

Blended Cultures: The Story of Tap Dancing America

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Abstract

The Jazz Age ushered in an era of new, expressive, and exciting art forms. Among these art forms, tap stands out as a highly unique and discernable dance style of the period. Though praised for being an art form born out of the American variety and vaudeville stages of the early 20th century, the origins of tap are, by in large, rooted in a blending of Irish folk dance and African Slave dance, dating back to the 16th century. The collision of culture required to incubate an artform such as tap could have only occurred in the United States, the crossroads of global identity and tradition. Research into American Tap Dance conveys how formal studies in American theatre and dance provide a true and conscious history of the United States. Tap dance further weaves African American influence into the tapestry of American culture and tradition, creating an allure out of this blended culture unlike other performative arts in American history.

Keywords: Storytelling, Cultural Appropriation, Identity

1. Introduction

Exploration of art unique to a given people or group provides a compelling insight to the lives and culture of the region. Drama, music, dance, and other forms of performative art provide a survey into the very nature of humanity—what a community values and devalues in their society on a grand scale and in their daily lives. In the case of the United States, iterations of popular music and social dances abound throughout its nearly two hundred fifty-year history as a nation and additional two and a half centuries as a European-colonized region. Today, popular rap and rock music trace their musical histories back to African spirituals and early appropriated American hymns by Stephen Foster. American theatre, however, has been entranced for over a century with the show-stopping tap number; perhaps the most recognizable feature of American Musical Theatre. These sights and sounds of American artistic history express an account of cultures colliding to generate revolutionary forms of self-expression.

American tap dance stands out as one of the most distinctive art forms in American history, as well as one of the most representative of American identity. The history of tap dance is quintessentially American—a seizing and melding of global cultures to create something new and shared. With tap, like many origin stories in American history, traditions from around the globe come together to chronicle a journey of cultural exchange, appropriation, and global blending. The story is troubled, but also points to ideals of hope and universality. Tap dance provides an artistic history for the preservation of identity, as well as the appropriation of culture for African Americans in the United States.

The story begins in the 1650s at a time in European-colonized America when mass migration of Irish indentured servants, under the rule of Oliver Cromwell, collided with the arrival of increasing numbers of African slaves, namely from West Africa, in the Caribbean colonies. Unlike most periods in colonial history, the seventeenth century was marked by slaves and indentured servants living in analogous conditions. The ability to gain freedom nonetheless

separated these groups, but geographic, and thus social, proximity existed in this time, unlike other times in colonial history. A key function of both cultures, dance served a central role in social interactions of the two groups.

As time progressed into the eighteenth century, contact with indentured servants decreased for African slaves. The eighteenth century is also marked by the emergence of highly restrictive slave codes in the British colonies. These restrictive laws, built in response to events such as the Stono Slave Rebellion in the British colony of South Carolina, sought to limit slaves' ability to communicate and share oral and musical tradition and history. The main tactic to accomplish this goal was to limit social interactions for slaves. This was accomplished through curfews, as well as the standard of separating children from their mothers. Without descendants to pass down culture to, many traditions were lost, causing a dissipation of individuality for Africans in the new world, building a sense of uniformity throughout slaves. Additionally, many codes prevented the use of drumming, an integral part of West African oral and musical tradition. As historian Margaret Fuhrer notes, "After the Stono Insurrection laws prohibited black slaves from using drums in the mid-eighteenth century, they transferred their intricate West African drumming rhythms to their bodies, specifically their feet."¹ The need to continue and preserve cultural history and communication bred innovation. Thus, the origins of the more rhythmic and improvised qualities of tap dance were born.

The newfound use of feet to create percussion for African slaves further blended with the pre-existing Irish traditions of foot-based dance learned in the seventeenth century. Without exposure to these feet-based dance styles over the course of nearly a century, it is possible such innovations would not have been as natural or likely, setting the stage for the loss of cultural history for an entire race of people in the new world. Gestures which would, in the future, be called "tap," provided the preservation of identity for the West African peoples of this period, despite the constant attempt by Southern slave owners to dissipate such distinctiveness. Like a phoenix, new traditions were born from the ashes of the old. Tap dance signifies the capacity of cultural tradition to persist, as well as its constant ability to adapt. Part African, part Irish, fully American, tap dance represents the history of African Americans in the United States as an integral part in the development of culture which is considered to be iconically American.

