

Jeffrey Page's Dance With West Africa (Interview)



"It's about women being seen as potential rulers of the world in a way that is sweet and endearing"

Jeffrey Page got to Africa the way a lot of American artists do; he followed African-American cultural retentions via hip-hop and Black popular culture. The recognizable rhythms of rap in his Indiana hometown worked like an Ellegua charm when his first dance teacher hooked her next students with an ad for the next Rock Steady Crew when she was really looking for future Katherine Dunham devotees. Page's early forays into the workings of West African dance prepared him for future work in the ongoing dialogue between African-American and African popular and folk cultures since the arrival of slaves in the New World in 1619. Those destinations would include choreographing BET Award Shows, a tour for Beyonce, a principal dancer in the Fela! musical and now being one of the choreographers for the much debated woman empowerment anthem video "Run The World (Girls.)"

The video sparked the usual Beyonce imitators who have used her past work to make creative intervention and empower their own self-esteem and notoriety on the internet. "Single Ladies (Put A Ring On It)" had the same viral effect two years ago with numerous video interpretations. But "Run The World (Girls)" has irked the feminist sensibilities of some women for its unrealistic portrayal of women's status worldwide. These critics have mistaken a mantra for a political critique yet missed the radical politics of remixing and representing authentic African dance to the masses.

Page's expertise in taking concepts and expressing them through the body helped make Beyonce's vision of strong women an artistic advance against the prevailing diluted versions of a Black folk art.

[youtube]VBmMU_iwe6U[/youtube]

How did you become a dancer?

When I was young I was walking around the neighborhood I saw a posting for auditions for hip-hop dance troupe it was in Indianapolis, Indiana and I went it. It kind of began my love of dance. In Indianapolis I would see different dance companies and I was kind of amazed that one could actually live a life doing a dance having health insurance and benefits and the whole nine that intrigued me and I wanted to enter the field.

I know that the poster said hip-hop dance but it was actually African dance.

Yes if it had said African dance I never would've gone in.

What is it about African dance that hooked you?

I'm actually getting ready to go to Mali for a month to do some more research in West Africa. Now that I've been doing more studying on it for the last ten years or so I've found it to be funky as hell. It's like if you think of the most funkier most grooviest type music we as African-Americans do in this country and have developed in this country it's kind of like derived from that. Like everything about it the funk hits you in a way like wow I really wasn't expecting it to hit me like that and it's addictive it's really really addictive. Kind of like going to church and you're sitting there and then they sing this song and something about it just hits you and you're like oh my God so it's very similar to that. And this is my second time going to Mali and I'm just kind of addicted to like the dirge of it the big bass the

syncopated off-timing to it similar to what James Brown really put out in his music. And with Chuck Brown and those folks pull out their music I think it's that.



What is the story behind "Run The World (Girls)?"

Frank Gatson who I call Beyoncé's executive choreographer because basically what he does. Beyoncé might have a vision or they may have a vision together and Frank's job is to make that vision come to life. I was having a conversation with Frank and I was trying to understand the video. He's like "Jeffrey it's just about women being seen in power positions." And that's the only storyline about it that's what it is. It's about women being seen as potential rulers of the world in a way that is sweet and endearing and magnetizing not in the way that is about brute but in the way that is alluring almost.' So I'm like "OK I got that but what is the video about?" he's like "Jeffrey we just want a collage of images" so I finally understood where he was going with this so it's just women being seen in different positions of power. In Beyoncé's mind one of the ultimate positions of power is that she was somewhere and she saw a picture of this guy I think it was like in Central Africa she saw this guy holding a Hyena like on a chain as a dog and she was absolutely amazed. She spoke about it for like 20 minutes so in that type of guttural way that power position but also in the way of being alluring like put you under a spell in that type of way of "You will do what I want you to do even without knowing that you're doing what I want you to do." So it's about all these different types of positions that people play in this society but she really likes the idea of this guy holding this Hyena. I think a lot of it was based on that image that she saw in her mind.



How do you feel like the dancing conveys that whole message?

