

### Johnny Brown (as learned from Avon Gillespie)

Lit - tle John-ny Brown— Lay your com-fort down—  
 5 Lit - tle John-ny Brown.—— Lay your com-fort down— Fold up the  
 9 corn - er John - ny Brown— Fold— up the corn - er John - ny Brown

Show us the motion, Johnny Brown (2x)  
 We can do the motion, Johnny Brown (2x)  
 Take it to your friend now, Johnny Brown (2x)



Group of Ewe dancers in the village of Dzodje, Ghana.

### 3. Johnny Brown

**Concepts:** Tempo, Movement improvisation and imitation, individual/group interplay

#### Activity

- Leader sings the song and demonstrates the sequence as follows:

*“Little Johnny Brown, lay your comfort down”*—Strut into the circle and lay out a scarf or handkerchief (square is best) in the middle of the circle.

*“Fold up the corner, Johnny Brown”* —Fold each corner precisely on the syllable “corn.”

*“Show us the motion, Johnny Brown”*—Pick up the scarf and make a clear, repetitive motion. (Later, make sure that the group does not copy while singing this phrase.)

*“We can do the motion, Johnny Brown”*—The whole group imitates the motion.

*“Take it to your friend now, Johnny Brown”*—Strut over to someone else and hand over the scarf. That person now goes into the center and the whole song starts again.

- Continue playing until everyone has had a turn. If the group is too big, there can be several Johnny Browns (each with a handkerchief) going in the center at once, with the remaining people in the circle choosing whose motion they want to copy.

#### Variations

- Sing *Julie Brown* for girls or substitute each child’s name as he or she goes into the center; *“Little Manuel Brown,” “Little Jessica Brown,” etc.*
- Play at a slow tempo.\* A faster tempo. Begin slowly and gradually increase the tempo as the game progresses.

#### Comments

*Johnny Brown* is a game that involves risk and is terrifying to some. The handkerchief provides some security for shy students. If a student freezes up when it’s time to show the motion, follow the cue of her body and copy whatever comes up. If the student shrugs her shoulders as if to say, “I don’t know what to do,” or shakes her head no, copy the motion immediately. Sometimes a simple model or suggestion before the game as in, “Your movement doesn’t need to be fancy. Wiggling your pinky is fine,” helps the insecure student.

Though you may have to carry the singing at the beginning, remind the students to sing, clap and sway to the music. The better the singing and clapping, the more inspired the dancing in the middle. If students move *too* much while singing, remind them to save their motion until they’re in the center of the circle.

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\* The slower tempo of *Johnny Brown* allows for more subtlety in the movement. Many people often misconceive of African-derived music as always fast and lively and the dancing as wild, free and uninhibited. John Miller Chernoff, in his superb book “African Rhythm and African Sensibility,” relates his experience in a bar in Togo:

“...I was amazed when I saw some Congolese dancing to one of their popular Rumba tunes; in spite of their reputation for lively dancing, it seemed that they were not even moving. One dancer raised his knee as if he intended to take his foot off the ground, but he never lifted it. He stayed poised to move. Gideon [the author’s friend from Ghana] said, ‘Wow! Look at him dance!’ and had a beer sent to the man’s table.”<sup>8</sup>

Everyone's natural tendency is to immediately imitate the motion in the center. Remind them to be patient and *wait* until they sing "*We can do the motion...*". This both allows for better observation—and thus, imitation—and sets up the exciting moment when one motion becomes many.

I once played this game at a teacher workshop where there was a one year old baby. Near the end of the game, the baby crawled into the center of the circle and sat down. We all immediately copied his posture. When he waved his arm up and down, we waved our arms up and down. He soon caught on to what was happening and laughed with glee as his every motion came back to him a hundredfold! Forget computer games—*these* are the kind of "interactive" experiences our children need!



Folding up the scarf for *Johnny Brown*.

### **CULTURAL VALUES: The group and the individual**

*Johnny Brown* reveals a particular relationship between the individual and the group that I believe is much needed in contemporary culture. It is the meeting point of the two important goals I communicate to my students:

1. "Blend in—align yourself with the group energy and become part of a greater whole."
2. "Stand out—express yourself as a unique individual with something to contribute."

These two goals are useful in setting the tone for class discipline. The students must understand that they will be given the opportunity to do both—blend in *and* stand out. Part of their learning is to understand when each is appropriate. Thus, students

who are acting out inappropriately can have their bid for attention channeled into an appropriate form by being invited in the center for *Johnny Brown* (four times out of five, they will refuse!). They will also understand that their ability to blend in is necessary for the success of the game. It is a great moment when the recalcitrant student discovers that it is more fun to play the game well than poorly!

