

# Dancing with the Ghost of Minstrelsy: A Case Study of the Marginalization and Continued Survival of Rhythm Tap

by

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**Abstract:** This article examines the obstacles faced by rhythm tap to gain artistic acceptance throughout seminal periods of its evolution as an entertainment art form. The legitimating of the art is discussed in consideration of its marginal, historical status and its identification with subservience and the minstrel tradition. This study, based on ethnographic field work and in-depth interviews, describes the 1990's as a crucial period in community building by rhythm tap artists. This examination sheds light on the purposive actions of tap cultural workers during this period, to finally gain artistic legitimacy for their once dying music/dance art form.

**Keywords:** dance, rhythm tap dance, artistic marginalization, mentoring group

The years leading up to the close of the century were an important time in the evolution of rhythm tap dancing, an indigenous American art form. The majority of African American men who helped to give birth to tap as a jazz based art form had long since retired and many had passed away. In their struggle to achieve artistic legitimating, the founding fathers and mothers of rhythm tap elevated the art form from its illegitimate past to a level of serious artistic recognition by turning dance into music - the syncopated rhythms of jazz. This once dying art form was now experiencing a re-emergence into the market place of mainstream entertainment. With the critical and financial success of *Bring in the Noise*, *Bring in the Funk* on Broadway, master tap innovator, Savion Glover, and a cadre of young, African American males ushered rhythm tap dancing into greater mainstream attention linking the art form to the youth culture of hip hop.

“Dancing with the ghost of minstrelsy,” examines the impediments confronted by an evolving art form to gain artistic acceptance. It further documents how the purposive actions of a community of cultural workers endeavor to gain artistic legitimacy for their once dying art form. It is a review of its once marginal status, a documented exploration of an important period in its history, and a summation of the now, then, and future of rhythm Tap.

The young generation of developing artists, led by Savion Glover, placed their personal stamp on rhythm tap and made it their own. Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out that human beings experience “a haunting of the present structure of past experiences” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 32). In the bodily meeting place of the past, present, and future, the African American males bodily representation in tap has become a vessel of symbolic protest against past, present, and future oppression. Through the performance genre of the rhythm tap, the African American male symbolically freed himself from the chains of his oppression that was representative of the minstrel and obsequious history of the art form.

During the period of the 1990s, rhythm tap resurfaced as part of the mainstream popular culture. At this epoch in its history, rhythm tap, the once theatrically enslaved body sold on the auction block of white dominated commercial entertainment became a new body in performance – a total antithesis to its former self. In contrast to the subservient tradition of minstrelsy, these young men now conveyed a power and bodily control. In fact, they danced fiercely as if they were excising the ghost of minstrelsy itself. Having experienced the pain of the past humiliations of the smiling, subservient, tap dancer, the new African American body in performance was aggressive, athletic, and totally expressive. The faces of these young men were without the larger than life personality and wide toothy smile of the minstrel tradition in entertainment. Most of the young men kept their personalities, feelings, and emotions in the music and not as exaggerated outward expression. The young men and women, who were in the minority, were performing not for audience approval but rather for their own personal feelings of accomplishment. They refused to project historic superficial performance expressions as part of their routines. These performers declined to compromise their artistic expression by trying to use their individuality to appeal to audiences rather than appearing to beg for acceptance. They danced with spontaneous raw feeling and emotion, with naked expression and honesty, representing the embodiment of freedom and masculinity. This emerging generation of talented performers in the bodily presentation of art purposely distanced themselves from popular images of minstrelsy that had poisoned the minds of the theatre going public for decades.

## **Cultural Invisibility**

Important elements of African American oral tradition that are often rendered invisible by scholars and observers of American society, include folklore, humor, sacred music, blues, jazz, art, and dance. These cultural and artistic expressions have been overlooked or misinterpreted due to the conventional emphasis and reliance on written texts, scores, and documents. Therefore, the artistry and significance of Black oral culture is often lost when it is solely interpreted from what exists on the printed page. The African American genre of tap dancing is an element of Black oral culture that has been similarly neglected and misunderstood. Therefore, the artistry and significance of Black oral culture is often lost when it is solely interpreted from what exists on the printed page. The African American genre of tap dancing is an element of Black oral culture that has been similarly neglected and misunderstood.

The history of tap represents the effects of racism on the viability and acceptance of marginal art forms by white society. Like other African American art forms, tap has been historically subsumed by the established dominant genre throughout its theatrical development. White tap dancers such as Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly were able to attain international recognition in the film industry while the African Americans were relegated to subservient roles portraying servants, shoeshine boys, and bellhops. Only Bill “Bo Jangles” Robinson emerged and achieved film recognition; however, he too played a subservient role as Shirley Temple’s loyal butler.

Consequently, the mass population was deprived of witnessing the greatest tap performances of the era since the best dancing was performed by accomplished African American tap dancers who were largely excluded from Broadway and film. These artists were seen in the less regarded performing venues such as Negro Vaudeville and Colored movies. Additionally, Broadway did not allow the greatest tap dancers to do their best work, relegating virtuoso artists to roles that demanded personality over ability. Even on these stages, in view of mainstream audiences, they remained hidden. The Broadway performances of one of the world’s greatest tap dancers of a generation, Bill “Bo Jangles” Robinson, were no exception.

Associated with the tapping legends of Hollywood and Broadway musicals, tap has been stigmatized as a glitzy, non-serious art form. Relatively unknown is the jazz genre of tap whose innovators (referred to as “Hoofers”) were African American males. It was only in the 1930s and 1940s that rhythm tap received mainstream visibility and recognition as tap dancers became featured performers with the big bands. Since its height of popularity in the 1930s, it has received only sporadic attention on Broadway. However, this genre of tap continues to exist mostly in small restaurant/bars and on the fringes of mainstream entertainment. Despite its remarkable evolution and continued survival, tap remains invisible to most Americans.

