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# It Don't Mean a Thing if It Ain't Got Musicality

## A Music-First Method for Teaching Historically Rooted Jazz Dance

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This article proposes a method for teaching jazz dance technique according to music concepts and prioritizing deep embodiment of music. This method addresses what can be seen as a disconnect between current practices and historical understanding in jazz dance today, a gap that can be bridged with education empowering students to make innovative choices about how they exist within historically rooted styles. By delivering content according to musical elements, students explore a wide variety of jazz and American vernacular music styles in conversation with one another, an approach that emphasizes individuality and musical understanding as a way to relate to history. This article outlines an eight-unit course that can be adapted to various ages, abilities, class sizes, and term lengths. By finding historical roots and contemporary relevance through individual understanding of music, this approach highlights how jazz and American vernacular dance forms are moving, shifting, and alive.

As an emerging specialist in jazz and American vernacular dance education, I am committed to bolstering the continued relevance of these forms in contemporary society. Jazz training develops within dancers many abilities, among them specificity, balancing multiple rhythms, improvising to find personal groove, and expressing while keeping an inner sense of cool. It also nurtures a respect for the past while reaching for innovation. Despite these rich hallmarks, there is confusion surrounding what jazz dance is today. With styles that span from chronological and history-first to contemporary popular culture slants, there exists a disconnect between historical understanding and current practices in jazz dance. In this approach, I position the embodiment of jazz music and its offshoots as the main priority of jazz dance education, a focus that allows for both historical contextualization and contemporary relevance within the classroom. This article outlines an eight-unit method that uses basic musical elements as groundwork for delivering historical information alongside movement training.

### DEFINING THE APPROACH

Before further defining why this approach is relevant for today's dance educators, I clarify some key terms. The term *social* will be used to indicate movement practiced in social settings during specific time periods. The term *presentational* will denote movement formulated into a series of choreographed choices meant to frame a viewing experience (Moradian 2011, 1). This term applies to work ranging from choreography on television shows such as *Hullabaloo* to staged Broadway productions like *Cabaret* to

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the work of concert companies and choreographers like Decidedly Jazz Danceworks and Danny Buraczeski.

I define *jazz dance* as a collection of movement ideas driven by interaction with jazz and other American vernacular dance forms, with an emphasis given to finding personal groove, improvisation, and the fusing of social and presentational dance ideas. The form is a living thing metered by and building on its history to develop new perspectives within its wide perimeters. By embracing movement and music material that includes roots, blues, musical theater, jazz fusions, and other offshoots of jazz, educators also encourage versatility within their students. The term *vernacular* is used to denote music and dance that occurs in normal rather than formal scenarios that can be attached to a particular country and time period.

With terms defined, I would like to clarify further why this approach is worth trying. When people explore kinesthetic embodiment of the auditory, communication lines open and information is developed and exchanged. This positions dancing to music as a powerful and important carrier of cultural knowledge. Jazz and American vernacular dance forms in particular give people rhythmically specific, individual, groove-driven, and expressive yet cool ways to generate and transmit ideas. Additionally, study of these forms encourages complex musicality, a valuable skill for dancers and programs that wish to develop versatile performers.

I view today's jazz dance classroom as a laboratory in which students explore movement motivated primarily by the lineage of jazz music and movement. As connecting to complicated rhythms and musicalities through the body is a poignant and widely enjoyed way to express oneself while relating to others, dancers trained in this way can both share their individual voices and enliven a group. By teaching jazz movement sensibility according to musical concepts such as rhythm, melody, and timbre, I am also able to quickly engage students by applying these ideas to their own musical requests as well as to the jazz, blues, funk, and hip-hop and other such repertoire that I carefully select.

In teaching, I also find it important to link dance and music to their cultural histories. Jazz dance scholar Minda Kraines notes in her book *Jump Into Jazz*, "jazz dance is a mirror of the social history of the American people, reflecting historical events, cultural changes, ethnic influences, and especially the music and social dances of its eras" (Kraines and Pryor 1983, 4). However, I find that today, there is a disconnect between historical understanding and current practices in jazz dance. This disconnect is fueled by commercialized, ballet-based approaches to jazz that have been popularized by television shows and adopted by many private K–12 studios (Risner, Godfrey, and Simmons 2004, 26).

