

**HISTORICIZING AND ENGAGING LINDY HOP: THE DEVELOPMENT,
PRESENCE, AND ABSENCE OF BLACK CULTURAL
VALUES AND AESTHETICS**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the social factors surrounding the development of Lindy Hop in Harlem, New York during the 1920s and 30s from a sociocultural perspective, applying the findings to an instance of contemporary Lindy Hop practice at Jazz Attack, a Lindy Hop venue in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in order to ascertain where elements of Black culture are present or absent. As Lindy Hop practice has transitioned from its point of origin in the Black space of the Savoy Ballroom to primarily white spaces today, questions arise about cultural preservation and erasure in this historically Black dance.

Using historical methodologies, this research examines the human experience of historical Lindy Hop participants to analyze the culture that developed within the dance. Ethnographic methodologies, including the use of participant observation and interviews, are then used in a cross-cultural comparison to examine where elements of historical Black Lindy Hop culture are present or absent in an instance of contemporary Lindy Hop practice. The findings argue that, while the reasons for engagement in Lindy Hop are intrinsically different between historical and contemporary participants, elements of emotional or spiritual release and an emphasis on community are present today. Other historical Black cultural elements surrounding the approach to movement source creation and bodily aesthetics are minimal or absent.

Keywords: Lindy Hop, swing dance, Black dance, Savoy Ballroom

To Chris, who made this work possible.

To all Lindy Hoppers: past, present, and future.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 17, 1928, the *New York Herald* (1928) reported on a partnered jazz dance marathon prominently featuring African American dancers. The marathon began at the Manhattan Casino in New York City and lasted sixteen days, before being shut down by Health Commissioner Harris out of safety concerns for the dancers. As far away as Paris, newspapers reported that on-site physicians had proclaimed the contestants to be suffering from low blood pressure and abnormal heart beats after what had then amounted to over 300 hours of dancing.

Over the course of the marathon, reporters would focus on George Snowden (more commonly known today as George “Shorty” Snowden) and Mattie Purnell, who were dance couple number seven. The *New York Amsterdam News* (1928) reported the dance duo to be “the most popular team on the floor” in addition to having “a little specialty dance of their own,” which included the Lindbergh Hop. *The World* (1928) newspaper reinforced the association between these dancers and the Lindbergh Hop by reporting that Purnell and Snowden received a prize during the marathon for “the fanciest performance of a new dance called the ‘Lindbergh Hop.’” Years later, Snowden would recount the marathon to Marshall Stearns, English professor and founder of the Institute of Jazz Studies, and his wife and jazz critic Jean Stearns (1968), who wrote that Snowden invented and named “The Lindy” through the improvisation of his footwork while dancing the breakaway with Purnell. The breakaway eventually evolved into the swingout, which is the foundational step of the Lindy Hop.¹ Executed over eight counts

¹ An early example of the breakaway danced by Snowden and Purnell is found in the film *After Seben* (JazzMAD London 2016).

of music, the swingout features an alternating double-step triple-step rhythm (or some variation on these steps) while partners shift between open and closed positions. The dance, classified under the general category of swing, is a spot dance (meaning it does not travel around the ballroom) and is danced to a wide range of music tempos.

My introduction to swing dance in general took place in 1998 when I saw the Gap swing dance khakis commercial (90s Commercials 2017), which ignited a fascination with early jazz music and dance. I became interested in the history of dance from the 1920s to 40s, along with the fashion, dance culture, and daily life experiences of the era's dancers. I imagine that at the core of it, Snowden's passion for dance has something in common with the reasons I, and many others, continue to participate in Lindy Hop today.

Upon entering undergraduate studies in 2000, I became involved in ballroom and Latin dancing through a dance class at St. Olaf college. After graduating with a B.A. in Economics, I accepted a position in administrative work at a prominent ballet and modern dance school in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I also took as many as eight classes a week under my employee benefits. At the same time, I continued to swing dance and participate in the Twin Cities ballroom and Latin dance scene.² Eventually, I left administrative work to focus on a teaching and performing career, which included teaching for a ballroom studio and performing with a Lindy Hop dance troupe. During my time in these various dance worlds, I was quick to note distinct differences in culture and values between the ballet and modern dance world, social and competitive ballroom

² When I use the term ballroom, I am referring to the social and competitive ballroom and Latin dance industry (waltz, tango, foxtrot, cha cha, rumba, and so on). This should not be confused with the African American and Latino underground LGBTQ+ Ballroom Scene or Ballroom Culture that originated in New York City.

world, and the swing dance world. Eventually my participation in the first two areas of dance diminished, and my focus shifted solely to swing dance, where my passion and embodied knowledge of the dance has led me to study its history, cultural origins, participant experiences, and cultural and aesthetic evolution from one generation and community to the next.

To circle back to Snowden, in one sense I can relate to his love of the dance, based on my own personal, academic, and professional participation. In another sense, however, I've come to the dance from an entirely different cultural context than that of Snowden. Understanding this connection between the Lindy Hop's past and present, including what cultural values have endured and what has changed, will therefore form the theme of my research.

The current body of research on swing dance, and more specifically Lindy Hop, is small. The available literature tends to focus on historical survey or be biographical in nature. The first major piece of dance research that included a study of Lindy Hop was *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* by Stearns and Stearns (1968). This work uses participant interviews and oral history to present a chronological survey of historical jazz dance development from early minstrelsy in the nineteenth-century to post-World War II. Yet, this text is not without its problems. While Stearns and Stearns commendably tackled an immense portion of early jazz dance history, they were not academic historians, and the absence of such rigorous analysis shows. To illustrate, much of their research on Lindy Hop history was based on oral interviews with only three dancers (Al Minns, Leon James, and George Snowden), and any sources that may have

been used outside these interviews are not cited. This lack of evaluation and cross-referencing requires some degree of caution on the part of the researcher.

Works dedicated primarily to Lindy Hop include *Swing Dancing* by dancer Tamara Stevens (2011), which chronicles the history of various swing dance movements and general development of the dance from the minstrel era to the swing boom of the 1980s and 90s. Historically, Stevens's book offers little that is not already covered in the work of Stearns and Stearns, although it does present a timeline of the transmission of Lindy Hop during the swing surge of the 1980s and 90s.

Outside of the chronological timeline, there is a small body of research by historians dedicated to the political role of Lindy Hop, both in America and in Europe, including Nazi-occupied Germany and the *Swing Jugend* during WWII (Kater 1992; Peukert 1987; Tucker 2013; Willett 1989). Additional Lindy Hop research of various foci began to emerge after the resurgence of swing in popular culture in the 1990s. This includes texts focusing on the Savoy Ballroom, historical representations of Lindy Hop on film, and the revival and cultural ownership of swing (Crease 1995; Engelbrecht 1983; Unruh 2020; Usner 2001). Social sciences scholar Harri Heinilä and dance historian Terry Monaghan both dedicated their academic careers to the research of historical Lindy Hop. Heinilä's (2016) dissertation on Harlem dancers and African American jazz dance is accessible online, but the majority of his research is available through his blog *authenticjazzdance* (<https://authenticjazzdance.wordpress.com/>). I have only been able to access a small selection of Monaghan's (2001, 2002) writing; and, unfortunately, his dissertation on the Savoy Ballroom was never published.

In my research, I argue that an awareness of the daily experiences and cultural values of Savoy-era Harlem residents is essential to preserving historical Africanist elements in contemporary Lindy Hop practice. I explore not only the Black cultural origins of the dance and the daily experiences of people like Snowden, which informed the creation of Lindy Hop, but also where foundational elements of Africanist culture, values, and aesthetics are or are not present within a contemporary community of Lindy Hop dancers.

The first chapter of my research historicizes Lindy Hop in its place of origin, Harlem, New York, during the 1920s and 30s from a sociocultural perspective. This approach reveals aspects of the human experiences and perspective that made up the daily lives of Savoy-era dancers, which in turn inform an understanding of the motivations behind the creation of Lindy Hop. Understanding the cultural significance and motivation behind Lindy Hop engagement then informs the cross-cultural comparison that I perform in the next two chapters through an ethnographic case study at Jazz Attack, the premier Lindy Hop venue in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Chapter two explores where historical Black culture and Africanist elements are present within contemporary Lindy Hop practice at Jazz Attack. The two historical Lindy Hop cultural values that I identify and focus on are the importance of emotional or spiritual release and social connection in Lindy Hop culture. I note the presence of these Black cultural values through participant observation and semi-formal interviews. Chapter three examines the spaces where there are, in general, absences of Black cultural knowledge and aesthetics at Jazz Attack. I begin by discussing how the contemporary movement-first approach to Lindy Hop results in a different value system than the music-first approach seen in

historical Lindy Hop culture. In order to demonstrate the significance of this shift, I offer two ways of looking at the absence of Black dance values through the application of scholarship by African dance scholars Kariamuw Welsh-Asante (1993) and Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996). Additional texts that I draw upon include research on related early-American vernacular jazz dance and social dance culture (Guarino and Oliver 2014; Guarino, Jones, and Oliver 2022; Hazzard-Gordon 2010), aesthetics and culture of African diasporic dances in the United States (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014; Gottschild 1996; Hazzard-Gordon 1983; Malone 1996), and the sociocultural and socioeconomic aspects of Harlem in the early twentieth century (Orsi 1992; Osofsky 1971; Pollard 1936-37).

One final note on terminology: The study of Lindy Hop as a form of Black culture and values requires some nuance in terminology when dealing with both an historical and contemporary perspective. Throughout my writing, I use both of the terms African American and Black, although they should not be interpreted as synonymous. Modern concepts of Black typically encompass people of African ancestry worldwide, regardless of where they were born or where they reside.³ Thus, applying the term Black to the population of Harlem in an historical sense creates some problems. Instead, I use African American as a narrower historical term by conceptualizing it to denote the specific Black population that had long-standing roots in America (generally due to enslaved ancestors) and resided in Harlem during the 1920s and 30s, either by birth or as a result of the Great Migration. This distinction between African American and Black as it relates to historical

³ I realize that not all readers may agree with this definition of the term Black. However, it is based upon current style guides including those from Associated Press (<https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>) and APA (<https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines>).

research is important for a few reasons. First, Harlem's population was primarily made up of African Americans and various immigrant populations during the 1920s and 30s. Some of these immigrant populations may be considered Black by today's definition but did not self-identify as Black during this time period. This was generally due to differences in language and culture that included individuals from Puerto Rico and southern Italy, and Haitians in neighboring Brooklyn (Orsi 1992). Secondly, African Americans comprised the majority of the Savoy Ballroom's attendance, and I have found no evidence to suggest significant attendance at the ballroom by Black immigrant populations, which has implications for the understanding of Black culture discussed later. Therefore, by using the term African American in my historical research chapter, I hope to more accurately represent the specific population that played the central role in the development of culture and values of Lindy Hop. When I do use the term Black in historical discussion, it is while discussing the ethnic population of Harlem in more general terms and when historical data does not differentiate between ethnic groups. Lastly, I define the term Black culture as the presence of certain values, including the importance of interpersonal relations, spontaneity, improvisation, being over doing, spiritual joyousness, and call-and-response (Gay 1987; Gottschild 1996; DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014). I discuss these values further when analyzing the connection between the historical culture of Lindy Hop and contemporary Lindy Hop practice in Philadelphia.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORICIZING LINDY HOP

Introduction

Historicizing Lindy Hop in Harlem, New York during the 1920s and 30s from a sociocultural perspective provides a deeper understanding of how Lindy Hop culture and aesthetics developed. In regards to chronological development of the dance, there is plenty of documentation that identifies various dance precursors of Lindy Hop and subsequent derivatives (Guarino and Oliver 2014; Manning and Millman 2007; Stearns and Stearns 1968; Stevens 2011). However, I am interested in more than the chronological development of Lindy Hop, and seek to show the importance of human experience in the development of the dance in this chapter.

