



Yoga instructor Porschla Coleman and hip-hop's Russell Simmons practice a Tapas Yoga workout at The Joan Weill Center for Dance in New York City's Alvin Ailey Studios.

## unity for yoga

Russell Simmons, Porschla Coleman promote modern 'Tapas' workout

BY ELAINE WELTEROTH  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN LEI

**When hip-hop impresario** Russell Simmons says something is hot, people tend to listen.

After all, he has successfully branded his rendition of classic American flavor for the past 30 years.

He started by launching Def Jam records. Later he entered the fashion industry with Phat Farm, the urban luxury line he sold for nearly \$140 million just 10 years after starting it.

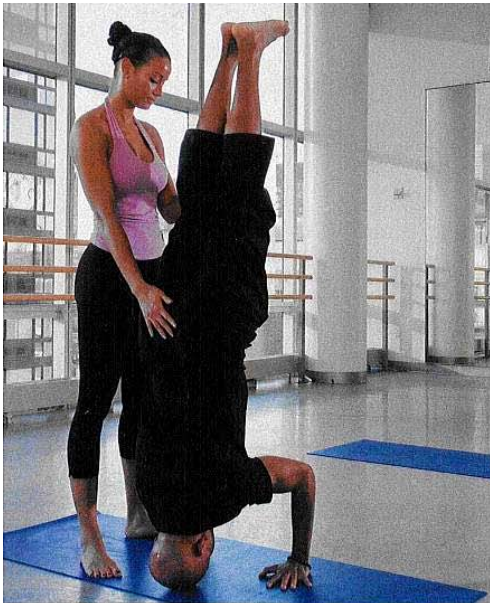
Simmons currently juggles his time between servicing five charities, tending to his latest fashion ventures (Argyle Culture and The Simmons Jewelry Collection) and being an executive producer of his brother's hit reality series, *Run's House*.

At 51 years old, Simmons continues to have his finger on

the pulse of pop culture. His latest interest, "Tapas Yoga," a yoga class conceived and taught by his former girlfriend Porschla Coleman, 25, is heating up at the world-renowned Alvin Ailey Extension in New York City.

A mix of hip-hop, R&B and traditional yoga melodies serve as the backdrop for breathtaking aerobic movements, challenging poses and "ohms" led by the near-flawless 5-foot-10 model-turned-yoga-teacher from Tennessee.

"It's very contemporary. It's very much about the workout and also the spirit, the musicality and letting go. People seem to like it, and I'm very excited that they're coming," says Yvette Campbell, director of the Ailey Extension, an instructional

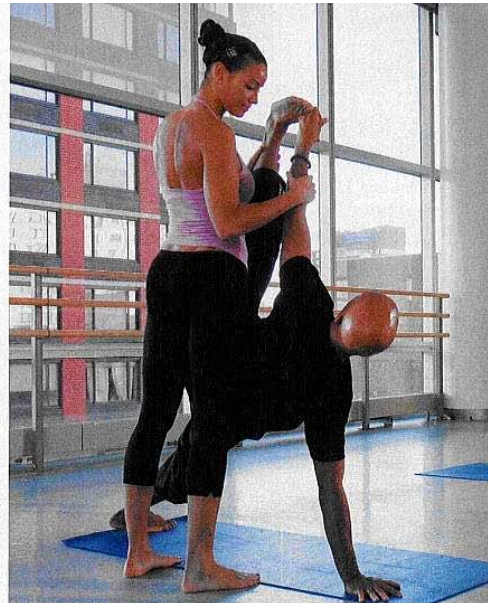


■ **Tri-pod head stand with adjustment.\***

**How-To:** Plant head and hands on floor with knees resting on back of arms. Stabilize. Slowly lean forward, lifting feet off ground into headstand keeping feet together and toes pointed.

**Benefits:** Strengthens arms, core and improves balance.

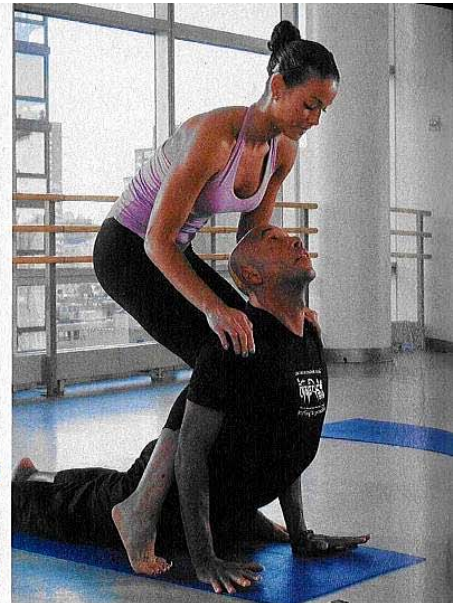
(\*Don't try these moves without professional assistance)



■ **Side plank with adjustment.**

**How-To:** Start by shifting onto outside edge of right foot, stacking left foot on top of right. Swing left arm to hip while turning torso toward left, supporting body weight on outer right hand and foot. Left index finger and foot meet to create one diagonal line from heel to crown.

