

Tap Dance in America:
A Very Short History
by Constance Valis Hill

Glover and Dunn: A Contest of Beat and Feet

On the evening of the thirty-ninth annual Grammy Awards that was broadcast on national television on February 27, 1997, Colin Dunn and Savion Glover faced off in the fiercest tap dance challenge of their lives. Colin Dunn, the star of *Riverdance—The Musical*, was challenging Savion Glover, the choreographer and star of *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*, to a battle of the feet that was staged to showcase and celebrate the two hottest musicals on Broadway. But there was nothing festive about the challenge dance for these two stars. Not only was their reputation as dancers at stake but also the supremacy of the percussive dance forms that each show represented--Irish step dancing and African American jazz tap dancing.

Dunn went on first. Standing tall and straight, his back to the audience and hands placed neatly at the waist of his slim black pants, he spun around quickly on his introduction, and with the stamp of his high-heeled shoe drew himself up onto the balls of the feet and clicked out neat sets of triplets and cross-backs in place. The camera zoomed in on the dazzling speed and precision of Dunn's footwork, zoomed out on the handsome symmetry of his form, and quickly panned right to reveal the hulking presence of Glover—who stood crouched over, peering at Dunn's feet. Without an introduction, Glover slapped out a succession of flat-footed stomps that turned his black baggy pants, big baggy shirt, and mop of deadlocks into a stuttering spitfire of beats. Huinkering down into a deep knee bend, he repeated the slamming rhythms with the heels, toes, and insteps of his hard-soled tap shoes. Dunn heard the challenge. Taking his hands off his hips and turning around to face Glover, he delivered a pair of swooping scissor-kicks that sliced the air within inches of Glover face; and continued to shuffle with an air of calm, the fluid monotone of his cross-back steps bringing the volume of noise down to a whisper. Glover interrupted Dunn's meditation on the "ssssh" with short and jagged hee-haw steps that mocked Dunn's beautiful line and forced the conversation back to the sound, not look.

They traded steps, spitting out shards of rhythmic phrases and daring each other to pick up and one-up. Dunn's crisp heel-clicks were taken up by Glover with heel-and-toe clicks, which were turned by Dunn into airy flutters, which Glover then repeated from a crouched position. When they tired of trading politely, they proceeded to tap over each other's lines, interrupting each other wittily with biting sounds that made the audience scream, applaud, and stamp its feet. When Dunn broke his focus just for a moment to politely acknowledge the applause with a smile, Glover seized the moment and found his edge by perching on the tip of one toe and delivering a flick-kick with the dangling other that brushed within inches of Dunn's face. All movement came to a halt. And for one long moment, the dancers just stood there, flat-footed, glaring at each other. Though the clapping melted their stares, they slapped hands and turned away from each other and walked off the stage without smiling and never looking back.

An American Genre

This performance is a sublime example of the tap dance challenge, the general term for any competition, contest, breakdown, or showdown in which dancers compete before an audience of spectators or judges. Motivated by a dare, focussed by strict attention to one's opponent, and developed through the stealing and trading of steps, the tap challenge is the dynamic and rhythmically expressive "engine" that drives tap dancing-- our oldest of American vernacular dance forms. What is fascinating about the tap challenge that took place between Colin Dunn and Savion Glover at the 1997 Grammy Awards is that Glover's style of tap dance, which he calls "hitting"--an unusually percussive combination of jazz and hip-hop dance rhythms that utilizes all parts of the foot to drum the floor-- is radically different from Dunn's style of stepping, a highly musical and sleekly modern translation of traditional Irish step dancing. Yet both of these dance forms trace their origins and evolution to a percussive dance tradition that developed in America several hundred years ago.

Tap dance is an indigenous American dance genre that evolved over a period of some three hundred years. Initially a fusion of British and West African musical and step-dance traditions in America, tap emerged in the southern United States in the 1700s. The Irish jig (a musical and dance form) and West African *gioube* (sacred and secular stepping dances) mutated into the American jig and juba. These in turn became juxtaposed and fused into a form of dancing called "jigging" which, in the 1800s, was taken up by white and black minstrel-show dancers who developed tap into a popular nineteenth-century stage entertainment. Early styles of tapping utilized hard-soled shoes, clogs, or hobnailed boots. It was not until the early decades of the twentieth century that metal plates (or taps) appeared on shoes of dancers on the Broadway musical stage. It was around that time that jazz tap dance developed as a musical form parallel to jazz music, sharing rhythmic motifs, polyrhythm, multiple meters, elements of swing, and structured improvisation. In the late twentieth century, tap dance evolved into a concertized performance on the musical and concert hall stage. Its absorption of Latin American and Afro-Caribbean rhythms in the forties has furthered its rhythmic complexity. In the eighties and nineties, tap's absorption of hip-hop rhythms has attracted a fierce and multi-ethnic new breed of male and female dancers who continue to challenge and evolve the dance form, making tap the most cutting-edge dance expression in America today.

Unlike ballet with its codification of formal technique, tap dance developed from people listening to and watching each other dance in the street, dance hall, or social club where steps were shared, stolen and reinvented. "Technique" is transmitted visually, aurally, and corporeally, in a rhythmic exchange between dancers and musicians. Mimicry is necessary for the mastery of form. The dynamic and synergistic process of copying the other to invent something new is most important to tap's development and has perpetuated its key features, such as the tap challenge. Fiercely competitive, the tap challenge sets the stage for a "performed" battle that engages dancers in a dialog of rhythm, motion, and witty repartee, while inviting the audience to respond with a whisper of kudos or roar of stomps. The oral and written histories of tap dance are replete with challenge dances, from jigging competitions on the plantation that were staged by white masters for their

slaves, and challenge dances in the walk-around finale of the minstrel show, to showdowns in the street, displays of one-upsmanship in the social club, and juried buck-and wing-contests on the vaudeville stage. There are contemporary examples of the tap challenge as well, such as black fraternity step dance competitions which are fierce as gang wars, and Irish step dance competitions, in which dancers focus more civilly on displaying technical virtuosity. But no matter the contest, all challenge dances necessitate the ability to look, listen, copy, creatively modify, and further perfect whatever has come before. As they said at the Hooper's Club in Harlem in the 1930s, where tap dancers gathered to practice their steps and compete: "Thou Shalt Not Copy Anyone's Steps—Exactly!"

