

In Conversation with Tonya Amos

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[00:00:00] **Andréa Spearman:** Dancers' Group is experimenting with new ways to unify, strengthen, and amplify voices in the Bay Area. We're excited to share a variety of ideas and stories.

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Welcome. We are back with *In Conversation*, an audio series of interviews exploring intergenerational conversations about the art of dance and different folks' relationship to dance.

I'm your host, Andréa Spearman. I'm a light-skinned Black woman with my dark brown curly hair in two-strand twists up in a loose bun and wearing black and brown glasses. Today I'm wearing a pink cable knit sweater.

And today we have with us, the fabulous Tonya Amos. Please introduce yourself and describe yourself for the listeners.

[00:01:07] **Tonya Amos:** Thank you so much. I am Tonya Amos. I am a light-skinned Black woman with curly hair and gray streaks on either side, like the Bride of Frankenstein. I have a loose bun on the top of my head, a black t-shirt, and I am wearing a headset today.

[00:01:27] **Andréa Spearman:** So Tonya, you've created such a staple in the Bay Area dance community with [Grown Women Dance Collective](#)'s annual [Juneteenth](#) celebration, sharing the history of the holiday through dance and music. Can you please briefly share how Grown Women Dance Collective came to be and why Juneteenth?

[00:01:48] **Tonya Amos:** Right on! Thank you. So Grown Women Dance Collective... I grew up in San Francisco. Long story short—I ran off, I danced professionally in New York for 15 years, and then when I moved back, I opened a Pilates studio. I thought as an artist, you could retire. [laughter]

Andréa Spearman: Never!

Tonya Amos: A few years ago I was like, “Oh! That's not a thing, is it?”

Between 2006 and about 2009, the African American community lost some really impactful community icons. People that had really changed the fabric of the nation and the world. There were people like [Rosa Parks](#) and [Gregory Hines](#), [Coretta Scott King](#), [Nina Simone](#). These were people that made a really, really big impact on all of our lives. And some of these folks were passing and there was a lot of fanfare and a lot of respect as they deserved. And some people were passing and nobody was noticing.

A really good friend of mine, Michelle Ned, that danced with me way, way, way back in the day, got together with other good friends, Eurydice Ross and [Marisa Castillo](#), and we said, you know, “We're artists [laughter]. We can figure out how to honor these people.” We had never done a show before. Our budget was \$300 [laughter]. We thought we were gonna produce a concert on that. Little did we know. Add some zeros.

Andréa Spearman: Bless your hearts.

[00:03:03] **Tonya Amos:** Bless our hearts, right? This *was* 13 years ago. What did we know? But we came together to honor these African American heroes and teach and celebrate Black history.

Why Juneteenth? Because when we started this project in 2009—luckily things have shifted since then—but in 2009, we had lost most of our Juneteenth celebrations in the Bay Area. Growing up, Juneteenth was front and center in the Black community and 2009 came and that was that time period where municipalities were not allowing gatherings. They were citing insurance reasons. Kind of like in the early days of hip hop, all of a sudden, “We don't wanna have gatherings ‘cause of our insurance.”

So there were very, very few Juneteenth gatherings during that time period. Now, the good thing is they have *come back* front and center. [**Andréa:** Yes.] But we decided during that time that this holiday is so important that it needs to be honored and what an incredible way to do it by honoring our cultural icons that helped change the fabric of the country and the world.

[00:04:21] **Andréa Spearman:** You are absolutely right, Tonya. We have to celebrate holidays as they are occurring, as they come up, and with joy and splendor.

[00:04:31] **Tonya Amos:** Mm. Joy and splendor. I love it. I love it and what better ways to do that than with arts? I would say there would be no society and no revolutions without artists.

[00:04:46] **Andréa Spearman:** Absolutely. And arts education and service seem to be a large part of your ethos as an artist. Would you say that that's true?

