

the history of tap dance

the history of tap dance is a captivating story of cultural fusion, rhythmic innovation, and artistic expression. This distinctive dance form emerged in the United States during the 19th century, blending elements of African tribal dances, Irish jigs, English clog dancing, and minstrel show performances. Over time, tap dance evolved into a highly technical and entertaining art, influencing musical theater, film, and popular culture worldwide. The development of tap dance reflects broader social and cultural changes, highlighting themes of identity, creativity, and resilience. This article explores the origins, key figures, stylistic developments, and lasting impact of tap dance through a detailed examination of its historical trajectory. The following sections will provide a comprehensive understanding of the history of tap dance, its cultural roots, and its significance in the performing arts.

- Origins and Early Influences
- Evolution and Popularization in the 20th Century
- Iconic Tap Dancers and Their Contributions
- Styles and Techniques of Tap Dance
- Tap Dance in Contemporary Culture

Origins and Early Influences

The history of tap dance begins in the 19th century United States, where various cultural influences converged to create a new dance form. African slaves brought rich rhythmic traditions and percussive dance styles, which combined with the European immigrants' folk dances, such as Irish jigs and English clog dancing. This blend of African and European dance elements laid the foundation for what would eventually become tap dance.

African Rhythmic Traditions

African dance traditions emphasized complex rhythms, body percussion, and improvisation. Enslaved Africans in America used dance as a form of communication, cultural preservation, and resistance. The emphasis on footwork and rhythmic expression in African dances significantly influenced the development of tap dance's percussive style.

European Folk Dances

Immigrants from Ireland, England, and Scotland brought their own step dances, such as Irish jigs and English clog dances, which featured intricate footwork and rhythmic tapping sounds. These dance styles were often performed in social gatherings and competitions, introducing the concept of percussive footwork to American audiences.

Minstrel Shows and Vaudeville

By the mid-19th century, minstrel shows, which were traveling variety performances, incorporated elements of both African American and European dance styles. These shows popularized early tap dancing forms, often performed by blackface entertainers. Vaudeville later became a major platform for tap dancers, enabling the art form to reach broader audiences and evolve further.

Evolution and Popularization in the 20th Century

The 20th century marked a significant period of growth and transformation for tap dance. It developed from its folk roots into a polished performance art seen on Broadway stages, in films, and in nightclubs. Technological advances, social changes, and the rise of new entertainment mediums contributed to tap dance's increasing popularity.

Broadway and Musical Theater

Tap dance became a staple of American musical theater, with choreographers integrating tap routines into large-scale productions. Shows like "Shuffle Along" and "Blackbirds" showcased African American talent and helped bring tap into mainstream entertainment. The visibility on Broadway established tap as both a popular and respected dance form.

Hollywood and Film Influence

Hollywood films introduced tap dance to an international audience. Stars such as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers brought tap routines to the silver screen, blending elegance and rhythm in their performances. Musical films of the 1930s and 1940s often featured elaborate tap sequences, helping to cement tap dance's place in popular culture.

Technological and Societal Factors

The development of sound recording and radio broadcasts allowed tap music and dance to reach new audiences. The Harlem Renaissance also played a crucial role, as African American artists gained greater recognition and influenced the artistic landscape. These factors collectively helped tap dance evolve and maintain its relevance throughout the century.

Iconic Tap Dancers and Their Contributions

The history of tap dance is closely linked to the contributions of influential dancers who expanded the art form's technical and expressive possibilities. Their innovations and performances shaped tap's development and inspired generations of dancers.

Bill “Bojangles” Robinson

Bill Robinson was one of the first African American tap dancers to gain widespread fame. Known for his clear, rhythmic style and upright posture, Robinson broke racial barriers and brought tap dance into mainstream entertainment. His stair dance remains iconic in tap history.

Gregory Hines

Gregory Hines revitalized tap dance in the late 20th century, combining traditional techniques with improvisation and jazz influences. As a performer, choreographer, and actor, Hines helped preserve tap's legacy while pushing its boundaries, making it accessible to new audiences.

Savion Glover

Savion Glover is credited with modernizing tap dance by emphasizing its percussive and rhythmic aspects. His style incorporates elements of hip-hop and funk, showcasing tap as a dynamic and evolving art form. Glover's work has been instrumental in keeping tap dance contemporary and relevant.

Other Notable Figures

- John Bubbles – Innovator of rhythm tap and complex footwork
- Cholly Atkins – Known for smooth, elegant choreography
- Ann Miller – Famous for speed and precision in tap dancing

- Honi Coles – Celebrated for his sophisticated style and technique

Styles and Techniques of Tap Dance

The history of tap dance encompasses a variety of styles and techniques that reflect its diverse origins and continual evolution. Understanding these styles provides insight into the artistic complexity and technical demands of tap dance.

Rhythm Tap

Rhythm tap focuses on the intricate musicality and syncopation of footwork. It emphasizes the dancer's ability to create complex rhythms and improvisations, often accompanied by jazz music. This style highlights tap as a form of percussion and musical expression.

Broadway Tap

Broadway tap is characterized by its theatricality and visual appeal. It often features larger, more exaggerated movements designed to be seen by an audience from a distance. This style is commonly integrated into musical theater performances and emphasizes showmanship.

Classical and Traditional Tap

Traditional tap honors the early forms and techniques developed by pioneers of the dance. It includes foundational steps such as shuffles, flaps, and time steps, often performed with a focus on clarity, precision, and rhythm.

