**Jazz Dancing**

**Summary**

Jazz dancing is an important modern art form that developed in tandem with jazz music between the 1910s and 1940s in America. Emanating from African-American folk and vernacular practices of the early twentieth century, jazz dancing reflects the evolving freedoms of modern African-Americans as well as the racial tensions of the modern era in which it was created. Indeed, jazz dance displays the complexity and exuberance of modern American culture and history. The many manifestations of jazz dancing range in style from vernacular to theatrical and embrace, to varying degrees, fundamental movement qualities such as a weighted release into gravity, rhythmic complexity, propulsive rhythms, a dynamic spine, call and response, a conversational approach to accompanying rhythms, and attention to syncopation and musicality.

**Foundations of Jazz Dance**

Jazz dancing and music emerged together primarily from African-American folk and vernacular practices, inspiring each other's development over time. Key inspirations included the Cakewalk, Juba and the Buzzard Lope, all of which were rooted in strong West African traditions of dance and music. The Cakewalk in particular, performed to syncopated ragtime music (an important precursor to jazz), inspired new and inventive steps for minstrel shows and vaudeville—both of which were key incubation sites for movements that would become part of jazz dancing.

Jazz dancing crystallised between the 1920s and 1940s as jazz music exploded in popularity and new dances performed to this music emerged, such as the Charleston and Lindy Hop, as well as tap dances performed to jazz music, commonly known as jazz tap. This period and style of dance is sometimes called traditional jazz dance, since it served as the foundation for all other varieties. The spirit of jazz dancing is contained in these early dances that were popular not only socially but also in a wide range of performance spaces, including clubs, films, concert halls, and Broadway*.* For example, *Running Wild,* which opened on Broadway in 1923, featured the Charleston. Professional Lindy-Hop dance groups such as Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, who started out in the legendary Savoy Ballroom in New York City became extremely popular from 1935 until WWII and were famously featured in the film *Hellzapoppin’* (1941). Tap dance performed to jazz music became popular during this era with performers such as Bill Robinson and Jeni LeGon performing onstage and in film. Katherine Dunham contributed jazz choreography for the films *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and *Stormy Weather* (1943), while Russian-born dancer Mura Dehn founded the Academy of Jazz in New York City in the 1940s dedicated to the research, teaching, and performance of jazz dance.

The cultural symbolism of jazz music and dancing in its early days was a modernist challenge to staid Victorian and Edwardian mores and traditional European-derived forms of music and dance. It was highly reflective of the increasing freedoms and changing lifestyles of its African-American creators. As a new style of black artistic expression, it was often presented and/or interpreted as exotic or primitive, in alignment with black stereotypes of the period. Examples include Duke Ellington’s shows at the Cotton Club with his Jungle Band, or Josephine Baker’s Paris-based show “La Revue Negre,” in which she performed “Dance Sauvage,” (Savage Dance). Because jazz appealed to the masses as entertainment, it was generally viewed as a popular culture rather than as high art. Simultaneously, the newly-developing American modern dance movement purposely distanced itself from jazz dancing in an effort to position itself as a serious art form with modernist themes, such as abstraction. Because jazz dance was often seen as entertainment rather than as art, it was not always welcomed onto concert stages initially. However, modern dance choreographers such as Talley Beatty and Donald McKayle adapted jazz movements to their own uses later in the 20th century.

As a result of the popularity of jazz music and dancing, Africanist movement aesthetics began to permeate dance forms across the United States. This influence was also felt in the other arts and in Europe. For instance, visual artists including Pablo Picasso and André Derain collected and kept African art in their studios, while Piet Mondrian listened to jazz albums such as *Boogie Woogie* (1942) when painting his most famous works. Classical modernist composer Igor Stravinsky listened to jazz musician Charlie Parker (and vice-versa). Choreographer George Balanchine often worked with jazz or jazz-influenced music while also working with African-American artists such as Katherine Dunham, and the famed tap dance duo the Nicholas Brothers.

**The 1950s-2000s**

The 1950s and 1960s were a major transitional period as choreographers and teachers grappled with how to formally teach jazz dancing. Ultimately, they extended jazz dancing in multiple directions, merging jazz sensibility with ballet and modern dance, resulting in diverse approaches to the creation, performance and teaching of the form. Pepsi Bethel began his Authentic Jazz Dance Theatre in New York City, maintaining roots in vernacular forms, while others such as Chuck Kelly were experimenting with how to create new jazz dance styles. Matt Mattox created his own Free Style technique based upon the technical precision of ballet blended with the isolations of jazz dance. Mattox worked first in New York City, and eventually emigrated to France to begin a new school and company there. Choreographers Jack Cole and Bob Fosse integrated the dynamics of jazz within their choreographies for film and Broadway.

