

Jazz Dance Entry – Grove Dictionary of Music  
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### Explanation

Jazz dance is a classic American art form which grew up alongside and in direct relationship with jazz music. Emerging primarily from the influence of the West African aesthetic in the Americas beginning with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, it became a physical expression of both the complexity and exuberance of American culture and history.

As with jazz music, jazz dance incorporates improvisation and reflects the power of community supporting the individual creative voice in a non-literal expression of storytelling and connection to the human experience. Its many manifestations include social dance, tap dance, theatrical dance, concert dance and film performance. These manifestations have produced a variety of styles called jazz dance that embrace, to various degrees, fundamental qualities associated with jazz expression.

### History

The early forms that gave rise to jazz dance are known as African-American vernacular dance. These dances retained the West African tradition of dance and music as conversational partners and the featuring of individual dancers. They included Ring Shouts, Juba and dances such as the Buzzard Lope and the Cakewalk. Cakewalk was one of the earlier dances that was performed to the syncopated rhythms of ragtime music and served as an incubator for inventive new steps in minstrel shows

and vaudeville.

The heart and soul of jazz dance crystallized between the 1920's and 1940's in the swing era. As jazz music exploded in popularity, a number of vernacular dance crazes emerged, the most significant being the Lindy. The essence of jazz dance is contained in these dances which made their way on to vaudeville stages across the country. They were performed by groups such as Whitey's Lindy Hoppers who evolved out of the Savoy Ballroom in New York City. Many of these dances were either introduced or popularized in Broadway shows. *Shuffle Along*, which opened on Broadway in 1921, was a successful all black musical and set a new standard for stage dancing and choreography. Tap dance emerged during this era with performers such as Bill Robinson appearing in venues from vaudeville to Broadway to film. Katherine Dunham contributed jazz choreography in films such as *Stormy Weather*. In the late 1940s, Russian born dancer Mura Dehn, known for filming and documenting these early dances, established the Academy of Jazz for training dancers in classic vernacular jazz dance forms.

The 1950's and 1960's were a major transitional era in jazz dance. Jazz as a formal and teachable style of dance was relatively new. Influenced by the swing era and the emerging popularity of jazz dance as a theatrical dance style, teachers and choreographers embraced the form from their own aesthetic perspective resulting in diverse approaches to the creation, performance and teaching of jazz dance. Popsy Bethel began his Authentic Jazz Dance Theatre maintaining roots to the vernacular

forms. Modern Jazz Dance began to be taught in dance studios primarily as a style of theatrical dance that was becoming popular on Broadway and in film through the works of choreographers such as Jack Cole and Jerome Robbins. Over time, Modern Jazz Dance frequently used a diversity of popular music styles. It significantly influenced theatre dance which was further developed by choreographers such as Bob Fosse. Concurrently, Broadway musicals such as *Black and Blue* and *Sophisticated Ladies* maintained the connection to jazz music for performance.

### Description

Within the complexity of the jazz dance genre today, there are core physical components identified as integral and traceable back to their West African roots. These components include a weighted release into gravity, rhythmic complexity, call and response, and attention to syncopation and musicality, all of which are fundamental to the concept of swing. Additional core qualities include improvisation, movement isolations, challenging physical coordination, explosive energetics, and a stylistic relationship to the vernacular roots.

The many styles of jazz dance that have emerged since its inception have been named in a variety of ways, including: vernacular, classic, afro, theatrical, concert, lyrical, modern, hip hop and music-based. Descriptions of these various styles vary depending upon the individual teacher or choreographer's point of view and approach. In general, the styles reflect an emphasis, to one degree or another, the various integral components. Many styles also incorporate other dance forms such as ballet and modern. Some of the important jazz dancers who have developed their own signature

teaching techniques include Pepsi Bethel, Matt Mattox, Frank Hatchett, Luigi, Lynn Simonson and Billy Siegenfeld. Jack Cole and Bob Fosse are previously mentioned Broadway and film choreographers who contributed their own unique style to the jazz dance lexicon. Dance companies that have committed to the jazz dance idiom in performance include Pepsi Bethel's Authentic Jazz Dance Company, Decidedly Jazz Danceworks, Jump Rhythm Jazz Project, Gus Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago, and the Danny Buraczeski Jazzdance Troupe. Other companies or dancers who are known for performing and choreographing to jazz music or working with a jazz influence include Donald McKayle, Talley Beatty, Dianne McIntrye and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago.

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