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(TURN OF THE CENTURY)

BUCK-AND-WING

CHALLENGE!

Bill Robinson versus Harry Swinton

(Bijou Theatre, Brooklyn, New York, March 30, 1900)

TWENTY-TWO YEARS OLD and newly arrived in New York City, Bill Robinson decided it was time to ascend the tap dancing ladder of success by challenging Harry Swinton, the reigning star dancer of the musical revue *In Old Kentucky*, to a buck dancing contest. Born Luther Robinson in Richmond, Virginia, on May 25, 1878, but taking his brother's name as his own, Willy Robinson had an exceptional sense of rhythm, so it was natural for him to turn to dancing. With his childhood friend Sammy ("Eggie") Eggleston, he danced on any corner where people threw pennies. Eggie's specialty was soft-shoe, and Willy's was the noisy and attention-getting buck-and-wing. Willy landed his first professional job in 1892 in the pickaninny (from the Spanish *pequeno*, meaning small and young) chorus for Mayme Remington in the stage show *The South before the War*. Touring the black southern circuit, Willy worked his way all the way up to New York City, and by 1898 he was dancing in Minor's Theatre in the Bowery and in dinner shows on Brooklyn's Coney Island. By 1900, he and his partner, Theodore Miller, were regular performers at the Douglas Club, an exclusive after-hours spot on West Thirty-first Street in Manhattan frequented by leading figures in the theatrical and sporting worlds. Then he read that *In Old Kentucky*, "Litt's Magnificent Molo-Dramatic Production," which had played a number of New York theaters over the years, was back in town:

> IN OLD KENTUCKY. SPECIAL FRIDAY EVE., FEB. 14. A GREAT BUCK AND WING DANCING CONTEST. THE DANCERS IN 'IN OLD KENTUCKY' CHALLENGE ALL COMERS. TEN (10) DOLLARS IN GOLD WILL BE AWARDED THE WINNER.

Written in 1893 by Charles T. Dazey and produced by Jacob Litt, *In Old Kentucky* enjoyed a tremendous success as a plantation-style integrated revue featuring white actors and black musicians and dancers. "You sang or you buck danced," said James Herbert "Eubie" Blake, who

made his New York debut as a musician in the pit orchestra when the show played the Academy of Music in Manhattan in 1902 on a stage so large that extra whites and blacks were hired to give the play atmosphere. The show, built around plantation life and thoroughbred racehorses, had a second-act stable scene with singers, buck dancers, and a pickaninny brass band, and a third-act horse race in which both horses and hoofers displayed their saltatorial skills—this perhaps was one of the earliest instances that the term "hoofer" was used to reference tap dancers.

Over its twenty-five-year run, *In Old Kentucky* had as many as three companies touring simultaneously across the country. To attract audiences and scout out local talent during its weeklong engagements, the company held Friday night buck-and-wing dance contests between members of the cast and local dance celebrities. Each contestant was given a number, and judges were placed under the stage, in the wings of the theater, and out in front of the stage to evaluate the sound, speed, precision, and presentation of the dancing that was done to the accompaniment of stop-time banjo, with one plunk at the beginning of each bar. After *In Old Kentucky's* weeklong run at the Grand Opera House, it moved to Brooklyn's Bijou Theatre, on Smith Street, for another week's run. It was the buck-and-wing contest of March 30, 1900, that Robinson decided to enter, and he was sure he was going to win. "Bill had been telling all of us how he used to win dancing contests when he was in the 'South Before the War' company, but Bill was *always* talking anyhow, and very seldom agreeing with anybody else," says Tom Fletcher. That is why he earned the nickname "Bojangles," from jangler, meaning contentious.

Harry Swinton was *In Old Kentucky*'s star dancer that season. Eubie Blake says that Harry came out in roustabout clothes with a paper cone full of sand and did more dancing, just by spreading the sand over the stage floor, than any dancer did in an entire act—and that was just a preliminary to his dancing. Swinton was a superior dancer, and that is why Robinson had to beat him. When he announced to his buddies that he was heading over to Brooklyn, they warned him that even without Swinton, the competition would be fierce, and he was in for a tough time. A number of white, mostly Irish, boys were there, including Joe Cook of the dance team Cook and Sylvia, Billy Lynch, Frank Forbes, and Jimmy Mullaney, all of whom were great dancers. The word was that Swinton often backed out when it came to competing against buck-and-wing dancers in Brooklyn, avoiding the competition by taking a low number and leaving the high-numbered competitors to buck it out. On the night Robinson competed, that is exactly what Harry Swinton did.

Upon arriving at the Bijou and hearing that Swinton had indeed drawn a low number, Robinson announced to his buddies that he "knew it was peaches." He proceeded to take on each and every high-numbered dancer, winning praise for the speed and clarity of his dancing by the judges who sat beside, beneath, and before the stage, and Robinson handily won first prize. His victory was further pronounced by his bragging about it loudly from the stage of the theater to the backstage door.

If it is true that the one thing Bill Robinson had in abundance was nerve, then he would need it after that evening. For by winning *In Old Kentucky's* buck-dancing contest, with the gold and valuable publicity that was bestowed upon the winner, Robinson was targeted as the new man to beat by every buck-and-wing dancer who would be king.[1]

Pickaninnies and Bucks

The general designation for tap dancing at the turn of the century was "buck." The term can be traced back to the West Indies, where Africans used the words *po' bockorau* as a corruption of the French word *boucanier* to refer to rowdy sailors, and to the Carolinas, where Africans spoke of the "po buck" jig dancing of unruly Irish immigrants.[2] The buck was a conspicuously flat-footed dance in 2/4 and 4/4 time. As late as 1961, the dancer announcing himself as "Hot Foot Sam from Alabam" performed his buck with feet that looked like pancakes; it began with a short, swift brush, chug, or kick but emphasized the second landing beat on the flat foot that made it rhythmically emphatic.[3]

While touring with Ulysses "Slow Kid" Thompson in the *Wild West Show* in 1909, Stanley Easton danced the buck in the show's featured Jig Top—a circus tent for black specialty entertainments. Buck, Chuck Green remembers, was so named because it was performed on the buck wagon, which transported medicine show and gillie dancers from town to town.[4] Pigmeat Markham, who worked in Doctor Andrew Payne's medicine show in a carnival in Lexington, Kentucky, in the early 1920s, says, "We came out and did a little comedy dancing, mostly Buck—no Wings yet—with plenty of eccentric stuff while the banjo backed us up, loud for laughs, to put the yokels in a buying mood."[5]

While the wing also began to be developed by dancers around 1900, it was not the aerial three-wing step that reached maturity in the 1920s, but more a lateral, side-brushing or scraping step that, when added to the buck, gave it more of a horizontal splay. "They called it *Buck and Wing*, but there was no elevation, no real Wing in it," explained tap master Charles "Honi" Coles about the step that comprised a simple hop with one foot flung out to the side. With the knees that lifted the feet and drove them vertically down beneath the hips of the dancers, the buck-and-wing was an evolution of the flat-footed style of jigging—that American percussive hybrid of 1800 that fused African and Irish percussive stepping traditions—in which the body was bent at the waist and movement was restricted to the waist down; the jumping, springing, and winging air steps made it possible for the dancer, upon taking off or landing, to produce a rapid and rhythmic shuffling in the feet.