The massification of this approach is problematic. When ballet vocabulary and pedagogical ideas become the base for jazz training, improvisation and groove-based social dance ideas often go missing. Additionally, these studios often serve students who are financially able to pursue higher

education. Such students carry their perceptions of jazz into their colleges and universities, where their dance history classes often do not spend enough time addressing jazz and American vernacular dance forms. In this chain of education, historically rooted perspectives on jazz and American vernacular dance get lost.

The jazz dance technique classroom often becomes the next best place to deliver such historical information. This method of teaching highlights ways to address historical perspectives while delivering curriculum in units organized by musical concepts. I choose to incorporate history according to basic music elements rather than on a chronology because these musical elements are just as relevant today as they were in 1880. Learning both steps from historical dances like the Shim Sham Shimmy and improvisation scores driven by jazz sensibility allows students to learn how to make innovative and individual choices informed by rich music and movement traditions. Additionally, this method can be an asset to liberal arts dance programs that emphasize learning multiple subjects in conjunction with one another, as it addresses dance, music, and history in conversation with one another.

## COURSE DEVELOPMENT

In my time as a dance professional, my performance, choreographic, and teaching interests have increasingly oriented toward encouraging understanding of jazz as a form with deeply rooted history, a complicated and interesting lineage, and endless potential for today's versatile and innovative artists to explore. My own pathway to this interest has included training with members of the former Minnesota Jazz Dance Company and its founder Zoe Sealy, the first woman to own a concert jazz dance company, as well as founder of JAZZDANCE Daniel Buraczecki and members of his seminal company. I have moved to Calgary, Canada, to train and perform with Decidedly Jazz Danceworks and tripped to Chicago to study with Billy Siegenfeld (2009) and the Jump Rhythm Jazz Project.

I have searched far and wide to connect and train with the artistic authorities of the music and history-first approach, and this is reflected in my work as an educator, particularly in high school and higher education settings. I have been experimenting with this teaching approach in programs with various enrollment, age, and ability levels over the course of the last three years, with a focused effort in my higher education teaching at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Additionally, I have conducted a jazz and American vernacular dance forms and music theory, pedagogy, and history literature review to uncover relevant facts and resources to include in my teaching material. The resulting instruction method provides a framework for educators versed in jazz to teach history alongside musical elements that can be adjusted to their own class exercise and music priorities. This method also allows flexibility in planning for different age levels, class sizes, abilities, and institutional requirements.

The approach is organized into eight units, with a number of suggested subunits that can be used to explore jazz sensibility in movement more deeply.

To prepare for each unit, I wrote a summary defining the music concept and identifying its presence along the development of jazz and American vernacular music and dance. My methods for using the information in class have included discussion while explaining applicable class exercises, such as talking about the Savoy while teaching a Lindy basic in the swing subunit. I have also read the historical summaries aloud in class, and given homework assignments that expand on developments within jazz dance related to the music concept of focus. Assignments have included the following:

- Reading: Unit summaries or specified chapters from selected works. Suggestions: *Music: The Art of Listening* (Ferris 2000), *Jazz* (Giddins and DeVeaux 2009), and *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (Stearns and Stearns 1994).
- Important figure, company, or trend summaries: Research and write a summary emphasizing the ways the unit's music concept has influenced the development of the selected topic.
- Journaling: Suggested topics include self-defining terms and their physical uses, recording discussed trends and figures in music and dance, and setting goals and tracking progress.
- Music listening: Listen to a piece by an artist selected from the instructor's list. Create an eight-count movement pattern to be performed and taught in class.
- Timeline assignment: As each class unit has jumped through various points in history, highlight important developments, trends, and figures from our classes and readings on a bullet-point timeline to gain an understanding of chronological lineage.
- Book report: Have students select a related source, then write a three- to four-page report centering the information around a selected class concept.

I also identified movement exercises that relate to the unit concept and corresponding history. Next, I have included a brief explanation, possible summary topics, and an example class exercise for each unit or subunit.