1600s and 1700s: Jig and *Gioube*

Opportunities for whites and blacks to watch each other dance may have begun as early as the 1500's when enslaved Africans shipped to the West Indies, during the infamous "middle passage" across the Atlantic Ocean, were brought up on deck after meals and forced to "exercise"-- to dance for an hour or two to the accompaniment of bag-pipes, harps, and fiddles (Emery 1988: 6-9). In the absence of traditional drums, slaves danced to the music of upturned buckets and tubs. The rattle and restriction of chains may have been the first subtle changes in African dance as it evolved toward becoming an African-American style of dance. Sailors who witnessed these events were among the first of white observers who later would serve as social arbiters, onlookers, and participants at plantation slave dances urban slave balls. Upon arriving in North America and the West Indies, Africans too were exposed to such European court dances like the quadrille and cotillion, which they adopted by keeping the figures and patterns, but retaining their African rhythms (Szwed 1988).

In the 1650s, during the Thirteen War between England and Spain (1641-54) and under the command of Oliver Cromwell, an estimated 40,000 Celtic Irish soldiers were shipped to Spain, France, Poland, and Italy. After deporting the men, Cromwell succeeded in deporting the widows, deserted wives, and destitute families of soldiers left behind. Thereafter, thousands of Irish men, women and children found themselves hijacked, deported, exiled, low-interest loaned or sold into the new English tobacco islands of the Caribbean. Within a few years, substantial proportions of mostly Atlantic Coast Africans were thrown on the so-called coffin ships and transported to the Caribbean. In an environment that was dominated by the English sugar plantation owner, Irish indentured servants and West African slaves worked and slaved together. "For an entire century, these two people are left out in the fields to hybridize and miscegenize and grow something entirely new," writes Irish historian Leni Sloan. "Ibo men playing bodhrans and fiddles and Kerry men learning to play jubi drums, set dances becoming syncopated to African rhythms, Saturday night ceili dances turning into full-blown voodoo rituals" (Sloan 1982:52). The cultural exchange between first-generation enslaved Africans and indentured Irishmen would continue through the late 1600s on plantations, and in urban centers during the transition from white indentured servitude to African slave labor.

It is believed that on the island of Montserrat in the Lesser Antilles of the Caribbean, the Africans'

first European language was Gaelic Irish, and that retentions and reinterpretations of Irish forms were most pronounced in music, song, and dance (Messenger 1975: 298). And in Joseph Williams's book, *Whence the Black Irish of Jamaica*, the sheer number of Irish surnames belonging to former African slaves--Collins, Kennedy, McCormick, O'Hare--supports the contention that enslaved and indentured blacks and whites lived and danced together. They also rebelled together. The 1741 St. Patrick's Day Rebellion in New York was led by John Cory, an Irish dancing master, and Caesar, a Free African, who together burned down the symbols of the British rule, the Governor's mansion and main armory. Corey and Caesar died together in the brutal suppression that followed.

Jigging and Juba

As Africans were transplanted to America, African religious circle dance rituals which had been of central importance to their life and culture, were adapted and transformed (Stuckey 1987). The African American Juba, for example, derived from the African *djouba* or *gioube*, moved in a counterclockwise circle and was distinguished by the rhythmic shuffling of feet, clapping hands, and "patting" the body, as if it were a large drum. With the passage of the Slave Laws in the 1740s prohibiting the beating of drums for the fear of slave uprisings, there developed creative substitutes for drumming, such as bone-clapping, jawboning, hand-clapping, and percussive footwork. There were also retentions by the indentured Irish, as well as parallel retentions between the Irish and enslaved Africans, of certain music, dance and storytelling traditions. Both peoples took pride in skills like dancing while balancing a glass of beer or water on their heads, and stepping to intricate rhythmic patterns while singing or liting these same rhythms. Some contend that the cakewalk, a strutting and prancing dance originated by plantation slaves to imitate and satirize the manners of their white masters, borrows from the Irish tradition of dancing competitively for a cake. And that Africans may have transformed the Irish custom of jumping the broomstick into their own unofficial wedding ceremony at a time when slaves were denied Christian rites.

The oral traditions and expressive cultures of the West Africans and Irish that converged and collided in America can best be heard. The flowing 6/8 meter of the Irish Jig that was played on the fiddle or fife (a small flute), can be distinguished from the polyrhythm of West African drumming, with its propulsive or swinging quality. The fusion of these in America produced black and fiddlers who "ragged" or syncopated jig tunes. Similarly, the African-American style of dance that angled and relaxed the torso, centered movement in the hips, and favored flat-footed gliding, dragging, and shuffling steps, melded with the Irish-American style of dance that stiffened the torso, minimalized hip motion, and emphasized dexterous footwork that favored bounding, hopping, and shuffling (Kealiinohomoku 1976). By 1800, "jigging" became the general term for this new American percussive hybrid that was recognized as a "black" style of dancing in which the body was bent at the waist and movement was restricted from the waist down; jumping, springing, and winging air steps made it possible for the air-born dancer, upon taking off or landing, to produce a rapid and rhythmic shuffling in the feet.

Jigging competitions featuring buck-and-wing dances, shuffling ring dances, and breakdowns

abounded on the slave plantations where dancing was encouraged and often enforced. As James W. Smith, an ex-slave born in Texas around 1850, remembers: "Master. . .had a little platform built for the jiggling contests. Colored folk comes from all around to see who could jig the best. . .on our place was the jigginit fellow ever was. Everyone round tries to git somebody to best him. He could. . . make his feet go like triphammers and sound like the snaredrum. He could whirl round and such, all the movement from his hips down" (Stearns 1968, 37). Any dance in the so-called Negro style was called a breakdown, and it was always a favorite with the white riverboat men. Ohio flatboatmen indulged in the Virginia breakdown. And in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) Mark Twain wrote that "keelboatmen got out an old fiddle and one played and another patted juba and the rest turned themselves loose on a regular old-fashioned keelboat breakdown."

Clog and Hornpipe

The Lancashire Clog was another percussive form that contributed to the mix during this period. Danced in wooden-sole shoes, the Clog came to America from the Lancashire region of England in the 1840s and in the next forty years had rapidly evolved into such new styles as the Hornpipe, Pedestal, Trick, Statue, and Waltz Clog. The Clog also melded with forms of jiggling to produce a variety of percussive styles ranging from ballroom dances with articulate footwork and formal figures to fast-stomping competitive solos that were performed by men on the frontier. None of these percussive forms, however, had syncopated rhythm; in other words, they all lacked swinging rhythms that would later come in such percussive forms as the Buck and Wing and Essence dances that would lead to the Soft Shoe (Stearns 1968, 49-50).