Buck-and-wing was also rooted in the tradition of Appalachian clog dancing, which evolved in the 1870s on the eastern side of the Appalachian mountain range that roughly divided the Virginias, Carolinas, and northern Georgia from Kentucky, Tennessee, and northern Alabama. Clog, an English word that originally meant "clock" dance, was a style of wooden-shoe dancing that had originated in the Lakeland regions of England several centuries before. The flat-footed style of clogging that evolved in the Appalachian Mountains was a product of the foot-shuffling square dances of Negroes on plantations in the 1700s and 1800s, which they learned from watching dances in the big house, and to which they added chugs and shuffles.[6]

The difference between the jigging of 1800 and the buck-and-wing of 1900 was in the syncopation, a rhythm produced by the ragging of fiddle tunes by black musicians in the 1800s and in the breakdowns—percussive explosions that evolved through jigging competitions on the plantation and on the levee. These had a rhythmic cadence not unlike the recitations of Vachel Lindsay's poem "The Congo":

Barrel-house kings, with feet unstable,
Sagged and reeled and pounded on a table,
Beat an empty bottle with the handle of a broom,
Hard as they were able,
Booom, boom, BOOM.[7]

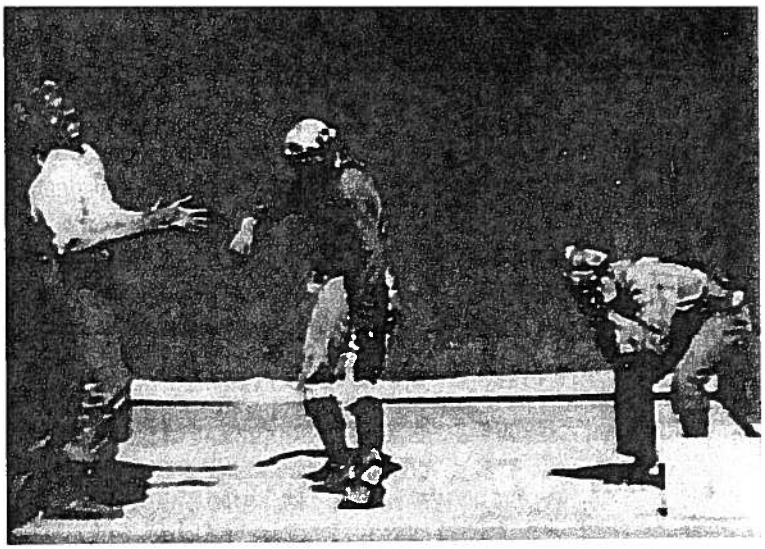
While the jig and the clog dance of the Irish moved from the knees down, its art being purely auditory, the buck dance of African Americans was more robust and full bodied, allowing the rhythms to move up into the body, and making the hips swivel and arms sway. Negro buck dancers were not alone in syncopating the jig. The blackface minstrel James McIntyre and his partner Thomas K. Heath claim to have introduced in 1879 a syncopated buck-and-wing, danced to the tune "Rabbit," at Tony Pastor's variety theater in New York; McIntyre admitted to learning it by "watching Negroes in the South" soon after the Civil War.[8]

Earliest Tap on Film

Probably the earliest example of buck dancing on film is Thomas Edison's 1894 *Pickaninny Dance* from *The Passing Show*, or *The Pickaninnies*, featuring Joe Rastus, Denny Tolliver, and Walter Wilkins, "the first African Americans to appear before a motion picture camera,"[9] perform "a jig and a breakdown." Shot by William Heise on October 6, 1894, in the Black Maria Studio in West Orange, New Jersey, the catalog annotation describes this fifty-foot kinetoscope as a scene representing Southern plantation life before the Civil War. The "three colored boys"[10] were members of Lucy Daly's Pickaninny troupe in *The Passing Show*, a farce comedy that had played at New York's Casino Roof Garden from May to August 1894. Rastus, Tolliver, and Wilkins were three in the group of eleven black male dancers forming Daly's troupe who were secured by the Edison company to film a part of their act with Daly, who does not appear in that film. What we see on film is not what was annotated as "comical darkies in a variety of tricks."[11] Nor are these three young men desexualized by the label "pickaninnies," but instead a trio of professional dancers engaged in the rivalrous camaraderie of a buck challenge dance, alternately performing for and accompanying each other.

The film opens on the three dancers in a semicircle. Wearing head scarves, long shirts, pants rolled at the ankle, and laced ankle-high boots, all three are clapping and stamping time, with Wilkins playing the harmonica. Rastus is first to cross the circle, setting the time with a thumping walk that scuffs the heels and tilts him forward into flat-footed stamps. Tolliver steps in (with Rastus double-clapping and patting his thigh to keep time) and turns the walk into a flurry of shuffle-hop-shuffle-steps; crossing his leg over and back in double time (the step is called "falling-off-the-log"), he propels himself into a backward turn and unexpected break (drop) to the floor, through a back shoulder roll and recover that beckons the next opponent. Wilkins then moves into the circle and, while playing the harmonica, picks up on Tolliver's cross-backs with double chugs and digging crossovers that swivel the ankles, finishing with stomps in double time. Unfortunately the fifty feet of film runs out before the end of the dance, but not before making clear that these are savvy performers with an awareness of the camera. They understand how to vary an act with walks on the diagonal, acrobatic breaks to the floor, and fancy legomania—with a wild informality in a breakdown and a driving rhythmic exchange that excites and impresses.[12]

If only the three Edison films featuring the dancing of James Grundy—*Buck and Wing Dance, Cake Walk,* and *Grundy and Frint*—had survived. Shot in January 1895 in Edison's Black Maria Studio, it was cataloged as "the best negro subjects yet taken, amusing and entertaining."[13] There, we would see the buck dancing of Grundy who, with his partner, Frint, were appearing in Whalen and Martell's revue, *South before the War.* Perhaps there we might also see the buck-dancing style of Katie Carter, who was a specialty soloist in the show. As the first professional female buck-and-wing soloist of the century, Carter was "the Queen of the buck and wing dancers," says Tom Fletcher, and "the largest box office attraction in the country at one time, with the result that buck-and-wing dancing became another big attraction in colored shows."[14]



Joe Rastus, Denny Tolliver, and Walter Wilkins, the first African Americans to appear before a motion picture camera, dancing a jig and breakdown in Thomas Edison's 1894 kinetoscope, *The Pickaninny Dance* from *The Passing Show/The Pickaninnies.* (New York State Library, Albany, NY)

What has survived, offering another variation of buck dancing, is the Edison kinetoscope *Dancing Darky Boy.* Shot in August 1897 at the Monmouth County Horse Show in Long Branch, New Jersey, we see a small black boy no older than age ten, wearing a short brimmed cap, double-breasted jacket, knickers, and laced boots, who is jigging on a raised wooden platform. Behind him, facing the camera, stands fifteen men, mostly white stablemen and jockeys, who clap hands and beat sticks on the ground as they watch the boy who, as the catalog notes, "is amusing the stable hands with a characteristic negro dance." Unlike the crouching, bent-kneed get-down attitude of Rastus, Tolliver, and Wilkins, this unidentified boy dances upright and in place. His kicks, shuffling footwork, chugs (dragging hops), and stomps are summarized in the catalog annotation as a "combination of jig, clog and cakewalk."[15]

Edward S. Porter's 1903 silent movie version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers two brief demonstrations of buck dancing. While all the principal roles in this melodramatic adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel were played by white actors in blackface, black performers occupied the background in crowd and dance scenes.[16] In "The Rescue of Eva" scene, set on a wooden platform where the ship *Robert E. Lee* has docked, three Negro couples in celebration of the arrival of Little Eva perform a long-ways country dance (clapped in 4/4 reel time), in which the men, after swinging their partners and while waiting for the next figure, fill the measure by stepping flatfooted into cloglike chugging and shuffling steps. In "The Auction Sale of St. Clair's Slaves" scene, a girl and boy perform buck-and-wing facing each other. The boy's heel-and-toe stepping is quick and light and interspersed with spins, while the girl, lifting her skirt with her fingertips, performs jiglike skipping-and-brushing steps on the balls of her feet.

