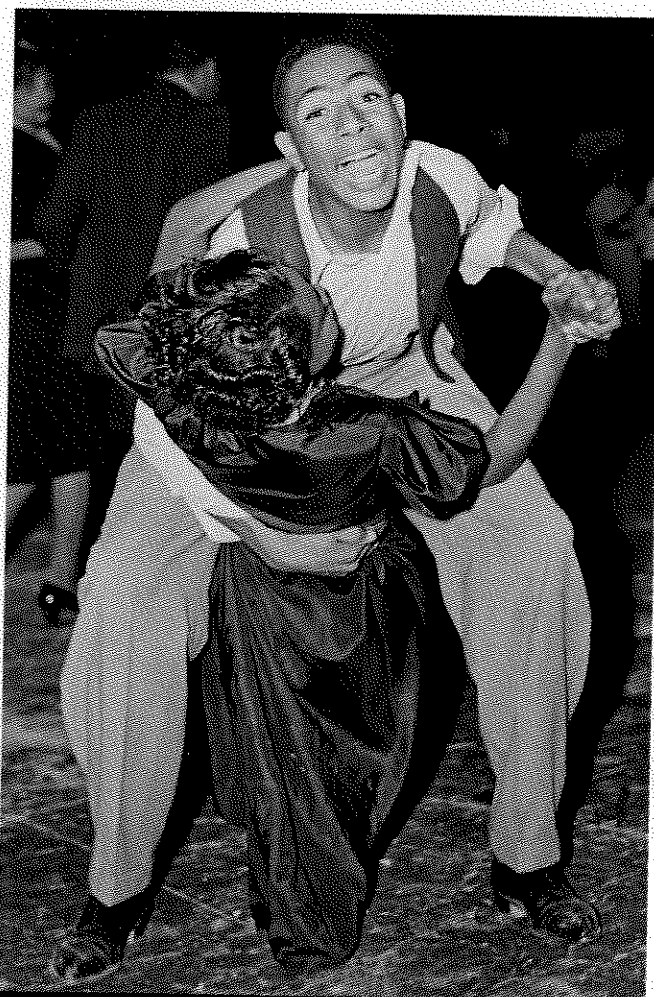


Popular Dance of the 1920s and Early '30s

From Animal Dance crazes to the Lindy Hop

Thomas F. DeFrantz

While leading scholars and artists stretched the boundaries of black expression in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s, African American social dances flourished. Embraced by the people themselves, eccentric and animal dances—when polished up—became the basis for popular singers and dancers in Harlem's clubs and the landmark theaters of the day, including the Apollo. These dances drew on earlier dances created by southern African Americans. Newly



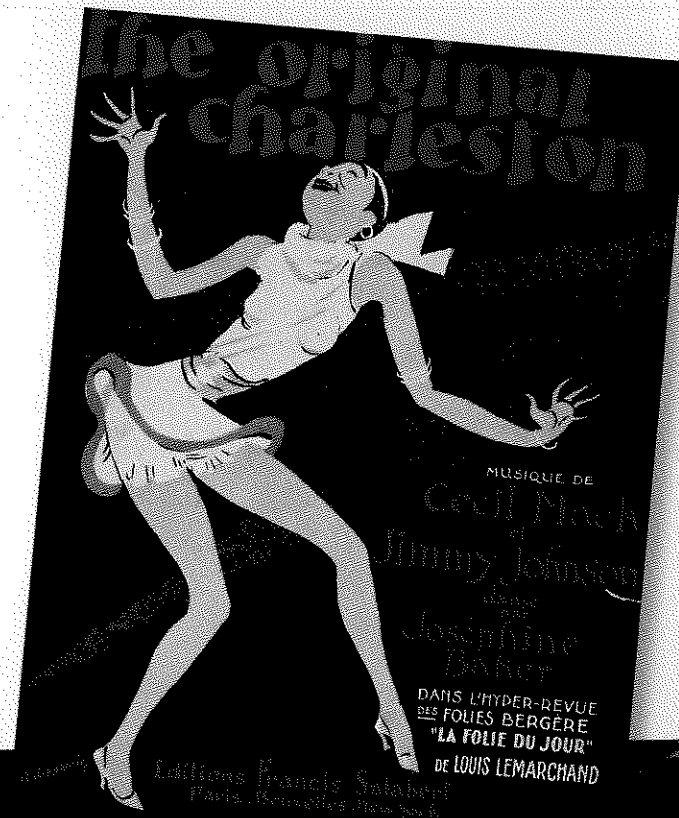
In 1938 amateur performers Myrtle Quinland and Lucas Smith dance the big apple, one of many popular swing era dances.

arrived in New York City, they brought country names and styles to the bustling cosmopolitan popular dance traditions of the urban North. Increasing northern migration and industrialization made individual expression more possible for African Americans, and these social dances reflected the hard-won expansion of personal freedoms. Like most African American expressive forms, these dances began in the small confines of apartments and dance clubs but were quickly adapted for stage performance and soon gained international attention.

