



# STEP AFRIKA!



## Engagement Guide

In preparation for the Step Afrika! SchoolTime matinee performance  
Fri, Feb. 24, 2023, 11am at Zellerbach Hall, University of California, Berkeley

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Cal Performances' Education Department Staff:

Rica Anderson, Manager, Education & Community Programs  
Mina Girgis, Director of Education, Campus & Community Engagement

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# How to use this Engagement Guide

If you have photos or lesson plans to share, please let us know! Use #StepAfrika@Cal

This engagement guide is organized around 4 key artistic practices (as identified by the [National Coalition for Core Arts Standards](#).)

**Creating:** Conceiving, exploring, and developing new artistic ideas and work, making artistic choices with a work of art in mind.

**Performing/Presenting/Producing:** Realizing artistic ideas and work through interpretation and presentation.

**Responding:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.

**Connecting:** Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context. Reflecting on both process and product and making connections to other aspects of life and study.

This Engagement Guide invites exploration before and after the performance, giving each student tools to make personal and meaningful connections during the show. You'll be able to link to specific subjects that you or your students may want more information about. We've included pre-performance engagement activities and post-performance activities for artistic practice and reflection. By no means should you feel limited by these suggestions! Go, make art, learn more...and share your experiences where you can.

**Arts Engagement:** More than learning basic information about a performance, we think real arts engagement starts with having the skills and knowledge to connect meaningfully with works of art. When students engage in the arts they come to understand that every artist draws from a core set of concepts skillfully chosen and applied in performance to create a work of art both unique to the artist, and connected to other works of art.

Through these guides, we aim to give you and your students a glimpse into the artistic process, and the opportunity to work on the same kinds of challenges the artists strive to solve creatively. We hope the next time you see a performance you'll use the insights you gained exploring the artist's process to connect with a work of art, and thus deepen your experience as an audience member.

And along the way, we hope that students of all ages – and their teachers and adult mentors – will be inspired to experiment with artistic decision-making and creativity themselves.

**Enjoy the show!**

# Your★STARRING Role in the Theater



As an audience member, you are a STAR, too! You play an important role in the performance community. The artists need YOU in order to give you their best work.

## S.T.A.R. Audiences

**S = Support** the artists by being attentive and focusing on the performers.

**T = Tune in:** listen and watch for understanding (and for Step Afrika!, notice how the dancers move in unison, create rhythms together, and how they communicate ideas and emotions to us through their performance.)

**A = Appreciate** the performers by clapping at the right time. For example, when a scene or dance ends, or when the stage lights fade to dark.

**R = Respect** the performers and other audience members. At a performance, you, the others in the audience and the artists are sharing this experience together and are part of a performance community. Think about ways you can best support the community's performance experience.

We know you will be a STAR today and will help your classmates shine too!



# About Step Afrika!

C. Brian Williams, the founder and executive director of Step Afrika!, learned how to step while attending Howard University in Washington, D.C. Later, on a visit to South Africa, he saw a young boy dancing a style that looked very similar to stepping. Recognizing the connection, Brian wanted to find a way for Africans and Americans to share their dances, music, and culture. In 1994, he founded Step Afrika! as the first professional company dedicated to the tradition of stepping. Step Afrika! ranks as one of the top ten African American dance companies in the United States.



Step dancers use their bodies as instruments to create intricate rhythms and sounds through a combination of footsteps, claps, and the spoken word. Stepping originated from the competitive schoolyard song and dance rituals practiced by historically African American fraternities and sororities, beginning in the 1900s.

Step Afrika! blends percussive dance styles practiced by historically African American fraternities and sororities; traditional African dances; and an array of contemporary dance and art forms into a cohesive, compelling artistic experience. Performances are much more than dance shows; they integrate songs, storytelling, humor, and audience participation. The blend of technique, agility, and pure energy makes each performance unique and leaves the audience with their hearts pounding.

