The Art of Misbehaving

Youth,

American Rhythm Dancing,

and

The Need To Not Be Good

Billy Siegenfeld

Jump Rhythm Jazz Project
Billy Siegenfeld, Artistic Director

www.jrjp.org • info@jrjp.org
I was invited to speak here this morning about how those of us who teach Jump Rhythm® Technique use it to help people express themselves through dancing and singing. Given MIMO’s focus on youth in their teens and young-adult years, I’ll direct my remarks to the work we’ve done with people in that age range.

Our two groups, Jump Rhythm and youth, have something in common. We share a common need. It is a need that is experienced not just by those in our two groups but by individuals in every kind of human group. It’s one that seems almost as basic to survival as the one to build shelters, feed ourselves, and propagate the species. I mean the need to express ourselves – to take a feeling or thought that’s inside us and figure out a way to get it outside of us; to take, for instance, an emotion like love or fear or anger and coax it out of our bodies, get it unstuck enough so that it can push past the enclosing, defensive surface of the body and emerge into the light of day.

This need can also compel us to take a feeling or thought and do an even more wondrous
thing with it: transform it into an outside-seen work of art using a language like dance or song or painting or words. This impulse to give form to something we feel or think is an old one in our species. The cave paintings discovered at Lascaux, Altamira, and, most recently, Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc, tell us that humans have been engaging in this process of self-expression for tens of thousands of years.

So, this is the tie that joins young people and those of us who do Jump Rhythm. We have this peculiarly human stuff inside us that needs to get pushed to the outside of us, apparently to announce what we think or feel, and/or to make us feel more connected to the world.

What obviously does not join our two groups are the circumstances of our daily lives. We who teach and perform Jump Rhythm have been lucky enough to lead lives that allow us to express feelings and thoughts creatively. Many teens and young adults lead lives that disallow this. Langston Hughes calls this condition of blocked potential “a dream deferred.” But it’s not just dreams that these young people can’t act on. Most of them have little or no chance to even go to a place that offers classes in the arts. Most of them have little or no chance to go to a place where they can even begin to realize that they have this thing inside themselves called creative potential.

In Western countries, the condition of blocked potential – whether in youth, in women, or in minority populations – has of course been around for a long time. As long as there has been or continues to be inequality between whites and non-whites, men and women, straights and LGBT communities, and, fueling all these divides, those who possess wealth and power and those who don’t, creative outlets for people lacking in political rights, social leverage, and/or economic
means will be in short supply.

I mention all this because such realities necessarily impact on anyone working with seriously troubled youth. For those of us teaching Jump Rhythm, the attempt to effect change in them remains limited. More often than not, what we do makes little or no difference at all. Yes, what we pass along can occasionally help a young person decide to live a more creative life. But that remains the rare instance.

I simply ask that this limitation be kept in mind as I begin talking about the work we do.

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The words of MIMO’s acronym – “moving in, moving on” – might help to introduce Jump Rhythm’s point of view. Both parts of the phrase suggest a challenge. I interpret the first part, “moving in,” as a challenge to get young people to move in, in the psychological sense of the term; to figure out how to get them to move toward their inner selves and become interested in getting unstuck what’s sitting inside them. If that were to start working, we might then get some of them interested in expressing themselves creatively. And then, if that were to happen, we might even be able to get a few of them interested in taking on the second part of MIMO’s challenge, “moving on.” That is, a few might become inspired to move beyond a life of blocked dreams to one that, at minimum, focuses them on doing something constructive with their trapped energies.

Jump Rhythm® Technique offers young people a way to work on the “moving in” part of the challenge. We do this by teaching them a skill we call full-bodied rhythm-making. Full-bodied rhythm-making teaches them to grab hold of their inside energy and funnel it outward. It does this by having them think of both their voice and the parts of their body as percussion instruments – as
“drumbeaters” they can use to strike sharp accents against the “drumheads” of the space. When students take a drumbeater like a hand and fling it against the space to knock out an accent, and then, as they’re hitting the accent, sing it out sharply, this fused voice-body action converts the energy they’re feeling inside the body into a rhythmic music that reads on the outside of the body.

