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# STEPPERS WITH CLASS

BY ZOE VAN BUREN

After the last class of the day finally let out, Coach Stephen Ellerbe walked through the front doors of Poughkeepsie Middle School and into a throng of students waiting eagerly in the lobby. He was

immediately bombarded with shouts for his attention—“Coach!” “Ellerb!” They had been waiting for the day’s practice to begin, and some had already started going through the routine in anticipation. Ellerbe is the coach of Steppers

With Class, the Poughkeepsie High School (PHS) step team. He and his high school steppers, known as “veterans,” were there to teach the middle school what they do.

Ellerbe led the crowd of students down



Steppers With Class practicing at Poughkeepsie High School a few days before the Youth Step USA’s New York State High School Stepping Championship, May 2013. Photo by Zoe van Buren.



Steppers With Style practicing at Poughkeepsie Middle School before competing at Six Flags, April 2013. Photo by Zoe van Buren.

to the basement, where they gathered in an empty room to go over the latest news. There were permission slips that needed signing, chaperones that needed finding, and a lineup of 15 middle school steppers that he and the veterans needed to select from the 30 or so who have shown up that day. In only a week, the younger cohort would be competing at Six Flags against other step teams, and in a month, the veterans would go head-to-head against other New York State high school teams in their own auditorium. The veterans were well acquainted with the step show circuit, but for many of these younger steppers, who perform under the name Steppers With Style, this would be their first time on stage. Ellerbe wrapped up his announcements, and the veterans dispersed into the halls with their novices. For the next two hours, the basement reverberated with the rapid-fire sound of stomping feet, clapping hands, and shouting voices.

Stepping is an intricate performance art rooted in the traditions of African American Greek organizations. Begun in universities as a means of publicly expressing pride and unity for fraternities, and later sororities, stepping draws from physical and communicative patterns that can be traced to both African American folk tradition and pop culture (Fine 2003, 3). Since the stepping first emerged among Alpha Kappa Alpha fraternity brothers in the 1940s, it has played a central role in the life and legacy of many historically Black Greek organizations (Fine 2003, 11).

For African American Greeks, stepping speaks to their experience with collegiate life. The style unites its performers as people of color on campuses that are often predominantly white, as Greeks among non-Greeks, and as their specific letter organization among a sea of competitors, friends, and rivals. The central components of a step routine will typically

play into these social dynamics of Greek life.

Saluting, freaking, and cracking make up the three most common forms of communication in a step routine. Saluting is used as a greeting ritual, in which one group will acknowledge the other by imitation. To engage the audience and rouse enthusiasm, one stepper will often break from the group form to show off, or “freak.” Cracking, or cutting, draws upon African American folk traditions of verbal dueling to express the competitive edge of stepping. Steppers may employ a variety of cracks, from the innuendo of the folk tradition of signifying, to direct criticism, to nonverbally mocking the signature moves of a rival. Like breakdancing, rap battles, and the dozens of jokes (which some may recognize in the form of “Yo Mama” barbs), stepping is a part of a strong tradition of verbal and nonverbal dueling games that foster competition at the same time as they establish group identity among

those sufficiently in the know to compete (Fine 1991, 48).

Step routines are rarely formalized. Although groups may often learn from video recordings and written texts, choreography is mostly transmitted orally from one generation to the next (Fine 1991, 46). Steps established by one member may be carried on by a group for years after the originator leaves, often under his or her name. Steppers remember their alumni through such eponymous routines, but transmission is by no means vertical and insular. Chapters will actively engage in an exchange of steps, allowing steppers from different schools to cross-pollinate their routines (Fine 1991, 46). As steppers draw from their peers and popular culture, routines are in constant stylistic flow. Steppers are always borrowing, sampling, and referencing each other and the world around them. When they need to reference their group identity, however, steppers call upon “trade steps” shared among all chapters of their Greek organization (Fine 1991, 46). With opportunities for nationwide interaction, steppers have been able to develop these trademark steps that point to national Greek affiliations. The most well-known trade step belongs to Alpha Kappa Alpha, the oldest Black sorority. Their routine, “It’s a Serious Matter,” is highly recognizable in the stepping world and is frequently remixed into fresh material (Fine 1991, 53).