## COURSE STRUCTURE

### Rhythm: Downbeat, Tempo, and Groove

As rhythm is the first unit, it is important to first define space, energy, and time as the three basic elements of dance. Rhythm can then be positioned as a reflection of time in both dance and music. "Keeping the beat," or following the metric rhythmic pulse of music serves as the base approach for jazz and American vernacular dance forms. Important aspects of this element are tempo, the speed at which a piece occurs, and meter, a reoccurring pattern of accents that

provide the pulse or beat. It is helpful to reference musical bars in relation to counts (e.g., eight counts is two bars in 4/4 music).

- Summary topics: Meeting of African and European music and dance, Transatlantic slave trade, Vernon and Irene Castle, "danceable tempo" of partnered social dances of the 1930s–1950s, Bebop, "four on the floor" downbeat in rock and pop music, Decidedly Jazz Danceworks.
- Class exercise—Groove: Provide a combination including movements arising from both social and presentational dance traditions, explore feeling groove internally as its visual presence fluctuates.

### Rhythm: Polyrhythm and Rhythmic Accuracy

*Polyrhythm* is defined as the simultaneous use of two or more contrasting rhythms central to both music and dance. Accuracy in reflecting complicated rhythmic patterns is positioned as a key characteristic of the jazz movement aesthetic.

- Summary topics: Early American roots music, Africanist body percussion/hamboning, flatfooting and clogging, Vaudeville and transformation toward Broadway.
- Class exercise—Polyrhythm explorations: Hold two different rhythms in two different body parts. For example, for 4/4 meter, walk across the floor with a step-dig that moves every beat (Step 1, Dig 2, Step 3, Dig 4) and oscillate head right on 1 and left on 4, repeating all the way across.

### Rhythm: Syncopation and Swing

Syncopation and swing are elusive, yet essential time and energy elements of jazz and American vernacular dance forms. Syncopation is the accenting of the normally weak beat in a rhythmic pattern rather than the downbeat. Swing is "a way of performing eighth notes where down beats and up beats receive 2/3rds and 1/3rd of the emphasis to provide a rhythmic lilt," a definition by music scholar Andy Wasserman (Grotting personal communication, November 2013).

- Summary topics: The swing craze, Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, big bands, Pepsi Bethel, swing breakaway, Katherine Dunham, Talley Beatty, Jack Cole, Matt Mattox.
- Class exercise—Under and overarching swing: Explore how swing can be felt as both a base feeling or groove (double-bounce under other movement) and a selected movement that relies on suspension (arm and torso swings).

### Melody

A *melody* is a recognizable sequence referenced throughout a piece of music. It often also serves as the base for the creation of jazz dance. This element is linked primarily with

the ideas of time and energy. A melody exists within time because it is reliant on rhythmic structure, and often provides the energy quality for dance. Motif, similar to melody, is a shorter pattern reoccurring throughout a composition.

- Summary topics: Blued sound and blues, Leadbelly, Ma Rainey, twelve-bar versus eight-bar structure, Minstrelsy, blues-rock fusion, Eric Clapton, B. B. King, Miles Davis, Brad Mehldau, blues social dancing.
- Class exercise—Vocalize: Play through a C major scale on the piano, incorporate a blued note into the scale. Have the students sing scale, then improvise a movement response while singing.

### Form/Structure

Form is the overall structure or plan with which a piece unfolds. This element applies to the concept of time in music and space in dance. Common forms or structures within jazz music styles include call, response, and comment (the foundation of twelve-bar blues) and AABA.

- Summary topics: Transit of European military instruments to the United States through the Spanish-American War, early brass bands, Tin Pan Alley, orchestral jazz.
- Class exercise—Call, response and comment improvisations: In groups of three, dancers switch between improvising to one another the call, response, and comment of a twelve-bar blues piece.

### Harmony: Tonal and Atonal

This subunit explores harmony in dance as exploration of unison (tonal) versus dissonance (atonal) and the many gradations between, such as counterpoint.

- Summary topics: American country family singing groups, launch of commercial radio in 1920, separation from pair dancing in 1960s, house dancing.
- Class exercise—Unison versus counterpoint: Groups create two repeatable counts eight (or two bars of four), in unison, to an AABA song. Have groups dance separately to demonstrate unison, and two groups at a time dance together to demonstrate counterpoint.

