

In the Beginning was African-American Dance

By Melvina Reid

Overview:

I would like to introduce African American Dance in its many forms and fashions. This unit will attempt to inform you of the historical facts pertaining to the creation of dance through the eyes of African Americans. People of African ancestry in the Americas created the African American dance. Africans brought their dances to North America, South America, and the Caribbean Islands, when they were imported as slave labor starting in the 1500s. The dance styles of hundreds of African ethnic groups in the Americas gradually merged with European dances and new forms of expression emerged that represent the continuation of the African aesthetic in the Americas. Dance has always been an integral part of daily life in African. In the Americas, dance played an important role in helping enslaved Africans maintain a connection with their homeland and keep their cultural traditions alive. As they had done before enslavement, Africans danced for special occasions, such as a birth or a marriage, or simply as a part of their daily activities. And dance helped affirm life and the possibility of a better future. The early types of African-American dance dominated through the 18th century included the ring shout or ring dance, the calenda, the chica, and the juba. This unit will attempt to introduce people who created dance movements that became popular all over the world. It will provide information regarding African-American dances from the beginning to the 1900s.

Rationale:

The African heritage is obvious today in the West Indies. French and Spanish slaves owners were more liberal than English and Americans in allowing the native Africans to retain their own culture. According to Harold Courlander, the survival of African heritage in Haiti was due to the relatively liberal attitudes of the first French and Spanish rulers and the Catholic Church. (Courlander, 13). In the West Indies the African was generally considered a human being, whereas in the United States the slaves were frequently considered non-human, and Protestant denominations were more repressive than the Catholics. Because of the great interchange of slaves between the West Indies and the mainland consideration of Negro dance in the Caribbean is basic to discussion of Negro dance in the United States. During the 1803 overthrow of the white ruling class in Haiti, white planters and their slaves flocked to Louisiana and particularly to the New Orleans area. After the Civil War there was a further exchange between the areas. The large West Indian population in New York City and the large number of Cubans in Florida are current evidence of a continuing process.

The dance of the West Indian black was based on rhythm, and movement was frequently controlled by percussion instruments, usually the drums. The complexity of the rhythmic patterns of the music led to a similar complexity in the structure of the dance; the feet might follow one rhythm while the hips moved to a second and the arms and head to a third and fourth. Their dances consist in great activity and strength of body and keeping time. The most complete account of the dance of the Negro in the New World was given by Moreau de St.-Mery. Born in Martinique in 1750, he lived there until he

was twenty-two, when he moved to Santo Domingo. He obviously knows more of Negro dances than those that were just visiting or touring the islands. His writings, and particularly his book, *Danse*, have been quoted extensively because of their wealth of descriptive materials. One of St.-Mery's favorite theories was that people born in the lush, hot tropics have a passion for dance and that the degree of passion decreases as one moves north to colder climates. The dancers would hold their arms a little like someone playing castagnettes. The jump, make swift turns, approach each other to a distance of two or three feet then draw back with the beat of the drum until the sound of the drums brings them together again to strike their thighs together, that is the men's against the women's. To see it would seem that they were striking each other's bellies although it is only the thighs which receive the blows. From time to time they lock arms and make several revolutions always slapping their thighs together and kissing each other. It can readily be seen by this abridged description to what degree this dance is contrary to all modesty. Even though the dance was considered indecent by some, it was adopted by the Spanish Creoles and proved to be one of their favorite pastime.

This unit is written specifically for High School students. Ranging from grades ninth through twelfth. These students may or may not be in the mainstream population of the school system. In order for this unit to be effective for special needs students certain modifications are required.

Objective:

The students will be able to use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies in order to find information pertaining to the African-American Dance of their choice of interest. The report will consist of origin, geography, movements, kind of music played during this dance, how was dance performed, (with one or two partners), was this dance a fad or did it have everlasting effects on the American culture, etc.?

The students will be able to respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems and to exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting valuable group communication as they are joined together in small groups to collaborate and compare information discovered about a particular dance. They will be able to perform and teach the dance movements to others successfully.

The students will be able to describe the meaning they find in various works from the performing arts as they have thoroughly explore the dances and presenting to others why certain dances were performed during special occasions. Explaining the significance of the dance for that moment in time.

The students will perform their dance and describe the meanings it has for them by grouping together all the information found and interviewing elderly folks who have experienced a favorite dance

in the past. They may videotape others performing the dance as a means of capturing first-hand emotional performances based on technology advances.

The students will be able to demonstrate that they can work effectively with others by forming partnerships with peers, the elderly, librarians, teachers, family members, friends, and community leaders, etc. as they examine their reports completely and critique the reports of their peers in addition to presenting their dances in concert style routines before their classmates, teachers, and parents and/or guardians in a collaborative effort.

