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THIS PAGE: A trio of drummers propels a Step Afrika! performance in 2007.

OPPOSITE: A child gets caught up in a Step Afrika! "Stepping Into Schools" program. Last December, Step Afrika! performed for more than 8,000 children in the Maryland-Virginia-Washington, DC, area.



Opposite photo by Sharon Farmer/sphotoworks; right: photo courtesy Step Afrika!



# Stepping Stone to College

Traditional African-based dance sends a powerful message to teens

By Lisa Traiger

Kids come to Summer Steps to dance. And dance they do, all day, every day, for a week. When they leave, they want to go to college. Every last one of them. And that's the point.

At Summer Steps, the team classes and rehearsals take place under the watchful eye of Step Afrika! founder Brian Williams and his 12 dancer/educators. The DC-based company is an anomaly in the dance world, focusing on professionalizing step dancing, traditionally a community-based art form.

Step dancing was born in African American fraternities and sororities on college campuses in the early 20th century. So it comes as little surprise that Summer Steps combines step dancing with college motivation. The form grew from the song and dance rituals that African American frat brothers and sorority sisters practiced to identify themselves and to compete against one another on college campuses.

Drawing from popular 1950s harmonizing song groups like the Platters and traditional African tribal dances, step dancing is a rich admixture of doo-wop, African percussion, call-and-response, and contemporary hip-hop, all melded into a distinctively rhythmic form of body percussion. Its percussive nature—flat-footed stomps, hand claps, body slaps, lightning-fast synchronization—and its frequently amusing, sometimes sassy, chants make stepping an irresistible draw for the 4th through 12th graders in Summer Steps, which is highly subsidized by Washington Performing Arts Society (WPAS) to target low-income children.

While Summer Steps is plenty of fun—just look at the smiles and listen to the laughs and chatter of the 125 kids gathered for assembly one August morning—the program “incorporates a heavy educational component in order to prepare young people for college,” says Katheryn Ray Brewington, assistant director of education at WPAS, Summer Steps’ sponsor. That means dance warm-ups, rehearsals, and college prep sessions daily.

Brandon Peel doesn’t mind. At 6' 2" he towers over most of the kids and teachers. And at 13, he’s got a few years before college applications come due. Long and lean in his black shorts and T-shirt, a baseball cap shading his eyes, he says, “I like learning the steps and being able to move with the rhythm. It feels pretty good.” But he also finds the college prep component helpful. “I was already planning to go to college,”

says the ninth grader, citing Duke and Villanova as possibilities, “but this summer with Step Afrika! has clarified it for me, although I’m still not sure if I’ll join a fraternity.”