One last snippet of black plantation-style buck dancing may be seen in Irving Cumming's film *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1914), the first to feature an African American actor in the role of Uncle Tom. The opening plantation scene shows a background shot of a group of Negro slaves clapping, playing banjos, and stamping feet as two male dancers alternately take solos. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was considered a "caricature film" in that it offered distorted representations of black life, employed blackface white actors in the cast, and contributed to the kind of blackface performance that African American philosopher Alain Locke bemoaned as "a plague of low-genre interest who multiplied the superficial types of uncles, aunties, and pickaninnies almost endlessly, echoing even today in the minstrel and vaudeville stereotypes of Negro half-clowns, half-troubadour."[17] However, in this and the other films mentioned above, the black dancers function mostly as scenic elements, background; because of that, they are shielded from the kind of distortions they might have been subject to as part of the main action, and they are able

to offer a fairly accurate representation of black vernacular dance forms at the turn of the century. Tom Fletcher noted that the minstrel shows and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows in his and Bill Robinson's youth all carried lots of black dancers who popularized the buck-and-wing, Virginia essence, and knockabout song-and-dance.[18]

BUCK DANCER'S LAMENT

The legendary buck dancer "King" Rastus Brown represents a high point in the evolution of the buck dance and its related paddle-and-roll style of hoofing. Born in Louisville, Kentucky, he became known in the New York City area around 1903. Early reports about him were that he won a buck dancing contest at Madison Square Garden in 1910 with a flat-footed style that was grounded and that used few wing or air steps. "He didn't do any 'winging' or jumping around," says dancer Willie Glenn about Brown. "He stayed on the ground and tapped."[19] Willie Covan remembers that he danced "flatfooted, moving from the hips down and swinging."[20] Others claim that Brown could dance for an hour straight while standing up, and then continue to tap for another hour sitting down. He could imitate anything, his admirers say, and he never repeated a single step; he was versatile in his sand dances, cakewalks, and cane dances, and he did an excellent Irish jig. Brown was most renowned for his "Buck Dancer's Lament," a simple eight-bar tune that furnished the frame for six bars of a rhythmic pattern, and a two-bar break in stop-time. The tune was so simple that anybody could play it with one finger, writes Marshall Stearns: "Starting on Middle C, the melody ascends five white keys to G every two bars—after a while, the third note was flatted to give it a 'blue' feeling—until the seventh bar where it stops for the break, leaving two bars silent until the last beat."[21]

AFRO-IRISH BUCK-AND-WING

Racial and ethnic lines were distinctly drawn in New York at the turn of the twentieth century, but not so strictly drawn, geographically and culturally, between Irish and African Americans living in some neighborhoods. Of the some 60,000 blacks in the city in 1900, the majority were concentrated in Manhattan, with most squeezed into two neighborhoods—the so-called Tenderloin district, which generally covered the West Twenties, and San Juan Hill, which spanned Sixtieth to Sixty-fourth Streets from Tenth to Eleventh Avenue.[22] New York also had a population of 275,000 Irish-born residents (they, together with their American-born offspring, accounted for 26 percent of the city's population) living in Brooklyn, which in 1900 was considered the largest Irish settlement in the world. A sizable number of African Americans also lived and socialized in Brooklyn, and some Irish immigrants lived for a time in Manhattan's Irish ghetto within San Juan Hill.[23]

Buck-and-wing was the dance of choice for black dancers, especially when performing for white audiences—such as at the Salmagundi Club Dinner held in Manhattan in March 1900. There, in an impromptu "artistic debut not in the program," according to a newspaper account, "Robert Hart, the brother of Johnnie, the colored butler of the club, gave *buck and wing* dances, and was properly salted, for there was no sand in the house, and sand is an essential to *buck dancing*."[24] Buck-and-wing was also enormously popular in white and predominantly Irish social circles in New York and Brooklyn (two cities that in 1898 merged to form Greater New York). In January 1900, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported the following:

> The Bijou Theatre was crowded to the doors last night with an audience interested in the play *In Old Kentucky*, especially in the contest for a prize for buck and wing dancing between a number of Brooklyn amateurs. There were ten in all and the variety of steps they accomplished evoked the wildest

"Waiting for the Sunday Boat," a young African American dancing buck-and-wing to the accompaniment of guitar and banjo. Tinted postcard, ca. 1895. (Transcendental Graphics)

> enthusiasm from their many admirers in the gallery. Marriott T. Dowden and two newspapermen acted as judges. The prize for skill was awarded to William Lynch of this borough. This is the second year he has won the prize, which is awarded by the *Old Kentucky* company and consists of a silver medal.[25]

The social entertainments announced in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in that period reveal dozens of buck-and-wing performances by semiprofessional male and mostly Irish dancers. In 1901, Billy Lynch, the "champion buck and wing dancer," appeared at the fourth annual entertainment and reception of the Pharos Club at Columbia Hall in a program that included pop singer Frank Eagan and Irish comedians Heaney and Walsh.[26] In Hayes and Healy's production at Hyde and Behman's Vaudeville House, "misters O'Rourke and Burnette" completed the bill with a "novel buck and wing dancing act."[27] At the same vaudeville house, blackface comedians Evans and Whiter's specialty was buck-and-wing dancing, "an art they have perfected to a high standard."[28] At the Orpheum Theatre in Brooklyn, John W. West sang a number of good parodies but was "best as a buck and wing dancer of the quieter kind."[29]

Other performances of the era include Frank Bennett's buck-and-wing dancing at the Annual Smoker and Entertainment in Cooper Hall in Brooklyn,[30] and buck-and-wing dancer Ben Wilson's act at a benefit for the Catholic Church of St. Francis.[31] At the Bon Ami in Brooklyn was a group called the Britons, "champion buck and wing dancers" who had appeared in John W. Isham's *Octoroons*, a staged medicine show, and performed at Brooklyn Music Hall.[32] A stag party held by the Catholic Library Association included among its amusements Willie Moran's "buck-and-wing dancing."[33]

