



JAZZ DANCE

A History
of the
Roots
and Branches

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and Wendy Oliver

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Jazz Dance from Emancipation to 1970

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The history of jazz dance is intimately tied to the history of jazz music. Collectively, as jazz expression with common histories and shared aesthetic characteristics, their entwined history from emancipation to the 1970s is complex. Their parallel histories reveal a multiplicity of aesthetic approaches, interactions, and a fluidity of cultural, musical, and dance identities.¹ Imagine the jazz tree as it appears in the introduction surrounded by a community dancing socially and performatively. The groove that the participants, dancers, and musicians share is one that celebrates individual expression yet moves as a collective. There is a give and take, shift and change in aesthetic intention that honors the roots of the tree, celebrating the heritage and legacy of jazz while new branches form as a result of new innovations. These innovations reveal a history of jazz expression where the essence of jazz is one of experimentation and discovery,² embracing and absorbing various influences while holding individualistic expression and freedom in high regard. Thus jazz history is a landscape of evolving meanings, values, ideas, sounds, movements, contestations, contradictions, pluralities, and multiple constructions of “what is jazz.”³

In this chapter, the historical discussion of jazz and its West African roots is framed by an examination of relevant jazz dance and music history literature as well as oral history interviews. This discussion and analysis offers a broad historical overview intended to introduce the sweep of jazz dance and music history.

Setting the Stage

“Jazz is a physical and aural expression of the complexity and exuberance of American culture and history.”⁴ Jazz dance and music emerged primarily from what is known as African-American folk and vernacular⁵ music and dance, lending creative inspiration to each other’s development.⁶ These early dances incorporated improvisation and reflected “the power of the community supporting the individual creative voice in a non-literal expression of storytelling and connection to the human experience.”⁷ A competitive spirit often imbued these early forms, and movements were characterized by a weighted release into gravity, a dynamic spine, propulsive rhythms, and a rhythmic, conversational approach to musical accompaniment.⁸

From the 1850s into the twentieth century, presentational performance opportunities and venues for African-American musicians and dancers increased and dance troupes such as the Whitman Sisters (1900–1943) became incubators of dancing talent.⁹ In medicine shows, tent shows, minstrelsy, vaudeville, gillies,¹⁰ and eventually the musical theater stage, movement details of African-American folk and vernacular dances were reemerging in new dances, or in dances once seen only on plantations, retaining their original form while expanding through movement invention.¹¹ The Cakewalk, performed to the syncopated rhythms of the emerging ragtime music in the 1890s, was one of the earlier dances that served as an incubator for inventive new steps.¹² In July 1898, *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk* opened on Broadway featuring the Cakewalk performed to ragtime music.¹³

Varied dance and music practices were also meeting each other in the cultural diversity of America where new ideas were explored. For example, William Henry Lane, known as Master Juba, lived in the Five Points district of New York City where Irish immigrants and African-Americans lived in the mid-1800s. He enlivened the rhythmic structure of the Irish jig with shuffle and African rhythms, adding the element of swing to his dancing.¹⁴

Sand dances and early tap dances followed, where the dancer used sand on the floor and metal implements on shoes to create musical sounds and rhythms. Dances retained African-like movements and propulsive rhythms while assimilating the solo style of white dancers.¹⁵ African-American vernacular dance became more syncopated, heading toward the swinging dance forms such as the Charleston and Lindy, which would be called early jazz dance.

Musically, in the mid- to late 1800s, two evolutions were occurring that are considered the direct precursors of jazz: the blues and ragtime. The blues

used devices such as blue notes (notes said to fall “somewhere between the cracks of the piano”), slurring, growls, call-and-response, and a loosening of the rhythmic structure of the melody line from direct correspondence with the basic downbeat, the strongest beat felt inside a musical bar. Ragtime began to deliberately throw syncopations against downbeats as a kind of counterpoint in equal standing with the downbeat.¹⁶

Jazz Arrives Swinging

Historians generally agree that jazz as a musical form was born in the early twentieth century, most likely in New Orleans. Around 1902, African-American folk and vernacular music began to swing through what is often called triple-based rhythm described as “hot” and “bluesy” with jagged rhythms and vocal humanlike sounds emitting from instruments.¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, dance done to this new music would also be called jazz.¹⁸