The Minstrel Show

Though African-Americans and European-Americans borrowed and copied from each other in developing a solo vernacular style of dancing, there was a stronger draw of African-American folk material by white performers. By the 1750's, "Ethiopian delineators," many of them English and Irish actors, arrived in America. John Durang's 1789 "Hornpipe," a clog dance that mixed ballet steps with African-American shuffle-and-wings, was performed in blackface make-up (Moore 1976, 42-51). By 1810, the singing-dancing "Negro Boy" was established as a dancehall character by blackface impersonators who performed jigs and clogs to popular songs. In 1829, the Irishman Thomas Dartmouth Rice created "Jump Jim Crow," a black version of the Irish jig that appropriated a Negro work song and dance, and became a phenomenal success. After Rice, Irishmen George Churty and Dan Emmett organized the Virginia Mnstrels, a troupe of blackface performers, thus consolidating Irish American and Afro-American song and dance styles on the minstrel stage (Winter 1978). By 1840, the minstrel show, a blackface act of songs, fast-talking repartee in Negro dialects and shuffle-and-wing tap dancing became the most popular form of entertainment in America. From the minstrel show, the tap act inherited the walk-around finale, with dances that included competitive sections in a performance that combined songs, jokes, and specialty dances.

It is largely because of William Henry Lane (c.1825-52) that tap dancing in the minstrel period was able to retain its African-American integrity. Born a free man, Lane grew up in the Five Points district of lower Manhattan, whose thoroughfares were lined with brothels and saloons that were

largely occupied by free blacks and indigent Irish immigrants. Learning to dance from an “Uncle” Jim Lowe, an African-American jig and reel dancer of exceptional skill, Lane was unsurpassed in grace and technique and was popular for imitating the steps of famous minstrel dancers of the day, and then execute his own specialty steps which no one could copy. In 1844, after beating the reigning Irish-American minstrel John Diamond (1823-1857) in a series of challenge dances, Lane was hailed “King of All Dancers” and proclaimed “Master Juba.” He was the first African American dancer to tour with the all-white minstrel troupe, Pell’s Ethiopian Serenaders, and to perform without blackface makeup for the Queen of England (Winter 1948). Lane is considered the single most influential performer in nineteenth century dance. His grafting of African rhythms and a loose body styling onto the exacting techniques of jig and clog forged a new rhythmic blend of percussive dance that was considered the earliest form of American tap dance (Sommer 1988, 58).

When black performers finally gained access to the minstrel stage after the Civil War, the tap vocabulary was infused with a variety of new steps, rhythms, and choreographic structures from African-American social dance forms. Tap dances like “The Essence of Old Virginia,” originally a rapid and pigeon-toed dance performed on the minstrel stage, was slowed down and popularized in the 1870s by the African-American minstrel Billy Kersands. It would later be refined, by the Irish-American minstrel George Primrose, into a graceful Soft Shoe, or Song-and-Dance, to become the most elegant style of tap dancing on the musical stage.

The Reconstruction

The Reconstruction era was also the time when technical perfection in tap dance was valued and awarded, and when the obsession with precision, lightness and speed—long been valued in traditional Irish Jig dancing—became the ruling standard of judgement in publicly contested challenge dances. The *New York Clipper* (April 11, 1868) reported that in one such challenge, “Charles M. Clarke, a professional jig dancer . . . had a contest on the evening of the 3rd in Metropolitan Hall . . . for a silver cup valued as \$12. Clarke did a straight jig with eighty-two steps and won the cup. Edwards broke down after doing sixty-five steps.” In the 1880s, big touring shows such as *Sam T. Jack’s Creole Company* and *South Before the War* brought new styles of black vernacular stepping to audiences across America. While black vaudeville troupes like Black Patti’s Troubadours featured cakewalk and buck-and-wing specialists in lavish stage productions, traveling medicine shows, carnivals and Jig Top circuses featured chorus lines and comics dancing an early style of jazz-infused tap that combined shuffles, wings, drags and slides with flat-footed buck and eccentric dancing.

Turn of the Century

At the turn of the twentieth century, when the syncopated and duple-metered rhythms of ragtime were introduced on the musical stage, tap dance underwent its most significant transformation. The music of Ragtime that was created from a new and unprecedented borrowing and blending of European melodic and harmonic complexities and African-derived syncopation evolved the earliest form of jazz. So too, tap dance, in its absorption of early ragtime and jazz rhythms, evolved into

jazz tap dance. The all-black Broadway musical, *Clorindy, or the Origins of the Cakewalk* (1898) presents a sterling example of this turn-of-the-century jazz and tap fusion. Will Marion Cook's music for *Clorindy* was marked by the distinctly syncopated rhythm of ragtime, while Paul Laurence Dunbar's lyrics were performed in a syncopated Negro dialect ("Dam de lan', let the white folks rule it! I'se a-looking fo' mah pullet") and Ernest Hogan's choreography featured offbeat cocks of the head, shuffling pigeon-wings, and sliding buzzard lopes. *In Dahomey* (1902), another turn-of-the-century black musical comedy, saw Bert Williams playing the role of the low-shuffling Fool, and his partner George Walker in the role of the high-strutting Dandy. Wearing blackface makeup and shoes that extended his already-large feet, Williams shuffled along in a hopeless way, interspersing grotesque and offbeat slides between choruses, while Walker as the "spic-and-span Negro" turned his cocky strut into a high-stepping cakewalk that he varied dozens of times. In "Cakewalk Jig," Williams and Walker danced buck-and-wings, bantam twists, and rubber-legging cakewalks to a "ragged" up jig, thus introducing a black vernacular dance style to Broadway that was an eccentric blend of the shuffle, strut-turned cakewalk, and grind, or mooche.

At the turn of the century, it was imperative for tap dancers to compete in buck-and-wing and cakewalk contests in order to earn the status of professional and gain entry onto the Broadway musical stage. Arriving in New York in 1900, Bill Robinson challenged Harry Swinton, the Irish-American dancing star of *In Old Kentucky*, to a buck-and-wing contest, and won. With a gold medal and the valuable publicity that was bestowed upon winning, Robinson was targeted as the new man to challenge. While Robinson fused ragtime syncopation with a light-footed and vertical style of jigging that favored the elegant soft-shoe of the famed Irish-American dancer George Primrose, Rastus Brown was known for a flat-footed style called Buck dancing. Among the oldest styles of percussive stepping dating back to the plantation days, Buck dancing worked the whole foot close to the ground with shuffling, slipping, and sliding step, with movement mostly from the hips down. Brown developed the Buck style into a paddle-and-roll style which was perfected in his famous "Buck Dancer's Lament," which consisted of six bars of the time step plus a two-bar, improvised stop-time break (Stearns 1968, 176).

