**Dehn (née Ziperovich), Mura (b. 1903, Odessa, Ukraine. Russia – d. 11 Feburary 1987, New York, New York. USA)**

**Summary**

Mura Dehn was a dancer, choreographer, writer and filmmaker whose work focussed on African-American vernacular jazz dance. Her greatest contribution to modernism and jazz discourses is her extraordinary film, *The Spirit Moves* (1973), a coherent culmination of her lifelong work of presenting jazz dancing. The film features rare footage of some of the finest African-American social dancers of the twentieth century performing their interpretations of popular dances from the early 1900s through the 1980s, plus some reels of specialty dance or comedy acts that would have been performed in black variety shows or clubs. The film’s most heavily referenced sections focus on dances from 1900 through the 1950s; because no other such detailed and lengthy footage exists, thousands of scholars and practitioners worldwide use *The Spirit Moves*, fulfilling Dehn’s intentions of creating a visual textbook for future generations.

**Beginnings**

Dehn’s populist radical jazz education began when the Ziperovich family fled Odessa for Vienna in 1920. In 1921-1922 the beautiful eighteen-year-old, who danced in an Isadora-like style, became the lover of the early modern American painter-lithographer, caricaturist and expatriate, Adolf Dehn (they were married from 1926 until 1932). Adolf would have a formative influence on Mura’s tastes. He travelled frequently and introduced his young mistress into the circles of freethinkers, radical artists and writers in Vienna, Berlin and Paris. Anti-bourgeois,they championed workers, leftist socialism, and haunted vaudeville, circus and, especially, the jazz clubs that animated post-First World War European capitals during the 1920s and 1930s.

**Jazz Age**

African-American jazz was received as a new modern art with curative and liberating powers that ruptured the old life-way tempos, breached racialised barriers and reformulated ideologies about grace and propriety. Its performers were idolised as urban primativists/modernists who could save the Old World. Mura subscribed to the jazz *zeitgeist* of motion, speed and liberation – personified by Josephine Baker whom Adolf took Mura to see in *La Revue Negra* in 1925 in Berlin. Charleston dancing embodied modern female sexual freedoms with shimmying torsos, the butterfly opening-and-closing of the thighs, in the flinging limbs, knock-knees, and the way the heads tossed as fingers splayed the air. But, if the dancing looked unbound it was fused to a coherent driving beat. The metaphor of jazz as a curative stuck, and throughout her life, Mura described jazz polyrhythms as a “pill” the Old World needed to ingest in order to become healthy.1

In 1929, Adolf returned to New York City and soon thereafter Mura and her mother joined him. When Mura first witnessed thousands of black dancers performing the social dances created by, and for the people, within their cultural community at Harlem’s enormous Savoy Ballroom, it was a revelation. Seeing these populist forms in motion – especially the Savoy Lindy Hop – Mura felt she had ‘come home’.2

Immediately she began promoting ‘authentic jazz’, resolving to present urban social dances (currently labelled ‘street dancing’) without diminishing their spirit – a problem that plagues the dance world still. Between 1930 and 1940, Mura and her dance partner and co-choreographer, ballet and jazz dancer Roger Pryor Dodge, made stylish works that fused modern dance with black social dance and looked like Art Deco in action. By the late 1930s, however, Mura was selecting the best jazz dancers from the clubs and ballrooms to join her company, first named the ‘Authentic Jazz Dance Company’ and later, ‘Traditional Jazz Dance Company’ (she did not perform in this company). Despite its longevity (1932 -1973), the company never achieved great critical or public success. In 1932, Adolf made a prescient pronouncement after Mura’s failed concert, which could apply to the body of her work: ‘They simply don’t know what Mura drives at. It’s all over their heads!’3

Filming for *The Spirit Moves* began in 1950 with famous graphic designer-photographer, Herbert Matter, as primary cameraman whose graphic aesthetic complemented the modernist angularity of jazz dancing. Abstract, self-referential, shot in black and white with a locked-down camera, no sound and no production elements beyond lighting, the scenography of moving bodies is stark and stunning. Dehn did not choreograph but assembled her dancers like a modernist collagist. Partly staged in a studio, partly shot as a documentary in Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom, the Chateau Gardens club, the Palladium Ballroom and a high school, brilliant soloists momentarily ascend then subside into a harmonic group of individuals each moving with strong personal flavor. Amplifying this hybridity is the music (added later) that sometimes synchronizes, sometimes disrupts the dancers’ visual rhythms.

**Legacies**

*The Spirit Moves* should be considered as the ultimate pinnacle of Dehn’s life efforts. Certainly the world’s popular acceptance of the Lindy Hop and its social dancing masters as major American art and artists is, in large part, due to Mura Dehn’s film. When it first became available in 1973 at the New York Public Library, it received little attention. But in the early 1980s, the famous French filmmaker-anthropologist Jean Rouch, and Director Patrick Bensard of *la Cinémathèque de la danse* (of *Cinémathèque française)*, proclaimed her film a masterpiece of American dancing and filmmaking. It was publically screened in France, then in America, and Mura Dehn slowly began receiving public and critical recognition. Unfortunately, she did not live long enough to enjoy the commercial rewards and public recognition of *The Spirit Moves.* Dehn died in 1987 in New York City, penniless, leaving behind an inestimable treasure of American dance.

**Sally Sommer**

**Endnotes**

1. *Eye on Dance*, ‘Interview: Sally Sommer interviews Mura Dehn’. ARC Videodance, 1982, no. 58. Telecast on June 21, 1982.

2. *In a Jazz Way: A Portrait of Mura Dehn.* Film (documentary). Produced and directed by Louise Ghertler and Pamela Katz. 1985, New York, NY. 30 minutes.

3. ‘Adolf Dehn: The Life’, by Richard W. Cox. In catalogue, *The Prints of Adolf Dehn, a Catalogue Raisonné.* Compiled by Joyclyn Pang Lumsdaine and Thomas O’Sillivan. St. Paul, Minnesota, Minnesota Historical Society, 1987. p. 43.

**Archival Sources**

Mura Dehn Papers on Afro-American Social Dance. (1869-1987), (S) \*MGZMD 72, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

**References and Further Reading**

Cox, R.W. (1987) “Adolf Dehn: The Life.” *The Prints of Adolf Dehn, a Catalogue Raisonné.* Compiled by Joyclyn Pang Lumsdaine and Thomas O’Sullivan for exhibition “The Prints of Adolf Dehn,” St. Paul, 1987. Published by Minnesota Historical Society.

Valis-Hill, C. (1996). “Jazz Modernism” in *Moving Words: Re-writing Dance*, ed. Gay Morris, New York and London: Routledge, 227-242.

**Videography**

*Eye on Dance*, 58. DVD. ARC Videodance, part of the television series *Eye on Dance*. Producers: Celia Ipiotis and Jeff Bush.[Video] director: Richard Sheridan. Program director: Celia Ipiotis. Technical director: Jeff Bush. Editor: Ipiotis and Bush Host: Celia Ipiotis. Arc Video Studio, New York. Recorded June 1, 1982. Telecast June 21, 1982.

*The Spirit Moves*, DVD of film. Mura Dehn, Producer, Director. 1950-1983. New York, New York. Volume 1, reels 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. \*MGZHB 16-1768. New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Lincoln Center. New York, New York (use in library

**Paratextual Material**

There are good images in the Cox publication as well as *In a Jazz Way: A Portrait of Mura Dehn* and *Eye on Dance*.