

Style



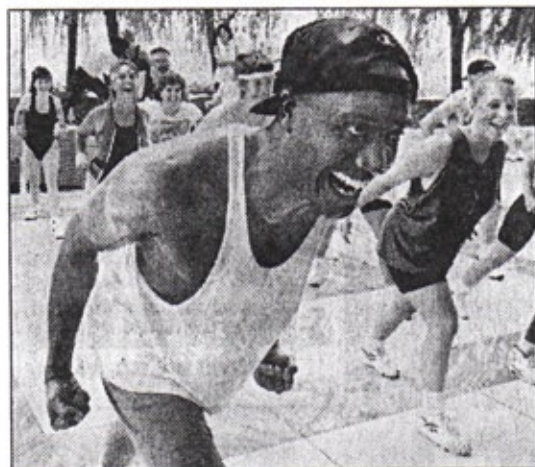
PHOTOS BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

All that Jazzercise: Judi Sheppard Missett smiles as she sweats during the Jazz Dance World Congress at the Kennedy Center.

THIGH CULTURE

At the Kennedy Center, Jazzercisers Follow Their Leader

By Inara Verzemnieks
Washington Post Staff Writer



Kevin Postell of Alexandria, part of the crowd that spilled outside the Grand Foyer yesterday for the 90-minute workout.

Busloads of canteloupe-calfed workout enthusiasts gathered in the Grand Foyer of the Kennedy Center yesterday, slinging gym bags stuffed with cross-trainers, bottled water and the latest thong-bikini leotards. They whooped, hugged one another and tried to contain their excitement.

The 600 spandex-clad men, women and children from the District, Virginia and Maryland were on a pilgrimage. They had come to pay homage to the creator of their exercise regimen, Judi Sheppard Missett, the inventor of Jazzercise.

This was an opportunity for the masses to meet their most exalted tanned-and-toned leader. For an hour and a half, they would sweat and grunt and thrust their pelvises with the woman who started this craze 27 years ago.

But this wasn't an antiseptic health club—this was the gold-columned opulence of the Kennedy Center, with twinkling chandeliers and plush red carpeting. Men wearing form-fitting bicycle shorts and neon tank tops strutted their

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An Exercise In Devotion

EXERCISE, From D1

stuff among the ushers in red blazers. Women in leotards breezed down the mirrored halls with as much self-confidence as ballgown-bedecked patrons at a gala affair.

Although the workout was part of the Jazz Dance World Congress, a five-day conference of jazz dance classes and performances, the Jazzercise event was filled almost entirely by folks with one goal.

"To see our fearless leader," said Beth Maclay, a Jazzercise instructor from Bethesda who teaches six classes a week. At the first sound of bass-heavy music, she began to pump her hips and arms in anticipation of the program to come.

All around her, piles of folded white towels, water bottles and sweat shirts covered the foyer's red carpet, carefully marking reserved places. Jazzercisers had begun to arrive at 8 a.m. to stake out choice locations for the 10:30 a.m. class, said Tina Olson, district manager for Jazzercise in Maryland. "Some people wanted to get here at 6:30 this morning to get a good spot," she said.

The devoted had no need for sleep. Wired on adrenaline, they bounced from one end of the Kennedy Center to the other, hoping to catch a glimpse of Missett, who has turned her Carlsbad, Calif.-based exercise company into a multimillion-dollar franchise business—and a way of life. Clothing. Videotapes. Albums. Cassettes. Books.