Strategies:

In the event that modifications and adaptations are necessary to ensure the successes of students' performance in this particular curriculum unit, find methods to use for special needs students. Also below are methods that would be of value to high achievers as well. For further considerations, use one or more of these methods together and bear in mind the students' levels of achievement. The methods I have selected are as follows:

One to one instruction
small group instruction
Peer tutoring
Teacher/student conferences
Independent studies
Adapted text and materials
Verbal prompts
Verbal cues
Verbal praises
Repetition of skills
Student facilitators
Additional time for completion
Research skills
Peer evaluation
Oral presentations
Owl
Questioning the Author
Direct reading module
Hands on activities
Technology resources
Parent/teacher conferences
Group discussions
Literature response

Audiovisual aids
Individualized instruction

Classroom Activities:

I will make a list of classroom activities to use in this unit. I will also give detailed instructions on how to use certain lessons.

- *Hold a discussion group
- *Write a book report
- *Make a diorama
- *Do a comparison of dances
- *Create pantomimes
- *Design a crossword puzzle
- *Make a fact quilt/tiles
- *Create a flipbook
- *Do charades of vocabulary words
- *Make a poster
- *Make a photograph album
- *makes a time line
- *keep a journal about a topic or theme
- *prepare and conduct a survey
- *make a travel brochure
- *design a mask
- *create a database
- *hold a debate
- *create a dance
- *create a musical instrument

Design a crossword puzzle:

Like adults, children of all ages enjoy doing crossword puzzles, but few have had a chance to make one. Composing crossword puzzles can be a challenge even though it requires only words and short phrases. Let's begin the work.

Objectives: Students will create a crossword puzzle and an answer key on an African American dance. To do this, they will:

- *Choose 10 answers related to the particular subject.

*Generate several clues and choose the best clue for each answer.

*Enter the 10 answers on the crossword grid.

*Place approximately 5 answers going down and 5 across.

*Connect one letter of each answer to a previous answer.

*Spell each answer correctly.

Motivators: Bring in some crossword puzzles. Ask students if they have ever done a crossword puzzle. Explain that people enjoy crossword puzzles because they are fun, entertaining, and challenging. Share a crossword puzzle that you have worked or have students help you work a crossword puzzle.

Key questions: What have we been studying about African American dance? If you could create your own crossword puzzle on anything you want, what would you pick? Since we have been studying African American dance, it will be fun to make crossword puzzles to inform and entertain your friends. What are some of the dances that we have studied? These will be the answers in our puzzle. Now we need to choose one of the answers and think of a clue for it. What clue can we give for _____?

Group Composing: Explain that a crossword puzzle has two parts: the answer key and the blank grid and clues that people use to solve the puzzle. Tell students that they need to create the answer key first.

Answer Key: Allow the class to decide which answers to include in the puzzle. Put a check or star by the ten answers they want to include. Explain that they have to spell answers correctly or no one will be able to work the crossword puzzle. State that there are three rules for placing words on a crossword grid.

Rule 1: You are allowed to put only one letter in each square.

Rule 2: Each answer must share a common letter with another answer.

Rule 3: Use all capital or all lower case letters.

Point out that it is best to start with the long answers because they can be difficult to fit on the crossword grid. Have students choose a long answer from the list.

Place the longest answer (large intestine) in the middle of a grid you have prepared. Model spelling the answer without writing it to see if the answer will fit. If there is room, print the letters in the blanks. Be sure to model writing in all capital or all lower case letters.

Remind students to put approximately the same number of answers horizontally as vertically. Explain that they need to connect as many answers as possible. This step sounds easy, but it isn't. Arranging the answers on the grid so that they overlap will be the most difficult part of this lesson. Help them with this step.

(Optional Step) Color in all the squares that are empty.

Next have students number all the answers. Start at the top and work left to right. Number the first answer #1. Put the number in the first square of the answer in the top left corner. Continue numbering all answers in that row no matter if they go down or across. Occasionally one number may serve two answers (i.e. a horizontal and a vertical answer).

Puzzle Grid and Clues: Tell students that now they can create the crossword puzzle grid. Lay another grid on top of the answer key. Trace the boxes with letters in them. Next trace over the numbers. Explain that the numbers will tell the puzzle readers where an answer begins for each clue. Tell them not to copy the answers because they want their friends to solve their puzzles. Explain that next, they need to add clues to the crossword puzzle. Have students select a clue for each answer. Guide them to select clues that are correct but don't give the answer away. List all the down clues in order under the heading "down." Then list all the across clues under the heading "Across." State that the crossword puzzle needs a title. Add a title such as the "Juba." Under the title write "by Mr./Mrs./Miss/Ms _____'s Class." Tell students they now get to create their own crossword puzzle. Give each student or team of students two sheets of special graph paper. They will need at least a 16 by 16 grid for ten medium-sized words. Regular graph paper can be used by older students but is usually too small for elementary students' needs. Remind them to read their clues and answers to see if they match.

Designing Travel Brochures:

Objectives: Learning basic desktop publishing skills, Inserting borders, Formatting text in different fonts, and Inserting pictures from a CD-ROM or the Internet.

Program needed:

Use a desktop publishing program such as Microsoft Publisher or Adobe PageMaker. Apple Works would also work, but make sure and select the drawing format when the initial Apple Works screen appears. This lesson will take more than one class period and require students to possess intermediate computer skills.

