**Shimmy**

The shimmy, also known as the shim-me-sha-wabble, is a jazz dance that features the upper body, especially the shoulders, shaking and quivering horizontally from side to side, such that a dancer’s ‘chemise’ might shift and slide. The dance, often associated with female sexuality, rose to mass popularity in the United States in the late 1910s and early 1920s, after emerging in the American South around the turn of the twentieth century within African-American communities. White performers learned of the shimmy when it eventually animated T.O.B.A. shows as well as black and tan clubs on the South Side of Chicago.

Three female Broadway stars—Gilda Grey, Bee Palmer, and Mae West—all publicly claimed the shimmy as their own during the 1920s and popularized it among white, middle-class audiences across North America. Their version of the dance offered white American women a means of embodying modern female sexuality that was predicated on racial mimicry. Interestingly, although this dance has clear African-American roots, the shimmy was also sometimes linked to Arabs and the Middle East owing to its similarity to belly dancing and, in particular, Little Egypt’s performances of the of the ‘hootchy-kootchy’ at the Chicago’s World Fair in 1893.

By the 1910s, the shimmy had become a popular dance on the South Side of Chicago, which was a hub for African-American expressive culture. There, black and tan cabarets and bars allowed white and black patrons to mix socially in ways not common elsewhere. In her autobiography, Mae West recounted witnessing the shimmy in the mid-1910s at a club called the Elite No. 1. She soon thereafter incorporated it into her own Chicago performances and claimed it as her own invention. By 1918, West introduced the dance to Broadway in New York City. And, by 1919, the shimmy was widely featured on vaudeville stages, in cabarets, and as part of Broadway revues, including the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1919.*

The dance’s rise to national-level popularity was greatly aided by African-American songwriter Spencer Williams’ 1917 song, ‘Shim-Me-Sha-Wabble’, which describes the movements of the dance. His song grew to be quite popular across North America. Shortly thereafter, Tin Pan Alley built upon the success of both the song and dance by producing numerous new songs that mentioned the shimmy, which only fostered the dance’s widespread popularity.

Like many other jazz dances, the shimmy eventually faded in popularity among white North Americans, even though it remained a staple within African-American dance spaces throughout the twentieth century. Its success was made possible by the appropriative patterns established during the ragtime era—between black and white performers—that flourished during the jazz age.

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