1920s and 1930s: Broadway Jazz

In the teens of the twentieth century, Americans went "dance mad" with the foxtrot, a syncopated ragtime dance that bounced couples along the floor with hops, kicks, and capers. Dozens of black-based "animal" dances, such as the Turkey Trot, Monkey Glide, Chicken Scratch, Bunny Hug, and Bull Frog Hop, were danced to ragtime rhythms. While dance bands in downtown New York Clubs were "jassing up" (adding speed and syncopation) such dances as the Grisly Bear and Kangaroo Dip for their white clientele, uptown Harlem audiences were rocking to *Darktown Follies*. J. Leubrie Hill's all-black musical revue of 1913 expressed an inexorable rhythm by its dancers who "stepped about, and clapped their hands, and grew mad with their bodies" (Van Vechten 1974, 38). The show introduced the "Texas Tommy," prototype of the Lindy Hop, as well as new styles of tap dancing. One was Eddie Rector's smooth style of "stage dancing, in which every move made a beautiful picture. Another was the acrobatic and high-flying style of Toots Davis, whose "Over the Top" and "Through the Trenches" were named for wartime combat maneuvers. The dance finale,

"At the Ball," was a spiraling, stomping circle dance whose rhythms, wrote Carl Van Vechten, "dominated me so completely that for days afterwards, I subconsciously adapted whatever I was doing to its demands" (Van Vechten 1974, 38). Florenz Ziegfeld bought the entire show for his *Follies of 1914*, thus helping to transplant black vernacular dance and jazz rhythms onto the Broadway stage.

By the Jazz Age twenties, both black and white dancers had discovered the rhythmic power of jazz. In this decade in which jazz music became a popular nighttime entertainment, jazz tap dance—which was distinguished by its intricate rhythmic motifs, polyrhythm, multiple meters, and elements of—emerged as the most rhythmically complex form of jazz dancing. Setting itself apart from all earlier forms of tap dance, jazz tap dance matched its speed to that of jazz music, and often doubled it. Here was an extremely rapid yet subtle form of drum dancing that demanded the dancer's center to be lifted, the weight balanced between the balls and heels of both feet. While the dancer's alignment was upright and vertical, there was a marked angularity in the line of the body that allowed for the swift downward drive of weight.

It is generally believed that *Shuffle Along* (1921), the all-black musical with music by Eubie Blake and lyrics by Noble Sissle, introduced the most exciting form of jazz tap dancing ever been seen on the Broadway stage. Blake's musical score provided a foot-stomping orgy of giddy rhythms that spanned traditional and early jazz styles. While the jazz dancing in *Shuffle Along* was never specifically referred to as "tap dance," the styles of percussive stepping certainly belonging to jazz tap dance were often described and singled out as the most exciting aspects of the dancing. In "Jimtown's Fisticuffs," the boxing match performed by Flournoy Miller and Aubry Lyles, as two would-be mayors, saw these rivals swinging and knocking each other down, jumping over each other's backs, and finishing each round with buck-and-wing and time steps. The title song, "Shuffle Along," a song-and-dance number featuring the Jimtown Pedestrians, had the Traffic Cop played by Charlie Davis performing a high-speed buck-and-wing dance that staggered the audience. Elsewhere in the musical, Tommy Woods did a slow-motion acrobatic dance that began with time-step variations that included flips landing on the beat of the music; and Ulysses "Slow Kid" Thompson, a well-known tap dancer, performed an eccentric soft shoe with rubberlegging legomania. The most obvious reference to tap dance in *Shuffle Along* is the "shuffle" of the title, a rapid and rhythmic brushing step that is the most basic step in tap dancing. The step also refers to the minstrel stereotype of the old and shuffling plantation slave who, accused of being lazy and venal, drags and scrapes his feet along he ground. While the book in *Shuffle Along* purveyed the old caricature of the black- shuffling Fool, the musical part of the show embodied a new image of the black dancer as a rhythmically propulsive source of energy. Tap dance was thus resurrected from its nineteenth-century minstrel origins to a modern twentieth-century art form. After *Shuffle Along*, musical comedy on Broadway in the twenties took on a new rhythmic life as chorus girls began learning to dance to new rhythms.

While Broadway chorus lines in the twenties performed simple steps in square rhythms and complicated formations by such choreographers as Ned Wayburn, the most elite of white Broadway

stars worked with the African-American choreographer Clarence "Buddy" Bradley. Born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Bradley moved to New York in the twenties, where he learned to tap dance at the Hooper's Club and performed as a chorus dancer at Connie's Inn. After re-choreographing the *Greenich Village Follies* in 1928, he worked at the Billy Pierce Dance Studio off-Broadway, where he created dance routines for such white Broadway stars as Gilda Grey, Jack Donahue, Ruby Keeler, Adele Astaire, Ann Pennington. On Broadway in the twenties, musical comedy dancing, whose simple walking steps were reserved for ingenues, was the lowest common denominator in show dancing. Uptown, African-American tap dancers were inventing intricate steps with complex rhythms. Bradley's formula for creating dance routines for white dancers was to simplify rhythms in the feet, while sculpting the body with shapes from black vernacular dances. Even though he simplified rhythms, he never sacrificed the syncopated accents of jazz, and he used the accents of jazz improvisations to shape new rhythmic patterns in the body (Hill 1992).

Bill Robinson and John Bubbles

The rhythmic revolution that began with *Shuffle Along* (1921) continued on Broadway with *Strut Miss Lizzie* (1922), *Liza* (1922), and *Runnin' Wild* (1923), in which a new tap-dancing version of the Charleston was performed, while the chorus beat out the time with hand-clapping and foot-patting (the beating out of complex rhythms had never before been seen on a New York stage). It was not until Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds of 1928* that jazz tap dancing began to be distinguished as the most rhythmically complex "cream" of jazz dancing. *Blackbirds* starred Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, a veteran performer in vaudeville and the most beloved dancer in the black community who as the age of fifty was "discovered" by Broadway audiences and pronounced "King of Tap Dancers."