The company has 14 full-time dancers, many of whom are alumni of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and are members of historically Black Greek fraternities and sororities. In addition to its riveting stage performances, Step Afrika! promotes stepping as an educational tool for young people, focusing on teamwork, academic achievement, and cross-cultural understanding. Their programming encompasses reading enrichment, college prep, step workshops and master classes, performance training, and educational lectures. The company reaches tens of thousands of Americans each year through a 50-city tour of colleges and theaters and performs globally as Washington, DC's one and only Cultural Ambassador.

## What You'll See

At the SchoolTime show on February 24, you'll see Step Afrika! perform three distinct styles of dance:

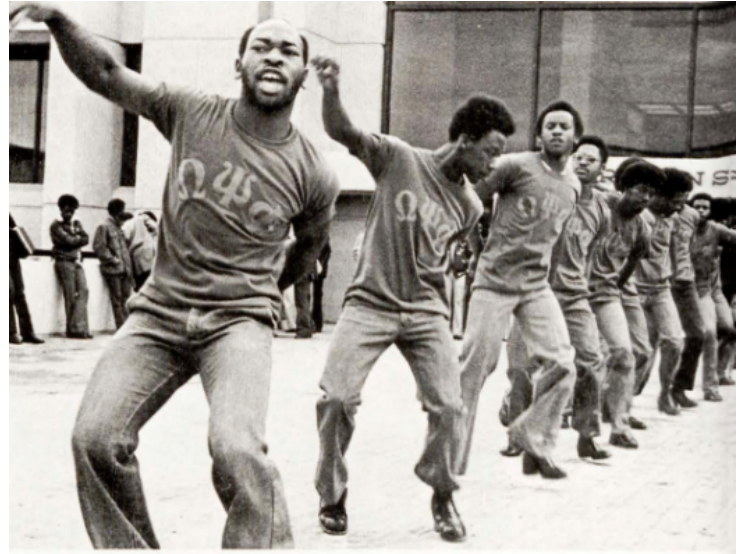
**Traditional Stepping:** Step Afrika! will demonstrate collegiate step traditions as practiced by men and women all across the United States. During the show, look for the explanation of fraternities and sororities, and notice the unique style of stepping.

**Contemporary Stepping:** Today, stepping has gained mainstream exposure. Stepping has grown from college campuses to churches, schools, and movies. As more and more people create step choreography, popular dance moves and chants are incorporated. During the show, look for special moves, creative formations, and chants.

**South African gumboot dance:** In this dance, the dancers wear rubber boots, or gumboots, that they will hit with their bare hands to make rhythms, or patterns of sounds.

# About the Art Form: Stepping

Stepping or step dancing can be traced back to the early 1900s when the dance form evolved from songs and dances traditionally practiced in African-American fraternities (groups with male members) and sororities (groups with female members) on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Stepping draws on a tradition of using sounds, words, and movements to communicate and create a sense of belonging within a community.



*A performance of the first Omega Psi Phi Step Show on the University of Arkansas's Union Mall in 1975.*

## What is Stepping?

Steppers create “body music” meaning that they create rhythm and detailed sound patterns through a combination of stamping, clapping, slapping, snapping, chanting, singing, and performing spoken word. In step, the body itself is a musical and percussive instrument. Sometimes props like canes or sticks are added in as well to create additional percussive sounds, and dancers often dress in matching costumes or uniforms. Stepping has elements from South African Gumboot Dance, American tap dance, military marching, and may even incorporate moves from breakdancing and gymnastics.

## The History of Stepping

The roots of stepping stretch all the way back to the traditional dances practiced by people from the West and Southern regions of Africa. When they were kidnapped, enslaved, and brought to America, their dances became a way to preserve their culture and identity, build community, express themselves, and celebrate together.

## Rhythms move from drums to bodies

In certain African cultures, families have their own unique rhythms and these drum rhythms are passed down through the generations. After discovering that the rhythms played on drums communicated messages between enslaved people, slaveholders feared slave rebellions and passed laws preventing enslaved people from using drums. Without drums, enslaved people began to play rhythms on their bodies, and this tradition of body music is still alive and well in African-American culture and can be seen in forms such as tap, hambone, and of course, stepping.

