it to create artistic motion that spanned the breadth of the culture. In 1976, she became the first choreographer to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and she was named “Dancer of the Century” by *TIME* magazine in 1998.



Katherine Dunham

Katherine Dunham has been called “the matriarch and queen mother of Black dance” by scholars. The Chicago native began dancing as a teenager and studied the anthropology of dance in college; during that time, she did extensive fieldwork in Jamaica and trained in ballet. She later entered into the performance space, and in the early 1930s, she formed Ballets Nègres—one of the earliest Black ballet companies in America—which went on to garner acclaim in the U.S. and abroad. She also ran the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, the only self-supported Black dance troupe of its time, and choreographed more than 90 individual dances, blending traditions from ballet, Caribbean, and modern dance. Dunham performed on Broadway, in Hollywood, and all over the globe. She received numerous awards before her death in 2006.



Pina Bausch

After studying ballet as a child, Pina Bausch entered the realm of modern dance when she moved to New York in 1958 to attend the Juilliard School. She rose to prominence during the 1970s, becoming a leading exponent of the German style Tanztheater (“dance theater”). As an artistic director for the Wuppertal Opera ballet, her ambitious, esoteric, and multi-sensory choreographed pieces—which combined music, dialogue, and elaborate set designs—became known worldwide. Intrigued? Check out *Pina* (2011), director Wim Wenders’s Oscar-nominated documentary, which traces Bausch’s creative evolution.



Debbie Allen

In 1964, Texas-raised Debbie Allen became the first Black dancer admitted to the Houston Foundation for Ballet. She went on to work on Broadway and eventually star in the NBC series *Fame*, for which she won a Golden Globe for Best Actress in a Musical or Comedy Television Series (the first Black woman to do so). Allen won a pair of Emmys for her work on the show, too, and was nominated more than a dozen times during her run as choreographer of the Academy Awards televised ceremony. Under President George W. Bush, Allen acted as a Cultural Ambassador of Dance, and since 2001, she’s run the Debbie Allen Dance Academy, a nonprofit that expands access to dance and theater for children.

THE OFFICIAL PARRIS GOEBEL MATRIX

A guide to the players in her ever-expanding universe



START HERE

Parris got her big break choreographing **JENNIFER LOPEZ**'s world tour in 2012. The pair teamed up again for the 2020 Super Bowl half-time show (three grueling months of preparation; Parris likened it to "building a house"), which also featured...



...**SHAKIRA**, whose music video for "Can't Remember to Forget You" surpassed 1 billion views on YouTube, thanks to a cameo from...



...**RIHANNA**, who endorsed Parris (Rih called P "a badass bitch") and tapped her to choreograph the innovative Savage x FENTY fashion shows. Those buzzy runway routines caught the eye of the British Fashion Council, which nominated Rihanna for the Urban Luxe Award. She won, and she was presented the trophy by...



...**JANET JACKSON**, the Queen of Pop herself. Jackson also hand-selected Parris to go on the road with her for the Unbreakable World Tour in 2015. Before it kicked off, Jackson accepted the inaugural Ultimate Icon trophy at the BET Awards, where she was honored with a tribute starring...



...**SAM SMITH**, the British crooner who showed off some seriously dreamy moves in the video for "How Do You Sleep?" The routine was choreographed by—you guessed it—**PARRIS**.

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...JASON DERULO AND CIARA. Ciara hit Parris up to choreograph her 2018 comeback single, “Level Up” (“I wanna do a music video where I dance from top to bottom,” Ciara said). So she flew to New Zealand to work with the ReQuest dance crew. As for Derulo, he’d worked with Parris the year before: She choreographed his video for “Swalla,” which starred...

...NICKI MINAJ, another of Parris’s repeat collaborators. Parris choreographed the Pinkprint tour in 2015 as well as Minaj’s tropical-inspired routine for the 2016 American Music Awards, where she performed the tune “Side to Side” alongside...



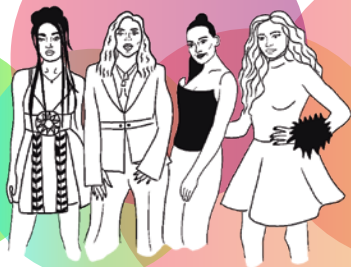
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...ARIANA GRANDE, who headlined Coachella in 2019. In the middle of her set, Grande brought out...



