

**the jazz cadence  
of american culture**

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# chapter 18

JACQUI MALONE

## Jazz Music in Motion: Dancers and Big Bands

Dancing is very important to people who play music with a beat. I think that people who don't dance, or who never did dance, don't really understand the beat. . . . I know musicians who don't and never did dance, and they have difficulty communicating.

—DUKE ELLINGTON, *The World of Duke Ellington*

**t**he infancy of jazz coincided with extensive artistic and commercial efforts to get black musical theater established on Broadway. As a result, jazz musicians had a recognized connection with professional dance acts prior to the thirties. From the orchestra pit, musicians backed professional dancers and singers in theaters across the country. Throughout the twenties, jazz musicians, singers, and dancers worked together in night clubs and cabarets; and they performed jointly in revues that toured the United States and abroad. As early as 1921, when Garvin Bushell toured with Mamie Smith and Company, his co-performers included a comedian, a dance team, a magician, and some singers. Many of America's jazz giants gained experience playing for these small revues. Bushell recalled hiring a pickup musician while appearing in Kansas City: "When we got there for the first rehearsal we met this youngster on saxophone who played all his parts and didn't miss a note. When we told him to take a solo, he took a tremendous one. We said, 'What's your name?' 'Coleman.' 'Coleman who?' 'Coleman Hawkins.' . . . We had to read our parts when we played in the pit, and Hawk never hit a bad note."<sup>1</sup>

Garvin Bushell was a member of Sam Wooding's orchestra when it toured Europe in 1925 with a revue called *Chocolate Kiddies* that included over thirty dancers, comedians, and chorus line members. The hit of the show was "Jig

Walk,” created by the choreographer Charlie Davis. According to Bushell, “That’s where we got to do the Charleston.” That same year the Claude Hopkins band toured Europe with the Josephine Baker Revue. These were just a few of many shows that afforded opportunities for professional dancers and jazz musicians to inspire one another.<sup>2</sup>

As jazz bands became increasingly popular, they moved up from the pit to take center stage. Earl Hines helped pioneer the move from the pit to the stage at the Apollo Theater:

We had to play the show from the pit and then go up onstage for our specialty. I had written three weeks before we got there that we wanted to wear the white suits and be onstage all the time, and they had agreed. “I’m not going in the pit,” I said, getting salty. The producer called the manager, and he came and said, “You *are* going in the pit!” I told all the boys to pack up then, and we left the show standing there. Next morning I went to the theater and said, “Well, what about it?” The stage manager said, “We’ve got you set up on the stage.”<sup>3</sup>

Vaudeville declined rapidly around the early thirties and a new performance format called presentation evolved. By this time, radio broadcasts had helped create a demand for jazz bands throughout the country at hotels, supper clubs, theaters, colleges, nightclubs, high schools, affluent prep schools, and at such dance halls as the Savoy and Roseland in New York City. Big city movie houses also featured bands on vaudeville-like bills that were presented between motion pictures.<sup>4</sup> According to Cholly Atkins, a tap dancer, choreographer, and director, the most popular venues of the thirties were dance halls, hotels, and theaters. Dance halls were scattered across the United States, and any town with more than 150,000 people had at least one hotel with a reasonably sized dance floor. And though they were often presented as part of a musical package, bands were the headliners in these performance arenas. During the era of presentation, these packages were called “revues” or “units” and included dancers, solo singers, comedians, a chorus line, and, of course, a big-name band.

Many bands had two or three dancing acts that they secured through booking agencies. For example, if Cab Calloway saw an act he liked, he would have his band manager find out which agency was handling the dancers and see if they were available for a future engagement. A booking agency allowed the tap duo of Honi Coles and Cholly Atkins to take their class act on the road with numerous bands. Typically they might hook up with the Basie band for a cross-country tour on a northern route from New York to California and come back with the Billy Eckstine Band on a southern route through Oklahoma City, St. Louis, Atlanta, and then up to Washington, D.C., as a final stop. But most dance acts didn’t do extended tours with big bands; rather, they were hired for “spot bookings.” During the thirties, Jimmy Lunceford carried his own revue, called *The Harlem Express*.

In the thirties, the most well-known African American theater circuit was called 'Round the World. Its tour comprised such independent theaters as the

Howard in Washington, D.C.; the Lafayette in Harlem; the Royal in Baltimore; the Lincoln, Standard, and Pearl in Philadelphia; and the Regal in Chicago. Ninety-nine percent of the artists featured in this big city loop were black. Revues generally opened with a couple of numbers by the band followed by a singer, a comedy dance act, more pieces by the band, a straight dancing act, another band appearance, and a closing number that featured a popular singer.<sup>5</sup>

Honi Coles counted as many as fifty top-flight dance acts “in the late 20s and early 30s.” Coles explained the importance of these acts: “Back a while, when show business was show business, and there were all sorts of variety presentations, the dancing act was the nucleus of every show. Dancing acts were always surefire crowd pleasers. . . . Generally speaking, [they] were used to strengthen the show.” Coles insisted that at one point tap dancers were more important than any other act on most bills because they could not only open and close the show but they could also fill the trouble spots. They were “the best dressed, the best conditioned, the most conscientious performer[s] on any bill, and in spite of being the least paid, [they were] the act[s] to ‘stop the show.’”<sup>6</sup>

