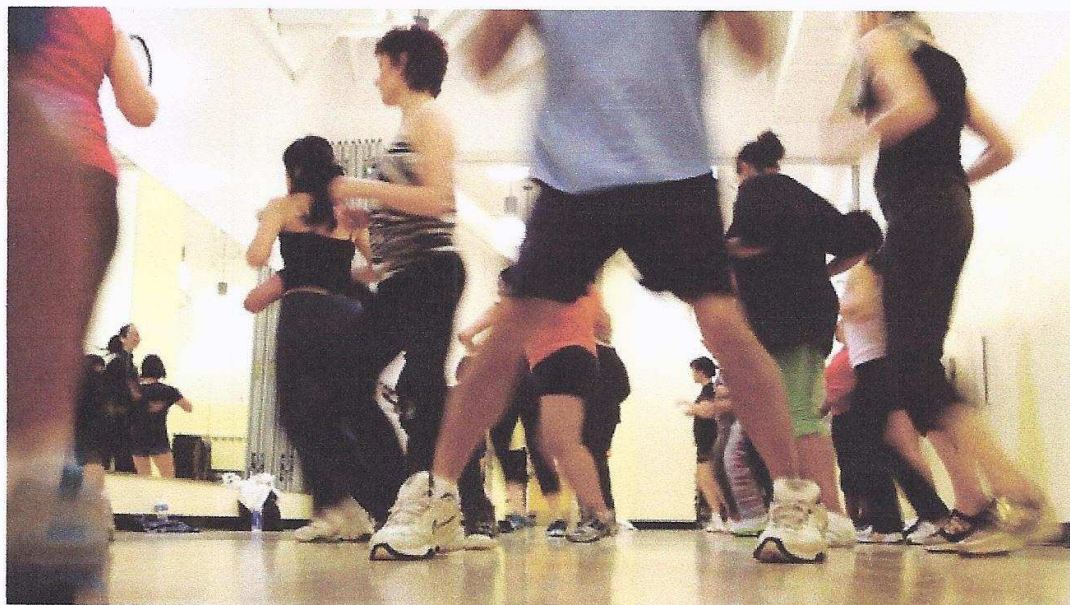


## Zoom In, Zumba Away



Emily Berl for The New York Times

Members of a Zumba class stretching and stepping at the Chinatown Y.M.C.A.

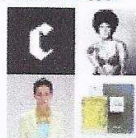
By HENRY ALFORD

Published: January 11, 2012

WHENEVER I read about people who are in thrall to a dance craze, my world suddenly seems too small. Oh, to dance the mazurka until my footmen are forced to carry me home on a makeshift gurney at dawn; oh, to spurn a dinner invitation to Scott and Zelda's because I literally cannot stop doing the Charleston.

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Deidre Schoo for The New York Times  
Ben Byrd leads Zumba at Alvin Ailey.

More recent offerings like the achy-breaky and the lambada held no appeal for me: one brought to mind the phrase "ratty mullet"; the other, "pelvic wallop." For all I know, Macarena is Portuguese for "a large room in which women apply makeup."

But I recently started doing Zumba, the dance and fitness phenomenon that, in 125 countries, has been whipping some 12 million people into a lather for the last decade, including everyone from Wyclef Jean to the writer Susan Orlean.

I can safely say that dance-wise it's the closest I have ever come to losing my mind. To wit: when I went to an elegant stand-up cocktail party in the San Remo building some weeks ago, I was moved to enact for a fellow swiller of white wine a bit of Zumba choreography that I think of as the Disco Pony. Forming a fist with my right hand and then raising it over my head, I rotated it while standing on my left foot and rapidly pivoting 360 degrees. Which caused an oncoming waiter to chastise me with an "Excuse me, sir!"

My Zumba origins are humble. I was initially drawn to the Z, as I like to call it, because I wanted to be more limber and nimble. Yes, I was impressed that this combination of Latin dance and cardio workout can cause you to lose 500 to 1,000 calories per sweat-soaked,

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hourlong session. But my stronger motivator was a desire to remedy my somewhat Frankensteinian corporeal stolidity. There are parts of my body that have not moved since 1965.

I started, as many do, on the [Zumba.com](http://Zumba.com) Web site. I learned there how, one day in the mid-1990s, the Colombian fitness instructor Alberto Perez, called Beto, forgot to take his aerobics music to a class he was teaching. Using instead some salsa and merengue tapes he had in his backpack, Mr. Perez started improvising what would eventually become Zumba.

He moved to Miami in 2001, soon spawning DVDs and an infomercial; in 2005 Mr. Perez and his business partners opened an academy to train instructors, of which there are now more than 20,000.

Typing my ZIP code into the Web site, I was told that 648 classes were within five miles. As the Hollywood adage runs, you could die from the encouragement.

I have now consorted with the Z for two months. Most of my frantic gyrating and quick quick-stepping has taken place at New York University and at three Y.M.C.A.'s in Manhattan. Though there are specialty classes like Aqua Zumba and Zumba Gold (a slower-paced variety, for seniors), the great majority of Zumba classes are open to people of all levels, and follow this format: an instructor arrives wearing stretchy black clothing and a facial expression of militant excitement; she turns on some music (lots of Ricky Martin and salsa, with a smattering of the Latin-Caribbean hybrid known as reggaetón) and wordlessly starts dancing. We 15 or 20 (primarily female) students, all in workout clothes, erupt in a Busby Berkeley-ish cavalcade of flailing choreo-mimicry.

