

CID – ATHENS ~ July 2023

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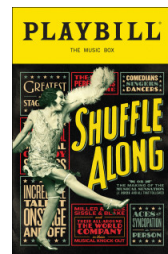
Research Presentation

THE ROARING TWENTIES: WON'T YOU CHARLESTON WITH ME?



In the 1920s Americans frequented nightclubs, speakeasies, ballrooms, and restaurants featuring large orchestras as a reaction to the industrialized age, greater freedom, and prohibition. Some of the most famous ballrooms in Manhattan and Harlem in New York include the Grand Plaza, Tropicana, Palladium, Savoy, Manhattan Casino, and the Cotton Club.

The dance, the **Charleston**, is probably the quintessential representation of the 1920s. Named for the harbor city of Charleston, South Carolina, its roots go back to the Ashanti dances of Africa. When it appeared in the show *Shuffle Along* in 1921 and a song and dance called *The Charleston* was included in the 1923 show *Runnin' Wild*, the dance became a sensation. *Shuffle Along*, recently revived on Broadway, introduced tap dancing to white audiences and helped create the craze for jazz music and dance, even though jazz was considered uncivilized and, on occasion, savage. It also marked the beginning of the idea that Black dancing wasn't as "low life" as previously thought. The



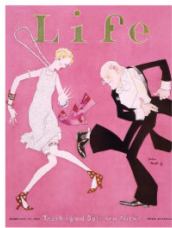
Charleston had some characteristics of traditional Black American dance, but it was a new creation, tailored to popular appeal and danced to jazz music of the decade.

Although the Charleston started as a simple twisting of the feet, it became a fast kicking step to the front and back with the arms swinging in opposition to the feet.

Requiring a bouncy carriage, loose limbs and quick footwork, the Charleston captured the fun and fancy-free nature of the Roaring '20s and was the source



of the term "kicking up your heels." It was done at home, at private parties, and in public in restaurants and ballrooms. It was the first social dance a woman could do unaccompanied by a partner. A form of challenge dancing, the Charleston made the cover of *Life Magazine* in 1926



and swept through America and Europe. The Prince of Wales was a fan and was quite accomplished at it. The couples version of the Charleston was introduced to "society" in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1923*.

Bee Jackson became known for doing a new dance called "The Charleston" while dancing in Club Richman in Manhattan. Bee went on a vaudeville tour and helped popularize the dance throughout America. Her legs were even insured for one million dollars! Although the Charleston was invented by black dancers in South Carolina, at one point she falsely claimed that she had invented the dance.



Variety Magazine and *The Boston Globe* claimed that the Charleston was responsible for the tragedy at Boston's Pickwick Club in July 4, 1925 because the vibrations of too many dancers resulted in the collapse of the building and the death of 44 people; it was subsequently called the 'death dance' in Boston. The band had just played the Twelfth Street Rag,



and club patrons claimed that revellers had danced the Charleston so frantically that they had caused the lights on the dance floor to cut out moments before plaster began to fall onto the dance floor, followed by the second and third floors crashing into the basement. The real cause of the collapse was that the building's structure had been weakened by 10,000 gallons of water used to put out a fire at the club three months before and further undermined by excavation for a garage next door. However, the collapse was used by the Boston media and city officials as a means to attack new-age social conventions such as dancing and jazz music, and they took the drastic step of banning the dance outright, citing the disaster at the Pickwick.

Although its popularity was rather short, the Charleston took couples away from intimacy and toward individual expression, allowed partners to separate while dancing, blurred the lines between performer and ballroom dancer, and produced the idea of "cutting in," where dancers could change partners mid-dance. The Charleston lasted longer than other 1920s dances because of its versatility – it could be danced in a small space solo, in couples, or choreographed into a



group dance; steps could be simplified (for social dancers) or embellished (for stage); and the movements looked great with the fashions of the day (slit fringed dress for women and casual jackets and slacks or tuxedos for men). It also

enhanced the careers of many actors, notably Ginger Rogers and Joan Crawford, who began their careers as Charleston stars. The fastest way to stardom was to be cast as a flapper with a Charleston or black bottom number. African-American teacher Billy Pearce was credited with training many Broadway dancers in Charleston, black bottom, and tap dancing.

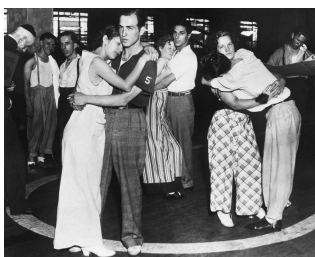


Charleston steps were incorporated in the dance called the **Big Apple**, which originated in the south at The Big Apple Night Club and swept the country when adopted by college

students. The dance used a caller to indicate which couple should “shine” by performing their unique version of the steps while surrounded by other dancers. Other steps included the Shag, Rock the Baby, London Bridge, Boogie Woogie, Suzie Q, Varsity Drag, and Praise Allah.

As the popularity of the Charleston’s jazz rhythm increased, it attracted a growing audience, but efforts were made to censor the "devil's music." By 1930 at least 60 communities in America had enacted laws prohibiting jazz in public dance halls, blaming it for the evils of the day. Thomas Edison, inventor of the phonograph, said jazz would sound better played backward. Speakeasies attracted customers from varying social backgrounds, and whites and blacks were allowed to mingle for the first time. The racial integration and the belief that jazz encouraged promiscuity were reasons for critics to crusade against it. During the next decade trumpet player Louis Armstrong and composer Duke Ellington helped propel jazz to a respectable level.