[00:04:53] **Tonya Amos:** Arts education and service, absolutely. To me, arts are an expression of life. They are continuity with who we are as human beings, and education is front and center as far as none of us would be where we are right now without educators in our lives that grabbed us by the arm or our ear or our behind or whatever, and said, "Let's do things this way."

And service to me, that's not a separate thing from how we live our lives. I really believe that wherever you are, I always say whatever your skill set is, do it even a little bit to make the world better. So I say, if that's marching, that's marching. If it's legislating, legislate. If it's lawyering, lawyer. If it's haircutting, haircut. [**Andréa:** Mm-hmm.]

And so the only two things I'm really good at are arts and wellness. And so I use those things to impact our society, to impact our culture, to impact our communities. I'm very, very cognizant that I'm standing on my ancestors' shoulders. None of us got to where we're at right now [without them]. You know, I was that kid that grew up in San Francisco, I would say back when there were Black folks in San Francisco. We're still there, but trying to get pushed out. But I grew up in San Francisco without running water, electricity, or food. I am very conscious as one of few people in my neighborhood that survived the crack epidemic, survived Three Strikes, that I "made it" and it is my job to—not even go back to the community, 'cause my feet are still in the community—but go back to the community and grab as many people as I can and pull 'em out, help 'em pull themselves out because that's what happened for me. I would not be standing without a lot of community support and a lot of luck.

I think wherever we are, wherever we are standing, whatever we "do"—that's in big quotes because most of us *do* a lot of things—if we just do a little bit to contribute, this is how we shift the axis of the world.

[00:07:15] **Andréa Spearman:** Yes, absolutely. Part of what you just said, that moving forward but still reaching back into the community, part of the Juneteenth celebration that you put forth has health very much attached to it. It's dealing with mental health. It's dealing with physical health for seniors, for folks who are non-dancers that wanna start moving. What made you wanna add those kind of extra things to this celebration of usually dance and music together? Like why those add-ons, why that additional health portion?

[00:07:52] **Tonya Amos:** Hmm. That's a really good question. All of this is kind of an evolution. It didn't happen overnight. When I came back from New York and I thought you could retire as a dancer, I opened a Pilates studio. I had a very “successful business,” which is kind of a trip because I didn't have any business experience.

When I opened my Pilates studio, I was a dancer. Well, dancers are smart. We're creative, we're hustlers. [**Andréa:** Mm-hmm.] Right? If you grow up, broke and Black in America, there's a good chance you know how to take two pennies and spread it and make a feast for the whole family. And so when I came back and I opened the studio, I was working exclusively on the front end in “wellness.” I'm a certified Pilates teacher and I quickly, accidentally became specialized in people with back and joint pain. I started doing fall prevention for seniors. I started working with pre- and postnatal women. I was doing a lot of stuff around osteoporosis and scoliosis. I also had a lot of people that were like, “I just wanna get in shape.”

But what happens is when you do good work, people... Like begets like, right? If you get someone out of pain, then they tell their friends, and then next thing you know, you got five more people with that same situation. So my studio became a haven for folks to come together, to create community, to get out of pain, to get in shape. And I'll talk about this in a moment, but it also became a place for Black and Brown folks to be able to experience wellness. So I used the Pilates studio as a place to develop my skills and get wellness into the world. [**Andréa:** Yes.]

[00:10:00] And then I started the Juneteenth project and that was the arts piece. All this time that I was running the studio, I would go back into our neighborhoods nights and weekends, and get free Pilates classes into Black and Brown neighborhoods. So I was kind of doing the Robin Hood thing. I was working with rich folks during the day, and then taking this work back into the community at night. [**Andréa** laughs]

And so when I would show up, I'd say, “Hey, I'm Tonya from [Aspire Pilates Center](#), and we're gonna do some Pilates.” And we were getting these skills, these back pain skills, these prenatal wellness skills, these fall prevention skills into our communities. Well, and then I had Grown Women Dance Collective. That was the arts piece.

