

## ***Jazz Dance: There's No One Way to Do It***

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### **What is jazz dance?**

Jazz dance has its roots in Africa. Africans from many regions mostly from the west coast of the continent, were stolen, shipped as cargo and brought to the Americas as slaves over 400 years ago. These Africans came to America with differing languages, customs, ceremonies, folk lore, music and dance which emphasized different parts of the body. The social expressions and dances of these Africans were not the same across cultural groups and land masses.

In the United States, Africans with language and custom barriers were able to find some commonalities. Over time on the plantations, with drums forbidden, these commonalities were more easily adapted in the body through dance. The dance that sprung up from this context is called Vernacular Jazz Dance. Dance was part of the natural continuation of the culture and eventually, with the influence of the European cultures evolved into community expressions where people pursued encounters for pleasure, social contact and spiritual renewal.

After the Civil War in the United States, the dances from the plantations were reshaped in juke joints, honky-tonks and dance halls. Authentic jazz dance and jazz music developed synchronously from the late 1800s until the 1940s.

Today's session will explore and improvise dances from two well-known periods. Some dances became very popular and lasted longer than others. One such dance is the **Charleston** coming from the 1920s. YouTube videos of dancing from this era are of movie performances in black and white or colorized film. Representation of these dances has been passed down. Improvisation is embedded in the culture.

Here is an incomplete list of some moves of Vernacular Jazz Dance from the early 1900s. In these notes, sometimes I describe the movement and in other cases the movement is so well-known, the name is used. The music in the session for the Charleston is from Louie Armstrong and the Hot Five/Seven

#### Charleston variations

- touch
- kick front
- kick front and back
- circle kicks in front
- toes swivel, legs kick out to the sides
- kick front hold leg and reverse direction (similar to tour jete)
- circle knee behind

Truckin'

Shorty George

Snake hips

Suzie Q

Horse

Swivel feet same toe/heel, opposite toe/heel

Knees in-out

Shuffle

Turn and stop with hips forward or one hip out

### **African-American Jazz Roots Dance Videos**

Minns and James <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mK8s3-1A10c>  
Jazz Roots 2015 – Teachers Battle Outro <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpeUnWrteQM&t=54s>

**Swing Dance** of the 1930s and 1940s is a derivative of the Lindy Hop (Jitterbug) of the 1920s. Swing Dance is a partner dance which became slower and not as athletic as the Lindy Hop. In this session I will share the Bop, which is a derivative of Swing Dance. I did the Bop as a teenager in the 1950s and 1960s. Even though by this time the dance remained, the music was strongly affected by Rock and Roll, Rhythm and Blues and the Motown sound. Duke Ellington's Perdido is used in the session.

### Lindy Hop

Hellzapoppin' – dancing begins about 2:30 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzc7vY9VTnk>  
A Day at the Races – Lindy Hop scene begins 1:25 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egopcBsOPIU>  
Lindy Hop Level 1 – with Frankie Manning <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VqSDEN2A5w>  
Frankie Manning Tribute Video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m34eD21QzUw>  
Shorty George Snowden – Improvisation [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxZ\\_GFF2EIE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxZ_GFF2EIE)

### Swing Dance

Swing Dance 1940s [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdbvd\\_1y5nE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdbvd_1y5nE)  
Shorty's vs Whitey's [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01kl69NCH\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01kl69NCH_E)  
Bop Dance from the 1960s <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeEwbjD6IsQ>

Basic Swing/Bop Steps – Rock step, Polka step, Polka step

1 2 3 & 4 5 & 6

Variations Step touch, Step touch  
Step kick, Step kick

Swivel steps

Slow turn

Fast turn

Add moves from jazz roots

In the 1940s, as World War II took effect on the United States, men went off to war, big bands had difficulty staying together and dance halls suffered a lack of attendance, causing many to close. At the same time jazz music began to become more complex and difficult to dance to. This begins the evolution of jazz dance carried on by professional dancers. By blending the classical technique of ballet with the natural bodily expression of modern dance, jazz dance developed a sophisticated, artist quality. Unlike early jazz dance that was performed by talented entertainers without formal training, modern jazz dance was performed by professionals with ballet and modern dance technique. There were no places teaching jazz dance in the 1940s.

Several names emerge from this period who influenced the evolution of jazz dance: Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, Jack Cole, Matt Maddox, Michael Kidd, Jerome Robbins, Luigi, Gus Giordano and Bob Fosse. By the middle of the century, dance studios began to teach their techniques and styles of jazz. The PowerPoint shows some well-known, recognizable moves of these greats. Dance of this era became more popular through TV commercials, musical films and on performance stages.

Rather than try to teach professional dance moves, let's look at the commonalities of jazz dance through history and include it as an exploration of jazz improvisation. Here are some definitions of the

commonalities: (Note: These are European/American word explanations of what is naturally experienced by this culture)

Body

- Low, grounded stance
- Relaxed muscular feel
- Knees primarily bent
- Impulse for movement often begins in the pelvis
- Inclined torso
- Body isolation - accents in the shoulders, ribs, hips, head, arms and knees

Rhythm

- Swing quality
- Rhythmic relationship with the music,
- Syncopation - polyrhythms, polycentrism (movement emanating from more than one place at a time) and articulation of the torso

Social characteristics

- Circle
- Friendly competition
- Vocal encouragement
- Individuality within the group
- Improvisation and dynamic play
- Contrasting elements like a switch from one rhythm to another
- Aesthetic of cool-attitude

Additional quotes:

Six Definite Characteristics of African American Vernacular Dance - Rhythm, Improvisation, Control, Angularity, Asymmetry and Dynamism "Steppin' on the Blues" p.32

As the Congo proverb goes "dance with bended knees, lest you be taken for a corpse". (e.g., Dancing with a straight spine is synonymous with death.) "The bent knees and angulated bodies (of black dancers) ... were in striking contrast to the erect spines, straight legs, turned-out feet, and rounded arms of the European American dancing instructors" Steppin' on the Blues, page 49

Each subsequent decade of social events in the United States influenced dance we call Jazz. Selected events include 1950s – Rock and Roll, 1960s – Rhythm & Blues and Motown with choreographer Charlie "Cholly" Atkins who influenced pop singer's moves for generations to come, 1970s – Disco, 1980s – Break Dancing, 1990s and beyond – Street Dancing and Hip Hop.

The commonalities of Jazz Dance remain throughout the centuries, yet indeed,

***There's No One Way to Do It.***

**References:**

*Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches* edited by Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver, 2014  
*Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* by Marshall and Jean Stearns, 1968  
*Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* by Jacqui Malone, 1996