## **Non-threatening Art Form Associated with the Minstrel Tradition**

From 1827 through the mid-1860s tap dancing flourished in mainstream entertainment because it was a non-threatening art form associated with the minstrel tradition and performed mainly by Whites. African Americans participated in minstrel shows after the Civil War, and continued the distorted portrayal of Blacks that Whites had created. The caricatures of African Americans performed on stage were representative of the unequal Black/White power relations in America.

Though Pierre Bourdieu is speaking of power relations in another context, his comments are applicable to African American performers in the minstrel tradition. He states:

The opposition between straight and the bent, whose function in the incorporated division of labor between the sexes has been indicated, is central to most of the marks of respect or contempt that politeness uses in many societies to symbolize relations of domination. On the one hand, lowering or bending the head or forehead as a sign of confusion or timidity, lowering the eyes in humility or timidity, and also shame or modesty, looking down or under, underneath, kneeling, curtsying, prostration (before a superior or a god); on the other hand, looking up, looking someone in the eyes, refusing to bow the head, standing up to someone, getting the upper hand (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 72).

Dancing, singing, and performing comic roles on stage, Blacks in minstrelsy enacted this subservience through the use of bodily expression. The bowed body, rolling eyes, down cast expression, and toothy smile were common gestures of the submissive African male performer. These roles were created to purposively assuage the fears of southern white males fearful of unchained Black male prowess and strength.

In the public space of the American stage, this compliant image of African American males created, in the American male psyche, a sense of security in the uncomfortable presence of a dark, male population who they feared would one day rape their wives and take their jobs. Etched into the American collective consciousness was the image of the African American, male body as non-threatening: shuffling and suffering from bouts of inertia. This wide-tooth, grinning, subservient, African American, male body in the guise of children, animals, or fools assuaged the nation's fear of the Black, male population and symbolically reaffirmed white, male cultural dominance.

## **The Present State of the Art**

Jimmy Slyde received the prestigious Kennedy Center Life-time Achievement Award as a folk artist. Seeing himself principally as a jazz percussionist, he explained, “I’m recognized by all the players and the musicians, but not, NOT, the critics, the writers, the discoverers and all these other very important people that choose not to give credit where credit is due” (Interview, Jimmy Slyde). In contrast to jazz, which has been elevated to the status of a classical American art form, Hank Smith contends, “tap is seen as an inferior art form to jazz – a stepchild of jazz [or] a rebuffed suitor of jazz” (Interview, Hank Smith).

What the most accomplished performers are doing has been interpreted as folk art. Efforts are being made to elevate rhythm tap and place it on a firmer artistic footing, insuring its preservation and its cultural survival. Hence, there is a growing tap resource collection at the Lincoln Center Library of the Performing Arts in New York City, the International Tap Association, (which links tap professionals through the publication of a widely distributed newsletter) and annual tap festivals in major cities throughout the country. These endeavors attract increasing numbers of students, tap enthusiasts and performers.

Rhythm tap continues to lack institutional support as well as regular funding links with highly valued institutions, endowments, and cultural support organizations. It lacks support from a significant number of influential dance critics, serious scholars, well established concert halls, or established funding institutions. It is absent of an association with academic institutions that contribute to the art form by supporting a teaching staff of professional performers, training a future generation of dancers, educating audiences, and keeping the art form alive. Philanthropic support for tap dancing from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council for the Arts has also been negligible.

## **Discredited Art Achieving Status Recognition: Modern Dance and Jazz**

In recent decades, barriers between high and low art have begun to break down (Zolberg and Cherbo, 1997). Art forms once considered low brow, such as modern dance and jazz, have now reached a significant level of prominence. This trend, however, has continued to elude the music/dance form of rhythm tap. Associated with the body and not with the mind, dance has been perceived as a marginalized art form (Sussman, 1997). Considered “folk” and not part of the rich jazz tradition, forces its dancers into a constant struggle to achieve legitimization.

In contrast to the efforts of cultural workers in the field of tap to gain artistic acceptance, White female, pioneers of the modern dance movement successfully achieved high status for the developing art form, (once considered more folk than classical), by gaining entry into the physical education programs of elite women's colleges in the 1930's and 1940's. These colleges provided choreographers and dancers institutional support towards repertory development, training and the necessary resources to guarantee the long term survival of the art form. Not only did modern dancers have the colleges as a base, but they were able to create performance venues from the reservoir of vast resources and alternative small stage venues (Sussman, 1997).

Major funding for small, self-supporting, modern dance companies has been on the decline for many years. Yet this art form, manages to maintain significant access to the pool of resources available for arts institutional funding and support. Besides the institutional support and revenue base that helps modern dance survive, many companies have self-supporting schools such as The Ailey School and The Graham School that provide additional revenue.

Recent scholars have credited Cold War politics of the 1950's for laying the foundation for the acceptance of jazz as a classical art form. As Russia dispatched ballet companies, classical music companies, and fine art throughout the world as a symbol of high culture and the greatness of a nation, the United States' State Department sent acclaimed jazz musicians (fully funded and supported) throughout Europe and the developing world as "ambassadors of American culture." Musicians, such as Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington, traveled the world to demonstrate what democracy had spawned. The government's intention was to construct American culture so that the international community would see it as the racially inclusive nation that it was not. As a result of the "Cold War" state department initiative, jazz would be given long overdue recognition as American, classical music. As a result, its rise in status, the institutionalization of jazz became a national mandate. Having traveled the world as cultural ambassadors, the musicians used their "Cold war" effort as a bargaining chip to attain legitimacy. The newly acquired status garnered for jazz artists opportunities such as increased funding opportunities, high-status concert engagements, and support for annual jazz music festivals such as The Newport Jazz Festival. Having achieved artistic elevation and recognition as American classical music, jazz is performed on national and international concert stages where it is included in the regular production season of established concert houses. There has been increasing effort to attract performance opportunities for the musicians through growing audience support initiatives in areas such as audience development, advertising, music publication and creative development. Jazz receives widespread commercial support through concerts, festivals, broadcasts, and recordings of well-known artists despite the decline of small club venues.