In his book *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, philosopher Paul Taylor (2016) argues that Black arts are not connected through their commonalities as final products, but rather through the commonalities surrounding the motivation to create. By exploring the human experience and perspective that was the daily life of Savoy-era dancers, motivation to create is revealed, and Lindy Hop becomes a reflection of cultural significance. Consequentially, understanding the cultural significance behind Lindy Hop informs a cross-cultural comparison with contemporary practice.

In this chapter, I historicize Lindy Hop and explore the human experience of Savoy-era dancers by beginning with a brief historical survey of racial and economic demographics of Harlem residents and Harlem social life. This is accomplished through the use of primary and secondary source material, including U.S. Census data compiled by Andy Beveridge (2008) for the *Gotham Gazette*, a first-hand survey of Harlem social

life conducted by Myrtle Pollard (1936-37), research by historian Gilbert Osofsky (1971) on the development and racial demographic shifts of Harlem during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, and research by historian Robert Orsi (1992) on racial dynamics of Harlem's immigrant population. The next section looks at historical participant and public perceptions of Lindy Hop, as well as how the Savoy and Lindy Hop are recalled in participant memory. Here, I look at print media, including *Life Magazine*, perceptions of jazz music and dance by Harlem Renaissance writers James Weldon Johnson ([1930] 1994), Joel A. Rogers ([1925] 1994), W.E.B. Du Bois (Du Bois cited in Williams 2002), and Langston Hughes ([1926] 1994), and memoirs by Savoy dancers Frankie Manning (2007) and Norma Miller (1996).⁴ The chapter finishes with a brief overview of the transmission of Lindy Hop on a national and international level beginning with WWII and leading up to the present day.

Harlem Demographics and Culture in the 1920s and 30s

Harlem was originally conceived as an affluent white neighborhood but shifted to African American and immigrant tenement housing during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. With this racial demographic shift, by the early-twentieth century Manhattan's white population had essentially abandoned Harlem (Osofsky 1971). The racial and ethnic make-up of Harlem during the 1920s and 30s was complex due to a population expansion consisting of African Americans via the Great Migration and the immigration of multiple European populations. The settling patterns of these various

⁴ Frankie Manning (1914-2009) was a dancer at the Savoy Ballroom and a member of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers dance troupe. He choreographed numerous routines for Whitey's, including *Hellzapoppin'* (1941), and is credited with having invented the first airstep in Lindy Hop. Norma Miller (1919-2019) was also a dancer at the Savoy Ballroom and a member of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers dance troupe, as well as an actress, author, and comedian. Miller was a 2003 recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship award.

migrating and immigrating populations led to a distinct racial demographic difference between Central Harlem and Greater Harlem. Beveridge (2008) estimates that in 1920, Black residents represented only 32.43% of Central Harlem. This number increased to just over 70% by 1930, and Central Harlem reached its highest percentage of Black residents at around 98% in 1950. In contrast, Black residents made up only 12.28% of Greater Harlem in 1920, 34.82% in 1930, and reached their highest concentration at 63.53% in 1970 (Beveridge 2008). The area of Central Harlem that was most densely inhabited by Black residents in 1930 spanned the area bordered within 8th Avenue, West 126th Street, Park Avenue, and the Harlem River, while the remainder of Greater Harlem's population was notably racially mixed (Osofsky 1971). This population consisted of other European immigrant populations, including German, Jewish, Italian, Irish, Spanish, and Puerto Rican (Orsi 1992; Osofsky 1971). While the white population of lower Manhattan looked upon Harlem as containing a population of "others," it would be incorrect to assume that Harlem's diverse population banded together in solidarity. While there was certainly cultural cross-over and moments of congenial shared experiences, residents of Harlem also found themselves getting caught in the game of differentiation against one another in an attempt to find acceptance in America (Orsi 1992).

Even within the African American population of Central Harlem, there was a large amount of cultural diversity. As part of the Great Migration, African Americans relocated to Harlem in unprecedented numbers between 1910 and 1930. Osofsky (1971) estimates that by 1930, less than 25 percent of the Black population residing in Harlem had been born in New York State. Instead, new residents had migrated from nearly every

state running the length of the east coast from Massachusetts to Texas. Additionally, it should be noted that in 1930 the Black population statistics of Harlem include a number of individuals who were born outside of the United States and therefore were not considered African American. Referred to as “West Indians” at the time, these immigrants primarily came from the Caribbean Island region and are estimated to have made up 17 percent of the Black population in 1930 (Osofsky 1971).

These overall demographics are important to understand the historical context of Harlem, but it is also necessary to be cautious about them when considering the racial and sociocultural aspects of Harlem during the 1930s. As stated earlier, the concept of who identifies as Black or white today differs from how the racial categories functioned in the 1920s and 30s. This makes it difficult at times to form a complete picture of Harlem from historical data, as it is not always apparent how the data was collected and categorized. To be clear, the aim of bringing the racial complexity of Central and Greater Harlem to light is not to imply that the Lindy Hop was an evenly mixed development of all the ethnic groups residing in Greater Harlem. Rather, it is to showcase that the African American population of Central Harlem operated within an extremely dense area full of ethnic and regional diversity. In other words, the residents of Central Harlem present during the development of the Lindy Hop were not a long-standing, homogenous cultural group. Lindy Hop developed within a population of primarily migratory African Americans surrounded by other European and Caribbean (Black) immigrant populations, and it is inconceivable to conclude that Lindy Hop was not affected by this complexity during its development. Noting the diversity of 1920s and 30s Central Harlem culture means that Lindy Hop was developing within a constantly evolving community. The

culture of Harlem was further complicated by its nightclub scene, where racial politics and time of day shifted the cultural experience.

While Central Harlem consisted of a rich blend of Black culture, nightclubs were a common party destination for white Manhattanites. In 1932, *Manhattan Magazine* published a cartoon map titled *A Night-Club Map of Harlem* (Campbell 1932). The map depicted the area between Lenox Avenue and Seventh Avenue (known today as Malcolm X Blvd and Adam Clayton Powell Jr Blvd respectively), and 131st street and 142nd street. This map was produced with the white middle- to upper-class Manhattan visitor in mind. On this map, the partygoer found location information on clubs including the Savoy Ballroom, Cotton Club, Club Hot-Cha, Small's Paradise, and more. Visitors were also directed to Tillies for fried chicken and given information on the current price for marijuana, what time was fashionable to show up at different clubs, and where to find notable dance acts like Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Earl "Snakehips" Tucker.⁵ The map makes sure to state that "the only important omission is the location of the various speakeasies but since there are about 500 of them" the reader will not have a problem finding one once they are in Harlem. Beyond the promises of good food, drink, drugs, and dancing, the appeal of Harlem nightlife is further enhanced by the cartoon caricatures that crowd the map. Black and white patrons are portrayed in evening gowns, fur stoles, tuxedos, and top hats. Club performers and staff wear suits, top hats and tails, and revealing showgirl outfits. Throughout the prohibition era, Harlem was depicted in

⁵ Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (1878-1949) was a Black American tap dancer, actor, and singer. He is most remembered for his stair dance routine. He was one of the highest paid Black entertainers during his time and known to be incredibly philanthropic. Earl "Snakehips" Tucker (1906-37) was known as an eccentric dancer, his nickname earned through a stage routine that employed mesmerizing movements mimicking a snake. The routine required Tucker to employ a high degree of flexibility, fluidity, and articulation through his joints.

newspapers and magazines as a place of entertainment. In 1935, the *New York Age* printed an article outlining details of entertainment to be found at dozens of dance halls and clubs and declaring Harlem an “amusement center” (Pollard 1936-37, 1:348). However, the experience of the white nightlife visitor was a far cry from the experience of living in Harlem.

While there were certainly African Americans living in Harlem during the 1920s and 30s that were well-situated financially (including Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neale Hurston and jazz musician Louis Armstrong), most African American residents experienced extreme economic hardship and lived in deplorable conditions. As Central Harlem shifted from a middle- and upper-class white neighborhood to a working-class African American neighborhood during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, former multi-room residencies were transformed into single-room, multi-family tenements (Osofsky 1971).⁶ Housing became scarce and overcrowded with the influx of African American migrants moving to Harlem between 1910 and 1930, and extortionist rents led individuals to hold rent parties. In addition to providing individuals a source of income to cover rent, these parties afforded attendees a place for socialization, food, liquor, gambling, and dancing. Before the emergence of large dance halls and ballrooms, these rent parties acted as a transient social space and increased the transmission of vernacular dance around the community (Hazzard-Gordon 2010).

Economic hardship also led to a surplus of churches in Central Harlem. While some churches, such as the Abyssinian Baptist Church, already had a long and

⁶ It is beyond the scope of this research to detail the transition of Harlem from an affluent white neighborhood to an African American neighborhood faced with poverty. Readers interested in the history of this change may wish to reference *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* by Gilbert Osofsky (1971).

established history prior to the Great Depression, others were a direct product of the Great Depression. Reputable and established churches were owned, operated, and controlled by African Americans and often provided public services in addition to being a place of worship. For example, Salem Methodist Episcopal Church served as home to over forty organizations, including Boy and Girl Scouts, an Historical Club, and a Floral Circle. They also had an education program for adults that helped Harlem residents learn to write their name, and offered education in foreign languages, math, dressmaking, typing skills, and so on (Pollard 1936-37). On the other hand, many new small churches were an attempt to survive. By renting a room that could serve as a place of worship, placing a sign out front, and rounding up members, the founder would have a place to sleep and a source of income (Pollard 1936-37). These Great Depression storefront churches are estimated to have comprised nearly two thirds of the total churches in Harlem. Storefront churches also capitalized on fear over the diseases and high mortality rates that plagued the residents of Central Harlem due to unsanitary living conditions (Osofsky 1971).

