**Black Bottom**

**Summary**

The Black Bottom dance began as an early-twentieth-century African-American social dance in the Southern U.S. and was dispersed into mainstream America via Broadway shows. The dance itself underwent significant alterations during this transmission. The Great Migration, urbanization, and industrialization resulted in the Black Bottom being brought into urban black communities in the North-East and Mid-West and their theatres. White directors and performers went into the predominately black neighbourhood of Harlem in the 1920s and witnessed the dance performed by black performers in segregated theatres. They also received private instruction from black dancers. They then took their knowledge of the dance out of the black community and put it on Broadway. This transmission into theatrical performance ignited the widespread popularity of the Black Bottom and led to its presence in white social entertainment venues, although the dance was greatly simplified. It became part of a modernizing American society that was drawn to white appropriation of black practices. The Black Bottom helped establish that dancing modern could mean adopting, adapting, and performing black dances.

**Black Bottom Dance and Modernism**

It was in the jook houses of the Southern U.S. that African Americans crafted the Black Bottom dance in the early 1900s. These semi-rural, black-owned establishments served as important social locations for the black working-classes. They provided a space for them to come together to dance and listen to live music, eat, drink, play games, and socialize. African Americans brought both jook culture and the Black Bottom out of the rural South and into the urban Northeast and Midwest during the Great Migration. In new urban settings social dances like the Black Bottom provided a release, a reprieve, and entertainment in the wake of the migration’s challenges.

The theatrical history of the Black Bottom includes a presence in black vaudeville shows, including some staged by the Whitman Sisters and performed by Ethel Waters. However, its first widely recognized inclusion in theatrical performance came in *Dinah*. This 1924 production by Irving C. Miller took place in Harlem, where white patrons regularly came to watch black performances. White directors like George White observed black performances, at least in part, to pilfer dances. Upon seeing *Dinah*, White asked composers Ray Henderson, Bud DeSylva, and Lew Brown to write a Black Bottom song. The lyrics to this song offered vague movement instructions, unlike African-American composer Perry Bradford’s *The Original Black Bottom Dance* of 1919. However, both dance instruction songs helped establish this genre of song as a means of dispersing directions for African-American social dance to audiences of all backgrounds. Bradford’s accompaniment included the following description: “Hop down front and then you Doodle back. Mooch to your left and then you Mooch to the right. Hands on your hips and do the Mess Around. Break a Leg until you’re near the ground. Now that’s the Old Black Bottom Dance” (Stearns 111). These words told listeners with knowledge of the terminology used how to move. For example, Doodle instructed one to slide while Mooch meant to shuffle with rotating hips. Henderson, DeSylva, and Brown’s song included ambiguous comments about the Black Bottom being the “new twister” and incorporating actions “just like a worm” (Stearns 111). White performer Ann Pennington danced the Black Bottom to these lyrics in *George White’s Scandals of 1926* and catapulted the dance into mainstream American culture. Pennington’s performance essentially exposed white audiences to a black dance, similar to the Shimmy and Charleston before it. In addition, Pennington’s, and subsequent performer’s bodies on stage, provided visual examples of how to dance. Their bodies clarified the meanings intended by the dance instruction songs, regardless of whether one lacked the cultural knowledge to decipher the instructions or the song failed to provide detailed instructions.

Theatrical performers maintained a primarily frontal orientation in this solo dance form. They included shuffling in a circle with their hands on their hips and hip rotations. Hobbling steps, slides, and foot swivels appeared alongside rear-end slapping. Alternating foot stamps with swaying hips were performed with bent knees. White audience members watched stage performers execute these dance steps with black origins and then tested out the movement on their own bodies, altering the dance so as to make it an appropriate social dance for the ballroom. Forward and backward hops remained as did the behind slapping, which Pennington’s performance stressed.

White appropriation of the Black Bottom dance helped to establish that to be modern could mean taking on black dance practices. The Black Bottom fostered a white interest black dance that continues to this day. This interest has led whites to observe, execute, and alter black dances. It has also contributed to simplified black dance practices being accepted and applauded in America. As a result, black dance remains a dominant force in American popular culture and helps define social dance in America.

**References and Further Reading**

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**Paratextual Material**

<http://vintagevivant.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/black.jpg> (A couple dancing the Black Bottom)

<http://i.ytimg.com/vi/n5UnEB23YCI/0.jpg> (A stage performer dancing the Black Bottom)

Adrienne Stroik