

PERFORMING ENERGY
American Rhythm Dancing
and
"The Great Articulation of the Inarticulate"

Billy Siegenfeld

Energy is the only life, and is from the body.
(William Blake)

Emotion is an organizer of form.
(Ezra Pound)

In the 2003 documentary *Rize*, Li'l C says this about the explosive urban dancing he does called "krumping":

People have problems, you know, didn't get this, didn't get that . . . Just the fact that you can get krumped, you can channel that anger, anything that negative that has happened in your life, you can channel that into your dancing.¹

His thought relates to a comment Jack Cole made forty years earlier. In an interview published in 1963 Cole is asked whether he would call a ballerina dancing ballet steps to jazz music "jazz dance." He says,

No. No, it wouldn't because for one thing . . . it would lack the essence of jazz, which is its *feeling*.²

Cole and Li'l C share a point of view about the kind of dancing generally characterized as "jazz": it comes from a dancer's feeling and is crafted so that that feeling impacts on the audience in performance. Dancing is not just about the technique the body masters or about the movement itself.

Cole's remark that jazz's feeling-essence is lacking when done by ballet dancers aligns his thinking with that of the pre-modern dance and modern dance mentors he worked with -- Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, then Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, who both danced with Denishawn before Cole arrived. These groundbreakers were searching in their own ways for a kind of dance that came from *them*, not from ballet's already codified, centuries-old system of training. Humphrey equated the dancing she was doing at Denishawn with feeling "free" with her body. She was enjoying discarding "the old routine things." She was reveling in the discovery of how it felt to be "moving from the inside out."³ Martha Graham, another Denishawn alum, pronounced that technique should be practiced with one purpose in mind: "so to train the body as to make possible any demand made upon it by the inner self."⁴

By the 1940s, by which time Cole was fully launched into working out his own jazz language, the idea was in the air: to make art in any medium depended upon what the painter Wassily Kandinsky called creating from one's "inner need."⁵ Twice more in the interview Cole makes comments suggesting that, for him, dancing jazz has to happen from

the inside out. He asks himself, "Is what a ballerina does accessible to the mass of urban folk?" He answers:

The man on the street can't get on pointe; he can't pirouette. Whenever I see someone come out and go through a "swinging" routine with a second position in it, I know he's left the track.⁶

His use of the phrase "urban folk" in the question helps explain the answer. For Cole jazz dancing then was what we call "street" today. Acknowledging jazz's populist roots, Cole contends that such dance is best done by "technically untrained folk." Using an academically schooled movement like second position when doing the Lindy doesn't make sense to him. It originated not from the gut but in the codes of proper conduct taught to the nobility frequenting the French and Italian courts. A "man [or woman] on the street" would never use second position. More, the turn-out required to hold the legs in second's wide stance would interfere with moving the feet in the fast, loose-jointed manner necessary to swing-dancing.

A comment by Donald Saddler, who was serving as artistic director of the Harkness Ballet in 1967 when Cole created a dance for the company, sheds light on Cole's sense that the two forms make strange bedfellows. Referring

to the rehearsals for the Cole piece, Saddler reflects on the challenge the ballet dancers faced -- that of performing

what's effective *in . . .* movement; how to rivet every ounce of concentration on just doing that. *Not overdancing, but pulling back, almost being still.*⁷

Saddler's "overdancing" comment is instructive. It recalls the aim in ballet to train the body's parts to expand spatially -- to make the spine and especially the legs extend beyond where the skeleton's normal anatomical limits want them to go when they align in relation to the pull of gravity. That is, the object of the training compels dancers to work at re-creating the *look* of the body -- to re-shaping the body's outside, to re-arranging what the audience sees so that it meets the goal of aggrandizing the body's presence in space. This is different from an approach, as Saddler says, that requires "pulling back, almost being still," not to mention sensing what's *in* a given movement.

Cole expands on this distinction:

The ballet kids, with their dedication to and orientation to linear design, do the whole thing from the outside. They *assume* feeling. [Jazz] seems to require a less formal person: by that I mean someone who is more concerned with individual expression.⁸

Cole is suggesting that ballet's mandate to perform spatially expanded, air-tending movements can block a dancer from sensing inwardly. Thinking outward and upward diverts the dancer from *getting down*, to recall a core principle of Africanist-inspired performance practice. Downwardness, I would further suggest, facilitates inwardness -- the kind that leads to greater kinesthetic and emotional awareness. Being grounded, which relaxes mind and therefore body, makes possible the sensing-in which Saddler suggests eluded the Harkness dancers.