Instructions:

Students should choose a particular country or city in which a particular dance was originated to make a travel brochure. Students need to gather facts about this city from the Internet or other sources.

Students will create a 2-sided travel brochure with three columns on each side. (You may want students to draw a quick sketch of their travel brochure with pencil and paper. Have students practice folding their rough drafts to make sure information is in the desired location.)

Students will then make text boxes and type information in them adhering to the three-column format.

Students will also add pictures from a CD-ROM or from the Internet in appropriate picture boxes.

Tell students that changing fonts, sizes and colors will enhance a travel brochure tremendously. Also, putting borders around text will give it more of a brochure appearance.

Spell check the brochure and then print.

Note: travel brochures are great to teach during a foreign language class or as a culminating project for a social studies unit. In addition, students could create a brochure advertising a choreographer, company studio, or an invention of a dance.

Dancing the Slaves

When Africans were brought to the New World, they were packed like sardines into the holds of slave ships and forced to endure voyages lasting anywhere from fifteen days to four months, depending on destination and weather at sea. When weather permitted, the slaves were brought up on deck once a day so that the hold could be cleaned of excrement and vomit. On deck, the slaves “exercised,” for slave-ship captains wanted them to look healthy so that they would bring high prices in the New World slave markets. This exercising was called “dancing the slaves.” (Thompson, 23). The slaves were compelled to dance, often prompted with whips. Sometimes, music was provided by a slave beating on a drum or the bottom of a pot, or strumming on the African stringed instrument that white observers variously called a banjo, a banjar, a bangelo, and a bonjour. At other times, a member of the crew would play a bagpipe or fiddle, and slaving captains were known to advertise for sailors who could play a musical instrument for just this purpose. Slave dancing was practiced as early as 1690s.

How sad it must have made these enslaved people to be forced to dance on the decks of the slave ships. In their native cultures, dancing was a joyous expression of freedom. Music and dance had been an integral part of life back in Africa, associated with religion, with farming, with births and deaths, and weddings and other ceremonies. It had been a way to bring the members of a community together. Now, they were being forced to dance to survive, and to make the slave traders rich.

But dance would not only help the slaves to survive in a physical sense in the New World. It would also help them to stay alive in spirit, and that was something that slave masters could not take away from them. And because enslaved Africans brought their dances to the New World, over time their dances, like their music, would have a profound effect on the cultures there. (Thompson, 47).

Slave dancing that had nothing to do with religion also flourished in the West Indies. Some of the most popular dances were competitive dances called Juba or Jumba, based on an African step dance

called Giouba, a kind of elaborate jig. (Thompson, 63). In these, dancers would challenge one another with their skill and agility, and the one who could out dance and outlast the rest was the winner.

There were also dances that were specific to certain holidays or occasions. In Trinidad, at Christmastime, the slaves were usually given a three-day holiday, and they danced throughout the three days. Many of the dances were ring dances, in which the slaves danced in a circle, always counterclockwise, and without lifting their feet from the ground. The wedding dances, which were not all that common because only a few favored slaves who worked in their masters' houses had elaborate weddings, which were paid for by their masters. More common were funeral dances. The enslaved Africans carried on in the New World the worship of a god of cemeteries, called Gede. At the funeral, Gede did a special dance called the Banda. The dance symbolized death and life, as well as the celebration of the future and the past in the present moment. Then there were "crop-over" dances to celebrate the harvest. Sometimes the masters joined in these dances, because they, too, were happy that the crop was in. (Hazard-Gordon, 19).

There were a great variety of dance that could be accomplished without lifting the feet - shuffles, weight shifts, bending and shifting the knees, rotation, bending and shifting the body. There were far more opportunities to dance on the plantations than in church. It was not unusual for a group of slaves to go into the woods at night so they could dance without worrying about being observed. These dances were often the same dances that the slaves remembered having done in Africa. At other times, the slaves simply danced in the slave quarters. They usually had Sunday off, and so Saturday night was a time of celebration, with much singing and dancing. The favored musical instrument to accompany dancing was the drum, which the slaves made from hollowed-out logs or nails kegs, with animal skins stretched tightly over one end. Much like the drums in Africa, these drums were used not only to make music but also to communicate. For example, in 1739, on a plantation called Stono about twenty miles west of Charleston, South Carolina, a group of slaves led by a slave named Cato killed two guards in a warehouse and stole arms and ammunition. Then they set off for Florida, beating two drums and calling to slaves on the plantations they passed to join them. More slaves did join them, and they managed to fight off or kill every white who tried to stop them. But after the Stono insurrectionists marched to the sound of drums, the Slave Codes of 1740 was passed. Large drums were banned entirely.

Slaves were forced to turn to other instruments to provide rhythm for their dancing and singing. They stretched cowhides over cheese boxes and made tambourines. They took cow bones and dried them in the sun, and used them as a percussion instrument. For example, in one dance, called "Pattin'Juba," the side of the thigh and the hip was patted and clapped in a syncopated rhythm.