In viewing all of this information, there are a few things about African American Harlem life of the 1920s and 30s that becomes apparent. Harlem residents exhibited a strong sense of community and survival. Numerous churches, educational and social programs, and attendance at rent parties served to establish communal bonds and support fellow neighbors. But these cultural elements were also a means of survival for African Americans in an otherwise inhospitable city. At times, means of survival in Harlem even caused residents to prey upon and deceive their fellow neighbors, as was the case in storefront churches. Additionally, nightclubs created a continuously shifting culture.

Many clubs were either segregated or open only to white clientele while employing Black workers in an attempt to provide what was referred to as the Harlem slumming experience. Some clubs, like the Cotton Club, only employed show girls of specific lighter black skin tones as a draw of “exoticism” (Wells 2016). Such racial policies created an after-dark culture that specifically denied residents access to various areas of Harlem during times of operation. In other words, Black residents were both welcome and shut out of their own neighborhoods, depending upon the time of day. An exception to the segregation practices of the nightclub business was the Savoy Ballroom, which was integrated but catered to Black clientele. I am most interested in the Savoy Ballroom as it was the epicenter for the Lindy Hop and a place where Black jazz dance culture thrived.

Lindy Hop and the Savoy Ballroom: Fact, Myth, and Memory

History has a way of remembering events in many ways, some of which are factual while others are mythologized for political, publicity, or other reasons. Memory offers an additional way of looking at an event, as what is recollected is just as important as what is not. These facts, myths, and memories are often intertwined, and each is equally important to the understanding of any historical event, place, or person.

The Savoy Ballroom, which opened on March 12, 1926, was located on Lenox Avenue between 140th and 141st streets and played a central role in the development of the Lindy Hop. Other notable Harlem ballrooms, such as the Alhambra and Renaissance, were seen as stepping stones on the way to the Savoy by dancers and musicians. In his autobiography, Manning recalls his ambition to move on from the Renaissance and attend the Savoy after seeing his friend Herbie (who had been to the Savoy) do the Lindy Hop.

I had never seen the Lindy hop being done like *that* before. It just took my breath away. It was so rhythmic, and his body movement ... Man! I'd seen kids at the Renaissance Ballroom do the Lindy, but they weren't as smooth as this guy. I don't know if he was a top dancer at the Savoy, but he was older, so he had *been* there.

Everything was being created at the Savoy—all these steps we had heard about—and we wanted to learn something new ... Those cats were killers. (Manning and Millman 2007, 61)

Historical texts remembering the Savoy often focus on the physical aspects of the venue. Stearns and Stearns (1968, 321) describe the Savoy as having “ornate counters,” a “small army of attendants,” and “mirrored flights of marble steps.” Dance scholar Barbara Engelbrecht (1983, 3) emphasizes the “huge and shiny mahogany floor,” a “dance floor as big as a city block,” and states that the goal of the Savoy’s management was to create a refined luxury ballroom that would be far superior to dancing in dingy, smokey nightclubs. Engelbrecht touches on a claim that has since followed the reputation of the Savoy: that the dance floor spanned an entire city block and measured fifty by two hundred feet.⁷ Dance scholar Karen Hubbard and Monaghan (2009) have since disproved this claim and have suggest that the dimensions of the ballroom and its capacity were likely exaggerated for promotional purposes. Yet the false statistic has been surprisingly resilient in the rumor mill, and has contributed to a mythologized view of the prestige of the Savoy today.⁸

⁷ Unfortunately, I have not been able to determine the original source of the claim that the Savoy dance floor was two hundred by fifty feet.

⁸ This statistic has continued to be published on Lindy Hop community websites without citation. For examples, see: <https://www.nyc-arts.org/organizations/savoy-ballroom/>, <https://castledanceproject.wordpress.com/2012/03/07/the-savoy-ballroom-harlem-ny/>, <http://history.just-the-swing.com/savoy-ballroom>, or <https://danceharlemrenaissance.wordpress.com/home-4/the-places/the-savoy-ballroom/>.

Oral accounts offer a recollection of the experience of the Savoy from another perspective. Musicians and dancers that frequented the Savoy rarely mention the interior or its amenities, other than the double band stand. Certainly, the beauty and amenity of the ballroom would have helped bring in nightly attendees. However, regardless of the actual décor and size of the ballroom, what is most notable in oral and written accounts of attendees was the reputation of the music and dancing. Comments about who was playing or dancing that evening far outweigh any mention of the interior of the Savoy and its amenities. It is through participant memory that the true value of the Savoy can be understood.

Dancing at the Savoy meant dancing to New York's best bands. Inside, the Savoy boasted two side-by-side band stands, and each dance night featured two swing bands. This set-up allowed for music to be played continuously throughout the evening, as one band could set up while the other played their set. But the focus of these bands was not simply about playing their set; it was about displaying their showmanship and outplaying the other band. The double bandstand set-up was also used for regular battles of the bands where the Savoy would set a big-name band against the house band (Dance 1974; Gottlieb 1996; Manning and Millman 2007). These band battles are often referenced in the memoirs of other musicians and dancers, and are noted to have pushed the creativity of both participating musicians and dancers (Dance 1974; Gottlieb 1996; Manning and Millman 2007; Miller and Jensen 1996; Stearns and Stearns 1968). In total, around 250 bands played at the Savoy Ballroom before it closed in 1958 (Stearns and Stearns 1968). These bands consisted of those who scored single-night engagements at the Savoy, and

regular appearances by the Savoy house bands, such as the Savoy Bearcats, Savoy Sultans, and the Chick Webb Band (Dance 1974).

Dance attendees were discerning in their musical taste. A bad show at the Savoy was detrimental to a band, as was the case for Cab Calloway during his New York debut. Describing the Savoy as “strictly big-time,” Calloway ([1976]1996, 119) relates the story of his Midwest band’s failure at the Savoy in 1929. Realizing that the current musical repertoire of the band consisted of “old-time, unhip, novelty tunes” in comparison to the jazz around New York City, Calloway ([1976]1996, 118) argued with his band to update their repertoire without success. Calloway goes on to describe the reaction his band receives at the Savoy as they follow an exciting set by Cecil Scott and his band.

Brother, when we started playing that dipsy-doodle music from the Midwest ... the damned dance floor cleaned out. You could feel the place go cold. Cecil had damn near set it on fire and we just cooled it off. We were an absolute flop bust, zero, nothing. Our music didn’t suit those jazzed-up people worth a damn.

We got our notice that first night ... We had a two-week contract and on the first night we got our two-week notice. (Calloway [1976] 1996, 120)

One of the most notorious battles of the bands took place on May 11, 1937 between Chick Webb and Benny Goodman. In the days prior to the show, newspaper releases spoke of how the four-thousand available tickets had been sold out for weeks (*Pittsburgh Courier* 1937).⁹ Post-show, newspapers emphasized the intensity of the evening both in attendance and excitement, and reporting that more than 20,000 people had to be turned away at the door (Briggs 1958; *New York Amsterdam News* 1937). The

⁹ It is also interesting to note that the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper release stated that the 4,000 tickets had been distributed with half for white patrons and half for Black patrons.

battle between Webb and Goodman remained one of the most memorable and important nights at the Savoy for Manning. Recounting the evening, Manning (2007, 72) writes “I danced to every single song, and sweated so much that I had to change suits three times! I’d tell Big George, the Savoy’s doorman, ‘I’ll be right back,’ and run home as fast as I could.”

Battle night or not, the caliber of bands that could be danced to at the Savoy pushed the creativity, interplay, and innovation of both the musicians and the dancers. James recalls dancing at the Savoy in 1937 when Dizzy Gillespie was playing with Teddy Hill’s band:

Every time he played a crazy lick, we cut a crazy step to go with it. And he dug us and blew even crazier stuff to see if we could dance to it, a kind of game, with the musicians and dancers challenging each other. (James cited in Stearns and Stearns 1968, 325)

What becomes apparent in all of these accounts are moments of experience with music and dance that formed lasting, life-long impressions upon musicians and dancers. Billed by Savoy management as the World’s Finest Ballroom, the Savoy’s significance came not from the décor, but from the social and communal experience that could be had. For the musicians, the value of the Savoy lay within the prestige of playing at a big-time club, playing their best set to a roaring crowd of dancers, and pitting their skills against some of the best bands in the country. For the dancers, the value lay within such experiences as simply being part of the excitement, being able to socialize within a club catering to Black individuals, or engaging in call-and-response when dancing to these top-notch bands. This call-and-response existed between dancers, as well as dancers and musicians, as there was a continuous give and take between each participant (such as in

the story recalled by James). All of these impactful memories come from a place of active engagement of the senses. As dancers like Manning recall moments of dance floors so packed and active that you could see the floor bounce, sweating through suits, roaring crowds, and excitement at collaborative innovation, it becomes apparent that viewing the Savoy through aesthetic elements creates a sterile image that fails to recognize the importance of the Savoy in Lindy Hop history.

While Lindy Hop dancing and jazz at the Savoy is fondly recalled by participants, literary artists of the Harlem Renaissance had mixed responses to the art forms. Concurrent with the time period of the Jazz Age, Harlem Renaissance intellectuals exhibit contradictory and ideologically motivated views within the African American community toward jazz music and dance. On one hand, Harlem Renaissance intellectuals sought to elevate the African American status quo within white society by promoting African American participation in literature, poetry, classical music, theater, and fine arts (Lewis 1994). On the other hand, Black vernacular music and dance, such as works by Bessie Smith and King Oliver, were often ignored in the Harlem Renaissance conversation. For those intellectuals who did write about jazz music and dance, opinions were widely varied. Some writers were outright against engagement by African Americans in the jazz arts while others felt that the jazz arts held promise, assuming the arts underwent some degree of refinement. Hughes was one of the few Harlem Renaissance intellectuals who embraced, and felt pride in, the jazz arts.

Johnson ([1930] 1994) and Rogers ([1925] 1994) acknowledged the popularity of jazz music and dance by declaring jazz an art form with promise, yet

viewed it as being in a crude development stage. In his short essay *Jazz at Home*, originally published in March 1925 when the Charleston dance was enjoying mass popularity, Rogers ([1925] 1994) speaks of the dance as still in the stages of low-class values. In his view, jazz dance contained movements of “gorilla-like shamble” and “rhythmic ague” (Rogers [1925] 1994, 53-54). Musically, Rogers believed that jazz had a bright future (although he does not say the same for the dance), as long as it continued to be sublimated and presented in ways that certain musicians, like Fletcher Henderson, had done. Specifically, Rogers is speaking of throwing out what he considers to be the “vulgarity and crudities of the lowly origin” ([1925] 1994, 55), which included jazz’s “morally anarchic spirit” ([1925] 1994, 57). At the end of his essay, Rogers ([1925] 1994, 57) concludes that jazz “has come to stay, and they are wise, who instead of protesting against it, try to lift and divert it into nobler channels.”

