

Step Afrika!



 VIRGINIA ARTS FESTIVAL

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Step Afrika!



Step Afrika! is the world's leading authority on the art form of stepping. Stepping is a form of dance with roots in the African American community. As an organization, Step Afrika! promotes stepping across the United States and worldwide. During international visits, the organization partners with local dance groups and arts organizations to create performances that blend different styles and cultures, using stepping to facilitate cultural exchange and bring communities together. Step Afrika! is dedicated to education and works with students of all ages and backgrounds to spread an appreciation for stepping and the values of teamwork, discipline, and creativity the dance demands.

Did You Know?

- Step Afrika! is the largest African American arts organization in Washington, D.C.
- As D.C.'s cultural ambassador, Step Afrika! represents the city nationally and globally with their performances, promoting cultural exchange and education.
- Step Afrika! is among the top ten African American dance companies in the United States.

Source: Adapted from [stepafrika.org](https://www.stepafrika.org) and Step Afrika!'s educational performance guide, <https://www.stepafrika.org/app/uploads/03-Step-Afrika-Educational-Performance-Guide.pdf>

Stepping in Style

In the early 1900s, African American students who were members of college organizations called sororities (for women) and fraternities (for men) created stepping. Stepping became a way that members of these organizations showed off their pride and dance skills in the college “yard”, casually or competitively. The founder of Step Afrika!, C. Brian Williams, learned to step while attending Howard University in Washington, D.C. Step Afrika! is the first professional dance company dedicated to the tradition of stepping. It began in 1994 as an international cultural festival in South Africa, in which the brothers of Alpha Phi Alpha, C. Brian Williams’ college fraternity, performed stepping and taught stepping workshops.

Stepping is a dance that uses the body as an instrument. It combines footsteps, claps, and spoken words to produce complex rhythms. Dancers wear hard-soled shoes that create loud sounds against the floor. There are many styles of stepping, with each fraternity and sorority having their own particular styles and moves. Traditionally, male step teams were more athletic in their style of stepping, hitting the floor harder and performing more stunts. Female step teams focused on hand work and singing. In recent years, women’s step teams have also developed more physical choreography.

Today, stepping continues to be an important part of college life for many people, but it has also become widely popular outside of universities. People step in schools, churches, and other community organizations, and attend professional performances like Step Afrika!’s. Stepping has been featured onscreen in movies such as *School Daze* (1988), *Drumline* (2002), and *Stomp the Yard* (2007), as well as the documentary *STEP* (2017).



Source: Text adapted from [stepafrika.org](https://www.stepafrika.org/app/uploads/03-Step-Afrika-Educational-Performance-Guide.pdf) and Step Afrika!’s educational performance guide, <https://www.stepafrika.org/app/uploads/03-Step-Afrika-Educational-Performance-Guide.pdf>

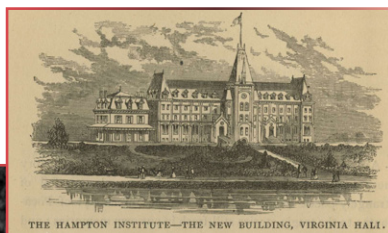
The Divine Nine and Black Excellence at College

Before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, African American students were barred from attending almost all white Southern colleges and universities, and often discouraged from attending Northern colleges as well. In response, over the years before and after the Civil War, free Black leaders, religious organizations, government efforts, and philanthropists across the country created schools to serve African American students and ensure access to education and the opportunities it unlocks. Today these are known as Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs). Local HBCUs include Norfolk State University (founded by community leaders and Baptist organizations in 1935) and Hampton University (founded by Union Army leadership in 1868).

In the first decades of the 1900s, Black students attending HBCUs as well as predominantly white colleges came together to establish their own “Greek life” (fraternities and sororities). In 1906, there were only a few Black students studying at Cornell University, and they were frequently isolated by their white peers and excluded from white fraternities and sororities. Young African American men studying at Cornell created Alpha Phi Alpha, the first historically Black fraternity, as a mutual support network and a source of pride and motivation in their studies. Quickly, other chapters of the fraternity were established at different colleges, including the prestigious HBCU Howard University. Several other Black fraternities and sororities were also established in this time period, including the oldest historically Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha. Today, these fraternities and sororities are known as the National Pan-Hellenic Council, or the “Divine Nine.”