Back in Africa, some tribes had used their heels to tap out rhythm on sun-baked clay. In the New World, slaves did the same thing on the floors of their huts or the boards of their dancing floors. It was at harvest festivals that the Cakewalk developed. By some accounts, it was once called the "chalk-line walk," and it was a dance done by couples along a straight path, balancing buckets of water on their heads. Later on, it came to be called the Cakewalk because the winning couple would be presented with a cake, often something as simple as a corn cake. It was an elaborate and festive dance, and couples

dressed in their best clothes. Dances that involved balancing buckets or glasses of water on the head were common among the slaves, and related directly to the African custom of carrying bundles and buckets and baskets on the head.

Traditional African animal dances also found expression in the slave dances of North America. Of great influence on North American slave culture were the blacks who arrived in Louisiana from Santo Domingo after that island was taken over by former slaves and renamed Haiti in 1804. As a result of the Haitian Revolution, Haitian slaves gained their freedom, never to lose it again. Haitian blacks remained isolated from the white-ruled countries that surrounded them and thus were able to retain more of African culture than were blacks in white-dominated countries. A number of free blacks from Santo Domingo also sought refuge in Louisiana, for they identified more with the French than with the slave revolutionaries. Together, these blacks, slave and free, had a great effect on the culture of Louisiana, particularly of New Orleans, where the majority settled. They brought with them Vaudou (Voodoo) as well as the weekly dances in Congo Square that many whites come to watch. By the early 1800s, blacks were not the only ones to engage in the African-influenced dances.

From the very beginning, the dances of the slaves interested and intrigued their white masters, and before long slave dances were being used as a form of entertainment for whites. When the master had a party, he would summon the most talented dancers from the slave quarters and have them dance for his guests. At other times, he might take his guests to the slave quarters on a Saturday night to watch the slaves dancing for themselves. Black musicians frequently played at white dances, and even though they usually played "white" instruments like the fiddle, their special rhythms influenced the way the whites danced. In Virginia, around the time of the American Revolution, it was a popular custom for whites at their cotillions (formal ballroom dances) to close the evening with a slave-style "Negro jig." Thus, it was very early that African dances began to influence white dancing and that black dance began to be a part of American culture. From "jazz dancing" to "break dancing," modern dance is heavily influenced by African dance forms.

Even before the American Revolutionary War, white entertainers were doing slave-style dances onstage. One of the first was an actor named Tea who appeared with The American Company in Philadelphia in 1767 and performed a "Negro Dance." To appear more authentic, he blackened his face with burnt cork. Other actors copied him, and their performances planted the seeds of the minstrel shows that would become popular in the late 1820s.

Minstrel shows depended almost entirely on black dance, music, and dialect. They were also performed almost exclusively by white entertainers. Minstrelsy is said to have started with Thomas Rice, a white actor who happened to see an old black man singing and dancing in the stable behind the theater where Rice was performing. The old man had a crooked look to him: One shoulder was higher than the other was, and one leg twisted at the knee. So, when he danced a jig, it was with a limp that Rice thought was funny. He learned that the old man called himself Daddy Jim Crow-Daddy, because that's what old black men were frequently called, and Jim Crow after his master. Soon afterward, Thomas Rice had changed his name to Daddy "Jim Crow" Rice and had built an entire blackface act

around an imitation of the old man's crooked jig. The act caused a sensation, and within months there were dozens of white entertainers doing similar acts. By the 1840s, there were entire shows in which actors in blackface-performed skits, songs, and dances.

The format of the shows was based on black dance, especially circle and hand-clapping dances. In a minstrel show, the entertainers sat in chairs arranged in a semicircle on the stage. In minstrelsy, the master of ceremonies was called the interlocutor. Those who sang the melody for the dance were the chorus, clapping their hands or shaking tambourines. Every man in the chorus had the chance to do a solo bit of some sort, just as blacks had in many African dance ceremonies. It was the minstrel shows that established some of the stereotypes of blacks that exist even today-the grinning, shuffling, dumb Negro, the citified dandy, and the watermelon eater.

By the early 1840s, William Henry Lane had so distinguished himself that he was appearing frequently on New York stages. He called himself Master Juba, after the competitive dancing style he favored, and which derived from the African step dance called Giouba. By most accounts, the dancing he did was not distinctly African in origin but rather a combination of an Irish jig and African steps like the shuffle and the slide, together with upper body movements that were also African in origin (in European dances like the jig, the upper body does not move). Juba did what talented black dancers had always done, and that was to include in the dances he did a style that was his own-with syncopation, improvisation, and an emphasis on rhythm and percussion (rather than melody) that would later be the basis of tap dancing. Juba had won the title "King of All Dancers." It was due to Juba that the dancing in minstrel shows retained more integrity as a black art form than the songs and skits.

Minstrelsy as a true imitation of black culture grew very stale very quickly. Part of the reason was that it was difficult for the white entertainers to get fresh material because they had to hang around blacks more than they wished to in order to hear their jokes, pick up their speech patterns, and even listen to their songs. But it was fairly easy to observe authentic Negro dancing, not only on the plantations but also in public places like saloons and dance halls. Of course, there never was anything very authentically black about minstrelsy, at least not as long as blacks were barred from it.