Jazz dancing influenced the work of modernist choreographers working in the 1940s-60s, such as Jack Cole, George Balanchine, and Jerome Robbins, who borrowed or appropriated elements of this African-American style and blended them with their own more European-based dance traditions, shifting the focus from rhythm to line and space. Although their blended form of jazz dancing was distinctly different from the traditional jazz dancing of the 1920s-40s, it did not receive a new name. Ultimately it was also called jazz dance, creating confusion within the dance world. This new blended form of jazz dance was used as the basis for choreography in many Broadway shows, Hollywood movies, and concert venues—for example in the musicals *Grease* (1972) and *42nd Street* (1980) and Bob Fosse’s work including *Chicago* (1975).

Alongside these blended forms of jazz were Broadway musicals that used traditional jazz music and dancing, choreographed by jazz and jazz tap greats such as Donald McKayle, Henry LeTang, and Frankie Manning. *Sophisticated Ladies* (1981) and *Black and Blue (*1989) are examples of shows that maintained a strong connection between jazz music and traditional vernacular jazz dances, without deliberately integrating European dance influences. Other examples include *Bring in da Noise, Bring in da Funk* (1995) and *Shuffle Along* (2016), both choreographed by rhythm tapper Savion Glover.

Two important jazz revival movements occurred during the last three decades of the twentieth century: the jazz tap revival and the Lindy (or swing dance) revival. Jazz tap developed along with traditional jazz dance between the 1920s and 1940s, but declined in popularity after World War II. The 1970s-80s saw a re-emergence of this dance form, bringing the elders of the tap community such as Honi Coles and Chuck Green back to the stage. Jazz tap was tap dance performed to jazz music, using music from the swing era as well as newer work by small jazz music ensembles. This dance form, also known as “hoofing” or “rhythm tap,” emphasized rhythmic complexity, deep musical connection, and distinctive personal style. The second revivalist movement, which peaked in popular culture during the 1990s, saw the creation of a number of groups featuring the Lindy Hop and its many variants. This became an international movement, with companies such as the Harlem Hot Shots in Sweden and the Jiving Lindy Hoppers in England showcasing upbeat and virtuosic partner dancing to jazz music of the big band era. In addition to the performing companies, many amateur dance communities sprang up to support the teaching and practice of the Lindy and its variants as a form of recreation and social interaction.

Another important development in the last decades of the twentieth century included the flourishing of new concert jazz dance companies. Professional companies such as Danny Buraczeski Jazzdance Troupe and Gus Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago continued to blend Africanist elements of jazz dance with aspects of modern dance and ballet, further developing the hybrid forms of theatrical jazz dancing that emerged in prior decades. Other notable jazz dance companies included Pepsi Bethel’s Authentic Jazz Dance Company, Decidedly Jazz Danceworks, Jump Rhythm Jazz Project, River North Dance Chicago (RNDC) and Odyssey Dance Theatre. Several companies based in Europe were also formed, including Ballet Jazz Art in France, originally founded by Matt Mattox in 1980. Many of these dance companies continue to thrive in the twenty-first century.

In the 1960-80s, jazz dance classes became a staple of professional and non-professional dance training in New York City as well as towns across the U.S. and Canada. Formal jazz dance classes took on a host of names, such as vernacular, classic, Broadway-jazz, jazz-funk, authentic jazz, modern jazz, and street jazz, to name a few. The styles varied depending upon the individual teacher or choreographer’s point of view and approach. Two important New York City teachers of this period were Frank Hatchett and Lynn Simonson. Hatchett developed an approach that he called “VOP,” which required “technique, attitude, and flair.” Simonson’s approach used a variety of jazz music and emphasized training the body safely, in a technique that combined jazz, modern and balletic elements. Other important concert jazz dancers who developed their own signature teaching techniques during this period included the previously mentioned Matt Mattox along with Luigi, Jo Jo Smith, and Billy Siegenfeld. Jazz dance training in the 21st century continues to be an important aspect of training the versatile dancer, particularly for those aspiring to concert jazz companies, commercial dance, or Broadway.

**Legacy**

Jazz dancing has influenced countless modernist choreographers in both the 20th and 21st centuries including Katherine Dunham and Jerome Robbins in the US and Kumiko Sakamoto in Japan. Jazz dancing lives on as a complex, varied art form in the 21st century. The vivacity of the original African-based social form created in the jazz age of the 1920s-40s lives alongside its myriad variations and evolutions that came from its blending with ballet, modern dance, and tap. Jazz dance today is visible on the concert stage as a serious art form, on Broadway as the primary dance genre within musical theatre, and in dance films that exemplify or document musical theatre. It is evident in the jazz tap or rhythm tap stylings of performers such as Savion Glover and companies like STOMP. It is represented in the many revival groups, both professional and non-professional, who practice and perform the Lindy Hop. And, it is manifest in the overlapping worlds of contemporary social dancing, where people still dance the Charleston and Lindy, alongside updated versions of them. Indeed, new variations of older jazz social dances are continually being created, and hip-hop party dancing is yet another permutation of African-American social dance forms that link back to early jazz dancing. The individualism and originality inherent in both jazz and modernism have remained clearly visible over hundred years since they began.

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