



GenEc DVD Review

Tuesday, August 26, 2008

Stepping: The Documentary

Stepping: The Documentary (CTG Films, distributed by MVD)

Stepping is an African-American phenomenon with African roots. Unlike so many other manifestations of black American culture, however, it remains little known to mainstream America at large.

Stepping may be best thought of as a form of exhibition dancing using the human body as a percussion instrument. There is much audible hard-stomping on the floor, slapping of the thighs and other resonating parts of the body, and occasional vocals/chanting /rapping, though the latter is not an essential component. It is done as a tightly choreographed group presentation, as much visual as musical, and can be a very entertaining spectacle indeed.

This film, by first-time feature directors Marshall Blackwell and Norman Whiteburn is a bit weak on background, but high in entertainment value. For example, the DVD's liner notes rightly point out the very strong connection between stepping and South African gumboot dancing. But in the film itself, the interviewees – who are presented as stepping experts, not as anthropologists or folklorists - seem to imply that the phenomenon had its origins in those areas of Africa that were most affected by the slave trade. This is rather tenuous, since the slaves came primarily from much further up the Atlantic Coast than the South African gumboot dancers. However, the film could have very easily drawn a connection between stepping and the "hambone", a related African-American body percussion tradition, the origins of which are more clearly West African. Stepping is also related to the march-dance styles of black college marching bands, as well as historically black American dances such as tap, buck and wing, et. al. It would have nice had these connections been explored in detail in the film.

On the other hand, there is a great deal of valuable historical background here on African-American Greek-letter fraternities and sororities, the organizations which fostered and developed the styles of stepping prominent today. Stepping is still often regarded as a college Greek-organization activity. As the film shows, however, it has spread to high schools and many elementary schools as well. Most of the stepping groups shown in the film consist of University students, and each unit has its own particular approach to the dance and the attendant showmanship.

Since most of the film is devoted to a wide range of highly entertaining and distinctive performances, with the intent of

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