A number of notices in the *Brooklyn Eagle* also announce buck-and-wing performances by female dancers: Miss Florence Brockway, "singer and buck-and-wing dancer" at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Brooklyn;[34] and Agnes Falkner, "buck and wing dancing" in an elaborately

produced show in Asbury Park, New Jersey.[35] The Orpheum featured Mame Gerue, "a very graceful dancer, both in imitation of the Spanish fandango and on the sand as a buck and wing stepper"[36] and, less than seven months later, the Esher sisters, "buck-and-wing dancers" appearing in a program headlining an opera singer.[37] Others were Miss Belle Lewis in "her famous buck and wing specialty" at a "merry party" at a private home;[38] Belle Gold, who "showed considerable cleverness in buck and wing dances" in a vaudeville bill at the Manhattan Beach Theatre;[39] and the Newell sisters, "buck-and-wing dancers" at the Unique vaudeville house.[40] Nellie De Veau received several announcements, one at Paula's Musee as a "buck-and–wing dancer,"[41] another as a "buck-and-wing and skirt dancer" at the Jefferson Club of the Sixteenth Assembly District in Brooklyn, Democratic headquarters at the time.[42]

With only the surnames, addresses (Miss, Mrs.), venues, occasions for dance and performances, and generic titling as buck-and-wing dancers, it is difficult to discern the style of buck-and-wing that each of these women danced, let alone their race or ethnicity, which such stage names as "Mame" and "Belle" disguise. Many of the occasions for female buck-and-wing dancers were clearly for social and political functions in small vaudeville houses that usually featured solo acts and some duos. Most certainly those performances continued from a strong tradition of Irish jig and clog dancing that had begun in nineteenth-century variety stage shows.

LOTTA CRABTREE

Born in New York City in 1847 and raised in California during the Gold Rush, Lotta Mignon Crabtree was trained in dance at an early age. She learned ballet, fandangos, and the Highland fling, and, because half of California's population in the 1850s was Irish, her teachers made sure she excelled at the jig. While working as a dancer touring mining camps, she was introduced to an African American dancer who taught her breakdowns, soft-shoe tap, and buck-and-wing dances. One of her songs had the lyric: "'Trike de toe and heel, cut de pigeon wing / Scratch gravel, slap de foot, dat's jus' de ting." Lotta "could touch off the highly masculine steps in tiny miniature, with a quick, grotesque little rhythm," one of her biographers wrote.[43] Crabtree's fame as a performer of jigs and reels with acrobatic flourishes spread throughout the country. Her only competitors were the three Worrell sisters, Irene, Sophie, and Jennie, who performed in clog-dancing shoes. When it was later discovered that Jennie Worrell's clogs had trick heels (hollowed out to hold tin-lined boxes containing two bullets) that made it sound as if she was dancing faster than she was, Crabtree had no peers when it came to jig and clog. "She can dance a regular breakdown in true burnt cork style and gives an Irish Jig as well as we have ever seen it done," wrote a *New York Clipper* reporter in 1864. In her later years she became a popular actress and the toast of Broadway. Although she retired from the stage in 1891, her renown as a female jig and breakdown dancer lasted into the early decades of the twentieth century.

Crabtree's popularity came from her ability to perform Irish jigs, reels, and regular breakdowns "in true burnt cork style," which speaks to the sheer variety of percussive dance forms that had proliferated by the late nineteenth century and which could be combined on a single bill: "straight" jigs danced to 4/4 reel time (four strong beats to the measure), which made for a jaunty, relaxed tempo; waltz clogs, mazurka clogs, and Irish jigs that were danced to lilting 6/8 time; song-and-dance, or essences, in 4/4 time; and buck dances in 2/4 time (two strong beats to the measure). There was also the Lancashire clog hornpipe, danced in 4/4 time with a plethora of triplet or "dotted hornpipe" eighth notes (1&a2&a3&a4&a), which dancer Barney Fagan described as "beautiful in its jingly rhythmic excellence [when] danced on a spot, or marble slab 15" square."[44] Then also there was the Lancashire clog hornpipe's New World

To describe this newly simplified hybrid form of step dancing, which had its roots in solo and duo clog dancing in vaudeville acts, Wayburn coined the phrase "tap and stepping." It is not true, however (as Gerald Bordman contends in *American Musical Theatre*), that Wayburn, "tiring of heavy-footed clog dances, put small metal plates on the bottom of dancers' shoes for a lighter, steelier sound" with a result that "tap-dancing was born."[55] Nor is it certain, as Aubrey Haines speculates, that this was the first time that the term "tap dancing" was "publicly and professionally used."[56] Certainly Wayburn was experimenting with different sounds from different shoes in that period; he was involved with the proscenium stage and used different ways of shaping different sizes of choruses. During that time of discovery, he devised a technical vocabulary and style of tap and stepping for the chorus, which stressed aural precision and exactness in execution.[57]

Wayburn assumed that until the mid-1910s, tapping and stepping was a solo or duo specialty, derived from clog dancing in vaudeville acts, which aided in the transition from individual specialties to chorus techniques of tap dancing; these would especially begin to take form during the "soldier" numbers that appeared in revues during World War I (1914–1918). He recognized the advantage of integrating tap and stepping sounds into the actual marching of the dancers, instead of just adding it conventionally through the percussion section of the band or orchestra. He recognized that the particular drawback to *en masse* stepping was the limited number of dancers who could tap before the sounds became muffled. He set about to devise a technique in which the footwork in tap dance would be further articulated, eventually spelling out six different ways the shoe made contact with the floor. Wayburn also incorporated "tap" steps into other dance idioms, such as modern Americanized ballet, character dance, eccentric dance, ballroom dance, and legomania, thus codifying tap dance and staging chorus movement for as many as eighty dancers. Thereby, he earned a reputation as one of the premier dance directors of show dance routines.

Cakewalk and Strut

The cakewalk was the graceful fraternal twin of buck-and-wing. Both dance forms evolved on the plantation—one in the big house, where house servants observed and copied the highfalutin' manners of their white masters; the other in the relative seclusion of the slave quarters where, deep into the night, field slaves could pray in their native tongues through the shuffling steps of the Ring Shout. Yet the cakewalk would have a tremendous impact on theatrical performances at the turn of the century, when the duple-meter rhythms of ragtime set it free. Transgressing the racial divide, the cakewalk would become the first black dance form to be accepted onstage by white society, thereby paving the way for the acceptance of the buck-and-wing.

Cakewalking emerged during the pre–Civil War era as a celebratory dance with links to West African festive dances. As it became rooted in the vernacular of American dance, it became common as a festival dance: "The slaves would assemble en masse dressed in their Sunday best. . . . Masters and mistresses would be there, one of whom would award the prize for the best 'cuttin' of the figgers.' Sometimes the mistress of the house would donate the prize cake."[58]

Although the cakewalk was a retention of African festival dances, so, too, could it be a parody of white mannerisms. "Us slaves watched white folks' parties where the guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march, with the ladies and gentlemen doing different ways and then meeting up again, arm in arm, and marching down the center together," reported an ex-slave from Beaufort, South Carolina. "Then we'd do it too, but we used to mock 'em, every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it, but they seemed to like it; I guess they thought we couldn't dance any better."[59] By flattering the master's vanity through imitation, these North

American slaves were also enjoying a parody of their master's customs within the safe confines of the song and dance. Decoding the cakewalk, then, depended entirely on the audience-performer relationship: who was dancing, who was observing, and in what historic juncture the dance was being assessed. Adding to this hybridization was white desire to enjoy and even expropriate black culture as portrayed in the cakewalk.[60]