By the time slavery was abolished and blacks were allowed into minstrel shows, true minstrelsy was past its heyday. Its rules were so set that even blacks had to put on blackface to be judged real minstrels! But the entrance of blacks onto the minstrelsy stage probably accounted more than anything else for its continued survival into the twentieth century, when it became part of vaudeville, medicine shows, fairs, carnivals, tent shows, and fraternity shows even into the 1950s. One of the most successful black minstrel companies was the Georgia Minstrels, organized by Charles Hicks in 1865. (Hazard-Gordon, 114). Others in the boom day of black minstrelsy were the Hicks and Sawyer Minstrels, Richards' and Pringle's Minstrels, and the McCabe and Young Minstrels.

Few blacks successful in minstrelsy made their fame only as dancers. Most were of necessity comedians and musicians as well. However, it didn't take black minstrels long to realize that whites were keenly interested in black dancing, and most of the black minstrel shows featured more dancing than

the white minstrel shows did. Bert Williams and George Walker are remembered best as musical-comedy team, but in dance history they are credited with helping black dance to really flourish at the close of the nineteenth century. The two decided since white men were so successful pretending to be “coons,” which was an unflattering racial nickname, they ought to be able to do well by billing themselves as the “Two Real Coons.” They were intrigued with the idea of real African dancing, and they studied the authentic dances intently. They also experienced the reaction of the crowds to the rhythmic excitement of African dancing. They realized that exotic African entertainment could be very popular.

In the meantime, however, they made fashionable a dance that was based on African dancing. It was the Cakewalk; the dance that slaves had first done on the plantations a couple of centuries earlier. Williams and Walker helped make it socially acceptable. It was during the time that they first performed the Cakewalk, which the audiences loved. They decided to capitalize on their success and to get some publicity, by challenging William K. Vanderbilt, the most prominent millionaire in New York at that time, to a Cakewalk contest. William and Walker got the publicity they sought. Pretty soon, a Cakewalk craze swept theaters and dance halls across the nation. The Cakewalk became the first black-based fad dance to become popular in both America and Europe. (Hansen, 58).

In black dance history, and in black cultural history generally, Williams and Walker made their biggest contributions during their early careers. It was then that they challenged racial stereotypes and made an effort to bring some fresh material and approaches to their performances. They introduced African characters such as kings and powerful warriors into their shows and were able to demonstrate to white audiences that not all blacks could be stereotyped as stock minstrel characters. And most significantly in the history of black dance, they helped pave the way for the first appearance of the black movement in ballroom dancing by making the Cakewalk fashionable.

Tap Dance

Tap Dancing, a form of creating rhythm and movement with the composition of your body takes many shapes and styles. You can tap dance to any style of music or make your own music by using your feet. In many cases, tap shoes are very similar to drums. They are instruments of rhythm. Because every style of music has rhythm, people tap dance to everything from rap, rock, jazz, blues, to even classical music.

Jazz tap, also known as rhythm tap, is a style of tap that began in the early 1920's. In jazz tap, the dancers are like a musician. The dancer uses his or her feet as an instrument in which are used to create musical patterns known as rhythm. In show tap, also known as Broadway tap, it is very important how the dancer steps are choreographed and how they are arranged to be presented. But in jazz tap, the focus is simply creating music; in fact, many jazz tap dancers can dance without the use of outside music, while creating a rhythm with their fancy footwork.

Jazz music was the main key to creating jazz tap. The two art forms shared many traits like a jazz musician and a tap dancer that have the ability to invent things as he or she goes along. Tap is very similar to jazz music in that it was invented in America, but a large majority of its origins can simply be traced back to Africa. When Africans were forced to come to America as slaves, they brought ideas about rhythm and dance from their native lands. They were denied their freedom, but they kept hope by remembering how important their culture was. (Johnson, 36). As African Americans came into contact with other ethnic groups in the United States, especially the Irish, their ideas and cultures mingled. Tap dance was born from this meeting of different cultures many years ago. Many African dances also use rhythm to make the drumbeat clearer to the listeners. The dancers do not wear tap shoes, but they still find a way to make their rhythms heard. Basket rattles are the favorite method. African dancers weave long leaves into tiny baskets. (Johnson, 42). They fill these baskets with pebbles and then tie them to their legs or wrists. Every time they step, the rattles shake. The Igbo sometimes cover their dance costumes with a long dried grass called raffia. Every movement makes a “shushush” sound. Instead of basket rattles, tap dancers wear tap shoes. But the shoes act in a similar way. Tap shoes have an aluminum plate (called a tap) attached by screws to the heel and toe of their leather soles. Their sounds vary from one dancer to another depending upon the tightness of the screws and the brand of shoe. In this way they can be “tuned.” Tap shoes work like leg rattles because they make a sound every time the dancer’s shoe hit the floor. They also function like drums. A tapper can make patterns as complicated as those of a drummer’s. He can move in one rhythm and tap in a different one. This means that tap dancer, like African Dancers, and can create polyrhythm. Tap dancers can also make music to take the place of drummers. One of the closest connections between African dance and tap is improvisation. Improvisation means dancing spontaneously without following a set routine. In an African dance circle, dancers move into the middle one by one to dance alone. The rhythm of the drummers stays the same, but the dancer can use any movements he wants that fit the beat. In jazz tap, too a dancer learns how to make up a rhythm on the spot.