This voice-generated body-music is what is of value to us. It’s of value because when students start pushing out the energy inside them we see them begin to sense what’s real about themselves, to use the only word, overused as it is, that adequately describes it. It is real for the simple reason that the energy they’re driving outward is coming uniquely and unmistakably from them.

Jump Rhythm also offers young people a way to work on the “moving on” part of MIMO’s challenge. Like other arts-outreach programs that help individuals tap into their potential, full-bodied rhythm-making can motivate changes in social behavior. In particular, it can serve as a path to building relationships. When students vocalize rhythms in our classes, they inch a bit closer – often without their being aware of it – to making a connection with other people based on the giving, not the withholding of their feelings.

The human voice, when it talks or sings, reflexively serves as a carrier of whatever emotion the speaker or singer is feeling at that moment. The strongly rhythmic singing students do in Jump Rhythm classes helps them channel outward what they’re feeling when they move. As reported in the news this past year, getting resistant people to use their voices to express emotion also defines the work being done by a theatre company in an outreach program in California. At the Rehabilitation Center in the city of Norco, artist-teachers of the Actors’ Gang focus the
inmates on using their voices to express “four basic emotional states: anger, fear, happiness, sadness.” Being guided to “confront [such] emotions and deal with other inmates” influences some of the inmates to think differently about themselves. While rehearsing Moliere’s Tartuffe (a play about a con man working a swindle), they begin to experience the satisfaction of using their voices and bodies to act out an emotion and have it affirmed rather than rejected. This positive reinforcement obviously contrasts with what many of them typically went through in their former lives – keeping an emotion stuffed down; having its repressed energy mutate into anti-social behavior; being sent to prison for it. In short, the Actors’ Gang workshop introduces these people to a world in which one can say and do what one feels without penalty. One of the inmates was reported as having said that the workshop “gives me a place to be silly – be myself.”

Yes: being silly; being silly as a path to learning how to be oneself. Defining this word as I think this inspired inmate meant it, this is also the goal of Jump Rhythm work: teaching students to let go of the fear of being judged so they can physically let go of the emotions they hold back. Full-bodied rhythm-making is the tool that levers this release. It helps students break through walls of fear, self-consciousness, or defensiveness – and the body-rigidity that accompanies these states – by freeing them to turn their voices and bodies into articulators of emotion-charged rhythms. When this happens, the dancing the students do becomes as much about communicating feelings as muscling movement and “getting the steps.” Using the voice to help students sense this inward aspect of dancing opens them up to working cooperatively with other people. That is, once students get practiced in using voice-generated body movement to wake up their insides, they become more available to working in partnered relationships with another person.
Practitioners and scholars of African and African American music and dance refer to this process of working together in rhythm-driven relationships “call-and-response.” Call-and-response is crucial to Jump Rhythm because its conversational approach teaches students how democracy can work. It acquaints them with the freedom to assert one’s own voice and, at the same time, the need to give another individual the time and space to say what she or he wants to say.

Gathered in a rhythm circle (itself a variation of another African-originated communal form, the ring shout), a common beat is laid down and everyone starts pulsing to it, both in their bodies and their voices. Then, using that pulsing as a kind energy-glue that binds everyone rhythmically, each individual does a short solo that expresses his or her own individuality. When the solo finishes, the individual blends back into the circle, giving the next person the chance to make his or her own rhythmic statement. That is, at its most effective, African-originated call-and-response guides students to practice both individuality and community. When this democratic component kicks in, students get a first taste of what scholar Robert Farris Thompson terms call-and-response’s “politics of perfection” – the enacting of “perfected social interaction.”