The diversity of dancing acts during the thirties and forties was astonishing: ballroom, adagio, eccentric, comedy, flash, acrobatics, and tap—the most prevailing style. Harold Norton and Margot Webb, who had studied ballet and performed a repertory of rumba, waltz, tango, and bolero numbers, made up one of the most famous African American ballroom teams from 1933 to 1947. Webb’s solo work included a jazz toe dance (*en pointe*). During the thirties, this team enjoyed extended bookings with the Earl Hines Band at Chicago’s Grand Terrace; toured England and France with Teddy Hill’s band as part of the *Cotton Club Revue*; and performed as a single act on variety stages in Italy, France, and Germany. Before meeting Norton, Webb appeared in revues choreographed by leading black “dance directors,” including Clarence Robinson and Leonard Harper.<sup>7</sup>

“Adagio” dancers performed a style that consisted of ballroom dance with various balletic and acrobatic lifts, spins, and poses. Honi Coles referred to Anise Boyer and Aland Dixon as the “fastest . . . adagio act.” They traveled extensively with the Cab Calloway Band, sharing the dance spotlight with stand-up tap single Coles and with the Chocolateers, who introduced a dance called peckin.<sup>8</sup>

Eccentric dance, a favorite with many jazz band leaders, “may include elements of contortionist, legomania, and shake dancing, although these styles frequently overlap with others, and a dancer can combine something of all of them. A few involve tap, for tappers are generally regarded as the dancing elite and imitated whenever possible. . . . ‘Eccentric’ is a catch-all for dancers who have their own non-standard movements and sell themselves on their individual styles.” One of the most famous of these dancers was Dynamite Hooker, who toured during the thirties with the bands of Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, and Jimmy Lunceford.<sup>9</sup>

The big band era coincided with the most fruitful years for comedy-dancing acts. As a result, bands provided steady employment for such two-man teams as Chuck and Chuckles, Stump and Stumpy, Moke and Poke, and Cook and Brown,

who combined superb dancing with acrobatics and tumbling. Straight acrobatic teams were also featured in traveling units. They combined gymnastic material with music and performed it precisely on the beat. Most of the black acrobatic acts used jazz music.<sup>10</sup>

By the thirties, many dancers in search of new and exciting ideas had developed what became known as flash dancing—a compression of acrobatics and jazz dancing. The flash acts “spice their routines with *ad lib* acrobatics. Without any warning or apparent preparation, they insert a variety of floor and air steps—a spin or flip or knee-drop or split—in the midst of a regular routine, and then, without a moment’s hesitation, go back to the routine.”<sup>11</sup>

The connection between big bands and tap dancers is one that has resurfaced in the last decades of the twentieth century. As jazz music has commanded a broader and broader audience, jazz lovers have discovered again one of the most sophisticated representations of jazz music by dancers, rhythm tap, created by African American tap innovators of the twentieth century. King Rastus Brown’s flatfooted hoofing preceded the legendary Bill Robinson’s “up on the toes” approach. Eddie Rector added elegance and body motion, and John Bubbles’s crowning achievement—dropping the heels—added extraordinary rhythmical complexity.

Baby Laurence, tap dancer extraordinaire, explained that “tap dancing is very much like jazz music. The dancer improvises his own solo and expresses himself.” Rhythm tappers are jazz percussionists who value improvisation and self-expression. Jazz musicians tell stories with their instruments and rhythm tappers tell stories with their feet. In a 1973 obituary for Baby Laurence, Whitney Balliett wrote, “A great drummer dances sitting down. A great tap-dancer drums standing up.”<sup>12</sup>

Rhythm tap’s close relationship to jazz music is evident in the large number of top caliber jazz drummers who could tap: Philly Joe Jones, Buddy Rich, Jo Jones, Big Sid Catlett, Eddie Locke, and Cozy Cole, who once had a dance act along with tapper Derby Wilson. Louis Bellson, who played drums with Duke Ellington in the fifties, commented on the relationship between drumming and tapping: “You get a guy like Jo Jones, all those guys can do a time step and the shim-sham-shimmy because that’s what you did in the theater. . . . We base all of our rhythms on dancing. When I play a drum solo, I’m tapping. My brother-in-law Bill Bailey, oh, what a tap dancer. I mean that’s one of the greatest drum solos I’ve heard in my life, Bill Bailey did it on stage. All he had was a rhythm section and he danced up and down that stage. I’ve got films on him. I look at them every once in a while. I study those films.” According to Bellson, Duke Ellington always referred to the drummers as dancers. “I remember Ellington telling me that the great thing about Africa is that the drummers and dancers are like one.” He would introduce the drummer by saying, “And now Dave Black is going to perform a little dancing for you.” Bellson added, “And I know every time I get ready to play the brushes, I say ‘I’m going to tap dance for you now, and these are Jo Jones’ licks that he taught me.’”<sup>13</sup>

At the start of their careers, the drummers Max Roach, Kenny Clarke, and

Art Blakey were greatly influenced by rhythm tappers. Roach accompanied Groundhog and Baby Laurence and learned steps from them. He recalled performing with Laurence: “We usually did our act as an encore. I would play brushes on the snare and he would just dance and we’d exchange things, call and response. I would imitate him and then I would play time over it.” In 1961, while playing with the Charlie Mingus band, Dannie Richmond enhanced his drumming technique by studying Laurence’s feet every night:

The band would play the head on the theme and Baby Laurence played the breaks. Little by little we worked it where at first I was just doing stop-time, fours, so much that I’d memorized every lick of his. I learned that it wasn’t just single strokes involved in the drums. My concept was that if you had the single strokes down, you could play anything. It’s not true. It’s almost true, but not totally. And the way Laurence would mix paradiddles along with single strokes. He could do all of that with his feet. It got to where we’re doing fours together. He’d dance four, then we played threes, twos, one bar apiece, but I was copying him. I’d more or less play what he danced. I was trying to keep it in the context of melody dance and, mind you, to me that was the same as a saxophone player trying to play like Charlie Parker. He was the only one who could dance to Charlie Parker tunes. . . . It was a gas for me to duplicate what Laurence danced. When he switched up me and changed the time, there was no way I could play that.