Eccentric dances derived from the highly valued individuality at the heart of black creative expression. In these forms, dancers created idiosyncratic movements that made the body appear strange in its motion. These dances built on the extraordinary variety and flexibility common in African American movement styles. Exaggerated rolls of the shoulders or neck; unexpected contortions of the spine or bending of the knees; and strangely mechanical locomotions or freezes formed the core of this style. These were solo dance forms practiced in theatrical settings and in social dances that allowed individuals to "shine" singly. Typically viewed as comic dances performed at a high level of virtuosity, eccentric dances moved from African American contexts through vaudeville to Broadway and Hollywood, as individual entertainers realized the value of creating dance expression that no one else could perform in exactly the same way.

The '20s also produced an unprecedented number of animal dances, which were fanciful vestiges of recently abandoned rural living. These dances drew on the legacy of the nineteenth-century buzzard lope, popular among African Americans in the South, especially in the Georgia Sea Islands. A solo form danced by individuals in a group for fun, the buzzard lope featured hopping steps and gestures that mimicked the awkward movements of a bird eating its prey. It certainly influenced the rise of the early twentieth-

century turkey trot, a partnered dance widely practiced as the movement component of ragtime music. Danced in close proximity, with partners face to face, the turkey trot featured a basic hopping step on each musical beat. Its dancers rocked back and forth while traveling in a large circle around the dance space, essentially following a modified ballroom dancing format. Flapping the arms like a turkey added the distinctive movement that gave the dance its name. Dancers also stylized their movements by adding trotting



Josephine Baker starred in *La Folie du Jour* at the Folies Bergères in 1926–27. Lower: Whitney's Lindy Hoppers were one of the best-known professional swing dance groups of the '30s.

steps, foot-flicking gestures, and abrupt freezes between phrases. As in other eccentric dances that featured individualized movements, the turkey trot encouraged invention. In a breakaway section, the couple separated, and each dancer explored his or her own rhythmic ideas before returning to partner formation.

Like many African American social dances, the turkey trot was derided by some for its so-called lewd and uncivilized, bent-kneed hopping and pecking gestures. But these distinctive gestures made the dance fun for everyone who did it. Mimicking the imaginary behavior of animals became a way for dancers to enjoy a release from the pressures of crowded urban life and to playfully engage a creative response to the new sounds of jazz music. Animal dances became a string of fads, each aptly named for some distinctive gesture. The camel walk, the chicken scratch, the grizzly bear, the bunny hug, the kangaroo hop, and the various "wing" dances—chicken wing and pigeon wing—each illustrated in playful exaggeration an aspect of animal behavior. Many of these dances had analogues in southern plantation settings that transferred to the Harlem of the '20s.

Some social dances of this era traveled from rent parties and nightclubs to the theatrical stage and back again. These dances, including the black bottom and the Charleston, featured extravagant body part isolations, especially in sinewy or sudden motions of the pelvis and spine, and rolling gestures of the torso, shoulders, elbows, and knees in unexpected continual waves or accented, rhythmic jerking. The snake hips dance, popularized by the impressive performances of Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker, a soloist with Duke Ellington's orchestra, emphasized successional movements that included the hips and pelvis, coupled with twisting motions of the feet.

The black bottom—named for districts in various American cities—allowed dancers a simple solo structure that encouraged improvisation. The dance involved slapping your hips and hopping forward and back, touching the ground, and letting your backbone slide from side to side. As a social dance, the black bottom originally had little cachet, but when stage performers started demonstrating personable, virtuoso versions of the dance, it gained currency for general audiences of African American social dancers. Stage shows that played at the Apollo Theater

in the '30s featured the dance with specially written music that called out its steps, so that audiences could learn it and repeat it at home. These popular versions of the dance, arranged by musicians including Jelly Roll Morton and sung by entertainers including Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, encouraged its adoption by white Americans and international audiences.

The most widely circulated popular dance of this era was the Charleston. Danced with a partner and named for the city in South Carolina, it gained popularity among African Americans in the 1910s and arrived on Broadway in the early '20s. (The 1923 song "Charleston" by James P. Johnson and Cecil Mack was added to the musical revue *Runnin' Wild*, featuring star entertainers Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles.) The twisting footwork and unexpected swinging arms and kicking accents of the dance ushered in the era of flappers, so called for the exaggerated movements of their limbs. The Charleston held great sway over the popular imagination of the day, and celebrities including Josephine Baker performed the dance in international venues.