In using call-and-response to build community, Jump Rhythm is honoring the tradition of the non-balletic, vernacular-bodied, vibrantly rhythmic dancing and singing that we trace to the expressive genius of both Africans and African Americans. Historically Africans used the fusion of drummed music and rhythm-propelled dance and song to drive communal rituals in their worship and celebrations. Later, after being ripped from their homes and transported to the United States via the nightmare of the Middle Passage, African Americans found ways to use these forms to re-shape their rituals during their 250-years of enslavement. Through the next almost 150 years
of struggle to gain participation in America’s body politic, they have been transforming these materials into the artistic achievements that have definitively influenced both American and world culture.

Serving as the sound score for these achievements, musical forms like ragtime, jazz, the blues, rhythm-and-blues, and jazz-and-blues-based rock, funk, and hip hop have defined and continue to define the ways in which rhythm-driven dancing and singing are done. I call this performance tradition “American Rhythm Dancing” since most of its fundamental characteristics were developed in America, first by blacks and then by blacks and – through a controversial mix of exploitative appropriation and sincere identification – individuals from predominantly white working-class populations. Jump Rhythm artist-teachers respect this tradition because the rhythmic language associated with it dramatically helps people transform their inside-felt energies into an exuberant body-music that, as noted above in the discussion of call-and-response, affirms the worth of both the individual and the people with whom one is interacting.

Thompson coined another phrase to describe the essence of such rhythm-driven dancing and singing: “vital aliveness.” Vital aliveness arises from the “joyous play” that comes from “infusing, democratically, equal life to different body parts.” I particularly note his reference to different parts of the body – not, as he points out, just the legs or feet: (“[The dancer] does many strong thing besides move his feet.”) Dancing that places primary rhythmic emphasis on the lower limbs is a characteristic of Europeanist, ballet-based systems of dance. In general, these systems build smoothly flowing motion in the body around an uplifted center of gravity, while the legs and feet travel along the floor or suspend gesturally in the air. This aesthetic differs from the down-
into-the-earth, rhythmically complex styles of motion exploded through multiple body parts found in Africanist-influenced forms like Lindy Hop, full-bodied tap dancing, break dancing, and the fiercely percussive street dancing invented in South Central Los Angeles called “krumping.”

In Jump Rhythm, too, a sense of vital aliveness fills students when they release energies through the body’s several parts, which we call its drumbeaters. The sounds that seem best able to coax vitality out of people are found in any music whose beat causes the body to pulse naturally in a rhythmic, bouncing quality of motion. These include the propulsive swing of bands like Count Basie’s, James Brown’s hard-hitting funk, and the floods of verbal rhythmning that drive hip hop. A characteristic central to the performance of this music is its rhythmic play – how a musician can play accents not only on the predictably “strong” beats of the pulse, called the downbeats, but also on the less noticeable, “weak” beats, called the offbeats. Music theorists call this landing of accents at unexpected moments syncopation.

Syncopation is about breaking patterns. For instance, if a rhythmic pattern lands a strong accent on both the “one” and “five” of a repeating series of eight beats (“ONE-two-three-four-FIVE-six-seven-eight, etc”), syncopation can disrupt that pattern by accenting the “two” and “four” instead of the “ONE” and “FIVE: thus, “one-TWO-three-FOUR-five-six-seven-eight.” This is exactly what Igor Stravinsky builds into the rhythmic phrasing at the beginning of the famous second episode of The Rite of Spring. Jazz people as well as devotees of rhythmically daring classical compositions like Rite love the way syncopations play against a set beat because they inject the music with surprise, if not, as in the case of the notorious first performances of the Stravinsky piece, shock.
Indeed, jazz’s built-in tug-of-war between accents that fall on predictable beats and those that don’t suggests why the art form, for some, feels like life at its most thrilling. The predictably repeating beats in a rhythm are like the habits that dictate our routine-driven days, days in which we follow the rules, follow the clock, and function “like everyone else.” In contrast, syncopations, whether in life or in art, veer us away from the predictable toward behavior that, even though conventional thinking might disapprovingly label it “eccentric,” or even “bad,” makes us feel exhilaratingly alive.