A step show in 2020



Hampton University in the 1870s.



Sisters of Delta Sigma Theta during a step show in the 1980s. University Archives Photograph Collection.

What Do You Think?

Are there any kinds of dance you associate with your own school? Which dances? When do you usually see them performed?

Pick a Historically Black College or University and research its origins. When was the school founded, and as a result of whose efforts? What changes and developments has the school undergone in the years since then?

Shall We Dance?

People have always danced, historians believe. We can see representations of people dancing in prehistoric cave paintings!

When people dance, they move their bodies to express emotions or ideas, usually accompanied by music. In this way, dance is like language, and the different steps and movements within each style of dance are the language's vocabulary. People can dance alone or with others. When people dance to entertain an audience, they often do so as part of a performing group called a dance company. Dance companies usually specialize in a certain type of dance, such as modern, jazz, tap, or ballet. Step Afrika! specializes in stepping and also performs other styles, like South African gumboot dancing.

Choreography is the art of creating dances. A choreographer imagines how a dance will look and arranges steps and movements to tell a story or express a particular feeling or idea. Choreographers must be knowledgeable in their chosen dance form and its particular vocabulary to effectively convey their message to the audience. They also select the music that will accompany the dance and work with set, lighting, and costume designers so that all elements of the performance work together to express the dance's story or idea.



Photos from Wikimedia.org

Left: Prehistoric cave pictographs. Kozarnika cave, Belogradchik, Daznaempoveche. Top right: Ancient Greek dance depiction. Painter of the Berlin Dancing Girl, ArchaiOptix. Bottom: Carved dancing figure in 13th century Hindu temple. Ramappa temple, Rudresvara, Palampet Telangana India, Sarah Welch.

Elements of Dance

All forms of dance can be broken down into their most basic parts. The acronym **BASTE** can help you remember these dance building blocks. As you watch the performance, try to keep these elements in mind. How do the dancers of Step Afrika! use and combine them? What is the overall effect?

Body

A dancer uses parts of the body or the entire body in various ways.

Example: Dancers might use their arms, legs, hands, feet, even their necks and heads.

Ask yourself: How did the dancers use their bodies? What shapes did their bodies make?



Action

A dancer performs particular actions.

Example: A dancer might bend, sway, or leap.

Ask yourself: What movements or actions did the dancers make?



Space

A dancer moves through space in various ways.

Example: A dancer might move forward, backward, diagonally, up, or down.

Ask yourself: What patterns in space did the dancers use?



Time

A dancer moves in relation to time in different ways.

Example: A dancer might move at a quick tempo or in a certain rhythm.

Ask yourself: What aspects of time—speed, rhythm, accent—did the dancers use?



Energy

A dancer moves with varied energy.

Example: A dancer might move smoothly or suddenly.

Ask yourself: What kind of energy did the dancers use?



Source: Adapted from *The Elements of Dance*
<https://www.elementsofdance.org>

Got Rhythm?

Rhythm is a pattern of long and short sounds organized by beat, accent, and tempo:

Beats are sounds that repeat again and again in a regular pattern. The ticking of a clock, the sound of footsteps, and hand clapping to music are all examples of beats.

Accents are beats that sound stronger than others. In most American music, beats are arranged in groups of two or three with the accent on the first beat. In African music, the accent is usually on the second beat.

Tempo is the speed at which the beats are played. Listen to the rhythms Step Afrika! creates. Is the tempo fast or slow?

Your music teacher probably taught you about percussion instruments—instruments that are played by “striking” them with a hand or object, like a drum. Based on the same idea of percussion, *percussive dance forms* use the body as a musical instrument. The dancers create music as they move, striking their hands and feet to make sounds and complex rhythms. Stepping, tap dance, and gumboot dancing are all examples of percussive dance forms. Some dances also use vocal sounds to add to the rhythms dancers create with their bodies while dancing. During Step Afrika!’s performance, listen carefully to the way the dancers use their bodies and voices to make music.