Technical Elements and Footwork

Tap dance utilizes a wide range of footwork including:

- Shuffles: brushing the ball of the foot forward and backward
- Flaps: a brush step that lands on the ball of the foot
- Time Steps: signature sequences combining steps and taps
- Pullbacks: jumping backward onto the balls of the feet
- Cramp Rolls: a combination of heel and toe taps creating a rolling sound

Tap Dance in Contemporary Culture

Today, tap dance continues to thrive as both a performance art and a popular hobby. Its history informs contemporary practice, while new artists and educators innovate and expand its reach. Tap dance remains a vibrant part of cultural expression worldwide.

Educational Programs and Competitions

Tap dance is taught globally in dance schools, universities, and community programs. Competitions and festivals celebrate the art form, encouraging technical excellence and creativity among dancers of all ages.

Integration with Other Dance Forms

Modern tap dancers often blend tap with hip-hop, contemporary, and jazz styles, creating fresh hybrid forms. This cross-pollination enriches tap's vocabulary and attracts diverse audiences.

Media and Popularity

Television shows, films, and online platforms continue to showcase tap dance, introducing it to new generations. Documentaries and biographies highlight its rich history, while social media enables dancers to share performances and tutorials worldwide.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the origins of tap dance?

Tap dance originated in the United States during the 19th century, combining elements of African rhythmic footwork and European clog and jig dancing.

Who is considered the father of tap dance?

Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson is often considered the father of tap dance due to his significant influence and popularization of the art form in the early 20th century.

How did tap dance evolve in the early 20th century?

In the early 20th century, tap dance evolved through vaudeville shows and minstrel performances, incorporating jazz rhythms and becoming a popular stage performance style.

What role did African American performers play in the history of tap dance?

African American performers were central to the development of tap dance, bringing their rhythmic footwork traditions and innovating the style, despite facing racial discrimination.

How did tap dance contribute to the development of American entertainment?

Tap dance contributed to American entertainment by influencing jazz music, Broadway musicals, and Hollywood films, helping to shape the country's cultural landscape.

Who were the Nicholas Brothers and why are they significant in tap dance history?

The Nicholas Brothers were a legendary African American tap dance duo known for their acrobatic and innovative performances, greatly influencing the art form in the 1930s and 1940s.

What impact did the film industry have on the popularity of tap dance?

The film industry, especially during Hollywood's Golden Age, showcased tap dance in musicals, popularizing it worldwide and immortalizing dancers like Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly.

How did tap dance change during the 1950s and 1960s?

During the 1950s and 1960s, tap dance saw a decline in mainstream popularity but experienced innovation through jazz influences and became more of a concert dance form.

What are some key styles or techniques in tap dance history?

Key styles in tap dance history include rhythm tap, which focuses on complex footwork and musicality, and Broadway tap, which emphasizes performance and choreography.

How is tap dance preserved and promoted today?

Today, tap dance is preserved and promoted through dance schools, festivals, competitions, and performances worldwide, as well as through educational programs and media.

Additional Resources

1. *"Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History"*

This book explores the rich cultural roots of tap dancing in America, tracing its origins from African and Irish dance traditions. It highlights key performers and the evolution of tap through the 20th century, emphasizing its role in shaping American entertainment. The author provides insightful commentary on tap's influence in music, film, and theater.

2. *"Stepping in Time: The Story of Tap Dance"*

"Stepping in Time" offers a comprehensive overview of tap dance's development, focusing on the social and artistic contexts that shaped this vibrant art form. Through vivid storytelling and historical photographs, readers learn about pioneering tap dancers and the venues that popularized tap. The book also discusses tap's resurgence in contemporary dance scenes.

3. *"Rhythm on My Feet: The History of Tap Dance"*

This engaging volume delves into the technical and stylistic aspects of tap dance history, highlighting influential choreographers and performers. It examines the interplay between tap and jazz music, revealing how rhythm and improvisation became central to tap's identity. The narrative also addresses challenges faced by tap dancers due to changing entertainment trends.

4. *"Broadway Taps: The Legacy of Tap Dance in Musical Theater"*

Focusing on tap's impact on Broadway, this book traces how tap dance became a staple of musical theater performances. It profiles legendary tap stars and the choreographers who brought innovative tap sequences to the stage. Readers gain an understanding of the genre's theatrical evolution and its enduring appeal in live performance.

5. *"The Tap Dance World of Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson"*

Dedicated to one of tap dance's most iconic figures, this biography chronicles Bill Robinson's groundbreaking career and contributions to the art form. The book sheds light on Robinson's techniques, his role in breaking racial barriers, and his influence on future generations of dancers. It also contextualizes his work within the broader history of American entertainment.

6. *"Echoes of the Tap: African American Roots and Legacy"*

This book explores the African American origins of tap dance and its cultural significance within Black communities. It highlights key performers, social venues, and historical moments that shaped tap's identity. The author discusses how tap served as both artistic expression and social commentary throughout its history.

7. *"Syncopated Steps: The Jazz and Tap Dance Connection"*

"Syncopated Steps" investigates the close relationship between jazz music and tap dance, illustrating how the two art forms influenced each other's evolution. The book features profiles of famous jazz musicians and tap dancers who collaborated to create dynamic performances. It also covers the technical aspects of rhythm and improvisation that define both styles.

8. *"Tap Dance in Film: From Silent Movies to Hollywood Musicals"*

This volume charts the portrayal and popularity of tap dance in the film industry, starting with silent films and moving through the golden age of Hollywood musicals. It examines how tap sequences were choreographed for the camera and the impact of film stars on tap's mainstream success. The book includes behind-the-scenes stories and critical analysis of iconic tap dance scenes.

9. *"Modern Tap: Innovations and Influences"*

Focusing on the contemporary era, this book discusses how modern tap dancers have expanded the boundaries of the art form by incorporating new styles and technologies. It highlights influential modern tap artists and their contributions to dance education and performance. The text also reflects on how tap continues to evolve while honoring its rich history.

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