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AS IT WAS SPOKEN . . . LET US RECORD .

Steppers meet cloggers at cultural crossroads

By: Susan Budig

Visual artist Mimi Girma describes how artifacts from her homeland of Ethiopia became art in the United States: For us, art comes out of functional, everyday experience. It becomes art when taken out of its element. By the same token, what began hundreds of years ago as an essential means to communicate incognito has evolved into performance art executed by step teams on both university and high school campuses.

Stepping involves hand-clapping, slapping hands against different body parts such as the dancer's thighs, hips, and chest, and feet-stomping to produce a complex rhythmic foundation for the performance.

Stepping is a relatively new phenomenon in high schools. As with most of African music, the drum plays an essential part in the dance. However, with stepping there is no drum. The body becomes the percussive instrument.

Virginia Tech University professor Elizabeth Fine, author of *Soulstepping: African American Step Shows*, says that the term itself is relatively new. Step shows developed in the fraternities and sororities in the early 20th century, Fine says. And while one of the influences for this visual art form was the drill team, she points out that drill teams look and sound more militaristic than step teams.

One of the first fraternities to perform a step show was the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. Alpha Phi Alpha's show was first performed in a Black Masonic Hall, Fine says. Now, non-Blacks and non-Greek frats and sororities are using [the step routines], attesting to the growing interest and acceptance of step dancing.

Responding to the designation of stepping as a dance, Fine says, "I don't like to call it a dance. I would call it a performance, because it's not done to music."

Marquita Wicker, a senior communications major at Augsburg College and member of Delta Sigma Theta sorority, a society that includes students from other colleges and universities, performs in her sorority's step team. Wicker concurs with Fine's concept of stepping: "I wouldn't consider it a dance, either. It's a form of movement," says Wicker.

It doesn't use music because, as Fine points out, the predecessor to stepping didn't use music. Slave masters outlawed the use of drums because they knew the drums were used to communicate. Slaves had to make their own percussive sound by using their feet and hands and spoons and sticks, which they would beat on the ground. They would have words that were often for entertainment but also carried a serious social message.

Steppers are not unlike cloggers. Clogging comes from the Appalachian Mountains and evolved from Scottish, Irish, and Dutch-German immigrants melding their own unique folk dances into one American dance. Both genres of dance, stepping and clogging, use the dancer's body as the percussive instrument to keep time and provide the rhythmic structure upon which the dance is built.

Ann Carter, member of The Wild Goose Chase Cloggers, created a show that combines both stepping and clogging. Cloggers and step teams will perform this coming Saturday, December 16, at Anwatin Middle School.

The performance will be a celebration of two unique percussive dance traditions, says Carter. It will also be an opportunity for different cultures to mix and learn about one another—in particular, to learn about their similarities.

Originating out of slavery and adapted by Greek fraternities and sororities, stepping has become a recognized, athletically viable activity within the athletic departments of many Twin Cities schools. African American advocate Sheila Penn-White supervises Robbinsdale's Cooper High School team; one of her students, Eric King, an 11th-grader at Cooper, performs with Cooper's Step Team and then travels over to Anwatin Middle School to coach

their team.

I like stepping because it's got rhythm and dancing in it, and I like to dance a lot," says King. He made a decision to coach at a younger school. "I wanted to have my own team. My sister went to Anwatin, and that made me think I could make my own step routines and then teach them at Anwatin."

Community dance is not only influenced by the past, but also incorporates popular techniques from the present. Liberian-born Edna Stevens Talton teaches many types of dance at her studio, Universal Dance Destiny, in North Minneapolis. Stevens Talton is accomplished in more than 10 dance styles that cross cultures including African, Reggae Dancehall, Funk, Jazz, Hip Hop, Tap, Latin and Swing.

Stevens Talton notes a key difference between hip hop and stepping: "In stepping, there is no music. Traditionally, drums are the main focus in African music, but in stepping, the dancer uses her body to create the rhythm without musical accompaniment. Stevens Talton often uses live drumming with her African-dance performers."

Beyond this difference, there are many similarities between stepping and other, more popular dances. Stepping highlights complex synchronized body movements coordinated by a step master, that is, one member who calls the dance. The complexity of movement—the use of the feet and hips—associates stepping to hip hop as well. A hallmark of both of these African dances is their polyrhythmic beat.

These dances carry cultural significance as well. Across the board, each ethnic group finds identity with its respective performance art. "It's important for the groups who do it because it's a dance of identity. It's a way of expressing their brotherhood and sisterhood and a love for their organization," says Fine.

Wicker agrees with Fine's proposition—she finds a bond with her sorority sisters through stepping.

Coincidentally, Stevens Talton's studio will also present a holiday performance this coming Saturday. Some of her dancers will perform in her show from 5:30–7 pm, then hustle over to Steppin' Out, to perform again with Ann Carter's show starting at 7 pm.

Universal Dance Destiny's Enfinity Dancers youth team, Optimistic Crew Breakers, and UDD students will perform hip hop, breaking, Latin and African dance set to live drumming at UDD's second annual Holiday Showcase on Saturday, December 16, from 5:30–7 pm at the Capri Theater, 2027 West Broadway Avenue, Minneapolis. \$7 for adults, \$5 for children 12 and under. Food and beverage will be sold during intermission. For more information, call 612-209-3265.

Anwatin Middle School Auditorium, 256 Upton Avenue South in Minneapolis, will host Steppin' Out, a percussive dance performance featuring the Cooper High School Step Team, the Anwatin Middle School Steppers, and the Wild Goose Chase Cloggers at 7 pm on Saturday, December 16. \$10 per adult, \$5 for children 12 and under. Proceeds from the show support these Step Teams. For more information, call 612-581-9899.

Susan Budig welcomes reader responses to tomandsusan@juno.com.