Cole presses the distinction between the two forms by contrasting the phrases "dedication to and orientation to linear design," "assume feeling," and "outside" with those of "individual expression" and "less formal." He is noting that ballet, for every justifiable reason given its aesthetic requirements, captivates audiences' eyes more by refining what's seen on the outside of the body than what's felt in it. Cole says that where "true jazz feeling" lies is in the vernacular-bodied Lindy Hop he saw performed at dance halls like the Savoy.⁹

Watching the Lindy in films like *A Day at the Races* and *Hellzapoppin'* can give a sense of this. In the latter Frankie Manning's choreography to Count Basie's "Jumpin' at

the Woodside" defines the way energy-explosive, time-precise partner-dancing can be used to grab audiences kinesthetically as much as visually. That is, it fires their empathy as much as, if not more than, their awe. Instead of emphasizing the outside-seen beauties of a body's extended line, the four couples invite the eyes to feel-through beneath the body's surface to the rhythmically shared energies passing between two people engaged in hand-guided, push-pull relationships.

Rhythm is a phenomenon of energy, and thus something sensed within the body. The verticality-asserting, erect spine of ballet is a phenomenon of space and thus best appreciated by the eyes. Peggy Harper parses this distinction in an observation she makes about African-based and European-based dancing. She notes that

body weight and gestures are directed into rather than away from the earth. . . . [I]n many forms of European dance movements are primarily concerned with the geometric patterning in spatial terms and escape from the ground surface. . . . [T]he emphasis is on moving from one distinct spatial position to another, whereas dancers in Africa [perform] with the emphasis on the rhythmo-dynamic aspects of the movement.¹⁰

A dance student who has taken a ballet or ballet-based class and then one in West African or the Lindy might

understand these differences. The spatially determined positions of European dance compel the dancer to work at -- and the viewer to look at -- what is commonly referred to as the "placement" of the body. Brenda Dixon Gottschild elaborates on this space-fixing aspect of ballet in her own investigation of the idea:

In traditional European dance aesthetics . . . the erect spine is the center -- the hierarchical ruler from which all movement emanates . . . the absolute monarch, dominating the dancing body. The ballet canon is organized around this center.¹¹

It is this stabilizing of the body around its "center" -- whether by, for instance, "tightening the core" or "sucking in the stomach" -- that keeps one's attention focused on the space of the body rather than on, as in the Lindy, the "rhythmic conversation"¹² two partners bat back and forth between each other over a base of infectiously beat-driven, call-and-response relationships. In Gottschild's reading, it makes sense that ballet began under an autocratic French ruler. Louis XIV had no interest in anyone's being his equal -- and therefore no interest in having his subjects relate to him in other than a deferential way. Therefore, the dancing masters he hired taught the nobility a code of bodily conduct that communicated this absolute obeisance. It forced people to

people to keep their eyes focused on the spatial signals the body was displaying, not on the feelings going on within it.

The aesthetic of Merce Cunningham, surely one of the twentieth century's greatest dance innovators, offers an example of how a ballet-based approach to movement can be used to direct one's attention onto the outside of the body. His choreography, performed by determinedly affectless dancers, provides no narrative or emotional through-lines, reduces sharp-soft dynamic contrasts to a minimum, and shuns both metric music and dancing to the beat of such music. These standards have been influencing the way dance is both made and viewed for over two generations. It effectively advises that movement be seen as "an object, something to be examined coolly."¹³

In an interview, Cunningham reveals one of his reasons for pursuing an anti-affective aesthetic. He says of his years performing the emotion-driven dances of Martha Graham,

the idea that was being given to you [was] that a particular movement meant something specific. I thought that was nonsense.¹⁴

Given this reaction, it makes sense that he would have turned to the visually transfixing vocabulary of ballet, which, as noted above, focuses so much attention on the outside of the body. A response he made to an observation of dance critic

Anna Kisselgoff explains the preference further. When she remarked on how he seemed to favor working with ballet-trained dancers, he answered: "I want someone with legs. I need that; that's the way I think."¹⁵ This also makes sense. The legs have little to do with communicating emotion in human behavior -- in contrast to the hands, head, and voice, which have everything to do with conveying it. Highlighting leg gesture in choreography deflects audiences from searching for meaning in the dance's movement vocabulary.