In 2017, I closed my brick and mortar to be able to go back to this—the community—full time. I wanted to really focus on BIPOC communities having access to this life-changing work. So at this point I shoved the two organizations

together because the Pilates was the wellness piece, Grown Women was the arts-for-social-justice piece, and I shoved them together. Now Grown Women Dance Collective is arts and wellness for social justice. [Andréa: Mm-hmm.] One side of my brain is wellness and the other side is arts.

[00:11:00] So when we started doing these celebrations, these *amazing* concerts, we always brought about 200 beautiful little bébés to the concerts and they were amazing kids that came from organizations all over San Francisco, from Oakland and Berkeley and Richmond and Bay Point and Antioch, and it was fantastic. They would come and they'd take classes with teachers that looked like them and they'd take a backstage tour and they'd have lunch and they'd experience history, which is done in this visceral beautiful way through the arts. And they'd leave with the Black history bio, so it was really impactful for them. So we did that year after year after year. During the year, I continued to go back into the communities to teach free dance classes or dance for literacy classes, or dance with Black history, and then the other side of my head would be Pilates and fall prevention and pain prevention, right? [Andréa: Mm-hmm.]

When we hit the pandemic, suddenly we're all inside and folks are really suffering. Folks are really going through it. Turning up the fire on BIPOC communities, it just got to the point that physical and emotional stuff was just over the top. And so we're trying to figure out how to support community, how to continue to have people engaged and loving on each other, and feeling supportive and feeling good in the cyberspace.

How do we do this? So the first year we somehow got that concert up before anybody knew how to do a concert in cyberspace. That was a crazy thing, but it was in the middle of the uprisings and we were like, "Ooh, our community, if we've ever needed this concert, we need this right now." And so we organized the Juneteenth concert and we realized at that point we really needed to bring a mental health piece in.

[00:13:00] We brought in Dr. Ardis Martin, who's a Black female psychiatrist and she did a [mental health workshop](#), a Black mental health workshop, which was really impactful. A thousand people attended. It was really a good, juicy thing. People were sitting around in their house. People were feeling sedentary. People were feeling isolated. People were feeling alone. Well, we have all these amazing dancers that are former soloists with [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#), [Dance Theatre of Harlem](#), [Martha Graham](#), [Bill T. Jones](#), and [Ballet Hispánico](#). We have all these incredible artists and we thought, what if we brought these artists into people's homes?

That's where we started our [half-hour family friendly series](#), where all of our dancers in the company teach a class. And it's really important for us that “normal” people get to access the power of dance—the beauty, the creativity, the self-confidence building, the sense of self moving in space.

You know, as dancers, we take this stuff for granted. And people that have not had the opportunity to take a dance class, it's kind of mind blowing. You gotta open this world up to them. Everybody knows what it feels like to go out dancing. Everybody *loves* that feeling in your body, feeling the music, feeling the beat, exploring.

[00:15:00] But what we hear very often from grownups is “I really wanted to take dance classes when I was little and I wasn't able to do it,” or “I did ballet for two weeks and then my family couldn't afford it” or whatever the case was. It's really important for us to open access to dance, so everybody gets to experience its powerful, grounding, making you feel like you can fly, dropping you back into your body, and just a sense of self in a different way that as artists, we're lucky to get to experience on a daily basis. Very often the general population doesn't get to experience it. And how special is it to be able to share this—this magic—with everybody?

[00:15:19] **Andréa Spearman:** That's very powerful. And I very much agree that those half-hour classes have definitely been impactful to the community of non-dancers and our dance community at large, because they get a chance to see these artists who have traveled and danced all around the world. They get to experience a new style that may not be familiar to them. It's great. And it's coming to them at no cost.

