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# A Brief History of Tap, Jazz + Hip-Hop

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2013



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Susan Yung, publications manager at BAM, produces programs, editorial content, and various projects, and edits and contributes to the [BAM Blog](#). She was associate editor on *BAM: The Complete Works*, the extensive book celebrating the institution's 150th year, and contributed a number of essays on iconic artists, including Pina Bausch and Bill T. Jones. As a freelance writer with a focus on dance and visual art, she blogs at [Ephemeralist.com](#), and has contributed to numerous publications and websites including *Dance Magazine*, WNET's Sunday Arts blog, *Pointe*, *Village Voice*, *Ballet-Tanz* (Berlin), *Brooklyn Rail*, and many others. Yung served for eight years on the Bessie Awards committee, and has adjudicated for several cultural grant- and award-giving organizations.



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## INTRODUCTION

American contemporary dance has evolved into many divergent styles. Each is as unique as one language is from another, yet just as romance languages share Latin's roots, these styles also share common origins. The genres of tap, jazz, and hip-hop are each distinct, yet they all have an emphasis on music: either rhythmically illustrating accompanying music, or in the case of tap, sometimes actually creating music. These three styles also place an emphasis on entertainment, whether in a more traditional sense of engaging viewers on a one-on-one basis, or by staging competitions with other dancers, as is common in tap and hip-hop. All three, however, showcase the best of America's "melting pot" spirit in lively, highly interpretive, physical, and expressive dance styles.

The three styles were founded largely by Americans of African descent, with strands from the British Isles. But while hip-hop is a young form, beginning in the 1970s, tap is relatively old, developing in parallel with the shifting role of African-Americans during their long struggle toward civil rights, and eventually branching into jazz in the 20th century.

## TAP DANCE

In America beginning in the mid-17th century, tap dance evolved from West African dances done by slaves and influences from the British Isles, including Irish step dancing and English clog dancing. Qualities from both geographical influences blended—with the African emphasis on dynamic and flow, and the British emphasis on technique and footwork. The different predominant characteristics from both can still be traced in today's variety of approaches to tap dancing.

The growth of tap can, in part, be attributed to artistic repression. A slave insurrection in the 1730s caused white slave masters to ban the use of drums, which they considered a tool for organizing revolution. Hence, resourcefulness and ingenuity led people to make rhythms with their bodies, and more specifically, their feet. Later in the 18th century, jig dancing contests were held on makeshift wooden plank "stages," awarding the most intricate routines and exciting dancers who maintained their balance.

Minstrel shows, immensely popular in the early- to mid-1800s, featured Caucasian (and

later African-heritage) performers in blackface, lampooning stereotypes of black behavior while simultaneously giving exposure to elements of African culture that found popularity in Vaudeville as minstrelsy's politics became outmoded. [William Henry Lane](#) ("Master Juba") performed in minstrel shows, at the time a rare black performer among whites. Minstrelsy, which at once spoofed and paid respect to black culture, reflects a tumultuous young country with an industrial, capital driven north and the plantations and slavery of the south. Vaudeville, which took off in the 1880s, featured a variety of acts, from serious monologues to acrobatics to dancing. Several circuits were established, linking a network of theaters, where proven acts could tour in an organized way.

Around 1900, the dance form was still known as clog, step, buck, or buck-and-wing dance. Its popularity was growing although it was essentially segregated. Theaters formed touring networks, which catalyzed the genre's dissemination. An organization named Theater Owners' Booking Association (TOBA) linked black Vaudeville theaters and artists. Broadway's popularity was also on the rise, but it would be Vaudeville that fostered tap's legacy. The ever-diversifying field would expand to accommodate more technical expertise and greater individuality.

The best-known artists of the 20th-century include the [Nicholas Brothers](#) (Harold and Fayard Thomas), whose daring acrobatics—jumping into splits and leaping between platforms over the band—drew gasps. Pairs of dancers arose in part as a result of a rule forbidding blacks from performing alone. "[Buck and Bubbles](#)"—John "Bubbles" Sublett and Ford "Buck" Washington—distinguished themselves with elegant tuxedos and piano accompaniment, and were habitués of Harlem's Hoofers' Club, where informal but competitive dance-offs took place. [Bill "Bojangles" Robinson](#) exemplified a suave, crisp polish; his staircase dances became his unique signature.