The "rhythmo-dynamic" aesthetic of an African-originated form like vernacular-bodied jazz works differently. It concentrates on crafting and releasing percussively rhythmic, emotion-carrying energies generated from within the body. As described in an earlier article, "Standing Down Straight," such rhythm-generated jazz expresses time-articulated *energy* more than space-articulated *shape*.¹⁶ It preferencess giving one's body over to the gravity-directed accents and pulses of a rhythm with geometrically organizing it around an erect spine.

Thanks to the preservation of dance on film, examples of this abound. Citing only a few from thousands: watch Gwen Verdon use staccato-attacked isolations of eyes, hands, and voice to seduce an innocent into submission in "Whatever Lola

Wants" in *Damn Yankees*; or Gregory Hines unleash a barrage of hard-hitting taps to defuse the depression of the life he lives in Soviet Russia in *White Nights*; or Miss Prissy, one of the South-Central L.A. krumpers in *Rize*, convert head, torso, and arms into a series of whiplashed body-hits that repeat with increasing intensity. These virtuoso feats of *expressivity* -- as difficult to perform clearly as any feat of technique-displaying *formalism* -- depend less on idealizing the look of the body than on crafting it to behave as it instinctually does when feeling drives its actions.

When asked to define further the essence of jazz dance, Cole says, "It is the great articulation of the inarticulate."¹⁷ I feel this remark could serve as a clarion call not just to dancers who use their bodies as percussion instruments but to any creative person seeking to transform inner need into art. Cole's childhood included a father he never knew, a mother who returned no affection, and the self-consciousness of bodily disfigurement. (His eyes had a cast in them). As strongly as childhood's wounds might have led him to turn reclusive, Cole turned his trapped energies into creative fuel. Barton Mumaw, who danced with Cole in Ted Shawn's Men Dancers, knew something of Cole's difficult past. When asked about Cole's disruptive behavior he doesn't

hesitate to say that Cole's recalcitrance fed his art:

It affected his kind of [dance] movement, if you want to get down to it. If you look at Jack's movements, you'll see a lot of hurt and a lot of fight. It's aggressive, and there's a deep resentment.¹⁸

The krumper Tight Eyez, in speaking about his own dancing, says, "It seems a little bit aggressive, but it's a good way to take out your anger when you go through stuff in your personal life."¹⁹

His and Mumaw's words ("hurt," "fight," "aggressive" and "resentment") point to the sources of the bold dynamic contrasts, animal stillnesses, and sudden drops into the floor and pounces away from it that characterized Cole's own fiercely performed dancing. Historically, such feeling-states can also explain the motivation fueling America's first publicly noticed performers of vernacular-bodied, rhythm-driven dancing.

W. T. Lhamon Jr. documents how newly freed, young black men doing pre-tap, foot-percussive shingle dancing at the Catherine Market in New York City transformed feelings like "hurt and fight" into the beginnings of what I term (and will define in a moment) "American Rhythm Dancing." Given the overwhelmingly confining social, political, and economic conditions weighing against blacks at that time,

he notes the obvious: it was survival-infused emotion that drove the performers doing this choreographic precursor to vernacular-bodied jazz dance. Lhamon writes: "Young blacks were dancing a free identity in a place that valued it against a backdrop of enslavement." For emphasis, he then re-phrases the metaphor, observing how this same emotional factor has continued to influence the expression of vernacular-bodied rhythm forms today like hip hop: "[It] is still playing virtually two centuries later: runaway freedom within confinement."²⁰

"[F]ree identity" against "enslavement"; "runaway freedom" against "confinement." These yoked images suggest an urge to take the emotional-mental energies within the self and funnel them into articulate expression outside the body -- to do what all living things not just want but, it would seem, are compulsively hard-wired to do. As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins describes it,

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same,
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves - goes itself . . .²¹

The desire to "selve," to "deal out that being indoors" is being denied exit because it's battering against actual resistance. And the barrier to this universal instinct to push out, to not hold back what one feels, transforms the

body into a compression chamber. What was being trapped there behaved like any element about to reach boiling point in a sealed-tight container: the volatility, the pressure to release becomes so great that when it issues, it does so ballistically, with power and suddenness. It is such tightly funneled articulation of initially compressed then exploded energy that these pioneers of percussive street dancing must have brought to these performances. *Must have* because what pushed back against them was the social mandate that African Americans, deemed three-fifths human in the Constitution, were not entitled to freely express themselves. But the trickster wit that the combination of African heritage and American trauma bequeathed them -- their use of "a strategy for disguising their inner emotions from the whites"²² -- allowed some of them to escape whips or death.

