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Music of the African Diaspora
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1920s Lindy Hop in The New Era

A Study of Lindy Hop's History and Contemporary Culture

I had just moved to North America when I heard of Lindy Hop for the first time. A friend of mine took me to a “swing event” where I watched a group of about 50 Canadians dance to old recordings of 1920's swing jazz. The environment was extremely friendly, everyone cheered when someone accomplished a cool move, people smiled as they clapped their hands to the music and dancers talked about rare Sidney Bechet vinyl records they were able to find at their local record stores. I enjoyed being at swing events, I was always asked to dance by multiple people despite not knowing how to do so. I made friends with the bands that were invited to play at the events and even took a beginner's class at a local church.

One day, during 2015's Lindy Bout (a Lindy Hop weekend event in Vancouver BC where dancers get together to social dance and perform solo and group choreographies) a “hopper” from Seattle presented a seminar about the history of Lindy Hop and how it has grown as a dance form in the past decade. It was the first time I had seen 1930's video recordings of the dance as it was in its early days so it made me wonder: Why are people dancing Lindy Hop today and how are they in majority white.

The Dance

Lindy Hop is a 1920's swing jazz, African American form of social dance derived from Charleston and Breakaway. "Lindy Hop in its most recognizable form, began emerging on the dance floor of the Savoy Ballroom in Harlan in 1935." (*William Given*, p. 229) During Lindy Hop's early days, couples entered a dance circle where they expressed a mixture of improvised and rehearsed dance moves often theatrical and laugh inducing. As lindy hoppers performs their moves the audience participates in the act by clapping along and excitingly shouting in response to the dancers. "On the dance floor, individuals from across the community, and from varying professions and socio-economic strata, could gather together in order to share in an experience of revelry that was based in equality and commonality on the dance floor." (*William Given*, p. 729)

Aside from being a form of entertainment Lindy Hop was a way in which African Americans expressed protest and freedom. According to Kendra Unruh on their publication *Black, working-class Women dancing the Lindy Hop* many of Lindy Hop dancers were young teenagers seeking Jazz culture, alcohol and sexual pleasure, things you could find at Savoy Ballroom. "it provided some of these Black youth a chance for achievement as well as a means to resist the dominant culture, both the White and Black bourgeois culture that emphasized the importance of work and respectability." (*Kendra Unruh*) Born during extreme racial tension Lindy Hop is often characterized as an expression of the 20's and 30's Black youth with its essence laying integrated with the African American experience.

In order to understand Lindy Hop's current growing popularity, it is important to make sense of how it became popular in the first place. As the dance grew increasingly popular Herbert "Whitey" White (an African American entrepreneur) put together a group of regular dancers called *Whitey's Lindy Hoppers* to regularly perform at various New York City clubs as well as travel around the



Figure 1 Hellzapoppin' 1941

country. (William Given, p. 730) The group later appeared on Broadway shows and Hollywood films such as *A Day at the Races* (Marx Brothers 1937) and *Hellzapoppin'* (Universal Pictures 1941). Another way in which the dance gain popularity was through the new acrobatic style of the young dancer *Frankie Manning* (member of the *Whitey's Lindy Hoppers*) who introduced air steps (stunt-like moves involving throwing the dance partner in the air) to the dance.



Figure 2 August 23, 1943 cover of Life magazine

The movie appearances of Lindy Hop for the first time brought the dance to white audiences “who viewed only the disembodied theatrical spectacle of the exciting air steps” (William Given, p. 730). The new audience then transformed the artform stripping away the ideals of inclusivity and community and steering it into a performance art in which the spectator only observes the dance, much like the movie watching experience that

introduced them to the dance. The new white dancers and audience generated an entire new market for Lindy Hop maintaining the dance's revenue inside the white American community. The newly appropriated artform becomes apparent with the August 23, 1943 *Life* magazine cover titled "Lindy Hop" featuring two white dancers "rigidly posed and grounded, smiling together with no one surrounding them." (*William Given*, p. 730)

With the end of the swing era and the birth of modern jazz in the late 40's and 50's, big bands were replaced by smaller ensembles, swing jazz was soon out of fashion and Lindy Hop lost its popularity. New dances such as Balboa and Rockabilly took over ballrooms across the American suburbs leaving Lindy Hop to survive on small jazz clubs in Europe where audiences still listened to swing music.