**Benefits:** Increases stability, strength and lengthens the body.



■ **Upward facing dog.**

**How-To:** From lying face down, place hands shoulder-width apart. Lift torso on inhaled, drawing strength from core. Gaze upward and breathe.

**Benefits:** Strengthens arms, wrists, abs and promotes spinal flexibility.

## 5 TIPS TO practicing yoga

■ **MEDITATION: "Take 5 minutes out of your day to sit with yourself and be peaceful."**

Meditation can be achieved by being committed to sitting still and quiet for a set amount of time per day, focusing effortlessly on a private mantra or "ohm." If mantras aren't your thing, just watching your breath without controlling it will help focus your energy on letting go. Russell Simmons, who sits in meditation for 30 minutes every day, says, "Meditation changes lives—no one can meditate daily and not see a dramatic effect."

■ **SURRENDER: "Leave your ego at the door."**

Yoga is about letting go of fear, anxiety, insecurity and embracing a transcendent experience. In fact, Jivamukti's definition is to allow the soul to be liberated while living. Yvette Campbell, the director of the Ailey Extension, says, "It's not about looking like the person next to you. It's a personal technique that is very much from within." When it comes to difficult poses, Porschla Coleman encourages students to not be afraid of saying, "I'll get you on the next one."

■ **BREATHING: "Smile and breathe through everything."**

Deep breathing through sequences builds up your own

heat to use as energy. As the difficulty increases, Coleman reminds students to "smile and breathe through every pose—it teaches you how to be graceful in life." The goal is to remain happy and calm.

■ **SELF-DISCIPLINE: "Feel the frustration...but go through it."**

They don't call Simmons "Rush" for no reason—but when it comes to yoga, he is disciplined about making time to practice. "I don't care what happens; I am going to class every day, no matter what. It is a commitment," he says. Practicing self-discipline in your diet, workout and in your daily interactions is one of the primary objectives of a healthy yoga lifestyle.

■ **HAPPINESS: "Getting the yoga glow"**

Practicing sincerity and happiness are just as important in yoga as the physical burn. Yes, you'll lose weight, but more important, according to Simmons, you'll notice in a matter of weeks how much happier you are after clearing out your "nadis," or energy channels. "You'll naturally gradually gravitate toward things that are helpful for your spirit," he says. You feel more connected, more grateful, more sweet."

program that shares the mission of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. "It's all about the teacher, so, for me, it was Porschla. I was very inspired by her."

Simmons credits yoga for teaching him the imminent benefits of single-pointed focus by harnessing the power of stillness.

"After the first class, I remember saying, 'If I keep doing this, I'll lose all my money,' because I thought the anxiety was the driving force in my physical success. But nothing is further from the truth. It's the seconds of stillness, the seconds when you are fully awake, when you are connected, that you do creative work. Good work is done when you are here, not when distractions from the future or the past are in your mind."

For Tapas Yoga, a skillfully diverse group of 10 to 15 students meets weekly at Ailey for a 90-minute workout that strengthens the body, energizes the spirit and quiets the mind.

At first mention, "Tapas" is often confused with the trendy Spanish-cuisine appetizers of the same name. But in yoga, "Tapas" is actually a form rooted in the Jivamukti principle meaning "self-discipline" or to "burn."