2. Form Development

2.1. The Perfect Blend

Restricted and separated by slave codes, drained of drums, and exposed to celebrations and performances by Irish folk dancers, African slaves were set up with the conditions to create a perfect blend. Historians Constance Valis Hill and Joann W. Kealiinohomoku describe the result of these two blended cultures, known as jiggging, stating "the African American style of dance that angled and relaxed the torso, centered movement in the hips, and favored flat-footed gliding, dragging, and shuffling steps, melded with the Irish American style of step dancing, with upright torso, minimized hip motion, and dexterous footwork that favored bounding, hopping, and shuffling."² Thus, the foundation of modern tap dance is born.

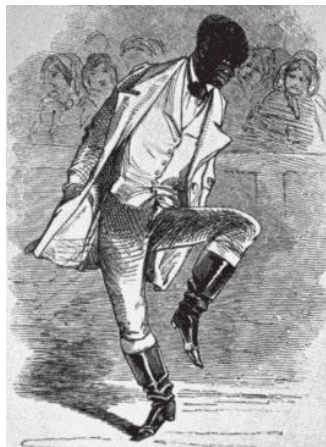


Figure 1. Master Juba performs a traditional jig, depicted in an 19th century English newspaper
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/history-of-black-dance-origins-of-black-dance/>

Above, an image from a nineteenth century English newspaper depicts William Henry “Master Juba” Lane, “a black man born free around 1825 [...] [who] impressed Charles Dickens when he visited New York City in 1842. Lane achieved a remarkable degree of fame.”³ Lane lived among many Irish immigrants in New York City and learned the dances of northern Europe, as well as those of his ancestors from Africa, making him the perfect subject for the father of American jiggging. Here, he demonstrates the ideal jig. The image depicts the collision of Irish and African dance qualities in one step.

2.2. First Audiences

Unlike the case for Lane, many southern slaves did not choose to perform their celebrated dances for their first audiences. As the popularity and commonality of tap grew amongst southern slaves, so too did the allure for many slave owners. Slave masters frequently built wooden stages on their plantations for public tap performances and competitions. These performances were forced and conducted under the precepts of punishment if a slave refused to participate. This form of forced entertainment built the foundation of what would become an appropriation of African American culture through tap dance for years to come.

As the gestures akin to modern tap dance became a more solidified and defined artform at the turn of the twentieth century, the sense of cultural appropriation created in the American Slave South continued in the lives of freed African Americans. The shadow of white performers’ interpretation of African American art lived on most prevalently in American Minstrelsy. Minstrelsy is an indigenous American theatrical form, popular from the early 19th to 20th centuries, that was founded on the comic enactment of racial stereotypes. Minstrel shows follow a three part form, beginning with a large and lavish opening number which features African American stereotyped characters Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones, followed by a variety act called the Olio, and ending with an afterpiece, usually a number centered around the falsified and fictional joys of slavery in the American South.

The Minstrel stages of American Vaudeville and Variety took tap dance across the nation as a part of blackface performing. Forever enshrined by its forced and mocked foundations, tap found its way into a career of cultural appropriation. Blackface performers toured the nation with great fame, using the rich and sacred dance history of a race of Americans as an extraction of expressive power and a generalized or falsified representation. These white performers understood the resonating strength of tap dance and used it to their advantage. Although the artistic gestures of tap dance remained powerful, the creators were unable to garnish the rewards. Rather than gaining mobility by this popularization of tap dance, many black performers were forced to present their heritage arts under the mask of appropriation formed by white artists. African American actors frequently themselves performed in blackface, shrouded by an interpretation and redirection of the power of their art. The dumbing down of tap dance has forced tap into a characterization as a lowly art form, unfit for the concert stage and unequal to such artforms as ballet and orchestra.

2.3. From Stage to Screen

The popularization of tap dance found its greatest success, however, in Hollywood. The lavish movie musicals of the 1930s and 1940s would not be complete without their signature tap numbers. These films contribute a great deal to the formalization of tap dance, by creating visual consistency and industry standards, so to speak. Fred Astaire’s debonair style and impeccable grace made him a national star and world-renowned dancer. His immense fame and popularity, as well as his role as one of the first on-screen tap dancers, has positioned him in history as a sort of standard-setter for tap dance. His relationship with the dance is almost inseparable, and his performances on film and stage are considered some of the greatest of all history.

However, Astaire did not develop his style on his own. His style is known for coming from high exposure to African American buck dancing and shuffling on the Vaudeville and Broadway stages of the 1910s and 1920s. However, few know the names of such performers as Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the Nicholas brothers, or Jeni LeGon, from whom artists like Astaire took inspiration. These African American performers fade into the pages of history books, unlike names such as Gene Kelly, Ginger Rogers, and Donald O’Connor. The white performers of the first half of the twentieth century represent a phase of cultural appropriation which left the credit for tap dance not in the hands of innovate artists of color, but rather in the hands of dynamic on-screen performers, predominantly white.