Likewise, the shy students who like to hide can grow to accept the responsibility of expressing themselves in front of the group and even learn to enjoy it. If no one wants to “show us their motion,” the game suffers—indeed, it loses its point.

The dancing circle is a primary form in West African communal celebration. The participants sing, clap, and move in place. Individuals go into the center when the spirit moves them to “show their motion.” If the circle is unified in rhythm, movement and song, the dancers in the center are inspired to dance their best. Likewise, they in turn inspire the group with their dancing and evoke stronger music.

This aesthetic lives on in jazz. The ensemble plays together, the soloist steps out (into the circle) backed by the ensemble. The soloist calls, the group responds. The group sends forth ideas, the soloists picks them up. When the conversation feels finished, the soloist re-enters the group to make room for the next soloist. This two-way flow of energy is a beautifully balanced system in which two basic human experiences are honored, played out and enhanced—our individuality and our common humanity. Jazz is amongst the most democratic of musical forms, in many cases giving *each* player an opportunity to step forward. The roots of this practice lie in the African dancing circles, transferred to African-American ring plays in games like *Johnny Brown*.

What precisely is the individual trying to express? Our competitive mentality might imagine the task is to create the “winning” motion—the fanciest, most technically complex, our “personal best,” but the African aesthetic suggests something different—dancing from the heart. Someone once told me of her experience witnessing such a dancing ring in Ghana. She watched many people go into the center and dance, but after one dancer, there was an obvious surge of appreciation from the crowd. She hadn’t noticed anything particularly accomplished about the dancer—indeed, others had seemed more acrobatic, dynamic or rhythmic. Her African friend patiently explained—“In that moment, the dancer was most like herself.”

This is true in jazz as well. The immature soloist will try to impress with flash, technique, complex jazz “riffs,” but at the end of all their efforts may be met by Duke Ellington’s comment to an aspiring pianist: “*My, you play so many notes!*” The jazz soloist, like the Ghanaian villager, is working towards the moment when the notes (or motions) speak the full radiance of her unique personality. When she is most fully herself, the whole group is inspired and celebrates.

*Johnny Brown* formalizes this interplay one step further with a built-in means of letting the individual know his contribution to the group. After the center player shows the motion, it is magnified by the group taking it up. This allows the children (or adults) to actively realize a primary Orff aesthetic—*everyone is both student and teacher*.

I know a teacher who told her students that the comfort (comfort is short for comforter) was like Linus’s security blanket. When you’re in the middle of the circle, surrounded and supported by friends, you don’t need it any more, so you can lay it down. This is a beautiful statement about how the game evokes risk-taking in an atmosphere of trust.

Though the form is similar, the experience of the dancing ring in traditional West African culture is markedly different from a contemporary American version. In the Afri-

can community wedded by common values and experiences, the meaning of the individual improvisation can be very specific. J.H. Nketia writes:

“The dance can be used as a social and artistic medium of communication. It can convey thoughts or matters of personal or social importance through the choice of movements, postures, and facial expressions. Through the dance, individuals and social groups can show their reactions to attitudes of hostility or cooperation and friendship held by others towards them. They can offer respect to their superiors, or appreciation and gratitude to well-wishers and benefactors. They can react to the presence of rivals, affirm their status to servants, subjects, and others, or express their beliefs through the choice of appropriate dance vocabulary or symbolic gestures.”<sup>9</sup>

In a classroom of children from different cultural backgrounds, the game takes on a new meaning. Instead of a shared movement vocabulary, there is the possibility of learning a wide range of movements. What we lack in depth of uniform movement style, we can make up for in breadth. This is the very process of cultural exchange that has informed the evolution of art.

Finally, the invitation to “stand out” is not an “anything goes” attitude, but is contained within the boundary of the circle. Many young people attempt to express themselves in ways devoid of responsibility (literally, ability to respond) to the group and thus damage the community and alienate themselves. The American view of the creative individual is the superstar or the alienated artist. The West African aesthetic is markedly different:

“Like a drummer, a dancer should not try to do too much or he will lose clarity and become pretentious. A dancer’s subtle refinement and good taste will enliven the music by enriching the occasion, pulling the whole scene into a movement rather than attempting to project the strength of one performer.”<sup>10</sup>

More than any single game, *Johnny Brown* strikes me as the quintessential expression of the African-American spirit.