African-American vernacular dance was also beginning to swing through rhythms such as the Buck and Wing and the Shuffle. Thanks to a social dance boom to the new jazz music around 1910, dance once seen primarily in after-hours joints or “jook houses” and brothels moved into ballrooms.¹⁹ According to jazz dance historians Marshall and Jean Stearns, the lyrics of Perry Bradford’s 1909 dance-song “The Bullfrog Hop” guided a listener on how to perform a dance with the phrase, “and do the Jazzbo Glide.”²⁰ Group dance forms gave way to partner dances,²¹ and animal dances such as the Turkey Trot and Bunny Hug became the rage along with the hip isolations of Snake Hips. The Texas Tommy emphasized the breakaway where couples broke close body contact but kept contact with both hands, improvising steps of their choice.²²

“The heart and soul of jazz dance crystallized between the 1920s and 1940s.”²³ The 1920s became known as the jazz age as this era embraced jazz music and its accompanying dance form with a passion. New dances were emerging from earlier African-American dances through experimentation, extension, and creative development. The Charleston, both a social and a theatrical stage dance, was highly syncopated and retained the patting of the knees with the hands crossing over each other from an earlier dance called Patting Juba.²⁴ Previous New York City-based theatrical shows such as *Darktown Follies* (1911) featured the Cakewalk, Ballin’ the Jack, and the Texas Tommy and would serve as inspiration for future musicals.²⁵ However, it was the 1921 show *Shuffle Along* featuring the Charleston that brought Broadway revues embracing jazz music and dance in vogue, pushing jazz expression to the forefront in musical theater.²⁶ Jazz social dances of this era were serving

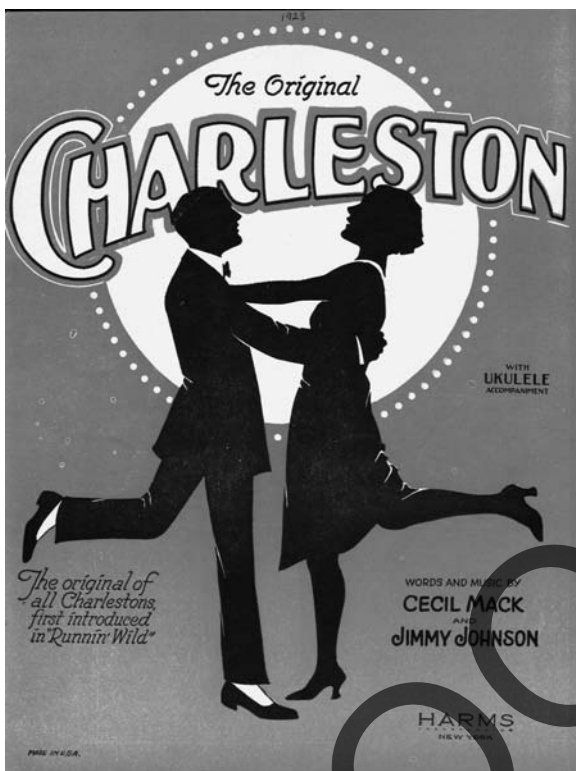


Figure 7.1. The Charleston, 1923. By permission of Tom Morgan.

as choreographic source material for stage performance while jazz tap, an evolution of early sand and tap dances, showed increased sophistication in its use of swing and complex rhythms.

Important musical innovations during this era include an increased emphasis on solo improvisation and a further coarsening of musical timbres and tones, strengthening the already voicelike quality of jazz music.²⁷ Jazz bands in the 1920s were developing greater ensemble rhythmic sophistication, and Duke Ellington was drawing on vernacular idioms for novel invention, “creating arrangements that left room for his players to contribute to the rhythmic conception of the piece.”²⁸ Additionally, jazz drummers were building on rhythmic phrases created by jazz tappers.²⁹

In the 1930s, jazz swing style music and jazz social dance were at their peak. Dances emphasized the swinging body in space, moving not only through the body’s weighted and under-curve release in and through space but also through a propulsive, rhythmic conversation with the equally swinging and propulsive jazz music. Harlem in New York City was at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, and it was at the Savoy Ballroom on Lennox Avenue

between 140th and 141st Streets “where black musicians and dancers converged and defined a period: music and dance at the Savoy drew attention to the fact that the tradition of black music and dance forms were interrelated, and together were responsible for the swing phenomenon.”³⁰

At the Savoy Ballroom, the greatest jazz social dance of all time, the Lindy Hop, was born.³¹ Norma Miller and Frankie Manning, legendary Lindy Hop dancers and members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, credit Twistmouth George as the creator of the Lindy at the Savoy when he threw his partner out into what is now called the “swing-out.”³² This is similar to the breakaway, but in the swing-out, couples not only break close body contact but also release one hand, allowing for more improvisation.