THE CHARLESTON

Music scholars have traced the Charleston back to Africa, where featured in the dances of the Ashanti people. In the 1940s, the dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham found Charleston steps done in Haiti. In the American South, it seems to be closest to a dance called the Jay-Bird. It is similar to the challenge dances, or Juba dances, of plantation days. It was first introduced in a black show called Liza, but it didn’t become really popular until James Weldon Johnson wrote the hit song “Charleston” for the Miller and Lyles musical *Runnin’ Wild* in 1923. This dance was fast. It was an exhibition dance that used the whole body in shimmying motions, included a fast kicking step, both forward and backward, and featured slapping the hands on the body, especially on the knees, while the dancers were in a knock-kneed position. This beating out of complex rhythms was something that most show-goers had never seen before, and the dance created a sensation. It wasn’t long before word of the new dance rage in the United States reached Europe, and more than one American black dancer went on to fame and fortune across the Atlantic because of the ability to dance the Charleston. One was Josephine Baker,

who took Paris by storm in 1924 with her scanty costume and wild Charleston renditions. Another was Bricktop, born Ada Beatrice Queen Victoria Louise Virginia Smith, who became a celebrated Paris nightclub operator because she taught the British Duke of Windsor to do the Charleston.

The Black Bottom a dance that was introduced in the 1924 show *Dinah*, became almost as popular as the Charleston. It, too, was based on black challenge dancing, and featured the slapping of the backside while hopping forward and backward. The version in *Dinah* came by way of Nashville, Tennessee. Later on, in the 1930s, there were new dance crazes, such as the Big Apple, the Suzy-Q, and Truckin'. But none of them ever topped the Charleston in popularity.

Elida Webb claimed to have invented the Charleston. As a ladies' room attendant, she could make two thousand dollars for the summer, which gives some indication of the comparative living standards for choreographers and domestic workers in those days.

Had there been greater opportunities for black choreographers during her era, Elida Webb might have made a more important mark on the history of American dance. Her choreography of the Charleston in *Runnin' Wild* was the only major contribution she made to the art. Her work at the Cotton Club and other exclusive Harlem clubs was steady, but it did not allow for a great deal of creativity.

Black Modern Dance

Black modern dance became well established during the 1940s. Modern dance is different from ballet in several respects, the most important being that it does not look to European models for its movement techniques, but rather to the expressive needs of the individual. Modern dance is expressionistic, and so any position necessary to create the desired effect is acceptable. Modern dance uses the ground as a source of stability and strength. Modern dancers perform in their bare feet to better feel the energy from the floor. In modern dance the torso moves in a more supple manner. People like Ted Shawn, Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan were the real trailblazers, followed by Martha Graham and Lester Horton and other who established various schools of modern dance. At first, however, blacks had to form their own modern dance companies, and in some ways this was good both for them and for modern dance.

The earliest known black modern dance group was formed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1940. A dancer named Bernice Brown performed modern dances with an integrated group she had developed at the Modern Dance Center. Two of her best-known pieces were *Negro lament* and *Statement for Peace*; however, the group did not become well known outside the Midwest.

The Twist

In the area of popular dance, there had not been a real, single-dance craze in the United States since the jitterbug of the 1940s. Although popular dancing had returned with rock 'n' roll, and there were a number of rock 'n' roll dances that nearly all teenagers did, few stood out from the others, and fewer appealed to adults. In 1960, however, a single-dance craze swept the nation.

Hank Ballard had composed and recorded a song called "The Twist" in the middle 1950s, but it was not a huge sensation. A few years later, an overweight young black man named Chubby Checker recorded it and performed it on Clay Cole's TV show, and suddenly America went crazy over the new dance.

Chubby Checker's real name was Ernest Evans, and he was born in 1941 in Philadelphia. During high school, he held a part-time job as a chicken plucker at a poultry shop, and he would entertain the customers with songs and jokes. The manager of the shop thought he was so talented that he introduced him to Kal Mann of Parkway Records, and when he was just eighteen, Ernest was signed to a contract with Parkway. It was then that he took the professional name Chubby, because he admired the singer Fats Domino and because that was the nickname his friends call him.

Kal Mann of Parkway records saw the teenagers on *American Bandstand* dancing to Hank Ballard's record, "The Twist," twisting their bodies by moving their arms from left to right quickly, partners dancing face to face but never touching. "The Twist" was the number one popular song in 1960 and again in 1961, the only song in history to hit number one on the national charts two different times. Adults picked up the dance, too, and started looking around for someone to give them Twist lessons.

Chubby Checker made several more Twist records. He also introduced other new dances, like the Hucklebuck, the Pony, and the Fly. A raft of new dances followed the Twist. They included the Monkey, the Bug, the Frug, the Hitchhike, the Watusi, the jerk, the Hully-Gully, the Boogaloo. Some of these also could be traced back to the old Shimmy (the Frug) or the old Heebie-Jeebies (the Bug and the Monkey). Others were simply pantomimes with a little extra body movement and footwork. None was as successful as the Twist, which, like all the most popular dances, is still done on occasion.