Accomplished jazz musicians receive ongoing government and corporate grant funding to encourage performances, composition, and music education for the youth. Schools and cultural centers are even integrating jazz into existing educational programs. Support organizations such as the New York City's Jazz Mobile, National Jazz Service Organization, National Association of Jazz, and the Charlie Parker Memorial Foundation receive continued government and corporate support (Baker, 1990).

Although jazz lags behind classical music in terms of recognition, prestige, and the level of support that it receives; it has garnered growing institutional support, thus encouraging the continuance and survival of the jazz tradition. Some of the efforts have been directed towards the historical preservation of jazz books, magazines, newsletters, audiotapes, videotapes, films and documentaries about jazz. City and corporate sponsored jazz festivals and concerts are presented in cities such as New York, Chicago, Kansas City, and Detroit. Tax-supported arts complexes, such as the prestigious Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. and Lincoln Center in New York City also produce jazz series. Recordings are preserved in library archival collections such as the Institute for Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the Smithsonian Institution. Books and scholarly articles by writers and scholars in the area of jazz history, biography, music evaluation and analysis, musicological research, and jazz criticism are increasing. Jazz also enjoys support from public television and radio.

## **Factors Influencing the Continuous Marginalization of Rhythm Tap in the Birth, Rise, Near Death and Re-Emergence of Tap**

### **Roots of Tap**

Tap dancing is an American art form. It was born in the 1800s from the meeting and meshing of the wide spectrum of ethnic percussive dance styles brought to the United States during that time by folk of African, English, Irish, and Scottish descent. The roots of tap dancing run far and deep in the continents of Africa and Europe. Africans, English, Irish, and Germans each brought to the new world their indigenous dance forms. Through several hundred years of gestation, tap dancing evolved as a distinctly original American dance art form. The history of African American dance is thought to have originated with the Slave Act of 1740, prohibiting the use of drums by enslaved Africans. This law was enacted because drums were used as a means of communication in the 1739 enslaved insurrection in Stono, Virginia.

Influenced by strict religious beliefs, the Christian slave masters viewed African dance as pagan, sensual, and potentially arousing. Eventually, laws were passed to outlaw indigenous dances by the uprooted, displaced population living in America. With traditional drumming and dancing prohibited, the enslaved Africans let their feet and voices do the communicating. Their feet tapped the drum rhythms and their voices sang the different tones of the drums, especially during church services. In this way, the enslaved Africans could not be silenced. Original dances from West Africa survived in the church services where enslaved Africans tapped their feet, clapped their hands, and moved their body in percussive syncopated rhythms when they “felt the spirit.”

Irish step dancing, found in the rapid, complex, and energetic footwork of Irish Americans (the Irish Jig), was an influence on the development of tap as well; so too was English and Scottish clogging, which was both rhythmic and improvisational. These dance forms are the foundation of rhythm tap. Although tap dancing has European ethnic influences, its heritage is entrenched more deeply in Africa. The rhythms of the Black genre of tap are distinctly African in origin. “In Africa, the use of multiple meters, overlapping rhythms and syncopation is common. Often dancers contribute yet another rhythm to the distinct rhythm of each instrument in the musical ensemble accompanying the dancers. This African rhythmic heritage is prominent in African American tap dancing, as is ‘shading the count’ or emphasizing the off-beat” (Hanna, 1983, pp. 58-59).

The merger between African and Irish folk music is undeniable as was their eventual separation nevertheless, before doing so, their union gave birth to two distinct forms of an American phenomenon: country music and folk blues. Tap dancing is the result of the same kind of marriage that occurred between the two musical traditions. While Blacks were in the fields, working the river bottoms, building highways, and working on prison farms, the Irish foremen ruled over them. The two groups depended upon each other for entertainment. At the end of the work day, the Black workers and whites overseers challenged each other in dance circles with one group trying to out-dance the other. The African Americans imitated the Irish Jig and incorporated it into the syncopated rhythms of their own dance forms. This early formation of black dance and tap’s later folk association as the low –brow art form would plague its evolution and become entrenched in minstrelsy, vaudeville, and the African American entertainment circuit (T.O.B.A.).



## **The Minstrel Tradition of Tap**

Around 1827, a new kind of popular entertainment invented by White performers took hold of the public imagination: minstrelsy. Its long-term success was a direct result of segregation. They smeared black grease paint on their faces and costumed themselves in tattered, outlandish outfits for the direct purpose of making a mockery of Black people. White, male performers entertained audiences by grotesquely exaggerating the movement and language of Black people in exaggerated, characterizations of the lazy sambo and the urban dandy. Important performance elements nurtured in minstrelsy included song, dance, and parody. Tap dancing, in particular, was its dominant dance form.

Minstrelsy produced two genres; the white-face minstrel shows performed by African American males, and the Black-face minstrel shows performed by White males. Struggling to survive in the competitive arena of mainstream minstrel entertainment, the African American performer entered this milieu in the early years following the civil war. Further exaggerating its characterizations of African American people, the smiling, docile, shiftless and lazy Samboesque figure was portrayed in heightened deformity by Black minstrels. The submissive minstrel stereotypes of amusement and ridicule became a feature of vaudeville, musical theatre, and Hollywood musicals.