In the 1930s, Vaudeville was declining, but Broadway and motion pictures were gaining popularity. This meant elaborate, splashy production numbers created by the likes of Busby Berkeley became a taste eagerly acquired by audiences, while more intimate improvisational showings receded from the public eye. Performers who emerged in that era remain icons of the genre—[Ann Miller](#), [Ray Bolger](#), Donald [O'Connor](#), [Gene Kelly](#), and most indelibly, [Fred Astaire](#) and his frequent partner [Ginger Rogers](#).



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Kelly and Astaire represented two very different, compelling faces of tap. Kelly wore slim-fitting sporty clothes, and blended tap with the burgeoning form of jazz, with its deep pliés and bent arms held away from the body. He carried himself with a confident attitude that seemed to personify the US, as seen in the technicolor epic, [An American in Paris](#). The jazzy notes found in Kelly's routines would pick up steam on Broadway and in film. [Astaire](#), on the other hand, was all elegance and grace. Often garbed in a tuxedo with a top hat or cane, he was a silver screen star who evolved from black & white into color with ease. Ginger Rogers was his frequent partner; they epitomized romance, humor, American optimism and choreographic ingenuity.

Tap dance may have faded from public view in the mid-20th century, but it found many advocates in classrooms and festivals. While tap's steps are codified to a certain extent, and its vocabulary standardized, it has always been a highly individualistic dance form, continually evolving with each new interpreter. Thus the art form was kept alive by practitioners like Jimmy Slyde, [Charles "Honi" Coles](#), and John Bubbles, all of whom appeared in Hollywood films or on Broadway stages. The next generation included many women such as [Dianne Walker](#), [Brenda Bufalino](#), [Lynn Dally](#), and [Jane Goldberg, who, through her organization Word of Foot](#), hosted conferences and kept the genre's traditions abuzz in the early 1980s and beyond.

Soon thereafter, a new generation of aficionados would watch American tapper Gregory Hines battle Russian ballet superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov in the film [White Nights](#). Their respective dance genres could be seen as indicative of their nation's characteristics. Hines displayed athleticism, virtuosity, and great screen charisma. He starred in [Jelly's Last Jam](#) (1992) with the young [Savon Glover](#), whom many people consider among the finest tap dancers ever. Glover emphasizes musical structure and counterpoint, working out ever more complex rhythms to a broad variety of music, including classical. He won a Tony Award for best choreography for the 1996 Broadway show, [Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk](#) and inspired another new generation.

Festivals are held across the US, in particular in cities such as St. Louis, Chicago, and Boston. The [Tap Extravaganza](#), which began in 1989, celebrates National Tap Dance Day and selects a dancer to receive an annual lifetime achievement award. Recent years have seen the emergence

of a diverse new generation of tap dancers, with increasingly individual stylistic flourishes. They include [Max Pollack](#), [Roxanne Butterfly](#), [Taman-go](#), and [Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards](#), and [Jason Samuels Smith](#), who is featured alongside tap icon [Arthur Duncan](#) in the short film [Tap Heat](#).

[Michelle Dorrance](#) has attracted deserved attention in recent years not only for her vibrant tap skills, but her creative, experimental approach to the form in solos as well as for her company, Dorrance Dance/New York. Her inventive choreography, sometimes done in socks as well as tap shoes, can be seen in spaces that usually present modern dance.

In broader pop culture, tap has a perpetual presence on Broadway, as seen in recent revivals such as [42<sup>nd</sup> Street](#) and [Anything Goes](#). Irish step dancing shows, spearheaded by [Riverdance](#), have proved to be immensely popular, and theatrical productions featuring step dancing are found off-Broadway. And both forms can occasionally be seen on some of TV's popular dance and talent competition shows. In the concert dance arena, companies such as Lynn Dally's [Jazz Tap Ensemble](#) perform around the country and internationally. The genre has grown to accommodate both tightly choreographed dances and the type of ingenious improvisation that finds parallels in music jams.

## JAZZ

Of tap, jazz, and hip-hop dance, jazz is the broadest genre in terms of technique. Like the music from which it takes its name, it relies strongly on personal interpretations of rhythm and dynamic. The jazz family tree shares its trunk with tap, which began early in America's history when slaves used their bodies and feet as percussion instruments, as drums were banned as instruments of revolution. African dances mixed with those from the British Isles, and new styles of dance emerged through competitions. With few exceptions, early on blacks were not permitted to perform, but the popularity of African culture took off in the latter part of the 19th-century in the prevailing form of entertainment, minstrelsy.

