Lindy Hop and Jitterbug: The Development of American Swing Dance in the United Kingdom

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Introduction

The Lindy Hop is a swing era social dance developed in the late 1920s and 1930s, which embodies the rich history and culture of American jazz music and vernacular dance. Until the twentieth century, the United States inherited its dance forms from other countries. It was not until the emergence of swing dance, specifically the Lindy Hop, that America had its own folk dance born on its own soil. The Lindy Hop is an African American social dance created on the streets of Harlem, New York. It is a social, partnered jazz dance, which exhibits a fusion of European ballroom dance and African rhythmic dance. Lindy Hop is characterized by its jazz music, rhythmic feeling, athletic posture, and signature "breakaway" step, during which both the lead and the follow dancers may improvise independently.

The Lindy Hop grew in popularity during the 1930s and eventually became a global phenomenon, sparking the creation of new swing dance forms as early as the 1940s. Research specifically studies the development of Lindy Hop in the United Kingdom, where the Jive, a swing dance primarily seen in formal ballroom settings, was created. The common understanding among dancers and historians is that Lindy Hop spread to the United Kingdom through three claims. First, American swing dances were introduced to the United Kingdom before the GIs arrived in the country. Second, swing dance was introduced to the United Kingdom as “Jitterbug,” a derivative of Lindy Hop heavily influenced by European ballroom dance and less authentic than the original Lindy Hop. Third, the Jitterbug was quickly rejected by ballroom dancers in the United Kingdom, leading to the swift and effective alteration of the dance into what is now known as the Jive.

2. Jitterbug and Lindy Hop

The words “Jitterbug” and “Lindy Hop” are commonly used interchangeably to refer to the same dance. However, among historians, there is no consensus on the exact definitions of the terms. In the United Kingdom, the term “Jitterbug” was used almost exclusively when referring to American swing dance. This language is significant because it suggests that authentic Lindy Hop—that is, Lindy Hop as an African American social dance—was not effectively introduced to the UK. Rather, it appears that the Jitterbug in the UK was heavily influenced by European ballroom dances and was primarily danced by Caucasians. The main source of this argument comes from original Lindy Hop dancers, Al Minus, Frankie Manning, and Norma Miller, who all equated Jitterbug dancing to a more European, Caucasian form of Lindy Hop.5,6 Further, some reports described Jitterbug and Caucasian swing dancing as wilder and more uninhibited than authentic Lindy Hop—descriptions which match up with the descriptions of swing dancing in the United Kingdom.7 In addition, the sources of information about American Jitterbug, such as movies and music, often featured Caucasian rather than African American performers, thus portraying a modified version of Lindy Hop.8 Finally, there is at least one record of a journalist distinguishing “impermissible” American Lindy Hop to the more acceptable British Jitterbug.9 Although this is a controversial point, there is evidence that Lindy Hop as an African American social dance did not gain a permanent foothold in British ballrooms. Rather, Jitterbug, a technically distinct dance, gained a lasting presence in the United Kingdom.

3. Development of the Jive

The emergence of Jitterbug dancing in the United Kingdom was viewed by ballroom dancers to be a threat. Ballroom dancers generally felt that Jitterbug interfered with orthodox forms of dancing, and some even viewed the dance as an aberration.10 Because the Jitterbug could only be danced in the ballrooms managed, often, by traditional dancers, the ballroom dancers were able to quickly transform Jitterbug into a new dance, the Jive. The new Jive dance, as one reporter explained, did not embody American swing dances—its lacked certain rhythmic and athletic qualities unique to authentic American swing dance. However, ballroom dancers successfully altered Jitterbug in the United Kingdom, and by the mid-1940s, references to Jive became more common than Jitterbug in the ballrooms.11

Conclusion

Based on this understanding of the development of Lindy Hop, my claim is that Lindy Hop as an African American social dance was not common in World War II-era United Kingdom, as is commonly believed. The Jitterbug dance that was introduced to the country appears to have had a few key differences to the authentic Lindy Hop. First, young Caucasian dancers were typically more uninhibited and energetic, focusing more on kicks, tricks, and aerials than social Lindy Hop dancers. This energy did, however, become more controlled as Jive became popular. Second, the European influence on the Jitterbug changed the posture and rhythm of the dance. The Jitterbug was no longer as reliant on swing music, nor did it necessarily retain the African athletic, rhythmic movement. The posture of the dance was likely much more upright, somewhere between authentic Lindy Hop and modern-day Jive. In short, the British form of Jitterbug removed, to a large extent, the ethnic quality of the dance. By the mid-1940s British ballroom dancers effectively overshadowed the Jitterbug with its altered form, the Jive, which removed the “eccentric” movement that appalled the ballroom dancers, and allowed for a more standardized, socially acceptable “swing” dance in the ballrooms.

References

3. Ibid.

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Jitterbug Dancing depicted in London newspapers. 14

Leon James and Willis Mac Ricker demonstrating the Lindy Hop in 1943 (left). A couple dances the Jitterbug at the Paramount Dance Hall on Tottenham Court Road in London, 1944 (right). 13

An early magazine advertisement for “Jitterbug foxie dance lessons.”

Footnotes, ed. Gabby Winkel (Florida State University, 2013). Print.