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Bond Keeps Trio In Step

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Since their boyhood days wowing classmates at school dances, Mike Kuzoian, Mike Minelli and Ron Libatique have tried to make it big as the hip-hop dance crew from Newington called E3.

Gigs over the past few years have included pre-teen beauty pageants, Sweet 16 parties and convalescent homes. Once, they even booked a first Holy Communion. Always, say the college sophomores, audiences have cheered their choreographed routines that usually involve at least one back-flip and a few pelvic thrusts.

But all bets were off at the Apollo Theater in Harlem last month, when E3 — the "E" stands for entertainment — twice faced a crowd famous for booing aspiring stars off the stage. Kuzoian, Minelli and Libatique say they each dreamed of their own shot at the Apollo's Amateur Night, the decades-old institution that discovered the likes of James Brown and the Jackson 5.

That drive brought them together as dance partners in the seventh grade. Now, as they prepare to return to the Apollo for a performance that will be televised nationally, the members of E3 realize that the accomplishment they're most proud of is their bond.

"If we stopped dancing today," said Minelli, 20, "we would not stop being friends."

The night of Jan. 2, as E3 waited in a dressing room in matching white tees, khaki pants and baseball caps, the Apollo audience went about discarding six or seven acts in a way no less humiliating than whacking a gong.

"There's no way to politely boo someone off stage," said Kuzoian, also 20 and Minelli's roommate at the University of New Haven. "This crowd was vicious."

Still, the street dancers from suburbia bore confidence. Their three-minute act is a rapid-fire medley of their best moves over the years set to a mix of hit songs from artists like Missy Elliott and Flo Rida — a routine that had been practiced hundreds of times, the guys said.



It all started in 1999. That year, Libatique and Minelli were fifth-graders at John Wallace Middle School in Newington, so they already knew each other's freestyle footwork. Kuzoian, who went to Martin Kellogg Middle School in the town's north end, became acquainted with the boys and talked about joining forces.

Nothing official happened until two years later, during a dance the two schools held at Mortensen Community Center. Even then, they improvised.

"A friend of mine just ran up to me, because he knew me and Mike [Minelli] danced," said Libatique, a 19-year-old Central Connecticut State University student with a serene, mellow voice. The friend talked about seeing "a really good dancer" from Kellogg who needed to be checked out.

Libatique soon found Kuzoian. They slapped hands. A circle of spectators had formed around them on the dance floor.

"I basically just walked up to him," said Libatique, who teaches hip-hop dance classes in Southington and works at Bertucci's restaurant on the Berlin Turnpike. "And he started going at it, and I started going at it."

Giddy classmates expected a small show at every middle school dance after that, Kuzoian said. With Minelli, the seventh-graders began meeting at each other's houses to watch music videos, usually studying boy groups such as 'N Sync and B2K, and practicing their moves in the basement or garage or whatever space they could find space without crashing into a wall.

E3 did their first routine to Sisqo's "The Thong Song."

"That was a hit," said Kuzoian, laughing.

"Everyone has their loves," said Minelli, who also sings and has been called the Beyoncé of the group for wanting to be the center of attention. "Ours was really just making the crowd go wild."

Once at Newington High School, they had fewer opportunities to put on shows, and so they mostly danced for kicks, they said. Then in 2004, their junior year, Kuzoian was teaching at the Backstage Academy of Dance in Newington when the studio's owner, Kim Larson, asked if he could get a crew together to perform at the Southington Apple Harvest Festival.

With that, E3 members say, Larson had introduced them to competitive dancing.

But the group went on a yearlong experiment of having a fourth member, someone about 6 feet tall, and it didn't really work, they said. The symmetry was off. Minelli and Kuzoian are 5 foot 7, and Libatique is an inch shorter. From afar, in their show clothes, they look like triplets.

Having grown up together, "we all know each other's comforts and discomforts," said Minelli, who believes their bond helps them keep in step.

In September 2006, after a year of performing as a trio again at parties and nightclubs around New England, E3 represented the United States in the small group category in an international hip-hop competition in Bremen, Germany.

On Jan. 2, Amateur Night, about 64 friends and family members from Newington and New Haven took the train ride to Harlem.

"Michael Jackson moonwalked on that stage that we were performing on," Kuzoian said. "That in itself was an achievement to us."

Also, they didn't get booed.

Based on the Apollo crowd's applause and hollers, E3 placed second to a performer named Lil' Robby, who sang Al Green's "Let's Stay Together." E3 then earned a spot in the second round of Amateur Night, which was held Jan. 23.

This time, E3 got the top applause among a dozen or so acts.

"That was more gratifying," Kuzoian said, "because we had way, way less people there to support us ... The neutral audience thought we were the best in the show."

Now the dancers will perform March 26 in Amateur Night's third round, called the "Top Dog" competition. E3 will also tape a performance for the syndicated TV show "Showtime at the Apollo," which they had to audition for separately, on March 3.

E3's members say they have a manager to help them book gigs now, though from their experience, the pay hasn't exactly put them through college: Sometimes they get \$50 each for a 6-minute act, other times just the crowd's cheers or gas money to drive four hours to a show.

In the end, Libatique wants to teach music, Kuzoian wants to be a music producer, and Minelli has a dream of becoming an R&B singer.

"After college, if we haven't made it to the point where we can at least establish a good amount of money a year, it's going to be harder for us to dance together," said Minelli, who has part-time jobs laying concrete and working at an after-school day care.

"But ... right now we're trying to focus on being the best crew that we can be," Minelli said. "Even if we're not the best — whatever. If we're happy at the end of day, that's all I'm happy about, he's happy about, he's happy about."

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