According to Philly Joe Jones, “the drummer who has been a dancer can play better than someone who has never danced. See, the drummer catches the dancer, especially when a dancer’s doing wings. And the cymbals move at the same time to catch the dancer.”<sup>14</sup>

In the thirties and forties, rhythm tap’s greatest exponents functioned in closely knit circles that included singers, comedians, jazz musicians, and chorus line dancers. The various types of performers shared rehearsal and performance spaces, jam sessions, and living quarters; they attended sports events and parties; they belonged to the same fraternal clubs. Billy Strayhorn, Duke Ellington’s co-composer, was the last official president of the Copasetics, a club organized by tap dancers but with musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie and Lionel Hampton among its membership.

The impact of the jam session, or “cutting contest,” on rhythm tap’s evolution parallels much of what Ellison has to say about the relationship of the jam session to the development of jazz instrumentalists. Ralph Ellison called the jam session the “jazzman’s true academy”:

It is here that he learns tradition, group techniques and style. For although since the twenties many jazzmen have had conservatory training and were well grounded in formal theory and instrumental technique, when we approach jazz we are entering quite a different sphere of training. Here it is more meaningful to speak, not of courses of study, of grades and degrees, but of apprenticeship, ordeals, initiation ceremonies, of rebirth. For after

the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz—the intonations, the mute work, manipulation of timbre, the body of traditional styles—he must then “find himself,” must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul. All this through achieving that subtle identification between his instrument and his deepest drives which will allow him to express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice. He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity. In this his instructors are his fellow musicians, especially the acknowledged masters, and his recognition of manhood depends upon their acceptance of his ability as having reached a standard which is all the more difficult for not having been codified. This does not depend upon his ability to simply hold a job but upon his power to express an individuality in tone.<sup>15</sup>

In nightclubs and on street corners tap dancers participated in jam sessions—exchanging ideas, inspiring one another, and battling for a place in the rhythm tappers’ hierarchy of artistic excellence. Jimmy Crawford jammed with many rhythm tap artists: “Dancers influenced the music a whole lot in those days. Sometimes we’d have jam sessions with just tap dancers, buck dancers and drums. Big Sid Catlett was one of the greatest show drummers who ever lived. He could accompany, add on, improvise, so well. And believe me, those rhythm dancers really used to inspire you.”<sup>16</sup> No jam sessions were as exciting as those held at the legendary Hooper’s Club, where the reigning tap kings of the early thirties included Raymond Winfield, Honi Coles, Harold Mablin, and Roland Holder.

In 1932, when Baby Laurence went to New York as a singer with the Don Redman Band, he headed straight to the Hooper’s Club: “Don discouraged my dancing, but when we hit town my first stop was the Hooper’s Club—it was the biggest thrill of my life.” The cardinal rule there was “Thou Shalt Not Copy Another’s Steps—Exactly.” Those foolish enough to break that rule in public had to suffer the consequences. Dancers lined up to get front row theater seats when tap acts performed at local theaters. According to Laurence, “they watched you like hawks and if you used any of their pet steps, they just stood right up in the theater and told everybody about it at the top of their voices.”<sup>17</sup> Leonard Reed’s first stop in New York was also the Hooper’s Club:

You could hear dancing the minute you got in the building. There was always dancin’ going on, known dancers and unknown dancers. Bubbles would come occasionally. Bill Robinson came in occasionally. . . . All the dancers would hang out, and they would trade ideas. That was affectionately called “stealin’ steps.” Everybody did it. That’s how you learned. You would do something, and you’d say to the other dancers, “You tryin’ to steal it? Alright, do it!” “Let me see you do this!” And they’d try it. Of course, when they did it, it was slightly different. But that’s how it was. Everybody was always showin’ steps and trying to steal steps. It was an amazing time.<sup>18</sup>

The very best dancers in this tradition have unique styles that are imme-

diately recognizable aurally and visually, although the emphasis, of course, is on sound. This drive toward individual expressiveness grows right out of an African American aesthetic sense that puts supreme value on what the African Americanist John Vlach calls “freewheeling improvisation and innovation, . . . distinctive dynamism, . . . and delight in the surprise value of new, not completely anticipated discovery.” What these dancers value most is not the exactness of frozen choreography and set routines developed by others, but the joy that is inherent in improvisational flights of freedom. Perhaps Baby Laurence said it best: “From my point of view, having a choreographer tell me what to do would ruin everything. I wouldn’t be able to improvise or interpret the music, and I couldn’t express myself.”<sup>19</sup>

During the early sixties, Stanley Dance conducted a “Spontaneous Opinion” poll in *Metronome* of twenty-eight jazz musicians. One of the questions asked was “Who is the greatest dancer you ever saw?” Twenty-six named tap dancers and over half of the votes went to Baby Laurence—a tap artist with a jazz musician’s sense of his craft.<sup>20</sup>

Jazz musicians and rhythm tap dancers were obviously in pursuit of identical artistic goals. Their partnership in the thirties and forties mirrored much more than a convenient musical package. Their mutual admiration grew out of a special kinship based on similar aesthetic points of view and what Albert Murray calls a shared “idiomatic orientation.”

