

History of Jazz Dance

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The varieties of jazz dance reflect the diversity of American culture. Jazz dance mirrors the social history of the American people, reflecting ethnic influences, historic events, and cultural changes. Jazz dance has been greatly influenced by social dance and popular music. But, like so much that is “from America”, the history of jazz dance begins somewhere else.

The origins of jazz music and dance are found in the rhythms and movements brought to America by African slaves. The style of African dance is earthy; low, knees bent, pulsating body movements emphasized by body isolations and hand-clapping. As slaves forced into America, starting during the 1600’s, Africans from many cultures were cut off from their families, languages and tribal traditions. The result was an intermingling of African cultures that created a new culture with both African and European elements. The Slave Act of 1740 prohibited slaves from playing African drums or performing African dances, but that did not suppress their desire to cling to those parts of their cultural identity. The rhythms and movements of African dance: the foot stamping and tapping, hand clapping and rhythmic vocal sounds were woven into what we now call jazz.

In the 19th century, American whites decided that they enjoyed the music and dance the slaves had created. In minstrel shows, white entertainers parodied their conception of slave life and popularized the African style of



dance and music. With white dancers as the star performers of the minstrel and vaudeville show, it was difficult for a black dancer to gain stature as part of a dance troupe. Because of this, many black performers migrated to Europe, where they introduced the newly emerging forms of jazz music and jazz dance. In Europe, these talented and innovative performers were more well received than in America. The minstrel show evolved and was eventually absorbed into the 20th century musical comedy.

Through the end of the 1920’s, Dixieland jazz music, with its fast ragtime beat, spread from New Orleans to Chicago and New York. The growth of jazz dance was directly influenced by this musical genre. In 1923, the Charleston was introduced and Americans were quick to adopt it. In the Charleston, dancers used body isolations for the first time in a social dance, and the hand clapping and foot stamping that it incorporated were a direct link to the dance’s African origin.



This was also the era of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, a black tap dancer who achieved world fame through the clean and clear percussive rhythms of his feet. The early forms of tap dance evolved from the Irish jig, which incorporated limited upper body movements. As the movements of the tap dance became more flexible, the lightness of Robinson’s style influenced the future of tap dance by changing the placement of the tap steps from the full foot to the ball of

the foot. Bill Robinson was seen performing on Broadway, in Hollywood films, and in shows that toured the country.

During the Depression of the 1930's, people escaped into dance competitions in hopes of winning a cash prize. The sound of jazz music started to change due to the "symphonic jazz" of Paul Whiteman. He brought full orchestration to his music and made syncopation a part of every song he played. (Syncopation places the accent or emphasis on normally unaccented beats of music. It adds to the surprise and spontaneity of jazz dance.) The music of the black American bands of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong gave birth to swing music. The "Swing Era" also termed the "Big Band Era", generated well-known dances such as the Lindy Hop and the Boogie Woogie.

During the 1920's, Fred Astaire had been a vital part of Broadway, but in 1933 when musicals found their fame in Hollywood, he became the leading man for movie musicals. Astaire created a unique dance style that brought elegance to



the dancer's image. He blended the flowing steps of ballet with the abruptness of jazz movements and was the first dancer at that time to dance every musical note so that the rhythmic pattern of the music was mirrored in the dance steps.

Just when social dancing was at its height, World War 2 put a stop to its popularity. Lack of attendance, plus the intricate rhythmic patterns of modern jazz music, which were too complex for social dancing, led to the closing of dance halls and ballrooms. With the demise of social dance, the growth of jazz dance as a professional dance form began. During the 1940's, jazz dance was influenced

by ballet and modern dance. By blending the classical technique of ballet with the natural bodily expression of modern dance, jazz developed a sophisticated artistic quality. Unlike early jazz dance, which was performed by talented entertainers without formal training, modern jazz dance was performed by professionals trained in ballet and modern dance.

It was during this time that man who later came to be known as the "Father of Theatrical Jazz Dance", Jack Cole, was busy developing his technique. Jack Cole had studied modern, ballet, and ethnic dance, had been a student at



Denishawn and had done choreographic work in the nightclub scene. In the 1940's there was a serious demand for groups of trained dancers for film work and Jack Cole was the one who started developing these trained jazz dancers for the Hollywood movie musicals. Also, during this time Gene Kelly, began making his mark as a dancer in Hollywood musicals. His impact on jazz was his individual, energetic dance style that combined athletic, gymnastic qualities with jazz and tap.