Other intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, including W.E.B. Du Bois, actively sought to disassociate themselves from popular jazz music and dance, and, moving in the opposite direction, tried to force a particular fine-arts culture on the African American community, which was not necessarily excited to receive or embrace it. For example, Black Swan Records, an organization on which Du Bois served on the board of directors, was formed with the vision of creating “a respectable black record company recording respectable black artists” (Williams 2002). The result was the production of records in an attempt to artificially create demand. Co-founder of Black Swan Records Harry Pace told the National Negro Business League:

It behooves some of us to undertake the job of elevating the musical taste of the race. We have issued 12 records, six of them standard high-class numbers, three of the popular type and three blues. We have had to give the people what they wanted in order to get them to buy what we wanted them to want ... our sales have naturally been larger for the last two types of records. (Pace cited in Williams 2002, 8)

What this quote reveals about Black Swan Records business dealings is a lack of trust in consumers to make their own decisions about music. Consumers want popular music and blues records, but it is only because they do not know any better. Instead, Pace, his co-founder W.C. Handy, and the board (including Du Bois) felt that it was their duty to educate the Black public on the types of music they should prefer, and to conveniently produce it for them.

In stark contrast to Johnson, Rogers, and Du Bois, Hughes openly praised and vindicated jazz. In his short essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, Hughes ([1926] 1994, 95) implores the Black artist to challenge the definition of art that he sees as being defined from a white mainstream perspective, and he also announces his shame at the artist who runs from the challenge of painting the Black people “because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features.” Instead of viewing jazz music and dance as something that African Americans might eventually be proud of after certain modifications (as Johnson and Rogers did) or trying to force a tactic of cultural assimilation toward European fine art (as Du Bois promoted), Hughes calls for African Americans to be proud of their heritage, skin, and culture, as well as all of their artistic contributions, including jazz, that they have created.

The motivation to either denounce or embrace the association between jazz dance and the African American identity becomes part of a contradictory set of mythic narratives surrounding the Lindy Hop. Many intellectuals associated with the Harlem Renaissance refused to align with jazz (either for what it was or what it could mean for their community), and instead insisted that fine art was the only way to elevate the African American in the eyes of white society. However, some others, like Hughes, held practically the opposite view.

Transmission of Lindy Hop Nationally and Internationally

Film, radio, print media, formal instruction, WWII, and shifting racial perceptions of the dance contributed to the spread of Lindy Hop both nationally and internationally. Like other early twentieth-century jazz dances (such as the Charleston, ragtime, and animal dances) Lindy Hop initially encountered strong resistance within mainstream white America. A 1936 issue of *Life Magazine* called the dance “barbaric” (1936, 64) and a “jungle dance” (1936, 66). Meanwhile, the Savoy is described as only appropriate for a night of “slumming” (*Life Magazine* 1936, 65). It is telling that none of the African American dancers are named, and all adults are referred to only as boy or girl, which served to reinforce inferior stereotypes of Black bodies. By 1943, America’s perception of Lindy Hop was drastically different, and *Life Magazine* (1943) again featured Lindy Hop; this time with a photo of white Lindy Hoppers Kaye Popp and Stanley Catron on the front cover. In addition to Popp and Catron, this issue also featured African American dancers Leon James and Willa Mae Ricker and described the Lindy Hop as having “attained respectability” as “America’s national dance” (*Life Magazine* 1943, 95-103).

The use of Lindy Hop in Hollywood film affected racial perceptions and acceptability of the dance and allowed visual transmission of the dance to communities far outside Harlem. Historian Robert Crease (1995) details the racial evolution of how Lindy Hop was portrayed on film during the 1930s and 40s. He points out that initial Hollywood Lindy Hop scenes featured Whitey's Lindy Hoppers (an African American performance troop from the Savoy Ballroom) and were developed as entertainment additions that had little to no impact on the plot of the film. Without being tied to the plot, dance scenes featuring the Black dancers could be removed when the film was shown in more conservative southern movie theaters. As public perception and acceptance of the dance changed, so did the racial representation and use of dance in film narrative. By WWII, the public portrayal of Lindy Hop on film had shifted from that of a disposable Black dance performed in secretive settings to a white dance performed in social situations and tied to the film's plot (Crease 1995). Dance scenes featuring white dancers used dance celebrities like Jewel McGowan, Jean Veloz, or Arthur Walsh, popular singers such as the Andrews Sisters, or teenage actors who also happened to dance. Lindy Hop in film not only transmitted the dance to new audiences by providing viewers a visual to mimic; it also shifted public racial perceptions by using white dancers and portraying the dance as acceptable in mainstream white social situations.

Radio and records also contributed to the spread and acceptance of Lindy Hop. Live radio broadcasts of artists, such as Benny Goodman performing in New York and broadcast in Los Angeles, made possible a market for the consumption of swing music and dance far from the actual geographic point of the performance. Similarly, record sales made it possible to play dance music on demand in the home and at social

gatherings. But more than simply increasing accessibility, options like records had already been creating spaces for years where dance could be separated from “disreputable” spaces, such as the Savoy, and the Black bodies that created the dance (Cook 2013). Likewise, the Arthur Murray dance franchise capitalized on the popularity of dances like the Lindy Hop, altered them to be fit for “respectable” society, and sold dance lessons in studios, via mail correspondence, and through instructional videos (Arthur Murray Dance Centers 2023). The inclusion of dances like the Lindy Hop in Murray’s formal instruction also began to fundamentally change the culture of the dance when practiced in these situations.

Internationally, radio broadcasts, record sales, and Hollywood films shown in local theaters made access to American swing music and dance possible for the more affluent European youth both before and during WWII (Kater 1992; Peukert 1987; Willett 1989).¹⁰ Upon the entry of the United States into WWII, swing dance became a source of national pride and camaraderie that represented American values and solidarity both on the home front and abroad. As military personnel were deployed overseas, they brought the dance with them (Crease 1995; Tucker 2013).

Today, a quick Google search pulls up evidence that Lindy Hop is danced across the globe. Swing dance clubs can be found in almost every major city in the United States and numerous other countries, including Australia, Mozambique, Italy, Ukraine, Japan, China, and Argentina. The Internet has made it possible to access Lindy Hop videos, performances, music, virtual dance lessons, and even competitions from nearly anywhere

¹⁰ The teenage *Swing Jugend* in Hamburg, Germany and *Les Petits Swing* or *Zazous* in Paris, France are two such well-documented groups.

in the world. Far from its origins in the African American community of Harlem, Lindy Hop has become a dance that people of numerous ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds engage in worldwide.

Conclusion

By historicizing Lindy Hop from a sociocultural perspective, I provide a way to more deeply understand the human experiences that surround the development of historical Lindy Hop culture and aesthetics. Knowledge of the human experience then contributes to my understanding of the cultural significance behind Lindy Hop, which then informs my cross-cultural comparison with contemporary practice.

Through this analysis, I describe how the densely populated African-American neighborhood of Central Harlem experienced gross economic hardship and was portrayed as an amusement center to middle- and upper-class white Manhattan residents. Acts of financial survival and banding together to support fellow community members permeated the daily lives of Harlem residents. Even within their own neighborhood, residents were shut out of certain nightclub establishments due to racist practices. Although racially integrated, the Savoy Ballroom catered to Black clientele and offered Harlem residents a space where Black culture could thrive in conjunction with the development of Lindy Hop. This combination meant that the joys, struggles, and hardships of Harlem residents could be expressed through dance. At the Savoy, dancers were free to engage in individual expression and Black culture, and they experienced affirmation and control over their own bodies. For those that attended the Savoy, this was often a life-changing experience. However, not all of the Black community felt that engagement with jazz

music and dance was in the best interest of the community, which I show through a selection of Harlem Renaissance writers.

Du Bois felt that jazz sent the wrong message to the world about African Americans and believed that racial elevation would be achieved through engagement with the fine arts. Slightly less opposed, Johnson and Rogers were skeptical of jazz but felt that it had promise if only it would lose what they viewed as low-class values. Hughes embraced the idea of jazz and felt that this was an opportunity for the Black community to stand proud of their cultural heritage and artistic contributions. Although there was a degree of divide over jazz within the Black community, both the dance and music continued to grow in popularity exponentially.

As Lindy Hop continued to flourish at the Savoy, it also began a transmission both nationally and internationally, which continues today. In the following two chapters, I look at Jazz Attack, the primary Lindy Hop dance club in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as an ethnographic case study. Having briefly explored aspects of human experience in 1920s and 30s Harlem, I now consider the ways in which the historical motivation to create remains present, and the ways in which Black cultural knowledge and Africanist aesthetics have been lost within this local dance community.

CHAPTER 2

REFLECTING THE ORIGINS OF A BLACK DANCE

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the Lindy Hop community at Jazz Attack in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as a source of ethnographic material to explore where the historical legacy of Black culture and Africanist elements are present within contemporary Lindy Hop practice. My participant observation research at Jazz Attack spanned the months of January to October of 2023 and included semi-structured participant interviews, which I conducted between the end of June and the beginning of August of 2023. In total, I interviewed seven participants (four women and three men) ranging in age from nineteen to late-thirties. Of these, five participants identify as white, one identifies as Black, and one identifies as Asian American. I chose to interview dancers who have shown a dedication to Lindy Hop for at least a year, and I attempted to have my participant group reflect the racial demographics of repeat attendees. Additionally, I conducted multiple unstructured interviews, through informal conversations, with various participants at the dance.¹¹

I begin this chapter with a description of an evening of dance at Jazz Attack, and relate common participant demographics in this dance community. Next, I discuss the manifestation of select Africanist aesthetic and cultural elements in Lindy Hop by applying the scholarship of Gottschild (1996) and scholar of dance and African American studies Thomas DeFrantz (2014) to an example of a Lindy Hop jam circle. I then argue that it is imperative to think beyond racial origins and Africanist ties and also consider

¹¹ For the sake of anonymity, I have changed all the names of interview and conversation participants.

the sociocultural factors of Lindy Hop's origins to further understand the cultural significance of Lindy Hop to participants. This exploration leads me to identify two core values of historical Lindy Hop culture that remain present in one form or another today.

The two values that I focus on are the importance of emotional or spiritual release and social connection in Lindy Hop culture. Using field observations and interviews, I show how these historical cultural values manifest at Jazz Attack. Lastly, I look at ways in which Jazz Attack seeks to honor Lindy Hop's Black history, including the use of Black swing-era artists, oral traditions of naming, and verbalizing aspects of history in group classes.

Jazz Attack: Let's Go Dancing

It is mid-January and I am here to visit Jazz Attack. The music is just audible from the street as I walk up to the historic building on the edge of Rittenhouse square. As I ascend the wide, curved staircase and admire the grand architecture of the building, the recorded music grows louder. I can hear the pounding of feet on the wooden floor before I see them, and as I enter the ballroom, I am greeted by the sight of purple lights projecting up the sides of the white walls, the color reaching toward the old plaster of the vaulted ceiling. Meanwhile, the DJ is playing "Take It Easy Greasy" by Naomi and Her Handsome Devils, a swing music group from my hometown of the Twin Cities. For a moment I reflect on how a single song can momentarily connect two different Lindy Hop communities from over one thousand miles away.

