

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN DANCE

Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

Overview Because of its history of converging cultures, shifting notions of identity, and a great desire for self-expression, dance has taken a unique shape and form in North America. The early uses of dance were associated with religion and ceremonies, but later, became very important socially, providing ways to connect groups, forge identities, and to innovate. The fusions of dance forms and functions was accompanied by innovations in music as well.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): Archeologists have found some evidence that the Clovis culture had spaces for ceremonies and collective acts. Whether or not they wore costumes or practiced rituals at the same time is not clear. However, based on the cultures that emerged, it is likely that they did have rituals that included drums, song and dance.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): The Pueblo Indians performed dances on feast days (which, after the arrival of the Europeans, corresponded to Patron Saint Days). The dances were essentially shamanistic, and dealt with entreating various entities to imbue the dancer with their special qualities. The dances include the Eagle Dance, for vision, courage, and leadership. The Deer Dance has to do with the attributes of the deer, which include intuition, quickness, and an understanding of the night.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): The Algonquin, Iriquois, and Seneca, as well as other tribes were largely matriarchal. Two of the native dances are mainly performed by women. The Jingle Dress is a medicine dress, and can bring healing. The women's Fancy Shawl represents a butterfly in flight, and it represents a woman warrior. The Grass Dance involves packing the grass down with one's feet in order to create a good dancing surface for all the dancers to follow.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): Artifacts found in the mounds and burial sites of Cahokia, Spiro (OK), and Tuscaloosa (AL) reveal musical instruments, masks, and rattles that were presumed to be a part of religious ceremonies. They practiced shamanistic types of dances, and the masks that have been found have the following animal motifs: deer, puma, wildcat, turtle, and fox.

EARLY MODERN (COLONIAL) PERIOD

Native Americans: Traditional Native American dances began to incorporate some of the narrative dances imported by the Europeans. The first was the Matachinas, adopted by the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest. Imported from the Spanish Conquistadores, the dance depicts the victory of the Christians over the Moors. Perhaps the largest influence that the Europeans had was the use of materials. The beads, silver ornaments, and woven cloth represented new materials for the Native Americans, and they embraced the materials for their costumes.

Louisiana / Cajun Jig: French immigrants from a part of French Canada referred to as "Acadia" moved to Louisiana, where they established French-speaking enclaves. They developed new instruments and integrated the accordion and other instruments to create a dance that resembled dances from France.

Eastern Seaboard / Contra Dance: Settlers in the plantation-growing areas, the tobacco farms, and the Appalachian highlands adopted Scottish highland dances using improvised instruments and percussion. The most popular was the Contra Dance, which involves couples positioned in lines or in circles. They dance and jig about, and the change partners throughout the dance. It became very popular because it required no formal training and was

accessible to dancers of all ages. Further, it was possible to dance with just a single violin or piano as the source of music.

19TH CENTURY

Folk Dancing: Dances were brought to North America by European settlers, who modified the dances to fit the musical instruments, locations, and personal tastes. French traditions resulted in the Cajun jib, while the Northeast, Eastern Seaboard, and Appalachia were homes to the contra dance, a kind of line dancing that originated in Scotland. Clogging, an Irish tradition, was embraced in Irish communities in the Northeast, and evolved into different dance forms such as tap (formal) and stomp (informal).

Social Dances: Immigrants from Europe brought a number of dances that were adopted and modified to align with American tastes. For example, the country dances such as the Scotch Reel was transformed into the Virginia Reel. The Waltz came reluctantly to a still-Puritan America, while the German and Bohemian immigrants to Texas and the Great Plains brought the Polka and the Mazurka. Eventually, the variety of dances faded, and most social occasions had either the Waltz or the Two-Step. They were taught to all young people and the ability to dance well was considered a necessity for social acceptance.