During the post–Civil War era, cakewalking became an integral part of minstrel performance. Also called the "walkabout" or "strut," it was one of the most celebrated of competitive dances primarily because it made its way into blackface minstrel shows. Like the buck-and-wing, the circular structure and the steps of the cakewalk were performed in the "Walk Around," the grand finale of the minstrel show, in which couples danced, promenaded, and pranced in a circle, improvising fancy steps in competition.[61]

In 1887, the Irish minstrel team Harrigan and Hart presented "Walking for Dat Cake" in their act. But it was in 1889, when Sam T. Jack's *The Creole Show* broke with the minstrel show format—by discarding blackface and offering a sixteen-girl chorus and Dora Dean dancing cakewalk—that the dance catapulted into national popularity. In 1892, the first Annual Cakewalk Jubilee was held at Madison Square Garden, a gigantic arena that extended from Fourth to Madison Avenue between Twenty-fifth and Twenty-seventh Streets. A three-night competition featured buck-and-wing dancing and variety acts, culminating in a national cakewalk competition for dancers who had won small-town contests. It was within these competitive formats that the cakewalk became so flexible a form that one could add anything, from buck to Russian steps, so long as the male grabbed his partner at the finish and they pranced off.

For the most part, however, buck-and-wing was distinct from cakewalk. In 1895 at the Madison Square Garden Cakewalk Jubilee, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported six thousand in attendance (and a gathering that was "a very mixed one and contained a large proportion of colored persons"), the program began with four men in a buck dancing competition (9:15 PM), followed by four women in a wing dancing competition (10 PM), and culminating in a Grand Cakewalk (11 PM). Almost every number was encored, and "when the buck-and-wing dancing began the audience went wild with delight." But it was the Cakewalk Grand Finale that was the crowning culmination of the evening.[62]

Describing the September 6, 1897, Gala Jubilee and Cake Walk at Madison Square Garden, Tom Fletcher remembered that "the curtain parted and 50 to 60 couples came from behind the stage on to the floor, prancing and dancing to the tempo of the music. It was very reminiscent of the grand entry at a circus. The girls' dresses were of all colors. The men wore full dress, clown clothes or comedy costumes with big checks. When all the walkers were on the floor, then the 50 or 60 couples could be seen doing different prances and dance steps ranging from buck-and-wing to toe dancing."[63]

In 1897, the Black Patti Troubadours advertised its cake prize made by a prominent caterer, and cakewalk competitions could be seen in Coney Island on Saturday nights. Though Sam T. Jack played a huge role in catapulting the cakewalk into this kind of popularity, no one had more fun with it than the comedy duo of Williams and Walker, who, through a spectacular performance and outrageous audacity, became known by many among New York's white elite as the inventors of the cakewalk.

WILLIAMS AND WALKER

Egbert "Bert" Williams, who was born in the West Indies in 1874, met George Walker, a Kansas native his own age, in San Francisco in 1893. After a brief stint with the Mastodon Minstrels, they worked in such free-and-easy cafes as the Café Royale where, nearby, hucksters, freaks, and medicine men performed under canvas tents illuminated by flaring torches. By 1895, they

had worked their way to Chicago, finding work with Isham's *Octoroons*, in which variety songs and dances were performed on the small stage at the back of a wagon. They billed themselves as "Williams and Walker, Two Real Coons," with an emphasis on the "real" and not the "coons." They were in a conscious rebellion against minstrel stereotypes but still performed in blackface. The easy manner in which they worked, wrote Tom Fletcher, "made it obvious to audiences that theirs was a natural talent."[64]

In this early organization of their act, they built their performance around their contrasting physical types. Williams, who was tall and lumbering, played the role of the fool. Wearing blackface makeup and shoes that extended farther than his already large feet, he shuffled along in a hopeless way, always the butt of fortune. "My bad luck started when I was born," he'd say. "They named me after my papa and that same day my papa died." He bemoaned this in "I'm a Jonah Man" in *The Sons of Ham* (1900), while interspersing a series of grotesque slides between choruses and making an already slouched body look pathetic. His combination of a lazy grind, or mooche, with swiveling hips was an early elaboration of the buck-and-wing that was comic as well as rhythmically expressive. In dramatic contrast, George Walker played the role of the high-strutting dandy. He was the "spick and span Negro, the last word in tailoring, the highest stepper in the smart coon world" who turned his cocky strut into a high-prancing cakewalk. After varying the walk more than a dozen times, he repeated all the variations to the shrieking applause of the audience.[65]

Williams and Walker's performance of the cakewalk combined the parodic with the spectacular, forcing into full display the comedic contrast of one's shuffling fool and the other's strutting dandy. Walker strutted onstage with a high step and arching toe and whirled through the dance; Williams stumbled in behind him, waving the sole of his shoe and flicking away a cigarette, to launch into the dance that combined the worst features of the stage shuffle and the buck-and-wing.[66] In 1897, after performing their cakewalk as a dance specialty in the musical farce *The Gold Bug*, they scored their vaudeville debut at New York's Koster and Bial's Music Hall—then the leading variety theater in America—with a version of the cakewalk that was the high point of their act. They first came on together, sang coon songs, then left the stage. A drum major jiggling a baton soon marched onstage, leading Walker as the master of ceremonies, who then introduced seven fancy-dressed couples, each competing in a cakewalk for the prize cake. After the presentations, Williams and Walker strutted onstage, each with a pretty "coffee-colored" woman dressed in a bright yellow fancy dress. As each proceeded with a ludicrous burlesque of the other's eccentric steps, everything was set for them to win the cake, which they accepted by leading the entire company into a jubilee cakewalk finale.[67]

Some months later, Williams and Walker learned that Tom Fletcher had been hired to teach the cakewalk to William Kissam Vanderbilt, whose grandfather Cornelius had built the Vanderbilt railroad fortune. Soon Williams and Walker made a formal call to the Vanderbilts' Fifth Avenue mansion to hand-deliver a letter. In it, the entertainers, emboldened by their cake win at America's leading variety hall, challenged Vanderbilt to a contest to determine the best cakewalker in New York City.

> To Mr. William K. Vanderbilt
> Corner of 52nd Street and Fifth Avenue
> New York, New York
>
> Dear Sir:
>
> In view of the fact that you have made a success as a cake-walker, having appeared in a semi-public exhibition and having posed as an authority in that

> capacity, we, the undersigned, the world-renowned cakewalkers, believing that the attention of the world has been distracted from us on account of the tremendous hit which you have made, hereby challenge you to compete with us in a cakewalk match, which will decide which of us deserve the title of champion cakewalker of the world.
>
> As a guarantee of good faith we have this day deposited at the office of the New York *World* the sum of $50. If you propose proving to the public that you really are an expert cake-walker we shall be pleased to have you cover that amount and name the day on which it will be convenient for you to try odds against us.
>
> Yours very truly,
> Williams & Walker[68]