In the ballroom, dancers triple-step, kick, and bounce to the pulse of the music. The musical rhythm can be felt and seen as the old worn wooden floor vibrates and creaks with life. Like most evenings, the crowd at Jazz Attack tonight is decidedly white

with only a small number of Black and Asian American dancers in attendance. Although aspects of art forms tend to shift with time to stay alive and relevant, the racial demographic shift since the inception of Lindy Hop has been dramatic, and the low number of Black bodies present this evening in the dance space is not unique to Jazz Attack. Participants and researchers throughout the United States have noted that people who participate in contemporary Lindy Hop tend to be college educated, middle-class, and predominantly white or Asian American (OSUfirebird18 2021; Unruh 2020; Usner 2001). For these reasons, it was not surprising that the topic of race came up in many of my interviews:

Lindy Hop is a historically Black dance. And when I go to Jazz Attack and look around, it's extremely white. It's just a very white community. And for me it's important that, you know, we are fortunate enough to continue dancing this dance. But we also need to learn where it came from and why it's important. (Renee, personal interview, July 10, 2023)

At the same time, the “why it’s important” remained unarticulated by many of the people I interviewed. While communicating the racial lineage of the dance is undeniably crucial, very few of the dancers I interviewed pushed beyond racial aspects to touch on Africanist aesthetics or elements of Black culture in Lindy Hop. This points to a disconnect between a participant’s engagement with the dance and their awareness of Lindy Hop history, values, and culture. In the next section, I identify a selection of aesthetic and cultural markers that are part of historical Lindy Hop Black culture and use an instance of a jam circle as an example to show where they are present today.

The Manifestation of African Ties

It is getting late. There is one more train I can catch to get home. I am already pushing my luck on time, so I quickly go downstairs and change my shoes. As I get ready

to leave, I hear clapping upstairs. The uniformity of the crowd clapping on the upbeat is unmistakable in its meaning—a jam circle has broken out. Torn between catching the train and wanting to see what is happening, I quickly decide the jam is too good to miss out on. I dash up the stairs and watch from the doorway. The crowd has thinned out to about twenty-five dancers. The song is fast, as is most often the case when a jam occurs. One dancer jockeys on the edge of the circle before entering, at which point he performs an improvised variation of the Shim Sham, complete with a low, forward body stance that screams athleticism. Moments later, a second dancer enters the jam and the two engage in a friendly dance exchange. The second dancer throws down a wild Charleston basic, his knees at times rising above hip level. The Shim Shammer anticipates a break about to hit in the music and deftly times a jump, throwing hands up into the air before landing in a squat Charleston on the beginning of the new phrase. The two dancers continue to face off in this interactive act of call-and-response for as long as they are inspired by the music and each other.

The remaining dancers in attendance form the jam circle and watch. Other than the clapping and occasional cheer, the crowd seems unsure how to engage with the jam. Some stand quietly in the back with hands in pockets, some bob their heads in time to the music and make small rhythmic engagements with their upright bodies, and a few catch the excitement of the jammers and respond by mimicking the Shim Sham with jolting, heavy movements. As the jam ends, I quietly make my exit and run for the train.

The Lindy Hop jam circle is an example of both circle and challenge dance traditions, which carry important cultural components in many West African dance practices (Emery 1988). However, while Lindy Hop contains Africanist elements, it is

not an African dance. To restate from Chapter 1, the Lindy Hop was born out of the mixing of African and European cultures and traditions, and these elements fused together to form a Black dance culture specific to the United States. Therefore, while Africanist elements are components of Black dance culture, it should not be assumed that Black and Africanist are the same thing. Furthermore, it is important to understand the Africanist elements and influences that are integral to Lindy Hop in order to better identify when the cultural balance begins to shift.

Gottschild (1996) interrogates this type of cultural intertextuality within Black American dances. In her work, she aims to separate Africanist aesthetics and cultural elements from those of European derivation. In considering these separate cultural threads, she defines “Africanist” as follows:

I use it here to signify African and African American resonances and presences, trends, and phenomena. It indicates the African influence, past and present, and those forms and forces that arose as products of the African diaspora, including traditions and genres such as blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, and hip hop. (1996, xiv)

DeFrantz, interrogates the term “Black,” which may be understood in conjunction with Gottschild’s definition of “Africanist:”

For me, black is the manifestation of Africanist aesthetics. The willingness to back-phrase, to move with a percussive attack, to sing against the grain of the other instruments, and to include the voices of those gathered in the fabric of the event – these are the elements of black that endure and confirm. (2014, 5)

Referring back to the jam circle, certain Africanist elements may be identified, such as how the line between spectator and participant is blurred. Dancers are free to move in and out of the circle, participating at their will whenever the music and other

dancers inspire them. This act of moving between spectator and participant ties back to African dance traditions where “the spectators and the artists are one” (Welsh-Asante 1993, 2). As the Shim Sham dancer jockeys on the side, he has become a participant even before entering the circle. Likewise, the spectators on the edge of the circle who mimic his dancing become participants while they simultaneously observe. Other Africanist elements that were described in the jam circle include call-and-response, improvisation, and grounded, angular body positions (Gay 1987; Gottschild 1996).

However, identifying the presence of such Africanist elements as improvisation, call-and-response, bodily aesthetics, and a blurring between participant and spectator is only one area of inquiry when examining the Black cultural aspects of Lindy Hop. In addition to these elements, I argue that the human experiences described in Chapter 1 are essential to consider as well. By taking into account all of these components in conjunction with each other, the importance of the dance within the community that developed it may be better understood. Combining these areas of inquiry allows me to more deeply examine how cultural values manifest today.

To illustrate, I look back to the experiences of Harlem residents of the 1920s and 30s where financial and emotional survival, a need for spiritual release, and a dedication to community uplift were at the center of a Black resident’s daily life. In Harlem, residents struggled against corrupt landlords, were forced to remain vigilant of their behavior in front of white society, and faced segregation practices that kept Black residents out of certain businesses, *even within their own community*. By catering to Black patrons, the Savoy Ballroom was able to supply an outlet where attendees could momentarily let go of their daily experience with racial inhumanities. At the Savoy,

individual expression was valued, attendees had agency over their own body, and spiritual release and self-affirmation were welcomed. As I show in the next section, this welcoming of spiritual and emotional release continues to be present in Lindy hop culture today, although it manifests in different ways.

Reflecting Cultural Origins: Emotional Release and Communal Value

Some of the dancers I interviewed have been fortunate enough to have personal connections with some of the original Savoy dancers. One such participant, Winston, shared that he had been in attendance at Miller's funeral service. When I asked about Lindy Hop culture and values, he related the following memory:

I was actually in attendance for Miss Norma Miller's funeral in the church, where there was a speaker and a big band there, like a big band in the church.

You know, the speaker would say something: "She [Miller] was like a fiery tornado!"

Band: (*Winston makes instrumental noises*).

Like it was, it was magical. And as they brought her out, the band started... The band started playing, and people started, like I saw people that were crying in the pews, started dancing in the aisles. And that for me was the—I get choked up thinking about it—that was the values personified. It's not joy, as an input. You take your struggle and you take your strife and you put it into this dance, and the output is joy. (Winston, personal interview, July 18, 2023)

Spiritual or emotional release is one important component of historical Lindy Hop culture that is present today. However, the reasons behind such release are intrinsically different than those of Black dancers in the 1920s and 30s. While I cannot speak for every individual dancer at Jazz Attack, interview responses indicate that, in general, attendees experience a very different type of stress than their historical counterparts.

Participants reported seeking mild to moderate emotional release from work, family, financial, or other personal stressors:

It's definitely an outlet. Lindy Hop is where I go when I'm dealing with any big emotions. Or like, you know, trouble in my life. Lindy Hop is a place where you can just, you dance it out. You connect with somebody on a different level, and you spend some time focusing on them. The physical activity of it all. It really helps refocus you and reset your brain. That's one of my favorite parts—that for 3 minutes this is all I have to think about. And this is all that I'm concerning myself with. I'm just listening to the music, and I'm focusing on my partner. And that's all I have space for. And it's delightful. (Emma, personal interview, June 29, 2023)

Social dancing is definitely, for me, a way to get out of the bubble that campus kind of creates around me ... Improvising and social dancing is a way where I can express whatever I'm feeling and hearing in the moment. (Wendy, personal interview, August 3, 2023)

What is does not appear in these comments is mention of participant subjection to daily racist experiences. To refer back to Winston's comment about taking personal struggles, putting them into the dance, and generating an output of joy, it becomes apparent that personal struggles between historical and contemporary participants are drastically different. Wendy's stresses of college life and Emma's use of Lindy Hop to recenter her attention reflect emotional release from external situational stressors that one can walk away from (work, school, family, etc.). In the case of Black dancers of the 1920s and 30s, their stressors stemmed from societal beliefs of bodily inferiority. These stressors were projected directly onto their worth as human beings. Thus, while both historical and contemporary dancers experience a degree of emotional and spiritual release when engaging in Lindy Hop, the intensity and impact of that need on the human psyche differs dramatically between the two demographics.

In addition to spiritual and emotional release, the importance of social interaction and communal development is another component of historical Lindy Hop culture that is present at Jazz Attack. When I asked interviewees what role Lindy Hop plays in their life, responses ranged from that of fulfilling weekly social activity needs to substantial life impacts:

For me it's, oh, really, it's social and it's kind of like a movement-based activity. So, I get my exercise. Gets me out of the house. And I meet lovely people. (Renee, personal interview, July 10, 2023)

Oh, man! You know, I still call it a hobby, and my girlfriend laughs at me every time I do. Lindy Hop plays a huge role in my life. Lindy Hop is the source of many of my closest friends. Lindy Hop is the source of all of my jobs ... Yeah, it's definitely the big social part of my life ... And it's also an athletic source as well. It's something that I do to, like, get all my energy out. It's a stress relief source ... It touches on a lot of different parts of my life. Social, creative, athletic. (Winston, personal interview, July 18, 2023)

Helena, who has moved around the United States numerous times, spoke about how Lindy Hop provides a starting point for developing social connections in each new city:

You can pretty reliably depend on finding an active swing dance scene in any big city you go to—and we've moved big cities several times—and so swing dancing for me has always been something that I will go out and get involved with in the new place that I move to, knowing that the culture it may vary a bit from one place to another, but I can depend on finding, like the same kinds of people, probably. (Helena, personal interview, July 28, 2023)

Xander spoke most directly about how Lindy Hop is connected to community and social interaction. In reflecting upon lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting inability to dance with others in a social setting, he stated:

I think it's something that everybody values a lot more having gone through the pandemic. I think they're like, yo—we all acknowledged that dancing by itself isn't the goal, or else we would have all been able to solo dance at home. And we would have been like, “Man! This is just as good as being at the social quarter!” But we all acknowledge, no, this is the worst version of this. (Xander, personal interview, July 2, 2023)

Xander's anecdote points to just how integral social and communal gathering is to Lindy Hop culture. While Lindy Hop is primarily a partner dance, solo dancing and line dances are also part of the dance. But Xander and others made the point that dancing solo in isolation felt worse than not dancing at all. To put it another way, Lindy Hop lost its value for these dancers when aspects of community and social interaction were removed. Circling back to Miller's funeral, it was not the act of dancing specifically that helped people through their grieving, but rather the act of dancing with others in a communal setting where emotions could be shared.