Stepping is also polyrhythmic, meaning dancers create several different rhythms at the same time (the prefix “poly” means “many”).

What Do You Think?

- Can you think of any other percussive dance forms? What are their origins?
- Do you ever use clapping and stamping to make rhythms? In what contexts? What effect does it have?



Activity

Create Polyrhythm Like the Dancers of Step Afrika!

Get together with your classmates and divide the group, or the whole classroom, into four smaller groups. We’ll call those groups A, B, C, and D. Each group should choose a different part of the body to create a sound. For example, one group can clap, another can slap their knee, another can stomp their feet, and the last group can repeat a word or sound.

Groups	Beats			
	1	2	3	4
A	*	*	*	*
B	*		*	
C		*		*
D	**	**	**	**

Look at the chart above. Each dot represents one sound, and each number represents one beat. Group A makes one sound on all four beats. Group B makes a sound on beats 1 and 3. Group C makes a sound on beats 2 and 4. Group D makes two sounds on each beat. Each group should rehearse individually, counting the beats out loud and practicing until all group members can repeat it three times accurately. Finally, bring all four groups together to perform at once and listen to how the different rhythms come together to produce a unique sound!

Source: Rhythm description and activity from Step Afrika!’s educational performance guide, <https://www.stepafrika.org/app/uploads/03-Step-Afrika-Educational-Performance-Guide.pdf>

South African Gumboot Dancing

One of the styles Step Afrika! performs is South African gumboot dancing. Like stepping, gumboot dancing is a percussive dance form, in which dancers create rhythms with their hands and feet. Gumboot dancing began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in the gold mines of South Africa.

The workers of South Africa's gold mines during this period faced brutal working conditions and strict rules. They lived packed together in barracks and only rarely had the chance to return home to visit their families. During the miners' long working hours, they labored in dark tunnels beneath the earth, standing in water containing toxic chemicals and heavy metals. Because working barefoot in the water caused skin infections and other health problems, eventually the mine bosses found it cheapest to provide the miners with gumboots (what we know as rubber rainboots) to protect their feet from the damp and debris.

Workers were not allowed to talk amongst themselves while underground in the mines. It's likely that gumboot dancing originated as a means of communication and resistance among the miners. They created rhythms by stomping and striking their gumboots. Rhythms conveyed messages, allowing the miners to communicate without the bosses understanding. The sound carried through the mine's tunnels and could be answered by someone else stamping their feet and slapping the sides of their gumboots. The rhythms allowed for self-expression and a sense of solidarity among the workers.

Gumboot dancing soon grew into a form of competitive dance and entertainment—part of the miners' social life after hours. By 1930, it was an organized activity in the workers' barracks. Today, it is one of independent South Africa's most popular national dance styles and cultural exports, viewed by many around the world. In South Africa, gumboot dancing is also called "isicathulo," which means "shoe" in the Zulu language.



The dancers of Step Afrika! performing gumboot dancing.



Gumboot dancer, Laura SA.

As a style, gumboot dancing draws on the dance traditions of the many South African peoples who worked in the mines, but blends them into

something new created from the miners' resourcefulness and the unique pressures of their situation. Like stepping, gumboot dancing features call and response, in which one dancer leads or calls out to the others and dancers move in synchronized movements in response. Individual dancers also improvise on the spot, showing off their skills and creativity.

"Gum Rubber"

You might be wondering why South Africans and British people, among others, call rubber boots gumboots. Natural rubber, sometimes called "gum rubber," comes from trees and vines that produce latex, a kind of gum, as a sticky fluid. It was also an ingredient in the first chewing gum!

Indigenous people in Africa and the Americas used the latex from these plants in a variety of ways. The Mayans and Aztecs made sports balls and waterproof clothes with natural latex. In the eighteenth century, Europeans began to use the material to rub away pencil marks—hence the origin of the name "rubber". In the UK, people still call an eraser a rubber.

Latex collected from
a rubber tree,
Hevea Cameroun.



Try This!

Create a gumboot dance at home with your rubber rainboots! Get a classmate to join you and try creating polyrhythm by combining different rhythms of stamping and striking your boots.

