

FIT CITY

Rhythm and Yoga, in Deep Conversation

Afro Flow blends West African dancing, vinyasa style, live drumming and singing.

By TIFFANY MARTINBROUGH

Inside a glass-enclosed dance studio at the Ailey School in Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan, a diverse group of New Yorkers, stripped down to sports bras, T-shirts, tights and bare feet, stretched in a circle.

Light drumming and singing accompanied a gentle, yoga flow. A collective "aaah-hhh" soon followed.

Gradually, the tempo sped up. A vocalist intensified her calls to the universe. The students' moves accelerated.

The percussion built to a feverish pace, and soon sweaty bodies were twisting, reaching, jumping and gyrating to African rhythms. The beating of the drum seemed practically hypnotic.

Then, just like that, the energy relented. The drumming slowed and the melody softened, returning the group to that initial place of peace.

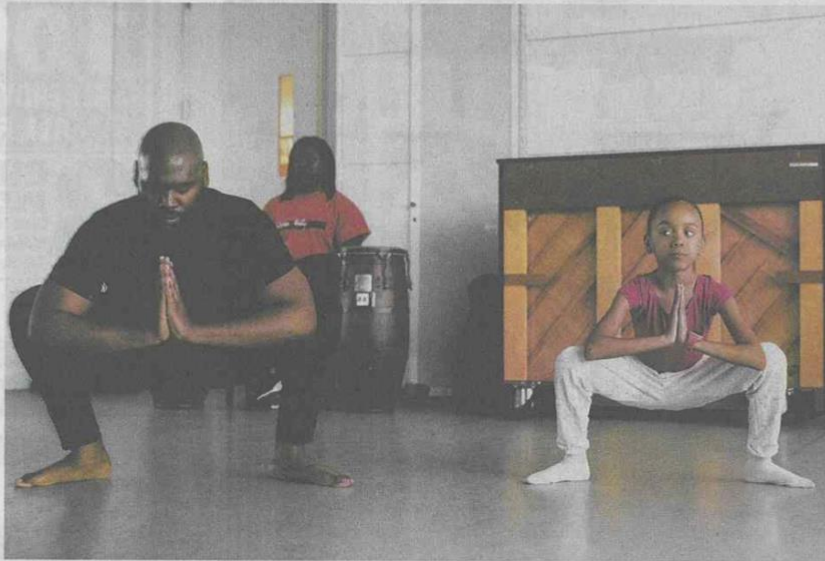
This colossal mash-up of West African dance and vinyasa yoga is called Afro Flow Yoga. Leslie Salmon-Jones, an Alvin Ailey-trained dancer, and her husband, Jeff Jones, an engineer and drummer, created the class in 2008 after spending two years in West Africa, Haiti and Jamaica.

"My husband and I decided to take a trip to learn more about our ancestry," Ms. Salmon-Jones said. The couple visited Ghana, Togo, Benin and Ivory Coast. They visited slave dungeons, Ms. Salmon-Jones said, and throughout the trip learned about all kinds of healing rituals, including ones related to dance.

Upon their return, Ms. Salmon-Jones was invited to teach yoga and Afro-Caribbean dance in Sedona, Ariz. That was where she had the idea to bring the two disciplines together with live music. "Even the name came through," she recalled. "I taught the first Afro Flow Yoga at this festival on the vortexes in the mountain on a full moon."

While researching the class, Ms. Salmon-Jones discovered that yoga had been practiced in ancient Egypt. "You see in the hieroglyphics all the yoga poses," she said.

The more she developed her idea, the more Ms. Salmon-Jones seemed able to merge the worlds of yoga and African dance into a cohesive class. "The movements come out of the connection to the earth, to the sky, to the heart," she said of African dance. (The same, arguably, could be said of yoga.) "We do a lot of heart-opening movements and combination of dances of the African diaspora — harvest dances in West Af-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARA NAOMI LEWKOWICZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

rica, planting the seeds, warrior movements." She demonstrated, thrusting her hands and legs in a stylish, rhythmic manner.

"A lot of the dances and rhythms survived the slave trade, so all throughout the diaspora there's a connection," she said. Dance was "part of the healing."

Afro Flow Yoga is two parts yoga with one part African dance wedged in between. After finishing the first part — a vinyasa portion of hip rolls, downward dogs, cobras and

slow roll-ups — participants transition to a feisty mélange of concentrated African dances before ending the workout with more yoga.

The class is constantly at odds with itself, simultaneously peaceful and high-energy, meditative and pulsating, spiritual and earthy.

It is also expanding, with Ms. Salmon-Jones training teachers in Boston, where she lives, Tel Aviv, Toronto, Oakland, Los Angeles and New York City.

Scenes from a culture mash-up: Piilin Anice, above, leads an Afro Flow class, which is two parts yoga and one part African dance, at the Ailey School. "We do a lot of heart-opening movements and combination of dances of the African diaspora," said Leslie Salmon-Jones, who created the class with her husband, Jeff Jones.

In an Ailey School class, a singer intensifies her calls to the universe.

Piilin Anice, another Ailey-trained dancer, teaches the class at Ailey, which takes place every other Sunday and costs \$20.

Ms. Anice said that she appreciates how the class gathers its strength from its emphasis on spherical formations.

"The circle is really good medicine," she explained. "It's rooted in love and compassion." It's also what Africans traditionally practiced, Ms. Anice added. "They'd come into a circle. Whatever they needed, it's like their movement was a prayer. Not just dance for dance sake."

The live music for Afro Flow Yoga blends peaceful vocals with percussion. "It's all in a flow, particularly when people are breathing together," said Dana Gae Hanchard, the vocalist for the class. "You just stay focused on what's happening — inhalation, exhalation, how people are coming out of a pose, how far they're going," she said. "I feel my role is to help them in that."

The conga drumming is both intense and introspective. "Congas come out of the tradition of central Africa," said Ron McBee, the class drummer. "They're melodic." Mr. McBee also plays the mbira, a traditional thumb piano native to Zimbabwe.

"It's really inspiring, the connection to your ancestors," said a 44-year-old student known as Anouska. "My family is from Guyana, so feeling that strong connection with slavery and my family coming over as indentured servants" is energizing, she said.

"The energy is amazing," said Michelle Kilic, 47, who has been taking Afro Flow for more than four years. "The endorphins are going through you, and you just feel alive. And afterward, you just go out and conquer stuff. You just feel so blessed and grateful."

Others find the class to be healing. Weeks after recovering from surgery to remove a cyst that caused an ectopic pregnancy, Andrea Smith, 35, longed for an activity that would alleviate her emotional and physical pain. "I was a dancer in the past, and I was looking for something that had rhythm and the healing structure of yoga," she said. "Something that could help me meditate while also stretching my limbs and wringing out my organs so that I could start the healing process."

She found what she was looking for. "The yoga did what it needed to do," said Ms. Smith. "But you realize that African dance is the conversation between you and the ancestors and the earth and God."