At the start of the 20th-century, to ragtime and ballroom orchestral and big band music, dance gained a firm foothold in the public imagination through revues ([Darktown Follies](#), [Ziegfeld Follies](#)), clubs ([Hoofers Club](#), [Cotton Club](#), [Savoy Ballroom](#)), and musical theater. The 1921 revue



# BAM

*Shuffle Along* included in its chorus [Josephine Baker](#), who became one of the era's biggest stars. Social dance such as the [Lindy Hop](#) (later called the jitterbug), was a way for the populace to access this new-found freer style of dancing—in a way an entrée for many into African cultural influences.

Jazz and tap were featured prominently in film, spreading their popularity, through such luminaries as [Bill “Bojangles” Robinson](#), [Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers](#), and [Gene Kelly](#). On Broadway, choreographers working primarily in ballet and modern began to choreograph shows, such as *Agnes De Mille*, *Donald McKayle*, *George Balanchine*, and *Jerome Robbins*. Strong traces of jazz would continue to surface throughout these choreographers' classical ballet repertory, for example, parallel positions and flexed feet and hands.

Robbins' [West Side Story](#) was a hit both on Broadway (1957) and the silver screen (1961); it won 10 Oscars, including best picture and best direction for Robbins and Robert Wise. Its dances were condensed into the *West Side Story Suite* in 1995 for New York City Ballet, which continues to perform it. The company has many Robbins ballets in its repertory, including 1958's [New York Export: Opus Jazz](#), revived in 2005. It was adapted as a critically-acclaimed film in 2010, with dances shot in various locations around New York City.

[Jack Cole](#) choreographed many films in a signature style that oozed coolness, with its deeply bent knees, limp “puppy” hands, and compass point arm moves. It shared ideas with the movement of Bob Fosse, who added dramatic details—sultry shoulder and pelvic flourishes, and a bowler hat and cane. Matt Mattox, one of Cole's dancers who was featured in many films, developed a jazz class patterned after the structure of a ballet class, and became a highly respected and influential teacher and proponent of the style.

Modern dance's rise dovetailed with some of the more lyrical strains of jazz. [Alvin Ailey](#) studied and then performed with [Lester Horton](#), a well-known teacher and choreographer, before establishing his own company in 1958. Ailey combined some of the more formal elements of jazz with ballet, African, and modern to create a repertory for his now internationally-renowned company whose signature is [Revelations](#).

Around that time, jazz studios and teaching were

on the rise. New York-based [Luigi](#), who received a 2013 Bessie Award for lifetime achievement, had a silky smooth, pulsing style developed in part as a therapeutic response to a serious accident; his classes drew big crowds even if the style didn't take a firm hold on the stage. Phil Black's studio, located just north of Times Square on Broadway, was a hotspot for jazz students. [Gus Giordano](#), in Chicago, was a strong advocate for the jazz genre, writing the *Anthology of American Jazz Dance*, and organizing the Jazz Dance World Congress. Lynn Simonson co-founded Dance Space Center in New York in 1983, where her fluid, propulsive style of jazz became popular (the center evolved into Dance New Amsterdam, which recently closed).

[Twyla Tharp's](#) repertory is so varied and deep that it escapes classification, although she gained a following during the time of the Judson Church post-modernists. Some of her dances can be described as jazzy, with rolling hips, a louche beatnik attitude, and playful musical syncopation. She has also created grand-scaled ballets for opera houses, and smash hit Broadway musicals, such as [Movin' Out](#).

Lou Conte founded [Hubbard Street Dance Chicago](#) in 1977; this company became a respected force in performing contemporary repertory with a jazz bent and strong technique. Building on Conte's early choreographic contributions and continuing to evolve under current Artistic Director Glenn Edgerton, HSDC currently boasts a diverse repertory from leading international dancemakers, expanding its breadth to include a wide range of genres from ballet to gaga (Ohad Naharin's technique).