Even though all interviewees in this local community of Lindy Hop dancers agreed on the importance of emotional release within a social gathering, not everyone agreed that a feeling of belonging necessarily followed. For example, the question of whether attendees feel a sense of community at Jazz Attack elicited a number of varied responses. Wendy felt very welcome and integrated into the dance scene immediately upon her first visit. In contrast, Helena (personal interview, July 28, 2023) said: “I don't necessarily feel like I'm part of it. I sometimes feel like I'm on the outside looking into it.” Renee (personal interview, July 10, 2023) pointed out that while the overall attendance numbers remain fairly consistent from week to week, the specific people in attendance do not: “it's more difficult to kind of create a sense of community when so few people are coming back week after week after week.” And finally, Emma (personal

interview, June 29, 2023) said, “That's a tricky question. I feel very warm and welcomed when I show up to a dance. But I also don't often hang out with people who attend these dances outside.”

In the end of my interview with Emma, she left me with these parting words on the idea of community:

I feel that Lindy Hop is so much more than the scene leaders. It's the community. It's the people that show up every night. It's the regulars. It's the newcomers. It's not just the people who stand out on top that make the community and make the scene. It's everybody else. And I think that's evident in the older videos, too, when you look at old videos of the Savoy. There's so many people there, and there's only a few names that we actually know and remember. And those people don't make a community. They don't make a scene. It's everybody else showing up that you won't remember down the line. But they're important to welcome and to know right now. (Personal interview, June 29, 2023)

What these responses reveal is that while Jazz Attack may fit the definition of a community (a group of people gathering to share and participate in a common interest), it does not necessarily create social bonds for every participant. Being welcomed into the space is not the same as feeling included within the community, and the goal of creating a deeper sense of social belonging at Jazz Attack is often on the minds of the organizers. One individual responded to me that Jazz Attack consciously implements strategies to encourage people to gather and socialize, such as putting out tables at the dance, as well as encouraging dancers at the end of the intermediate-level Topics Lessons to dance with a beginner or newcomer at the dance to foster inclusivity. Of course, Jazz Attack's connection to the historical Lindy Hop values of spiritual and emotional release, social interaction, and communal development are not the only way that the historical origins of

the dance live on in this gathering of people. Black history also lives on in more conscious decisions made by the organization, which I explore in the next section.

How does Jazz Attack honor Lindy Hop's Black history?

The room smells of sweat. It is exacerbated by the heat that has been produced by so many dancing bodies. I know this smell well, but you get so used to it that you hardly remember it is there, until you step out for some air and then return. Like Manning (2007) recounting the night of the Chick Webb and Benny Goodman battle at the Savoy, and the three times he ran home to change because he had yet again sweated through his suit, there are nights like tonight where dancers wish they had remembered to bring an extra shirt. As we dance the evening away to the music of well-known artists like Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, and Jimmie Lunceford, and lesser-known artists like Jimmy Rushing and Lil Hardin Armstrong, I reflect on how being present with the music creates a direct connection to the past. In this sense, dancers are creating memories of the evening that depend upon the memories of others.

I wanted to know where other dancers saw evidence of, and connection to, Lindy Hop's Black history at Jazz Attack. When I posed the question to Xander (personal interview, July 2, 2023), he responded with a seemingly simple yet profound answer of: "I would say, in essence, [by] existing at all." For him, the fact that the dance is still alive and practiced by this community is a form of honoring the dance's history. By passing the dance down from generation to generation, and peer to peer, the continued existence of Lindy Hop becomes a form of oral and embodied history.

Nevertheless, the historical preservation of Lindy Hop requires more than continued existence. It also requires a conscious effort to maintain connection with

historical roots. For instance, two observations that came up in nearly every interview I conducted were the use of music by Black swing-era artists at the dances and the incorporation of Lindy Hop history into the lessons by the instructors. Emma (personal interview, June 29, 2023) recalled the “brief little blurb” she had heard numerous times from instructors at Jazz Attack lessons: “Oh, it’s a dance from the 1930s and 40s out of a ballroom in Harlem called the Savoy.” Renee (personal interview, July 10, 2023) responded with a similar statement: “Ever since, like my first class, Jazz Attack has made it very clear that this is this historically Black dance coming from the Savoy ballroom up in Harlem in the early 1900s.” While fairly formulaic and not in depth in content, this form of oral transmission is a conscious effort by instructors and organizers to educate those in attendance about Lindy Hop’s cultural and historical origins. The intermediate level lessons (promoted as “Topics”) create more space for connection to Black history. These classes focus on aspects like musicality or solo jazz improvisation, with the intent of deepening the dancer’s understanding of Lindy Hop values and fundamentals.

For example, during February’s Black History Month, Jazz Attack offered a class that focused on teaching students a solo jazz routine inspired by the “Mr. Beebe” dance number in *Carolina Blues* that featured Black dancers, including Marie Bryant, Harold Nicholas, Lennie Bluett, Avanelle Harris, and many others who went uncredited in the film (Jason 1944).¹² The class began with attendees watching the dance clip while the instructor named as many dancers as possible when they appeared onscreen in order to give credit to their contributions. Next, attendees talked about what they observed in the

¹² Like many films of the jazz and swing age, *Carolina Blues* (Jason 1944) centers around an all-white cast and only makes space for Black bodies during scenes devised as entertainment (in this case as part of a theatrical show) for the film’s white characters. Despite this marginalization, the dancers in *Carolina Blues* should be celebrated for their excellency in their craft.

clip and then learned a short routine inspired by Bryant's portion of the performance. These oral and embodied methods of incorporating Lindy Hop history into the lessons and dance not only perpetuate tradition, but also serve to expose even the newest attendee to aspects of the dance's Black history and culture.

Conclusion

In this chapter, participant observations and interviews at Jazz Attack allow me to recognize where and how historical cultural values of emotional release and communal importance present themselves in a contemporary Lindy Hop practice. Even though the connection between these values and historical Black culture remained unarticulated by many individuals I interviewed, the focus of their responses on such values shows that they remain present at Jazz Attack in one form or another.

In terms of emotional release, both historical and contemporary participants experience uplift from Lindy Hop participation, yet the reasons that draw participants to the dance are intrinsically different. While Savoy-era African American dancers seek emotional release from a continuously disenfranchised societal experience that targets their intrinsic worth, participant observations and interviews support that the predominantly white demographic of contemporary dancers are often college-educated and middle-class, who tend to seek emotional release from external stressors that do not tie back to their value as human beings. With regard to communal importance, Jazz Attack participants gravitate strongly toward this value, and many interviewees mention the importance of social interaction when discussing Lindy Hop.

Finally, as an organization, Jazz Attack places a strong value on sustaining historical knowledge of the dance. Organizers and instructors make conscious driven

efforts to verbalize historical facts to dance students about Lindy Hop's geographic origins, founders, and early generations of dancers and musicians. The success of these efforts is reflected in the ability of interview participants to recount various pieces of historical knowledge.

While I have shown that the historical Black values of emotional release and communal importance are present at Jazz Attack (even if they manifest in different ways), there are other important aspects of Black culture and aesthetics that remain absent. In the final chapter, I consider the ways in which Lindy Hop culture has shifted away from historical roots.

CHAPTER 3

THE ABSENCE OF BLACK CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Introduction

In this final chapter, I examine the spaces where certain elements of black cultural knowledge and aesthetics are, in part, absent at Jazz Attack. I begin by describing a typical beginner-level class structure and discuss the cultural value system that results from the prioritization of a movement-first approach. Often in value opposition to a music-first approach, this contemporary movement-first approach contributes to a different aesthetic and cultural outcome when compared to historical Lindy Hop practice.

Next, to demonstrate the significance of this shift, I offer two ways of looking at the absence of Black dance values through the application of scholarship by Welsh-Asante (1993) and Gottschild (1996). First, I apply a model set forth by Welsh-Asante on the source of movement creation within the African aesthetic to video footage examples of Manning and Dawn Hampton¹³ dancing together. I then compare the findings to Jazz Attack movement observations, revealing different aesthetic and cultural outcomes between historical and contemporary Lindy Hop practice. Second, I apply five Africanist elements identified by Gottschild (1996) to video footage of LaTasha Barnes and Peter Strom dancing at the International Lindy Hop Championships in 2022.¹⁴ Again, I compare the findings to Jazz Attack movement observations. This analysis reveals further

¹³ Born in 1928, Hampton made a career as a singer, musician, songwriter, and dancer, and she taught at many Lindy Hop events until her death in 2016.

¹⁴ LaTasha Barnes, originally from Richmond, Virginia, is a leading performer, choreographer, and educator in Black American social dance forms, including Lindy Hop, House, and Hip-Hop. She is currently Assistant Professor of Dance at Arizona State University. Peter Strom, from Minneapolis, Minnesota, began dancing Lindy Hop in 1998 and has since won multiple divisions in the American and International Lindy Hop Championships. Both Barnes and Strom are sought-after Lindy Hop instructor who teach both nationally and internationally.

areas in which elements of Black cultural knowledge and aesthetics are absent in this particular community of contemporary Lindy Hop practice.

Movement- versus Music-based Engagement in Lindy Hop

It is February when I attend a beginner “Lindy 101” lesson at Jazz Attack. We stand in a large circle with the instructors in the center of the dance floor and begin by dancing on our own. The group moves in unison in a counter-clockwise direction with everyone practicing double-steps and triple-steps. The room is crowded, and dancers shuffle along the circle while attempting not to run into the dancer ahead of them. Having graduated from the footwork exercise, we pair up and begin to dance together. Each dance couple consists of one leader and one follower, but this pairing does not necessarily equate to one man and one woman. During the remainder of class, we are introduced to the basic swing dance hold, a few introductory six-count dance patterns, and dance floor etiquette for the evening, which includes how to ask for a dance and the expectation to walk away if someone declines. We talk about, and briefly practice, the pulsing bounce that is inherent in Lindy Hop, and learn our six-count patterns through counts and movement names (triple-step, triple-step, rock-step, 1, 2, 3 and 4...). While I am impressed by the smooth flow and lesson preparation by this evening’s instructors, I am also left with the feeling that I have experienced a lackluster, cookie-cutter version of a Lindy Hop social. The dance lesson has served its purpose in getting me to dance, but it did not contain anything that helped me connect to the dance’s history or culture.