During Step Afrika!'s performance, look out for gumboot dancing—you'll know it by the dancers' rubber boots and the different style of their moves.

Research & Reflect

Stepping and gumboot dancing came about independently around the same time, but bear many stylistic similarities. Why do you think these two dances might have so much in common?

The histories of gold mining and rubber both involve companies employing coercive tactics and grueling working conditions to extract natural resources. Both also relate to developments in culture, society, and economics not just locally, but around the world. Try researching the histories of the most influential industries in your town. What connections do you see? Compare and contrast with either gold mining or rubber.

Are there any dances, songs, foods, or specific art forms in your own cultural background that emerged from a period of hardship?

In the 1840s, Charles Goodyear discovered a way to cure rubber with sulfur so that it would hold its shape more durably, precipitating a worldwide rubber boom. Rubber boots, tires, and especially tubing, hoses, and seals for industrial machinery were in extremely high demand. European companies' mad dash to extract rubber created intensely exploitative conditions in the Amazon and in Central Africa. As natural rubber vines in Central Africa were depleted, companies established new rubber plantations in other tropical regions.

Today, some rubber is sourced from rubber trees on plantations, but most of it is synthetically created from fossil fuels. We use rubber for all kinds of products and industrial processes. Are you wearing sneakers? Their flexible soles are made of rubber. One old-fashioned word for a rubber-soled shoe is a "gumshoe," which became a name for a detective—because of the shoes' quiet, "sneaky" steps.

Resources for Further Reading

Step Afrika! Educational Performance Guide

<https://www.stepafrika.org/app/uploads/03-Step-Afrika-Educational-Performance-Guide.pdf>

Education guide for younger audiences produced by Step Afrika!, presenting a brief history of stepping and an introduction to rhythm in dance.

“Step Afrika! Through the Years”

<https://timeline.stepafrika.org>

Interactive timeline of Step Afrika!’s history and growth as a dance organization from 1994 to the present.

Soulstepping: African American Step Shows

by Elizabeth Fine (University of Illinois Press, 2007).

The first book to document the history of stepping, its cultural roots, and social impact. An academic text for older students and teachers.

Steppin’ On The Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance by Jacqui Malone (University of Illinois Press, 1996).

This book by Jacqui Malone examines African American history and culture as relates to dance, showing how music, song, and dance are closely interwoven. A great resource for high school students and teachers.

STEP, documentary directed by Amanda Lipitz (2017, Stick Figure Productions).

Insightful and motivational documentary about stepping, focused on a girls’ high school step team in inner-city Baltimore.

“The Historical Legacy of the Divine Nine,”

National Museum of African American History and Culture. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/divine-nine-black-fraternities-sororities>

Overview of the roots of historically Black fraternities and sororities in the early 1900s and their significance for students.

“Gumboot: The Dance of South African Miners”

by Anu Onasanya, African Music Library.

<https://africanmusiclibrary.org/blog/gumboot-the-miners-dance-of-south-africa>

Engaging introduction to gumboot dancing for students of all ages.

“Stepping Up & Showing Out” by Fay Mitchell, North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.

<https://www.dncr.nc.gov/blog/2018/02/18/stepping-showing-out>

North Carolina-focused article introducing stepping in connection to historically Black fraternities and sororities.

Slavery to Liberation: The African American

Experience, 2nd edition, edited by Joshua Farrington, Norman W. Powell, Gwen Graham, Lisa Day, and Ogechi E. Anyanwu (Eastern Kentucky University, 2022).

Available at Eastern Kentucky University’s Encompass Digital Archive: <https://encompass.eku.edu/ekuopen/3>

Resource for educators as well as students, with individual contributions analyzing various facets of African American history. Chapter three examines gumboot dancing and stepping and offers a possible lesson plan for teaching various age groups about these two dances and their histories.



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Event: _____

How did your students respond to the performance?

How did you prepare your students for this performance? Did you use the Education Guide? If so, how?
Did students enjoy the materials?

How did this performance contribute to experiential learning in your classroom?

What role do the arts play in your school? In your classroom?

If you could change one thing about this experience, what would it be?

Please include quotes and comments from your students as well!

(Optional)

Name: _____

School: _____ City: _____

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