Numerous rhythm tappers performed with jazz bands during the thirties and forties. Honi Coles worked as a single with Count Basie, Claude Hopkins, Jimmy Lunceford, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Lucky Millinder, Louis Armstrong, and Cab Calloway. Coles felt “it was such a kick to work with the great bands, especially with guys like Fats Waller—the looser of the band leaders. . . . People like Fats Waller and Louie Armstrong were people who enjoyed and loved life and showed it every instant of the day.”<sup>21</sup> Buster Brown toured with Count Basie, Jimmy Lunceford, and Dizzy Gillespie; Bunny Briggs with Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, Count Basie, and Charlie Barnet; Jeni LeGon with Fats Waller and Count Basie; Baby Laurence with Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Woody Herman; the Miller Brothers and Lois with Jimmy Lunceford and Cab Calloway; Coles and Atkins with Billy Eckstine, Count Basie, and Charlie Barnet; and Peg Leg Bates with Erskine Hawkins, Claude Hopkins, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and many others.<sup>22</sup>

Although dancers appeared with big bands in theaters throughout the country, the premiere stage and number one testing ground in America was Harlem’s Apollo Theater. Beginning in 1934, stage shows were built around such well-known jazz bands as those led by Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Don Redman, Chick Webb, Lucky Millinder, and Fletcher Henderson.<sup>23</sup> The Apollo opened around 10:00 A.M. and offered four to five shows per day, starting with a short film, a newsreel, and a featured film, followed by a revue. Presented in the spring of 1934, *The Golliwog Revue* was a typical show that consisted of seven acts, including Don Redman’s band, the headliner; chorus line dancers; the Jack Storm Company, an acrobatic act; Leroy and Edith, the Apollo lindy hop

contest winners; Myra Johnson, a singer; the Four Bobs, tap dancers; and Jazzlips Richardson, an eccentric dancer. Throughout the show Johnny Lee Long and Pigmeat Markham, comedians, joked with Ralph Cooper, the host.

In addition to their own presentations, the featured bands played for the chorus lines and for all the dance acts. Andy Kirk backed Bill Robinson at the Apollo: “Playing the Apollo was different from playing a dance hall, because in a dance hall the dancers had to dance to your music. At the Apollo, with a star like Bojangles, we had to play music for *him* to dance to. . . . We always had regard for the artist, whatever he was doing, and our music was background. We wanted to play it right—the way he wanted it.” The Apollo had a good floor for dancers. And the place was known for unusually demanding and discriminating audiences. “When big name dancers played the Apollo, there was nothing in the audience but dancers with their shoes,” said Sandman Sims. “Up in the balcony, dancers, and the first six rows, you saw nothing but tap dancers, wanta-be tap dancers, gonna-be tap dancers, tried-to-be tap dancers. That’s the reason a guy would want to dance at the Apollo.”<sup>24</sup>

Under the direction of black producer-choreographers (who maintained their own chorus lines), the Apollo revues changed each week. Charlie Davis, Leonard Harper, Addison Carey, Teddie Blackman, and Clarence Robinson also took their chorus lines on the independent theater circuit ‘Round the World. The Apollo chorus line was the best in New York. Honi Coles “was astounded at the dancing ability that most of these young ladies had. A dancing act could come into the Apollo with all original material and when they left at the end of the week, the chorus lines would have stolen many of the outstanding things that they did. . . . The production numbers that these girls did were often as effective as anything the stars or any of the acts would do.”<sup>25</sup>

The role of chorus line dancers in the development of jazz has been consistently overlooked by jazz and dance historians. According to Dicky Wells, many jazz musicians felt a kinship with chorus line dancers: “They used to be the biggest lift to musicians, because we thought alike.” “They were more important than people realize. You might say we composed while they danced—a whole lot of swinging rhythm. That’s when we invented new things and recorded them [the] next day.”<sup>26</sup>

The Apollo’s dance contests featured some of the most dedicated big band followers in the country. Their intricate steps devised to the swinging rhythms of America’s jumpiest jazz bands could only be matched in enthusiasm by the contests held further uptown at Harlem’s legendary dance hall the Savoy Ballroom, known among the initiated as “the track.” The artist Romare Bearden went there three nights a week during the early thirties: “The best dancing in the world was there, and the best music. . . . You’d want to be either in Harlem then or in Paris. These were the two places where things were happening.”<sup>27</sup>

When the Savoy opened its doors on 12 March 1926, over five thousand people rocked the city block-long building to the rhythms of Fess Williams and His Royal Flush Orchestra and the Charleston Bearcats. “Few first-nighters will ever forget the dynamic Fess, whose eye-catching trade mark was a shimmer-

ing, glittering diamond studded suit and whose showmanship and musicianship eventually catapulted him to national fame from the newly-born Savoy's No. 1 bandstand."<sup>28</sup>

That first night, Fletcher Henderson's Roseland Orchestra made a guest appearance at the Savoy as did the legendary tap dancer Eddie Rector. Leaders of Harlem's benevolent, social, cultural, civic, educational, and welfare groups were present along with Hollywood and Broadway stars, social leaders, church dignitaries, sports and newspaper personalities, and federal, state, and city government officials. The Savoy offered quite a showcase for this grand event: "Architecturally, the Savoy dazzled with a spacious lobby framing a huge, cut-glass chandelier and marble staircase, an orange and blue dance hall with soda fountain, tables, and heavy carpeting covering half its area, the remainder a burnished dance floor 250 feet by 50 feet with two bandstands and a disappearing stage at the end."<sup>29</sup>

