JAZZ DANCE: A HISTORY

The evolution of jazz dance is as exciting as the dance form itself. American choreographer Agnes de Mille described the vital spirit of jazz dance as "the true American pep, creativity, and fun." The bond between jazz dance and the United States is more than spiritual, however: Jazz dance mirrors the social history of the American people, reflecting ethnic influences, historical events, and cultural changes. Jazz dance has been greatly influenced by social dance and popular music—especially jazz music. The two jazz forms evolved together, each echoing and affecting developments in the other.

The varieties of jazz dance reflect the diversity of American culture. But, like so much that is "from America," the history of jazz dance begins somewhere else.

The Beginning

The origins of jazz music and jazz dance are found in the rhythms and movements brought to America by African slaves. African slaves were first brought to Latin America as early as 1510. As the slave trade expanded, Africans, particularly from the Niger region, were shipped to islands such as Haiti before their final destination in North America.

In Africa, every event of any consequence was celebrated and expressed in music and dance. The style of African dance is earthy: low, knees bent, with pulsating body movements emphasized by body isolations and hand clapping. As arriving slaves, Africans from many cultures were cut off from more than their artistic conventions; they were isolated from their families, their languages, and their tribal traditions.

Although slave owners did not allow African crafts and ceremonies, music and dance often were permitted. After several slave uprisings, however, slave owners passed the Slave Act of 1740, prohibiting slaves from playing African drums or performing African dances. However, the prohibition of their native music and dance did not suppress the slaves' desire to
clinging to those parts of their cultural identity. The rhythms and movements of African dance endured in foot stamping and tapping, hand clapping, and rhythmic voice sounds.

European music and dances gradually were introduced to the African slaves. This was the beginning of the long fusion of West African music and dance tradition to the harmonies and musical structure of European music. As we look back in our jazz dance history to this era, similarities between the dance traditions are evident. Buck dancing is an earthy, flat-footed two-step. The shimmy incorporates the primary movements of the Shika dance from Nigeria. The lindy-hop and the jitterbug have steps similar to those of the Shango dance and an Egor tribal dance. Snake Hips (early 1920s) was duplicated from the Congo in Trinidad and the Congo in Africa. The Charleston uses movements from one of the first recorded animal dances, the “Buzzard’s Lope.”

As American vernacular dance evolved, it was influenced strongly by African elements of dance, movement, and musicality.

### Minstrel Shows

In the nineteenth century, American whites discovered they enjoyed the music and dance that the slaves had created. In minstrel shows, white entertainers parodied their conception of slaves’ lives and popularized the African style of dance and music, which depended greatly on solo performance and improvisation.

After the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1859, many blacks migrated north, where they replaced black-faced white minstrel performers. For the most part, though, the minstrel show was a southern entertainment—until it incorporated the cakewalk. Originally, the cakewalk was a social dance invented by blacks. Couples paraded in a circle, creating intricate steps in competition for the prize of a cake—hence the name cakewalk. Minstrel shows began to incorporate a theatrical form of the cakewalk as the grand finale, and many of the shows were a success nationwide. The sense of competition was retained by couples marching elegantly around in a circle, showing off with high kicks and fancy, inventive struts.

With the popularity of minstrel shows and the development of vaudeville, white performers, still in imitation of black dancers, introduced the buck-and-wing. This dance was strongly influenced by the Irish jig and the English clog, with their fast legwork and footwork and minimal body and arm movement. The buck-and-wing was unusual: The dancer’s movements stressed the musical offbeat, or upbeat. This metrical pattern was typical of African music, which is often counted one-two rather than the traditional European way, one-two. The popularity of the buck-and-wing encouraged musicians to create new accompaniments that employed the unusual rhythm, called syncopation. The syncopated music that resulted
The Joffrey Ballet's interpretation of the cakewalk. Photo © Martha Swope.

came to be known as jazz, and syncopation was—and still is—its hallmark. As the music evolved, so did the dance. Dancers adapted the movements of the buck-and-wing and incorporated them to create the elegant and graceful soft-shoe.

With white dancers as the star performers of the minstrel and vaudeville shows, it was difficult for a black dancer to gain stature as part of a troupe. Embittered, many black performers migrated to Europe, where they introduced the newly evolving forms of jazz music and jazz dance. In Europe, these talented and innovative performers were received more readily than in their American homeland. The minstrel show eventually evolved and was absorbed into the twentieth-century musical comedy.

The 1910s

At the close of the minstrel period, the syncopated rhythms of American ragtime bands accompanied the introduction of early forms of jazz dances. In the brief period from 1910 through 1915, more than a hundred new dances emerged and disappeared from American ballrooms. The fast-paced, hectic, one-step dances paved the way for the famous dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle. The Castles brought an elegance to the dances of the period with the refined Castle walk and made dancing a fad in high-society circles. They also popularized a new dance step, the fox-trot. Inspired by the rhythmic style of the blues, the fox-trot outlasted all the other
dances of the period. When World War I started, the public was engaged in the novelty of dancing in restaurants and cabarets, which gave a great impetus to the musical craze called jazz.

By 1914, record players had become popular with the American public. New songs included brass band instruments such as the saxophone, the clarinet, and the trombone. These instruments symbolized the Jazz Age. Recordings such as the “Ball and the Jack,” “Snake Hips,” and the “Big Apple” were heard over the wireless and encouraged the American public to dance.

The 1920s

The 1920s marked the end of World War I, and Americans looked forward to a period of prosperity. The dances that emerged during this period reflected the public’s need for gaiety and freedom, which were lacking during the war era. Through the end of the 1920s, Dixieland jazz music, with its fast ragtime beat, spread from New Orleans to Chicago and New York. The growth of jazz dance was directly influenced by this musical genre.