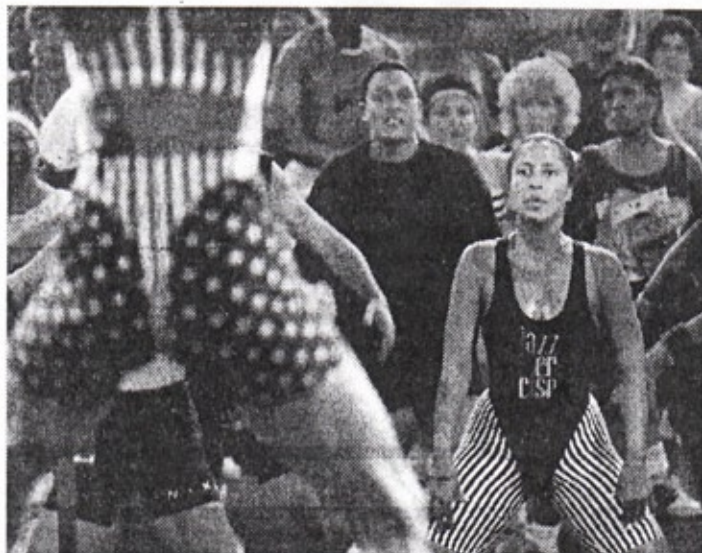
"If you are going to be addicted to something, you might as well be addicted to this," said Barbara Noe, a Jazzercise instructor for 16 years, who teaches classes in Stafford.

Renee Nothstein, from Fort Monroe, Va., was on the road by 6 a.m., but even hours later, her face didn't betray the slightest bit of fatigue. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see Judi," she said, bouncing from foot to foot, her Jazzercise-logo shoelaces slapping against the sides of her sneakers. "I even brought my camera."

She wasn't the only one. Amid the crush of bodies that stretched from one end of the foyer to the other, video recorders and cameras surfaced like the periscopes of submarines, sweeping the area, scanning for Judisightings.

When they found their target, the Jazzercise groupies unleashed their arsenal of flashes, and bathed the 52-year-old, rail-thin exercise queen in a pool of blinding white light.

Poof. An old hand at this, Missett shook her blond mane and thrust her



PHOTOS BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

Instructor Kathi Thurston, of Washington, stretches in a prime front-row spot in the Grand Foyer during the workout.



Jazzercise founder Judi Sheppard Missett leads a crowd in aerobic exercise at the Kennedy Center.

shoulders in the direction of the light. She flashed a toothy smile.

Poof. "Judi! Judi!" the crowd chanted.

But one voice rose above the others: "Beth, come on. Come on, Beth."

Karen Bayer, a schoolteacher from Stafford, wanted her friend Beth Rodriguez, a Jazzerciser of 13 years, to pose next to their idol. But Rodriguez stood firmly rooted to the floor of the Kennedy Center, shaking her head. Stand next to Judi? For a photo? This is too much.

Missett heard the commotion and stopped posing for a moment.

"Beth," she called out to the petite brunette, as though they had been

friends forever. "Come here. Come on now."

Not one to disobey orders from Judi herself, Rodriguez ran over, gingerly put her arm around the great one and aimed a dazed grin at Bayer.

Poof.

Finally, the much-awaited workout began. Missett pranced onto the stage and roared into her microphone headset like a gravelly voiced construction foreman, "Is this cool, or what?" and the crowd whooped like mad and the music began to thump through the floorboards.

When she barked, "Are you doing this for you?" the hundreds of leg-thrusting, arm-wavers on the floor below did not hesitate to answer.

"Yeah!" they shouted back. On the beat, too.

They replied to every one of Missett's "huh, huh, huh's" with more of the same. They ignored the crowded conditions, worked around the potted plants, even propped open the doors and spilled outside when they ran out of room.

Toward the end of the session, Jo Bluestein and her two children, Elizabeth, 7, and Andrew, 5, wandered into the foyer on their way to a performance of "Beauty and the Beast" and lunch at the rooftop restaurant.

The three of them stood transfixed, watching the room bounce up and down. Andrew's mouth was open. Elizabeth's eyes followed the bobbing ponytails.

"I don't know," Bluestein said, as muscles bulged and unbulged before her eyes and Missett's shouts of "You want to party?" punctuated the sweaty frenzy.

"The thought of going upstairs and piggling out on the rooftop—I'm feeling guilty now."