Zumba's corporate slogan is "Ditch the workout, join the party." At the Z-fest, no one is going to count out the song's beat for you, or demonstrate the choreography before the song starts: you're here to party, my friend, not to take a graduate seminar at the Dance Notation Bureau. Indeed, one of my Chinatown Y instructors told a group of us, three of whom looked to be closing in on 70: "You need to relax your face. You don't go to a nightclub and look all tense. Imagine there's a great-looking guy or girl at the club."

This is the most physically exhausting party you will ever attend. You may be encouraged to, say, kick your legs as high as your shoulder or to propel yourself across the floor purely through the magic of buttocks-clenching. Your body will ache. You'll bend parts of your body previously unbent. You'll get caught up in the excitement and you'll overdo, overextend. During the slow songs, you'll configure your face in a manner that is at once tragic and urgent: you've been shot in the stomach but are late for an appointment.

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I operate at 50 or 60 percent mastery of the choreography, which is about average. Certain stuttering Latin beats, and the fancy footwork they foster, elude me. But my Achilles' heel is my overly literal approach: any time an instructor telegraphs a coming move midsong by, for instance, pointing to the right or holding up three fingers to denote repetition, I am sure to make these prescriptive actions the very centerpiece of my dancing. I'm the language student who greets passers-by with, "Lesson 1: Good morning!"



Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

A Chelsea Piers class.

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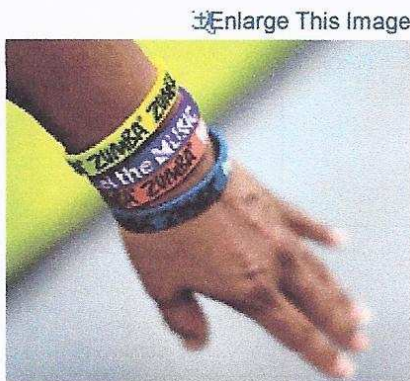
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Emily Bert for The New York Times  
Zumba-theme bracelets.

My favorite instructor so far is Yvonne Puckett. When I read on the Zumba Web site that this 73-year-old showbiz veteran had danced with Fred Astaire and with Marge and Gower Champion and had been in two Elvis Presley movies, I hied myself to Chelsea Piers to take her class.

In the soaring, bustling hangar that is the Chelsea Piers Sports Center, I pegged Miss Puckett at first sight: a warm pixieish Carol Burnett type in boysenberry cargo pants and black-sequined sneakers. I gushily introduced myself, and asked, "Do you think Fred Astaire would have embraced Zumba?" She said, "Oh, definitely, as all dancers would."

I told her, "I'm trying to get some of the Astaire buoyancy and lightness into my Zumba work." She smiled at me indulgently, as if I had told her that there were tiny people living inside my mailbox.

Unlike some of my other instructors, who use war and combat metaphors ("Punch it," "Kick it out of here") to fire up a class, Miss Puckett proved to be all unicorns and rainbows; she trilled, "Bee-you-tea-full" to us no less than five times during the hour. I wafted home on a cloud of lavender Tofutti.

I've hurt myself only once. Hoping to up my game, I took a class one Sunday morning at Alvin Ailey, where I had heard the crowd was younger, the choreography fiercer. At the registration desk, thinking of the Ailey company's spectacularly athletic production, "Revelations," I asked the bubbly 20-something registrar, "Is this going to be 'Revelations' Zumba?" Outstretching both her arms to her sides and raising them up over her head to describe a giant nimbus or clamshell, she intoned, "No." I thanked her and then God.

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Fifteen minutes later, my instructor, Ben Byrd, a puckish redhead in his 20s wearing a navy do-rag, was complimenting my speed walking in place during one song, which led me to think, I'm in.

But some five minutes later, my cloddishness about touching the floor with my hands while crouched in a frog stance caused him to yell at me, "Get lower!" I did, whereupon he smiled, grabbed one of his own buttocks diagnostically and gave me a sign of encouragement. I don't know how this translates in the dance world, but in the nondance world it means: Ben is as concerned about my keister as I am.

The dancing ramped up in fiery intensity, which was thrilling. I overexerted, I overdid. At hour's end, Ben led us through 15 additional minutes: 75 jumping jacks, 75 push-ups, and 75 situps, of which I completed one-fifth. The next day my body was a lake of fire. I looked like the Baryshnikov chapter in a public library's copy of Gelsey Kirkland's memoir: overtrafficked, heavily waffled. I got three massages in five days; I swore off the Z for almost a week.

When, post-Ailey, I returned to the relative oasis of the Chinatown Y, it was with some of the hauteur of the Broadway veteran who has been asked to perform Chekhov monologues at a Cracker Barrel. Suddenly I was Mr. Juilliard. "You should stand at the back of the class if you're going to embellish the choreography," I told one hot dog who was doing something unnecessarily tendril-like and octopoid with her fingers; when I started to slide in a puddle in the locker room, I thought, "Where is this facility's toe chalk?"

But subsequently, my ego has cooled and I have returned to a modest attempt to improve my 50 to 60 percent mastery. Am I, in the end, more limber, more nimble? I would say, to be determined. Part of me thinks that an effort to be lighter on my feet may, given that I'm gay, be an impossibility. I have noticed, however, that when I bend at the waist, I can touch my toes now, an improvement of an inch or so. I've also noticed that the Zumba workouts exhaust and debilitate me much less, and sometimes even energize me. Facebook "like" button.

And then there's this: two or three mornings a week, when I awake, my head is occupied by faint Latin music, and I envision the footwork I should be doing. If that's not crazed, I don't know what is.