I thought that it conveyed it pretty well. Iâ€™m a big fan of the other choreographers who were a part of the video. And I thought each choreographer I thought we all kind of brought a different texture to it. While I was working on it I couldnâ€™t see where all of our textures fit but then looking at the video I see it very beautifully. The concept of the dance was excellently executed I thought it was danced well. I see the line from the beginning to the middle to the end.

You are one of the principal dancers in Fela! What was the hardest thing about getting into character?

Getting into character is never hard for me maybe I havenâ€™t met a role that has challenged me to make it difficult. What did make it hard is the physical demand. I go around and I work with dancers and performers all the time and I kind of give them tips here and there and the main tip that I give people in order to get to your sweet spot in order to get to your magic spot you have to make sure that everything else in place. The getting there is I have a 2 and a half hour show and itâ€™s physically demanding not only that but Iâ€™m singing in the first tenor range the whole show. My range is a little below first tenor so that means I have to have a rigorous workout so that means I have to hit the gym everyday before the show. I have to make sure that Iâ€™m in my vocal classes to keep my voice malleable. I have to make sure that my body is at a place where I can step into a role and not be held back by my physical inhibitions. If my physicality is not holding me back I can hit that sweet spot.

Now that youâ€™ve learned more about Fela from doing the show, what is it about the show that translates who Fela was to the world?

Itâ€™s an amazing show although I am no longer in it because Iâ€™m moving on to other things. I would say that the thing

the show translates to who Fela was and is, is he is this man who did not move. He did not move because of fear because whatever was happening in his country he contemplated leaving his country he was beginning to be a big musician. He could've been like a Bob Marley but he chose to continue to speak on the corruption of his countrymen. I think the biggest thing that we learn from Fela! Is that we really can use music as a weapon and when you have a position don't let anything sway you. Don't let anyone bring you fear. So that's the biggest thing the show's about; this man who was getting weary with all of the corruption all of the murders that was happening in his country and he wanted to leave. The government threw his mother off the top of his building. He wanted to leave to have a better life for this family and in the end he decided not to because he felt like he was the man to be the voice of the people so he decided to stand his ground and change the situation instead of leaving and running away from the negative situation.

Does American culture influence West African dance and vice-versa?

I've been going to Africa for a while now and I've made several research expeditions and I've researched a lot. I was in Casamance, which is in the southern region of Senegal in West Africa. I was hanging out with the Milenke in Casamance and it was a naming ceremony it was way in the back bush no electricity or anything. Imagine just no electricity no running water or anything all the people and all this food and we're having a good time. And out of nowhere I see a saxophone a big shiny saxophone and it kind of took me back. I remember seeing it before in the Gambia when I went to the Gambia but I never really asked questions.



I thought it was something they just pulled out for the benefit of tourists because I was with a tourist group the

first time I went to Gambia. So in Casamance Iâ€™m like this is really weird I want to know more about this so I started asking questions about the saxophone and the saxophone is actually inside their traditional ceremonious ritual the Malinke do. When it comes to naming ceremonies, circumcision when it comes to rites of passage when it comes to weddings. The reason being is because John Coltrane created *A Love Supreme* they thought of it was this very spiritual and divine type of music. So they began to incorporate the saxophone in their traditional cultures. I mean traditional like non-touristy culture that is actually a part of the indigenous cultures now. I think your question is good because people sometime neglect to see that Africa is a big influence at the same time the amazing culture that we as African-Americans created in this hemisphere and in this country including jazz and the blues and rock and roll, lindy-hopping and all of those big band type things and hip-hop theyâ€™re amazing within themselves. In addition to that they start to wind back in a circular motion to influence what we have been influenced by so very long this circular thing. Weâ€™re thinking weâ€™re being influenced by Africa but in reality we are influencing a lot of artistic developments a lot of whatâ€™s going on in Africa we influence that so now theyâ€™re take on who we are now influences us again itâ€™s the craziest thing in the world. Jumping to the Beyonce video Tsou Tsou, this group from Mozambique, and Iâ€™m not really familiar with Mozambique Iâ€™ve never been to Mozambique but their choreography that they created years ago for a wedding in Mozambique that Beyonce likes so much was because of Michael Jackson. Because they really really liked Michael Jacksonâ€™s legwork footwork and so on and so forth they created this dance because of Michael Jackson. It wasnâ€™t because of some deep Zulu traditional type of thing it was because they liked Michael Jackson so they created a dance in their own texture, their own language own vocabulary it kind of made them feel like they were doing something Michael Jackson would do and thus comes what we see Beyonce doing in the beginning of the video.