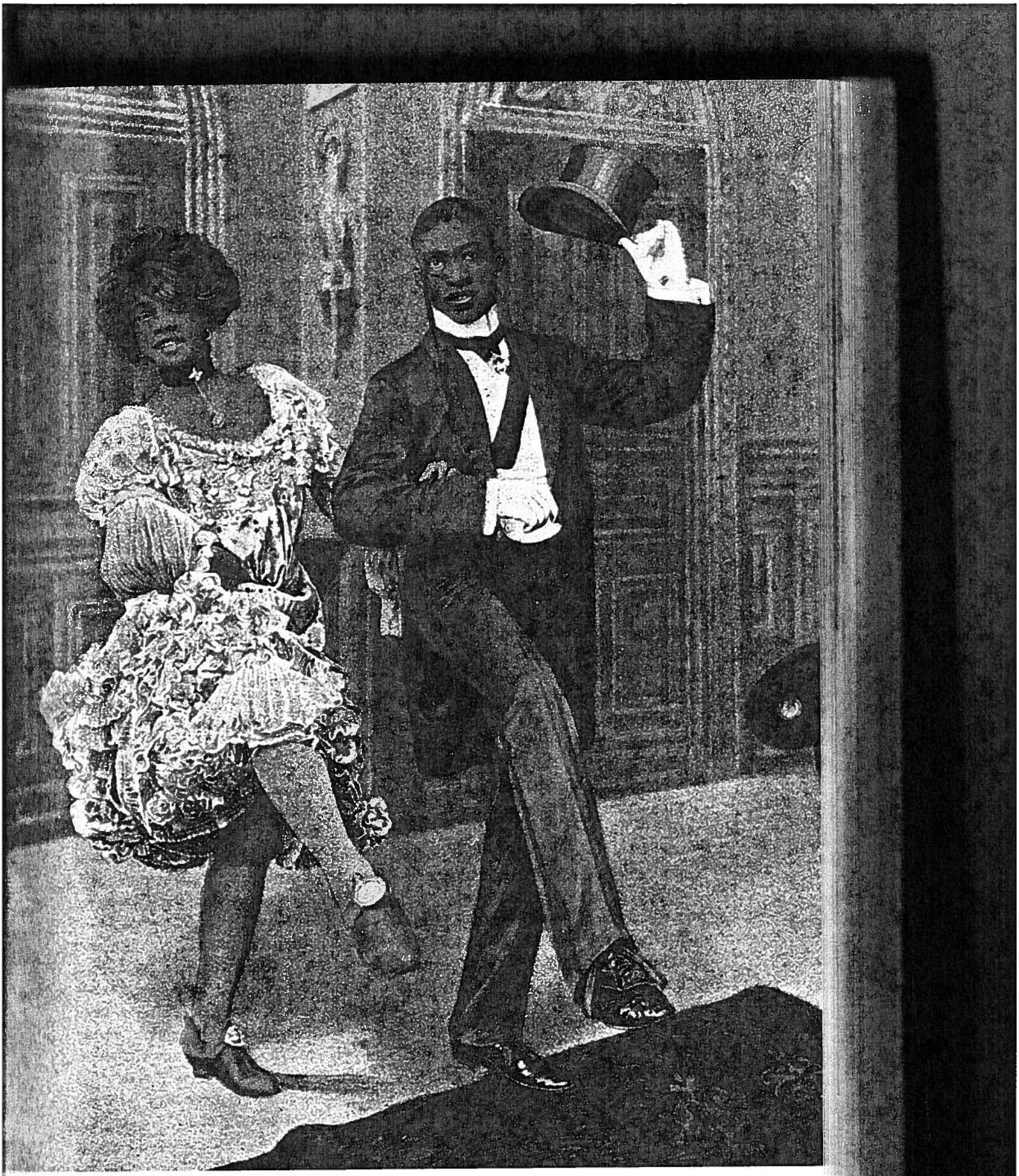
Although the cakewalk challenge never came off—Vanderbilt apparently never sent a reply—many of Vanderbilt's peers (and others who wished they were) came to think of Williams and Walker as the upstart entertainers who had invented the cakewalk.

ADA (AIDA) OVERTON WALKER

The girl in the yellow dress, one of "the two girls with the café au lait complexions" that George Walker partnered with in the cakewalk finale at Koster and Bials, was the extraordinary young dancer Ada Overton. Seventeen when she partnered with Walker, nineteen when she married him and joined the Williams and Walker company, Overton would come to be known as cakewalking's greatest choreographer—and, arguably, the first modern American choreographer of the twentieth century.

She was born Ada Wilmon Overton on Valentine's Day in 1880 in Greenwich Village, the second child of Pauline Whitfield, a seamstress, and Moses Overton, a waiter. She was a child who seemed to have danced before she walked. Legend had it that she was fond of dancing in the streets with a hurdy-gurdy, and when one of her street shows caused a traffic jam, her mother forbade her to dance outside and saw to it that she would receive dance instruction from a Mrs. Thorp in midtown Manhattan. Around 1897, after graduating from Thorp's dance school, she toured briefly with Black Patti's Troubadours. A new opportunity came when a girlfriend invited her to model for an advertisement with Bert Williams and George Walker, who had just scored a hit in their vaudeville debut at Koster and Bial's. She agreed to model for the ad and subsequently joined the men in the cakewalk finale. She then joined the cast of *Octoroons*, in which one critic declared of her performance, "I had just observed the greatest girl dancer."[69]

In 1898, Overton rejoined Williams and Walker at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in the second production of *In Gotham* with a cast of forty, in a program of songs and dances. With Grace Halliday she then formed the sister dance act of Overton and Halliday; a critic later reflected that "their turn was the biggest of any sister acts. It equaled any of the white acts."[70] Overton and Halliday performed as the pair of Honolulu Belles in the Williams and Walker production of *The Policy Players* in October 1899 at the Star Theatre, and from there Overton began to develop as a soloist with more substantial roles. In *The Sons of Ham*, which premiered in October 1900 at the Star, she sang and danced "Miss Hannah from Savannah" and "Leading Lady"; and when the musical comedy went into its second edition, two more numbers were added, "Society" and "Sparkling Ruby" which brought her jubilant acclaim. James Weldon



Ada Overton Walker and George Walker dancing the cakewalk, ca. 1903. (Transcendental Graphics)

Johnson recalled in his autobiography that Ada Overton "had a low-pitched voice with a natural sob to it, which she knew how to use with telling effect in putting over a song."[71] And Tom Fletcher remembered her as a singer who did ragtime songs and ballads equally well; she was a dancer "who could do almost anything, and no matter whether it was buck-and-wing, cakewalk, or even some form of grotesque dancing, she lent the performance a neat gracefulness of movement which was unsurpassed by anyone."[72]

Overton married Walker on June 22, 1899, and they became the leading cakewalking couple of the new century. In Overton, Walker had found a partner who would bring his company and cakewalking to the height of perfection. And in the cakewalk, they had found a vehicle with which to transform and elevate a core African American folk dance form into a quintessential black modernist expression—a high art worthy of being performed before royalty, for the white elite, and on the concert stage.

In 1903, Williams and Walker's production of *Dahomey* was one of the first to realize the cakewalk's transformation. This musical farce, the first all-black show to play a major Broadway theater (New York Theatre), presented Williams and Walker playing Shylock Homestead and Rareback Pinkerton, two con artists. With their newfound wealth from stealing, they escape with the African Colonization Society to the West African kingdom of Dahomey, where, they sang, "Evah dahkey is a King."