[00:15:47] **Tonya Amos:** Exactly. Our whole thing is how do we make this powerful work accessible? And during COVID, all of our concerts were always really low cost anyway, which isn't very smart for your bottom line, but we've always said this is a Juneteenth concert. This is really about engaging Black community and about engaging community to share with us in this journey of history told from *our* perspective versus the larger society's perspective, which is a really cool thing because that means in the theater, people are rocking out and hugging each other, talking to each other, kids are dancing in the aisles, and grandma's got her hand up over her head like she's in church, and brothers sitting, sagging next to a woman with high heels and pearls. It's a really incredible cross-cultural intergenerational bridge builder.

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[00:16:57] **Andréa Spearman:** So Tonya, talk to us about the [Joyful Movement Whole Life program](#). What is that?

[00:17:04] **Tonya Amos:** Hmm, that's my baby. Again, I had my brick and mortar for 12 years. I would, like I said, go back into the communities and I would teach free classes and they were mat classes or they were dance classes and they were all impactful and they were great.

But I had a Pilates studio. And the power of reformer work. The power of trapeze table work is really transformational for people. So I would go into the community and I'd identify folks that seemed really connected to the work and they were coming consistently. I'd say, "Hey, if you can get to my studio, you got a scholarship."

So over time, people just started showing up into my studio and there was a young person that would say, "Can I take a nap in the Princess Tiana room?" I'm like, "Go ahead, baby, go take a nap." And then they're hanging around and then they'd say, "Hey, what's that green stuff you're eating?" And I'd say, "It's broccoli. You want some?" And they'd say, "I dunno about that."

And a few weeks later, they're like, "Maybe I will taste that." Next thing you know, they're now buying broccoli and their blood pressure, their parents' blood pressure, their grandparents' blood pressure has all dropped.

So my studio became almost like a community center where folks would just find their way in. Young people would need some help with their studying and so we'd find a tutor for them. We'd get them through high school. We'd get them into college, we'd get them outta college. We'd get them into graduate school. You know, some of our former students/interns now have double masters in chemistry and biochemistry, right? [**Andréa:** Yes!] And they came in just 'cause they needed a place to take a nap. Or [I'd say] "Why don't you go jump on that reformer? See how that feels." "Oh, my knee is kind of jacked up." "Exactly. Let's get you on that reformer." Next thing you know, they're falling in love with Pilates. They're spending time in the studio. Their friends are spending time in the studio.

So over the 12 year period that my brick and mortar was open, I mentored a lot of folks. We certified some Pilates teachers. These people have gone on, some of 'em are making more than me, you know? They're making somewhere in the hundreds. One is making \$160 an hour. This is kind of like the dirty little secret that people do not know how much Pilates teachers make, especially in the Bay

Area. So over the years, kind of just organically supporting and mentoring and scholarshiping folks.

You know, traditional Pilates studios are pretty vanilla and my studio had a good amount of BIPOC coming in and out because I made sure to create a space that they felt safe and could access this really super expensive, life-changing work.

In 2017, I closed my brick and mortar to go back into the community full time. And my intention was to build a pro-community sliding scale Pilates studio. And when I say Pilates, you know, I can't leave the other side of my brain out. So it's an arts and wellness studio that's in my brain. Right?

And then we had these uprisings and the whole world kind of turned upside down and many organizations realized that they weren't actually doing the work. So the beautiful thing that has come out of that is some people have actually stepped forward.

[00:21:00] During that time, [Balanced Body](#), who's the biggest Pilates organization in the world, and I partnered, and I built an international Pilates initiative for them, that's the Diversity in Pilates Initiative. And part of that was integrating all of the training manuals. So all over the world, when people do Pilates certification now, you will see Black and Brown bodies.

I built an international scholarship for them. So we are going into our third round. We have 150 Black and Brown folks studying to be certified teachers all over the U.S. and in seven countries. This program was based on a blueprint that I had had in my head for years, which became the [Joyful Movement program](#).