### WHAT IS RHYTHM?

Rhythm is patterns of long and short sounds organized by beat, accent, and tempo. Beats are sounds that repeat again and again in a regular pattern. Beats are everywhere: from the ticking of a clock to the sound of footsteps. When people clap their hands to music, they sound the beats. Accents are beats that are sounded more strongly 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 for the rhythms Step Afrika! creates. Is the tempo fast or slow?

## **South African Gumboot Dance**

Interestingly, stepping shares characteristics with another form of dance that also helped sustain and inspire people of color during difficult times. Gumboot dancing originated in the oppressive conditions of the gold mines during Apartheid in South Africa. Dangerous and dark, the mines' floors often flooded due to poor drainage, causing skin problems and disease. Rather than spending money to properly drain the shafts, the bosses issued rubber gumboots to the workers instead. Miners weren't allowed to talk to each other so they used their boots to do their talking for them. They could warn each other of dangers in the mines, send messages of support, and, very importantly, do so without their bosses knowing what was going on. This method of communication evolved into entertainment with gumboot dancers stomping their feet in rhythms, clapping their hands, slapping their thighs and other body parts, and chanting. During the massive protests which brought down Apartheid, gumboot dancing, along with other forms of music and dance, became a vehicle for political protest.

There are several similarities between South African gumboot dancing and stepping. Both dance forms:

- Feature precise and synchronized movements, performed at high speed
- Include body percussion
- Use different languages and cultural references to emphasize togetherness
- Showcase complex, high-speed footwork
- Were not originally accompanied by music, but that has changed with time
- Employ call and response, a musical technique with deep African roots
- Are polyrhythmic, meaning dancers play several rhythms at the same time
- Highlight improvisation
- Blend powerful group action with opportunities for individuals to shine.

## **Stepping Evolves**

In its early form, as it was popularized by African-American college students in sororities and fraternities, stepping was a blend of African tribal dance, call-and-response folk songs, and military march themes. Stepping was a way for students of color to express themselves, foster and feel pride in their community, and provide support for each other in a world that could seem unwelcoming, if not outright hostile.

Traditionally, step teams were either from all-male fraternities or all-female sororities. Male stepping teams tended to feature athleticism with more jumping and harder hits on the floor and female teams tended to focus more on song and choreography. However, the lines are blurring with female steppers now highlighting their own physical strength. Step Afrika!'s performances include dances that are performed by male and female dancers as well as all-male and all-female pieces.

Steppers are very respectful of tradition and incorporate both traditional steps and new choreography as they continue to add to the form and incorporate other styles into their dances. Part of what makes step so powerful and memorable is that it balances a deep appreciation and respect for what has come before with a constant desire to improve, move forward, grow, and deepen.



Today, stepping is practiced not only on college campuses but in public schools, churches, and community organizations. Fraternities and sororities of Latino and Asian students are adopting the art form. Films like *STEP: the Documentary*, *Stomp The Yard*, *School Daze*, *Drumline* and *How She Move*, have helped to popularize stepping. Step Afrika! is expanding on the form by including tap dance, modern dance, and hip-hop styles in their choreography as well as by highlighting traditional African dances (like the Gumboots dances and Zulu dances) in their performances.

For more information on Stepping and its history, go to:

<https://dancespirit.com/the-art-of-stepping-and-how-its-brought-people-together-for-more-than-a-century/>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stepping\\_\(African-American\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stepping_(African-American))

#### **Beyonce Celebrates Stepping**

One of the most visible examples of step performance in recent years was Beyonce's 2018 Coachella concert. Choreographed and designed as a tribute to the black college experience, the rousing and mesmerizing performance incorporated marching bands, drumlines, majorettes, and, of course, stepping.





# Engagement Activities

## Before the Performance

These activities can be explored in one extended classroom period or divided into 2-3 shorter classroom sessions. (If dividing, remember to review the previous lessons briefly so that the scaffolded engagement will have the greatest impact on your students' learning.)



## POLYRHYTHMS

### Overview

Students will learn about polyrhythms, practice listening and concentration, experiment with body percussion, and create polyrhythms together.

