

Constructing a Children's Jazz Dance Class

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Conceptualizing a jazz dance class for children can be problematic, not only in creating the class itself but also in considering just what is jazz dance and what should the finished creation look like. Jazz dance has many variables in definition, from the purity of the original vernacular steps to the theatrical styles of Bob Fosse and the more nebulous contemporary jazz dance creations.

Rather than discussing all of the variables in jazz dance training, I will limit this discussion to qualities normally associated with a classical jazz dance movement style, and how these qualities can be instilled in the dance abilities of young dancers. Also, this lecture is meant to discuss components that can be part of a jazz dance class, but not to give an actual jazz dance class curriculum.

Jazz dancing originated in the vernacular dances of the 1920s and 1930s, that were danced to classic jazz music – dances like the Charleston, lindy, shorty George, Susie Q, etc. These movements showed the greatest linkage between jazz music concepts and feelings, and how those musical concepts became visible in the dancing body.

In the 1940s and 1950s, choreographers from ballet and modern dance began to sample the body stylings of jazz dance and the movement vocabulary of jazz dance, and to mix these with aspects of ballet and modern dance techniques. This would include the styles of Jack Cole, Bob Fosse, Jerome Robbins, and Katherine Dunham.

During the later 1950s time period, classes to teach jazz dance became popular, with most pulling from the ballet/modern dance styles of jazz dance, and not the vernacular styles of jazz dance.

These classes were led by teachers like Luigi, Matt Mattox, Gus Giordano, Charles Kelley. There was a strong presence of jazz dancing in popular media like television, film, and Broadway, and the jazz dance classes for adults and professionals followed in the styles of these originators.

Jazz dance classes for children generally fell into a version of the creations by these pioneers. In my estimation, since the feeling of the popular rock music and lingering swing sentiment of the 1940s was still present, younger dancers had a general feel for jazz music/dance concepts in their bodies due to the popular music and social dances.

But now in our current time period, these jazz related influences in both music and movement are less present in the daily activity of today's young dancers. The funky, isolated movements

instilled in rock music are not popular. The bent knee, grounded body position of jazz dance seems to be alien to most young dancers. It seems that to truly teach a viable jazz dance class, a remedial course in “what is jazz dance and jazz music” is first necessary. In past days we took this knowledge for granted, but no longer.

So I think that constructing a jazz dance class/curriculum for young dancers of today will require an approach that includes historical and musical education, as to what the concepts of jazz dance/music are, and how those concepts can be reflected in body movement. On a grand scale, this would entail having time to educate young dancers in the history of jazz music, jazz dance movement vocabulary, and popular jazz dance styles during its evolution. Of course, most teachers do not have the time and resources to present this information in a local dance studio setting.

My recommendation would be to make educational resources available to your students – by using videos available on Youtube that will demonstrate jazz music/dance styles of the 1920s – hot jazz, Louis Armstrong, Charleston, 1930s – big band swing, Benny Goodman, Lindy, 1940s – be bop, Dizzy Gillespie/Charlie Parker, beginnings of Jack Cole style, 1950s – rock n roll and cool jazz, Elvis Presley and Miles Davis, Luigi/Matt Mattox styles, 1960s – pop rock, Bob Fosse, 1970s – disco, Michael Bennett, 1980s – street dance, classic rap artists, Frank Hatchett, 1990s – hip hop, C&C Music Factory, Paula Abdul/Janet Jackson, 2000s – contemporary, Mia Michaels.

Young students must be introduced to jazz music as a musical form just to listen to, as well as to dance to. Students will not integrate the felt qualities of jazz music without having first had a study of jazz music.

As for actual class exercises, I will not outline a curriculum of technique exercises, but instead talk about jazz dance movement concepts that can be inserted into your current jazz dance structure.