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...LITTLE MIX, the British girl group that worked with Parris on its video for “Touch” as well as live performances. Little Mix was a featured guest on the BBC’s *The Big Night In*, which raised more than £27 million (nearly \$35 million) for COVID-19 charities and was hosted by...



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...ED SHEERAN, who originally penned his anthem “Shape of You” for...

8



...JUSTIN BIEBER to perform “Sorry.” That song’s music video, released in 2015, remains one of the most-viewed clips in YouTube history, thanks in no small part to Parris’s hypnotic routine and ReQuest’s ‘80s- and ‘90s-inspired outfits. Parris is responsible for the moves in plenty of the Biebs’s other videos, too, including “What Do You Mean?”—the lyrics for which were written by...



SQUAD GOALS

Meet the dance crews that bring Parris's jaw-dropping routines to life

If you've seen Parris's videos or performances (and, statistically speaking, you probably have), then you know she's often backed by one of her crews. She and her dancers have appeared with Jennifer Lopez at the Super Bowl halftime show, supported heavy hitters like Rihanna on stage, and rocked out in music videos for Justin Bieber, Jason Derulo, and Ciara. At the time of this writing, the Palace Dance Studio is home to four award-winning crews (ReQuest, the Royal Family, Sorority, and Bubblegum). But two of them—ReQuest and the Royal Family—have reached a level of superstardom that most crews can only dream of.

ReQuest was Parris's first crew, a troupe that dates back more than a

decade to when Parris dropped out of school and cofounded the Palace Dance Studio. "Early on, we were doing a lot of tomboy things," Parris says. "We were dressing as guys and putting caps on. And everyone was like, 'Whoa, who are these girls that can move like guys?'" In 2009, ReQuest competed at the World Hip Hop Dance Championship in Las Vegas, sweeping the Varsity division (ages 13 to 17) and then nabbing gold in the Adult division (ages 18 and older) the next year.

Once the Palace was up and running, the need for more crews began to emerge, leading Parris to start several others for dancers of all ages. One of those is the coed MegaCrew, known as the Royal Family. According to official World

Hip Hop Championship rules, MegaCrews must have at least 10 and no more than 40 dancers, with the Royal Family being on the larger side. The extended Royal Family dominated the WHH MegaCrew division honors three years running (2011 to 2013); numerous television appearances, a sold-out tour, and a slew of viral videos followed (their 2018 guest performance at WHH has racked up more than 107 million views and counting on YouTube).

Today, the @officialroyalfamilydancecrew Instagram account has more than 1 million followers, with @officialrequestdancecrew on the rise at 245,000-plus followers. And while all of Parris's crews have made waves, ReQuest and RFC have proved to be her crown jewels.

Smartphone Film School

The professional equipment you have right in your pocket

Parris films all her rehearsals to see how a routine will eventually appear on a stage or the screen. She says you don't need anything special to do the same: "An easy way of doing that is just grabbing your iPhone and exploring all different angles."

She's not alone. In recent years, an increasing number of professional filmmakers have ditched the Panovision in favor of smartphones. Oscar winner Steven Soderbergh (*Ocean's Eleven*, *Magic Mike*) shot his psychological thriller *Unsane* on an iPhone 7 Plus. Same goes for *Détour*, the whimsical short by fellow Oscar winner Michel Gondry (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*). In 2015, director Sean Baker received

critical acclaim for *Tangerine*, his feature film about a transgender sex worker in Florida when it debuted at Sundance. He made the whole thing using three iPhone 5s.

Shooting on a smartphone can make camerawork feel more accessible—you don't need Hollywood chops to pull off (and share) your vision. The best part? If you execute well with the equipment you have, you can still get noticed. Parris admits that she was an amateur when Justin Bieber called and asked her to direct the "Sorry" music video—she didn't know about camera tricks or special effects, or even the extent to which editors could manipulate her footage after the shoot wrapped. So don't sweat it if you don't have a film school diploma, much less the "right" camera. Just throw your phone on the charger, then greet the challenge head-on. The result might not end up at a film festival, but you'll add another skill to your repertoire—and get a fresh perspective.