Born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1878, Robinson had earned nickels and dimes by dancing and scat-singing in the street. He had begun his career performing as a member of a "pickaninny" chorus, and by the twenties became the headliner on both the Keith and the Orpheum circuits; and New York's prestigious Palace Theatre. In *Blackbirds*, Robinson performed his famous "Stair Dance," which he introduced in vaudeville about 1918. Dancing up and down a flight of stairs in his split-soled clog shoes (the wooden half-sole, attached from the toe to the ball of the foot, was left loose), each step was tuned to a different pitch and used a different rhythm. As he danced to clean four- and eight-bar phrases followed by a two-bar break, Robinson's taps were delicate, articulate, and intelligible. Whether interweaving buck or time steps with whimsical skating steps or little crossover steps danced on the balls of the feet, the dancing was upright and rhythmically swinging. The light and exacting footwork is said to have brought tap dance "up on its toes" from an earlier, earthier, more flat-footed shuffling style. Langston Hughes, describing these tap rhythms as "human percussion," believed that no dancer had ever developed the art of tap dancing to a more delicate perfection than Robinson, who could create "little running trills of rippling softness or terrific syncopated rolls of mounting sound, rollicking little nuances of tap-tap-toe, or staccato runs like a series of gun-shots" (Hughes 1957, 49). Reviewing *Blackbirds of 1928*, Mary Austin observed in *The Nation* that the postures of Robinson's lithe body, and the motions of his slender cane punctuated his rhythmic patter and restored for his audience "a primal freshness of rhythmic coordination" that was fundamental of art" (Johnson 1930, 214). Broadway had not only

discovered Robinson, but had become newly enamored of a strikingly modern rhythm dance that interpreted Negro folk rhythms, transforming them into a sleekly modern black expression. "A Bojangles performance is excellent vaudeville," wrote Alain Locke, "But listen with closed eyes, and it becomes an almost symphonic composition of sounds. What the eye sees is the tawdry American convention; what the ear hears is the priceless African heritage" (Locke 1936: 135).

The 1920's also saw the rise of John Sublett Bubbles, who is credited with inventing "rhythm tap," a fuller and more dimensional rhythmic concept that utilized the dropping of the heels as accents. Born in Louisville in 1902, Bubbles at the age of ten teamed with the six-year old Ford Lee "Buck" Washington in an act billed as "Buck and Bubbles." Bubbles sang and danced and Buck played accompaniments, standing at the piano. After winning a series of amateur night shows, they began touring in musical engagements. At the age of eighteen Bubbles' voice began to change and instead of giving up show business he focussed on dancing. After smarting from the embarrassment of being laughed out of the Hooper's Club as a novice, Bubbles developed his technique and returned to the Club to win everyone over with a new style of tapping laced with Over-the-Tops and triple back slides. By 1922, Buck and Bubbles reached the pinnacle in vaudeville circuit known as T.O.B.A., their singing-dancing-comedy act headlined the white vaudeville circuit from coast to coast. Buck' stop-time piano, which was played in the laziest manner imaginable, contrasted with Bubble's witty explosion of taps in counterpoint. They appeared in *Broadway Frolics of 1922*, Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds of 1930*, and sensationalized *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1931*. Bubbles' rhythm tapping revolutionized dancing. Before him, dancers tapped up on their toes, capitalized on flash steps, and danced to neat two-to-a-bar phrases. Bubbles loaded the bar, dropped his heels, and hit unusual accents and syncopations, opening up the door of modern jazz percussion.

While most white professional dancers learned tap dance in the studio in the twenties and thirties, black dancers usually developed on their own, on the street, or in the dance hall where dancing was hotly contested as a basketball game. And it was at the Hoofers Club in Harlem-- an old pool hall that was next to and down the stairs from the Lafayette Theatre, where rookie and veteran tap dancers assembled to share with, steal from, and challenge each other. Dancers who frequented the Hoofers Club and perfected their technique included Bill Robinson, John Bubbles, Honi Coles, Eddie Rector, Dewey Washington, Raymond Winfield, Roland Holder, Harold Mablin, "Slappy" Wallace, Warren Berry, and Baby Laurence.

1930s and 1940s: Tap on Film

In the thirties and forties, jazz tap dancing continued to develop in direct relationship to jazz music. Swing-style jazz of the thirties emphasized rhythmic dynamics with relatively equal weight given to the four beats of the bar (hence the term "four-beat jazz), solo improvisation, and a forward propulsion imparted to each note by an instrumentalist through the manipulation of attack, timbre, vibrato, and intonation. Tap dancers were often featured performing in front of swing bands in dance halls like Harlem's Savoy Ballroom. The swinging four/four bounce of bands like Count Basie and Duke Ellington proved ideal for hoofers, while intimate nightclubs such as the Cotton Club featured excellent tap and specialty dancers and tap chorus lines like the Cotton Club Boys.

It was also in the thirties and forties that tap dance was immortalized in such Hollywood film musicals as *Dixiana* (1930), starring Bill Robinson; *Forty-Second Street* (1933), starring Ruby Keeler; *The Little Colonel* (1935), starring Robinson and Shirley Temple; *Swing Time* (1936), starring Fred Astaire; *Atlantic City* (1944), featuring Buck and Bubbles; *Lady Be Good*, featuring the Berry Brothers, *Stormy Weather* (1943), featuring Bill Robinson and the Nicholas Brothers; and *The Time, the Place and the Girl* (1946), featuring the Condos Brothers. For the most part, because of continued segregation and different budgets, black dancers were denied access to the white film industry. As a result, a distinction in tap styles began to develop. In general, black dance artists such as John Bubbles continued the tradition of rhythm tap on stage and screen, with its flights of percussive improvisation; while white artists like Gene Kelly evolved a balletic, Broadway style of tap dancing in film and Broadway musicals in which jazz rhythms were less important than the integration of dance into the narrative structure of the musical. As tap became the favored form of American theatrical dance, new styles emerged:

The Eccentric style was exemplified by the attention-getting routines of Jigsaw Jackson, who circled and tapped while keeping his face screwed to the floor; Clarence "Dancing" Dotson, who tapped and scratched in swinging counterpoint; and Alberta Whitman, who executed high-kicking legomania as a male impersonator. The Russian style, pioneered by Ida Forsythe in the teens by performing Russian kazotsky kicks, was made popular by Dewey Weinglass and Ulysses "Slow Kid" Thompson. The Acrobatic style exemplified by Willie Covan and the Four Covans, Three Little Words and the Four Step Brothers, who specialized in flips, somersaults, cartwheels, and splits. The Flash Act dancing of the Berry Brothers was brought to a peak by combining tap with high-stylized acrobatics and precision-timed stunts. Black Comedy Dance teams such as Slap and Happy, Stump and Stumpy, Chuck and Chuckles, and Cook and Brown infused tap dancing with jokes, knockabout acrobatics, grassroots characterizations and rambunctious translations of vernacular dance in a physically robust style (Hill and Sommer 1992).