Here are examples of classic jazz dance movement characteristics:

- Movement in demi-plie with bent knees/body leaning forward – the typical jazz dance stance related to the vernacular styles is with the body having loosely bent knees, and the upper body slightly tilted forward at the waist. The body is grounded, meaning that it is connected to the floor in a low, resilient fashion. The legs are spread while the torso is lowered but still supported. Dancers must learn this body positioning, rather than be stuck in a highly vertical, straight knee position that reflects ballet training.
- There is a smooth transition in body support from one leg to the other, that keeps the upper body calm and controlled. This is a shift of weight from one leg to the other, while maintaining the presence of the body center in a supported fashion. This method involves transferring weight from one hip socket to the other, using both centered and tilted pelvis lines, in a calm supported manner. All in a lowered demi plie level.
- There is an easy release of the body weight with each step or transfer within hip sockets. The body weight falls slightly, with a smoothness, that then rebounds off of the floor into the next successional movement. This slight bounce and rebound is a physical

evocation of the swing feeling in jazz music. Again, this rebound lives in the lowered jazz dance, and not in the erect body/straight knee posture of ballet.

- Jazz dance often requires the dancer to respond to accents within the music with accented body movements – and a method to develop this control of singular body parts has been called “body isolations.” Classic jazz dance classes generally have a portion devoted to isolations of the head, shoulders, chest/torso, and pelvis. These can be simple movements, or complicated exercises involving coordinated arm movements to provide challenge to the dancer in body control. More about the important hip isolation coming in a bit!
- Understanding a sense of musicality – how to manipulate sharp hits and slow drawn out sections of movements. Jazz dancers should be skilled in how to make accents with body parts – shoulders, hips, feet, etc. But also how to contrast those percussive hits with slow, tense movements that take time to develop – legato, lyrical. Jazz dance likely more than any other form of dance makes use of the manipulation of body accents in lyrical and syncopated rhythms. Accent-Reverberation - Dissipation
- Understanding how to assimilate the feelings and rhythms of the classic jazz music forms into movement ideas. There is the pop and beat of the Charleston, the swing bounce of the Lindy, the controlled glide of Jack Cole, the slinky posturing of Bob Fosse, etc.
- Improvisation – jazz dance originally sprang from improvised movement by social dancers to jazz music. Individuality was prized. In today’s classes we tend to resort to choreographed or set movement phrases. But encouraging improvisation by dancers, responding to the rhythm and beat, is a great way to develop understanding of jazzy music and its possibilities when translated to movement.

A few concepts as related to movement exercises:

- Correct body alignment versus released body. Young dancers must know how to move in and out of straight body alignment and into a released body alignment. This simple but critical quality is of great importance to the jazz dancer. If the dancer only holds the erect lifted feeling, and does not know the released feeling, the released quality of jazz dance will never find its way into their bodies. Discuss the Nat Horne reach up, release roll up, and how important this is.
- Jazz fourth – young dancers do not know how to move into plie and out of plie, with a supported upper body. The basic jazz fourth exercise is of critical importance in developing this ability. Discuss the exercise, and how students normally try to move into a lower body position by releasing the pelvis.
- Control of the pelvis in all formulations – alternating hip, same hip, circular hip. Relate this to how the pelvis is used in jazz movement vocabulary with centered and tilted levels.
- Classic jazz dance position of dropped side pelvis with spinal rotation/shoulder pushing forward
- Double bump of funky jazz

- Bounce of Lindy Swing, step high, step low, jazz out, pas de bouree
- How these stylistic and isolated positions relates to the Chorus Line pose

To really instill the classic jazz dance feel, study and learn the vernacular dances, and the feelings of the music that are related to the corresponding jazz dance movements. Young students will have lots of fun learning the Charleston, Lindy, Susie Q, etc. And they will internalize the jazz concepts inherent in these movements. There are instructional videos on Youtube for these movements. Also look for the swing jazz dance from Black and Blue, and one of my dances "Duke Ellington's Jazz Nutcracker." Also my jazz dance "Get With It."

CONCLUSION:

In creating a jazz dance class for children, be sure to first know the classic defining movement concepts of jazz dance, and then create exercises that will instill those qualities in your students. Most important of these are:

- relaxation in body joints, especially knee/ankle/hip
- jazz dance stance
- ability to move from lifted to a released body with ease and control
- ability to move in and out of the demi plie level
- ability to isolate body parts
- ability to manipulate sharp and smooth movements with skill and ease
- possess a high level of skill in manipulating the center/shift/tilt of the pelvis in weight shifts
- and the slight relaxation of the weight into each foot when stepping