During the 1950's, Rock and Roll music, which had been played by black musicians for many years already

at this point, became popular with teenage audiences and thus new kinds of social dances were created to go with this type of music. During this decade, the influence of Latin

American music and dance enriched jazz dance as was seen in the landmark Broadway production of *West Side Story*, choreographed by Jerome Robbins. It was also during this time that Matt Mattox, who had been a dancer of the Jack Cole style in many Hollywood musicals, began to develop his own teaching and performing style. He was another dancer who had studied ballet, modern, and tap and then found his love of jazz in his late 20s. Matt Mattox went on to teach dance in New York for many years before moving to Europe in the 1970s and developing his school and style based on what he calls “Freestyle” although many people still label him as a jazz dance teacher and choreographer.

With the 1960’s came the twist, as easy to perform, overnight craze which brought adults back to the social dance floor. At this point, Motown was the new hot musical craze. It came out of Detroit and the groups featured choreographed routines mostly done



by Charles “Cholly” Atkins. This idea of the lead singer being spotlighted in front while the back up singers performed

choreographed moves, was new and is credited to Mr. Atkins, who was brought in to Motown to work with these groups and give them a uniform look onstage. His work can be seen on Motown groups such as The Supremes, Smoky Robinson and the Miracles, and The Temptations. On the dance floor in the clubs, just as we do today, people copied those dance steps they saw the singers doing, which in turn popularized that style of dance.

It carried through the 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s in groups like En Vogue, The Jacksons, The Backstreet Boys, N’Sync, and is still strong today in all the vocal stage choreography you see where a singer has backup dancers.

During the 1960’s, two other names emerged among the ranks of professional jazz dance greats: Luigi and Gus Giordano. Luigi developed his technique as a result of an auto accident that left him paralyzed on the right side. Doctors claimed he would never walk, let alone dance again, but he persisted through operations, physical therapy, and his own study of body development based on dance exercise, and eventually was able to not only walk again, but to dance and to teach. The



technique he developed is influenced by ballet and is very lyrical. His technique requires that the body be exercised to its fullest to develop the strength necessary for

muscle control, yet still look beautiful. Gus Giordano’s style is classical but greatly influenced by the natural and freer body movements of modern dance. His technique teaches isolation movements, emphasizing the head and torso and creating an uplifted look of elegance. Yoga is incorporated into Giordano’s technique as a means of relaxation.

In the 1970s Bob Fosse became the outstanding name in jazz dance. He performed

on Broadway and in films, but his true success was as a choreographer. His work includes the films *All That Jazz* and *Sweet Charity*, the Broadway hit *Dancin'*, and the television special *Liza With a Z*, among many other famous works. He choreographed a reproduction of *Chicago* in 1975. Fosse's style was distinct; it was highly creative and often included



bizarre movements; it was slick, erotic and intense. He was a one-man jazz phenomenon whose style continued to make its mark on the Broadway stage and in Hollywood throughout the 1980s.

The 1970s also saw the huge impact of John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, which boosted the image of the male dancer; of Michael Bennett's production of *A Chorus Line*; and the notable jazz production of *Grease*. But another major influence on jazz dance came not from a person, but from an area. Out of the ghetto neighborhoods of New York City came the dance phenomenon called breakdancing.



Breakdancing is an umbrella term for all forms of modern street dance: breaking (specific moves done on or close to the floor); freestyle (gymnastic moves and partner lifts); electric boogie (flowing movements that enter one part of the body and exit another);

popping (any staccato movement); Egyptian (an imitation of Egyptian style art); and floating (steps such as the moonwalk, in which the feet seem to float across the floor).

These dance styles can be traced to the West African cultures of Mali, Gambia, and Senegal. In the late 1960s, many West African dancers came to America and



settled in the South Bronx. Breakdancing emerged not as an entertainment form, but as a competition, as a means of attaining superiority in street corner fraternities; it was an alternative to gang warfare. In the 1980s, breakdancing exploded out of the ghettos and into mainstream American dance culture. In this same period of time, jazz dance further expanded its horizons when it combined with physical fitness classes to make exercise more fun and sociable. The result was a new hybrid; aerobic dance classes.

