

SELF

Afro Flow Yoga Helped Me Connect to the Rhythm of My Ancestors and View Fitness in a New Way

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Now, I'm totally hooked on the flow.

I consider myself a person that's pretty invested in exercising—I pay for a gym membership and actually use it, and I've started to enjoy running outdoors now that I've found a few favorite sneakers and sports bras that make me feel secure. But like many people, I have a hard time getting active when it's cold out. Between the months of December and March, I tend to go into workout hibernation. I'd just rather stay in my apartment and Netflix and chill (literally) than swing a kettlebell.

During my fitness hibernation phase this year, I went to a work event at a New York City Athleta store to get a preview of the newest apparel. At the beginning of the event, there was a short yoga class in the downstairs studio. Though I hadn't worked out in a while, I have done yoga since high school—primarily vinyasa, although I'm into Bikram, too—so no matter how I feel, I'm usually happy to stretch into a few Warrior II or Happy Baby poses.

Practicing that day helped pull me out of my fitness slump, but more importantly, it led me to Afro Flow Yoga.

The yoga class at Athleta was soothing but still challenging, thanks to our instructor, Pilin Anice. From the moment I met her, Anice was a ray of sunshine on an otherwise dreary winter day. After the other attendees and I thanked her for her instruction, she told me about another class she teaches at Ailey Extension—an offshoot of the original Alvin Ailey Dance Theater that offers dance and fitness classes for all levels—called Afro Flow Yoga. After hearing the words “Afro flow,” I was instantly intrigued. When she told me that the class involves dancing to live music after the yoga portion, I knew I had to try it out.

Afro Flow Yoga was created by Leslie Salmon Jones, a dancer who trained at Alvin Ailey, and her husband, musician Jeff Jones. The couple got the idea for Afro Flow after taking a trip to West Africa (specifically Ghana, Togo, Benin and Ivory Coast) to learn about and connect with their ancestors. According to the New York Times, the couple wanted to develop a practice that respectfully merged the traditions and movements of yoga with the rhythms of West African dances and music. They taught the first Afro Flow Yoga class a year later, in 2008, at a yoga and Caribbean dance festival in Arizona.



Shortly after completing her yoga teacher training, Anice met Salmon Jones in a Haitian dance class, where Salmon Jones told her about Afro Flow Yoga. After one class, Anice was hooked. She signed up for instructor training. Now, she's been teaching the class for almost seven years.



I have admired the Alvin Ailey dance company since I was a kid, so I loved the thought of taking a class at the studio.

I grew up watching Alvin Ailey dance performances with my grandmother at New Jersey Performing Arts Center, so I was well aware of the rich history of the company, which was started in the late 1950s by African-American choreographer and activist Alvin Ailey. The first show I'd ever seen was Firebird, a performance I'll never forget. I was so touched by the strength and skill of dancers who looked just like me, their talent sparkling under the bright stage lights.

As an adult, a friend and I had talked about taking a dance class at Alvin Ailey multiple times, so Afro Flow Yoga seemed like the perfect one to start with. We signed up for a class, not knowing what, exactly, we were getting ourselves into.

The class started with vinyasa flow yoga.

After walking through the historic doors of Alvin Ailey, I instantly swelled with pride for my African-American culture. Although Anice had given me a brief description of the class beforehand, I didn't quite know what to expect. To start the class, which was roughly an hour and a half long, Anice asked the group to form a large circle in the room with our yoga mats and share our names.



Anice started the class by telling us that her practice was rooted in love and compassion. Then we continued with a vinyasa yoga flow, which included poses like Downward Facing Dog and Cobra. It was very relaxing.

About one-third of the way into class, we moved into the dancing portion, which was hands-down my favorite part. After pushing all of our mats aside, there was plenty of room left in the spacious studio to dance. Anice first instructed us to copy a few of her simple movements—like reaching our hands to the sky one by one, or slowly sinking into a squat on the beat—according to the rhythm of the drums in the background. Even the smallest movements felt more intense with the heavy, pounding beat. And it didn't feel at all like a choreographed dance, but more like how my body might naturally move along to a good beat.

Although I didn't know the people next to me in class, I felt connected to them, almost like the circle had brought us closer together. I couldn't help but notice the broad range of people in it—different ages, ethnicities, and genders—all rooted together in dance and flow.

Eventually, the class turned into a sort of Soul Train line, with Anice in front, leading us through more dance movements. I had no fear of doing a move the wrong way or strangers judging my actions—I felt totally free to be me. It felt damn good. The live music added energy to our motions, and every single person had a smile on their face as they glided along the studio floor.



Toward the end of the class, we were able to freestyle and really let loose until Anice directed us back to our mats to relax. After everyone was seated, she asked us to say a word that described our experience in the moment. I said, "peace."

Afro Flow left me feeling deeply connected to my roots, and actually changed the way I look at fitness in general.

"My hope is that each person present leaves feeling grounded, joyful, and a deeper connection with themselves and others," explains Anice about her classes.

I felt all of that, and then some. There was something really special about the way the class connected me to the rhythms and movements of my ancestors, in a way that no other fitness class has before. Anice says she witnesses this often among African-American students in her class.

"Part of the mission of Afro Flow is to share the traditions and teachings of dances from the African Diaspora, yogic practices, and healing rhythms in a non-judgemental, compassionate space for people of all colors, sizes, and backgrounds," Anice says. "For that reason, our classes attract everyone, which is awesome! But I think African-Americans especially feel a cultural connection to the class." Part of that could come from the fact that it's taught by a woman of color, she says.

"Representation matters, and I think seeing a woman of color teaching a practice pioneered by another woman of color, in a room with live African drumming, is healing and empowering," Anice says. "I personally love that this class allows me to bring aspects of who I am into my yoga practice, all while sharing it in a safe, loving, and sacred space with people from all backgrounds."



Afro Flow Yoga also made me realize that fitness doesn't have to be a structured combination of strength and cardio work; sometimes, it can just be about moving your body in whatever way feels good to you. While I very much appreciate the calming, restorative powers of traditional yoga, sometimes I crave a space where I can just move to a beat and let loose. Afro Flow Yoga made me feel physically, emotionally, and spiritually stronger, something for which I'll always thank Anice—and the hypnotizing pounding of the drum.