Legendary jazz orchestras and artists such as the Duke Ellington Orchestra, Fess Williams, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, Chick Webb, Dizzy Gillespie, and Cab Calloway were playing at the Savoy,³³ and their music fueled the creative energy that fed the development of new jazz social dances. In turn, the musicians were creatively influenced by the dancers’ movements and rhythms.³⁴ Other jazz social dances and dance steps developed alongside



Figure 7.2. Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers at the Savoy Ballroom. New York World’s Fair 1939–1940 records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

the Lindy, such as the Big Apple, Shorty George, and Suzie Q, the majority of them Savoy-originated.³⁵ This new movement vocabulary continued the trend of serving as source material for experimentation and innovation for social, theatrical, and future concert jazz dance forms.

On Broadway, African-American choreographer Buddy Bradley was going directly to jazz music for inspiration and jazz dance movement invention,³⁶ while jazz tap was gaining popularity in movies through the work of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, John Bubbles, Fred Astaire, the Nicholas Brothers, Jeni LeGon, and the Condos Brothers. Jazz tap artists Coles and Atkins and Buster Brown were traveling with big bands like Duke Ellington’s on the vaudeville and club circuit and appearing at New York clubs such as the Cotton Club and the Apollo Theater. These artists contributed significantly to jazz through their own dance creations, movement style, and manner of rhythmic, conversational exchanges with musicians. For most of these jazz artists, creative movement ideas originated in the vernacular and social jazz dances, arose from the rhythmic impulse of swinging jazz music, and were embellished for the performance stage.³⁷

A similar phenomenon was evolving with the Lindy Hop dancers. Professionals such as Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers were performing in clubs, films, on Broadway, and in concert halls including Radio City Music Hall. The routines of these Lindy Hop groups embellished the Lindy with moves not generally seen on the social dance floor except at contests,³⁸ such as the aerial moves (throwing a partner in the air) that can be seen in the classic Lindy film sequence from *Hellzapoppin’* (1941). Frankie Manning is credited with the first Lindy aerial move around 1935 or 1936 and for creating ensemble dancing for the professional Lindy Hop dance teams, although individual couple dancing continued to coexist with ensemble dancing in performance.³⁹ Norma Miller credits Herbert “Whitey” White with creating the first choreographed Lindy routines, including the first for the performance stage.⁴⁰

Mura Dehn, a Russian émigré, arrived in America in 1930 to study and research jazz dance and she focused on jazz in Harlem, particularly at the Savoy Ballroom. Subsequently, she founded the Academy of Jazz dedicated to the research, teaching, and performance of jazz dance. For Dehn, jazz dance could be seen in the current social dances, especially the Lindy Hop, and in the practices of the African-American tap dancers,⁴¹ and classes at her Academy of Jazz included African primitive, improvisational, and early American jazz expression.⁴² In Dehn’s words, early American jazz expression was inclusive of “all interpretations of modern jazz that we are familiar with . . . ragtime, Charleston, truckin, swing, boogie-woogie.”⁴³ Dehn would later create a landmark documentary, *The Spirit Moves* (1950), that captured

not only these early jazz traditions but jazz dance performed to the upcoming stylistic innovation in jazz music, bebop, by dancers such as Clarence “Scoby” Strohman, Jeff Asquiew, Leroy Appins, and Milton “Okay” Hayes.

Dehn was also a principal dancer in the 1930s with choreographer Roger Pryor Dodge. Dodge began writing about jazz music in the 1920s with one of his best-known articles appearing in the *Dancing Times*, an English review



Figure 7.3. Mura Dehn and Roger Pryor Dodge. *Dance Recital of Concert Jazz*, January 22, 1938. 92nd Street Y.M.H.A., New York. Roger Pryor Dodge Collection, courtesy of Pryor Dodge.