The style of Class Act dancing perfected the art of tap dancing. From the first decades of the century, the elegant-mannered song and dance teams of "Johnson and Cole" and "Greenlee and Drayton," traveled across the stage to make a beautiful picture of each motion. Soloists included Maxie McCree, Aaron Palmer and Jack Wiggins. Eddie Rector's "stage dancing" dovetailed one step into another in a seamless flow of sound and movement. "Pete, Peaches and Duke" brought unison work to a peak. By the 1940s, it was the dance team of Coles and Atkins, by combining high-speed rhythm tapping with the elegant Soft Shoe dancing that brought class act dancing to a peak.

Charles "Honi" Coles (1911-1992) learned to tap dance on the streets of Philadelphia, where dancers challenged each other in time step "cutting" contests. He made his debut at the Lafayette Theatre in 1931 as one of the Three Millers, a group that performed over-the-tops, barrel turns, and wings on six-foot-high pedestals. After discovering that his partners had hired another dancer to replace him, he retreated to Philadelphia, determined to perfect his technique, and returned in 1934,

confident and skilled in his ability to cram several steps into a bar of music. Performing at the Harlem Opera House and Apollo Theatre, he was reputed to have the fastest feet in show business. And at the Hooper's Club, he was hailed as one of the most graceful dancers ever seen. After performing with the Lucky Seven Trio (they tapped on large cubes that looked like dice), he toured with the big swing bands of Count Basie and Duke Ellington, melding high-speed tapping with an elegant yet close-to-the-floor style where the legs and the feet did most of the work. In 1940, as a soloist with Cab Calloway's orchestra, Coles met Charles "Cholly" Atkins, a jazz tap dancer who would later choreograph for the best rhythm-and-blues singing groups of the 1960s. Atkins was an expert wing dancer, while Coles' specialty was precision. They combined their talents by forming the class act of Coles & Atkins. Wearing handsomely tailored suits, they duo opened with a fast-paced song-and-tap number, then moved into a precision swing dance and soft-shoe, finishing with a tap challenge in which each showcased his specialty. Their classic soft-shoe, danced to "Taking a Chance on Love" played at an extremely slow tempo, was a nonchalant tossing off of smooth slides and gliding turns in crystal-cut precision. The team of Coles & Atkins epitomized the class-act dancer (Hill 1997).

No dancer or dance team fit neatly into any one category. The Nicholas Brothers, Fayard (1914-) and Harold (1921-2000) created an exuberant style of American theatrical dance melding jazz rhythm with tap, acrobatics, ballet and black vernacular dance. Though they were most often remembered for the daredevil splits, slides and flips in their routines, their rhythmic brilliance, musicality, eloquent footwork and full-bodied expressiveness was unsurpassed. From a young age, at the Standard Theatre in Philadelphia where his parents conducted a pit orchestra band, Fayard was introduced to the best tap acts in black vaudeville. He then proceeded to teach young Harold basic tap steps. The "Nicholas Kids" made their New York debut at the Lafayette Theatre in 1931, and one year later opened at the uptown Cotton Club. Dancing with the orchestras of Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington, they evolved a classy and swinging style of musical performance in which comic quips and eccentric dance combined with precision-timed moves and virtuosic rhythm tapping. Alternating between the stage and screen throughout their career, they made their first film, the vitaphone short *Pie, Pie, Blackbird*, with Eubie Blake in 1932, and their first Hollywood movie, *Kid Millions*, for Samuel Goldwyn in 1934. On Broadway, in *Ziegfeld Follies of 1936* and *Babes in Arms* (1937), they worked with choreographer George Balanchine, and starred in the London West End production of Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds of 1936*, in which they worked with choreographer Buddy Bradley. At the Apollo, Harlem Opera House, Palace, and Paramount theatres, the brothers danced with the big bands of Jimmy Lunceford, Chick Webb, Count Basie, and Glen Miller. In Hollywood, on contract with 20th Century-Fox, they tapped on suitcases in *The Great American Broadcast* (1941), jumped off walls into back flips and splits in *Orchestra Wives* (1942), and jumped over each other down a flight of stairs, landing into a split on each step, in *Stormy Weather* (1943), these dazzling feats always delivered with a smooth effortlessness. The musicality of their performance and an insistent exploration of rhythm within an elegant form are the distinctive features of their style (Hill 2000).

In the postwar forties, there was a radical transformation in American jazz dance, as the steady and

danceable rhythms of swing gave way to the dissonant harmonies and frenzied rhythmic shifts of late 1940s-50s bebop. Jazz tap rhythms, previously reserved for the feet, were absorbed into the body, and a new style of “modern jazz” dance--less polyrhythmic and performed without metal taps--became popular in Hollywood and on Broadway. Dancers like the Nicholas Brothers, Condos Brothers, Jimmy Slyde, and especially Baby Laurence Jackson, were able to endure the radical musical shifts that bebop instigated with a high speed, full-bodied, and improvisatory response to the music.

Born Laurence Donald Jackson in Baltimore, Maryland, Baby Laurence (1921-1974) was a boy soprano singing with McKinney’s Cotton Pickers when the bandleader Don Redman discovered him and brought him on a tour of the Loew’s circuit. On his first trip to New York, he visited the Hooper’s Club, saw the tap dancing of Honi Coles, Raymond Winfield, and Harold Mablin, and decided he wanted to be a tap dancer. Dickie Wells, who retired from the group Wells, Mordecai and Taylor, encouraged his dancing and nicknamed him “Baby.” He continued to frequent the Hooper’s club, absorbing ideas and picking up steps from Eddie Rector, Pete Nugent, Toots Davis, Jack Wiggins, and Teddy Hale. By the 1940s, as a soloist, who became his chief dancing rival. Through the forties, he danced with the big bands of Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Woody Herman, and in the fifties made the transition by dancing in small Harlem nightclubs. Listening to such musicians as Charlie Parker, Art Tatum, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell and Max Roach, Laurence duplicated in his feet what these musicians played, and thereby developed a way of improvising solo lines and variations as much like a hornman as a percussionist. More a drummer than a dancer, he did little with the top half of his torso, while his legs and feet were speed and thunder, a succession of explosions, machine-gun rattles, and jarring thumps.” (Balliet 1976). “In the consistency and fluidity of his beat, the bending melodic lines of his phrasing, and his overall instrumentalized conception, Baby is a jazz musician, wrote Nat Hentoff in the liner note for Baby Laurence/Dance Master, a 1959 recording of Laurence’s rhythmic virtuosity that demonstrates the inextricable tie between jazz music and dance.