Swing Revival

In the beginning of the 1990's, nearly 50 years after the swing era, a new demand for swing jazz started to happen. In search of an alternative to rock and pop, with the aid of the accessibility of CDs, remastered jazz records began to sell. With a new search for swing music came an interest for Lindy Hop resulting in swing clinics happening around the country. Many of these clinics were taught by veteran hoppers such as Frankie Manning and Norma Miller who returned to the scene to teach the next generation of dancers.

With Lindy Hop back on the dance floor, it didn't take long until Movie producers and advertisers took notice of the swing revival. In 1993 the movie musical *Swing Kids*

(Hollywood Pictures) brought Lindy Hop back into the big screen though with an almost entire white cast. Another movie often attributed to the 1990's swing revival is the 1996 movie *Swingers* (Miramax Films) “the swing content in *Swingers* was close to zero, even if it did depict in passing



Figure 3 GAP TV commercial 1998

some swing dancing” (Jesse Walker) still the movie credited the return of swing jazz. The most striking example of the Lindy Hop return is a 1998 controversial TV commercial by GAP featuring the dance in the forefront though again with an almost entirely white cast.

Though the return of Lindy Hop had once more been subject to adaptations made by white Americans, in social dance ballrooms the culture had returned closer to its original form. Since many of the swing clinics were given by early Lindy Hoppers who lived through the dance's initial appropriation the dance was now taught with emphasis on the original inclusivity and commonality values.

Swinging Today

Today Lindy Hop continues at college campuses, ballrooms and Lindy Exchanges events across the country. In a 2001 article the *New Orleans City Business* magazine claims “There are nearly 15,000 Lindy Hoppers around the country and exchanges take place in different cities every other weekend.”

Swing dancing is now also reaching audiences in Central and South America due to events such as Chile's *Swingtiago* and Brazil's *Sugarloaf Stomp*. (*Swinghopping* website) The upcoming Lindy Hop scene in cities such as Mexico City, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Bogota, Medellín and Santiago (*Frankie Manning Foundation*) motivated a 2013 study by Brazilian physiological studies magazine "*Revista Brasileira de Prescrição e Fisiologia do Exercício*" to conduct a study in order to understand the motivations behind the uptake in swing dance. According to their survey which included 250 Lindy Hop and West Coast Swing students from three different Brazilian cities, Lindy Hop "not only keeps its practitioners for pleasure, improvisation, joy, but also by extra dance aspects such as culture, history and music that permeate the swing dances."

The inclusion of history and culture as reported motivations for dancing Lindy Hop indicates a significant distinction to the 1940's white Americans approach. Though the motivations for learning Lindy Hop on the 21st century may be more respectful to the dance's African American origins the appropriative nature of how it is portrayed in media deserves to be monitored since it is often blind to the dance's history.

Conclusion

Lindy Hop started as an African American dance, form of expression, protest and community which was popularized by Hollywood movies. Once danced by white Americans the artform and its history were tempered to erase its African American origins. Lindy Hop's popularity ended in conjunction with the end of swing jazz at the birth of modern jazz.

With the advent of CD technology in the early 90's swing music returned to popular culture and so did Lindy Hop. As the dance and culture of swing jazz became marketable, once more it was used by popular media under a white filter which further rejected the dance's African American origin while creating an interest among white dancers. However, due to dance clinics such as Lindy Exchange which purposely focuses on the dance's history and culture through lectures and seminars, the dance practice returned closer to its original form. Today Lindy Hop is danced around the world by a growing multicultural audience looking for a community, self-expression, fun and a way to connect to the history of swing jazz.

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