I would like for people to start to understand that the influence especially in this day and age runs both directions.

Has Beyonce begun to influence Africa?

Just from my personal experience and I've been dealing with her for a long time for a few years now. But in my personal experience in not dealing with her hell yes! Like for instance in the northern region of Senegal you can see all of the Sabar movements that they do you can see that Beyonce very particularly is influencing that type of music that type of movement. Originally the funny thing about Sabar music originally what's called Mbalax again a traditional form of music Mbalax is kind of like this breakdown inside of the music so it's kind of like you have a straight pattern in the music and in the middle you have this breakdown now that was done by Youssou N'Dour who was influenced by James Brown so now 20 years later Beyonce is making even more influential moves to this particular form of Senegalese dance called Sabah. She is seeing her take on her art form on this culture and then she's being influenced by their take on it.

Could you give me 3 things that distinguishes and/or defines African dance?

When you say African dance it means so many things. We're talking about a humongous spectrum to be more specific because my expertise is West African dance I would say some defining traits of it is it's kind of like tape dance to where the rhythm is found. The body acts as an instrument within itself to create rhythm but also to show what music might look like. The movement is essential to the music in the same way that the music is essential to the movement. So that is one defining characteristic of African dance. The second would be in certain settings the communal experience. I think the communal experience exists with most folkloric dances of the world. I think the second would be that there is a place for everybody. It's dances and textures for the old folks,

there's stuff for the younger folks stuff for the babies.



For instance, if the rhythm is hot and alive and sweltering when they see an older person stand-up and getting ready to come to the center all of the musicians will take the music down so that this older person can get their groove on. It's organic the musicians see the dancer and the dancer sees the musician and they adjust to each other. And they dance and play music and they create music and they create dance with each other. I think that is a distinguishing characteristic of West African dance. I would say that the third is that there is always a momentous type of flow nothing is held for any particular reason. It always has some type of meaning the weight of the body always moves in some organic type way the body is not fighting itself. If you get into it and figure out what the texture is it always for some reason feels good to your body because the body is not fighting itself. No awkwardly held poses or anything like that. It revolves off of the theory of momentum. If my arm is dropping this way then what happens to the head as it regards the arm with the leg as it regards the arm so when you get into it and you understand weight placement you'll understand that the body is not fighting to accomplish this thing. Which is why for ballet dancers the end of their career is probably the age of 29. With folkloric dance I've seen African dancers in their 60's.

What would you say is your vision for your choreography and direction?

I hope to create some Broadway musicals I hope to create some film concepts. I'm working on a musical right now. I was on YouTube yesterday and I saw this guy randomly doing Beyoncé's choreography. He fit the image of a low self-esteem type of person. A person society would otherwise cast away he fit that description. And while I was looking at it,

it was like this guy has found his sweet spot in terms of he didn't care about anybody he had the camera on he is dancing away he is finding his sweet spot and it is amazing to him. And he did my choreography in his little clip and it was amazing. That is really really gratifying for me when a person can find their sweet spot and they can be elevated in terms of their self-image that's amazing to me. So beyond what I want to do with my direction in terms of developing shows it's amazing to me that people are influenced by the work that I do in an indirect way. I feel as though that I might be able to make some small change in the world.



How do you feel about mass media as a transmitter of contemporary dance culture?

I think mass media is a great contributor if it's not overly used. I think it's a great contributor mass media has brought the world together YouTube has brought the world together. I think Facebook has brought the world together. Unfortunately a lot of the good art has been overlooked in mass media because the good art is a whole lot of artists who are only focused on their art. They're not focused on the commerce of it the business angle of it so unfortunately a lot of the good work is overlooked because mass media doesn't care about whether it's good or bad it's about whether it's entertaining. All art isn't about entertainment but a lot of the good work that could uplift us as a people and a country is overlooked just because sometimes artists are artists. They're only focused on the color purple and red and blue and not how can I promote my art further. They're not focused on that it's unfortunate so in that way I think mass media is machine and it does what it needs to do. We as artists have to figure out efficient ways to get our work out there. I think mass media is an excellent tool when used properly.

