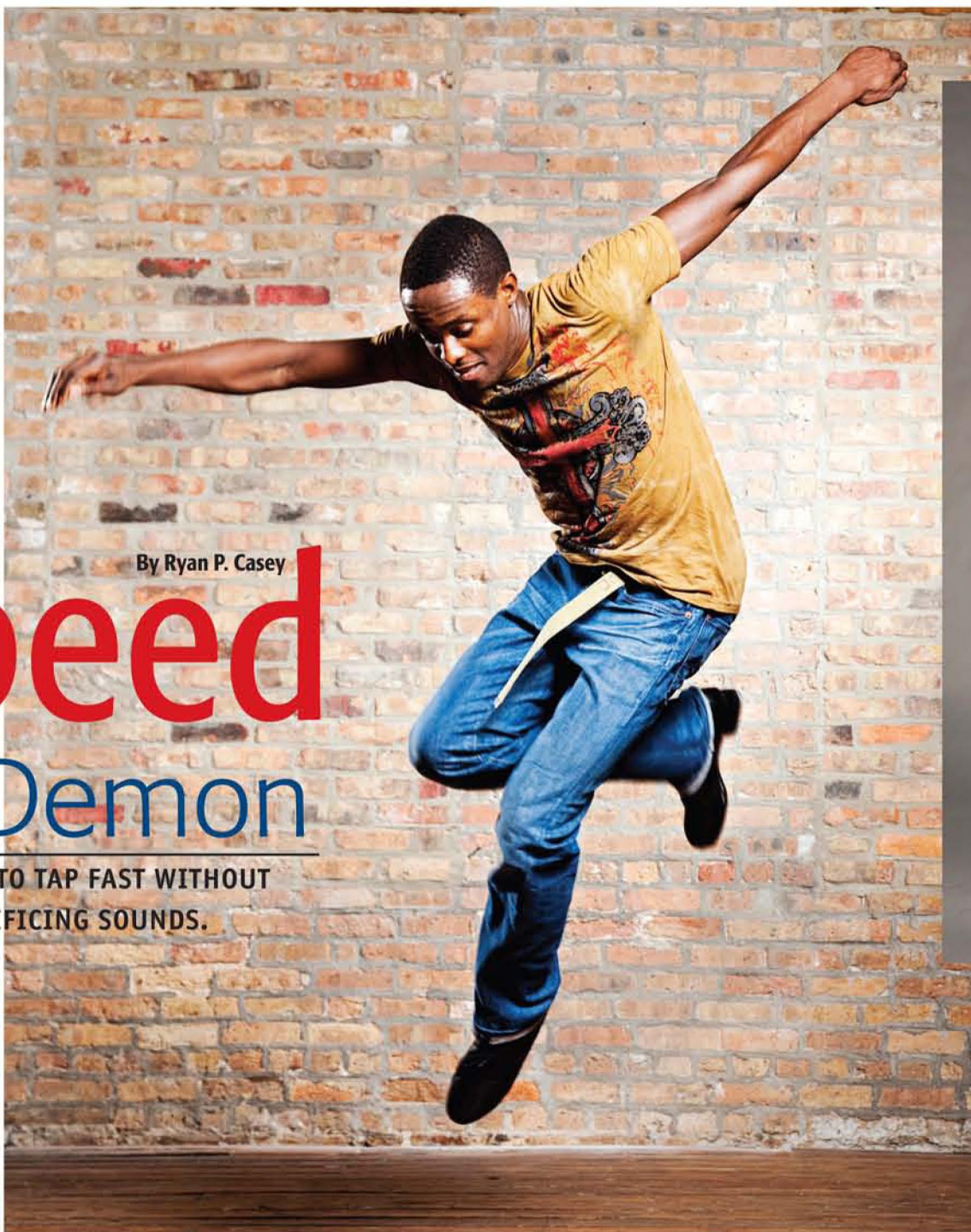


Joseph
Wiggan

By Ryan P. Casey

Speed Demon

HOW TO TAP FAST WITHOUT
SACRIFICING SOUNDS.

Sarah
Savelli

VYou're in tap class and have nailed a combination. Then, your teacher asks everyone to do it double time. You try, but it feels impossible to keep up. The steps you just executed perfectly are now missing sounds, and your rhythms are unclear. Why are your feet no longer doing what you want them to?