A few months later, I attend an intermediate Topics Lesson focusing on open-position movement vocabulary, where the intent is to give students material to expand their movement knowledge base. We watch the instructors demonstrate a movement,

imitate it with our current dance partner, and then rotate to a new partner in the circle for the next movement. This watch-and-imitate process is repeated until we have covered about ten different movements. The class ends with the instructors playing music and allotting us time to see how many of the movements we can remember. What is lacking is any attention to Africanist aesthetics in body movement. At no point do we talk about groundedness, body posture (such as what Gottschild (1996) refers to as a “‘get-down’ stance”), or the way movement flows through the spine.

Reflecting upon other lessons (both beginner and intermediate levels) that I have been to at Jazz Attack, I notice a lack of Africanist movement principles. Additionally, there is a strong reliance on what I term movement-first pedagogy: that is, a prioritization of accumulating a lexicon of dance movements, which are learned as separate entities from the music. In contrast, dances grounded in the African diaspora value a music-first approach. This pedagogy understands music as the foundation for *creating* movement (Liebhard 2015, 2019).¹⁵ By relying on teaching Lindy Hop through a movement-first approach, rather than a music-first approach, the dance feels separate and disembodied from the music. In other words, the act of dancing is removed from its historical source of movement creation, which becomes problematic. As the foundational relationship between music and movement is removed, the dance begins to lose its connection to historical Black culture.

¹⁵ This is not to imply that instructors are oblivious to the importance of music in Lindy Hop. However, I have not observed students being engaged in a music-first approach, nor given context as to the cultural importance of learning to dance through a music-first approach, in any of my site visits.

With the focus on movement-first pedagogy, it comes as no surprise that Africanist aesthetics and values remained unarticulated by most individuals I interviewed. While some appeared to have a strong understanding of Lindy Hop history and the Black culture that developed within it, one individual in particular said, “I don't feel that I know a whole lot about the history.” Some of the effects of movement-first pedagogy began to exhibit when I asked interviewees what level of dancer they considered themselves to be. Their answers point to a value system that is at least partially a product of movement-first pedagogy, which complicates the issue of preserving historical Black culture and values in Lindy Hop:

I'd be a better dancer if I knew more moves. (Hayden, personal conversation, March 2023)¹⁶

What cool moves you can show me? (Abigail, personal conversation, August 2023)

Additionally, a theme of equating competition with status and proficiency emerged in many of my interviews:

I'm not a beginner anymore, but I'm definitely not competing. (Emma, personal interview, June 29, 2023)

Did I win because I'm good? Or am I just good enough to not mess up Andy [dance partner in competition] and stop him from winning. So, I was like, mmm... I didn't know whether I should move into the advanced category or not. (Xander, personal interview, July 2, 2023)

When employing a movement-first approach to Lindy Hop, a value system is created that equates expanding a vocabulary of movements with being a better dancer.

¹⁶ This sentiment was repeated by numerous people both in interviews and casual conversations.

However, possessing a large catalogue of dance steps does not necessarily mean understanding how to implement the movements in connection with the music (musicality), or understanding how to connect technically or emotionally with a dance partner. The same is true when excelling in a competitive performance situation is seen as a primary value. In this context, dancers strive to wow and entertain a crowd with flashy movements, rather than focus on their ability to internalize and generate an emotional connection to the music.

This is not to say that having a large lexicon of dance steps or aspiring to win competitions is inherently separate from a music-first approach. Nevertheless, it is to say that what the participants tend to value in these situations results in a different skill set when compared to what is achieved when creation through music is the foundational focus. Furthermore, as Lindy Hop communities like Jazz Attack continue to evaluate their approaches to preserving historical Black dance traditions, it will be important for them to understand that the value systems and teaching approaches used in a community will have a significant impact on the preservation of historical Lindy Hop culture and aesthetics. To further illustrate the importance of a music-first approach, and to demonstrate where Africanist values diminish or become absent when the approach is not used, I now look at Lindy Hop as a Black dance, based on the scholarship of Welsh-Asante (1993).

A Source of Movement Creation

In exploring the African aesthetic, Welsh-Asante (1993) developed a model that conceptualizes commonalities within African and African diasporic arts. In this model, spirit, rhythm, and creativity are identified as the three foundational sources that African

diasporic arts draw upon in their creation. Spirit represents the connection between the tangible and intangible, or the physical world and what might be considered the supernatural. Rhythm represents the life force within every human, along with one's relationship and attunement to it. She states, "it is not a question of having rhythm or not having rhythm but how well does one negotiate rhythm in life and in the artistic expressions of life" (Welsh-Asante 1993, 12). As the third and final source of art, she conceptualizes creativity as what comes out of the connection to one's sense of spirit and rhythm.

Using this model, the spiritual or emotional release experienced by Lindy Hop participants may be understood as representing the foundational source of the spirit. Rhythm and its life force manifest literally through the pulse and rhythm of the music, but also through grounded movement, which reflects a connection to the earth. Finally, creativity is the movement that results from a dancer's developed connection to spirit and rhythm. These sources, integrally tied together, manifest in the concept of musicality. That is, a dancer's attunement to the rhythms and emotions of a piece of music, as well as the movement that results out of this awareness.

Hampton and other Black dancers of the Savoy era, including Manning and Miller, often addressed the importance of musicality in their classes. As an example, I refer to a video recording of a class taught at Herräng Dance Camp by Hampton in the 1990s (Lee 2016). As the recording begins, Hampton speaks to the group:

I want to talk to you about not just dancing, but feeling the music. What you feel in the music is what makes you dance. It's what inspires you to create outside of doing what you learn in class. You have to put some of you into what you're doing. Not this some of you [*points to head*], but this some of you [*points to heart*]. I want you to start by learning where the

beat is. I see a lot of you do a lot of steps. The steps are wonderful, but the beat is over there [*points to the far right*]. So, I want to get you with the beat ... Let yourself feel it. I can't say the word enough. Because I see people counting, I see people doing steps, but you can tell by the way they're dancing that they're not feeling it. (Dawn Hampton speaking in Lee 2016)

As Hampton leads the class to snap their fingers on beats two and four, she embodies the pulse of her manifested rhythm. Immersing herself further, she begins to vocalize beats one and three with a deep, internalized “huh, huh.” She sits on the edge of the theater stage, and her body begins to move with subtle intensity, like hot embers ready to ignite when asked. As she begins to dance, there is a sense of groundedness so powerful that it seems as if her feet have grown roots into the floor, yet she is ready to spring into vibrant movement at a moment's notice. Hampton's class focuses on the African aesthetic movement sources of spirit, rhythm, and creativity. Instead of focusing on new dance moves, she directs her teaching to the corporeal internalization of a conversation with the music. Put simply, it is not what you dance that is important but how you dance.

As I rewatch some of the video footage I have taken at Jazz Attack dances, I begin to notice that, in addition to upright body stances, many participants tend to dance the same way to each song, regardless of the timbre of the music. In watching the video, this monolithic interpretation makes it impossible to gauge the character of the music if watching without sound. There is also a lack of groundedness, as exhibited in the earlier example by Hampton. Instead, some dancers turn the swing rhythm into such an upright bounce that their heels repeatedly lift off of the floor and they look as if they might begin to levitate. Others are so focused on performing the movements “correctly” that I can see

their lips moving as they count to themselves. Some do not appear to care about steps and instead choose to jump up and down while holding hands. And then there are some who appear to be unaware of the music as they go from one dance move to the next, staring off into the distance, concentrating on the destination rather than the journey of the movement. Looking across the room on a macrolevel, there is a lack of spirit, rhythm, and creativity in these observations. Participants are not connecting to these Africanist values in the way Hampton does, and perhaps they are unaware of these values.

In contrast, in 2008, at the age of 93, Manning danced an improvisational social dance with Hampton at Lindyfest in Houston, Texas (Houston Swing Dance Society 2008). As I rewatch this dance, I notice how integral the rhythm of the music is to their dancing, along with the high presence of non-verbal conversation created within their dancing. Their movements are simple yet stylish. Manning leads Hampton in a basic tuck turn. Instead of immediately driving through to the next movement, they enjoy the moment by stretching out the end of the turn, making eye contact, and allowing their bodies to groove with the music before Manning finishes the phrase with a saucy mess around to emphasize the melody (Houston Swing Dance Society 2008, at 0:30-0:43). While some of the simplicity in their movement may be due to limits of physically aging bodies, the complexity of their musicality follows the African aesthetic model of spirit, rhythm, and creativity as the source of the dance. As Manning and Hampton spend time being present with the music, recognizable dance steps seem to float in and out of their dancing. Much like a landscape on a foggy day, the transition between structured swingout and irreproducible creative moments happens so organically that a starting or ending point is difficult to pinpoint. This is precisely what Hampton is referring to when

she says “what you feel in the music is what makes you dance” (Lee 2016). Manning and Hampton rely on their connection to the music and each other to create dance movement within the moment.

Aesthetic Threads of Movement Engagement

While Welsh-Asante’s model of the African aesthetic reveals the presence or absence of movement creation from an Afrocentric source perspective of spirit, rhythm, and creativity, Gottschild’s (1996) work helps reveal whether the movements created show the presence or absence of physical and visual Africanist aesthetics embodied in the dance. Gottschild (1996) designates five elements that she sees as distinctly Africanist in their origins that have influenced American dance: embracing the conflict, polycentrism/polyrhythm, high-affect juxtaposition, ephemerism, and the aesthetic of the cool. Applying these elements to contemporary Lindy Hop practice at Jazz Attack provides an additional way to view the spaces where Black culture and aesthetics may or may not be present.

Before conducting a comparison to Jazz Attack, I provide a strong visual of these elements using the 2022 Invitational Draw performance by Barnes and Strom at the International Lindy Hop Championships (2022). Intended to mimic social dancing, the Invitational Draw invites professional dancers and teachers to compete with a randomly drawn partner, whom contestants may or may not have ever danced with, along with randomly selected music. In the finals, each couple performs an improvisational spotlight dance with music performed by a live band. The high caliber social performance of these professional dancers provides a clear visual reference of the Africanist principles identified by Gottschild.

Dancing the second 8-bar section of a 32-bar chorus, Barnes and Strom perform a simple amalgamation of send out, swingout, swingout to closed, and finish with another send out (International Lindy Hop Championships 2022, at 0:37-0:48). While these movements are basic enough that they are taught in beginning level Lindy Hop classes, their execution of the movements is anything but simplistic. Barnes perfectly times a kick-ball-change at the end of the first send out to coincide with a flourish played by the pianist. Strom responds with his own improvisational footwork by sliding his feet out into a wide stance before quickly bringing them back underneath him on the upbeat, finishing the swingout while simultaneously engaging in call-and-response with both Barnes and the music. These few seconds demonstrate an example of what Gottschild (1996, 11) refers to when she states that “how a thing is done—the movement of the action—is as important as getting it done.”