Transforming one's feelings, whether of aggression or grief, into percussive dance is the gift these canny, socially marginalized dancers passed down through generations. The tradition's beneficiaries are legion; they are any dancers who have ever artistically taken hold of intensely felt, survival-driven energies and transformed them into rhythm-driven body-music. To recall only one

example among hundreds of legendary rhythmicists, watch singer-dancer James Brown percuss, beside feet, drumbeaters like hands, head, and blurted scat syllables against not just the floor but against all the other imaginary drumheads surrounding the space of his body.

I group any such acts of dancing, singing, and/or instrumental-playing driven by inner need under the rubric "American Rhythm Dancing." This ongoing tradition includes those types of African-American-originated, full-bodied music-making. This essence honors the African performance principle called "ngoma," which, from the Bantu, translates as "drumming and rhythmic song-dancing."²³ American Rhythm Dancing, as performance practice, fuses body and voice into a multi-body-part-percussing musical instrument that uses jazz-based and blues-based rhythms to articulate the fundamental impulses of instinct-driven human behavior.

I would also propose that the tightly funneled rhythmic energy associated with this tradition impacts best when performed through the vernacular body rather than through one that organizes movement to be valued spatially. The latter type celebrates dancing that beautifully expands and elevates the body. The former prefers dancing that physicalizes three ideas: Cole's, that it anchors in the

articulation of feeling; and Harper's and Gottschild's, that its African roots compel the performance of energy more than space; and this author's, that it's the solidity of the earth, not the porousness of the air, that the body needs to push against if it is to make clear the accented dynamics of percussive rhythm-making.²⁴

American Rhythm Dancing favors using the vernacular body because, as with the art of acting, it more readily allows one's common humanity to radiate through a given performance. It therefore also frees the performer to speak his or her private heart in public with greater believability and less artifice. The jazz writer Gary Giddins has this individualist dimension in mind when he says,

The one truth about jazz of which I am certain is that it incarnates liberty, often with a stubbornly proud intransigence, merging with everything and borrowing anything, yet ultimately riding alone. . . . Not a bad thing, independence, which is what hooked many of us on art in the first place.²⁵

It's true that Giddins is talking about jazz music, not dance. But his insistence that the art's core value is independence coupled with intransigence can readily include dance iconoclasts whose performances embrace these qualities. Being free to speak one's inside voice requires

taking a stand apart from what is conventionally approved of, whether in one's surface life or, today, on the surfaces of digital screens providing us with answers that, courtesy of nanosecond-fast search engines, require little digging down for.

Ballet and ballet-based dancing are among humanity's glories. It is a constant inspiration to watch performances of dance in which humans successfully strive to achieve transcendence. But the urge to transcend can also promote tacking in directions that take one away too far from the earth and the self. "We go outside ourselves," Michel de Montaigne writes,

because we do not know what it is like inside. Yet there is no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk on our own legs.²⁶

Mary Oliver continues Montaigne's wry thought, noting the one universal that constantly signals us to make peace with where we already are:

Gravity is a fact everybody
knows about.
It is always underfoot,
like a summons . . .²⁷

Jump Rhythm® Technique, a vocal-rhythmic approach to jazz-based learning, suggests putting away the stilts.²⁸

It builds into the pedagogy the what the combination of

gravity and basic instinctual intelligence have already taught the body; to dance not by overdancing but by quieting the body-mind enough so it can sense what gravity's directives -- not "preconceived notions as to how we ought to look"²⁹ -- are telling the body to do.

Surely this is why people still delight in watching a brilliant body-musician like Fred Astaire. His movies teach us not only that he knew how to let his body just be. He also knew how to use his inarguably cool groundedness to explode into space some of the most perfectly weight-flung, precision-timed rhythmic accents ever recorded on film.

Astaire was by his own admission "bad-tempered, impatient, hard to please, critical."³⁰ But, as with any artist whose work continues to impact on us, his temperament drove him to dance what his gut commanded:

I do nothing that I don't like, such as inventing "up" to the arty or "down" to the corny. . . . What I think is the really dangerous approach is the "let's be artistic" attitude.³¹

Reminiscent of how Giddins sees jazz, Astaire enjoyed borrowing from everything, worshipping nothing, and turning the movement he chose into masterpieces of sharply etched, rhythm-driven body-music. Giddins calls it liberty;