The popularity of the African American and White minstrel shows began to wane in the late 1800s. Not only did the minstrel shows continue to exclude women, but audiences felt they were becoming stagnant and began demanding something new. Therefore, the tap dancing “fool” was developed to meet the need for this novelty. What remained in popular consciousness, especially in the consciousness of African Americans. This association of tap with the tap “fool” remained an obstacle to its mainstream recognition as a legitimate jazz art form. Meanwhile, it continued to evolve as a percussive jazz art form.

## **Bringing Tap Beyond Minstrelsy as Jazz Art**

The evolution of tap in the following years was directly related to the evolution of jazz from ragtime, swing, and bebop to avant-garde. By the 1930's, tap dancing had become a popular American dance form rising above the demeaning tradition of minstrelsy and White tap dancers including Pat Rooney, the Condos Brothers, James Barton, Harland Dixon, Fred and Adele Astaire, and George M. Cohan became popular stars of White vaudeville. It would be the elegantly attired Black tap dancers performing with polish and grace in vaudeville entertainment houses who would attempt to bring dignity to the dance tradition of tap while minstrel performers continued to entertain audiences with exaggerated, stereotypical characterizations of Blacks on stage and screen.

As featured performers with the popular swing bands of the 1930's and 1940's, tap dancers called their performances "Class Acts." Movie musicals became a favorite American pastime featuring well known tap acts such as the Nicholas Brothers, Coles and Atkins, and the Berry Brothers as performers in night club scenes. These featured performers blended tap dance with jazz music, and the art form became a jazz art.

The rhythms had "swing." A tap was placed to the toe area of the foot by Bill "Bo Jangles" Robinson and given bodily elegance by Eddie Rector. John Bubbles incorporated the heel and he added rhythmic syncopation and complexity to the music-dance-art form. The next stage of originality in tap is associated with Baby Laurence, who added the faster complex rhythms of bebop. It is important to note, even in the choreographed routines of the minstrel era, vaudeville, and the big bands that the tap dancer often left room in his routines for improvisation. The style of rhythm tap called "Hoofing" is a completely spontaneous improvised music-dance-art form. By emphasizing the motto "keep creating new steps," the dancers attempted to protect the genre from becoming repetitive and monotonous by giving it a fresh, unrelenting vitality.

### **Tap as Improvisation**

On the African American vaudeville circuit and in the Rhythm Club and the Hoofers Club in Harlem, African American tap dancers performed exclusively for African American audiences. Among the population of aspiring professional dancers, only the best dancers were permitted to perform. When African Americans performed for African American audiences, performance standards were high, and the art of improvisation was expected. The call - and - response of the audience drove the entertainer to greater performance heights and established an environment that was highly critical. Thus, the African American audience niche was important to the survival of tap because of the fluctuating standards and changing trends of mainstream entertainment, which diluted and eventually rejected it by the early 1950's. In the past, African American tap clubs and the segregated African American entertainment circuit was a protective environment where performers were able to expand their talent in a relaxed and supportive environment without the limitations of mainstream scrutiny. This safe space allowed the art of improvisation to remain a dominant feature in contrast to the expectations of mainstream entertainment which demanded choreographed routines.

In rhythm tap dancing, the visual aspect of performing found in the theatrical styles of tap performed in Broadway musicals, in films is secondary. Rhythm tap is the creation of polyrhythmic phrasing with the feet. The rhythm tap dancer is a percussive instrumentalist. Traditionally, the tap dancer percussively improvised in "stop time" as the ensemble softly played the bare skeletal outline of a standard jazz composition consisting of relatively few melodic complexities per phrase.

During the act of improvisation, the rhythm tap dancer, like the jazz musician, spontaneously shades, shapes, and stretches a cavalcade of sound and rhythms that are complex, varied and syncopated. In the excitement of the moment, the tap dancer follows the music inside of him or her, that are variations on a theme expressed in the language of rhythm. The cascading rhythms take the audience on a roller coaster ride full of emotion and surprise. In traditional African American musical expression, spirituals, work songs, and blues songs were not sung the same way twice. In the same vein, early jazz music emanated from spontaneous improvisation. Historically, the art of improvisation in African American culture created a finished work of art at the creative moment of inspiration and emotional expression. Then and now, the music is constantly created and re-created in an atmosphere of anxious anticipation and communal celebration. The creative process of improvisation is a conversation as well as a call – and - response between musician and musician, and musician. The art of improvisation is an important factor in the art form's continued survival. Once a tap dancer has mastered a basic vocabulary of steps and patterns, he is left on his own to improvise and develop his own creations.

### **The Near Death of Tap**

By the late 1940's, vaudeville was dead. New cabaret laws forced nightclub owners to cut variety and dance acts in favor of small bands and comedians. The popularity of the big bands also began to wane. Many tap dancers were unable to stay abreast of the crowded rhythms of the bebop revolution in jazz. Others became bebop tap dancers creating complex rhythms that often confused the listener. Consequently, tap dancing began to fade from the culture of mainstream entertainment. In the 1950's, it had a resurgence prompted by the continuing popularity of big screen movie musicals and the birth of television featuring tap dancers in the popular variety shows of the period such as the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Unfortunately, this revival was to last for only a few years.

By the late 1950s, there was no work for the majority of tap dancers. Movie musicals were no longer being filmed, and television concentrated on ballet and modern dance, giving exposure to only a few "flash acts." On Broadway, there was a new demand for modern dance and ballet-inspired musicals. Rock and Roll usurped jazz as the dominant form of conventional entertainment. The fervent years of the Civil Rights Movement saw a rejection by the Black community of entertainment art forms which conjured up the negative stereotypical images associated with the minstrel tradition and the subservient characterizations of African Americans on film that grew from this tradition. Hence, the "hooper" hung up his (and her) tap shoes and sought alternative employment (Stearns, 1994).