Adding flare to the end of her swingout, Barnes demonstrates embracing the conflict through a display of high-affect juxtaposition and the aesthetic of the cool (Gotschild 1996). Declining to finish with a traditional triple-step, Barnes suspends the expected and creates tension as she sends herself out sideways, roots her feet into the ground, and allows her collected body to lean and counterbalance Strom. Her cool composure extends to her face as she presents a disinterested face toward the audience before allowing her eyes to shift to the right and lock with Strom. Giving a subdued shimmy, she breaks the effect at the last moment with a bright smile that hits with the piano as if on cue. The effect disrupts the rhythmic clapping of the audience and viewers cheer the dancers in show of approval.

As Barnes and Strom finish this portion of the phrase with a second send out, they demonstrate the principle of ephedism, which “encompasses attributes such as power, vitality, flexibility, drive and attack. Attack implies speed, sharpness, and force” (Gottschild 1996, 15). Barnes improvises on apple jacks, her feet at once both sharp in their articulation and driving in the path she carves on the floor. Strom performs triple-steps with a fish tail influence that requires a grounded, get-down posture along with vitality, flexibility, and suppleness throughout the entire body to accomplish the movement. Additionally, Strom incorporates polycentrism and polyrhythm during this moment, as he twists his upper body in opposition with his feet and snaps his right hand in a secondary rhythm. Within ten seconds of dance, Barnes and Strom prominently demonstrate all five Africanist principles identified by Gottschild (1996).

This performance stands in contrast to the absence of such Africanist movement characteristics when analyzing some of the dancing at Jazz Attack on a general level. Ephedism, while arguably at least somewhat ingrained in the act of Lindy Hop, becomes muted with the upright posture that the majority of dancers engage in. Gottschild (1996, 8) notes that the “Africanist dancing body...privileges flexible, bent-legged postures that reaffirm contact with the earth.” Even when flexed at the hip, spines tend to stay rigid, preventing movement from one part of the body to flow to the next. Accordingly, the opportunity to engage in polyrhythms or polycentrism rapidly declines. Instead, I watch feet stumble and shuffle in a somewhat uncontrolled manner, the flexibility, groundedness, and awareness of one’s body necessary to control movement missing. As described by Gottschild (1996, 9), these postures represent less of the Africanist dancing body and

more of the Europeanist dancing body with their “pulled-up, aligned stance and static carriage.”

Like ephebism, high-affect juxtaposition is not generally visible (and consequently neither is embracing the conflict). Bodies maintain unvarying repetitions of sugar pushes, swing outs, and six-count basics. Polyrhythms, footwork variations, and breaks, hits, or freezes that coincide with the music phrasing rarely make an appearance outside of a few select dancers. This lack of contrast also affects the manifestation of the aesthetic of the cool. As stated by Gottschild (1996, 16), the aesthetic of the cool “lives in the other concepts, and they reside in it. It is an attitude ... that combines composure with vitality.” In other words, the aesthetic of the cool is the way juxtaposition and ephebism manifest in one’s attitude. Returning to the concept of embracing the conflict, she states that this element “is embedded in the final principle, the aesthetic of the cool, since coolness results from the juxtaposition of detachment with intensity” (Gottschild 1996, 13). Already lacking in ephebism and contrast, the aesthetic of the cool and embracing the conflict become inaccessible.

Historical Preservation Complications

Looking at Lindy Hop at Jazz Attack through the work of Welsh-Asante (1993) and Gottschild (1996) reveals absences of Black culture, aesthetics, and values, but it also raises complications in the issue of preserving this historical dance when the majority of participants today approach the dance from non-Black cultures. Many of the dancers that I spoke with either came to Lindy Hop without any previous dance background, or only had prior dance experience with disciplines like ballet. Unfortunately, this presents a bit of a catch-22 where the absence of Black culture results in a cyclical problem. As new

dancers come in without knowledge of Black dance practices, the absence of such values continues to be reinforced. As such, the dancers cannot access, and therefore don't learn, what is not present. While a reader might argue with me that it is unreasonable to expect a relatively new dancer to absorb and enact a new culture within their first few lessons, I wish to point out that this learning process also cannot take place if the information is unavailable.

I have already stated that many dancers are able to articulate general historical facts about Lindy Hop due to the inclusion of such information in every beginner-level lesson at Jazz Attack. Yet there is an absence of Africanist characteristics in the dancing at Jazz Attack, and I argue that this is inevitable when there is little to no inclusion of such elements within the lessons. Attendees are quickly able to restate the previously unknown historical facts that are presented to them, and it stands to reason that cultural embodiment would increase if cultural immersion were to be incorporated from the beginning of a dancer's learning process. This, however, would involve a reconceptualization of teaching methods. While I have been able to identify a small number of dancers and instructors at Jazz Attack who have devoted a significant amount of time to learning about the history, culture, and values of Black dance, their knowledge has not, at least in part, translated to students and fellow dancers.

Although I argue that certain teaching practices, like the aforementioned movement-first pedagogy, contribute to the absence of various Africanist aesthetics and values, there is also the problem of weekly turnover, as described by Renee when discussing concepts of community in Chapter 2. While cultural immersion from the first lesson would certainly build the cultural knowledge of participants sooner, the problem

remains that some individuals may not return to the venue for an extended amount of time (or even at all). Much like learning words in a foreign language, repetition and reinforcement is necessary to build upon and retain this knowledge.

Conclusion

This chapter focuses on looking at contemporary Lindy Hop through an Afrocentric perspective in order to reveal the places where Africanist values and aesthetics have become minimized or are absent at Jazz Attack. Doing so allows me to identify places where aspects of historical Lindy Hop culture no longer exist on a general level. These findings then present areas of opportunity for cultural preservation efforts.

Through my observations, I identify a focus on movement-first pedagogy in the lessons at Jazz Attack, which encourages dancers to develop different skill sets and values than the Africanist approach of music-first pedagogy. As a result, contemporary dancers place value on accumulating a lexicon of dance steps rather than focusing on music as the source of movement inspiration. This finding is further explored as I apply the research of Welsh-Asante (1993) to show the importance of spirit, rhythm, and creativity in the Africanist approach to movement generation, and show that this value of connection between music and dance is non-existent in the majority of participants. I further demonstrate through the work of Gottschild (1996) how Africanist principles of embracing the conflict, polycentrism/polyrhythm, high-affect juxtaposition, ephemerism, and the aesthetic of the cool remain minimized or absent at Jazz Attack. In closing, I address how the current dance culture, pedagogy, and lack of the aforementioned Africanist principles complicates efforts of historical preservation, and I finish by identifying current practices that impede preservation efforts.

CONCLUSION

The presence and absence of historical Black Lindy Hop culture is revealed in contemporary Lindy Hop practice by exploring the human experience, culture, and values of Savoy-era African American dancers. This type of research is necessary to aid in the historical preservation of Lindy Hop and ensure that the cultural values and contributions of a historically marginalized group are not permanently erased in contemporary and future generations of Lindy Hop participants. My findings also contribute to the broader conversation of how the cultures of historically Black American dances have shifted as the practice has moved into predominantly white spaces. Additionally, I offer ways to look at engagement with Black dance that stem beyond repeating historical facts. This includes address additional areas of culture, values, and aesthetics, which are necessary to consider in pedagogical practices in order to avoid further cultural erasure.

In Chapter 1, I examine the human experience of Harlem residents of the 1920s and 30s through sociocultural factors. Here, I identify some of the cultural values that developed out of experiences related to financial survival, racist policies, and community support. In turn, examining the daily life experiences of Savoy-era dancers reveals their motivation to create. At the Savoy, individual expression was valued, attendees had agency over their own body, and spiritual release and self-affirmation were welcomed. Consequentially, Lindy Hop became a reflection of cultural experience. Understanding this experiential significance behind Lindy Hop history then informs my cross-cultural comparisons with contemporary practice of the dance.

In Chapter 2, I examine contemporary Lindy Hop practice at Jazz Attack in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania through participant observations and interviews in order to ascertain where elements of Black culture are present. My observations reveal the presence of historical Lindy Hop values of emotional release and the importance of community and social interaction. Although contemporary participants approach Lindy Hop from a different culture than historical participants, my findings suggest that the two values I identify are part of the foundational fabric of Lindy Hop.

In Chapter 3, I take the opposite approach and use my observations to identify where elements of Black culture are not present. This uncovers areas where contemporary practice differs greatly from historical Lindy Hop culture, including how dancers approach movement creation, embodiment, and aesthetics. As a result, I discuss how these observations complicate efforts of Jazz Attack organizers and instructors to promote knowledge of historical Lindy Hop culture.

As a Black dance, Lindy Hop reflects the human experience of navigating a racially unjust period of United States history. The continued practice of Lindy Hop retells this story and keeps the memory of historical participants alive. However, as the dance transmits from generation to generation, and one community of practice to another, parts of this story are becoming lost and an incomplete picture of the significance of Lindy Hop remains. While I could argue that the historical Lindy Hop values of emotional release and communal engagement are common within a broader human experience, Africanist values toward movement creation and aesthetics are not. For a population that has already seen much of their history ignored and forgotten, the continued loss of Africanist cultural tradition in Lindy Hop further depletes the memory

of the Black community. In completing this research, I add to the archives of Black American history. But this research is relevant to more than the Black community or the dance community, as jazz has influenced multiple areas of American and international history, such as the dance being enacted as a political tool during WWII.

Of course, this research is not without its shortcomings. Perhaps the biggest frustration as a researcher is that a single chapter cannot fully address two decades worth of life in Harlem, and words are limiting in the extent that they can depict the human experience. While I have surveyed aspects of historical Harlem life, the words do not completely relate the visceral responses of the body to such experiences, an understanding which is necessary to fully comprehend the significance of walking into the Savoy Ballroom as an African American during the 1920s and 30s. On that note, a continuation of this research would be enhanced through the inclusion of more Black voices that can speak more directly to the human experience of this era.

In some ways, this research also opens up more questions than answers. Perhaps one of the biggest questions is where the lines of difference are drawn between concepts of cultural erasure, cultural appreciation, and cultural adaptation. Just as important, this research opens up questions of cultural access. Is one's culture determined by the perceived race of an individual or through degree of engagement with a culture, and how does the answer affect ideas of racial limitations and stereotypes?

In summation, my hope is that this research has contributed to the canon of Black dance and made clear the importance Lindy Hop from a cultural perspective. By surveying the human experience of Savoy-era dancers and conducting a cross-cultural comparison with contemporary Lindy Hop, I hope to have provided practitioners with

new considerations for their own practice in terms of how they engage with the dance.

Lastly, I hope that other researchers are inspired to pick up the torch on the exploration of Lindy Hop, and, whether through text or practice, uncover and retain its stories and histories.

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