At Poughkeepsie High and Middle Schools, Coach Ellerbe’s steppers have no such higher affiliation. They have no ties to national Greek organizations, let alone to any universities. If stepping was born from Greek organizations in a collegiate setting, what does it mean for Ellerbe’s steppers to perform in middle and high schools? Does stepping take on different forms when it is removed from fraternities and sororities?

In many ways, Ellerbe’s steppers are closely aligned with the tradition of collegiate stepping. Like their Greek counterparts, their routines are developed and transmitted orally, and often named for the steppers that created them. In their practices with the middle school, there is a strong sense that the Steppers With Class are pulling up the younger generation behind them, preparing them both for high school

and the next level of stepping. By teaching routines named for alumni or crafted for the Steppers With Class, the older students become mentors to the younger. Through step, they demonstrate to the middle schoolers that they are a part of a trajectory towards success, should they choose to stick with it. Although not all of the Steppers With Class will go on to step in college, Coach Ellerbe has seen a direct link between the step team and the higher educational goals of his students. Greek-letter organizations themselves do not play much of a role in Steppers With Class, but the team’s competition schedule has brought the steppers out of Poughkeepsie and onto the campuses of America’s colleges and universities—following a step event at Morehouse College, the team’s only male member applied and won admission to the school. While Ellerbe intends to lead his teams to competitive victory, he is equally determined to nurture their academic successes as well.

During the spring of 2013, Ellerbe’s teams multitasked at a dizzying rate. Every month brought a new competition; every competition brought a new permutation of routines. Their signature steps at this time were two lightly boastful routines, one done in a call-and-response style and the other performed by three groups that each chanted as one, volleying the action back and forth across the stage.

In the first routine, the calls were performed by one stepper. The group’s responses are indicated in parentheses:

Now that you know who we/(Are!)  
We. Are not here. To stick our noses in  
the/(Air!)  
And we’re definitely. Definitely. Def-in-  
ite-ly, not here to kick a simple/(Step!)  
Now my ladies/(Girls only: Yes!)  
I mean my beautiful Steppers With Style  
ladies/(Girls only: Yes!)  
And my Alpha males with style/(Boys  
only: Yes!)  
Are we here to bore them?/(No, no. *One  
stepper in the group stands out and “freaks”:*  
nooooo!)  
She’s trippin’. Now my steppers break it  
down for me/(Ooo, aaahh)

\*\*\*\*

*Middle group:* Ice. Ice. Ice cold  
*Left group:* Boom, ahh, do that step. A  
boom boom, ahh, do that step

*All:* Ice, ice, ice, too cold, too cold. Ice,  
ice, ice, just another step show  
*Right group:* Is it cold enough?  
*Left group:* It’s too cold  
*Middle group:* Ice, ice, ice, too cold, too  
cold. Ice, ice, ice, just another step show  
*All:* Ice cold!

The Steppers With Class were also simultaneously working on an extended Wizard of Oz-themed skit with an anti-drug message, and a religious skit that they would perform at Gospel Fest in Newark, New Jersey:

Boom, boom. Praise God  
Step back, and look out  
Because the power of God is gonna rock  
this house  
Step back, and look out  
Because the power of God is gonna rock  
this house  
Get ready for God’s show

Lastly, the Steppers With Style compiled a routine outlining the accomplishments of Barack Obama’s first term in office, which praises his education initiatives and the Affordable Care Act. Outside of the collegiate context, Poughkeepsie’s steppers employ step to comment on everything from faith to politics.

This is not to say that collegiate steppers do not also exercise their social consciousness through step—the Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) sorority at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill has used their performances to celebrate African civilizations and call for unity among the American Black diaspora today (Yarger 1996, 116). Yarger (1996) also observes that when the UNC Chapel Hill AKA sisters taught a routine to a group of younger girls, they turned the line “I love my AKA” into “I love being black” (116). This adaptation indicates the interchangeability of the two identities for the sorority sisters, but also the limitations of the Greek terminology for their younger counterparts. In some contexts, the sorority or fraternity unit has even acted as a restraining factor on the steppers. Official steps are often never performed outside of the privacy of the organization, except at sanctioned shows and competitions. Sorority sisters, who grew up learning steps from their older Greek relatives, report never using the steps until they,



Coach Ellerbe teaching the Steppers With Style at Poughkeepsie Middle School, April 2013. Photo by Zoe van Buren.

the younger sisters, had pledged, out of respect (Rouverol 1996, 100). Step excels at group representation at every scale; but without the clear parameters of Greek affiliation, young steppers are both freed and required to put it to use for any other community of which they feel themselves to be a part.

