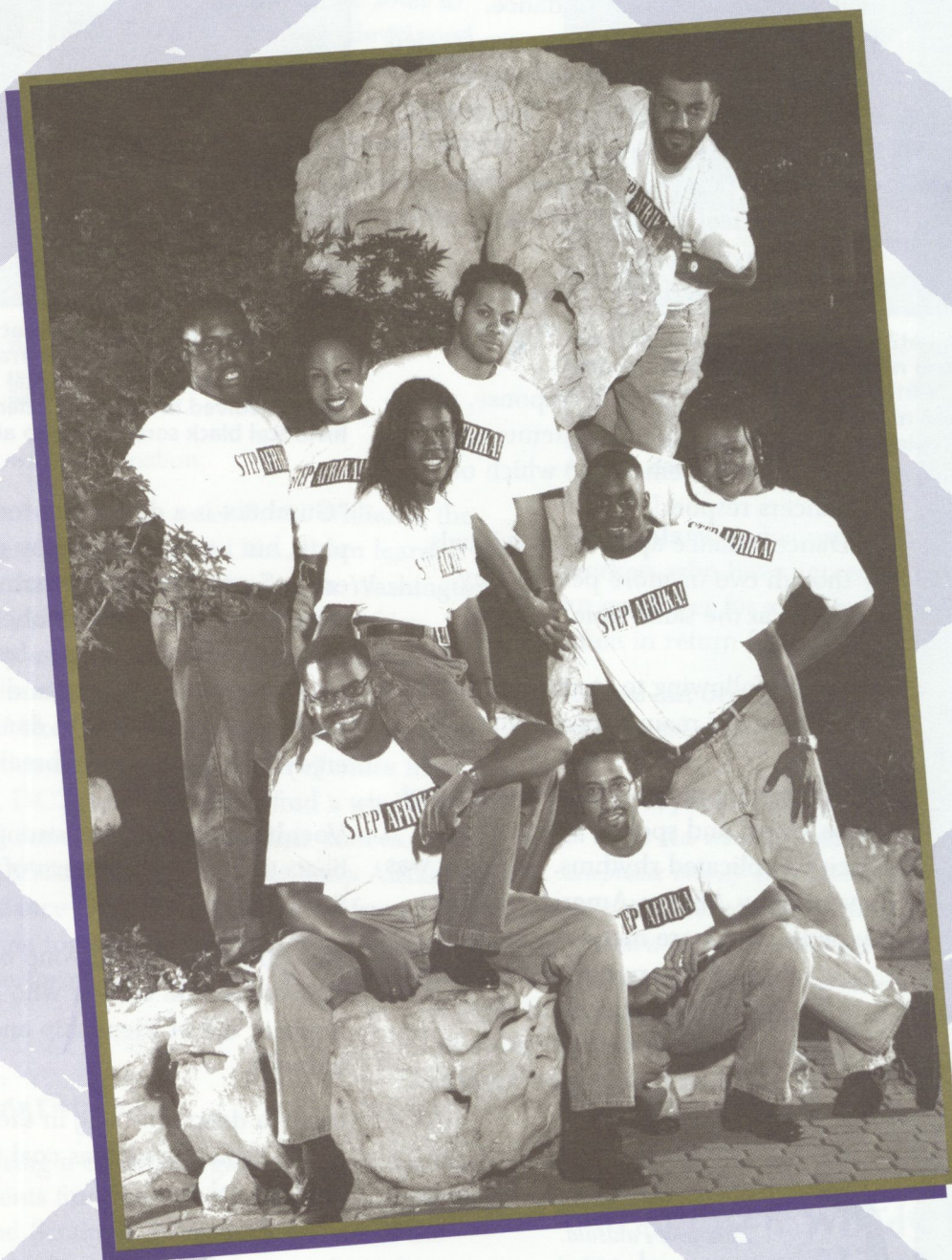


# STEP AFRIKA!

Brian Williams, Founder and Director of Step Afrika! USA  
Step Afrika! Dance Exchange • Soweto Dance Theatre •  
Lee An'e't Noble, Tap Soloist



## Cue sheet FOR TEACHERS

Welcome to *Cuesheet*, a performance guide published by the Education Department of The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC.

This *Cuesheet* is designed to help teachers prepare students to see *Step Afrika!*

This *Cuesheet* introduces stepping and explains its ties to other African-influenced dance forms. It also includes pertinent vocabulary.

For Your Information (FYI) comments provide background information for teachers.

