

## COVER STORY

# Whole-body friendly

Adaptable movements of Nia are kind to older backs and knees

BY DONNA OLMSTEAD  
For the Journal

A dozen barefoot women and a man dance across a birch floor to "Spiritual High," a suite of music by Moodswings featuring Chrissie Hynde.

"Slip into your body," encourages Nia teacher Beth O'Neall. "Free yourself. Cut it loose. Get ready to fly."

The hour of choreography moves the class through several peaks of intensity with karate chops and blocks, free-flowing arms and jazz shimmies, a little something from all 52 movements of the Nia technique.

Nia, an acronym for Neuromuscular Integrative Action, fuses martial arts (tae kwon do, tai chi and aikido), dance (jazz, Duncan and modern), and healing arts (yoga, Feldenkrais and the Alexander technique). The music can be diverse — from opera to country, O'Neall says.

The class at Studio Sway, on Jefferson NE near Central, winds down with walking and some free-form stretching on the floor. "Imagine you are on a particular path to a dream and your companions are hope and faith," O'Neall says.

Nia was developed 25 years ago by Debbie and Carlos Rosas, a California couple, both fitness professionals, who were looking for a more body-friendly workout that individuals could adapt as they and their backs and knees grew older, O'Neall says.

"It's really good for baby boomers because we are allowing the body to move in a way nature intended," says O'Neall, 44. About half the dancers in the class held up their hands when asked if they were boomers.

The exercise develops a mind-body focus that encourages participants to move with care. "This may sound weird, but we're not just stepping, we're having a relationship with the floor. Each step is making contact. That contact can be mindful or



MORGAN PETROSKI/JOURNAL

Nia teacher Beth O'Neall leads a class at Studio Sway. O'Neall says Nia encourages moving with mindfulness. Each step is "a relationship with the floor."

encourage mindful contact. Moving with mindfulness helps to prevent injury and gives us the means to heal injuries."

## Healing movement

Maureen Small, a physician and doctor of Oriental medicine, says of the Nia classes she teaches at Studio Sway, "This is the most healing work I've ever done."

"I came to Nia in my mid-40s just having had back surgery and knee surgery," says Small, now 52. "I was looking for a movement practice that would help me get in shape without creating more pain. I improved my strength and was ergonomically sound in the practice."

Nothing is new under the



From left, students Erin Damour, Barbara Darling and Kristine Susco dance during a recent Nia class. The exercise technique combines martial arts, dance and healing arts.

where Small felt free to move her body to discover for herself the Nia philosophy of

"Unless we're having sex or eating nobody really pays that much attention to pleasure.

when our body is giving us pain messages. Here was a chance to open up and become aware."

It also helped her drop more than 30 pounds. Building her body and her mind in this way encouraged her to teach, she says. "I learned to accept my body wherever I was at."

All Nia classes are open to participants at all levels. Beginners or people recovering from injuries may want to take a gentle class like Small's or they can pace themselves and participate in a more intense class like O'Neall's, both teachers explain.

"It's a noncompetitive, nonmechanical organic movement," Small says. "It's



Consider this a little musical workout for your brain. The words are oh-so-familiar, tugging at your memory. Can you identify the song and artist for these lyrics? Answers on Page 19.

- 1) "When you're weary,  
Sighing small,  
When tears are in your eyes,  
I will dry them all;  
'Tis on your side."
- 2) "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,  
Nothing don't mean to me,  
Nothing honey if it ain't free."
- 3) "Picture yourself in a boat on a river,  
With tangerine trees and marmalade skies  
Somebody calls you, your sweeter quite slowly,  
A girl with kaleidoscope eyes."
- 4) "Hey little sister what have you done  
Hey little sister who's the only one  
Hey little sister who's your superman?"
- 5) "We're caught in a trap  
I can't walk out  
Because I love you too much baby."
- 6) "Want some whiskey in your water?  
Sugar in your tea?  
What's all these crazy questions they're askin' me?  
This is the craziest party that could ever be  
Don't turn on the lights  
Cause I don't wanna see."

# Nia dance suitable for people of all fitness levels

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accessible to people at all levels of fitness. It's like learning a language. You have to approach it with a child's mind."

O'Neall and Small, along with Ana Edwards, Elizabeth Johnson, Erin Damour, Judy Cates and Margo Morado, teach at Studio Sway, which opened this past year, but most like Small and O'Neall still teach Nia in other wellness facilities around the city. A drop-in class at Studio Sway is \$10 with discounts when multiple classes are purchased in advance.

## Learning how

O'Neall says that in her eight years of Nia, she has seldom seen anyone unable to learn the movements if they enjoy themselves. She says that she often sees her middle-age beginners approach learning Nia with more self-acceptance and playfulness than her younger students.

O'Neall, an English composition teacher at Central New Mexico Community College, says she found Nia after her children were born because she needed exercise and a creative outlet. In the days when she was a student, "it was so emotionally stimulating, I would cry. I had to excuse myself."

She decided to teach when her favorite Nia teacher left Albuquerque a few years ago. "I didn't see myself as a dancer at all. I had done a little



MORGAN PETROSKI/JOURNAL

Nia dancer Barbara Darling lifts on one leg as the instructor urges students to "Free yourself. ... Get ready to fly."

dancing in college and when I was a kid. So it was a huge leap for me to be a Nia teacher."

Judy Brown, 56, one of O'Neall's loyal students, says she loves Nia. "I've found it an expressive outlet during really stressful times. When we're doing punches, it's easy to visualize breaking down barriers. Nia speaks directly to that emotional side."

It's a full-body workout for Brown and she finds classes to attend from Oakland, Calif., to

Israel when she travels, she says.

Her husband, Henry Shoner, also has become a Nia devotee.

"I love it," Shoner says. "It's so many cool things all put together. You focus, but you don't have to overthink it."

Shoner, who has always enjoyed dancing, says Nia typically doesn't attract a lot of men, but he doesn't mind the mostly female company. "Maybe that's good for me."

## Perú Negro to perform at cultural center

most fans in the United States, Peruvian music means an panpipes, but Perú delivers the experience from its Afro-Peruvian cultural roots.

The country's African music has recently gained attention. The slave trade in Peru until 1845, and the descendants of these people live in villages and along Peru's Pacific coast. Their music, rhythms

and dance trace back to West Africa.

Perú Negro will perform March 6 at 7:30 p.m. at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, 1701 Fourth SW. Call 232-9868 or visit [www.abqmusic.com](http://www.abqmusic.com) for information.

Tickets are \$15, \$25 or \$30 through the NHCC box office, Ticketmaster at 883-7800 or Smith's stores.

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