### Harmony: Canon and Borrowing

*Canon* is when groups of dancers perform the same phrase with different timings, creating new texture with the same movement. *Borrowing* is another way to create texture by sharing movement, encouraging improvisers to borrow physical ideas from fellow dancers to explore unfamiliar territory.

- Summary topics: Field hollers, sampling in music, DJing, electronic dance music.

- Class exercise—Borrowing in improvisation: Walking around, locate a partner. Trade eight counts of improvisation for several times, borrowing motifs or ideas from partner.

### Timbre: Dynamics and High-Affect Juxtaposition

In music, *timbre* describes color or quality through elements like tone and volume. In dance, timbre is the dynamic with which energy is applied. *Dynamic* means the overall, stylistic execution of a piece. One dynamic common within jazz and American vernacular dance forms is high-affect juxtaposition. Africanist dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild defines this as contrasting a cool temperament with hot, fast movements (Gottschild 2001a, 275).

- Summary topics: Robert Farris Thompson's (1973) "An Aesthetic of the Cool," culture of New Orleans jazz.
- Class exercise—Dynamics: Perform the same across the floor combination giving dancers different directives for dynamic approach (e.g., quiet and subtle energy, 90 percent energy and raw edge, etc.).

### Timbre: Accenting Staccato, Legato, and Sforzando

Timbre is also present in dance through the development of accent patterns. To accent means to place emphasis on a particular note in a specific way. Although accents are commonly classified in jazz and vernacular music as sharp (staccato) or smooth (legato), there is a wide spectrum of other approaches (including sforzando, which is to accent the top of a note sharply and to finish with a smooth release).

- Summary topics: "Crooners" (Doris Day and Frank Sinatra), the mambo craze, Jump Rhythm Jazz Project.
- Class exercise—Accent improvisation: Walk around improvisations emphasizing accent of different body parts with differing accent styles.

### Improvisation

Improvisation is the art of creating your music or movement in the moment. Vibrant improvisation simultaneously considers manipulation of time, space, and energy through all of the discussed concepts; rhythm, melody, form, harmony, and timbre. Improvisation is a key component of jazz music.

- Summary topics: Kariamu Welsh Asante's (2001) "Commonalities of African Dance," jazz music ensemble improvisation, riffing, 1960s and 1970s social dancing, toasting and rapping.

- Class exercise—Live music improvisations: Invite live musicians to class (if not already being used). Explore improvising to, with, and against live music.

## Interaction

*Interaction* is the practice of relating to the other members of the ensemble. Jazz and American vernacular musics are social; relating to one another provides additional focus and purpose. In dance, interaction is the practice of physically and visually connecting with one another through movement.

- Summary topics: Modern Jazz Quartet, fusion styles and American folk festivals, proliferation of interaction between musical styles, Flying Foot Forum.
- Class exercise—Focus changes: Ask dancers to move through the room with a simple footwork improvisation, with the goal of connecting visually with others to select a partner and start improvisation trades.

## The Whole Sound

“The Whole Sound” is a final unit that serves to synthesize all class concepts; rhythm, melody, form, harmony, timbre, improvisation, and interaction.

- Class exercise: Assign a creative project in which students are split into groups to create and share a piece of choreography that uses at least three class concepts.

I have also created an appendix of music artists I consider when planning class. I select artists that reflect jazz sensibility and cover a wide range of time, from The Original Dixieland Jazz Band to contemporary pianist Vijay Iyer. To maintain contemporary relevance, I update my playlists every time I teach to include new jazz and sometimes rhythmically complex popular pieces. With careful planning, each unit concept can be explored through many different music artists and jazz-related styles such as blues and soul.

## CONCLUSION

The outlined method for teaching jazz dance organizes material according to music concepts while incorporating historical perspectives. Prioritizing individualized embodiment of music through this eight-unit jazz class allows students to connect with American history in their own innovative ways. It is recommended students be notified that historical material addressed in class work is a survey of information and that a more complete understanding of American history through the lens of music and dance

requires sustained study. This is a great reminder of the depth of this subject matter; this method is a starting point with endless possibilities for an empowering way to teach jazz dance.

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