



Sound Ideas:

A Folk Arts Response to Taboo Rhythm Games at School

by Anna Beresin

In 2015 in this journal, I presented a short article called “Pen Tapping: Forbidden Folklore” with a short collaborative film made by my undergraduate students titled, “Making Beats.” A taboo practice in elementary school, making beats with a pen was outlawed both in music class and in free time. It was considered “noise” and often linked to punishment. As a response, we at NEUARTS, Neighborhood Engagement at the University of the Arts, secured funding to support children’s rhythmic practice by bringing in three sets of professional artists for afterschool workshops in tap dancing, Latin percussion, and dance lines, all at no cost to our institutional partners in the Point Breeze neighborhood of Philadelphia. It was our attempt to show the lineage of various rhythm genres and legitimize the practice of rhythm play in a predominantly African American neighborhood.

Performers included Tap Team Two, a traditional hoofing dance group, led by Robert Burden, Jr., and Corinne Karon, both trained in the Philadelphia style of tap by the great LaVaughn Robinson. Robinson was recognized as a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and Tap Team Two is faithful to his legacy and to honoring the lineage of tap.¹ Arturo Stable, a two-time Latin Grammy Award winner, brought young friends, a vocalist and a jazz guitarist, to give the children a geographic tour of Latin rhythms.² And from our university, the UARTS Royals, a student group started by Marques Furr, brought a band dance line tradition associated with Historically Black Colleges to our elementary afterschool partnerships.

About the photo: This screenshot from the *Sound Ideas* video shows students learning band dance line tradition.

These afterschool programs, the Dream Academy of Philadelphia and Vare Recreation Center, are geographically close to the University and have been in a long-term institutional relationship with our program for over four years. Both locations have 100 percent of the children in these K-8 programs receiving free or reduced-priced lunch. In Philadelphia, one of America's poorest big cities, not all children have access to art or music.

According to my communication with the School District of Philadelphia Office of Arts and Academic Enrichment, in 2016-17, with 151 elementary schools in the district, 114 had visual arts, and only 108 had music instruction; 43 had no music or rhythmic instruction at all, a situation considered a legitimate social justice issue.



The 2016 *Nation's Arts Report Card* stated, "schools with a higher concentration of students in poverty were less likely to offer arts education, which prompted the U.S. Department of Education to declare the status of arts education 'an equity and civil rights issue.'"³ So, the restriction of the arts in general is doubly constricted among school programs in under-resourced minority neighborhoods, and triply constricted when the children's own folk traditions are criticized. Where does the obvious joy of participation in traditional arts enter in the idea of aesthetic education? What does the folklore literature on rhythm games and stepping have to offer in our search for legitimization? What tensions emerge in the reshaping of past narratives, and how does a folklorist reconcile the roles of documentarian, historian, educator, and curator?

The Residencies

At the end of Tap Team Two's workshop, led by master tappers Robert Burden, Jr., and Corinne Karon, a student asks, "Can you give us a beat, and I'll rap?"

Burden leaps into the air and with his feet offers a classic hip-hop beat:

Boom, chhh, BOOM (pause) chh chh
 Boom, chhh, BOOM (pause) chh chh

And a boy calls:

My name is Rodney
 And I like to eat chicken
 Boom, chhh, BOOM (pause) chh chh
 Boom, chhh, BOOM (pause) chh chh

The room giggles. The child simultaneously echoes rap phraseology with a playground singing game. Students had just heard and practiced the rhythms of an entire abbreviated history of American tap in an hour's time. Robert Burden and Corinne Karon recognized that their rap play is a variation of the beats that have preceded them.

The children had just practiced the seven basic steps of tap, learning their names along with technique, a motif of labeling repeated throughout the workshop:

- 1) Step (walk, whole foot step)
- 2) Toe Beats (walk on toes)
- 3) Heel Beats (rock on heels, catching balance and walk on the heels)
- 4) Brush (kick floor forward or back)
- 5) Shuffle (brush forward and brush back in sequence)
- 6) Brush and Step

The children brush and step faster and faster until they fall down laughing.

- 7) Hop. They picked “their favorite leg” and hopped on it and then hopped on both.

The master teachers ask for questions, and a student wonders aloud, smiling, “How much pain is the floor in now?”

When Burden posed the question, “How many know the two places tap comes from? One is a continent and one is a country,” the children had hollered a variety of offerings:

Europe?
Africa!
Greece?
India?
Ireland!