Rapid tap dancing commands an audience's attention. Tappers like Savion Glover, Steve Condos and Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards are known for blazing through tricky combinations at unparalleled speeds. Quick feet make you a more versatile tapper and can

give even the simplest steps complexity. They're especially useful if you're dancing to upbeat music or want to incorporate double-time sequences. But speed is only impressive when your sounds are clean and articulate. *DS* talked to some of the fastest tappers around to find out how they build speed while maintaining clarity.

SLOW DOWN

Whether you're attempting a basic or an advanced step, begin by practicing at a slow pace to ensure that every

sound and count is crisp and clean. "When dancing slowly, I have more time to make decisions as I transition from one rhythm to the next," says tapper Joseph Wiggan, who recently showed off his fast feet in the Cirque du Soleil show *Banana Shpeel*. You'll only be able to perform a step quickly and correctly if you can perform it slowly and correctly.

THINK FAST TO TAP FAST

You don't have time to think when your feet are in a frenzy. As you practice, it helps to sing your rhythms out loud and then in your mind. When it's time to perform the steps, the rhythms in your mind will lead and your feet will follow. "I find myself playing thoughts in my mind faster and easier than I had even planned," Wiggan says. Cleveland- and NYC-based tap teacher and choreographer Sarah Savelli also recommends visualizing how your feet will

(L TO R) KRISTIE KAHNS; JOSHUA ALBANESE

move. "I often tell students to review in their heads whatever exercises need improvement before going to sleep," she says. Practicing mentally helps ingrain the steps in your muscle memory.

MAKE IT SMALL

Tapping rapidly isn't just about speed—it's also about size. Fast footwork requires small, tight steps. It's essential to keep your feet close to the floor and the choreography close to your body. "Limit how far your legs extend to a distance that's approximately shoulder-width in all directions," Savelli says. She calls this area the "power circle" and explains, "You have the most control over your feet when utilizing this [stance]." The smaller your movements are, the easier it will be to control their speed.

STAY FOOTLOOSE

If you tense up your ankle muscles while you tap, they'll tire quickly and you won't be able to maintain your speed for long. "Tension anywhere in the body restricts movement," Wiggan says. A loose ankle is essential for 3- and 6-count pullbacks, which get their extra sounds from the relaxed foot bouncing off the floor. But if you release the muscles in your feet completely, you won't be able to control them and your sounds will be muddled. "The key is to practice until you find the right balance between tension and relaxation," Savelli says.

Savelli adds that it's also important to use your toes. "Thinking about them doing the work will automatically clean up your tap dancing," she says. "If you're trying to tap quickly, you need to use your foot in the most economical way possible." Focusing just on the toes, rather than on the entire foot, is an effective way to visualize how you're making sounds, and it will keep your footwork smaller and tighter.

BIT BY BIT

Just because you want to tap fast doesn't mean you should rush through the learning process. When working on a step, "increase your speed gradually, and only once it's clean," Savelli says. "Know your limitations

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Starinah
Dixon

When Starinah Dixon of Chicago's M.A.D.D. Rhythms teaches a class, she makes her students say, "Fast means nothing if it's not clean!" In addition to tap master Steve Condos' rudiments—a set of toe, heel and shuffle sequences that have become traditional warm-up material for tap dancers—Dixon recommends using this warm-up (which she developed) at various speeds to get your feet moving:

1. Starting with your left leg as your supporting leg, do eight hop-shuffles in a triplet rhythm, alternating sides.
2. Starting with your left foot, do eight brush-back-flaps in a triplet rhythm, alternating sides.
3. With your left leg as your supporting leg, do eight hop-shuffles in a triplet rhythm, all on the same side.
4. Repeat step 3 with the shuffling foot crossed behind the hopping foot.
5. Repeat steps 1–4 starting with the right leg as your supporting leg.
6. Repeat all of the above doing only four repetitions on each side, then two, then one.

and don't go faster if you are missing sounds." Fast, sloppy dancing is never as exciting as clean, coherent rhythms. With disciplined drilling, you'll have your feet flying in no time. **DS**

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