Ada soon changed the spelling of her name, from Ada to Aida, the name of the Haitian loa (spirit) of fertility, rainbows, and snakes and the wife of the snake god Danbala. In *Dahomey*, Aida played Rosetta Lightfoot, "a troublesome young thing," and had a featured solo in "I Want to Be a Real Lady," but her two most glorious dance spots in the production were "The Czar" and the "Cakewalk Finale," in which she was partnered with her husband. Theirs was a cakewalk that has never been matched. The writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten wrote after seeing George and Aida in *Dahomey*: "The line, the grace, the assured ecstasy of these dancers, who bent over backward until their heads almost touched the floor, a feat demanding an incredible amount of strength, their enthusiastic prancing, almost in slow motion, have never been equaled in this particular revel, let alone surpassed."[73] After opening to rave reviews in New York, the Williams and Walker company took *Dahomey* to London, where it received accolades from the press. The London *Times* praised Williams and Walker, but its highest accolades went to Overton Walker: "She acts with much dash and dances with extraordinary vivacity."[74]

On June 23, 1903, *Dahomey* was presented as a command performance before King Edward VII at Buckingham Palace, in the private quarters of the royal family. When the queen saw the cakewalk for the first time, it is said that she laughed, applauded, and showed an intense interest in the actual awarding of the cake; afterward, Overton Walker was asked by the king to demonstrate the cakewalk. Immediately after the performance, the king sent Lord Farquar to inquire whether the cakewalk, as presented by the company, and by George and Aida Walker in particular, was an absolutely correct cakewalk. A reply was immediately sent in the affirmative.[75] British high society followed the royal family with a gushing enthusiasm for cakewalking. "At these entertainments we were not screened off, nor were we slighted in any way," Overton Walker wrote years later. "English nobility were present and expressed pleasure and delight at being entertained as we entertained them."[76]

After the Williams and Walker company returned to New York from playing in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Peckham, and Oxford, a new version of the musical farce, called *In Dahomey*, premiered at the Grand Opera in August 1904 with an opening-night crowd that was the largest in the theater's history. Soon Overton Walker was using her reformed cakewalk choreography as entrée to elite white society. She promoted cakewalking's grace and eloquence by terming it the "modern cakewalk." She provided the dance with a new gloss, converting it from its past

in a lower-class black "dance halls" that referenced the old slave culture to being an icon of the modern concert hall. "The cakewalk," she told an interviewer about this authentic black folk dance, "is characteristic of a race and in order to understand it, it is necessary to keep your mind upon especially what the cakewalk really is—a Gala dance."[77]

Overton Walker used the performing arts as a vehicle for upward mobility in the "racial uplift" movement of middle-class blacks. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explained, they had "equated normality with conformity" to white middle-class models of gender roles and sexuality, and they believed that " 'proper' and 'respectable' behavior proved blacks worthy of equal civil and political rights."[78] Influenced in part by W. E. B. Du Bois's idea that "the talented tenth" among African Americans "rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage point,"[79] many turn-of-the-century African American women became social activists and—in their commitment to improving the social, cultural, moral, and material conditions of women—feminists. That commitment firmly resounded when Overton Walker, in arguing that her performances were a reaction against the longstanding image of actresses as morally unfit, wrote: "No doubt conscious of being a woman of color as well as a performer, [w]e must work together for the uplift of all and for the progress of all that is good and noble in life."[80]

Overton Walker's commitment was also resounded in deed. For her, the labors of elevating the cakewalk to a high art was not only to ensure its survival and success in show business but also to seize, perhaps, the sole opportunity for bringing meaning to her career within "the maze of contradictory maps, blueprints, guidebooks that women of color often needed to exchange in order to make sense of their lives."[81] Overton Walker's achievements in gaining acceptance of the cakewalk and reformulating its image to suit the needs of an emerging white middle class served to prepare her to become an independent African American female solo dance artist. Her experience as a dance soloist had begun even with *In Dahomey*, in which she had a new Spanish dance, "beautiful to behold." It was a solo in large part because love scenes between a black man and woman were forbidden on the American stage. "Now why is this?" Overton Walker later wrote. "It is not an accident or because we do not want to put on plays as beautiful and artistic in every way as do the white actors, but because there is a popular prejudice against love scenes enacted by Negroes."[82]

In Williams and Walker's next show, *Abyssinia* (which premiered on February 20, 1906, at the Majestic Theatre), a musical comedy about black Americans traveling to Ethiopia, Overton Walker was both a performer and the show's choreographer. While she had never been to Ethiopia, she made dances from her creative imaginings of the culture (as had her white contemporary Ruth St. Denis, who was inspired by and borrowed from "exotic" faraway cultures like Egypt and India in her choreographies). These left audiences spellbound. She featured herself in four dance numbers. In the first act, she led a dance group to "The Lion and the Monk (Die Trying)" with nine Abyssinian maids; and in the finale, she choreographed three ensemble dances. The *Chicago Tribune* marveled at how she was able to impart her dance technique to the chorus women: "They move with a grace, a lightness and a swiftness that makes watching them a pleasure. Mrs. Walker is clearly responsible for this unusual quality in the work of the women of the company, for the same excellence marks her own performance to a superlative degree."[83]

Two years later, Overton Walker was featured in and staged the musical numbers for Williams and Walker's *Bandanna Land*. Her dancing continued to draw attention for its gracefulness. The second act's "Ethiopian Ballet," one critic remarked, "showed her in all her wonderful grace and daintiness." In the same act, George Walker joined her in the popular "Merry Widow Waltz" which "was one with dash and spirit."[84] Soon after *Bandanna Land* opened at the Majestic, a new solo, "The Dancing of Salome," was added for her, which prompted

Ada Overton Walker, 1911. (Frank Driggs Collection)

theater managers to post "Standing Room Only" signs for patrons. The *Boston Globe*, complimenting her for substituting artistry for immodesty, found this "very properly draped Salome" to be "interesting."[85]

One evening in 1908 while onstage in *Bandanna Land*, George Walker, playing the role of Bud Jenkins, became ill. He was later diagnosed as having syphilis. He left the show in 1909, and his role was rewritten for Overton Walker, who donned his flashy male clothes and sang his numbers, including his major song, "Bon Bon Buddie," while retaining her own roles. With her husband's condition slowly deteriorating and facing decisions about her future, she chose not to renew her contract with Williams and Walker. She considered a booking with six girls in Venice, Italy, but instead joined the cast of Bob Cole and J. Rosamonde Johnson's *The Red Moon* in May of that year. This "American Musical Comedy in Red and Black" about Native Americans and African Americans featured her in two musical numbers: "Phoebe Brown" and "Pickaninny Days," in which she danced buck-and-wing with the chorus. She also had a solo, "Flaming Arrow," performing what the program described as an adaptation of an aboriginal dance titled "Wildfire." The decision to join the cast of *Red Moon* was fateful. Had she gone to Europe she might have benefited from the avant-garde environment that nurtured her female contemporaries Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan. She opted instead for a creative career in modern dance that would be forged on the vaudeville stage, with a full embracing—unlike Fuller, Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis—of jazz music and dance.[86]