On May 15, 2013, the Poughkeepsie teams arrived in the auditorium of their middle school to compete in Youth Step USA's New York State High School Stepping Championship. "Upstate vs. Downstate," on Youth Step USA's Facebook page advertised, "The Battle for New York." Steppers With Class, it turned out, was the only team representing "Upstate." The rest hailed from New York City, representing schools like Brooklyn Tech and Beacon High School. The event was sparsely attended, but one school brought a marching band.

The show was opened by the president of the Mid-Hudson Valley Pan-Hellenic Council—an Alpha Kappa Alpha alumni—and then by a representative from Alpha Kappa

Alpha, Inc. Every judge was soon revealed to be from a Greek organization, immediately establishing that this event belonged in the Greek-letter tradition. Since none of the competing steppers belonged to these organizations, none of the judges' organizations were individually represented by the performances. Instead, the Greek-letter groups became one entity, together representing step as a form, college as a goal, and healthy competition as a way of life. A local community advocate took the stage next and delivered a cautionary tale of the dangers of secret online relationships. The parents in the audience voiced their agreement. While "We Are Family" played over the loudspeaker, the advocate then asked that all stand and shake the hand of a stranger in the audience, in a gesture immediately reminiscent of the Sign of Peace in many church services. Fraternities and sororities may be symbols of potential future selves for younger steppers, but Ellerbe's steppers did not come to show unity with them. They came to represent the

Hudson Valley, Poughkeepsie High School, and Steppers With Class.

Beacon's Finest, an all-female team from Beacon High School in New York City, gave an aggressive performance with nods to stepping fundamentals: "I don't think they realize how serious this is," they chanted, playing off of "A Serious Matter." Their style was more confrontational and athletic than Ellerbe's teams, but pride was the great uniting factor. They chanted: "You must never forget/we *always* set the highest standards/and never settle for less." There was an element of gender play in their performance, as they seemed to be "hard stepping," like the more militaristic routines that defined the original male collegiate teams. Coach Ellerbe's wife confided that she wished the PHS team were less "soft," but she didn't know why they didn't step more aggressively. "That's just the way we are," she said. The PHS steppers have no rivalries with other schools in the state, which may lead them to choose softer technique and humor over aggression.

The Future K's, from Queens, opened with a comedic skit. Although they used female actors for their skit, the actual steppers were all male. They used sticks in their routine, beating the ground emphatically. Next up were the Lady Dragons from Brooklyn Tech, who incorporated Middle Eastern motifs in their costume and hand motions. They used their routine to honor Scheherazade of *Arabian Nights*: the princess who saved herself and didn't need a man. Their male counterparts from Brooklyn Tech performed next, using comedy in their skits and routine as well. They incorporated marching patterns into their steps and lived up to the hard-stepping routine they promised, when they chanted that they were "back to make the stage crack."

The Steppers With Class performed last, using their Wizard of Oz anti-drug skit. "We keep it so drug free," they proclaimed. In contrast with their competitors, the Steppers With Class were the only mixed-gender group, and the only women to use humor in their routine. They were also the softest steppers, and the least boastful. Their third-place ranking that night suggested that hard, aggressive stepping and chanting was a bigger crowd pleaser, but the MC singled out the message of their performance for commendation at the end. Ellerbe and the steppers chose the drug-free routine for their own reason: it was supposed

to have been performed at a recently cancelled anti-gun violence event, but they still wanted to get the message out. Although they did not win, the Steppers With Class gave a performance indicative of step's communicative powers, both in and out of collegiate groups.

Fundamentally, stepping is about representation and the strength of the group. As it moved into secondary schools and youth groups, it has proven itself to be capable of thriving outside the structure of Greek-letter organizations. Along with the other competitors at the championship, the Steppers With Class demonstrated that the full range of stepping technique, tradition, and innovation has been carried down to non-Greek teams; however, without the structure and rivalries of the Greek system, their steps derive their meaning from the sociopolitical environments that surround them in their schools, churches, and streets. Although the sorority or fraternity unit might serve collegiate steppers as a signifier for these same experiences, high school steppers may need to be a bit more explicit. Fraternities and sororities serve as a reference point that step can always return to, but its central ethos translates without difficulty, and with great possibility, to any group seeking a means of self-representation, community pride, and mutual support. ▼

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