Dance marathons were the rage in the 1920s, developing from hour long events to Depression era entertainments that went on until the last couple was left standing. In these dance contests amateur dancers sought prize money, food or gifts, and fame. The first documented marathon in America was in March 1923 when Alma Cummings, a New York City dance



instructor, decided to see if she could achieve the world record for longest continuous dance. She wore out six partners over 27 hours of dancing, breaking a British record. Newspapers reported on her partners, shoes, clothing, diet, and religion.

Fanned by youth culture, freedom of expression, and the recent women’s right to vote, marathons represented the survival of the fittest. During the Depression, entering a marathon was often an act of desperation as dancers were fed and were awarded prize money greater than

they could earn in a year's wages. Skill at dancing, where the best dancers took the prize, became secondary to the ability to stay on your feet. In some ways dance marathons were theatrical events, similar to today's television reality shows – compete, suffer, endure, fail or triumph. Spectators cheered their favorites or heckled contestants they hoped would lose, creating excitement, drama, and controversy. If either partner's knees touched the floor or they stopped moving, the couple was disqualified. Winners represented the American dream; losers typified “real life” in America.

Marathons became big business, though not necessarily ethical business, as some promoters went to small towns, opened a show, sold seats (and resold them when vacated), then left without paying the prize money, raking in the cash but giving marathons a bad name. Together dancers, promoters, and spectators produced the illusion that something important was happening in spite of exhaustion or pain experienced by the contestants. The blood, sweat, and tears of the dancers provided a livelihood for promoters. Eventually, this ‘dance or die’ ethic aroused criticism, and reformers protested the exploitation of women and minors. Cities and states passed laws that prohibited conducting or participating in marathon dance contests on the grounds that they were harmful, unregulated, attracted undesirables, and were scams run by con men. Although the 1920s and ‘30s form of dance marathons vanished, they lived on in the form of the roller derbies of the 1950s, Twist contests of the 1960s, and the popularity of 21st century television talent shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance* and *American Idol*.

Charleston steps showed up in the lindy hop of the 1930s, the mashed potato of the 1960s, the Quickstep, in street dancing, and in stage performances of the *New Kids on the Block* of the 1980s. Broadway musicals, such as *The Boyfriend*, *My One and Only*, *Thoroughly Modern*



Millie, and *Anything Goes* feature choreographed charleston dancing. It remains an icon of the jazz age and the young flappers who kicked their way through the 1920s.

Summary

Dances, invented by common people, have been stylized by performers for theatrical productions, dance concerts, and revues; and dances seen in theaters have been copied by the general public, creating a crossover between theatrical performance and dancing for pleasure. Dancing has provided escape and distraction from the harsh realities life, including war and the Depression. It provides physical activity, an opportunity to conduct a romance, and teaches etiquette, behavior, social graces. The invention of new dances, or a reimagining of old ones, has become essentially linked with society's perceptions of morality and aesthetics, provoking criticism and condemnation; but dances have also provided an understanding of society and a view of customs and trends in popular culture.



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PRESENTER INFORMATION: (Summary of qualifications of speaker):

Karen Lynn Smith (retired) was Professor in the Drama & Physical Education Departments and Director of the Dance Minor at Washington College in Chestertown, MD. She has a B.S. in Dance and an M.A. in Physical Education from the University of Maryland and is certified also in Pilates. She has received a Presidential Citation and the William Burdick Award from the Maryland AHPERD, EDA-AAHPERD Merit Awards in Dance, 1987, and in Physical Education, 1990, the EDA Honor Award in 1991, and the AAHPERD Honor Award in 2010. Karen was director of the Dance Commission of ICHPER•SD (the International Council for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport, & Dance) from 1994-2004 and received the 1995 ICHPER•SD Distinguished Scholar Award in Dance Education, and 3 National Dance Association Presidential Citations. She has taught hundreds of workshops and master classes in yoga, jazz dance, modern dance, ballet, and stretching and has presented scholarly papers on nutrition for the dancer, flexibility, alignment, dancing healthy, spiritual foundations of Native American dance, and dance curricula at State and National conventions, 31 Maryland State Dance Festivals, the inaugural National High School Dance Festival in 1992, at the American Dance Guild Conference in Hawaii (1976), at the International Dance Council World Congresses (CID-UNESCO) in Greece (2002, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022), Spain (2009), Latvia (2010), Montreal, Canada (2013), St. Petersburg, Russia (2013), Tokyo, Japan (2014), Gainesville, FL (2015, Miami, FL (2016, 2021), Nassau, Bahamas (2023); at ICHPER-SD World Congresses in Ireland (1991), Japan (1993), the U.S. (1995), Korea (1997), Egypt (1999), and Taiwan (2002); at the World Dance Alliance Global Assembly in Toronto, Canada (2006), dozens of National Dance Association conventions, and the IADMS conference in Singapore (2012). Karen is the author of Popular Dance: From Ballroom to Hip-Hop, (Chelsea House, 2010). She is the 2021 National Dance Society Global Dance Educator, 2014 National Dance Association Scholar-Artist, Past President of the Dover English Country Dancers, founding member of the National Dance Society, and a Vice President of the International Dance Council/CID.