There were so few opportunities for black choreographers in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s that Buddy Bradley had to go to Europe to get the recognition he deserved. But before he left the United States, he coached and created dance routines for a great number of white stars, including Fred Astaire, Lucille Ball, Mae West, and Eleanor Powell.

Clarence "Buddy" Bradley was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in the early teens of this century. He was dancing by the age of eight, concentrating on the Charleston and other African-derived dances. His father died when he was very young, and when he was fourteen, his mother also died. After her death, Bradley moved to Utica, New York, to live with a brother-in-law. Within three months he was in New York City, determined to make a living by dancing.

He went often to the Hoofers club, where tap dancers tried to outdo each other and also learned the latest steps. Bradley learned quickly and soon landed a job as a chorus boy at Connie's Inn. Chorus work bored him, but it was a living, and he studied the work of dancing stars who were featured in the show at the club. In 1928, he met Billy Pierce, a white man who wanted to start a dance studio for white stars.

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was born in Richmond, Virginia. Robinson left Richmond when he was about twelve years old, but not before he had accomplished four things that would become hallmarks of his career. His first steady job was as a "pick" (short for pickaninny) in an 1892 minstrel show called *The South Before the War*. Later, he worked in vaudeville with a variety of partners, dancing and doing comedy routines. The longest-running partnership he enjoyed was with George Cooper, although at first he got little opportunity to dance and had to play the clown. Over time, Robinson got more opportunities to dance and started to receive equal billing with Cooper. Robinson took the bold step of going solo. He introduced the stair dance into his act in 1918. What distinguished Bill Robinson's stair dance was his showmanship. His stair dance, when perfected, involved a different rhythm for each step—each one reverberating with a different pitch—and the fact that he had a special set of portable steps enhanced his claim to originating the dance. He used to say that his feet did their best work when they were tired.

Not until 1928 did Bill Robinson get the chance to appear on Broadway. Robinson might use a little skating step to stop-time; or a Scoot step, a crossover tap which looked like a jig; hands on hips, tapping as he went, while one foot kicked up and over the other; or a double tap, one hand on hip, one arm extended, with eyes blinking, head shaking, and derby cocked; or a broken legged or old man's dance, one leg short and wobbling with the beat or an exit step.

Robinson went to Hollywood, where he became Shirley Temple's most famous co-star. He appeared with the white child star and danced with her in several movies. Seven-year-old Shirley Temple and fifty-six year old Bill Robinson grew very close.

Katherine Dunham is without question a giant of black concert dance. She put black dance "on the map," and it has been there ever since. She was born in 1909 in a suburb of Chicago, and raised in Joliet, Illinois. Dunham was an entertainer from an early age, putting on performances of singing and dancing at home and at church. She was fascinated with Native Americans and formed a secret club at school called the Eagle Eye Society, based on a symbol she had seen in a book about Native Americans. She was also president of the Girls' Athletic League and played center on the girls' basketball team. She took ballet lessons, and in early 1930, when she was barely twenty-one, she opened her own dance school with the backing of two white dancers whom she had met.

She called the company of dancers she formed from her students the Ballet Negre (Negro Ballet), and from the beginning she was determined to show through her company her belief that black people had a special dance style.

One day she attended a lecture given by a professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. The subject was the its and pieces of African culture that had survived in the New World after slavery, and these included dances. Dunham was excited to learn that popular dances in the United States, like the Lindy Hop and the Cakewalk and the Black Bottom, could be traced back to Africa. One had to go to a library and find some musty old book that hadn't been taken out in years to find the truth: that there had been great societies in Africa, with rich and powerful kings, with civilizations more advanced than those in Europe at the time, and with proud cultural traditions. Dunham found these books, and read about Africa, and became even more excited. She wanted to share her excitement with young people, so she opened two more schools. Both were failures.

She applied to the Rosenwald Fund in Chicago for a grant to study the dances of various cultures herself, and received the grant. In the summer of 1935, at the age of twenty-six, Katherine Dunham began an extended study trip to the West Indies.

Arthur Mitchell was born in 1935, the eldest of five children in a poor Harlem family. He attended neighborhood public elementary and junior high schools. Then, prompted by a junior-high-school counselor who had seen him dancing at a social function, he did a tap dance audition and gained admission to the public but exclusive High School of the Performing Arts, now a part of Fiorello La Guardia High School. He did an imitation of Fred Astaire, the great white movie dancer, because it was the only routine he knew.

At this specialized high school, which was the inspiration for the movie *Fame* and its television spin-off, students take courses in dance and music as well as in math, science, and geography. Mitchell took tap, modern dance, and ballet, but as time went on, he found ballet to be the greatest challenge and thus the style that he was most interested in.

On graduation from the High School of the Performing Arts in 1952, Mitchell had so distinguished himself in dance that he was offered two scholarships.