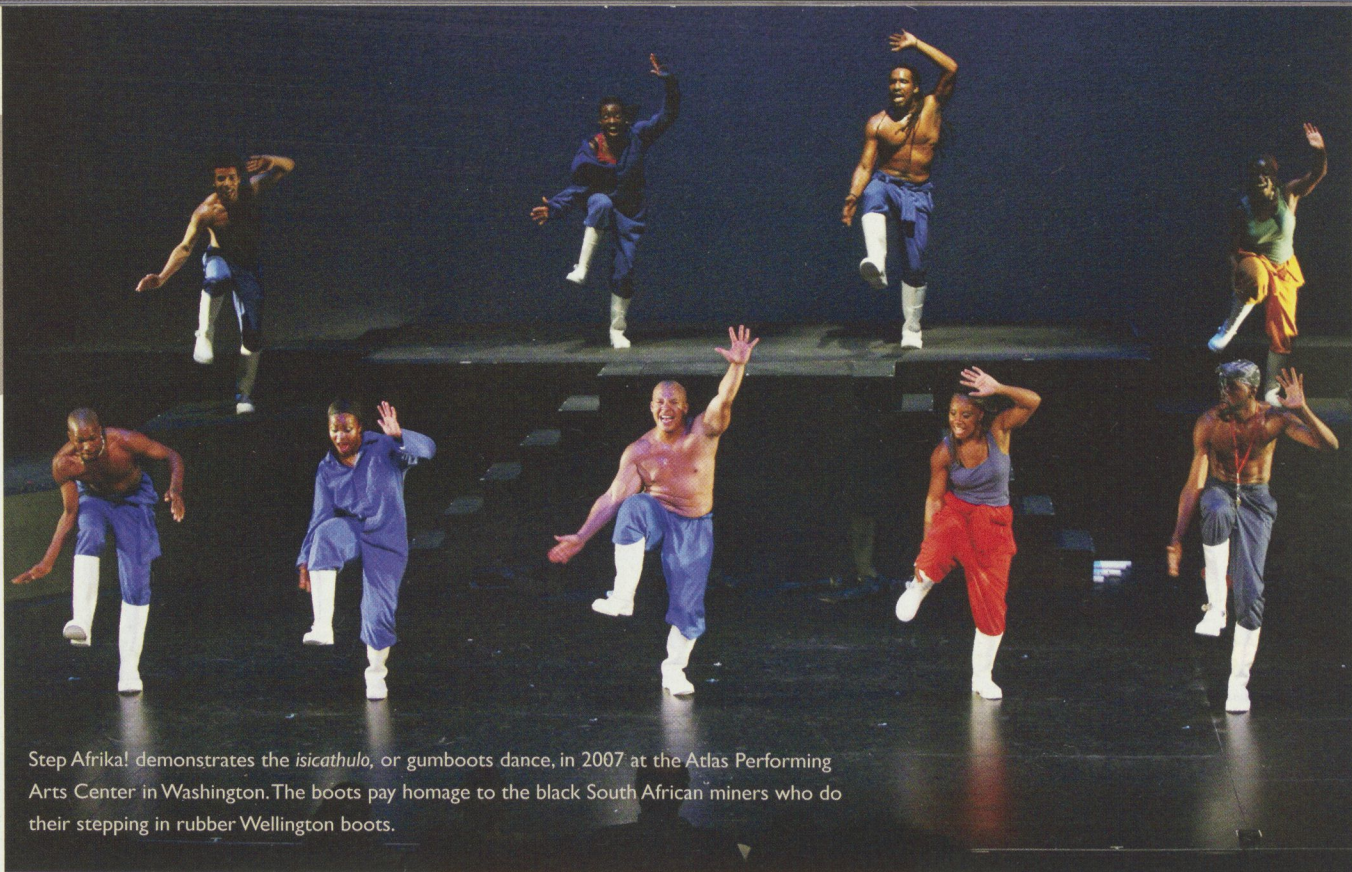
In the past two decades, stepping has infiltrated Hollywood films like Spike Lee’s *School Daze* and 2007’s *Stomp the Yard*. These days, step dancing can be found in elementary, middle, and high schools as well as community centers and churches, particularly (but not exclusively) in predominantly African American areas.

But Williams was stepping long before the genre expanded beyond college campuses. A member of the oldest African American fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha, founded in 1906, he noticed similarities between the step dancing he practiced on the Yard at Howard University and the dances he saw diamond miners in South Africa perform in rubber Wellington



Opposite photo by Sharon Farmer/Spitoworks; right photo courtesy Step Afrika!





Step Afrika! demonstrates the *isicathulo*, or gumboots dance, in 2007 at the Atlas Performing Arts Center in Washington. The boots pay homage to the black South African miners who do their stepping in rubber Wellington boots.

boots. The one-time marketing major built an exchange program between step dancers and South Africans in Soweto Dance Theatre into a full-fledged professional dance company. By 1994 Step Afrika! was sharing its step dances with children in townships and performing for under-served kids in the DC region before venturing onto the concert stage.

Today Step Afrika! tours the nation extensively each year, performing in major concert venues like the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in DC and Lincoln Center Summer Stages in New York. Along with original step numbers, the equally percussive *isicathulo*, or gumboots dance, and hard-driving Zulu tribal numbers make up its repertoire. Yet the more contained and motivationally directed shows presented in school cafeterias and gymnasiums remain its most important.

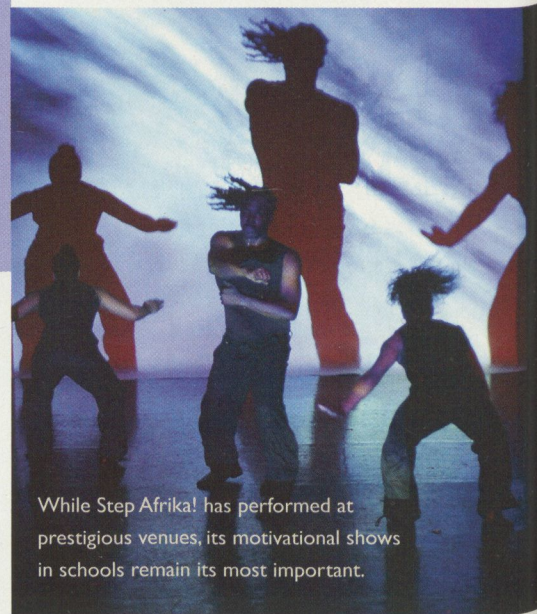
"Nowadays it's not cool to talk about good things and righteous things and commitment and teamwork and discipline," says Sumayya Ali, a former company member and opera singer, who has worked with youths and seen the problems that come from dwindling arts-education

Step dancing is a rich admixture of doo-wop, African percussion, call-and-response, and contemporary hip-hop, all melded into a distinctively rhythmic form of body percussion.

budgets. "Step Afrika! is one of the only groups I know of that shows that it's cool to be righteous, to uplift, and to empower. We do things that make a difference in people's lives. It's not just about entertainment on the stage. There's a real message."