The most prominent name in the 1980s musical theatre was Andrew Lloyd Webber, who is acclaimed for shifting the focus of the Broadway musical from America to the London stage. His musical hits include *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and the hottest musical of the 1980s, *Cats*, with choreography by Gillian Lynne.

Jazz dance in the 1980s received a tremendous boost from prominent movies of the decade: *Fame*, *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, *Staying Alive*, *Breaking* and *Dirty Dancing*.

Attendance in jazz dance classes skyrocketed with students eager to conquer this exciting dance form. American businesses noticed the large



audience appeal of jazz dance and moved in quickly to capitalize on the craze. As never before, jazz dance appeared in television commercials for Panasonic, Coca-Cola, and many fast food chains.

The 1980s also saw the introduction of MTV



a new medium for dance and

professional dancers. When MTV began broadcasting in 1981, music videos combined high-energy jazz, ballet, street dance and social dance in striking and innovative ways.

Some major choreographers of the period were Michael Peters, Jeffrey Hornaday, Lester Wilson, Toni Basil, Paula Abdul, Madonna, and Janet Jackson. The supreme video star of the 1980s was of course, Michael Jackson.

Michael Jackson made a major impact on the direction of jazz dance with his creative dance steps, his videos, his presentation and his choreography, most of which was done by Michael Peters, or Jackson and Peters as a team.



Two other names to add to the list of professional instructors who have influenced the development of jazz dance are Frank Hatchett and Joe Tremaine. Entertainers, students, and dance teachers from all over the world come to study with Frank Hatchett. Frank continuously tours the country giving master classes, and making special guest

appearances. In addition, Frank is one of the featured master teachers for the annual *Jazz Dance World Congress*. The Frank Hatchett style is a blend of strength, funk, and individual interpretation, with an emphasis on selling your performance. Associated exclusively to Frank Hatchett, his unique energy and spirit have

come to be called VOP. Joe Tremaine started studying in New York in the 1960s and later appeared in many television specials and variety shows. His teaching style is comparable to his style on the dance



floor; up to the minute, fast, flashy, and funky. The variety of techniques he brought from New York are also a part of his unique style which many refer to as “West Coast Jazz” or “L.A. Jazz”. This style is driven by current musical trends, is rhythmic and jazzy. He has channeled his enthusiasm for dance in another direction as well; his own dance conventions and competitions.

In the 1990s jazz dance world, the buzz words in training centers were street dancing, street funk, and hip hop. Street dance is inner city dance taken directly from the street corners with performers using “boom boxes” as their accompaniment. The *Fly Girls* dancers featured on the early 1990s hit show *In Living Color*, gave many primetime viewers their first look at street dance.

Choreographer Rosie Perez is credited with developing this style of jazz, which mixed street moves with technical ballet and jazz moves. Street dancing may be considered an umbrella dance term that



encompasses funk, popping, breakdancing, and hip hop. Hip hop dance is done to hip hop music. The dance style uses the whole body including complex footwork, body isolations, breakdancing and gymnastic moves. Hip hop is a style of clothing, attitude, dance and music.

Jazz dance in the new century continues to both look back to the classics for inspiration and move forward to create new dance performances. In film, jazz dance, hip hop and ballet fused in the box office success



Center Stage. In some ways, *Center Stage* is reminiscent of *Flashdance* in storyline and also in that dance was given a tremendous boost and dancers yet again realized the importance of training in wide varieties of dance styles. The current jazz dance performance world has sought a wider variety of performance platforms, including cabaret and lounge shows, cruise ship entertainment, and touring dance companies. Concert shows with musical superstars feature dancers as an integral part of their concert entertainment. Jazz dance, and in particular musical comedy, has become a primary theme park entertainment. Music videos, major television productions, such as award presentation galas, and industrials (promotional business shows) still prominently use jazz dance. The history of jazz dance has evolved in pace with the music and moods of each decade. African American culture has been a huge influence on the development of jazz dance. For example, the Charleston, Lindy Hop, Jitterbug, Swim, Watusi, Breakdancing, and Hip Hop all grew out of the full-bodied, free-spirited music and dance heritage of African

American culture. Today jazz dance is recognized as a uniquely American contribution to dance art.