Seoul Train

Parris's sphere of influence is truly global

Parris has collaborated extensively with the hottest Korean idol (a.k.a. K-pop) acts in South Korea, establishing herself as a premier choreographer on two continents. At first blush, it might seem like an odd marriage. But this is a match made in entertainment heaven.

Consider the ways K-pop aligns with Parris's ethos: Singular and eclectic, the genre borrows elements from hip-hop, R&B, Caribbean dancehall, Europop, and American Top 40 to create a whole that's greater (and distinct from) the sum of its parts. It's also eminently shareable on social media, leaning on visual grandeur to transcend the boundaries of language and location. Sound like anyone you know?

Parris choreographed the seminal "Bang Bang Bang" dance for boy band sensation BigBang as well as the video for "Ringa Linga," the solo hit from BigBang member Taeyang. She's also collaborated with best-selling girl groups 2NE1 and Blackpink as well as viral "Gangnam Style" legend PSY, his protégés iKON, and Billboard Award winners 4Minute.

Looking to get acquainted with Parris's K-pop oeuvre? Start with the video for English-language banger "Hello Bitches" from CL, the breakout star of 2NE1. It's a fierce feast for the eyes—meaning it's pure Parris.

MAKING MOVES



HUSTLE AND FLOW

Parris gets candid about switching up her routines at the last second, her favorite dance movies, and her artistic legacy

You've said, "When I create, I try to let the music inspire me." How many times do you choreograph the same section of music?

It's definitely a process because I'm a perfectionist, so I'll keep going until I'm happy. Which is kind of never. I'll usually workshop for maybe two hours—it'll just be me and the ReQuest girls. I'll free-style, we'll create an energy. I'll end up with something that I'm vibing, and that's my base. And then I work off that, but I'm constantly tweaking and improving the movement and creating several versions. Then I'll film it and watch it, like, a million times, because what feels right isn't always what looks the most effective on screen. And then I'll just keep changing things. I'm infamous for changing things all the way up to the last second.

What's the craziest routine you changed at the last second?

The Super Bowl show.

Say whaaaat! What did you change?

I was cleaning all the way up to the

moment that they went on stage. And then there were a few things I changed the day before. So yeah, that was hectic.

When you think about creating movements, how does the stage play a part in your choreography?

The stage is my playground, so I feel like I keep playing and trying things until it looks right. Depending on this space that you're working with, there are different formations that will look effective and powerful. For the Savage x FENTY show I just did, each set was so different, so the formations were extremely different from each other. It's trial and error—I keep trying things until that formation looks like it lives in that space.

It's one thing to choreograph for a live audience, where people only see a formation from the front. How do you think about choreography and formations when it's going to be shot from a variety of camera angles?

I'm super hands-on with all of that stuff. If I'm not directing the video, I will film the routine in the way I think

it should be shot and then work really closely with the director, because all those things matter. It might look great from a certain angle, but if they shoot it a different way, it could actually look bad or messy. Sometimes people aren't open to listening to your—artistic expertise, shall we say? So when you come across people like that, try to stay on top of how they're going to shoot it and adjust to whatever the camera angle is.

Do you ever think about using your formations to express different things? Is there any sort of deeper meaning to the shapes you create?

Formations are usually the last thing I do, so I would say the movement itself probably has the deepest meaning. But everything I do is intentional. For example, if you're putting people shoulder-to-shoulder to suggest a certain connection or intimacy, there's obviously a deep intention with that.

What do you look for in dancers when you're casting them for a job?

I'm usually not looking for the most talented dancers—I'm looking for the hungriest dancers. Who's hungry to be a part of something great and special? You can see in people's eyes. So I look for that spark and that hunger and that hustle, because I know that they're going to work just as hard as me to bring the vision to life. If you don't have dancers like that in the room, it makes it so hard to achieve what's in your mind. So I try to look for those qualities, and usually it's a feeling. Energy doesn't lie. So I think just feeling the energy and trusting my gut.

Any tips and tricks for the casting process?

Only you know your vision. What

kind of dancers do you see in your head? What do they look like? What do they feel like? Maybe they all look really similar. Maybe they look really eccentric. Maybe they're all a certain height. There are so many details about your vision that only you would know. Confidently know exactly what you want, then when you go to cast, it makes it easy. Because then it's like, boom, it's her, it's him, it's both. It's about you and what you're looking for.