For a brief time, exclusively black casts danced to jazz music on the Broadway stage in such musicals as *Shuffle Along* (1921) and *Runnin' Wild* (1923). *Shuffle Along* introduced the dynamic dancer and performer Josephine Baker. Baker was in the chorus line but immediately called attention to herself with mugging and out-of-step movements that were done with such finesse that they became a featured part of the act. She continued to dance on Broadway until she went to Paris, where she became a huge success. Many other black performers also found success in Paris at this time.

*Runnin' Wild* introduced the Charleston, and Americans were quick to adopt it. In the Charleston, dancers used body isolations for the first time in a social dance, and the hand clapping and foot stamping that it incorporated were a direct link to the dance's African origin. The Charleston popularized dancing and prompted new dances such as the Big Apple and the Black Bottom, which were performed to dance songs that included dance-step instructions in the lyrics.

This was also the era of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, a black tap dancer who achieved world fame through the clean and clear percussive rhythms of his feet. The early versions of tap dance evolved from the Irish jig, which incorporated limited upper body movements. As the movements of tap dance became more flexible, the lightness of Robinson's style influenced the future of tap dance by changing the placement of the tap steps from the full foot to the ball of the foot. Bojangles was seen performing on Broadway, in Hollywood films, and in shows that toured the country. His recognition helped to establish the popularity of this dance form.
The 1930s

The 1920s closed with the introduction of talkies, and the public flocked to the movie houses and abandoned the Broadway musical. The 1930s were the years of the Depression, when people sought an escape from their dreary lives. They found escape in dance marathons and in the music of big bands. Dance competitions became popular, for people were willing to try anything in the hope of winning a cash prize. Jazz music moved away from ragtime, Dixieland, and blues, and a new sound began to emerge with the “symphonic jazz” of Paul Whiteman. He brought full orchestration to his music and made syncopation a part of every song he played. The substitution of countermelodies for improvisation made his music more danceable.

The black American bands of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong also attracted public attention. Their music gave birth to swing, and a line from a song by Duke Ellington tells how quickly Americans took to it:
“It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.” The swing era, also termed the big-band era, was marked by the orchestrated jazz music of such greats as Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, and Count Basie. Swing music consisted of a simple theme that was improvised on by solo instruments. The dances that evolved during the swing era were an interpretation of the energy that this musical style generates. During this time, the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, dubbed “The Home of Happy Feet,” was the largest ballroom in the world—one square block—and for thirty years, jazz dancers and swing musicians converged there.

Well-known dances that emerged from this era were the jitterbug and the boogie-woogie. The boogie-woogie was characterized by knee swaying and foot swinging. The jitterbug, initially introduced as the lindy-hop (named in honor of aviator Charles Lindbergh), was a syncopated two-step or box step. After the basic step of the lindy, the couples separated for the breakaway, the improvisational section of the dance. During the middle and late 1930s, these improvisations became a show unto themselves. The steps and improvisations of the lindy brought back the solo style of dancing characteristic of African dance and marked a departure from the European style of dancing in couples.

It took years to capture the true excitement of dance on film. In 1933, two films paved the way for the following 20 years, which came to be known as the Golden Era: *42nd Street* with the wild cinematic choreography of Busby Berkeley and *Flying Down to Rio* with the subtle artistry of Fred Astaire, the most graceful and beguiling dancer the movies has ever known.

Busby Berkeley never studied dance or took a lesson, yet he was known for his endless ideas for dance routines. Berkeley was one of the top four dance directors on Broadway. His routines were characterized by intricate patterns created by groups of dancers. Ingenious camera movements and overhead camera projections made the patterns look as though they were stop-frame kaleidoscope art. A string of major dance musicals fell under his direction: *42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, *1935* and *1937*, and the Rooney–Garland musicals *Babes in Arms*, *Strike Up the Band*, and *Babes on Broadway*. Before his retirement in the early 1970s, Berkeley supervised the dance sequences of the Broadway smash *No, No, Nanette*. Berkeley’s contribution to film meant the movie musical would never look the same again.

Although Astaire had been a vital part of Broadway throughout the 1920s, when musicals finally found their ground in Hollywood in 1933, he became the leading man for movie musicals. Astaire created a unique dance style that brought elegance to the dancer’s image. He blended the flowing steps of ballet with the abruptness of jazz movements and was the first dancer to dance every musical note so that the rhythmic pattern of the music was mirrored in the dance steps.

Audiences were also intrigued by the sight of Astaire and Ginger Rogers in their complex dance duets. They were partners in a string of dance musical hits that included *Roberta* (1935), *Top Hat* (1935), *Follow the Fleet*
The jitterbug at a 1930s dance hall. Improvisation was the key to its excitement. Photo from Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

The charismatic Fred Astaire, showing nonchalance and sophistication. Photo from Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

(1936), Swing Time (1936), Shall We Dance (1937), Carefree (1938), and The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle (1939).

Over the next two decades after the split with Rogers, Astaire continued to dazzle audiences with his charismatic style of dancing with a list of stars—Leslie Caron, Cyd Charisse; Vera-Ellen, Judy Garland, and Jane Powell, to name a few. He also teamed up with male partners Bing Crosby and Gene Kelly. In 1949, when Judy Garland became ill during the making of The Barkleys of Broadway, MGM reunited Astaire and Rogers for their final appearance together.

In 1959, after a brief retirement, Astaire returned to dancing with a television video hour called “An Evening with Astaire,” which was followed in 1960 with “Another Evening with Astaire” and in 1961 with “Astaire Time.” In 1981, much of Hollywood’s royalty attended the gala televised gathering in which Astaire was awarded the American Film Institute’s Lifetime Achievement Award.