Overton Walker next opened at the American Theatre in New York in 1909, with a vaudeville dance act featuring a new dance, the "Kara Kara," or dance *l'Afrique*, described in *Variety* as having "a wild, weird aspect and immense amount of action to it. Eight colored girls are concerned in the act, a splendid octet and active dancers. They have a special act showing a Jungle theme behind them, and Miss Walker leads several numbers."[87] In 1910, she joined the *Smart Set*, a black theatrical company, and starred in *His Honor the Barber* the next year. She sang "Golly, Ain't I Wicked?" and "Porto Rico," and in male impersonation performed "That's Why They Call Me Shine." In the first two numbers, the *New York Age* declared, "Miss Walker's dancing is the best she has ever done"; and with "Shine," it said, "she surpassed all former efforts as an artist."[88]

By July 1911, six months after her husband died, Overton Walker had formed a new vaudeville act with one male and eight female dancers, in which she sang "Shine" as a male, impersonating her late husband, and she performed the new dance craze "The Barbary Coast" in close embrace with her new male partner. *Variety* regretted that much of the act focused upon the ensemble choreography—"That Miss Walker doesn't dance more is a bit disappointing for she is a great dancer with very few equals."[89] Yet from 1912 until her death in 1914, she continued to choreograph for two black female dance groups, the Happy Girls and Porto Rico Girls,

whose dancers included Lottie Gee, who would later star in the musical revue *Shuffle Along*, and Elida Webb, who would star at the Cotton Club in the twenties.

In 1912, Overton Walker danced "Salome" again in a spectacular vaudeville performance at Oscar Hammerstein's Victoria Theatre in New York. She also rejoined Bert Williams for the annual Frog's Frolic (the Frogs was an African American theatrical club in New York founded by George Walker). Appearing onstage with Bill Robinson and minstrel showman Sam Lucas, she wowed the crowd by showing up in a provocative dress, dancing to the ragtime tune "International Rag." In 1913, Overton Walker's dream to produce her own show was realized with a company of twelve at the Pekin Theatre in Chicago. She appeared three times on the program, first with Lou Salsbury in "La Rumba," next in "Aida Valse," a solo, and last in a closing medley of songs; the production was praised by the press as the "most successful engagement of her career."[90]

In 1914, she switched from African-style dance to ballroom dance in her vaudeville act. With her new partner, Lackaye Grant, Aida presented several ballroom dances whose roots, she made clear in performance, were in the black vernacular: "Maxixe," "Southern drag," "jiggeree," and "tango." She participated in the tango fad by giving a "tango picnic" in July at New York's Manhattan Casino, where she and Grant performed their ballroom dance act. The tango picnic was Overton Walker's last public appearance. She died October 11, 1914, from kidney disease.[91]

Mourned as the foremost African American female stage artist, Overton Walker's interest in both African and African American indigenous material and her translation of these to the modern stage anticipated the choreographic work of modern dance pioneers Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus. Both in her solo work for women and in the unison and precision choreographies for the female chorus, she claimed a female presence on the American theatrical stage. She also gave presence to black rhythm dancing, thus opening prime-time, public professional space for tap performance, which had been previously restricted to post-show-time, late-night buck-and-wing contests. By negotiating the narrow white definitions of appropriate black performance with her own version of black specialization and innovation, Overton Walker established a black cultural integrity onstage that established a model by which African American musical artists could gain acceptance on the professional concert stage. In 1905 she wrote the following:

> As individuals we must strive all we can to show that we are as capable as white people. . . . We must produce good and great actors and actresses to demonstrate that our people move along with progress of the times and improve as they move. Our people are capable and with advantages they will succeed.[92]

Class Act

At the turn of the century, concurrent with the musical comedy dance teams that were working in the blackface tradition, Aida Overton Walker became the aesthetic conscience for an elite group of black performers. They rejected the minstrel-show stereotypes of the grinning and dancing clowns, the fool and the dandy. Clean-faced and well-dressed, these performers insisted on absolute perfection in sound, step, and manner. Though they eschewed the stereotype of the lazy, ignorant, incompetent fool and instead imitated and embellished the formal elegance and sophistication of certain white acts, they ran headlong into the stereotype of the high-strutting dandy who, as Robert Toll says in his history of show business, "thought only of flashy clothes, flirtatious courting, new dances, and good looks."[93] These performers nevertheless aspired to a

Charles Johnson and Dora Dean, of Johnson and Dean, "King and Queen of Colored Aristocracy," ca. 1900. (Frank Driggs Collection)

purely artistic expression that was driven by their desire for respectability and equality on the American concert stage. They were the forerunners of what in tap dance is called the "class act."

When Bob Cole and John Rosamond Johnson began their partnership at the turn of the century, the so-called coon songs were the rage on the musical stage. Minstrel parodies had also reinforced what whites wanted to believe about northern Negroes, and became permanent stereotypes of the urban black they illustrated. Cole and Johnson decided not to write and perform songs that presented repellent portraits of black life. There would be no shuffling, no songs in syncopated Negro dialect, no condescension to black folk traditions. Instead, they presented themselves in a quiet and finished manner that was artistic to the minutest detail. Handsomely dressed in evening clothes, the two entered and talked about the party they were about to attend; they played Ignacy Jan Pederewski's "Minuet in G," they sang classical songs in German, as well as songs of their own composition, and they fast became a success with white theatergoers.[94] A far cry from the minstrel-show dandy character that informed white perceptions of the northern Negro newly arrived in the big city, Cole and Johnson illustrated—to whites and blacks alike—how ludicrous Negroes could be when they tried to live like "white gemmen." By donning the attire of (and as their performance proved they were) gentlemen, they touched on the role of the dandy ever so gracefully while ridiculing those Americans who aped European manners and cultivation.

At the turn of the century, Charles Johnson and Dora Babbige Dean billed themselves as "Johnson and Dean, The King and Queen of Colored Aristocracy," thus announcing and establishing the roles of the genteel Negro couple on the American stage. Dean was not a singer; she "talked" her songs and she "posed" in fancy dresses. Johnson was not a tap dancer; he "strutted" in the cakewalk tradition which he claimed to have introduced on Broadway. Together they appealed to audiences through well-dressed elegance and impressive personalities. Johnson always presented himself in full evening dress—top hat, tailcoat, monocle, gloves, and a cane—and he attributed his stage success to the inspiring stories of his mother, a former slave, who told him to always be "a real gentleman."

After touring Europe with Johnson and Dean, Rufus Greenlee and Thaddeus Drayton returned to New York and, in 1914, formed an act that matched formal dress with an elegant style of dancing that combined strutting, ballroom dance, and cakewalking with percussive stepping. In 1923, at the height of their career, Greenlee and Drayton opened at the Cotton Club. Their graceful act was described as "picture dancing" because every move made a beautiful picture. Strolling onstage, they sang "You Great Big Beautiful Doll," doffing their hats and

making sweeping bows. In "Virginia Essence," a soft-shoe danced to stop-time, they filled in the breaks of the music with conversation in various foreign languages. "With the partial exception of Charles Johnson," writes Marshall Stearns, "this was probably the first occasion that any pair of Negroes, *not* clad in overalls, performed the Soft Shoe on the American stage."[95]

By the early 1920s, following in the performance aesthetic that was defined by Aida Overton and George Walker and Johnson and Dean, and chiefly in reference to Greenlee and Drayton, the phrase "class act" came into general use among stage dancers. Graceful and impeccably dressed, moving together across the stage, making every move a beautiful picture, these dancers aspired to perfection in everything they performed. From these pioneers would emerge the cream of tap dancing, onstage and on film.