# Ragtime Dancing

# Summary

Ragtime dancing is a social dance practice, performed to ragtime music, that began in the 1890s and gained widespread popularity in U.S. dancehalls until the end of the First World War. With roots in both African and European dance traditions, ragtime dancing began in jook houses of the South and dance halls of the North, and developed largely in the African-American community before making its way to white participants through migration, integrated dancehalls, and the vaudeville stage. Popular interest in ragtime dancing eventually led to its performance in ballrooms and on Broadway (though the dances changed with each new iteration). During the peak of its popularity, ragtime dancing, with its intimate embrace and free improvisatory form, was seen as liberatory and represented the changes that came with modernity and the new century. In addition, ragtime dancing’s energetic movements inspired changes in women’s fashion that became iconic of modernism’s ‘New Woman’. In its prime, ragtime dancing was often itself referred to as ‘modern dancing’.

# Roots of Ragtime Dancing

The precise origins of ragtime dancing are uncertain; however, most scholars agree that it began in African-American communities in the 1890s. Ragtime dancing contains both Africanist and Europeanist dance influences. The use of rhythmic syncopation, improvisation and competition as well as a loose torso and playful style are generally assumed to be inherited from African dance practices, while the closed-couple hold and the vertical posture derive from European traditions.

One of the first dances to be performed to ragtime music was the Cakewalk though its origins predate ragtime. The Cakewalk, a high-stepping competitive dance between promenading couples, originated on the plantations of the Antebellum South as a black parody of white customs. Slaves would imitate the dancing practices of their white masters (formal attire, rigid upright torsos, and couples linked by the elbows) often in front of white audiences. After the abolition of slavery in the U.S. in 1862, many former slaves made their way to urban centres or migrated North and/or West where dance practices like the Cakewalk continued in jook houses, honky-tonks, and house parties as well as on minstrel show stages.

**Development of Ragtime Dancing and Contributions to Modernism**

With the advent of ragtime music in the 1890s, a style developed by black urban composers in the Midwest and known for its syncopated melody and march-like bass line, social dancers began adapting the Cakewalk as a ragtime dance, but soon other dances began to take shape too, like the Black Bottom and the Slow Drag. Ragtime dancing is generally performed by couples in a close embrace with occasional ‘break away’ moments that allow dancers to perform independently. The footwork usually consists of a one-step or two-step (both relatively simple walking patterns) making it easy for novices to learn. The one-step also allows dancers to accent the syncopation of the music with their feet. Ragtime dancing’s improvisatory nature lets dancers add flourishes to its performance, and especially popular in the early twentieth-century was the imitation of animals. The Grizzly Bear for example, featured dancers in an awkward embrace taking large clumsy steps from side-to-side and occasionally splaying the fingers and lifting the arms to indicate a bear attack. The Turkey Trot was another popular dance. Though the performance of the Turkey Trot changed from one venue to the next, in general it consisted of couples marching and ‘flapping’ their elbows in imitation of a Turkey. While dancing, the man would sometimes position himself in close behind the woman and the two would hop about together, which some audiences (especially upper and middle class audiences) found improper and vulgar. Similarly, the Bunny Hug involved a couple jumping and wiggling in close proximity— a parody of rabbits mating. The close embrace of these ragtime dances, the playful grinding and shaking of the hips, and the allusion to sexual activity suggest that, as dance scholar Nadine George-Graves explains, ‘the dancers of the time were using dance to push the boundaries of sexual politics and decorum’. (61) This rebellion against established social conventions helped ragtime dancing become a significant marker of the changing modern ethos of early twentieth century America.

African-American migration to the Northern and Western United States helped ragtime music and dance to circulate. Ragtime dancing eventually became popular in both black and white contexts. Favourite ragtime dances would gain exposure in integrated dancehalls and vaudeville performances; ragtime dances performed on stage by professionals would be re-appropriated by the public. Though much of the white working class eagerly adopted these dances and themselves introduced new ragtime dances, public perception (especially among white elites) remained largely negative in the early years of ragtime dancing.

There was a great deal of social resistance in the upper and middle classes to ragtime dancing in its early years, as some considered it primitive, unrefined, and improper. These judgments however were largely due to racist stereotypes that surrounded black dance at this time, and also because of the challenges the dances posed to established white ballroom conventions. White elite social functions often had a set program of dances with complex floor patterns and dance partners maintained a relative distance within their closed embrace. Ragtime dancing’s use of improvisation was seen as un-artistic and its movements lascivious because it jettisoned much of the formalities of nineteenth century dance. It emphasized the relationship between the dancers in the couple rather than the group, and dancers held a much closer embrace, often touching not just hands but sometimes also hips and chests. When ragtime dancing began to make its way into white ballrooms it caused such a stir it would occasionally make the papers. In 1912, a headline in the Society section of the *New York Sun* reported ‘Turkey Trot seen at Plaza Dance: Society Didn’t Want It and Was Somewhat Shocked’. (quoted in Malnig 138)

The performances of white professional ballroom dancers, especially of Vernon Castle (1893-1918) and Irene Castle (née Foote, 1893-1969), helped dissuade the concerned social reformers and popularize ragtime dancing among the middle and upper classes. ‘Our aim’, write the Castles in *Modern Dancing*, ‘is to uplift dancing, purify it, and place it before the public in its proper light’. (17) The Castles learned ragtime dances while performing in the New York theatre circuit and their performances became quite fashionable in Europe while touring there. Upon returning to the U.S. in 1912, the Castles helped promote an image of ‘sophisticated’ ragtime dancing by modifying it to suit white expectations of social dance. In particular, ragtime dancing in upper and middle class ballrooms distinguished itself as ‘civilized’ by maintaining a rigid torso and stiff arms, keeping a distance between the dancing couple, and avoiding anything too acrobatic like jumps or dips and especially any of the animal dances. By the 1910s, ragtime dancing became a sensation not just for the working classes but also, gradually, for the middle and upper classes creating what was commonly referred to at that time as a ‘dance craze’.