**Time needed: 20-30 minutes** (can be extended with layers of exploration).

### Supplies and Prep

- Whiteboard or easel sheets and markers.
- Open space for moving and performing.

### Instructions

#### Step 1 Creating Polyrhythms

“Polyrhythm” (also sometimes known as “cross-rhythm”) means the simultaneous performing of two or more different rhythms..” – from [All Around This World website](#)

- Divide the class into four 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 group can slap their knee, another group can stomp their feet, and the last group can repeat a word or sound.
- In your groups practice your sounds. What does it sound like when you make your beat faster or slower, louder or softer?
- Look at the chart on the next page. Each dot represents one sound, and each number represents one beat.

## GROUPS

## BEATS

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

- Each group makes their own sound on different beats:
  - Group A makes one sound on all 4 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 their sounds five times accurately.
- Finally, bring all four groups together to perform.
- Reflect together:
  - What did you notice about playing your group's beat as the other groups played theirs?
  - If it was challenging to keep your beat steady while hearing the other groups' sounds all around you, discuss ways you might focus primarily on your beats.

*Extend the exploration:* Learn more about polyrhythms and play them along with a drummer [here](#).

## STEP CHOREOGRAPHY

### Overview

Students will discover the elements of stepping and will learn the choreography for a short step routine.

**Time needed: 20-30 minutes** (can be extended with layers of exploration). Can be divided over two class periods: Step 1: Learn basic movements of stepping. Step 2: Learn a short step routine.

### Supplies and Prep

- Whiteboard or easel sheets and markers for writing instructions and capturing observations and reflections.
- Open space for moving and performing.
- Laptop, projector, and screen to show videos.

## Instructions

### Step 1 Learn Step Basics

- Learn about Tone Claps, Cup Claps, Over Unders, and Blades from Ryan Johnson of *Sole Defined* in this video: [Introduction to Stepping, Part 1 \(The Kennedy Center\)](#)
- Experiment with the movements you learned.
  - *Improvisation:*
    - To improvise is to try something without planning or practicing it beforehand. Find a space in the class and experiment with putting together clap and step combinations. Which ones make interesting rhythms both to hear and to make with your body?
  - *Call & Response:*
    - Divide the class in half and try a call and response where one group claps or steps a rhythm and the other group repeats the rhythm back.
    - Or, one group might “call” their specific rhythm, and another group “respond” with their own rhythm. Cycle through the groups with each getting a chance to lead the call, and to respond.
  - *Polyrhythms:*
    - Return to your four groups. In your group, create a rhythm together using clapping, stepping, or a mixture of the two.
    - Experiment with playing each group’s rhythms together. One group might start, and after listening for a while another group adds its rhythm. The third group listens, then joins in with their rhythm, then finally the fourth.
    - How might you adjust your group’s tempo (speed) to complement the other rhythms better?
- Reflect together:
  - What was it like to create your own patterns of claps and steps? How did you work together to find a rhythm you liked?
  - How did it feel when everyone moved together and created sounds in unison?

### Step 2 Learn a short Step routine

- Learn more step choreography and practice a short routine in [Introduction to Stepping, Part 2 \(The Kennedy Center\)](#)
- Reflect together:
  - What was it like to learn the step routine? What was challenging, and how did you work through those challenges?
  - Why do you think groups find it meaningful to move and make rhythms in unison (or in what’s called synchrony)?



## **Additional Classroom Prep:**

### **Lead a Discussion:**

During the 1960s, as African Americans fought for civil rights in the United States, stepping provided students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities a way to build the strength of their communities, communicate allegiance to a group, and convey their identity and pride.

In South Africa, during the popular uprising against apartheid, gumboot dancing was a way for protesters to creatively express themselves and draw courage from one another.