Burden and Karon explained that in the 1920s and 1930s in the U.S., tap emerged from two traditions, Irish and African, and that tap, a truly American art form, was also called “hoofing.” Karon gave a brief history of dance in Ireland. There were three styles of dance taught by a dance master who travelled from town to town: jigs, reels, and hornpipes. Then, she told students, in the 1300s people would take the doors off their homes and place the doors on the floor for solid wood to tap on. Tap Team Two also taps on portable small wooden doors, amplifying their sounds, and the children crowded around the planks to have their turn at being loud. In Africa, Burden explained that different nations and tribes used drums to talk to teach other. They respected the drums, and they respected their ancestors. Drums were like their cell phones, and the children nodded at the concept. Burden then began tapping on his chest, patting Juba, and then a complex series of footwork on wooden doors made the elementary school children’s eyebrows rise up to the ceiling.⁴ Tap skill, no matter the body part, was based on technique and pure speed. The children immediately respected both.

The artists took the children on a lineage tour, introducing the three of the most famous American hoofers: King Rastus Brown, who is said to have invented the first time step, or rhythmic tap combination; Bill Bojangles Robinson, who danced up on his toes and danced with a little girl named Shirley Temple; and John Bubbles, who created his own time step, but they say it is now

“lost to history.”⁵ Karon and Burden then recreated a famous routine, almost a hundred years old, called the Shim Sham. Legend has it, the Shim Sham was created by Leonard Reed and Willie Bryant, but it probably came after a version invented by Frankie Manning, a swing dancer and competitive Charleston performer and also an NEA National Heritage Fellow.⁶ Karon performed the 1927 Shim Sham version while Robert Burden did a 1970 version, created by their mentor, LaVaughn Robinson. They asked the children, “Did anyone feel or hear anything different in the two versions?” (Her step started on 4. His, the 1970s version, started on 1.) Then, they did both their Shim Sham at the same time. The children noted that the 1970s Philly style version had more beats per bar, recognizing what tap historian Brian Siebert called, “what the eye hears” (2015). The children exited the class improvising beats, making raps while they attempted to tap with their feet.



When Arturo Stable taught his Latin rhythms workshop, he brought with him a young jazz guitarist, a vocalist, and his own *cajon*, a box drum that he sat on while he played. The drum has its roots in the shipping crates of Peru, and from there he demonstrated samba rhythms from Brazil, and *la clave*, the classic rhythm associated with his native Cuba. The music morphed seamlessly into jazz, and some children were so mesmerized by Coltrane’s “Afro Blue” they were almost lulled to sleep. One girl who was new to the program, angry and often in trouble, raced up to the performers and spoke in rapid-fire Spanish, beaming. We would reference her happiness in our conversations with her over the coming weeks, as her anger visibly dissipated.

The connections between the Latin rhythm traditions were left unspoken, and Stable thought it best to let the children play with rhythm in a call-and-response style and try their hand, literally, at songwriting. At Vare Recreation, they first set a rhythm together after a display of options and then chose a chord progression, A, B, C. One boy offered a theme:

Chicken and hot sauce 123,
Chicken and hot sauce ABC,
SOCA!

For Dinner? Arturo called. They answered, Fried chicken!
For Lunch? Fried chicken! For Breakfast? Fried chicken!

The children shouted “Soca,” intuitively recognizing the “Soul of Calypso” rhythm that Stable played on his *cajon*, although they did not know what the term meant. Rooted in a fusion of calypso, African, and East Indian rhythms, their bodies recognized the beat before they knew its definition.

When the Royals Band Dance Line arrived at the Dream Academy, children were intrigued by the recordings of a loud marching band. One dancer faced the audience and performed a standing undulating movement phrase, which was repeated by the team in variations based on her hand signals. The children were taught to stand like royalty, with imaginary crowns on their heads, their spines elongated and proud, and then practiced strutting and following the leader. Some participated under pressure, and it was unclear whether it was the crossing of the cafeteria stage that made them shy, or their difficulty in connecting to a tradition so southern, and so collegiate. The adolescent boys enjoyed watching the female college students perform and were happy to follow them across the room. At one point a group marched across the room playing imaginary horns and drums. I noted the irony of invisible instruments in a district with insufficient funding for its music programs.

The staff of the Dream Academy connected most directly to this tradition and were seen strutting and stepping on the sidelines, much to the pleasure of the children who noticed. We invited the staff to join the front lines instead. The program director, Maurice Williams, said that he had attended Morehouse College, a Historically Black College in Atlanta, and loved seeing the band dance team there—Mahogany in Motion, he recalled with a smile. For him, the memory of this type of dance was embedded in the memory of college itself, something his program advocates for these young children. Few have relatives who have attended college.

The children were indirectly invited to picture themselves in these various roles: as an early hooper, as a dockworker with a *cajon*, as royalty, as a college student, and as a composer. The approaches: historical, geographic, and bordering on the ethnographic. An appreciative set of audiences, the children engaged most when invited to play: play with their own feet, with their own hands, with speed, with composition, with inhabiting new postures. I wonder about the role of play in this dialogic, two-way version of “the ethnographic imagination” (Willis 2000).