Rhythm tap dancing as a music-dance-art form suffers from double marginalization. It was marginalized by Whites because of its association with Blacks and “low brow” entertainment and it was marginalized by Blacks because of its association with the humiliation of subservience. Tap gained greater mainstream acceptance and legitimating when a “White” style of “smooth tap” was showcased by stars such as Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly in Hollywood musicals of the 1930’s, 1940’s, and 1950’s. But, the artistic legitimating did not extend to rhythm tap: the hard-hitting, rhythmically complex style associated with African American performers. Following the dismantling of the studio system in Hollywood and the decline of the traditional musical as a film genre, even the acceptance that smooth tap had gained was no longer at the forefront of mainstream popular consciousness. The rejection of tap by the young in the 1960s was a particularly damaging aspect of marginalization. Acceptance by this generation was considered crucial for its cultural and artistic survival.

During and after the 1960s, there has been a continuing struggle by professional tap artists to gain acceptance by mainstream audiences and to garner artistic legitimization from the arbiters of art. Audiences were awestruck by the visual aspect of the genre. Routines which emphasized acrobatics (splits, flips, and spins) had become popular during the height of tap’s mainstream popularity. Commonly called “flash acts,” these routines garnered greater audience attention than rhythm tap, which emphasized the jazz rhythmical aspect of tap dancing. By the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black community rejected tap, including flash acts and rhythm tap because of tap’s association with minstrelsy. According to Brenda Bufalino, a tap performer and enthusiast who brought the veteran performers into the concert dance venues of the period, “A whole lot of people knew about concert dance in the Black community. They didn’t want to do it with tap dance. It was ‘Uncle Toming.’ So, regardless of who wants to admit it, the Black community did not want the Black [tap] artists – did not want to have anything to do with the dance” (Interview, Brenda Bufalino). Toes further comments:

The thing that happened I think with the Black community for a long time is that tap got associated with the sort of “Uncle Tom” thing – Bill Robinson, that kind of thing. Because tap dancers, Black tap dancers in movies, they had to portray porters or butlers or something like that – some servant. They could never be someone like Fred Astaire with a top hat.  
(Interview, Toes)

It became clear to rhythm tap dancers and its supporters that to resuscitate the art, to breathe new life into it, and for it to flourish, its image associated with subservience would have to be reinvented.

This effort to transform tap's image was given a powerful push by jazz historian Marshall Stearns, who wanted to reverse the threat of its extinction as a music-dance-art form by demonstrating its legitimacy and percussive complexity. In 1962 and 1963, Stearns brought rhythm tap dancing to The Newport Jazz Festival, calling his presentations "revival" concerts.

However, the decisive factor in the resurgence of tap was the promotional activities of White women. Divorced from the psychological impact of minstrelsy and armed with the educational and cultural capital to bring rhythm tap into small theatres that were showcasing burgeoning modern dance companies, White women became the conduit through which the art survived. In fact, they became the leaders of the tap resurgence. Passionate about the art of rhythm tap dancing, these women were able to get older Black male hoofers, who found dignity in their art, to pass down the art of rhythm tap dance to them in the form of workshops and performances. A mentor/protégé, father/ daughter relationship resulted between the two, and the Black men were affectionately seen as their "tap daddies."

### **The 1990s Tap Renaissance: Building Community and Establishing Respectability**

For the last twenty years, we have had four generations of tap dancing together at one time. This was the Renaissance. When does that ever happen in life when the originators, the people who began it and their babies are up together? It was a beautiful decade. It can't stay, you can't have that forever.

(Interview, Brenda Bufalino)

The early 1990's were the beginning years of the period of the hip hop influence on rhythm tap. It was an important time in the pursuit of artistic recognition and respectability for the art form through a concerted effort by cultural workers to link rhythm tap to the mainstream, popular culture of hip hop. At the time, the older tap masters, who were in their seventies and eighties, had begun to stop dancing, retire and/or pass away. These remaining masters of a venerable generation were painfully aware of their own mortality and, therefore, worked urgently and tirelessly toward building community among a younger generation of tap dancers. In their effort toward developing a community that would last for generations, the elders began to pass on the art and its rules to the next generation in small New York City performance milieus in which they performed together. This historical moment in tap was illuminated at Jimmy Slyde's *Wednesday Nights at La Cave* from 1992-1994.

This upper east-side underground performance space became an informal learning environment for tap dancers. It was in this performance that young, developing dancers performed a style of tap dancing that was linked with hip hop and youth culture. The style was bold, rapid, and eloquent. Jimmy Slyde, Lon Chaney, and Chuck Green interacted and danced among the young, enthusiastically and consistently teaching and mentoring them. La Cave offered New York City tap dancers and a few aficionados of this music-dance-art form an opportunity to witness the birth of a tap community. Within this space, older men acted as mentors to a younger group of dancers passionate about tap and willing to learn its traditions as they distanced themselves from its association with the minstrel tradition in dance. The social dynamic at La Cave was a seminal historical “renaissance” moment in community building among tap artists.

### **Dance as an Expression of Community Bonding**

The La Cave jazz club provided a protective and nurturing environment for rhythm tap dancers. In this safe space, tap dancers had the unique opportunity to practice the art of improvisation and challenge. Away from the demands and trends of more commercial venues, they were allowed to grow as artists. The long term survival of this art form depends on this protection. In this insular environment, tap dancers were able to learn through trial and error and from watching each other experiment rhythm, style, and sound possibilities of tap. The older men performed rhythms that evolved throughout a lifetime. The younger leading dancers, called “young lions,” blended the old rhythmic variations and performance styles with the new. The various influences created complex, contemporary rhythms and exciting, individual performance styles. Hidden away from mainstream audiences in the basement performance space of La Cave, individual performances were witnessed almost exclusively by members of the tap community and a few aficionados.

