**One Step**

**Summary**

In the years before the entry of the United States into the First World War, the One Step replaced the Two Step as the common popular dance. As the name suggests, it signalled a new relationship between dance step and musical meter. Whereas the Two Step, popular since the 1890s, consisted of a skipping step to music in 6/8 meter, the One Step featured a step, glide, or trot on each beat of duple-meter music marked by the syncopated and dotted rhythms long associated with African-American musical practices. African-American composer and bandleader James Reese Europe similarly proclaimed the One Step ‘the national dance of the negro’. At its simplest, dancers walked or trotted four or more steps forward and back, and additional turns, dips, slides and drags could be added in response to the syncopated upbeat music. Thus with a music heard as racially primitive yet revitalizing by white critics, dancers across race, class and gender divides, embraced opportunities to move in individualized and modern ways. The One Step suggested ease and improvisation in keeping with a modern, urban age, a characteristic of popular music and dance that would become more pronounced in the succeeding decade with the emergence of jazz where the One Step’s improvisatory nature found outlets in dance steps like the Charleston.

**The One Step and Modernism**

As social critics had noted as early as 1906, dancing was increasingly popular with young working class men and women, and a number of different names were used interchangeably by dancers and observers to describe these new movement practices including tango, texas tommy, frisco, turkey trot, bunny hug, and grizzly bear. The waning Two Step and the newer trotting dances were likely danced concurrently reflecting a flexibility of choreography that corresponded to music similarly described in multiple ways; for example, the sheet music cover to ‘Très Moutard (Too Much Mustard)’, widely associated with the One Step, identifies it as a ‘One or Two-Step or Tango’.

Popular entertainers Vernon and Irene Castle, who emerged on the New York City stage in 1912, categorized their eponymous Castle Walk as a variation of the One Step, one that emphasized rigidity through an upward motion off the ball of the foot with stiff legs. In their book *Modern Dancing*, they also identify the One Step as the quintessential dance for ragtime, suggesting again the African-American derivation of both the music and its stepping or trotting movement. In instructions published elsewhere they admonished dancers to ‘listen to the music’ and allow choreographic responses to ‘suggest themselves’ thus encouraging dancers to embrace improvisatory responses to energetic music.

Recording technology provided new accessibility for popular dancing, and the One Step became a widely used marketing category for dance records. The Columbia Recording Company marketed a One Step dance instruction record featuring G. Hepburn Wilson, while the Victor Talking Machine Company utilized the Castles as spokespersons for its dance recordings including those made by their musical director, the African American bandleader James Reese Europe, who recorded ‘Too Much Mustard’ with his ensemble in late December 1913.

**Susan C. Cook**

**References and Further Reading**

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**Paratexts**

“How to dance the One Step,” by Vernon Castle, *The Toledo News Bee* April 2, 1913 (not sure where can be found)

Sheet Music Covers: “Too Much Mustard” (Mississippi State Digital Library); “Castle House Walk” (Getty images)