Popular Dance of the 1920s and Early '30s
From Animal Dance Craze to the Lindy Hop

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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. Emboldened 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 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.

Eclectic 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 movements or frenetic forms were 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 lobe, 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 lobe 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 cigarette music. Danced in close proximity, with partners facing in, the turkey trot featured a basic hopping step at each musical beat. Its dancers rocked back and forth while moving in a large circle around the dance space, essentially affecting a modified ballroom dancing format. Flipping the arms like a turkey added the distinctive movement that gave the dance its name. Dancers also stylized their movements by adding trotting
steps, foot-flapping gestures, and abrupt freezes between phrases. As in other ecstatic dances that featured individualized movements, the turkey trot encouraged invention. In a breakdown 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 loud 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 caned wall, the chicken scratch, the grizzly bear, the bunny hop, 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 analogies 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, were popular in 1920s and 1930s, especially in the South or even national gatherings. A group of black dancers, known as the "Turkey Trotters," performed a routine that featured exaggerated movements and pecking movements, accompanied by the enthusiastic "Turkey Trot" music. These dances were performed in various venues across the United States, and they became popular in the 1930s, especially among African Americans.

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 Eddie McVay was set to the musical review "Roosin' Wild," featuring star entertainers Flommy Miller and Audrey Ilyn.) The twisting footwork and unexpected swinging arms and kicking motions of the dance, neither 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 audiences. The rise of the Charleston and other ecstatic 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, and then were exported back to London, where they became the toast of the town. Thus, they were also performed abroad, to great acclaim. The Savoy Ballroom provided dancers with a space to develop new social dances that then became featured acts on the Apollo stage, including the Harlem stamp, pecking, the Lindy hop, and the big apple.

The Lindy hop clearly related to earlier black social dances, including the turn-of-the-century Texas Fandango, but by the early 1930s, it had also begun to develop its own distinctive rhythm and footwork patterns. "Shorty" George Snowdon, a celebrated dancer, has been credited with naming the dance after the aviator Charles "Lindy" Lindbergh, who made the first successful transatlantic flight across the Atlantic. Various groups, including the Shorty Snowdon Dance and Herbert "Whiz" White's Lindy Hoppers, performed it internationally and in the movies. Frankie Manning, who