A key feature of the dynamic web of social interaction among rhythm tap dancers was the old head/younger dancer mentoring relationship. Hosting the most respected tap jams were Jimmy Slyde and Buster Brown. Having devoted their lives to the pursuit of the art of rhythm tap dancing, they were now teaching and mentoring the next generation of artists. As masters of ceremonies, Buster Brown at Swing 46 and Jimmy Slyde at La Cave orchestrated evenings that were pregnant with a sense of history and rebirth. As living repositories of a rich tradition, Buster Brown, in his late-eighties, and Jimmy Slyde, in his mid-seventies danced among their brood of younger dancers who were the art form’s future. The dapper elder statesmen were an awe-inspiring presence as they gracefully moved across space in a musical rhythm and pattern that defied time’s usual cruel stiffening effect on aging bodies.

At the end of the evenings, the middle-aged “hoofers” joyously joined a younger generation of fiery paced dancers on stage for the collective jam. Both audience and performer experienced a sense of community renewal, gleaned an understanding of the continuum of a music-dance-art form, and witnessed the passing of the torch by the elders to the next generation.

The tap jams and shows provided a safe space for tap dancers to develop the art of improvisation. These events offered each dancer an opportunity to take creative leaps beyond the boundaries of choreographed tap and into a performing realm where individual self-expression loomed limitless. Tap dancers sat at tables and at the bar intensely listening to feet improvise to jazz standards as young “hoofers” work toward improving their rhythmic ability and finding a voice of their own. Inclusiveness was a salient feature of the events. Each dancer, irrespective of age, talent, gender, and ability, was given the opportunity to dance. Although the system was democratic, it was also a meritocracy. The more accomplished dancers always performed last. The final performers helped to build the evening to a climatic peak. The communal nature of tap in these alternative performance venues echoes the communal nature of dance in West Africa. Katrina Hazzard-Gordon comments on the function of dance in West African culture: “Social dancing links African Americans to their African past more strongly than any other aspect of their culture. This is hardly surprising because dance was (and is today) of central importance in West Africa. It is not only a routine communal activity, but an integral part of ceremonies that bind groups together as a people. It links one’s personal identity to that of the group” (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990, p. 32).

The parallels are obvious. Through this routine, communal activity in the performance structure of rhythm tap dancing, audience and performer experience a collective oneness. Through these communal ceremonies, the audiences as members of the circle as well as the dancers are united into a collective feeling of exuberance. The notion of a “tap renaissance” also helped to psychologically bind the tap community together. This collective belief that tap was in the midst of a rebirth kept the group’s spirits high. The pervasive optimism helped the group not to become discouraged by the harsh realities of the not too distant past and the limited performance opportunities of the present.

## **Mentoring**

Mentoring has also been a vital factor in the survival of tap. Rhythm tap dancers have traditionally established mentor-protégé relationships. Strong intergenerational bonds developed between “old heads”/younger dancers in the course of this mentoring process in the 1990’s. The passion and commitment brought to rhythm tap by the old heads was a powerful motivator to their mentees.

By continuing to dance in old age, the mentors believed that they provided younger dancers with positive role models, demonstrating ways to preserve the art of tap. For their part, the younger dancers had a deep reverence for age. It is believed that it takes a lifetime of experience to have something to say as an artist. This aspiring generation appreciated the unique opportunity they had to perform with men belonging to the generation that developed the jazz foundation of the tap art form. Reverence for the old heads came, then, not only from recognition of their lifelong accomplishments as dancers, but also from the inspiration they provided as a result of their dedication to mentoring, their work ethic, and their deeply-felt friendship with the younger dancers. Following deep African traditions, the younger dancers looked upon the elder masters as role models to be emulated and given the utmost respect, deference, and adulation.

One important outcome of the strong intergenerational bonds formed between the old heads and the younger dancers is that these bonds enabled the old heads to accept the younger generation's new style and new voice in tap. The old heads were able to embrace the hip-hop evolution in music and culture associated with the sound, rhythm, and dress style of its leading tap innovator, Savion Glover, and others. They understood that their mentees were spirited youth performing a rebellious form of tap that was loud, hard hitting, and rhythmically fast. They accepted the fact that this next generation wanted to distance themselves from the associations of tap with minstrelsy and the grinning tap dancer that the young found humiliating. The young dancers, on the other hand, did not intend their new style, which foregrounded masculine expressiveness, to radically break with all tradition. They only wanted to depart from what they thought were its negative aspects. Thus, this younger generation, while improvising, often executed signature steps of older tap dancers in addition to steps taught by now-deceased African American hoofers as a way of paying homage to their predecessors. By doing this, they symbolically communicated their recognition of the fact that this shared music-dance-art form known as tap would not be possible if not for the tap masters who handed down the tradition. Intergenerational bonds were strengthened by the merging of generations onstage and by the feeling of shared identity as tap artists that resulted from old heads/younger dancers forming a community like others.

## **Challenging**

When the old heads were in their prime as performers, the challenge was the dominant practice through which tap artists grew artistically and established reputations that helped build careers. In rhythm tap, the verbal sparring of signifying, playing the dozens and "dissing" is substituted by rhythmic sparring called challenges, the "dance-off," or the "compete dance." These rhythmic challenges often took place on street corners, sidewalks, and back alleyways in Harlem and Philadelphia. At the Apollo and other Harlem theatres, challenges often took place between performances.