### What's in Cuesheet?

About the Performance, pages 2-3

American Dance Meets African Dance, page 3

Dance in Africa, page 4

The Beat of the Drum, page 5

Activity: Recipe for Rhythm, page 5

Activity: Creating Polyrythms, page 6

Activity: Practicing Call and Response, page 6

A Look at the Dances, page 7

Going to the Kennedy Center, page 8

# About the Perf

## The Kennedy Center

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Vice President, Education

### Cuesheet/ Step Afrika!

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Explain to students that Step Afrika! includes different kinds of dance. Though some of the dances were created in America, they all have been influenced by African tradition. The dances share the following qualities:

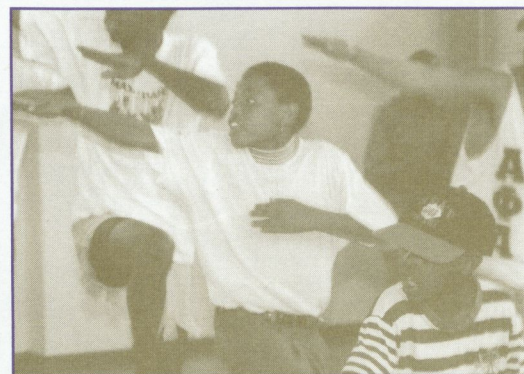
- They are percussive, meaning dancers use their feet, hands, and voices to create rhythms.
- They are polyrhythmic, meaning dancers play several rhythms at the same time.
- They involve call and response, meaning a leader makes a statement with words or movements to which other dancers respond.
- Dancers dance apart as individuals, though two or more people may dance at the same time.

Read the following to students to introduce the three main dance forms:

“Stepping is a dance that combines foot-steps, claps, and spoken words to produce complicated rhythms. Stepping was invented by African-American college students who were members of clubs called fraternities and sororities.

The club members step together to show pride in their fraternity or sorority.

**FYI** *The performance includes traditional African dances such as Zulu and Pantsula.*



The partially obscured Greek letters on the right —  $\Delta\Phi\Delta$  — stand for the fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha, one of five historical black fraternities involved in stepping. There are four historical black sororities who also step.

“Gumboot is a dance that looks like stepping, but was developed by mine workers in South Africa. The name of the dance comes from the rubber-soled boots — gumboots — worn by the mine workers. Mining is hard and dangerous work, and miners would dance for enjoyment during their breaks.”

**Vocabulary:** rhythms—strong and weak beats that create a pattern of sound through time

fraternity/sorority—a group of men/women in college who have come together out of friendship and shared interests

mine—a deep hole dug in the earth from which minerals such as coal, iron, or gold are taken



# Performance



“Tap is a dance in which the heels and toes strike the floor to sound out complicated rhythms. Tap dancers wear shoes with metal pieces nailed to the soles to make the sounds easier to hear. Tap was developed over 200 years ago by Africans brought to America as slaves. The dance blends movements and rhythms from traditional African dances with Irish and Scottish dance styles. African slaves learned Irish and Scottish dances because they often worked with Irish and Scottish indentured servants.”

## American Dance Meets African Dance

Read the following explanation:

“In this performance, you meet Brian Williams, the man who created Step Afrika! USA. Brian learned how to step when he was a college student in Washington, DC. Several years later, he visited South Africa. Driving down a street in South Africa, Brian saw a young boy dancing outside. The dance the boy was doing looked like the stepping Brian had learned at college, but this boy lived thousands of miles from Washington, DC. Brian wanted to find a way for Africans and Americans to share their dances, so he started Step Afrika! USA. Each year, Step Afrika! USA organizes a dance festival where dancers from different countries come together to dance and learn from each other. The performance you see is the result of these festivals.”



### Geography

Using a classroom globe or map, have students find Soweto, South Africa and Ireland and Scotland. Explain that some of the dancers have come all the way from Soweto to dance at the Kennedy Center. ■



The drummer is a member of Step Afrika! who learned traditional African drumming in workshops during a Step Afrika! International Cultural Festival in Soweto, South Africa. Here he accompanies traditional African dancers in performance.

**Vocabulary:** indentured servants—workers who have agreed to work for an employer for a limited period of time, often in return for food and a home

festival—an organized series of artistic or musical events

**FYI** *The performance begins with a skit in which new students – called pledges – seek acceptance into African-American fraternities and sororities. Prior to full membership, pledges must perform a step show. These step shows recall African rite-of-passage ceremonies which include dance as part of a coming-of-age ritual.*

Stepping is a dance that combines footsteps, claps, and spoken words to produce complicated rhythms.

# Dance in Africa

## Who Dances?

If you can talk, you can sing; and if you can walk, you can dance.

Write the following African proverb on the board:

"If you can talk, you can sing; and if you can walk, you can dance."