I've had this blueprint in my head for years and I just did not, I couldn't get it off the ground. I needed manuals. I needed some kind of seed money, et cetera, et cetera. So with all of the world turning upside down, I finally got *my* program off the ground. So I built the Balanced Body program. And then the Joyful Movement Whole Life Program is Grown Women Dance Collective's baby.

It's a two-year certification course. We're in our first cohort. We have 11 Black, Latina and indigenous folks in the group. The group is dynamic and incredible and intersectional in every way possible. We have folks that are formerly incarcerated, [folks] that are currently or formerly unhoused. We have incredible single parents. 8 out of 11 people are artists. We've got community activists in the group.

The idea was to get folks that were deeply rooted in community already, that were already doing the work and they're folks from all over the Bay. And the idea was to get them national Pilates certifications.

[00:23:00] Plus here's my big plus sign. It's the Joyful Movement Whole Life program. We know in order to break intergenerational poverty, we know if we're gonna really build as a community, it takes more than *just* a certification. It takes more than *just* a career. So part of that program is Dr. Ardis Martin, the Black female psychiatrist, doing two years of free mental health counseling with our entire cohort. We've got Black dieticians working with us. So we've got classes in nutrition and trips to the grocery store and farmer's market. We have chefs coming in, teaching us how to cook culturally relevant and delicious meals. We've got financial empowerment classes and these are all Black practitioners doing this. We've got business building skills so by the time we're done with this, everybody's gonna have a business plan written. We also are working with finance people that can underwrite for folks that want to potentially open their own businesses.

Then what's really exciting about this. Oh! And I forget, remember the two sides of my brain. Dance for literacy. So the idea is to train arts and wellness and get this work back into the community really deeply. What I'm really excited about is they all are gonna participate in community impact hours. They're gonna participate in paid internships and we are gonna flood our communities with 2,000 free arts and wellness classes per cohort. [Andréa: Wow.] Right! So they need those hours to sit for the national exam. The community needs this incredible work, right? So we're gonna pay folks from the community to go back into their own neighborhoods, to teach free arts and wellness classes.

Then they'll sit for the national exam. They will all pass. We have a 100% pass rate on all of the tests up to this point. We're paying for insurance for them for the first two years. We're opening—cross your fingers for us—we're opening a sliding scale brick and mortar in downtown Oakland this fall. They will be able to use that space to develop their own clientele, to practice on their friends and family.

We're planning on not only going back into the community, to the libraries and the shelters and the senior centers and after-school programs and all of that to get this incredible work, but this space will be a community resource where people can actually have access to really high-quality, machine-based Pilates. Which I have to tell you it's life changing. I mean, the reason why I can walk, let alone dance at age 54, you know, (i.e. Grown Women Dance Collective) is because Pilates keeps my body from falling apart completely. [laughter]

[00:25:51] **Andréa Spearman:** Wow! That is so wonderful to hear about this space that's coming, you said in the fall?

[00:25:56] **Tonya Amos:** Yep. We are in negotiation with the landlord as we speak. Cross your fingers and toes and eyeballs for us. I don't wanna jinx it, so I don't wanna speak too much on it yet, but I've got seven Pilates machines ready to go.

When I closed the studio, they're rented to my clients right now for residual income, ya'll. [laughter] And so I'm gonna go and gather those machines back and plop them right into the space in Oakland. And we're gonna open up those doors and make sure that our community can have a place that just feels good and feels welcoming. It feels yummy, and they can use their body in new ways in a place that's built for them.

[00:26:36] **Andréa Spearman:** That's amazing. Yes, Dancers' Group will definitely keep an eye out on the development of this new space and with you, Tonya. So exciting.

[00:26:46] **Tonya Amos:** Thank you. I'm really excited about this. This feels like my life's work coming together now.

[00:26:54] **Andréa Spearman:** So last question for you, what would be one thing you want people to take away from the work that you're doing now?