At the Hoofers Club and the Rhythm Club in Harlem, the challenge was usually a part of the performance. At the Hooper's Club, only the top African American, male tap dancers were permitted on stage. Subsequently, this art achieved its highest form of expression at the African American clubs and theatres.

## **Non-Competitiveness**

In the 1990's, to reduce competitiveness among the younger professional tap artists as well as to encourage young artists to develop their skills through the challenges of performing, the elder tap masters orchestrated an atmosphere of non-competitiveness at the small clubs where the community gathered to jam. In support of the other dancers, the elder mentors attempted to thwart the natural inclination of the male dancers, in particular, to see tap as a competitive sport. One evening, Jimmy Slyde said to me: "Everyone's so supportive in the tap community. [There is] no competitiveness. [Everyone is] supportive of each other" (Field notes taken at *On Tap*, November 27, 1999). Terry says, "There hasn't been competition" (Lerman Family Interview). Without these values being adhered to, the young artists have a tendency to substitute dancing fast for artistic development. Van Porter, a professional middle-aged tap dancer and "Young Lion" during the *La Cave* days explains, "Young guys be cutting – trying to outdo each other. See who can dance the fastest" (Field notes taken at *On Tap* December 4, 1999).

The older masters introduced the idea of friendly competition by encouraging their mentees to compete against themselves instead of others. The elder, tap masters stressed to the younger artists that the small clubs offered them the opportunity to improve their performing ability over time. They tried to improve upon the way it was practiced at the time of tap's height of popularity. The values "to keep creating" and "to remain humble" were also promoted by the "old heads" to help bind the community together. The promotion of humility and non-competitiveness created an environment what everyone had the opportunity to perfect his ability to improvise without cutthroat competition, intense scrutiny, or severe criticism.

In contrast to the "class acts" of the 30's and 40's, when performers made a conscious decision to dress elegantly on stage to help erase the low brow image of tap rooted in the minstrel tradition, these young men wanted their art to be taken seriously without having to compromise themselves by changing their manner of dress on stage. Therefore, they performed in baggy pants and blue jeans. For the younger generation of African American, male tap dancers, tap became a way to cope with a society which deemed them a threat and rendered them invisible.

Therefore, the new representation of tap became African American masculine identity. In response to their invisibility in society and the negative association of the art form with minstrelsy, the young, African American males took on a cool behavior that was evident in their walk, demeanor, speech, gestures, clothing, and hairstyles. A hip hop “cool” embodiment of the dance became part of the style of male rhythm tap dancing, during this time, influencing the style of both males and females rhythm tap dancers of this period. Social conceptions of gender and race broadened, and an alternative version of Black masculinity was embraced by young, Black men as tap dancing was reinterpreted and associated with strength. It continues as an aspect of the style of tap dancing associated with many tap artists active today. The term “front stage,” a pattern of public behavior referred to by noted sociologist Erving Goffman, can be used to describe the hip hop “cool” contemporary style that continued to evolve. On the public stage, the tap dancers create and manage the presentation of self by replacing the mask of the smile with the air of cool detachment. Influenced by hip-hop, the young men asserted the importance of sound over music. Responding to near invisibility in society and wanting to “say something” through their art, the young men took a subversive and revolutionary stance in the making of music. By tapping harder, faster, and louder than what was done in the past, the young men emphasized complexity of rhythm over music. By improvising as they performed and challenging one another in friendly competition in the “jam” at the end of each tap show, they are adhering to important elements in the tradition of tap. This form of nonverbal subversive communication in dance and music has been part of the African American culture since the early days of enslavement, when enslaved Africans communicated plans for enslaved revolts by singing, tapping, and slapping their bodies in church in religious ecstasy.

### **Seeing the Old in the New**

Ted Levy spoke about the youthful hip hop associated style of tap of the period as different from traditional tap: “Yeah, they do some of the old stuff. But they have a completely new way – it’s like a new way of doing it. It’s not the same as the old. It’s not the same” (Interview, Ted Levy). But, Jimmy Slyde saw the similarities. Slyde said:

I see the masters in everybody because without the masters you wouldn’t know one foot from the other. The masters are always around whether they’re identifiable or not or whether they’re recognized or not. You hear them breathing. You hear the breathing [in the rhythms the young tap dancers produce]. You hear them breathing. If they paid attention if you paid attention to Chaney and Chuck, you hear them. The beat goes on.

(Interview, Jimmy Slyde)

From the perspective of the tap innovators, the tap art form has evolved from the era of the big bands to the present. Although the youth oriented hip-hop associated style of tap is performed bent - over, and the rhythms are louder, faster, harder than more traditional tap dancing, the artists and educated audience hear familiar rhythms and see familiar steps. Especially among the most gifted, exemplified by Savion Glover, musically complex mixes of rhythms are heard by the trained ear. This is what they hear, even though tap dancing looks different on the younger bodies, especially when observed by an audience with an untrained ear. Therefore, tap dancers closely associated traditional rhythm tap dancing with this new form of tap, interpreting what Savion Glover and the young “hoofers” are doing as a variation of the more traditional form.

Although to most audience members, their style of tapping seems contemporary; the goal of the young, advanced dancers was to merge the old with the new in an attempt to create breadth and dimension into their dancing. White avant-garde tap dancer, producer, and participant in the resurgence of tap explains: “But to me, the important part is because kids have their rap and their hip-hop so I think [traditional tap] really helps some of those forms which tend to be a little one-note sometimes” (Interview, Lorraine Goodman). Embracing their past, the young dancers understand that they are a product of all that came before them. They take it upon themselves to study historical tapes of well-known tap dancers so that they can replicate the traditional rhythms and combinations associated with the masters of the tradition.