Religious Dance: The Shakers were a religious sect whose main tenets were celibacy and a firm belief in the imminent return of Christ. They were called the "Shakers" because of their religious services that included dance forms. Contemporary witnesses reported that they were ecstatically shaking in their ceremonies. However, recent recordings of current ceremonies of the surviving members show a very sedate and clearly planned choreography. It was no longer exciting.

African Dances: The slaves brought dance traditions from West Africa that tied dances everyday life and also special occasions such as births, marriages, or holidays. In the mid-19th century, Minstrel shows began to emerge which included comedic routines that both parodied and celebrated African-American traditions. Some of the dances included the Juba, which includes slapping the legs, chest, and cheeks to keep time, as well as stomping. There were several variations, such as the Hambone (slapping the thigh). The dancers would perform several different types of dance moves, including the Yaller Cat, Pigeon Wing, Blow that Candle Out, and The Long Dog Scratch.

Native American Dance Spectacles in Wild West Shows: The settling of the American West and the rise of penny novels romanticized the life of settlers, the cattle ranchers (and especially cattle drives), and they also exoticized the Native Americans. To capitalize on the fascination, fanned on by the penny novels sold to urban city-dwellers, enterprising "cousins" of P. T. Barnum (traveling circus inventor) such as Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill invented the traveling "Wild West Show." The shows traveled by rail, and when they set up in a town, they fascinated everyone with their spectacles of horseback riding, sharp-shooting, mock Indian raids, roping and rope tricks, and above all, the Indian Dance. What emerged was a very colorful combination of stomp dance, and Fancy Dance, with Indians wearing very brightly colored costumes and enormous feather headdresses. The dances were a pastiche of different traditions, invented to elicit the maximum impact. The dances were very popular, and as is the case with shiny imitations, they quickly supplanted the real and the authentic.

Victorian "Interpretive" Dancing: Informal varieties of ballet came to be known as "interpretive" dancing in the nineteenth century. They were a bit scandalous, since the women wore what was considered to be very daring, revealing clothing.

20TH CENTURY

Ragtime: Ragtime, which emerged during the late 19th century and reached its peak before World War I, was characterized by its "ragged" rhythm (syncopation). It was a mainstay in certain African-American communities, but quickly crossed over and was sold in sheet music. Dances evolved to accompany ragtime, and they included the Two-Step, and the Cake Walk. A number of dances were popular among the working classes, and they included the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, and the Camel Walk. An elegant married couple, Irene and Vernon Castle, exhibited the new American dances in Paris, which served to popular and lessen the scandal.

Jazz: The "Jazz Age" began in earnest after the close of World War I, and the dance parlors and private parties that included an orchestra (or a phonograph) and dancing continued to be very popular. Instead of taking ballet or tap dances, children regularly learned ballroom dancing, and the new dances that were danced with the new music were extremely popular. They were upbeat and fairly easy to learn, and they expressed the exuberance of the era. Dances included the Fox-Trot, the Charleston, and American variations on Latin American imports, the Samba and the Tango.

Hollywood Dance: After the Wall Street crash of 1929, Hollywood became the emotional salve of the nation, and cinema-goers could escape their anxieties by watching elaborate spectacles of dance and exuberant, graceful dances in musicals. Busby Berkeley, Hollywood's most renowned choreographer, created spectacles of waves of women, men, fountains, and light. Individual dancers such as Fred Astaire (noted for his grace and versatility), Gene Kelly (known for his muscular vitality), Ginger Rogers, Cyd Charisse, and many other very talented dancers inspired ballroom dancing and also the incorporation of Latin dance moves. Great dance musicals were popular through the 1950s.

Swing: The returning veterans of World War II were eager to participate in the boom, and their optimism blossomed in a new form of music, the Swing, which included a new kind of dance, the Swing. The most famous Swing dance was the Jitterbug. The Western Swing evolved from the original Swing forms, and is danced with country-western music.