Then read:

"In Africa, dance and music are part of everyday life. Everyone in Africa, from the very young to the very old, dances and makes music. People dance and make music to mourn their dead, to connect with their gods, and to encourage crops. Many Africans think dance and music are necessary to life."

Explain to students that the African belief that dance is for everyone is part of the stepping tradition. When they are not performing, the dancers in Step Afrika! USA also work as lawyers, teachers, graphic artists, and business people. When Step Afrika! USA needs new dancers, Brian Williams goes to college step competitions to find people who love to step.

### Dance as Music

Help students understand that in African culture, dance and music are not considered separate activities. Musicians move and sway as they play music and dancers create sounds through their movements. A few of the dances in Step Afrika! are performed to drumbeats. However, in most of the

dances, the dancers make music with their bodies.

### Activity: Body Music

Suggest several ways dancers can make music with their bodies, such as stomping their feet or clapping their hands. Ask students to think of other sounds dancers can make by moving parts of their bodies. Then ask the class to choose four favorite sound movements. Have the students practice these sound movements in a sequence until they can perform the sequence several times in a row. If appropriate, this activity can be done in small groups with each group performing its sequence for the class.

### After the Performance

After seeing Step Afrika! USA perform, ask students to recall sound movements used by the dancers.


### Resources

To learn more about African and African-influenced dance...

#### You may want to listen to...

- Africa Never Stands Still CD Set.* Lark in the Morning Musical Catalog BOA234, 1994.
- National Percussion Group of Kenya. *Roots!! African Drums.* Lark in the Morning Musical Catalog RCD382, n.d.

#### You may want to read:

- Emery, Lynne Fauley. *Black Dance from 1619 to Today.* Pennington, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1988.
- Haskins, James. *Black Dance in America.* New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Junior Books, 1990.
- Malone, Jacqui. *Steppin' On the Blues.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996. 

Explain to students that the drum is a very important musical instrument in African culture. In some parts of Africa, each family has its own drum rhythm and this rhythm is passed down through generations. Drums are used to communicate messages across large distances. For example, drumbeats send messages to neighboring towns to announce births or marriages.

If appropriate, explain that when Africans were brought to America as slaves, they brought their drum rhythms with them. Slaves used drums to communicate with slaves from other plantations. When slave owners discovered this, drums were forbidden. Slaves continued to play drum rhythms; however, they used their bodies to make the sounds.

### Activity: Recipe for Rhythm

This activity is designed to introduce the concept of rhythm to students. Read the following explanation aloud:



“Rhythm is a combination of three things: beats, accents, and tempo.”

“Beats are sounds that repeat again and again. Beats are everywhere: in the ticking of our classroom clock, in the sound of footsteps, or in the sound of our hearts.”

When people clap their hands to music, they are sounding the beats.”

“Accents are beats which are sounded more strongly than others.”

“Tempo is the speed at which a rhythm is played.”

(Invite students to create a rhythm together by following these steps. Begin by writing twelve vertical lines on the board to represent beats. Then read aloud:)

“To make rhythm, we begin with beats.”

“Next, we need to choose which beats to accent. In most American music, beats are arranged in groups of two or three with the accent on the first beat of the group. In African music, the beat is mostly on the second beat. Which beats should we accent in our rhythm?”

(Indicate accented beats on the board by circling them.)

“Now we need to choose a tempo. Different tempos create different moods in music. Slow tempos can make music sound sad, while fast tempos can make it sound exciting. Do we want to play our rhythm fast or slow?”

(Now invite students to play the rhythm together by patting their desks with their hands. Practice the rhythm several times until the class is in unison. If appropriate, experiment with different tempos and accents.) ■

# The Beat of the Drum



African cowhide drum



## Activity: Creating Polyrhythms

Reproduce the chart on the board. Divide the class into four groups. Assign each group a part, A, B, C, or D, and a part of the body with which to create a rhythm. For example, one group can clap their hands, another can snap their fingers, another can tap their feet, and the last can repeat a word. Using the chart, have each group determine which beat they should sound. Group A sounds all four beats, group B sounds only 1 and 3, group C sounds only 2 and 4, and group D sounds twice on each beat. Rehearse each group alone, counting the beats out loud. Rehearse together as a class until students can play the pattern accurately three times.



beats	1	2	3	4
group A	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕
group B	⊕		⊕	
group C		⊕		⊕
group D	⊕ ⊕	⊕ ⊕	⊕ ⊕	⊕ ⊕

## Activity: Practicing Call and Response

Call and response can be spoken, with a leader calling out words to which others respond, or it can be danced. Write the following script on the board. Assign a leader to “call” the questions, and ask the class to respond together. Practice the sequence several times until everyone answers in unison.