A resurgence in the improvisation-based style of tap dance for both stage and screen has emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, led greatly by dancers and choreographers such as Savion Glover and Gregory Hines. Glover is responsible for such hits as the movie *Happy Feet* and Broadway Musical *Bring in ‘Da*

Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk. This revival of the more African-inclined roots of American tap dance show a living thread in the rhythmic storytelling passed down all the way from the 1650s.

2.4. A Bridge to the Future

Tap dance, though clouded by a long history of cultural appropriation and lack of accurately awarded credit, also exists as a highly accessible artform. “Tap dancing is a mode of transportation in the search for self-expression. Through the ages, humans have instinctively utilized their innate sense of rhythm to communicate with their world and each other through dancing.”⁴ There is a unifying factor in tap dance, through an innate sense of rhythm and a natural tendency towards exploration of that rhythm. This exploration cannot be limited to those with two feet, as one-legged dancer Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates made clear through his over forty year tap dance career, appearing “on *The Ed Sullivan Show* twenty-one times—more than any other tap dancer.”⁵ Tap is always evolving, creating an accessibility and agency for dancers of varying ability.



Figure 2. Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and Shirley Temple in *The Little Colonel*, 1935
<https://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/backstage/2018/10/tap-dancing-history.html>

Tap continuously breaks down barriers. One dancer in particular, however, continuously changed history with the work he did. Bill “Bojangles” Robinson was an American stage and screen performer during the first half of the twentieth century. Robinson covered every venue from Broadway to Hollywood, making his mark bold and memorable along the way. Robinson was known for breaking free from the molds of blackface stereotypes and performing as his authentic self. Perhaps his most compelling contribution, however, was in his “trademark ‘stair dance’—a fifteen-minute routine consisting of a series of elegant taps that skipped gracefully up and down a set of stairs.”⁶ This beloved routine made history in 1935 when he performed it alongside Shirley Temple in the film *The Little Colonel*, making Robinson and Temple the first interracial dance partners on screen. Tap dance bridged a gap many thought impossible to achieve. The scene is depicted above in Figure 2. This moment in history resonates with the idea that, though suppressed and appropriated, cultural arts have a poignant resiliency that permits their narrative power to prevail. Despite attempts a century prior, Robinson’s work epitomizes tap’s resistance to hegemony. Tap dance is the account of American culture—a fusion of global practices into something new. The development of tap is a conversation, not a recitation; it evolves, it changes, it adapts, it overcomes.

3. Conclusions

In order to cognize a people or society, one must look to the arts of said people. Therefore, in analyzing the social and political culture of America, an examination of tap dance is essential. This dynamic artform provides further insight into understanding the relationship between African slaves and Irish indentured servants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as further study into manners in which slave owners suppressed the identity of African slaves. Furthermore, study of tap dance informs the frequent problematic nature of American musical theatre and performing arts popularized in the first fifty years of the twentieth century through American Minstrelsy and early Hollywood musicals. Tap dance provides an illustration of the effects of cultural appropriation on an artform with non-western roots’ inability to be viewed on the same intellectual level as western art.

Despite attempts of suppression and a history of appropriation, the edifying character of tap dance demonstrates the powerful nature of African and AfroAmerican dance forms in American culture. Tap dance’s history strongly argues

that an embodied performative art can work both personally and syncretically, in order to resist hegemony. Efforts to eradicate African culture and tradition only bred innovation. The loss of drums, an African cultural cornerstone, only propagated the birth of dance unique to American culture. Reared from African culture, preserved by appropriation of white dancers, and renewed by modern African American dancers, tap withstands the test of time. The commandeering of culture witnessed on the minstrel stage exhibits the power of tap dance. Despite being used out of context from the originators of the form, the strength of the practice endured. Though treated as a piece of lesser culture from a lesser people, its ability to draw crowds and attention overcomes such ideas. The performers who appropriated tap dance knew the resiliency and impact the art had, creating a surprising and inspiring resistance to the supremacy of nineteenth and twentieth century appropriation.

Tap dance subsists as fully American, encapsulating what an artform of such designation signifies—a blending of global cultures, filled with troubled pasts, as well as hope for a brighter future. This research is innovative because it opens the door to further discussion into cultural appropriation in the United States through avenues Americans, young and old, understand—art and popular culture. Tap dance offers individuals the opportunity to further analyze issues facing contemporary society in a more wholistic, as well as personal manner.

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