Broadway continues to be a major repository of musical theater jazz by the likes of Lynne Taylor-Corbett, Rob Marshall, Graciela Daniele, and Susan Stroman, many of who direct as well as choreograph. Many contemporary choreographers incorporate jazzy elements into some of their repertory, such as Lar Lubovitch and [Trey McIntyre](#). Michael Jackson had been a pop star since he was a child, but when MTV finally conceded to show his videos (they previously didn't show black artists), the genre took off. His immensely popular music videos of “[Beat It](#),” “[Billie Jean](#),” and “[Thriller](#)” were huge hits in part due to his magnetic dancing, with nods to Bob Fosse and other jazz artists.

“Contemporary” is often used to define dance seen in Broadway musical theater and more commercial ventures. At the same time, the term can



# BAM

have a broader application to modern dance styles after the [Judson Movement](#), including post-modern, ballet-influenced, and more conceptual choreography. With the recent boom of dance on television reality shows, such as [So You Think You Can Dance](#), contemporary dance has become a new subgenre of jazz as taught in numerous New York studios. Loosely defined, it can be a blend of modern, ballet, and jazz styles—lyrical, technically challenging, with big leaps and multiple spins and infused with dramatic emotion, done by choreographers such as [Mia Michaels](#). Ideally, it would be helpful to expand the lexicon to reflect the ever-broadening art form as the word contemporary is being stretched to its limits.

Broadway has been the stomping ground for jazz choreographers, but several dancemakers known in other genres have had great success recently—[Bill T. Jones](#), who emerged in the 80s as a postmodern choreographer, and Karole Armitage, known for her [punk ballet](#), to name two. What all of these artists share is the desire to connect and entertain through dancing to, or in syncopation with, rhythmic music.

## HIP-HOP

Hip-hop dance emerged as one strand of a larger movement that encompassed four elements: deejaying, emceeing, break dancing, and graffiti. It took root in the Bronx in the 1970s, when [DJ Kool Herc](#), using a couple of turntables and a mixer, pulled out the breaks in funk records and looped these sampled percussion segments for long repeating spans. Dancers developed particular moves to go along with these breaks, and became known as b-boys or b-girls, the “b” for break.

At dance parties that became so popular they eventually moved outside to parks, Kool Herc’s exhortations and spoken messages and rhymes to the dancers and partygoers were fundamental to the beginnings of rapping, which evolved as emcees developed unique styles and subject matter. Often the text expressed political opinions or frustration arising from the civil rights movement. Later, artists took free rein to personalize rap to reflect lifestyle choices which arose from finding lucrative success in the music industry.

[DJ Afrika Bambaataa](#) coined the term “hip-hop,” which had started to emerge in the 70s, when New York City, and particularly the Bronx, was crime-ridden and derelict. The Bronx looked like

a war zone, which, due to drugs and gangs, it had all but become. But without a certain mindset of lawlessness and the abandonment of the borough by the middle and business classes, the seeds that became hip-hop might never have found fertile ground. The restless youth who had no exit found an expressive outlet, and communal purpose, in the various genres of hip-hop. What might have been manifested in violence often became competition between artists, although brutal violence would continue to be present in the music world.

[Graffiti](#) covered subway cars outside and in, and taggers would compete with one another to see who had more dominance. They developed individual styles that became instantly recognizable from afar, often featuring big, loopy, colorful script and signature cartoon imagery or graphics. It mirrored the turf wars being played out by gangs on the streets, but in a much less bloody manner, even if graffiti was the destruction of property. But in part due to a forward-thinking Bronx gallery called [Fashion Moda](#), graffiti moved off the subway cars and onto gallery walls. Many of the main practitioners became celebrities in their own right, like [Futura 2000](#), [Keith Haring](#), and [Dondi](#). This shift—from being the visual manifestation of a street-fought turf battle to a commodity traded internationally for large sums of money—would echo throughout hip-hop’s most popular forms, particularly music.

The aggressive, repetitive beats played by deejays were conducive to dance floor competitions between b-girls and boys, who would improvise and try to impress the crowds with their best moves. The style began upright with top rocking, a basic cross-and-hop step that has the appearance of moving, but actually remains in one spot, as the tight confines of the circle (or cipher) dictate. The necessity of remaining essentially stationary forced hip-hop dancers to use creativity in making it seem like movement is happening. They added popping and locking (or smurfing), and robotic moves with exaggerated stops and frozen poses. One of the early, best-known groups was the [Rock Steady Crew](#), formed in 1977.