Leader: Are you ready?

Class: Let's go.

Leader: Where are we going?

Class: To see Step Afrika!

Repeat the exercise using movement instead of words. In this exercise, the teacher is the leader. The class repeats each movement after the teacher. Explain to students that they must watch carefully so they know what movement to do.

1st movement: clap four times

2nd movement: take four steps forward

3rd movement: clap four times

4th movement: take four steps backward

After the performance, ask students to recall examples of call and response. ■



With their hands across their chest, the dancers are in the position from which all Step Afrika! dances begin. The leader calls out, “Brothers and sisters.” The Step Afrika! dancers respond by saying, “Ice.” Each step group has its own signature response. Before the performance, tell students to look for the position and to listen for the call and response which begin all Step Afrika! dances.

# A Look at the Dances

## Styles of Stepping

Explain to students there are many styles of stepping. Each fraternity and sorority is known for its particular style. Before the performance, tell students to watch for the following:

- A group that uses canes in their stepping.
- A group that emphasizes the use of hands, creating rhythms by slapping their thighs or clapping.
- A group that uses kicks and spins.

**FYI** Traditionally, step teams have been either all male or all female. In the past, male step teams were more athletic in their stepping, hitting the floor harder and performing more stunts, while female teams focused more on the use of hand work and singing. This distinction is changing, as female teams become more physical in their approach. In this performance, men and women dance together as well as separately.

## Tap Dancing

Explain to students that tap dancing is another percussive dance that has influenced stepping. Tap dancers strike the floor with their heels and toes, moving their feet with amazing speed. While steppers and gumboot dancers use their hands, voices, and feet, tap dancers rely on their feet only to make sounds. In the performance, Lee Ane't Noble, from Tappers with Attitude, performs a tap solo. Ask students to listen for the sound of the metal taps and to watch the speed of the foot movement.

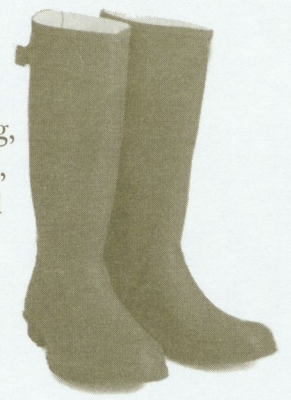
**Vocabulary:** solo—a dance in which one person dances alone



This image shows the looser, less uniform style of gumboot dancing as compared to stepping. Notice the dancers' right legs, two of which are in different positions.

## Gumboot Dancing

Explain to students that gumboot dancing resembles stepping because both dance forms use foot-stomping, hand-clapping, thigh-slapping, and singing. However, the footwork in gumboot dancing is often slower and the movements of group members are less uniform. Ask students to watch for the similarities and differences between gumboot dancing and stepping.



gumboots

## After the Performance

Ask students to describe the styles of stepping they saw.

Also, ask students about the sounds made by the different shoes, the use of the body, the speed of the footwork, and the rhythmic patterns in each of the dance forms. ■

Can you see the similarities and differences between gumboot dancing and stepping?

# Going to see **Step Afrika!**

## A Good Audience

Help students understand their important role as members of an audience. Read and discuss the following:

“In a theater, you are the audience. Being an audience member in a theater is different from watching movies and television. In a theater, the dancers are in the same room with you when they perform. You help dancers do their best when you pay attention. Remember that the dancers in Step Afrika! make music with their bodies. To be a good audience member, it is just as important to listen to the dances as to watch them. Pay close attention to the complicated rhythms the dancers create. If you enjoy a particular dance, clap at the end.”

## Visiting the Kennedy Center

Reproduce the illustrations at the bottom of this page, making sure to cover the written information for teachers so that it is not copied. Distribute the illustrations to each student. Ask students to point to the appropriate illustration as you read the following explanation aloud:

“You are going to see a dance performance called Step Afrika! at the Kennedy Center. You will ride a bus to the Kennedy Center. The Kennedy Center is named after John F. Kennedy, a popular president of the United States. There are six theaters in the Kennedy Center.

“When you arrive, you will walk into the Hall of States. Remember to look up to see the flags from all the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the five U.S. Territories.

“To get to the performance, you will ride in an elevator to the Kennedy Center’s top floor. Step Afrika! will be performed in the Theater Lab. A large sign that says ‘Theater Lab’ hangs on the wall outside the theater. Inside the theater, a person wearing a red jacket – the usher – will show our class where to sit. You will sit on long, cloth-covered benches arranged in rows that go upwards like big steps.

“Four hundred people can watch a performance together in the Theater Lab!”

