

Jack Cole (1911 – 1974)

by *Debra Levine*

The legendary jazz-dance pioneer Jack Cole was born John Ewing Richter in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and died at age 62 in Los Angeles. Over his four-decade career, the hard-driving dancer/choreographer developed a searing style of distinctively American dance for stage and screen. A master of many forms, Cole drew from them all—modern, ethnic, ballet, and popular—to forge a twentieth century movement language known as theatrical jazz dance. (Cole preferred the expression “urban dance.”)

Cole was recognized even in his time as a stellar exponent of the art form. In retrospect we see that he broke down genres, anticipated dance multiculturalism, trained exceptional performers, and challenged both his audience and the dance establishment. His innovations and achievements earn Cole a place not only at the top of the jazz dance realm, but in the pantheon of America’s greatest dance artists.

Jack Cole, Dancer

He was an unusual-looking man. A crew cut hugged his tidy head and a Van Dyke beard often adorned his chin. Deep-set, soulful eyes (one of them wandered and sometimes crossed) anchored his face. His high-cheekboned visage and moody gaze read, even today, as theatrical and exotic. In his many dramatic poses, Cole spread his legs well beyond a dancer’s traditional “second” position, and bent his knees slightly, accentuating his muscular thighs and buttocks. A riveting, powerhouse performer with a chiseled physique, Cole stretched his limbs with expansiveness and sensuality unusual for his era.

Behind Cole’s formidable physicality lay a shaky psyche. The lonely, only son of divorced parents, and a teenage runaway,

he came of age during the Depression when dance was only a tenuous profession for a man. His career trajectory, like his appearance, was unconventional. Starting to dance in New York, he ended in Los Angeles, reversing the traditional geographic path. He debuted in the most bohemian of modern dance circles, and then morphed into a supremely commercial creature—a dancer/choreographer for nightclub and cinema.

Although a cult of Cole has gripped an impassioned few since his death, those who knew him or worked with him are leaving our midst. Even in the dance world, Jack Cole’s name lacks the recognition that his talent, contribution, and influence merit.

Roots: Modern Dance

Cole first studied modern dance at the Denishawn school in New York City. After training a mere six weeks, he joined the company for its August, 1930 Lewisohn Stadium performances. Cole enjoyed a longtime, close, and loving relationship with the modern dance pioneer [Ruth St. Denis](#); with [Ted Shawn](#), however, he chafed. Despite this, when St. Denis and Shawn separated and the Denishawn troupe disbanded, Cole remained with Shawn and became a charter member of his Men Dancers, one of four men who helped Shawn repurpose his Berkshires farm into the summer dance center known as [Jacob’s Pillow](#). Cole returned to Jacob’s Pillow in 1971 and 1972 to teach the "American Theater Dance" course.

After his time with Ted Shawn’s Men Dancers, Cole spent six months in the troupe of his fellow Denishawn veterans, the Humphrey-Weidman Group, in New York. From [Doris Humphrey](#) Cole inherited a strong sense of the architecture of choreography. ¹

Cole internalized and expanded upon Ted Shawn's credo about the dignity of male dancing. It was in the early 1930s, and with Europe inching toward war, that the young man dropped his German-sounding surname and adopted his stepfather's last name, capping it with his own nickname. The sleek, atomic-era name positioned Jack Cole well for the commercial realm he would enter.

Roots: Ethnic Dance & Ballet

Cole's first exposure to ethnic dance was in the pageants of Denishawn, which enacted derivative Indian, Native American, Caribbean, Ancient Greek, Renaissance Commedia del'Arte, and Spanish spectacles. He then sought out and mastered authentic forms of ethnic dance. He learned the Indian dance form *bharata nātyam*, working with master instructor Uday Shankar (Ravi's elder brother). Studying with the American-born La Meri, Cole mastered "the cobra head movements, undulating arms, subtle hip-shoulder isolations, precise 'mudra' hand gestures, and darting eye actions," according to jazz-dance historian Constance Valis Hill.² He studied Afro-Caribbean, Spanish, and South American dance forms. Visiting the dance clubs of Harlem, notably the [Savoy](#), he conquered the Lindy hop. A devoted dance researcher, Cole prepared for his 1953 Broadway show *Kismet* by traveling to Baghdad. He visited Haiti for the film *Lydia Bailey* (1952). He also toured the Caribbean and Brazil, studying native dance. Finally, Cole was a lifelong adherent of the Cecchetti ballet technique, studying with the Italian master Luigi Albertieri in New York. He auditioned his dancers with a ballet barre.

