

The Charleston

by Dawn Lille

The 1920s in America were characterized by a sense of abandon, pleasure, and gaiety. The era's chief literary chronicler, F. Scott Fitzgerald, immortalized the flapper and her dance, the Charleston, as quintessential symbols of the time. The dance and the "new woman" were solidly entwined for one glorious year, mid-1926 to mid-1927. Although other dances replaced it, the Charleston, an indigenous American jazz dance, has made frequent comebacks in one form or another ever since. Roger Pryor Dodge, an early dance critic, called it the greatest step of all and a major contribution to American dance.

The Charleston is a dance that was performed by the descendants of African slaves in the American south. Like its sister vernacular form, jazz, from which it takes its rhythmic propulsion, it is a blend of African and European sources, and it has had a broad influence on American life and art. The name derives from the fact that the dance was supposedly seen performed by black dock workers in Charleston, South Carolina. It is probable that they came from one of the black communities on an island off the coast.

The African origin of the dance is accepted by most historians, with Frederick Kaigh claiming that the children of Africa were doing what became known as the Charleston long before Julius Caesar began his conquests. Some relate it to an ancient Ashanti dance, others to the Cape Verde islands in West Africa, and many say the steps could be seen in the challenge dances of the African American community. In some form the Charleston, or at least some of its individual steps and variations, may have been danced on the southern plantations.

[Katherine Dunham](#) found Charleston steps in Haiti in a dance called La Martinique.

The Charleston was seen as early as 1903 in southern black enclaves. It was used by the Whitman Sisters in their stage act of 1911 and was part of Harlem stage productions by 1913.

During World War I, many southern African Americans came north to a better life. They brought their dance and music with them and frequented Harlem dance halls and nightclubs. Some of the better dancers were hired for the acts presented in such places as the Cotton Club and Small's Paradise, which were patronized by white downtown audiences who eventually brought the dances to white ballrooms. The [Savoy Ballroom](#) opened in 1926, coinciding with the Harlem Renaissance; it was racially integrated and had a special area reserved for the best dancers.

But it was Broadway that launched the Charleston craze. The dance was introduced in 1922 in an all-black stage play called *Liza*, and was present to some degree in many of the influential all-black musicals such as *Shuffle Along*.

The Ziegfeld Follies of 1922/23 included a Charleston. Ned Wayburn was the choreographer. Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, who wrote the music, introduced him to a young African American boy who showed Wayburn the basic steps. He blithely went on to teach it and even made a series of short films in 1925 called "How to Dance Charleston."

The dance reached a larger public and soared to fame outside of Harlem in 1923 because of the all-black musical *Runnin' Wild*. Produced by George White, it featured the song "Charleston" by James P. Johnson and Cecil Mack. Elida Webb, the choreographer, erroneously claimed the dance was her invention. When it was performed by a group of chorus boys called "the dancing redcaps," the only accompaniment was hand clapping, body slapping, and foot stomping--the way it had been performed in the south. The audience reaction to this previously unseen combination of jazz rhythms and body movements was explosive. Within a short time the Charleston had spread to all the white ballrooms and clubs, and by 1925 it was both

watched and performed widely, although in its new homes it was a bit calmer and tamer.

The basic Charleston step is performed to syncopated ragtime jazz in a quick 4/4 meter, but often uses only two beats. In its simplest form this is what happens:

- 1,2 L. foot steps forward
- 3,4 R. foot kicks forward
- 5,6 R. foot steps back
- 7,8 L. foot steps back

A kick can be performed before any step or shift of weight. The arms move in opposition to the legs, as in walking, either forward/back or side to side. As the body integrates the step the legs rotate in and out, led by the heels.

This is the foundation for improvisation, in which the whole torso, which is really the core of the dance, is free and can spin or twist. The performer may add all sorts of free kicks in any direction and the hands may shake or flap or do anything the dancer can think of, as long as the jazz rhythm is kept. One common variation, again with African antecedents, is the crossover, in which the arms, placed with one hand on each knee, keep crossing and uncrossing as the knees rotate in and out. The movements may increase in speed or engage in half time, and the dance may be performed as a solo or with partners facing each other.

The lack of formality, the body freedom and hip movements, made the Charleston and its related dance forms scandalous. It required women to be able to move with abandon and thus helped to liberate the new woman in post-World War I America. The flapper (according to one explanation, the term came from the movement of the arms in the dance) openly drank liquor when it was legally prohibited, smoked in public, drove a car, cut her feminine tresses short, wore knee length skirts with the waistline dropped to the hip, and enjoyed the new style of "cutting in" on the dance floor. The Charleston was one of the few dances taken over immediately by men as well as women, and was even used by tap dancers.

Hollywood appropriated the Charleston as early as 1919. Joan Crawford and Ginger Rogers both won several of the nationally popular Charleston contests, thereby boosting their screen careers. Some of the best examples of the dance were performed by the under-publicized black dancers in American films.

The Charleston craze was superseded by the Black Bottom, but it keeps coming back. Like so many dances rooted in the African American tradition, it had an impact from which there was no retreating. The many possible variations and the role of improvisation allow it to be revived and rediscovered by new generations. Many steps were integrated into the Lindy Hop, and the dance itself was particularly popular in the fifties. There was a rock and roll dance called Charley Bags, and the Mashed Potato was a much later form. The West Coast Swing of today is performed to contemporary funk music; but the Charleston is the basis for modern swing.

Although the Depression and World War II ended the atmosphere of the Roaring Twenties, the Charleston is still here.

Dawn Lille, trained in ballet, modern dance and labananalysis, has worked with dancers and actors as a performer and rehearsal coach. She has taught internationally, headed the graduate program in dance research and reconstruction at City College and taught dance history at Juilliard for fourteen years. Dr. Lille has written two books, chapters in five books and over one hundred articles in encyclopedias, numerous periodicals and *Art Times*.