1950s: Tap in Decline

By the 1950s, tap was in a sharp decline, due to a number of causes, among them the demise of vaudeville and the variety act; the devaluing of tap dance on film; the shift toward ballet and modern dance on the Broadway stage; the imposition of a federal tax on dance floor that closed ballrooms and eclipsed the big bands; and the advent of the jazz combo and the desire of musicians to play in a more intimate and concertized format. “Tap didn't die,” says Howard "Sandman" Sims. "It was just neglected." The neglect was so thorough that this indigenous American dance form was almost lost, except for television reruns of Hollywood musicals. Through the early sixties, performance venues for jazz tap dancers had reached their lowest ebb in America, and many dancers found themselves out of jobs. Charles “Honi” Coles, in what he called “the lull,” when there was no call for dancers, took a job as the production stage manager in the Apollo theatre. Other hoofers took jobs as bellhops, elevator men, bartenders, and carpenters. Television had come into almost every American home by this time but the regular weekly variety shows had become the more infrequent “television special.” Except for those specials, with an occasional performance by

Ray Bolger or John Bubbles, little or no tap dance was to be seen.

1960s and 1970s: A Slow Awakening

The one event that revived tap dancing took place on July 6, 1963, when Marshall Stearns, at the Newport Jazz Festival, presented Honi Coles, Chuck Green, Charles “Cooky” Cook, Ernest “Brownie” Brown, Pete Nugent, Cholly Atkins, and Baby Laurence in a show entitled Old Time Hoofers. These “seven virtuoso tap dancers of the old-fashioned pounding school of hoofing who drew their strength from the floor reminded an enthusiastic audience at the Newport Jazz Festival of what this much neglected American ethnic art for of exciting rhythm has to offer,” wrote Leticia Jay in *Dance Magazine*. This old guard of black jazz tap dancers from the thirties and forties began to come back strong, eager to show that the tradition of rhythm dancing had not lost its fire. The Bell Telephone Hour’s “The Song and Dance Man,” broadcast on NBC-TV (January 16, 1966), presented a mini-musical history of tap dance in America and saw the Nicholas Brothers and Donald O’Connor demonstrating a tap challenge. The performance was less a challenge dance and more a brilliant demonstration of signature Nicholas jazz tap combinations, which O’Connor was able to absorb and perform as a third member of the team.

Beginning on April 7, 1969, Leticia Jay presented her *Tap Happenings* at the Bert Wheeler Theatre at the Hotel Dixie, on West 43rd Street, off Times Square in New York. And there, for several successive Monday evenings, such out-of-work and underemployed hoofers as Lon Chaney, Honi Coles, Harold Cromer, Bert Gibson, the Hillman Brothers, Raymond Kaalund, Baby Laurence, Ray Malone, Sandman Sims, Jimmy Slyde, Tony White, Rhythm Red, Derby Wilson, and Chuck Green participated in “jam sessions” of traditional tap dancing. *Tap Happenings* later reopened as *The Hoofers* at the Mercury Theatre off-Broadway, where it played for two months and became the toast of the dance world. After the new production of *The Hoofers* and the 1970 Broadway revival of the 1925 musical, *No, No Nanette* (choreographed by the seventy-five-year old Busby Berkeley and starring the sixty-year-old Ruby Keeler), there developed a kind of nostalgic interest in tap dance and all New York dancers wanted to learn it, giving the veteran hoofers the chance to pass on what they knew to a new generation of dancers.

By the mid-1970s, young dancers, many of them white women, began to seek out elder tap masters to teach them. Tap dance, which had previously been ignored as art and dismissed as popular entertainment, now made one of the biggest shifts of its long history and moved to the concert stage. As tap historian Sally Sommers describes: “The African American aesthetic fit the postmodern dance taste: it was a minimalist art that fused musician and dancer; it celebrated pedestrian movement and improvisation; its art seemed casual and democratic; and tap could be performed in any venue, from the street to the stage” (Sommer 1992). Enthusiastic critical and public response placed tap firmly within the larger context of dance as art, fueling the flames of its renaissance.

The 1970s produced video documentaries *Jazz Hooper: The Legendary Baby Laurence*, *Great Feats of Feet*, and *No Maps on my Taps*. One of the best moments in the decade was the last three

days in 1979 was the Brooklyn Academy of Music's *Steps in Time: A Tap Dance Festival*, in which veteran tap dancers were joined by a few of their present-day heirs, took the stage to display their collective prowess. The four-hour program included an hour-long musical section by Dizzy Gillespie and his band, performances by members of the Copasetis, and the Nicholas Brothers, who closed the show with their own dazzling blend of ballet, jazz, and acrobatic dancing.

1980s: The Renaissance

In the eighties, there was a renaissance of interest in tap dancing that began to grow and spread. "It's satisfying to know that tap didn't die," remarked James "Buster" Brown in George Nirenberg's film *No Maps on My Taps* (1980), which documented the hoofers who helped keep tap alive through its lean years. Michael Blackwood's documentary film *Tapdancin'* (1980) followed the performances of veteran dancers such as the Nicholas Brothers who built their routines to irresistible climaxes meant to arouse high responses from the audience. 1981 saw the Broadway opening of *Sophisticated Ladies*, a musical homage to Duke Ellington that starred Gregory Hines. In 1982, the new tap musical, *Tappin' Uptown* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, starring Honi Coles. With the proliferation of tap festivals across the country and films such as *White Nights* (1985), *The Cotton Club* (1984), and *Tap* (1989), and the Broadway productions of *The Tap Dance Kid* (198?) and *Black and Blue* (1989), everyone proclaimed that tap was back. On television, the PBS production of *Tap Dance in America*, hosted by Gregory Hines, featuring tap masters and young virtuosos like Savion Glover, bridged the gap between tap and mainstream entertainment.

Since his Broadway debut at the age of nine as the title character in *The Tap Dance Kid*, Savion Glover has been considered the artistic grandson of the most revered figures in jazz tap dance-- Jimmy Slyde, James Buster Brown, Honi Coles, Arthur Duncan, Chuck Green, Harold Nicholas, Lon Chaney, Bunny Briggs-- and heir to the generation of dancers led by Gregory Hines and his brother, Maurice. As a child, and then as a teenager, Glover took his place beside them in such Broadway productions as *Black and Blue* and *Jelly's Last Jam*, and in the 1988 film, *Tap!* in which he played opposite Gregory Hines and Sammy Davis, Jr. On television, Glover appeared in the PBS Dance in America special, *Tap Dance in America* with Hines and Tommy Tune, and then became a regular on *Sesame Street* as the tap-dancing cowboy. Trained as a drummer, Glover thinks of his tap shoe as a drum--the inside toe of the metal tap is the hi-hat, the outside toe of the tap is the snare, the inside ball of the foot is the top tom-tom, the outside rim of the is the cymbals, his left heel is the bass drum, and the right heel the floor tom-tom-tom. He regards himself as a hooper who, unlike a classic tap dancer, uses the whole foot to elicit music, including the inside and outside, the arch and the ball, rather than just the heel and the toe. "We as hoofers are like musicians, more into rhythms," says Glover. "It's not about sensationalism. It's no arms or anything like that. Everything is just natural" (Glover 2000, 10-11). In 1991, when Glover took on his first tap choreography project commissioned by Jeremy Alliger's Dance Umbrella in Boston, it was not to create a number to classical jazz tunes like "A Train," "Cute," or "Perdido"; instead, he used a number from Quincy Jones' "Back on the Block," from his *Birdland* album. "It's nothing like you've ever seen before," said Glover about the work, "I had people playing basketball, leaping, running. It's a mixture of things, but it's mostly tap" (Glover 2000, 11). Utilizing seventeen

dancers all under the age of sixteen, Glover found new sounds by recycling old steps, and letting younger people make up new rhythms, thereby paving a new direction in tap for the younger generation.