Modern Dance: As the desire for a less rigid form of ballet deepened, a new kind of interpretive dance emerged. While it uses moves from ballet, it incorporates additional moves, and it seeks to create a mood, tell a story, or break with tradition. It emphasizes the new and the creative urge. Isadora Duncan (1878-1927) wore tunics rather than tutus, and forged a new philosophy of dance that focused on creative self-expression and athleticism, rather than adherence to tradition. The movement gained acceptance, and now is one of the most important trends of dance. It is inclusive, and does not limit itself to body shape, age, or music.

Broadway / Hollywood Modern Dance: There was something of a revival of the dance musical in the 1970s with the gifted Bob Fosse, who took the experimental ideas of modern dance and combined them to make the uniquely American Dance Theatre. Fosse, who started out as a dancer, became a gifted choreographer and visionary. He began in the 1950s, at the end of the song and dance musical, but later his work deepened and darkened, with choreography that was both muscular and reflected the political edge of the day. His first break-out "dance theatre" production was *Cabaret*, which won every possible award for film and stage. Later, *Pippin*, *Chicago*, and his re-envisionings of *Sweet Charity* and *All That Jazz* made it clear the impact he had on choreography and in the widening influence of American Dance Theatre. Most of his stage productions took place in the 1950s through 1970s, and they were later made into movies, using the same choreography. His unique style pivoted the moves of ballet and jazz; Fosse's "positions" were turned-in knees, shrugging shoulders, sideways shuffling, "amoeba" movements, and the use of splayed fingers in the "jazz hand" and his willingness to emphasize decay and degradation through garish colors and grotesque makeup.

Pop Culture Dance: Closely tied with music, and disseminated through television dance shows, competitions, and later, music videos, popular music was often accompanied by a distinctive dance style or technique from the 1950s through the end of the century. Examples are Rock 'n' Roll (the "Twist" etc.), rap (Breakdancing), Country line dancing, HipHop, Reggae, Reggaeton, techno electro-dance,

Discussion/Questions

1. The civilizations in North America used dance in conjunction with religious ceremonies and to express connections to animals, natural phenomena, and spirituality. Some of the ways that they expressed the connection was through music and the costumes used in dance, which included masks and skins. Describe the shamanistic beliefs expressed through dance.
2. Dance served important social functions within all levels and groups of society. For the recent immigrants, the European dances provided a familiar cultural connection. For African American slaves, the dances served as social connection as well as a point of resistance. For isolated communities, dance served as a method of connection and

communication. For the elites, dance was a way of demonstrating one's privileged education. Describe how each one of those types of dances evolved over time in North America.

3. In the 19th century, the traveling show (circuses, Wild West shows, carnivals), traveled along the railroad lines and brought their bright, action-filled, and exotic spectacles to towns of all sizes. What inflamed the imagination most was its emphasis of the "exotic" and the way they brought scenes to life that had previously only been described in words in the dime novels. The dances that were included were a very important part. Describe the aspects of the dances in the Wild West shows that would have most intrigued the audiences. Explain how the desire to please audiences may have led to compromised authenticity.

4. Innovative dance forms went hand in hand with the rise of the recording industry and the commercialization of music. At first, there was sheet music that helped popularize the songs that were accompanied with dance (ragtime, fox-trot, the Charleston, etc.). Later, records were marketed, and dance halls helped spread the new music and dance. With the advent of television, and then later, the Internet, music and dance shows, as well as music videos encouraged both innovation and adoption of dance forms. Select 4 different dances that connected with popular music and describe the way that they reflected changing times.

Readings

Brown, Jean M., Naomi Mindlin, Charles Humphrey Woodford, Charles H. Woodford. (1998). *The Vision of Modern Dance: In the Words of Its Creators, Ed 2.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company.

Cass, Joan, et al. (1993) *Dancing Through History, Edition 1.* New York: Pearson.

Highwater, Jamake. (1996). *Dance: Rituals of Experience, Edition 3.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johnston, Kay. (2003). *The Spirit of Powwow.* Boston: Hancock House Publishers.

Patterson, Daniel W. (2000) *The Shaker Spiritual.* NY: Dover Publications.