

Dancing Out Loud: Antoine Hunter Uses Dance To Express The Deaf Experience

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Antoine Hunter is an Oakland-based dancer, choreographer, director, and advocate for the Deaf community — that's Deaf with a capital D, which refers to Deaf culture. When Antoine was growing up, dance became a lifeline to the world around him.



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It's a chilly evening in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, and I'm outside of a tiny performance space called CounterPulse. It's a community-focused theater that produces all kinds of risk-taking, sometimes experimental, shows. Tonight, I'm here for a dance performance.

As I enter, there's a familiar pre-show buzz in the air, but it's also clear that there's something unique about this performance. I see a flurry of hand movements, as a half-dozen conversations take place in American Sign Language.

The show is called Deaf Louder. It's being produced by Antoine Hunter and his Urban Jazz Dance Company. Tonight, Antoine and the other deaf dancers will perform in front of a mixed hearing and deaf audience.

In the dark performance space, Antoine walks on stage and addresses the crowd: "Deaf should be elevated. With that capital D Deaf. Representing culture, power, and strength. That's Deaf. Capital D."

Antoine has an electric energy when he signs. You can feel the entire audience being drawn in. When he begins his solo performance, they're already on board. It's an expressive, interpretive dance about his experience as a Deaf man in a hearing world. He uses a combination of powerful and graceful movements to tell his story, along with video projected on a wall behind him.

When he takes a bow, there's no applause. Instead, there's a thundering sound as the entire audience stomps their feet together. Typically, an audience would shake their hands in their air to signal clapping, but in the darkness of the theater, Antoine has to rely on feeling the vibrations of the stomping through the floor.

After an intermission, the full dance company performs. Five dancers walk out on stage and lower their heads. There's a moment where I wonder, "How will they stay on tempo?"

The music starts — it's a bass-heavy Miles Davis tune — and they burst into movement. And it is perfectly in sync. They are moving and leaping, and spinning, arms and legs extending, and it just looks beautiful.

I find myself trying to imagine their experience. What would it be like to be dancing, and not hear the music the way I'm used to hearing it? Instead of the snare drum, the horns, the guitar — those highs and the mids — it's just the bass rumbling through my body.

I can't really imagine what that's like, so I wanted to ask Antoine about it.

A few weeks later, I sit down with him to learn more about the experiences that propelled him into this profession. He tells me that Deaf culture isn't one thing. Some people are profoundly deaf, but there's a lot of variation. Antoine himself was born with about five percent hearing.

He explains, "Being Deaf, we have different hearing levels. Some can hear the birds but not the motorcycle. Some can hear the motorcycle but not the birds. Different frequencies. Some call them 'Hard of Hearing' some say 'Deaf.' Many of them don't always say it's a disability for some people, but a culture. Another way we experience life.

"My great grandfather would have a big stereo. And I would lean my back against it and I could feel the vibration of it. I can feel the music telling me all the images that are happening.

"I remember my great grandfather was like, 'what are you doing?' And I'm like, 'I'm listening to jazz music.' And he said, 'What? What do you know about jazz?' And I said, 'Well, it feels like you get up in the morning, the sun rises, and you go to school. The teachers are mean, but you're happy to leave school because you go home and eat. All the things that you feel during that day that make you who you are.' And he said, 'That's right!'"

As a performer, Antoine's had to find unique ways of adapting to an art form in which most people are hearing.

"As a dancer, people will ask me, 'Oh you can feel the vibration, that's it, you'll be fine.' No. If I jump, I can't feel the vibration. If I'm running around really really fast, I can't feel the vibration. I have to slow down and stay in one place for a while to feel the vibration. So what

does that mean? I'm listening. I'm using every intelligence of my being to do what I have to do to make it work."

For Antoine, this often means creatively finding visual cues to stay on beat.

"So sometimes I'd try to see what was happening with the light. Maybe the light would feel the vibration and I could see what the rhythm is. Or I look at the musicians, and they're bopping their heads or tapping their feet. I say, 'Oh ok, that's what the rhythm is.'

"My body started to develop a spiderman sense. Some people say, 'How do you know when the music starts? Or the music changes?' Well, it's my spiderman sense."

Antoine's been adapting his whole life. His childhood was a difficult one. He found himself unable to connect with others around him.

"You feel like you lose your mind when you can't express yourself. When you can't express yourself you feel crazy."

He began to struggle more and more with depression and feelings of isolation. One day his mom took him to a performance that opened up his world.

"When I saw the Oakland ballet it was jaw-dropping. I could understand everything that was happening during the performance. It was like colors and motion, loud vibration of the music. But it was so expressive."

And then something happened that Antoine had never experienced before.

"Some things were really really funny. Usually, when you watch something on TV the caption came a little bit late. And so something funny would come up and I would laugh later. Everybody already laughed a long time ago. And that made me look really weird. But this time, I could be in the same rhythm as everyone else. Laughing at the same time. I was like, 'Hahaha—wait a minute.' When I looked around: 'Ohh, everybody's laughing at the same time.' And I got to laugh, and cry, and smile at the same time as everyone else.

"I saw dance was another way to communicate. It was an art that's alive to help you connect. So how can I get into that? I said, 'Mom, I want to be a ballet dancer!'"

But private ballet classes were too expensive. Antoine had to wait until high school to take dance.

"I didn't want to be the only deaf person in there and not doing so well, so I practiced, and practiced, and practiced. And I was hoping people would dance with me, but guess what? My teacher tried to have a group. But in the group, nobody wanted to dance with me. So she was like, 'Why don't you go ahead and do a solo?' So I picked the music: Whitney Houston, 'I Will Always Love You.'"

"I couldn't really understand the words, but I could feel her emotion. And then it's the instrumental break, and I'm just moving like I was out in the ocean with the lightning and the thunderstorm, you know what I mean? The water pushed me, the wind, the fire, the lightning—shifting all in my body, my spirit... And everybody in the room that was watching me stopped. They gave me an applause, and they were telling me what they saw. They saw that I was cold. They saw that I was alone. They saw that I wanted to break free. I was like, 'Whenever I said something, people couldn't understand me. But when I danced, they understood me.' It saved my life. Yeah. And you know the sad thing before that? Before dance? I almost... took my life away because people couldn't understand me with words. I couldn't connect. But they could understand me with dance. So it allowed me to express myself, to feel whole.

"My work talks about deafhood. It talks about the journey of being deaf. My work talks about the hidden truth that people don't want to talk about—that's unheard of. You know what I mean? And I get people to just talk about it through my work."

Back at Deaf Louder, near the end of the performance, there's a moment that feels really special. Antoine asks for volunteers and invites three people on stage to dance with him. As they introduce themselves, we learn that two of the volunteers are hearing, and one is deaf. The music starts up and what follows is a joyous dance session. They finish up to a stomping celebration from the crowd.

The interpreter voices again for Antoine. "Could you tell who was deaf? No, you couldn't. And that's the point. Dancing - it's about the human element."

It's a point that really lands for me. When we're authentically connecting, the "how" of it tends to fall away.

"I love to help people. That's my greatest passion. They say 'dance is your greatest passion!' No, helping people is my greatest passion. And dance, the art is alive. It has the power to heal, you know. It saved my life. But because I learned to do dance to save my life, I want it to save other people's lives. And give other people a voice."

Special thanks to Dane Lentz for help with interpreting.