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| Black Bottom |
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| The Black Bottom dance began as an early-twentieth-century African-American social dance in the Southern United States. It later entered the American mainstream via Broadway productions, and underwent significant alterations during transmission. The Great Migration, urbanisation, and industrialisation resulted in the Black Bottom being brought into urban black communities and theatres in the Northeast and Midwest. In the 1920s, white directors and performers went into the predominately black neighbourhood of Harlem and witnessed the dance performed by black performers in segregated theatres, and later received private instruction from black dancers. These performers and directors took their knowledge of Black Bottom out of the black community and onto the stages of Broadway. This transmission into theatrical performance ignited the widespread popularity of the Black Bottom, and led to its presence in white social entertainment venues (the dance, however, was drastically simplified). Black Bottom became part of modernist American society, which in itself was drawn to white appropriation of black practices. The Black Bottom established that dancing modern often meant adopting, adapting, and performing black dances. |
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Black Bottom became part of modernist American society, which in itself was drawn to white appropriation of black practices. The Black Bottom established that dancing modern often meant adopting, adapting, and performing black dances.  It was in the jook houses of the Southern United States that African Americans created the Black Bottom dance in the early 1900s. These semi-rural, black-owned establishments served as important social locations for the black working-class, and provided a communal space to dance, listen to live music, eat, drink, play games, and socialise. 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 challenges faced during the Great Migration.  Black Bottom appeared in black vaudeville shows, including some staged by the Whitman Sisters and performed by Ethel Waters. The first widely recognised incorporation of Black Bottom into theatrical performance came with Irving C. Miller’s 1924 production of *Dinah* in Harlem, where white patrons regularly attended 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. Unlike African American composer Perry Bradford’s ‘The Original Black Bottom Dance’ of 1919, the lyrics to White’s requested song offered vague movement instructions. Regardless, both dance instruction songs helped establish this genre of song as a means of dispersing directions for African American social dances 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 lyrics instructed listeners with a background knowledge of the terminology on how to perform the dance. For example, Doodle instructed one to slide while Mooch meant to shuffle with rotating hips. Henderson, DeSylva, and Brown’s song, however, included ambiguous comments about the Black Bottom being the ‘new twister’ and as incorporating movements that were ‘just like a worm[’s]’ (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 exposed white audiences to a black dance, similar to the Shimmy and Charleston before it. Additionally, Pennington’s and subsequent performers’ bodies on stage provided visual examples of how to perform the 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 if the song failed to provide detailed instructions.  Theatrical performers maintained a primarily frontal orientation in this solo dance form. Movements included shuffling in a circle with the performer’s hands on their hips, and hip rotations. Hobbling steps, slides, and foot swivels appeared alongside rear-end slapping, while alternating foot stamps with swaying hips were performed with bent knees. White audience members watched stage performers execute these dance steps, and then attempted the movements, altering the dance so as to make it an appropriate ballroom social dance. Forward and backward hops remained as did the behind slapping, which Pennington’s performance stressed.  Image: Stage.jpg  Figure 2 A stage performer dancing the Black Bottom.  <http://i.ytimg.com/vi/n5UnEB23YCI/0.jpg>  White appropriation of the Black Bottom dance helped establish the notion that to be modern often meant appropriating black dance practices. The Black Bottom fostered a white interest in African American dance that remains to this day — an interest which has led whites to observe, execute, and alter black dances. This interest and appropriation has contributed to the popularity of simplified black dance practices being accepted and applauded across America. As a result, black dance remains a dominant cultural force in American popular culture, and contributes to the definition of social dance in the United States. |
| Further reading:  (Banes and Szwed)  (Glass)  (Jones)  (Malnig)  (Stearns and Stearns) |