This institution of international fame surpassed all of America's top dance halls in grandeur and impact on American music and dance. The Savoy's twenty-fifth anniversary booklet was justified in boasting: "From [the] Savoy's mammoth mahogany floor, there was launched a long succession of dance fads, styles, and crazes that 'caught fire' almost overnight, capturing the imagination of dancers in every nook and corner of this country and sweeping far to the four winds and the seven seas for universal popularity." Dances that started or were made popular at the Savoy include the lindy hop, the flying Charleston, the big apple, the stomp, the jitterbug jive, the snakehips, the rhumboogie, variations of the shimmy and the peabody, and new interpretations of the bunny hug and the turkey trot.<sup>30</sup>

Charles Buchanan, the Savoy's manager, paid such dancers as Shorty Snowden to come in and "perform" for his clientele. Couples went there to practice during the day, and the most skillful "rug cutters" were constantly vying for first place honors in the northeast corner of the dance floor, known as "the Corner." There an invisible rope surrounded a dancing area that met the requirements of ritual, recreation, and performance. The "Saturday night function" that is associated with affirmation, celebration, and freedom was played out in this setting, where individual expression and inventiveness were as prized as technical virtuosity and the ability to execute carefully rehearsed maneuvers. As at the Apollo, no one could copy another dancer's steps. Shorty Snowden, the self-styled introducer of the lindy, was king for many years. Although his expertise was limited to the floor lindy (as opposed to the lindy, which had aerial steps), his dancing skills still far exceeded the capabilities of the average dancer.<sup>31</sup>

The lindy revolutionized American dance. Its fundamental approach can still be seen in social dancing. The breakaway, its most important element, allows for improvisation that might incorporate old steps or create new ones. An influential predecessor of the lindy was the Charleston swing. Barbara Engelbrecht explains that "this 'swing' infused the Lindy Hop's basic step—the syncopated two step, with the accent on the offbeat—with a relaxed and ebullient quality. And this relaxed and ebullient style of execution gives the impression, like the music, of

the beat moving ‘inexorably ahead.’ The dancers’ feet appear to ‘fly’ in syncopated rhythms, while the body appears to ‘hold’ the fine line of balance in calm contrast to the headlong rush of the feet.” According to Stearns and Stearns, the lindy flowed more smoothly and horizontally than the earlier two-step, had more rhythmic continuity, and was more complicated.<sup>32</sup>

At the Savoy, black musicians and dancers, armed with the musical innovations of Louis Armstrong, helped develop the formula for what was eventually called “swing music,” which swept the country during the Great Depression and ricocheted far beyond the Western Hemisphere. The relationship between dance halls and jazz is eloquently explained by Ralph Ellison:

Jazz, for all the insistence of the legends, has been far more closely associated with cabarets and dance halls than with brothels, and it was these which provided both the employment for the musicians and an audience initiated and aware of the overtones of the music; which knew the language of riffs, the unstated meanings of the blues idiom, and the dance steps developed from, and complementary to, its rhythms. And in the beginning it was in the Negro dance hall and night club that jazz was most completely a part of a total cultural expression; and in which it was freest and most satisfying, both for the musicians and for those in whose lives it played a major role.

“The Savoy Ballroom was the ultimate conferrer of postgraduate degrees in big bandsmanship,” asserts Nat Hentoff. Only the best bands were allowed to return, and Charles Buchanan, the Savoy’s manager, called the best bands the ones that kept the floor filled. Night after night, the dancers and musicians at the Savoy spurred one another on to greater heights and earthier depths—always with an attitude of elegance.<sup>33</sup>

During the forties, Dicky Wells played trombone at the Savoy for six months with Jimmy Rushing’s band: “There was plenty of competition on the next stand then, with all the different bands coming and going. And the Lindy Hoppers there made you watch your P’s and Q’s. The dancers would come and tell you if you didn’t play. They made the guys play, and they’d stand in front patting their hands until you got the right tempo.”<sup>34</sup>

Countless jazz musicians have commented on the importance of dance to their music:

*William “Cat” Anderson:* “I enjoy having a floor full of dancers. It seems to me that everybody enjoys the music more, even those who are not dancing but just standing there watching the dancers. We play more swinging things than we would at a concert, because people like to get up and move about in rhythm.”<sup>35</sup>

*Duke Ellington:* “They used to have great dancers up at the Ritz, Bridgeport. Every now and then you go into a ballroom like that where they have great dancers. It’s a kick to play for people who really jump and swing. On two occasions up there we were using a substitute drummer, but we didn’t have to worry about him because the dancers were carrying the band and the drummer. You start playing, the dancers start dancing, and they have such a great beat you just hang on!”<sup>36</sup>

*Pops Foster:* “In about 1935 or 1936 we started playing for audiences that just sat there. I never liked this, I always liked to play for an audience that dances.”<sup>37</sup>

*Lester Young:* “I wish jazz were played more for dancing. I have a lot of fun playing for dances because I like to dance, too. The rhythm of the dancers comes back to you when you’re playing. When you’re playing for dancing, it all adds up to playing the right tempo. After three or four tempos, you find the tempos they like. What they like changes from dance date to dance date.”<sup>38</sup>

*Baby Dodds:* “When I first went to New York it seemed very strange to have people sitting around and listening rather than dancing. In a way it was similar to theater work. But it was peculiar for me because I always felt as though I was doing something for the people if they danced to the music. It never seemed the same when they just sat around and listened. We played for dancing and quite naturally we expected people to dance.”<sup>39</sup>

