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Author(s)	Janice Ross
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# 'Beat Street' looks seriously at youthful street artists of the South Bronx

By Janice Ross  
The Tribune

Just when you were ready to write off break dancing as a passing media fad, a hip form of street dancing that has been wildly overexposed, along comes "Beat Street."

"Beat Street," the brainchild of singer-actor Harry Belafonte, is 1984's "Saturday Night Fever."

The film, which opens today at theaters throughout the Eastbay, is the first to treat break dancers, graffiti artists and rap musicians (people

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who talk rhythmically to the beat of the music) as legitimate and talented artists.

Acting simultaneously as entertainers and cultural anthropologists, producers Belafonte and David Picker reveal these street-smart artists as the Beethovens, Nijinskys and Picassos of the inner city.

The film traces the central trio of characters: Kenny, a rising and talented rapper; Lee, his younger brother and expert breaker, and Ramon, the finest graffiti artist in the South Bronx — as they struggle for survival and recognition.

Their story is framed by a couple of parallel love plots, between Ramon and Carmen, mother of his illegitimate child, and between Kenny and Tracy, an uptown college music student.

But the central theme of the film is the minority artist's struggle for recognition in a society that only grudgingly tolerates ghetto blasters, head spins on the sidewalk and spray-painted designs on subway cars.

As if the social and urban landscapes aren't harsh enough, "Beat Street" is set during the winter. Even the need to stay warm becomes a daily battle.

Not a studio set is used. The movie is set in the Roxy, New York's leading break dance club, and on the crowded streets outside the crumbling tenements of the South Bronx.

More authenticity is added by the real-life



In 'Beat Street,' break dancing is the background for a story of survival and recognition.

rappers and break dancers who join professional actors in the cast. Break dancing groups such as the New York City Breakers, Rock Steady Crew and Magnificent Force are the central acting dancers in the film.

Writers Andy Davis, David Gilbert and Paul

Golding based the screenplay on Steven Hager's tale about the perils of coming of age in urban subculture.

Resisting the usual Hollywood tendency to divide the world into confronting sides, "Beat Street" chooses the mature middle ground.

Guy Davis portrays Kenny as an obstinate, ambitious rapper, a man with a beat and a vision of how to use it to propel himself out of the Bronx.

Rae Dawn Chong makes an attractive siren as Tracy, the girl with beauty, brains and guts who discovers Kenny's brother Lee as he break dances at a club.

Jon Chardiet's Ramon, the obsessed graffiti artist, is the most impassioned of the three. Long before we see him on his midnight escapades, spray painting new subway cars in the car yards, we know he is destined for a violent end. And Ramon dies for his art, rolling on an electric subway rail as he tussles with the mystery man who has been systematically defacing every car he paints.

Chardiet cuts a romantic and confused figure, but his explosive emotions and reticence at marrying his girlfriend suggest that he, too, is still just a boy.

Robert Taylor as Lee, the spunky little breaker who lives to boogie, conveys, as do the other two, the demonic obsession that defines the truly great hip-hoppers. (Hip-hopping is the inclusive term for break dancing, rapping and graffiti writing.)

At times "Beat Street" is almost willfully perverse in turning audiences' expectations away from the standard plot ploys of love and gang warfare. In fact, the most frightening sound in the film is the steely rattle of a can of spray paint being shaken, a sound that heralds the arrival of Spit, the mystery defacer of Ramon's graffiti.

Whipping itself up and ending alike a Broadway musical, "Beat Street" concludes with a New Year's Eve wake for Ramon, staged at the Roxy. There in the bastion of hipness, Kenny brings together gospel singers, college dance students, breakers and rappers to pay artful tribute to a fallen hero. It is a vision of community the streets will be hard put to duplicate.