[00:27:03] **Tonya Amos:** I'm a little obsessed, a lot obsessed—anybody who knows me, I'm a lot obsessed about making the world better, making our communities stronger. And art is a way of creating profound shifts, not in only ourselves, but in our communities and society and globally. Grown Women Dance Collective is arts and wellness for social justice because I cannot separate the social justice piece from anything that I do. Walking through the world as a Black woman, breathing every breath as a Black woman, there's no separating it. There's no, "Well, I'm gonna do this, and when I have it together, then I'm gonna go back and I'm gonna do something." Or "I'm gonna make my money, and when I get my money, *then* I'm gonna do something," right? Or "I'm gonna do this, this and this, and then when I have my stuff together, I'm gonna do..."

No, there is no later, there's only now. And we are standing on generations and generations of ancestors that kept pushing. Kept pushing us forward. And I don't believe that any of us have a moment to sit down on that because if they did not push, none of us would be where we are right now.

I understand that we all have different stuff in life. We all have different needs and family responsibilities and financial situations. I get that.

The concept of tithing, right? I don't go to church, but I love this concept. Just a *little* bit of your time, or just a *little* bit of your intention, or just a *little* bit of your money, or just a *little* bit of your writing emails, right? Wherever you are in your life... if you are a hair cutter, how can you use those scissors to change the lives of people that need that extra support?

And so anybody that's around me longer than five minutes knows I speak on this proudly. You know, I come from a line of people that burnt down plantations. We burnt down two, potentially three plantations. And that story has been told from generation to generation. And it's my reminder that I can't sit down.

And so whether you're an artist, whether you're a lawyer, whether you're a toenail clipper, whatever you do. [laughter] Ha! I know that's a little ratchet right there. Whatever you do, you can find a way with just a *little* bit of time. You don't have to sacrifice everything, but just a *little* bit of time. How can you contribute to making society better with the skills that you already have? 'Cause we have 'em [**Andréa**: Yes.], we have 'em. What are you already doing and how can you use those skills to make this world better?

So that's my takeaway. Social justice is not a separate thing. Social justice is not about “when I—” It's right now, whether we know it, whether we like it or not, we're breathing it or we're not breathing it. So how do we breathe it into existence with what we are good at? With what skills and magic and artistry that we have?

[00:30:51] **Andréa Spearman**: Wow. What a rich and full discussion that we've had. Tonya, would you please tell the audience where they can learn more about you, The Joyful Movement program and Grown Women Dance Collective? Where can they find you?

[00:31:07] **Tonya Amos**: Absolutely. Our website is GrownWomenDance.org. It has our programs, which are our concerts and our dance projects, our arts and wellness classes and Joyful Movement Whole Life workforce development through arts and wellness program. It's all there.

[00:31:34] **Andréa Spearman**: Thank you again so much for this time, Tonya.

[00:31:37] **Tonya Amos**: Thank you. I appreciate you so much.

[calming mid-tempo music plays in background]

[00:31:42] **Andréa Spearman:** Thanks so much for joining us for this audio experience. For additional content that reflects our dynamic dance community, visit our *In Dance* article archive at DancersGroup.org. [00:32:00]

Mentioned in the recording:

- [Rosa Parks](#)
- [Gregory Hines](#)
- [Coretta Scott King](#)
- [Nina Simone](#)
- Michelle Ned
- Eurydice Ross
- [Marisa Castillo](#)
- Dr. Ardis Martin - see the [recording](#) of Dr. Martin's workshop with Grown Women Dance Collective
- [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#)
- [Dance Theatre of Harlem](#)
- [Martha Graham Dance Company](#)
- [Bill T. Jones](#)
- [Ballet Hispánico](#)
- [Balanced Body](#)
- [Joyful Movement Whole Life program](#)

For more information:

Grown Women Dance Collective

- GrownWomenDance.org
- Facebook: [Grown Women Dance Collective](#)
- Instagram: [@GrownWomenDanceCollective](#)

Aspire Pilates Center

- AspirePilatesCenter.com
- Facebook: [Aspire Pilates Center](#)