During Summer Stages that message gets imparted by the contract the youths must sign to participate: No

disruptive behavior, excessive talking, profanity, disrespectful conduct, lack of attention, or uncooperative behavior is tolerated. And each day an age-appropriate session is devoted to college prep. For the youngest kids it might be motivational talks; for high schoolers it might entail how to navigate the college application process. By the time the week culminates in a visit to the campus of Howard University, one of the oldest and most



While Step Afrika! has performed at prestigious venues, its motivational shows in schools remain its most important.

Top photo by Sharon Farmer/sphotoworks; bottom photo by Erik Watson



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Young participants in the "Stepping Into Schools" program must sign an agreement banning disrespect, profanity, excessive talking, and other forms of misconduct.



significant historically black colleges, virtually every kid is sold on college.

And when Williams stands up to speak, the children listen. "We want to connect what we do in stepping with where it came from: college campuses," he tells them. "We want you to know that college is a place for you to think about your future, to have a great time, to live and study, eat and take classes, and to have fun."

June Idrissa, a parent volunteer, watches her 12-year-old son, Imran,

make new friends and learn new steps. "It's wonderful to see them working as a team," she says. "They learn rhythm, which is extremely good for the brain. And it's a good age for them to focus on discipline." Idrissa, who lives in DC, also values the college push. "It's an excellent approach to get these kids focused and thinking at an early stage about college. It's better for them to have aspirations now and not wait until high school."

'Step Afrika! is one of the only groups I know of that shows that it's cool to be righteous, to uplift, and to empower. We do things that make a difference in people's lives.'

— Sumayya Ali

Canaan Peterson, a 14-year-old who attends Baltimore School for the Arts, has already made up his mind about pledging a black fraternity and continuing the stepping tradition once he reaches college. "I want to study business, maybe become a mortician. And I think I'll join a fraternity because you have a chance to serve and go back and help others."

Held near downtown Washington in the grand Vermont Avenue Baptist

Photo courtesy Step Afrika!

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Photo courtesy Step Afrika!

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\*All Dates and Locations are subject to change.





Step Afrika! in *Ndlamo 2007 (The After Party)*, a piece modeled after a Zulu dance party, at the Gala Theatre in Washington, DC (below), and *Wade in the Water*, a gospel number (left).

Church, Summer Steps keeps kids dancing and thinking all day. The morning begins with breakfast followed by an all-camp session to practice basic rhythms, chants, and movement combinations before breaking into smaller, age-appropriate groups. The rest of the morning is spent rehearsing individual numbers for the end-of-the-week showcase. The tightly packed schedule keeps the majority of kids out of trouble.

Company member Delonte Briggs flings his long dreadlocks behind his shoulders as he oversees an energetic group of early teens. "Remember these two words—attention and intensity," he says as he tightens the less-than-precise claps and spaghetti arms into something more defined



and razor sharp. "I see you in the back, cargo shorts and black cap," he calls over the heads of a gaggle of girls, to fine-tune one young lady's final pose. "Don't hit it and then flinch. Make it tight."

"We're stressing commitment," says Darrius Gourdine, an early company member who now runs a graphic production company but remains a Step Afrika! supporter. "We're stressing discipline. We're stressing teamwork. We're not only giving them theatrics, we're giving them real-life ideas to deal with. Before you step, you study. Before you see your friends, you do your chores. You couldn't do the step show if you didn't have a 3.0. That's the core of the [fraternity] culture and of Step Afrika! It's about keeping the tradition."

As the kids board the bus and head back to Summer Steps' home base, the chatter is incessant. Along with grade school gossip, other snippets leak out: "Howard University, just like my dad"; "I'm gonna pledge Alpha, like Brother Brian"; "I'm applying to Bowie University"; "I'm thinking of Ball State or Maryland."

It turns out that in a week, 125 youngsters, many from underserved neighborhoods in a rapidly gentrifying city, not only learned how to step, they know where they're going. ♦

Photos this page by Erik Watson

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