*Jimmy Crawford:* “In ballrooms, where there’s dancing like I was raised on, when everybody is giving to the beat, and just moving, and the house is bouncing—that inspires you to play. It’s different when you go to those places where it’s ‘cool’ and the people just sit listening. I don’t care too much for the ‘cool,’ harsh pulsation. I don’t like music where it’s simply a matter of ‘Listen to my changes, man!’ and there’s no emotion or swing. I think Louis Armstrong has done more to promote good feeling among earthy people than anyone. He can’t speak all those foreign languages, but he lets a certain feeling speak for him. You can play too many notes, but if you make it simple, make it an ass-shaker, then the music speaks to the people.”<sup>40</sup>

Frankie Manning, Norma Miller, and many other lindy hop experts attest to the ability of the Savoy big bands to “speak to the people.” Constantly driven toward excellence and technical perfection, the Savoy Lindy Hoppers perfected the lindy in direct response to the dynamics of the musicians. According to Stearns and Stearns, the stage was set for movement innovations with the appearance of a group of Kansas City musicians in 1932. The power and drive of the Bennie Moten Band “generated a more flowing, lifting momentum. The effect on the dancers was to increase the energy and speed of execution.”<sup>41</sup>

During the midthirties, a monumental change in the lindy took place when Frankie Manning and his partner Freida Washington introduced the first aerial or air step (called “over the back”) in a Savoy dance contest against Shorty Snowden’s Lindy Hoppers. What followed was the development and perfection of numerous air steps by Savoy dancers. Manning and Washington were members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, a group of excellent dancers organized by Herbert White, the Savoy’s floor manager. In 1936, Manning developed the first ensemble routines, which made it possible to easily adapt the lindy hop to stage presentations.<sup>42</sup>

As the dance became airborne, its popularity spread the length and breadth of America. By the fall of 1936, White managed three teams, each comprised of three couples. Frankie Manning became the main choreographer for the first-string team; during his years with Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, they became

internationally known. The Savoy dancers traveled with many great jazz bands, including those of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Chick Webb, and Cab Calloway. Manning was a member of the teams that traveled to Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. The Savoy dancers appeared in a production of *The Hot Mikado* with Bill Robinson at the 1939 World's Fair, at the Cotton Club and Radio City Music Hall in New York City, at the Moulin Rouge in Paris, and in a musical short, *Hot Chocolate* (1941), with Duke Ellington. In addition to *Hot Chocolate*, White's teams appeared in the films *A Day at the Races* (1937), *Radio City Revels* (1938), and *Hellzapoppin'* (1941). With the exception of *A Day at the Races*, Frankie Manning was the choreographer for all of the film appearances.

Between 1935 and 1950, Savoy lindy hop teams won fourteen championships at the annual Harvest Moon Ball, a competitive dance spectacle held at Madison Square Garden in New York. During the thirties and the forties a significant number of Savoy regulars made the transition from amateur to professional. Whitey's Lindy Hoppers disbanded after Manning, and most of the group's other men were drafted during World War II.<sup>43</sup>

The Savoy's success owes as much to the famous "battles of the bands" staged there as it does to the music and the dancers who created visualizations of the music. For most of the thirties, the all-time favorite at the Savoy was the hard-driving band of Chick Webb. When a band battle was scheduled, Webb's musicians trained like prizefighters and had special section rehearsals to prepare for the "kill." "The brass used to be downstairs, the saxophones upstairs, and the rhythm would get together somewhere else. We had the reputation of running any band out that came to the Savoy. But just forget about Duke!" Another tough opponent was the Count Basie Band. Dicky Wells called Basie's rhythm section "nothing less than a Cadillac with the force of a Mack truck." The alto saxophonist Earle Warren recalled one occasion when the Count reigned supreme.

*Swingin' the Blues* was built to be a house breaker. . . . "We began working on it when we were on the road and getting things together for a battle of jazz with Chick Webb at the Savoy. The battle of jazz was something to be reckoned with and we had to have something fresh and new to bring to the Savoy or we would falter at the finish line. So we proceeded to rehearse diligently. . . . By the time we got it together we were cookin'. At the Savoy we saved it until about halfway down in the program. Chick did his thing, *God Bless*, and then we reached into our bag and pulled out this powerhouse. When we unloaded our cannons, that was the end. It was one of those nights—I'll never forget it." Nor will anyone else who heard it, for that was one of the few nights at the Savoy when Chick Webb lost a battle of jazz.<sup>44</sup>

One of the most famous battles at the Savoy was the night the Benny Goodman Band faced Chick Webb and His Little Chicks. The Savoy was packed and many more people waited outside. For blocks, traffic was backed up in every direction—with approximately twenty-five thousand people trying to attend. Goodman pulled out all of his guns, but could not win the crowd. When Webb

ended the session with a drum solo, the dancers exploded in a thunderous ovation. “Goodman and his drummer, Gene Krupa, just stood there shaking their heads.”<sup>45</sup>

The Savoy was Webb’s “musical home,” and he played on and off there for ten years until his death in 1939. His phenomenal success is explained by Duke Ellington:

Some musicians are dancers, and Chick Webb was. You can dance with a lot of things besides your feet. Billy Strayhorn was another dancer—in his mind. He was a dance-writer. Chick Webb was a dance-drummer who painted pictures of dances with his drums. . . . The reason why Chick Webb had such control, such command of his audiences at the Savoy ballroom, was because he was always in communication with the dancers and felt it the way they did. And that is probably the biggest reason why he could cut all the other bands that went in there.<sup>46</sup>