With increased urbanization, developments in the women’s rights movement, and new conceptualizations of ‘morality’, the early twentieth century saw changes to U.S. society that the spirit of ragtime seemed to capture (especially in the freedom, chaos, and individuality that accompanied breakaway moments). ‘As ragtime dancing became increasingly popular, it literally came to embody, through its music and movement, the purported freedoms and vitality of the modern age’ (Cook 133). In fact, when appropriated by the upper and middle classes, ragtime dancing often took on the name ‘modern dancing’.

# Legacy

Although some of the dances that developed during the Ragtime era would remain popular in later years (like the Charleston and the Foxtrot), ragtime dancing fell out of fashion by 1918 and many of these dances have since been lost. In spite of this, many of the changes ragtime dancing brought about continue to inform American social dance practices, especially its physicality, use of improvisation, and close embraces.

Ragtime dancing also became important in disseminating the image of the ‘New Woman’ that began to take shape in the 1910s and 1920s. It paved the way for the fame of numerous professional ballroom dancers like Irene Castle, whose bobbed hairstyle and loose fitting garments (ideal for ragtime dance movements) articulated a new sense of freedom and independence among society women.

Ragtime dancing also contributed to a growing trend in modernism of white artists appropriating black culture in the U.S. and Europe. Scholars such as Brenda Dixon-Gotschild have argued that historically, white artists have seen black culture as a source of raw artistic material to be borrowed and improved upon by white artists. The appropriation of ragtime dancing by the upper classes, and in particular the modifications made to ‘civilize’ the dances, indicate that such a trend characterizes the racial dynamics of the Ragtime era.

# References and Further Reading

Castle, Vernon and Irene. *Modern Dancing*. New York: Arrangement with Harper & Brothers, 1914. (This book outlines the Castles’ approach to dance practices of the Ragtime era and describes the changes the Castles used to make the dances more acceptable to the upper classes).

Cook, Susan C. “Passionless Dancing and Passionate Reform: Respectability, Modernism, and the Social Dancing of Irene and Vernon Castle.” In *The Passion of Music and Dance: Body, Gender, and Sexuality*. Ed. William Washabaugh. New York: Berg Press, 1998. (This article examines the iconography of Vernon Castle and analyzes how his performances of ragtime dances bridged the gap between competing notions of manliness and masculinity).

George-Graves, Nadine. “‘Just Like Being at the Zoo:’ Primitivity and Ragtime Dancing” In *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*. Ed. Julie Malnig. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 55-71. (In this article, George-Graves analyzes how racialized notions of blackness are misinterpreted in popular performances of ragtime dancing, and encourages those studying ragtime to carefully consider its African-American roots. George-Graves provides movement descriptions of the animal dances mentioned above).

Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance Art: Dance and Other Contexts*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996. (In this book, Gottschild provocatively argues for a reinvestigation of the African-American roots of American art and culture).

Malnig, Julie. “Two-Stepping to Glory: Social Dance and the Rhetoric of Social Mobility.” *Etnofoor*. 10.1/2 (1997). 128-150. (In discussing the social dance practices of the U.S.’s early twentieth century, Malnig identifies how dance came to be associated with social status and how could contribute to upward mobility. Included in this article is a discussion of ragtime dance and Irene Castle’s influence on the image of the ‘New Woman’.)

Robinson, Danielle. “Performing American: Ragtime Dancing as Participatory Minstrelsy.” *Dance Chronicle*. 32:1 (2009), 89-126. (Robinson analyzes early twentieth century practices of ragtime dancing among European immigrants in New York City and suggests that ragtime dancing can be seen as a continuation of Blackface Minstrelsy).

Stearns, Marshall and Jean Stearns. *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. New York: Macmillan 1968. (Peppered throughout the book are descriptions of specific ragtime dances like the Turkey Trot, the Black Bottom, and Ballin’ the Jack)

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# Paratextual Material

Ken Burns, dir. *Jazz.* ‘Episode One: Gumbo’. PBS Home Video, 2000. (Although focused predominantly on the development of jazz music, this film features early footage of Vernon and Irene Castle performing a one-step and describes the development of ragtime music as well as some of its key contributors, Scott Joplin and James Reese Europe).

Dancetime Publications ‘Dances of the Ragtime Era’ *How to Dance through Time volume II*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCkkOqXUaZo>. 29 April, 2008. (This video shows reconstructed versions of the Grizzly Bear, Castle Walk, Tango, Maxixe, and Hesitation Waltz).

Christopher Martin. ‘Vernon and Irene Castle’. *Dance Heritage Coalition*.

<http://www.danceheritage.org/castle.html> (This site includes a short essay by Martin about the life of these exhibition ballroom dancers as well as video footage and photographs).

Powers, Richard. ‘Social Dances of the Ragtime Era’. Social Dance. Stanford, 2012. <http://socialdance.stanford.edu/syllabi/ragtime\_dance.htm> (This website contains a brief summary of ragtime music and dances including photographs as well as a link to fashions of the ragtime era).