In 1986, La Mama presented *Sole Sisters* an all woman, multi-generational tap dance show directed by Constance Valis Hill that brought together high-heeled steppers and low-heeled hoofers, the veteran grande dames of tap and younger prima tapers. The show, conceived by and starred Jane Goldberg, included veterans Josephine McNamara, Miriam Ali-Greaves, Marion Coles, Harriet Browne and Frances Nealy, and younger dancers Brenda Bufalino, Sarah Safford and Dorothy Wasserman. *Sole Sisters* was not the only production to open the door for the recognition of female jazz tap dancers. On the West Coast Lynn Dally, who founded the Jazz Tap Ensemble in 1979, combined her extensive experience in modern dance with jazz tap to organize a group of dancers that insisted on performing and interacting with a live jazz ensemble. On the East Coast, singer, jazz and tap dancer Brenda Bufalino, formerly a partner of Honi Coles, founded the American Tap Orchestra, and set about experimenting with how to layer and orchestrate rhythmic groups of dancers on the concert stage. Both Dally and Bufalino were hailed not only as leaders in the renaissance of jazz tap dance but also in concertizing jazz tap, and infusing it with upper-body shapes of jazz dance and new spatial forms from modern dance.

Contemporary Tap: New Influences

The nineties saw the resurgence of percussive forms of percussive dance forms that are outgrowths of the tap dance's Afro-Irish cultural and musical, and rhythmic traditions. Stepping is a percussive dance form in which African-American youngsters in military lines run through routines in rapid-fire movements, slapping their hands on their hips, stomach and legs, crossing and re-crossing their arms to the hip-hop beat and gospel music. Often they chant praises to the Lord as they step, imbuing their performance with an air of spirituality. Stepping dated back to the early twentieth century, when black veterans of World War I who enrolled in colleges wanted to express their blackness through a communal art form of their own. Inspired by their military training, they brought to their dances a highly rigorous, drill-like component and combined it with elements from other black vernacular dances. Today's step dance or drill teams add hip-hop movements to their combinations. African-American stepping, like jazz tap, relies on improvisation, call and response, complex meters, propulsive rhythms, and percussive attack, stepping quickly took off in black fraternities, becoming an integral part of initiation, with students holding fierce contests to demonstrate their originality. Spike Lee's 1988 film *School Daze* brought Stepping to a wider audience (Gladstone NYT 2 June 2002).

Though Stepping would certainly not be confused with the style of step dancing performed by the Trinity Dance Company, which sprang from a school that won step-dancing competitions in Dublin, it shares elements of clean rhythmic precision, speed, and the keen sense of competition. Though the company stages its challenges in an air of competition dancing its movement is considered progressive Irish dance, and liberties, such as the semaphoring of arms movements and dazzling knee-to-toe action--have been taken with the original form of Irish step dance. Trinity is

not the only company to revive, transform and concertize the traditional Irish step dance forms. The most creative departure from tradition was achieved by dance and choreographer Sean Curran. A postmodern dancer and choreographer with a background in step dancing who also was a principal dancer with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane company, Curran's danceworks, such as *Curran Event* (2000) have co-opted related rhythmic forms, such as body percussion, to create patterns intricate enough to keep the eye alert and the pulse throbbing.

In the 1990s, there were two musicals which were sterling representations of the evolution of the Afro and Irish tap traditions: *Riverdance* and *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*. With *Riverdance*, which moved to Broadway in 1996, traditional Irish dancing was virtually transformed overnight, liberated, and seen around the world. Since the sixties, Ireland had enjoyed a renaissance of Irish traditional music brought to the world by the Chieftains U2, Van Morrison, Enya, and Sinead O'Connor. With *Riverdance*, dozens of talented Irish dancers but also dancers from Britain and America who were dazzling world champions and principal dancers who had been perfecting their craft from going to Irish dancing classes from virtual infancy, entering competitions and brought home medals and cups. The main Irish dance numbers in *Riverdance* were choreographed by Michael Flatley (who went on to create *Lord of the Dance*), who unabashedly mixed traditional Irish step dance and the sensuous flow of flamenco rhythms. Still, the pure essentials of Irish dancing—the frankness of the frontal presentation, calm neutrality of the torso, arms, and pelvis, footwork as keen as a flickering flame, the blithe verticality of the body—glorified a centuries-old Irish dance tradition.

Also in 1996, Savion Glover had the opportunity to mine the riches of jazz tap and ground its history in the heart of African American identity when he choreographed and starred in *Bring 'da Noise, Bring in 'dae Funk*. Subtitled “A Tap/Rap Discourse on the Staying Power of the Beat,” the show that was conceived and directed by George C. Wolfe, with lyrics by Reg E. Gaines, opened at the Public Theatre in New York and subsequently moved to Broadway to win Tony Award for best Choreography in a Musical. *Noise/Funk*, wrote New York Times critic Ben Brantley, was “not just the collective history of a race but the diverse and specific forms of expression that one tradition embraces” (Brantley 1995: C18). Critics commented that Glover's feet in the show spoke hip-hop, and that he was the first young tapper in his generation to yet again reawaken the art form. The show brought the history of rhythm in America up-to-date, and in the process, making tap dance cool again.

In the 1990s, tap dance has continued to thrive and evolve as a unique American percussive expression. When tap dance artists were asked what was new in the technology, technique, translation, or theatre of tap in the nineties, their responses ranged from amplification, concertization, layered rhythms, verbal embellishment, instrumentation, exotic rhythms, political raps, modernist shapes, newly explored space (Hill 1991, 2). Incorporating new technologies for amplifying sounds and embellishing rhythms, new generations of tap artists in the nineties are not only continuing tap's heritage but also forging new styles for the future.

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