Headline Act in Top Nightclubs

While appearing on Broadway in the Humphrey-Weidman production of *School for Husbands* in early winter 1933, Cole

began to moonlight in nightclubs. When the modern dancers fired him in 1934 for tardiness to rehearsals, Cole responded by teaming with his Denishawn colleague Alice Dudley in a cabaret act at New York's Embassy Club. The act combined interpretive modern-dance style works with *japonaiserie*, and a Balinese work.³ The Cole-Dudley partnership lasted a year, dissolving in 1935. But Cole was on his way. His trio of 1937 with Anna Austin and Florence Lessing had staying power. By decade's end, Jack Cole and His Dancers were headliners at the country's premier nightclubs, significantly New York's Rainbow Room and Slapsie Maxie's and Ciro's in Los Angeles.

Nightclub acts flourished on exotica, and cocktail sippers would confront no sight more fascinating than the muscular, bare-chested Jack Cole interpolating East Indian dance with American vernacular jazz moves. Bob Boross cites New Year's Eve 1937, at the Rainbow Room, as the birthplace of a new dance genre, as he writes:

[Cole] had set the authentic movements of East Indian dances to the swing beat of jazz music. The rebounding feeling of the swing remarkably was a perfect match to the sharp, precise, isolated Indian movement. Audiences went wild ... it was dubbed "Hindu Swing." ... It wasn't pure Indian dance, or authentic jazz dance, or modern dance, yet it retained characteristic qualities of all three forms of dance. It was a style of dance, singular and instantly identifiable as "Cole."⁴

This juxtaposition forged Cole's unique brand. He tapped the uptown culture of black and Spanish Harlem for his seminal nightclub number "The Wedding of a Solid Sender," first seen in Broadway's *Ziegfeld*

Follies of 1943. Photos show three women in skirts and three zoot-suited men leaping and jiving in a frenetic Lindy hop. Here Cole pulled popular dance into the performance realm.

In “Sing, Sing, Sing” (1947), a rambling paean to the big-band tune of the same name, an all-male cast struts, leaps, and slides (on knees) to the blaring horns of the Benny Goodman band. Said Cole dancer Buzz Miller: “When I first did [“Sing”], I came bouncing off the stage – everyone was in the corner throwing up. It’s really hard to get through ... there’s such tension.”⁵ Important venues for Jack Cole and his Dancers in this period were the Chicago’s Chez Paree and New York’s Latin Quarter.

Cole often returned to nightclubs throughout his career. He staged Jane Russell’s Las Vegas revue following her success in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and his December 1957 show for Ginger Rogers inaugurated the Copa Room cabaret at the Riviera, the infamous Havana hotel owned by crime boss Meyer Lansky.

In his Cole biography, *Unsung Genius*, author Glen Loney speculates that Cole’s dealings with mobster club owners contributed to the choreographer’s hot-tempered tough-guy persona. Cole also kept pace with the legendary expletive-spewing of Harry Cohn, the cigar-chomping Columbia Studio boss who sponsored Cole’s dance group at the film studio in the 1940s.

Jack Cole, Hollywood Dance Genius

Unlike his contributions to concert dance, light opera, Broadway, and nightclub, most of which have disappeared, Cole’s Hollywood movie-musical choreographies remain as precious artifacts of his creative output. The Jack Cole Dancers were first hired by 20th Century Fox for a Betty Grable

vehicle, *Moon Over Miami* (1941). Ethnic dance expertise, not choreographic skill, won Cole the job, but his Seminole Indian sequences offended censors and hit the cutting room floor.

Despite this initial failure, Cole gained credibility and began to choreograph for movies by 1944. Nearly thirty films produced at Columbia, Fox, and MGM studios fill his resumé, some credited, others not. He lost little time in transferring his movement innovation to a new medium, and he became an avid student of the camera. In interviews he expounds with passion and detail about cinematography for dance. Much more than a choreographer, he actually directed film sequences, famously the three major song-and-dance numbers in Howard Hawks’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

Cole deployed uncanny skill in pulling peak performances from actors not trained in dance, including three bombshells of the post-war era—Grable, Rita Hayworth, and Marilyn Monroe. Cole understood that the camera’s microscopic eye magnified weaknesses; on the other hand, with careful shooting and editing, it could also lie. He transformed careers, giving actors added fire power through the ability to communicate with their bodies. Grable, a 5'4" bundle of blonde energy whom Cole fondly nicknamed "Thumper," displays superb physical comedy in "No Talent Joe" from *Meet Me After the Show* (1951). Hayworth, the 1940s love goddess who grew up dancing in her family's G-rated vaudeville act, unleashes infinite sexual allure in "Put the Blame on Mame" from *Gilda* (1946). And in Cole's great movie masterpiece, "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend," Monroe, encased in a fuchsia evening gown (Cole influenced the Travilla-credited costume as well as the hot-red production design), oozes exquisite femininity as she follows a deceptively

simple roadmap of walks, skips, shrugs, and shimmies in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953).

