

SHAPE

Mind and Body Fitness for Women

get offa that seat

What do you get when you mix aerobics with a world beat? Fun, funky, feel-good exercise.

By Liz Brody

Does the very thought of taking a funk class knot up your stomach like macramé? Is "soul" something you feel you were born without? Let's be blunt: Some of us—no, many of us—feel a little uptight at the call to "get down." Or maybe we've tried, only to find ourselves dogpaddling against a surging tide of boogeying bodies, desperately seeking the almighty "groove."

But truth be told, for all its familiarity, straight-up aerobics can get boring. That's why adding some soulful oomph is worth a try. Once you get past the initial fear, who knows? You may discover that fitness with an ethnic world beat is not only aerobic but sexy, sensual and fantastically fun.

To help you get started, we've chosen three top godmothers of soul fitness and asked them for their best tips on how to loosen up the body, mind and soul: Yes, you do have one!

Animal Grooves

Maria Nhambu Bergh, whose workouts and "Aerobics With Soul" videos are based on the dances of her native Tanzania, has students pretend they're animals to help them loosen up and experience the natural movement of African dancing. "At first you laugh because you can't take yourself seriously when [you pretend] you're a hippo or an ostrich," she says, "and that relaxes you." Bergh adds that animals are her inspiration: "A giraffe will

never move like a cobra. And a cobra will never move like a cheetah. Animals are true to their nature. We, too, come in all shapes and sizes. Each of us should dance as who we are."

Bergh's two animal exercises will help loosen up your hips and spine, which are both important in dancing to a world beat. When you feel dumpy, the giraffe will lift your spirits; when you feel tight, the cobra will help you unwind. Practise these exercises and

take them to class with you.

The Giraffe Stand with your feet 2 to 6 inches apart, shoulders relaxed, hands on hips (thumb to the back, elbows pressing forward) and imagine you are a giraffe. Think tall and proud—as in, I'm on top of the world." This is a very elegant animal known for its long neck and grace. It has no hangups, is not worried about its thighs; just its presence alone makes others stand at attention.

"We are not
ashamed of
our bodies. If
we have
great boobs
we jiggle
them; if we
have big
butts, we
shake 'em."

—Maria
Nhambu
Bergh

A. Chin circle: Bring your chin in and toward the base of your neck; raise it straight up (not back) so the crown of your head lifts toward the ceiling; move the chin forward and back to the starting point. (It's as if you're moving around the circumference of an apple that sits between the base of your neck and chin.) Stop in each position and make several circles.

B. Repeat A without the stops, making the circle in one smooth movement. This time, soften the knees and follow with your upper body, extending the spine in the direction of the chin.

C. Repeat A and B in the other direction.

The Cobra Stand with your legs apart, knees soft, hands placed loosely on your waist (thumb to back elbows down and relaxed), and imagine you are a cobra. As a great snake, your body coils and uncoils while your head stays up and alert, ready to strike.

A. Hip Circle: Move your hips

forward, right, back and left while keeping your feet firmly planted. Make several circles stopping in each position.

B. Reverse the circles.

C. Repeat A and B without the stops. Sense the smoothness and roundness of the cobra's movement as you coil and uncoil, wind and unwind.

Don't Plan Your Meat Loaf In class try not to think about which socks to wear tomorrow or how to get back at your boss. When your mind is on the future, your body can tighten up in a kind of holding pattern. "One of the reasons Africans are so loose and fluid when they dance, says Bergh, "is that they know how to live in the moment—a state of being which expresses itself

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offer evocative workouts
based on the dances of
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are set to original African
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in a physical going-with-the-flow." And they do it, she explains, by absorbing themselves in the music.

Practise listening—*really* listening by choosing a recording you've never heard before. African music, even contemporary pop, is great because of all the rhythm changes. (Bergh created "Aerobics With Soul" audio cassettes, featuring original music without voiceovers, for this purpose.) Instead of focusing on the lyrics, try to identify all the instruments, paying special attention to the bass and percussion. "Very often your body knows how to move if you are relaxed," says Bergh. "In Africa, people grow up concentrating on the music and just let their

bodies go."

Be in a Funk if That's How You

Feel "We dance in Africa not only for joy, but for funerals, circumcision, the harvest...every occasion," says Bergh. To really live in the moment you have to be aware of where you are emotionally today, and dance with it. If you are sad, let the mood come through the music and tell your body how to move. This way the sadness can run its course and gain another dimension by the end of class because you have expressed it through movement.

Soul Fitness Dos and Don'ts

When in class,
Don't calculate how
many calories are in a
vegetarian pizza.

Do listen to the beat.

Don't panic about
getting the step
perfectly.

Do listen to the beat.

Don't glue your eyes
on your thighs in the
mirror.

Do listen to the beat.

Don't worry about
whether all those other
dancers are thinking
about you. *They're*
listening to the beat.