

A Musician's View of Jump Rhythm Technique

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Billy Siegenfeld's Jump Rhythm Technique develops and clarifies dancers' deepest, rhythmic responses to music - both to the music they hear played and to the musical rhythms they feel inside their own bodies. In this way, the technique is unique. From years of teaching music to dance students and playing for dance classes, I know of no other systematic approach beside Jump Rhythm that trains dancers to increase the speed, precision and emotional commitment of their bodies' responses to both simple and complex rhythmic accenting. The reason for this, I learned, is found in the natural alignment work that forms the basis of the technique. This point of view puts dancers solidly on their feet so they can perform pulse, accents, and quick shifts of weight from a neutral stance. Helping dancers find what it feels like to stand on the ground "like a .relaxed but ready boxer" does nothing less than allow them to dance powerfully from themselves. They truly "sit in the pulse" - the only place to be, Siegenfeld so clearly explains, if one wants to live and play rhythmically.

The results I saw in the dance students Siegenfeld worked with for three weeks in Finland were astounding: they began to develop a clear kinetic-musical vocabulary that they also felt free to fill with spontaneous expression. Jump Rhythm's inventive visual image of "playing the drum beaters" - the two hands, the head, and the voice - against the "drumheads of the space" seems to encourage this. It made our dancers here perform every movement with rhythmic clarity, physical power, and an infectiously joyous, fun sense of being alive. The work done in Jump Rhythm classes is supported by the students' own scat-singing self-accompaniment. Jump Rhythm is an energetically singing dance class! Siegenfeld teaches an exercise or a combination by first scatting its rhythmic structure. Then he scats it again, intensifying the difference between the accents and the pulse. Then the students start singing it back, repeating it over and over. (I noted it's relatively easy for them to pick up these rhythms because Siegenfeld himself is an exploding drum set. His voice and body are a battery of bass, snare, toms, crash cymbals, and high-hats that plays music with killer time!) Only after the students learn the rhythms vocally do they begin to learn the movements in their bodies.

In the classes I observed, I saw how the confidence the students gained from knowing a movement combination rhythmically - "from the inside," Siegenfeld calls it ~ lets them perform the movement with more conviction. The vocalizing in a Jump Rhythm class also hooks dancers into some of the best jazz and .blues standards of twentieth century music. The dancers "play" the rhythms of their bodies and voices both with and against the rhythms of these wonderful songs, the way the great jazz improvisers do. That is, this technique also builds into its core jazz's necessity for improvising with clear time. It teaches dancers how to play a pulse accurately through the whole body and then solo

syncopated phrases against it. Jump Rhythm swings! In Jump Rhythm the dancer is taught to become a physically and emotionally expressive musician. By being a musician as well as dancer - a dual-performer approach Siegenfeld always credits to African dance and music aesthetics - each student gets the chance to participate fully in what Jump Rhythm refers to as "a community of rhythm-makers."

What Siegenfeld and the members of his company, Jump Rhythm Jazz Project, are giving to the world of dance and music is not just an extraordinary rhythm pedagogy called Jump Rhythm Technique. They are also creating a refreshingly human approach to dancing that teaches dancers how to be the best they can be as people - both fully alive, self-aware individuals, and activist, sharing members of a group. For this reason alone, the technique could also justifiably be called Jump Rhythm LIFE.

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