Indeed, these popular dances brought distinctive African American gestures to international populations. The rise of the Charleston and other eccentric dances on theatrical stages demonstrated a cycle in which social dances first emerged in regional locations; traveled to New York, where they were further refined; were transmitted to the New York stage, where they became the toast of the town; and then were performed abroad to great acclaim. The Savoy Ballroom provided dancers with a space to develop many new social dances that then became featured acts on the Apollo stage, including the Harlem stomp, peckin', the Lindy hop, and the big apple.

The Lindy hop clearly related to earlier black social dances, including the turn-of-the-century Texas Tommy, but it differed in its close relation to the propulsive rhythms of swing music and its intricate rhythmic footwork patterns. "Shorty" George Snowden, a celebrated dancer, has been credited with naming the dance after the aviator Charles "Lindy" Lindbergh, who made the first successful nonstop solo flight across the Atlantic. Various groups, including the Shorty Snowden Dancers and Herbert "Whitey" White's Lindy Hoppers, performed it on international tour and in the movies. Frankie Manning, who

later became a professional choreographer, has been credited with innovating the spectacular "air" steps in the mid-'30s for professional dance exhibitions.

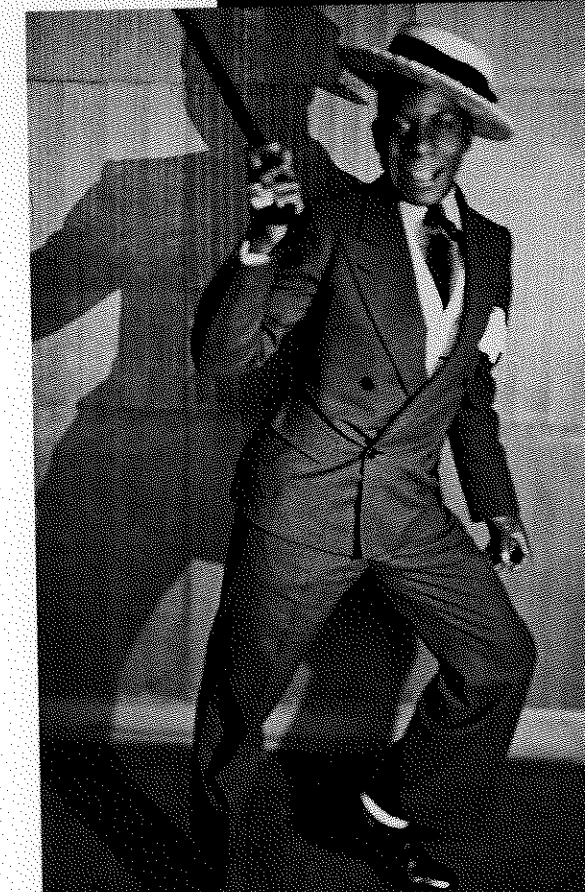
The Lindy hop included breakaway steps that encouraged individual expression. Lindy hop movements contributed to the big apple, an African American group social dance, briefly popular in the late '30s. Related to the even earlier ring shout and the cakewalk in form, the dance began when couples marched in a counterclockwise circular formation. A caller directed steps to the dancers and, at times, allowed couples to enter the center of the circle to demonstrate spontaneous virtuosic movements.

The big apple, which derived its name from the Big Apple Nightclub in Columbia, South Carolina, spread across the country when it became the centerpiece of traveling stage shows featuring teenage dancers. By 1937 the dance had reached the Savoy Ballroom in New York, where its format solidified further to include comic, eccentric steps from earlier dances. These included a modified version of the Charleston; the Suzy-Q, in which dancers traveled sideways while twisting the feet with one foot on the toe and the other on the heel; spank the baby, in which dancers fanned their bottoms with one hand as if scolding a naughty child; the peck, in which dancers facing each other thrust their necks forward, imitating the pecking motion of chickens and roosters; the Shorty George, in which dancers slunk from side to side with their arms pointing downward at the sides of their bodies; and truckin', an exaggerated walking locomotion that traveled around a circle with one admonitory finger raised upward.

Like the cakewalk, the various animal dances, the Charleston, and the Lindy hop before it, the big apple achieved huge international popularity and produced an industry of distinctive fashions, special-event dance parties at nightclubs, and courses of dance study offered by teachers who taught its steps to cultural outsiders. In this way, the popular dances of African Americans produced routes of understanding and exchange that influenced the marketplace, the social status, and the physical capacities of an international public.



Irene and Vernon Castle helped introduce African American social dances to whites through performances and their dance school.



Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker, who created the dance bearing his nickname, was often featured with Duke Ellington's orchestra.