About 130 years before Michael Jackson wrote the song “Bad” (by which, of course, he meant behavior that felt good to him), Henry David Thoreau used the same word in the same sense. As America’s great nonconformist chronicler of the human need not to conform, the need to occasionally (or even more than occasionally for rare ones like Thoreau) “step to the music” of “a different drummer,” he too praised the virtues of being “bad”:

The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?

Jazz suggests a metaphor for life because its central rhythmic characteristic, the continuous play between accents that land squarely on expected beats and those that fall unexpectedly off them, honors the necessity for being off as well as being on; honors the necessity to engage in ways of behaving that others might consider misbehaving. Whether we’re jazz artists, front-line social workers, reformist educators, innovative businesspeople, against-the-grain athletes, aspiring Michael Jacksons and Beyoncé, or – more to the point here – young artists-in-potential from Finland or Estonia, syncopation, the core rhythmic ingredient of the jazz arts, inspires us to fulfill the deeply basic human need to occasionally not do what convention dictates. Surely, the feeling
that comes from granting ourselves this freedom to misbehave is what Michel de Montaigne, another radically prescient modern thinker, had in mind when he said well over 400 years ago, “The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself.”

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George Gordon Byron – yet another forward-thinking author whose writing speaks to the benefit of getting out of ourselves the unique, syncopated stuff we feel inside ourselves – wrote this:

’Tis to create and in creating live  
A being more intense, that we endow  
With form our fancy, gaining as we give  
The life we image . . . .

“Live a being more intense.” Yes, sooner or later that too can begin to happen once we begin acting on the instinct to “be myself.” Once we begin to engage in actual self-expression – what Byron seems to intend by the phrase “endow[ing] with form our fancy” – we open ourselves to the pleasures of living and working intensely and constructively with ourselves rather than intensely and destructively against ourselves.

I’m also invoking Byron’s words for their obvious relevance here. So-called troubled youth don’t get many chances to turn intensity into creativity, much less turn it into a creatively lived life. They don’t for the reason that it remains locked up inside them. They’re “full of passionate intensity,” to use William Butler Yeats’s words – but they either never get a chance to release that passion or, at those hope-killing moments in life when “things fall apart,” can only release it destructively or self-destructively.

But this is the challenge those of us who teach Jump Rhythm face every day as a matter of
course. It’s the goal of full-bodied rhythm-making; it’s the meat of our work, whether we’re dealing with severely disadvantaged youth or with the teens and young adults we teach in universities and private dance studios. Indeed, emotional intensity can sometimes remain trapped inside with greater resistance among this latter group – with those who have the benefit of taking dance classes. The ballet-based techniques that typically dominate dance training in these institutions, especially in the studios, have taught them – by pushing them to achieve beautiful body shapes rather than use movement to express emotion – to hold energy in instead of let it out.

So, using the method of full-bodied rhythm-making, we try to deal with this challenge. We try to get unstuck the energy-potential lying within these young people by working with their intensity, with the feelings that have become pent-up inside them. In this way Jump Rhythm honors the tradition of time-precise, energy-explosive street dancing. The first performers of this art were the black foot-percussionists who laid down rhythmic sound at marketplaces in cities like New York in the early 1800s. The scholar W.T. Lhamon Jr. evokes how these African Americans, whether fugitive slaves or freed, were dancing “a free identity . . . against a backdrop of enslavement”; they were expressing “runaway freedom within confinement.”¹⁰ Their sometimes satiric, always percussive releasing of held-back life continues in any number of urban styles today. As Tight Eyez, one of the South-Central L.A. artists interviewed in the documentary Rize, says of krumping: “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.”¹¹ JoJo of New York City’s Rock Steady Crew addresses the emotional base of b-boying even more directly in The Freshest Kids: “Aggression was break dancing . . . ‘cause, before that came, there were gangs.”¹²
Whether we think we need to or not, each of us – may I say, all of us? – is driven in some hidden or not-so-hidden part of ourselves to, at least every now and then, “spit it out”: spit out the so-called negative energy that dealing with life’s everyday demands so often makes us keep locked inside. Granting the soul this therapeutic relief is a remedy psychologists and self-help books address as a matter of course. But it’s also common sense. Only when the feelings that are trapped inside start getting pushed out into the light of day can we begin to convert self-awareness into self-affirmation.