For their part, the older, male, traditional, rhythm tap dancers did not criticize the contemporary, hip-hop influenced style of tap dancing performed by the younger generation of tap dancers. Instead of looking at the younger generation for what they are not doing (traditional tap from the past) and feeling that the art is being severely compromised, the elders embrace them as long as they are expressing themselves musically and not just making noise. The tap masters had experienced first-hand a loss of jobs in entertainment, as the art form that they had once made a living in faded from popularity. In an effort to help bring tap back as popular entertainment culture, they supported the contemporary style of the younger dancers. It was their belief that the young artists were securing a future for the music-dance-art form. Watching the young dancers on the scene perform, the elders could see aspects of the old style of tap in the new one that was evolving. They saw in the new style the coming together of a shared tradition. Like the artist who sees through the prism of a Jackson Pollack drip painting the artistic tradition of cubism and surrealism, they embraced the contemporary style.

## What Do You Hear? Or, the Primacy of the Visual

One historical constant in the reception of tap by audiences with untrained ears is their tendency to assimilate images more readily than sound. The young tap artist at *La Cave* thinks the primacy of the visual today is greater than it was in the past. She observes:

The problem is that the audience is always relating now to the visual... At the end of the show, everybody was like having standing ovations for the flash dancers. Everything is image, much more than sounds. People relate to pictures more than the music that goes along. People see, people don't hear. Because that's how life is right now. 'Cause everything is fast. You don't take time to listen but you swallow images.

(Interview, Roxanne)

Because the young tap dancers wear baggy pants and tee shirts associated with hip-hop street culture, they seem to lack training as artists and the art form appears to lack elegance and sophistication. This causes it to be devalued. Tracy recalls a lady's comment after a tap event:

So I even remember it at one concert that the "Young Hoofers" did and they were a big hit. A lady said, 'Oh, those noisy tap dancers.' And she was one of the people in charge of the event and I thought, you know what, I bet they don't ask us back because of that: 'Oh those noisy tap dancers.' So people, not everybody sees it as a fine art. A lot of people just see it as a bunch of noise. They don't understand.

(Interview, Roxanne)

Reduced to a visual level of understanding, rhythm tap is a misunderstood music-dance-art form.

## **Lack of Critical Attention**

Jimmy Slyde explains that the tap art form's lack of critical attention by dance critics adds to its marginalization. He says:

People like to see it, we never lack for audiences, but we lack for the respectability amongst critics and those kind of people. Classics gets a lot of attention and do rightfully so. Modern jazz, whatever they call it, the sneaker dancers. They get a whole lot of attention.

(Interview, Jimmy Slyde)

According to Toes, "You hardly ever see anything about tap in the magazine. Even the Voice, as hip as the Voice is, I go through it, I look at the dance section. They don't review anything about tap, ever" (Interview, Toes). This lack of coverage from critics underlines the marginality of tap as an art form.

## **A Further Reflection on Legitimacy**

To attain the legitimization it seeks as a valuable and respected art form, tap dance must resolve the dilemma posed by the contradiction between its appearance and its essence, especially when most of the public and even many critics focus on appearance. Inside the world of tap, the "young lions" have adopted hip-hop dress and folk presentation in order to counter the demeaning image of minstrelsy. By doing so, they have replaced one folk image with another. The new image has been positive for them as a statement of resistance to subservience and is therefore, one they are loath to give up. Yet it, like the minstrel image of old, is linked to forms of artistic expression that are certainly not associated with high culture.

The current tap community emphasizes cultural and global diversity as the artists dance to complex world rhythms and the varied styles of jazz. Savion Glover taps with outstanding classical orchestras and well-known jazz musicians. If this tap community can find a way to affirm its identity while, at the same time, speaking to the public's need for the appearance and the substance of high culture, it may see the full flowering of the tap renaissance it so deserves.

## Conclusion

As an invisible art form on the fringe of society, rhythm tap has continued to survive in the Black community for over 350 years. This resilient art form has endured without cultural legitimation and consistent institutional support such as regular funding links with highly valued existing cultural institutions, endowments, or support groups. The nineties was an important time in the evolution of rhythm tap dance because elderly tap “masters” were urgently passing the rules of the art to a generation of young practitioners. Young, African American males were performing an exciting new style of hip-hop tap that is bold, raw, rapid, and eloquent that influenced the performance art style of a new generation. It is important that this cultural process of the “old head/” younger dancer mentoring relationship be recorded as this once dying art form experiences a re-emergence into the market place of mainstream entertainment and before the few remaining traditional “old heads” retire from the stage or pass away.

Rhythm tap endured as a creative voice of oppressed people because it has been a flexible medium of expression that has the ability to adjust to the changing demands of mainstream entertainment. The important elements of improvisation and challenging found in the social construction of the tap art form allowed individuals full artistic expression within the protective environment of the African American community. African Americans were able to make a living in the milieu of mainstream entertainment by creatively producing a form of tap expression that blended and adapted with other dance and entertainment forms. Rhythm tap dancers produced a nonthreatening hybrid commodity which met the demands of the mainstream entertainment market. Important social values within the African American community of mentoring and "passing on the tradition" helped preserve the art of tap and protect it from extinction in the past, as well as in the integrated tap community of the present. Cognizant of the tenuous position of rhythm tap dancing amid the fluctuating tastes and trends of audiences, tap artists continue tirelessly in their struggle to gain artistic legitimacy for this resilient and enduring art form. This struggle centers in the effort to create a performing environment where the complex, rhythmic essence of tap as an art form can endure. The words and rhythms of the “old head” mentors still linger in the minds and feet of many of the leading contemporary dancers of today.

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