Ralph Ellison has written that after the church and the school, the third most vital institution in the lives of African Americans has been the public jazz dance. There the artistry of dancers, musicians, and singers converged to create a union that personifies what jazz is all about. Ellison spent time in Oklahoma watching Jimmy Rushing on the bandstand: “It was when Jimmy’s voice began to soar with the spirit of the blues that the dancers—and the musicians—achieved that feeling of communion which was the true meaning of the public jazz dance. The blues, the singer, the band and the dancers formed the vital whole of jazz as an institutional form, and even today neither part is quite complete without the rest.” Wynton Marsalis’s conception of an ideal forum for jazz is an intimate communal setting in which members can choose to participate by dancing or by engaging in “call and response” with the musicians: “We love to have the people get into the music even if we’re in a concert hall. . . . People should be able to come in and out of the hall, it’s like a community event. We’re community musicians.”<sup>47</sup>

In the late fifties, the Savoy Ballroom closed and later the building was demolished. Ralph Ellison had this to say about the Savoy’s importance as a cultural institution of the thirties.

In those days, for instance, the Savoy Ballroom was one of our great cultural institutions. In the effort to build much needed public housing, it has been destroyed. But then it was thriving and people were coming to Harlem from all over the world. The great European and American composers were coming there to listen to jazz—Stravinsky, Poulenc. The great jazz bands were coming there. Great dancers were being created there. People from Downtown were always there because the Savoy was one of the great centers of culture in the United States, even though it was then thought of as simply a place of entertainment.<sup>48</sup>

The musicians, dancers, and singers that walked through the doors of the Savoy infused American culture with elegance and brilliance in music and movement and an unmistakable style that has been embraced by cultures worldwide.

Albert Murray observed, “No institutions had more to do with the development or the sophistication, the variety, the richness and the precision of jazz than institutions like the Savoy ballroom. But dance has always been central and I always want to see jazz connected with dance. What we should try to reach in a concert hall is the same kind of ambience that one reaches in a dance hall.”<sup>49</sup>

### **Vernacular Dance on Stage: An Overview**

The dances that began on the farms, plantations, levees, and urban streets of colonial America evolved through minstrelsy and moved onto the “stages” of traveling shows, vaudeville, musical theater, cabarets, and nightclubs. The development and growth of this country’s preeminent vernacular dance paralleled the evolution of African American music and took a giant leap forward in the twenties, thirties, and forties, when the connections between black singers, dance acts, and jazz musicians revolutionized American culture.

Throughout his life, Duke Ellington, arguably America’s greatest twentieth-century composer, never severed the tie between his music and dance. Even the sacred concerts, late in his career, featured such dancers as Geoffrey Holder, Baby Laurence, Bunny Briggs, and Buster Brown. Ellington always preferred having musicians in his band who could dance: “I used to be a pretty good dancer at one time. I think it’s very important that a musician should dance. . . . Dancing is very important to people who play music with a beat. I think that people who don’t dance, or who never did dance, don’t really understand the beat. What they get in their minds is a mechanical thing not totally unacademic. I know musicians who don’t and never did dance, and they have difficulty communicating.” According to Albert Murray, one of the first Ellington musicians that played and danced in front of the band was Freddy Jenkins, known as “Little Posey,” but the all-time king of the dancer-musicians in this band was Ray Nance, nicknamed “Floorshow.” During his years with Ellington, he was featured on trumpet and violin and as a dancer and singer.<sup>50</sup>

As Wynton Marsalis perceptively remarked, “Duke Ellington understood the importance of romance in body movement, the romantic aspect of body movement to jazz music.” When Ellington reached his sixties, he danced in front of the band much more than he had in previous years. Still, movement was important to him all along. According to Albert Murray, earlier in his career “there was that subtle thing, the way he would walk and as [Count] Basie and those guys would say, ‘It was all such a picture.’ ” Many jazz musicians knew how to move with style: “Ellington had that big wide-legged stride and Earl [Hines] had that flashy patent leather tip and Nat King Cole put it like his shoes were velvet, like they were socks and Basie would come out there like he didn’t know what was happening. He was doing the hell out of that stuff. They all had that—Hamp [Lionel Hampton] always danced, Cab [Calloway] could sing and dance.”<sup>51</sup>

Louis Armstrong, America’s quintessential twentieth-century musician/singer/ dancer, was “considered the finest dancer among the [jazz] musicians” of the twenties. During the midtwenties, at Chicago’s Sunset Cafe, Armstrong played in a show that included Buck and Bubbles, Edith Spencer, Rector and Cooper,

and Mae Alix. On Friday nights Charleston contests were held. The show's producer staged the finale of the main show as a dancing act for four musicians in the band: Armstrong, Earl Hines, Tubby Hall, and Joe Walker. Armstrong remembered: "We would stretch out across that floor doing the Charleston as fast as the music would play it. Boy, oh boy, you talking about four cats picking them up and laying them down—that was us."<sup>52</sup>

Another sparkling partnership on the dance floor consisted of the jazz singer Sarah Vaughan and Dizzy Gillespie. Vaughan recalled that during the early forties when she and Gillespie toured with Earl Hines, "we'd get to swinging so much, Dizzy would come down and grab me and start jitterbugging all over the place." Ella Fitzgerald had similar memories: "We used to take the floor over. Yeah, do the Lindy Hop because we could do it. Yeah, we danced like mad together. . . . We'd go with the old Savoy steps." Gillespie, noted for a "snake hips" dance specialty at the start of his career, always created dances to his music: "A feeling for dancing was always a part of my music; to play it right, you've got to move. If a guy doesn't move properly when he's playing my music, he ain't got the feeling. Thelonious Monk, Illinois Jacquet, and all those instrumentalists who move a lot, are playing just what they're doing with their bodies."<sup>53</sup>