America’s first great poet of common speech, Walt Whitman, describes such a self-affirmative act bluntly and humorously. He calls it a “barbaric yawp,” an unashamed and unself-censored shouting-out of feeling. At an earlier moment in “Song of Myself,” the poem in which these then-startling words first appeared in 1855, Whitman was wondering whether he might be able to adequately express what he was feeling inside himself. The uncertainty provoked him to ask this question: “Walt, you contain enough, why don’t you let it out then?”

It’s a question I find it necessary to ask every now and then, both of myself and of the people I work and learn with in Jump Rhythm. For I notice that anytime we challenge ourselves to use our bodies and voices to “let it out,” we give ourselves a chance both to be ourselves and to work more productively. With a nod to those whose thinking has partly inspired this talk, we give ourselves a chance to live and work in a way that Thoreau might say lets us step to the beat of a different drummer; that Thompson might say puts us more in touch with the core of our vital aliveness; and that jazz people might say sets flowing the source of that most delightful, non-destructive misbehavior of all, the urge to syncopate, to play off of, not always on, those beats of
life and art that conventional wisdom too often deems are the so-called “right” ones.

Yes, if that were to start happening more each day, if we were to start making a greater commitment to pushing out into the light of day the aliveness sitting within us, we might also begin to realize that, in an apparent paradox, this sharing-outward of interior energy is what can also help us pay better attention to the needs of the people around us. The sense of community can come when we realize we’re working with people who ache as much as we do to get what’s in them out of them. It can come when we notice that these other individuals are, like us, seeking an environment in which one can share one’s private truths publicly without fear of punishment.

I note Thoreau’s phrase for the moment when a person suddenly shares what he or she was formerly afraid to: “self-emancipation.”15 His thought here – one that continues what he wrote in Civil Disobedience and that deeply affected both Mohandas Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. – is that it is only when we begin saying out loud what feels real to us that we can begin to sense what it means to be freely ourselves. And, further, it is only when we begin expressing this “truth-force,” or “satyagraha,”16 as Ghandi came to call it, that the people with whom we live and work might become inspired to do so as well.

To relate this thinking to the job of helping young people unblock their creative potential: if we who mentor them were to express more often, through both voice and body, the peculiarly unique, so-called “bad” thoughts and emotions that we ourselves tend to keep hidden; and if, in an embrace of call-and-response, we were to applaud the expression of such “uncivilized” inside-held energy in these young artists-in-potential, it’s just possible that a few more of them might discover what it feels like (recalling the words of both Montaigne and the inmate working with the Actors’
Gang) both to “belong to oneself” and to “be myself.”

Yes, if this were to start happening – no, let me change that to the more hopeful verb – if this starts happening, it means that we, the mentors of these sometimes sullenly nay-saying and oftentimes frightened young people, are facing down our own blocked fears and resistances and answering Whitman’s question, “Why don’t you let it out then?,” with some version of “yes.” Maybe at first it’s only a mild “yes.” Maybe on some later day it changes to a stronger one. But, whatever the intensity with which it’s said, when we decide to share it with the people we live and work with, it becomes a “yes” that moves us closer to what Whitman calls a barbaric yawnp – closer to a humanity that gives instead of withholds, closer to a “yes” that gets us to know ourselves better and fear each other less.

NOTES

4. Thompson, 9.
6. Thoreau, 10.
11. *Rize* (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2005), 28’31” - 28’36.”
14. Whitman, 47.
15. Thoreau, 7.