How does this differ in Senegal or Gambia or does it not?

No it does not differ over there but it's a different texture for instance, everybody doesn't have a television so it might be in a poster. If the neighborhood store has a television everybody gathers around so what are the things at this neighborhood store. All of these phone companies and soap companies they have this huge influence on what happens in Gambia and Senegal. Like you will see this Black woman with a really light-skinned complexion all of the placards and billboards that you see there to say it's soft it's light the same thing that we dealt with in America in the '70s and '80s it's there but imagine that a lot of these folks have no television and no radio so what they see of mass media is what these phone companies and soap companies and skin-bleaching companies want them to see on these humongous billboards and placards. It's slightly different 50 Cent is still big over there but it comes in a different way. You know 50 Cent is big over there because he sells t-shirts. It's like a 50 Cent brand t-shirt kind of like Fruit of the Loom.

Why do you think African dance has been so influential on American pop culture?

I think that African dance has been inside this culture for a very long time. I just don't think we've given a name to it.

Do you see things that you recognize but most people have no idea where it came from?

All the time and with that I would say the origins of hip-hop have been wildly shifted for the commercial benefit. In the '80s you would never ever see a white person do hip-hop that was considered a lowly type of form. Now you have a lot shows that promote hip-hop as the style like if you don't do hip-hop then you don't dance. In the same way I think that African dance has been a hidden stepchild think of 'Cabin In The Sky' it was African dance in 'Cabin The Sky' Katherine Dunham and I think Bill Bojangles Robinson was in

that. All of those movies, "Carmen" all of those movies had African dance in them.



This is not a new thing this has been around for a minute I think what's new about it is the fact that it's not this "ooga booga" form that's why I tip my hat to Beyonce. Because while many television productions and movie productions are still using it to be this "ooga booga" form to scare you or make you celebrate Black History Month. Beyonce is really seeing the beauty not the novelty I'm going to spit fire at you but the essence and the beauty of it. The same beauty that has contributed to it turning into hip-hop it turning into jazz it turning into blues in turning into Lindyhopping it turning into Rock and Roll and it turning into go-go music. The spirit of it not the thing of "I'm going to put on a piece of Kente cloth and celebrate Black History Month for the month." I applaud Beyonce for trying to find that and she is an artist so of course she's going to put forth her artistic opinion and her opinion is subject to other people's opinions. As an artist you need to not be scared to put forth your artistic statement and to say this is what I believe in this and then everybody jumps in says "I hate you I love you, you're the greatest." She sees beauty inside little kids doing dances at their elementary school she loves that she loves the natural organic stance of dance. She loves what that is and that is what she tries to promote inside of her music and inside of her stage performances. I think that African dance has been alive in our culture for a long time. I applaud our society for slowly beginning to remove the Kente cloth. I love Kente cloth but when I say Kente cloth I'm talking about how it has turned into this plastic idea of what being African is what we think African culture is "All I need to do is slap on a piece of Kente cloth and I am now African." And it's a lot deeper than that and a lot more complex than that and it lives beyond a month and it lives in so many different ways and in so many

different religions so many languages at least become sensitive to one texture and find the appreciation in one of those textures. It's not a new phenomenon and I can't wait to see where it can go the next texture it takes on. We did the hip-hop we did the jazz what's next what new form will this African style of feeling take on I can't wait to see it.

What are your current projects and next plans?

I'm supposed to be choreographing a new musical called "King Solomon" and Toni Braxton is the lead in that musical. I might be going out on tour with a new musical but I can't speak on it yet because it hasn't fully developed yet. I'm doing a musical called "The James Brown Project" which is being produced by The Apollo and Otis Sallid is the director of it and we're not really sure when that starts. I have a million things that are up in the air. I'm looking forward to this "King Solomon" project with Toni Braxton because I've never worked with her.