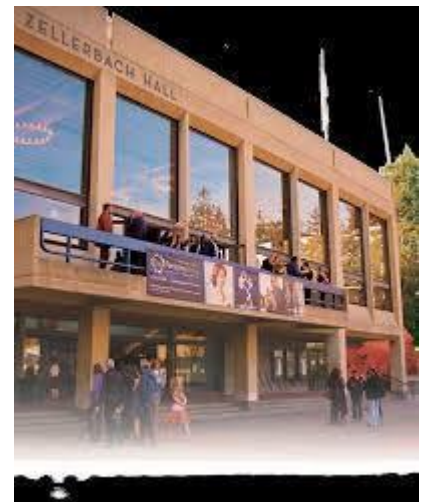
Can you describe other situations in which music and dance played an important role in social movements or in lifting a community's spirits?

**Before the performance, share the videos below with your students:**

[The Story of Step Afrika!](#)

[Step Afrika: Stepping through history to inspire the next generation](#)

**See you at Cal Performances' Zellerbach Hall on Friday, February 24 at 11am for the Step Afrika! SchoolTime performance!**



## Post-Performance

### **Time needed: 20-40 minutes**

Students will reflect on what they saw and heard, thought and felt during the performance, and will make connections between what they did in preparation for the performance and what they experience at the event.

### **Supplies and Prep**

- Writing materials for students (paper, writing implements, journal)
- Space for students to stand and move in a circle together





### **Reflection**

#### **Step 1      Embodying images from the show**

- In a circle, go around and each person show with your whole body a movement or body shape you saw in the performance.
- After each person demonstrates with their body, our whole group will repeat the movement or pose.

#### **Step 2      Journaling and/or drawing reflection**

- Think about what you **saw** during the performance. Right now, just remember things you actually saw with your eyes, not what you might have seen in your imagination. Write down and/or draw or doodle some things you saw.
- Remember what you **heard** during the performance. Again, focus on what your ears actually heard, not what you might have imagined among the sounds. Write down and/or draw or doodle some things you heard.
- Now, let's bring in what we **thought** and imagined. Write down, draw or doodle some things you thought about or imagined during the performance.
- How did you **feel** during the performance? What emotions or feelings came up as you watched the dancers and heard the music? Write about and/or draw or doodle these.
- On a whiteboard or easel sheet make four quadrants, and title them See/Hear/Think/Feel. As a class, let's share some things you saw first. (Write these in the See quadrant. If students share something they interpreted or imagined, remind them to share something they actually saw with their eyes.) Now, let's share some things you heard... some things you thought ... some things you felt during the performance. (Capture these in each of the quadrants.)

<b>SEE</b> 	<b>HEAR</b> 
<b>THINK</b> 	<b>FEEL</b> 

### Step 3

#### Class Discussion Questions

- What did you expect the performance to be like? How did you connect this with what you actually experienced at the performance?
- What in the show made you think of things we did in class before the performance?
- What surprised you? What seemed a little familiar? What seemed really strange?
- What questions would you ask the artists if you could? What artistic advice might you share with someone who was going to see the performance?

#### *Further Exploration*

You might consider seeking curricular connections in literature or history/social studies. If you design a lesson that you'd like to share, please let us know! We'd like to consider including it in future shared resources and workshops for teachers.





# Resources

## Web Sites

[The Step Afrika! Company website](#)

[Background on Step Afrika!](#)

[The Art of Stepping and How it's Brought People Together for More Than a Century \(Article from DanceSpirit magazine\)](#)



## Videos

[Step Afrika! promo video](#)

[Step Afrika! Celebrates the Divine Nine](#)

[The Art and History of Stepping](#)

[The Tradition of Gumboot Dance](#)

[Using Body Percussion in the Classroom](#)

## Books

- Soulstepping: African American Step Shows. By Elizabeth C. Fine. 2007.
- African American Dance: An Illustrated History. By Barbara S. Glass McFarland. 2012.
- Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance. By Jacqui Malone. 1996.
- Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities. Editors & Contributors: Kariamtu Welsh, Esailama Diouf, Yvonne Daniel. 2019.
- *Article: From Slavery to Liberation: Chapter 3 Gumboot Dancing and Steppin': Origins, Parallels, and Uses in the Classroom.* By Nicola F. Mason. 2019.

## Local organizations featuring African American Culture:

[African American Art & Culture Complex](#)

[Museum of African Diaspora \(MoAD\)](#)

[African American Museum and Library at Oakland](#)



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