Let's talk a little bit about fashion. Is it true that the clothes in the "Sorry" video all came out of your closet?

I mean, like, 90 percent of them, yes.

That's incredible. What role does fashion or costuming play in your choreography? How important is it to your art and your vision?


Styling is essential. The colors people are wearing, the textures, maybe even the era of the inspiration—all of that can make or break the visuals. So I'm very hands-on when it comes to the styling. Most of the time I pretty much grab and style myself. Style is another great way to express what's in your mind, along with the movement, the set design, the lighting—all of those things combine to create the vision that's in your head. So I very much care about styling, even down to the color of someone's nails.

Do you have any favorite visual moments from a specific job?

In the "Yummy" video, I got one of the girls to suck on a red lollipop so that when she licked her thumb, her tongue was bright red. There are so many details that you can obsess over, and I love obsessing over those little things, because I know

that when people watch it—maybe even on the tenth time they watch it—they'll pick up on something new. Art is about constantly discovering what the artist is trying to say, because when you put your art out there, you're not really given the opportunity to explain it. So everything from the choreography to the styling is your opportunity to say what you want to say, and then it's up to people to discover your message.

You mentioned your work for Rihanna's Savage x FENTY shows. What's alluring to you about choreographing routines for unorthodox dance outlets like that?



“ART IS BEAUTIFUL BECAUSE YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE GOOD AT IT TO EXPRESS YOURSELF. I COULD BE BAD AT PAINTING, BUT I COULD PAINT SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL BECAUSE THAT'S MY EXPRESSION.”

Those are my favorite projects to do: projects that challenge me, projects that align with my beliefs as a woman and the things that I stand for. The Savage shows are probably my favorite projects that I've done in my whole career purely because they made such a huge dent in the stereotypes that people are conforming to in the fashion world and in the world in general. That's what I'm about—free expression, body positivity, loving yourself. To be able to create a show that stands for those things feels like, *This is what I was born to do*. It's so much bigger than dance. When you have

women crying watching it because they finally feel free to go out and wear a bikini or buy lingerie for the first time, that's what life's about. And it makes me feel truly within my purpose.

If you could choreograph a video or a tour for any performer, dead or alive, who would it be?

Prince. He's probably my favorite artist of all time. I think he's a genius. He came onto the scene unapologetically, and some people got it and some people didn't. And I love that. He was a true artist, from the way he created music to his visuals to



The Dos and Don'ts of Finding Your Magic

According to Parris, the first step of any creation involves looking within and finding your magic. But how do you tap into that mystical artistic force? Here are her tips for harnessing the juice

DO research every aspect of your industry, so you know where your curiosities lie. Research can also give you a sense of what's already out there—and help you figure out how you want to change the game.

DON'T consider the qualities that are unique to you to be “flaws.” The things that make you unique are the same things that will make your art unique.

DO tap into those unique traits and transform them into your superpower. For Parris, that means leaning into her curves and her tomboyish attire.

DON'T compare yourself with others. Everyone has strengths; focus on yours.

DO compete with yourself. Parris says, “I’m always trying to outdo myself. I’m never looking left or right. I’m just looking at me in the mirror.”

DON'T let outside noise drown out your inner creative spirit. “If you can find that trust with that creative person within you,” Parris says, “there’s no doubt.”

the way he dressed. I just feel like he and I would be crazy together.

The Prince x Parris World Tour would be incredible.
It would be insane.

If you had to choose, what would you say are your top three guilty-pleasure dance movies?

One of my favorites of all time is definitely *West Side Story*. I know it's more of a musical, but the dance was so incredible that it doesn't matter. I love *Save the Last Dance* as well. And then I'm going to say *Chicago*.

Choreography and dance have been around for eons, and both will be around for eons to come.
How do you envision your art

impacting future generations of dancers?

I try not to think too deeply about all of that because it overwhelms me. It's kind of selfish, but I hope to live on forever through my art. That's what drives me to create things that I will be proud of.

That's not selfish.

It sounds selfish because it's about me. But I hope it inspires other people to create and be a free spirit. It seems like the whole world is caught up in what other people think. Art is beautiful because you don't have to be good at it to express yourself. I could be bad at painting, but I could paint something beautiful because that's my expression. It's from my soul. And I hope that my art inspires people to do the same.