Play, Resistance, Aesthesis

Embedded in the play of these young children are the beginning stages of social critique. Content too remote? Let’s add chicken. Process too slow? Do it faster. Activity too passive? Let’s do it where we sit. Play is fundamentally about exaggeration, about the play of boundaries. No wonder schools find it threatening, although it does not have to be perceived that way. The point of bringing in Robert Burden was not just to create future tap dancers, but also to legitimize the idea of constant bodily rhythm play. Arturo Stable bears the tradition not just of Latin percussion, but also of percussive experimentation. Known for tapping their cutlery at mealtime, for drumming on signposts, and for scat singing in public, Burden and Stable embody the physical joy of movement, so criticized during the school day. Playing with rhythm in public is a much needed dose of aesthesis. Noted by Henry Glassie, anesthesia is for sterile places like the surgical table; we would

argue it has no place anywhere near children (Glassie 1989, Beresin 2014). Children need these artists to model vibrancy, aesthetic history, and a playful passion for learning.

Film and video allow us to freeze time and offer the media back as a gift to both practitioners and scholars. When the children of the Dream Academy saw the “Sound Ideas” video embedded in this article, five months after it was filmed, they were shocked by their own physical changes, by their thoughtful and attentive faces. “When was this filmed? It was sooooo long ago.” A follow-up performance, initiated by a Dream Academy staffer, led three 8th-grade girls to step, holding an American flag, while gunshots rang as a soundtrack, and the children dropped to the floor. Their words before they fell: Trayvon Martin. Amadou Diallo. Manuel Loggins, Jr. Ronald Madison. Kendra James. Sean Bell. Eric Garner. Michael Brown. Alton Sterling. They were echoing the motifs of Kendrick Lamar’s 2018 Grammy Award Ceremony choreography. All of this time is still current, from King Rastas Brown to Kendrick Lamar, and we folklorists deconstruct the layers of time and place, just as the children combine it through play and choreography.

Rhythm Literature

Academic rhythm literature is divided by genre: There is a tap dance history literature (Valis Hill 2010; Siebert 2015) and a rhythm game literature (Gaunt 2006; Jones and Lomax Hawes 1972; Beresin 2010). For a sophisticated history of marching step history, tracing its roots from Africa through minstrelsy, see Malone’s *Stepping on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (1996) and Fine’s *Soulstepping: African American Step Shows* (2007). There are encyclopedias of rhythm traditions in the ethnomusicological tradition (Murphy and Pearsall 2016) and the equivalent in dance, Shay and Sellers-Young (2015) *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*. The overall evolution of the field itself seems to be reflected in Shay and Sellers-Young’s four sections: “the construction of ethnic identity,” “choreographing the nation,” “performing the other,” and “dance as a form of ethnic resistance.” As such, the encyclopedic approach reflects the academic trends in folkloristics as it reflects the meta-analysis of folktales and material culture (Landis and MacAulay 2017; Noyes 2016). In our own Sound Ideas program, we can see these concepts emerge organically, framing ethnic identity, nationhood, the other; but where is resistance? Where is critique?

We need both the formal critique like the dances of the Dream Academy, and the informal critique of play and game traditions to make sense of our current senseless present. Play and art, expression and practice, and with them, the focus and discipline required for all rhythmic play are the same kinds of tools needed for critical thinking—observation, analysis, and reflection. Play itself keeps the material relevant, flexible, and necessary. As play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith noted in conversation, play is children’s answer to the hypocrisy of the adult world. Through their play, the children remind us of the artificial boundaries of all these subjects, and of the absurdities of our budgetary allocations, as they play with their own sound ideas and fantasize about being fed.

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To contact Anna Beresin about supporting an inaugural Pen Tapping Rhythm Festival, contact her at aberesin@uarts.edu. We thank you in advance.

Endnotes

1. See <https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/lavaughn-e-robinson>.
2. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arturo_Stable.
3. See <http://www.aep-arts.org/wp-content/uploads/NAEP-Frequently-Asked-Questions-3.pdf>
4. For more on patting Juba, hambone, or slap jazz, see the Master hambone artist Danny “Slapjazz” Barber here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BCzIjY-taY>.
5. See http://www.danceheritage.org/treasures/bubbles_essay_morrison.pdf and <http://www.atdf.org/awards/bubbles.html>.
6. See <https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/frankie-manning>.

URLs

Sound Ideas: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZYQoIINWNH1lq_SbpKx4F1zoiLJCoJa5/view

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