Thelonious Monk, like Ellington, never severed the connection between jazz music and dance. According to the pianist Randy Weston, "not only is Monk such a master pianist and composer, but when you watch him play, he does a complete ballet. He doesn't just play the piano, but he puts his whole body into the piano. . . . It's a whole dance." Monk would often rise from the piano and break into bodily visualizations of his music. "When his music was happening," according to Ben Riley, a jazz drummer, "then he'd get up and do his little dance because he was feeling good and he knew you knew where you were and the music was swinging and that's what he wanted. So, he'd say, 'I don't have to play now, you're making it happen.'"<sup>54</sup>

Early in his career, Count Basie played with Gonzelle White and Her Jazz Band, a stand-up act that featured dancing musicians who performed all kinds of tricks with their instruments. Basie would play behind his back, stand on one foot, play with his leg on the piano, or perform fancy tricks with his hands and arms. Gonzelle White's trumpet player, Harry Smith, was featured as a dancer who tapped, did splits, buck and wing, kicks, and the soft shoe. Basie was knocked out by the group's drummer: "Freddy Crump was a top-notch drummer, and he did all of the fancy things that show-band drummers used to, like throwing his sticks in the air and catching them like a juggler without losing a beat. He was a whole little act by himself, especially when it came to taking bows. He used to come dancing back in from the wings and hit the drum as he slid into a split. He used to grab the curtain and ride up with it, bowing and waving at the audience applauding."<sup>55</sup>

But the all-time experts of show-band novelties were the dancing-singing musicians that played with Jimmy Lunceford. Eddie Durham, an arranger, believed that Lunceford's band had the slickest, most precise stage presentation in the business: "There was nobody could play like that band! They would come

out and play a dance routine. The Shim Sham Shimmy was popular then and six of the guys would come down and dance to it—like a tap dance, crossing their feet and sliding.”<sup>56</sup> What followed were impersonations of other bands and glee club–like song presentations. Nat Pierce, a jazz pianist, saw Lunceford’s band perform in Boston: “His four trumpet players were throwing their horns up to the ceiling. It was a big high hall, and they’d throw them up twenty or thirty feet, pick them out of the air, and hit the next chord. I was just amazed by the whole thing.”<sup>57</sup>

Commenting on the relationship between jazz and dance, Murray observes that

whatever else it was used for, it was always mostly dance music. Even when it was being performed as an act in a variety show on a vaudeville stage, the most immediate and customary response consisted of such foot tapping, hand clapping, body rocking, and hip rolling as came as close to total dance movement as the facilities and the occasion would allow. Nor was the response likely to be anything except more of the same when the most compelling lyrics were being delivered by Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith, whose every stage gesture, by the way, was also as much dance movement as anything else.<sup>58</sup>

From Billy Kersands’s captivating Virginia essence to the dynamic glides, spins, and splits of James Brown, African American dancing singers have captured the imaginations of people throughout the world. The long-standing tradition of dancing singers in African American culture reaches back to central and western Africa, where song was always coupled with bodily movement. Many of America’s most outstanding twentieth-century singers began as dancers or included dancing in their performances.

Just after World War II, the relationship that dancers, musicians, and singers had enjoyed for so many years was fractured by federal, state, and city governments. In 1944, a 30 percent federal excise tax was levied against “dancing” night clubs. Later it was reduced to 20 percent. “No Dancing Allowed” signs went up all over the country.<sup>59</sup> Max Roach argues that the new tax signaled the end of variety entertainment as it had been known: “It was levied on all places where they had entertainment. It was levied in case they had public dancing, singing, storytelling, humor, or jokes on stage. This tax is the real story behind why dancing, not just tap dancing, but public dancing per se and also singing, quartets, comedy, all these kinds of things, were just out. Club owners, promoters, couldn’t afford to pay the city tax, state tax, government tax.”<sup>60</sup>

Dancers, singers, and comedians suffered. Only jazz instrumentalists were able to thrive under these conditions. According to Roach, “if somebody got up to dance, there would be 20 per cent more tax on the dollar. If someone got up there and sang a song, it would be 20 per cent more. If someone danced on the stage it was 20 per cent more.” As a result jazz gradually lost its dancing audience. People began sitting down in clubs, and as agents began pushing small combos, only a few big bands were able to survive.<sup>61</sup>

Social dancing suffered, but as usual African Americans found other avenues for public dancing. Professional dancers, on the other hand, were faced with a serious dilemma. Many tap dancers turned away from dance to other careers. The eccentric dancer Bessie Dudley eventually found a job in a Long Island factory. By the early fifties, promoters were pushing vocal groups instead of dancers.<sup>62</sup> With the help of Cholly Atkins, these groups became the new disseminators of vernacular dance on stage. They comprised a new generation of dancing singers.

The extremely rich cross-fertilization of African American vernacular dance, jazz, and singing in the twenties, thirties, and forties brought character and style to American culture. The dance that evolved during that period in America's history is "classic jazz dance." Duke Ellington had this to say about a renewal of the association between jazz music and jazz dance: "With the new music that already is, and what is coming, there's no predicting what effect the disassociation from dancing will have in the future, but my own idea is that it is going to make a big fat curve and come right back to where it was, except that it will be on a slightly higher musical plane."<sup>63</sup>

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