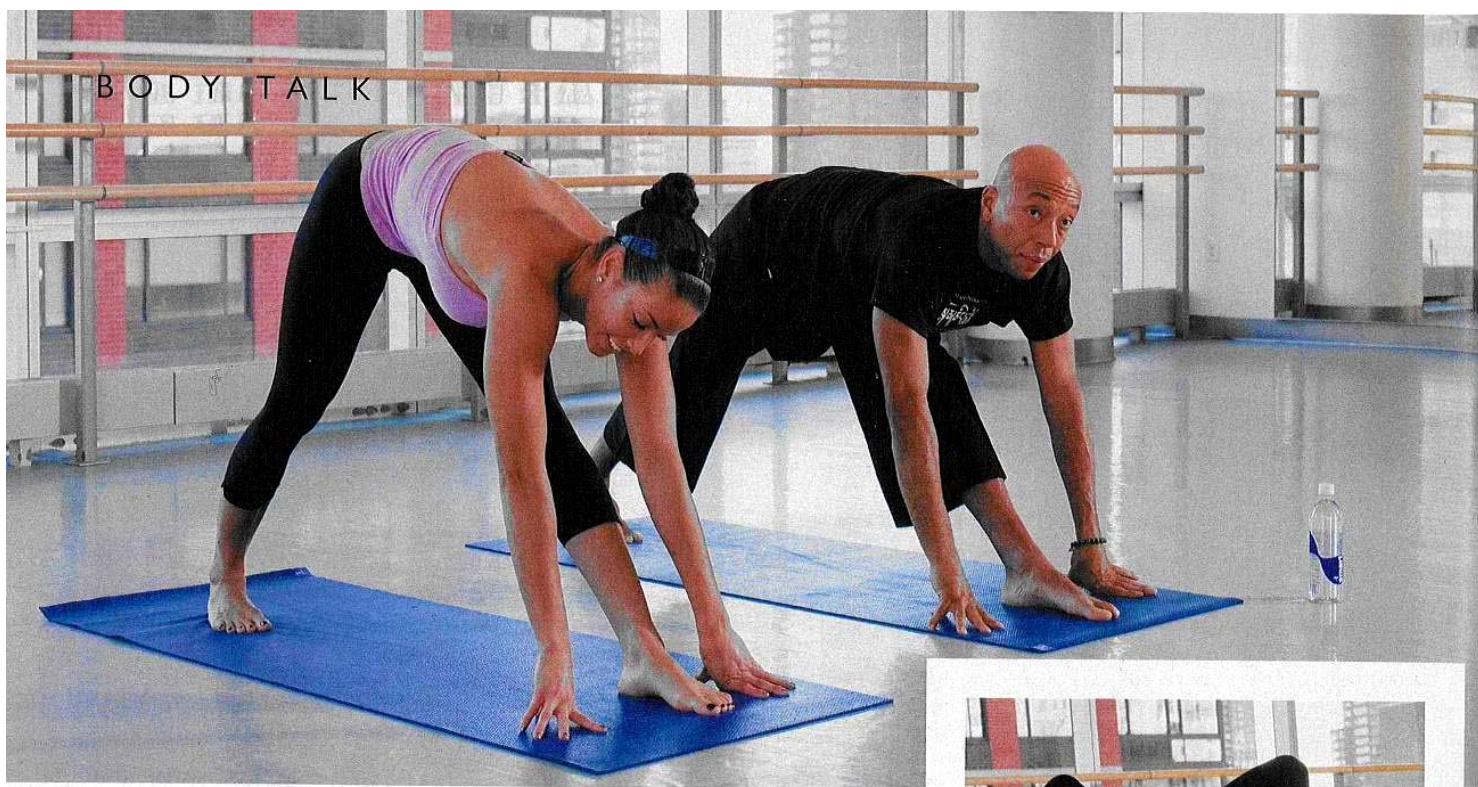
These principles are hardly foreign to Simmons and Coleman, one of EBONY's "Hottest Couples" last year who now practice yoga together as friends and are individually committed to maintaining vegan lifestyles. "I want people coming into this class to learn discipline. If I make them hold the pose for 10 breaths, I tell them to feel the frustration...but go through it," Coleman says.

Coleman also encourages reflective introspection throughout each class. Before leading the group in chanting, Coleman, from the prostrate position, encourages participants to quiet the busyness of their minds and focus energy on dedicating their workout to something larger than themselves. By inviting the group of participants to "leave their ego at the door" and gather as family, Coleman disarms any sense of intimidation.

"A lot of people say they can't go to the class because it is too advanced. Yoga is not a competition," Coleman says. "You go in and do what you can do. And then it's a daily practice. I didn't start out being able to do a scorpion pose. You have to start somewhere, but the goal is to keep going."

What began some 14 years ago as a strategy for Simmons to meet

## BODY TALK



■ **Left hamstring stretch.** **How-To:** Place left leg in front. Lean in to front foot, placing hands on either side. Press through heels, keeping legs straight. **Benefits:** Increases flexibility of hamstrings and calves. ■ **Scorpion.** **How-To:** (Not for beginners) From forearm stand, bend knees and lift head into deep backbend. Knees separate; toes touch. **Benefits:** Strengthens shoulders, abs and back; also improves balance. ■ **Standing forward bend.** **How-To:** Lean forward and down, folding at the hips. Try to straighten legs, touch nose to knee and flatten hands to floor. **Benefits:** Stretches and lengthens hamstrings.

beautiful women and five years ago for Coleman as a rigorous workout regimen to wean her off a long gymnastics career has evolved into a deeply spiritual ritual woven into their respective lifestyles. This spiritual component, which works hand-in-hand with any religion, is incorporated into the classes.

“Most forms of exercise focus primarily on physical benefits. But yoga is about working on holistic health—strengthening the mind, body, spirit connection that helps us move toward our highest potential in all aspects of life. If you take it seriously, yoga can be a truly transformative experience,” says Simmons’ close friend and Tapas Yoga partner, Josue Sejour.

“Yoga is meant to teach you to evolve quicker—to relieve you of the obvious symptoms of unconsciousness, like sadness and sickness,” says Simmons.

This enlightening message is one he hopes to deliver to the Black community through a scholarship program that sponsors people of color to get extensive Jivamukti-certified teacher training.

Just last year Coleman earned her certification from the world-renowned Omega Institute and now privately instructs celebrities, Wall Street professionals and a class full of New Yorkers who all look to her for a rejuvenating workout that helps to recover balance in the midst of hectic lifestyles.

While most high-profile hookups tend to end in messy, high-profile breakups, Simmons and Coleman have found peace in partnership outside of romance, citing yoga as their foundation.

“The world is in perfect order,” says Coleman of the evolution of their relationship. “Who knows why Russell and I were brought together—maybe it was to bring yoga to everyone. But I think what makes me so happy is that we are such good friends and we still practice yoga. It goes to show that yoga provides a natural state of happiness—you just let things come and you let them go and you can’t get mad at it. We are not meant to be together intimately, but we are going to be friends for the rest of our lives.” □