While studying ballet, Mitchell continued to dance in the modern style as well, appearing with Donald McKayle's company and with the New Dance Group. He also danced briefly in *House of Flowers*, the same production in which Geoffrey Holder and Carmen De Lavallade appeared.

Arthur Mitchell was the first black male principal dancer with the American Ballet Theater (Haskins, 139).

The idea for a black ballet company came to Mitchell on the day Dr. Martin Luther Kings, Jr., was assassinated, April 4, 1968. Mitchell was at the airport getting ready to fly to Brazil, and by the time he boarded the plane, King was dead. He recalls, "I sat there the whole time, thinking to myself, here I am running around the world doing all these things, why not do them at home? I believe in helping people the best way you can, my way is through my art."

Mitchell then turned to Karel Shook, a white ballet master and a former teacher of Mitchell's at the Katherine Dunham School of Dance. Together, they sought funding and a space for the school and company. Despite its name, the Dance Theater of Harlem began operations in a loft in Greenwich Village in February 1969.

Donald McKayle was born in New York City on July 6, 1930, and first became excited about modern dance after he saw a performance by Pearl Primus. After graduating from high school, he enrolled at the City College of the City University of New York, but he also followed in Primus' footsteps by winning a year's scholarship to the New Dance Group.

He performed in New Dance Group concerts and choreographed his first works when only eighteen-*Exodus*, *Saturday's Child*, and *Creole Afternoon*.

In the work, McKayle did not use children, or even particularly young-looking dancers, but somehow he captured the feelings and imaginations and fears of children in the piece.

As important as McKayle, indeed, if not more important to modern dance in general, and black modern dance in particular, is Alvin Ailey. Not only has he distinguished himself as an individual dancer/choreographer, he has also accomplished the rare feat of keeping a permanent company together almost continuously for some thirty years.

Ailey was born in January 1931, in Rogers, Texas, into grinding poverty. His parents separated when he was young, and Alvin was a lonely child who began to write poetry at an early age. As a teenager, he was active in sports. He also took tap and primitive dance lessons, but he did not take dancing seriously. On graduation from high school in 1948, he briefly enrolled at the University of California at Los Angeles before transferring to Los Angeles City College. His plan was to become a teacher.

With the help of a scholarship, he took composition and technique classes with Horton. He also worked in the stage crew and danced with the Lester Horton Dance Theatre. But in 1951, he decided that he needed a steady career and transferred to San Francisco State College to major in Romance languages so he could teach them.

Just a few months later, Lester Horton died. The company wished to remain together and decided to have a go at it. Ailey got the opportunity to choreograph for the company, and in 1954, his works *Mourning Mourning* and *According to St. Francis* were performed by the Horton company in Los Angeles.

In January 1960, The Alvin Ailey company premiered what has been called Ailey's masterwork, *Revelations*, at the 92nd Street Y. It was Ailey's interpretation of American spirituals, and the sets and costumes echoed Southern nineteenth-century life.

By means of his integrated company, Ailey has broken down many racial barriers and stereotypes about dancing and race. He has shown that white dancers can dance the blues, that Japanese dancers can execute jazz techniques, and that black dancers can dance a classic ballet such as *Swan Lake*.

Judith Jamison was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on May 10, 1944. She began dancing at the age of six at the Judimar School of Dance and made her stage debut at Town Hall in Philadelphia that same year. Her training was principally in ballet. She was an athlete in school, and on graduation from high school, she went on a physical education scholarship to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

She made her formal debut in 1959 as Myrtha in *Giselle*. In 1964, while she was still studying at the Philadelphia Dance Academy, she was discovered by the great choreographer Agnes de Mille (who had created the dances for the show *Oklahoma!* in 1943 and almost single-handedly changed the whole concept of musical-theater dancing). She also danced with The Alvin Ailey's Dance Company in New York. She toured Europe in Muenster, Germany. She can recall how that night the audience applauded for one solid hour.

Michael Jackson was a major force in the popularization of break dancing and dancing in general. His idol was Fred Astaire, a white-ballroom dancer who made a number of movies with Ginger Rogers in the 1930s and 1940s, and Jackson used a lot of ballroom moves as well as break dancing steps.

In 1974, when he was still with his brothers in the Jackson Five, the group had a hit record called "Dancin' Machine." In live performances, Michael, who was the star performer of the group, did the Robot when the group sang that song. Several years later, after he left the group and went out on his own, he started doing other dances when he performed, types of dances which by then were called Electric Boogie. When he performed the hit single "Billie Jean" from his 1982 hit album *Thriller*, he did the Moon Walk. In 1983, his video for "Beat It," another hit song from the *Thriller* album, was released. In this video he introduced a new step invented by choreographer Michael Peters called the Worm. It is an undulating, wavelike step done as you back up. In no time, half the kids in America were doing the Worm and the Moon Walk.

Content Standards

Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

1. All Students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.

3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.

6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communication.

Arts and Humanities

1. All students describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.

4. All students produce, perform or exhibit their work in the visual arts, music, dance or theater, and describe the meanings their work has for them.

Citizenship

8. All students demonstrate that they can work effectively with others.

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