Astaire called it his "outlaw style."³² This highly individuated point of view conveys neither the upper-class superiority that audiences of his time associated with the wealthy and powerful nor the white-tie-and-tails elegance people still glibly tag him with -- a look Astaire himself didn't like. It rather communicates what Morris Dickstein calls the "instinctive democrat" in him.³³ His dancing is about

a sense of movement and relationship to those who [felt] hemmed in and isolated, a democratic kind of classiness, available in fantasy if not fact, to replace stiffly hierarchical notions of class.³⁴

The people who first saw Astaire's movies wanted to dance like him not just because they too wanted to cavort on an Art Deco set. They did so because populist nonconformity lay at the core of Astaire's performances. That inspired most of them, who either lived during the Depression or vividly remembered it, to use dance to express their own wit-laced rebellions. As Arlene Croce says of one of his duets with Ginger Rogers,

it's like a moment of *cinema verité* bursting through the surface of a polished commercial film³⁵

Outlaws like Astaire can do this for us. Their examples can help those of us who do jazz to create this "bursting through" effect in our own work. As models of

convention-defying artistry, they inspire us to use the art form as a means of authentic self-expression. They inspire us to make and perform dances that break apart the polished surfaces of classroom-imitated "steps" to reveal that more reliable source of creativity lying within each of us -- our own wondrously peculiar, real-life behavior.

In this spirit, may more of us continue to honor the tradition of American Rhythm Dancing. May more of us be good outlaws as well as good citizens. And may more of us take the time to roam not the Wild West but those other, equally real wide open spaces -- the ones in us. If we do that, if we allow ourselves to become, to borrow Margaret Lloyd's metaphor about Graham, excavators who dig downward as much as explorers who seek outward,³⁶ we join the larger dance tradition of moving from the inside out. This revolutionary idea was effectively started by the dance world's first certifiable rebel, Isadora Duncan, and continued by groundbreakers like Graham and Humphrey in expressionist modern dance, and Jack Cole and James Brown in feeling-generated percussive dance. The future of jazz and its offshoots lies in this practice. It's there, beneath the body's surfaces, that we tap into our emotion-charged energy.

When we focus primarily on performing energy, not space, when we focus primarily on performing inside-felt urgency, not outside-seen spatial design, we affirm what artists throughout the ages have always acted on, often against great odds: the need to speak one's subjective truth. This is what the pioneering foot-percussionists did at Catherine Market. By daring to give articulation to the inarticulate rioting within themselves, they danced the freedom-seeker's challenge spoken in the last lines of Shakespeare's *Lear*. Its message, as relevant today as at any other time, affirms what inside-out creators have always done in the face of pressures to conform to what established society deems right or proper: "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."

NOTES

1. LaChappelle, *Rize*, 28'37"-28'46".
2. Giordano, *Anthology*, 72.
3. Cohen, *Doris Humphrey*, 75.
4. Cohen, *Dance as a Theatre Art*, 139.
5. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual*, 34-35.
6. Giordano, *Ibid*, 73.
7. Loney, *Unsung Genius*, 329.
8. Giordano, *Ibid*.
9. *Ibid*, 73.
10. Harper, "Dance in Nigeria," 289-290; 294.
11. Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*, 8.
12. Siegenfeld, "Standing Down Straight," 117.
13. Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 43.
14. Tomkins, "Appetite for Motion," 54.
15. Kisselgoff, "Ceaseless Novelty," 1.

16. Siegenfeld, *Ibid*, 118.
17. Giordano, *Ibid*, 72.
18. Loney, *Unsung Genius*, 35.
19. LaChappelle, *Rize*, 28'31"-28'36,"
20. Lhamon, *Raising Cain*,16.
21. Gardner and Mackenzie, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*,90.
22. Levine, *Black Culture*, 133.
23. Janzen, *Ngoma*, 1.
24. Siegenfeld, "Standing Down Straight," 114.
25. Giddins, *Visions of Jazz*, 8.
26. Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, trans. 1044.
27. Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*, 19.
28. Jump Rhythm® Technique bases its rhythm-driven approach to movement learning on the gravity-directed alignment concept called Standing Down Straight®. For further reading: Billy Siegenfeld, "Standing Down Straight: Jump Rhythm Technique's Rhythm-Driven, Community-Directed Approach to Dance Education," *Journal of Dance Education* 9 (December 2009).
29. Todd, *The Thinking Body*, 34.
30. Astaire, *Steps in Time*, 7.
31. *Ibid*, 6-7.
32. Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 226.
33. Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 382.
34. *Ibid*, 392.
35. Croce, *Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers*, 47-48.
36. Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book*, 48.

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