

The excitement of African dance is usually not the dance, but the way it is performed, and the degree of participation by the audience. The response of the body to expressions of love, joy, fear, grief, despair and hope, to the accompaniment of music, song and dance opens up the soul of the dancer to the participants for therapeutic cleansing and nourishment. Therefore the mind, body and spirit are simultaneously engaged during the entire duration of the workout. The participant's soul rather than the style of "soul music" is the essence of Aerobics With Soul.

Aerobics With Soul does not teach anatomy or physiology, "spot" reduction, scientific terminology or "fitness instructor lingo" or suggest you abandon your chosen activity for gaining and maintaining fitness. Combining the structure and objectives of traditional aerobics with the grace, creativity and movements of African dance, Aerobics With Soul will help you cross the bridge from here to there without sacrificing your individual or cultural integrity.

Aerobics With Soul:

What is it?

Television has made our world smaller. We can see, hear and empathize with our fellow human beings anywhere in the world, almost live. Africa's contribution to contemporary dance is a fresh dose of the infectious liberation and self celebration of African art and culture. Cross-cultural exchanges can now take place in a positive supportive atmosphere in the fitness industry.

There are six elements in Aerobics With Soul—music, relaxation, feelings, expression, sharing and taking. The most important element is music. Use it as a foreground, rather than background to create different moods and attitudes. The best way to feel the texture, vibration, rhythm, tempo and beat of a piece of music is to isolate the musical instruments and human voices, and listen to them one at a time. The acappella songs of "Ladysmith Black Mambazo" will familiarize you with the isolation of individual voices, and "Babunde Olatunji" is excellent to practice identifying the percussion instruments. Once you

AEROBICS WITH SOUL



Listen to the beat, feel it in your heart,
and stomp it with your feet.

By **MARIA NHAMBU BERGH**

have grasped the rhythm and tempo, pick one that is easy and obvious at first, and move to that rhythm. Then pick another piece of music, and so forth.

As you continue to isolate and interpret the movement of the piece you will "feel" the music as a whole, and you can choose what beats and tempo are appropriate for the exercise you want. Ask students to help find African music that will fit with the flow of your class. Paul Simon's Graceland album is an attractive blend of American and African music. Pick songs with short, explosive refrains, so students can sing along, even if they don't understand a word of their outbursts.

In order to free your body and mind from whatever stresses and inhibitions you bring to class, you must learn to relax—a prerequisite for self expression. To help you relax, play a piece of music you know touches you in a sensuous way for the first number of your workout. In hale and exhale deeply several times during the song, and close your eyes. Have a mental picture of yourself from head to toe—without limbs or body parts. Imagine moving this unit (your body) from floor to ceiling, wall to wall, up and down and around as though you were an amoeba. Any movement by any part of this amoeba affects the whole. Then

pretend your skeleton is composed of cartilage rather than bone. Think of expanding and contracting elastic as you do the same movements. A relaxed body moves this way. Practice getting from point A to point B in your mind without concern of how you get there.

The best way to feel your body is to isolate and move each part before you learn to move the parts as a whole. Move the neck, shoulders, hips, knees and ankles up, down, right, left and around depending on what kind of joint it is. While you are doing these isolation exercises, touch your body, and be aware of how it feels. Extend and contract your back, open and close your chest, loosen up your spine by undulating your entire torso. Getting in touch with your body will enable you and your clients to challenge and respect it without the danger of overextending and overexerting yourself. Relaxing and feeling along with the inevitable rise in body temperature should be measurable achievement of the warm up, and will set the stage for the next three elements,

For those who are unfamiliar with African music, expressing your feelings as you exercise can be quite disconcerting and foreign. Always remember to relax and move your body as naturally as possible. By basing movements on the grace, agility and instincts of African wild animals—the giraffe for neck and spine; ostrich and birds for shoulder, arms and upper torso; elephant and hippo for controlled and grounded movements; gazelle and cheetah for speed, precision and alertness; cobra for circling the hips and releasing and opening the pelvic area and monkey for his playfulness and “I don’t give a hoot what I look like” attitude—clients are encouraged to be themselves, and not to be intimidated by the color, size, shape, fur, stripes or spots of the other beautiful “animals” in class.

Let your movements express your emotions, let your emotions direct your movements, no matter how “mundane” and simple the exercise might be. Many emotions can be expressed at the same time, therefore the aerobic section of the class is the time to be creative. African music lends itself to a multitude of styles of movement within the same song.

Another important “tool” of expressing yourself is the “free dance”. This is when students have about five minutes to

independently put into practice what was done in class. The only requirement is movement. Participants should cover every square foot of the studio. The instructor should then help those with questions about the movements, and encourage the timid ones, while the others visit and do their thing. Then it is time to move at their own pace, switch gears and get ready for the cool down.

The sharing part of class should always be done in a circle, parallel lines facing each other, or in groups of two, three, and four people if possible. By moving in a circle we affirm our dedication to be complete—as individuals, and as individuals within the group. The circle has no beginning or end. An individual has no beginning or end. *Aerobics With Soul* incorporates this concept during the greeting. No one should leave class without acknowledging the presence of all participants. One by one, go around the circle and introduce yourselves. When students have

overcome the initial shock of having the floor and moving any which way in front of others, each person will go in the center of the circle and the participants will call their name out loud in rhythm to the music. After a while people will show off—which is encouraged.

The final element of *Aerobics With Soul* is taking. Whenever people get together there is always give and take. We return into our mind, body and spirit in proportion to how much we have given to class. Seize the present moment and lock it within. Send it out to your entire being, to nourish and regenerate as you stretch and reach and hold. Be thankful for your health, and the group synergism that has made the class therapeutic and take this feeling of rebirth to the world outside the studio.

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Star/creator of the “*Aerobics With Soul*” video, **Maria Nhambu Bergh** specializes in the teachings of African culture and dance.



Maria Nhambu Bergh

For more information call (800-423-9685)