The vocabulary shifted down the body to incorporate floorwork, sometimes called footmoves or floor rocking, featuring freezes (frozen poses supported by the hands and arms with the feet aloft) and spins. Spinning began on the head with simple rotations (pencils), increasing in speed and revolutions. Dancers spun on their rear ends, eventually pivoting on their backs like



# BAM

upside-down turtles, rotating multiple times to dizzying effect, or doing impressive windmills where the legs slice through the air. Other forms of dance influenced the genre, including tap and capoeira, the Brazilian form descending from martial arts in which the performers use all limbs equally and are upside-down as often as rightside up. The west coast contingent, rooted in Los Angeles, developed its own distinct styles such as popping, strutting, and krumping.

For the most part, such dancing was not commonly seen in traditional theaters, where modern dance, ballet, and tap performances were offered. Variations of hip-hop dance came to be seen on some broad platforms beginning in the 1980s. Michael Jackson's [style](#), hugely popular via his music videos on MTV, was more jazz-based, but it paved the way for other black artists, and his group dances were precursors to some of today's hip-hop crews, which perform elaborate, dramatic routines that require precise synchronization. Festivals and [competitions](#) now draw performers from all around the world.

A widely-seen commercial version of hip-hop was seen on the 1990s sketch and variety TV show, [In Living Color](#). The show employed a regular group of "fly dancers" who performed snappy dance sequences and included future stars such as Jennifer Lopez. While the choreography varied greatly and crossed into jazz or modern at times, the numbers often featured a bold physicality, hopping footwork, and combinations that stayed in one place, like hip-hop. Pop musicians began to include similar dances as regular attractions in arena concerts.

In the 90s, troupes formed that were patterned more along the lines of modern dance companies. [Rennie Harris Puremovement](#), founded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1992, featured rapid steps and big athletic moves in a theater setting. In recent years, Harris has been commissioned by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, bringing hip-hop into one of the most respected contemporary dance repertoires. [Illstyle and Peace Productions](#), also based in Philadelphia, blends old and new school hip-hop with other genres such as tap, ballet, DJing, and beatboxing in performances with an upbeat attitude. [Ana "Rokafella" Garcia](#) has made inroads into a primarily male-dominated world, gaining steadfast fans in performances; she recently made a film, *ALL THE LADIES SAY*, about six women breakers.

As the film [Planet B-Boy](#) documents, hip-hop has become a worldwide phenomenon. [Compagnie Kafig](#), a French company founded in 1996, was a leading proponent of hip-hop in traditional theaters, and incorporated dance routines within a dramatic context, supported by theatrical trap-pings. Individuals have also distinguished themselves in the field. Danny Hoch, a performance artist who established himself in theaters in downtown New York City, has organized a hip-hop dance theater festival. [Bill Shannon](#) dances with crutches, which adds a new dimension to hip-hop. And from Brazil hails [Grupo de Rua](#), which maintains the grittiness of the street in its conceptually ambitious and polished productions. And it can be seen on TV in competition shows such as America's Best Dance Crew and, in relatively commercial forms, So You Think You Can Dance.

Hip-hop, in all its manifestations, has evolved into two minds and continues to provoke major debates. Its music and rap have developed into an often hugely lucrative business, where many artists hold up a mirror to their own success, for better or worse, symbolized by materialism. There are still proponents of its origins, which focused on civil rights and the state of African-Americans. Graffiti's surge peaked long ago, but it went through a major boom during which some artists profited heftily while others went unrecognized.

In contrast, hip-hop dance has had far fewer opportunities to capitalize on its artistry in the way that music and rap can. It's possible that it has been left in a more pure state, impervious to the temptations that riches can bring. And the success of its transition from the street and club to the proscenium theater is still debatable. Yet it continues to be performed among the people—in the [subway](#), in Times Square, where it maintains the gritty appeal it was born with, in theaters, competitions, and clubs.

Hip-hop continues to innovate, with dancers collaborating across styles and cultures. [Lil Buck](#), once a street dancer, performs his own brand of Memphis jookin', a recent form that has been embraced by unexpected sectors, including ballet and classical music. His fluid arms and toe-spins in sneakers evoke hip-hop, but as his [Swan Lake](#) demonstrates, the structure is less pegged to a series of big moves than an overall through-line. His terrific recent popularity and broad reach—[collaborating with cellist Yo-Yo Ma](#)—show how quickly dance can evolve.



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