Monroe had been gaining traction in Hollywood, but Cole's ability to zero in on her gifts and package them irresistibly in *Gentlemen* catapulted the starlet into the stratosphere. Grateful (and dependent), she retained Cole as a trusted adviser. He went on to stage Monroe's song-and-dance numbers in *River of No Return* (1954), *There's No Business Like Show Business* (1954), *Bus Stop* (1956), *Some Like it Hot* (1959), and *Let's Make Love* (1960). On the latter film, he was both rehearsal coach and a daily presence on the set, with director George Cukor's blessing.

With these three women, as well as with Mitzi Gaynor, Dolores Grey, Jane Russell, Gwen Verdon, Marge Champion, and Ann Miller, Cole unleashed feminine sexuality and power. He enhanced features and figures, camouflaged defects, and zoomed in the camera for glamour shots of pouty lips, limpid eyes, and velvety skin. After coaching his charges in practice studios, he mirrored their moves to them as the cameras rolled. Cole was indeed a performance coach, habitually advising on line readings and songs, significantly with Monroe, but also with others.

Cole's ambivalence toward his Hollywood work was tied, in this writer's opinion, to his adherence to modern dance as his quality standard. He never forgot his Denishawn roots. He is quoted in John Kobal's *People Will Talk*:

I was wasting a lot of time doing things for people who were not really talented. ...They adored me and trusted me and I became the brother/mother, trying to make them look good without too much talent ...It was possible to make

somebody very beautiful, especially in film—you can't do it in theater—to take people who are the right type and who have a kind of cinematic quality and make quite a lot of things happen.⁶

By 1959, Cole was director Vincente Minnelli's go-to candidate to play Randy Owen, a flamboyant and combative choreographer in MGM's Lauren Bacall/Gregory Peck vehicle, *Designing Woman*. The film, which explores, fifties-style, the perimeters of gender roles, closes with Cole's exhaustive martial arts solo, which unambiguously asserts his masculinity against a barrage of anti-gay slurs.

Achievement on Broadway

Never highly valuing his life in Los Angeles (he was an art connoisseur, a book collector, and an expert in art and dance history), Cole was an early bicoastal player, relentlessly pursuing the prize he desired most—a hit on Broadway. This would elude him although he choreographed more than 20 musicals. His most well-known shows included *Alive and Kicking* (1950), *Kismet* (1953), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), *Foxy* (1964), *Jamaica* (1957), and *Man of La Mancha* (1965). Two that bombed, *Magdalena* (1948) and *Carnival in Flanders*, are remembered for their Jack Cole dance sequences, but are by and large lost. Deep disappointment visited Cole with the failure of the two musicals he both choreographed and directed, *Donnybrook!* and *Kean*, both in 1961.

Bob Boross asserts that the lack of an enduring Cole-branded musical on Broadway (like Robbins's *West Side Story* or Fosse's *Sweet Charity*) contributes to the loss of cultural memory for Cole. Larry Billman, the founder of The Academy of

Dance on Film, also a Cole specialist, agrees, noting in conversation with this writer, “There is no single song-and-dance indelibly associated with Jack Cole.”

Influential Dance Instructor

Cole taught at a studio run by his former partner, Anna Austin, in New York, and for Ruth St. Denis at the dance department she founded at Adelphi University. In Los Angeles, he taught at Eugene Loring’s American School of Dance in Hollywood and at the Morro-Landis School in the San Fernando Valley.

Cole’s most distinctive and influential training facility, however, was the resident dance ensemble that he ran in Studio 10 at Columbia Pictures. In this rare halcyon moment for dance in Hollywood (circa 1944-48), dancers drew fulltime salaries, rehearsing and performing as members of a bona fide studio department. (This status would not again be conferred upon dancers in the film industry.)

Certainly Cole’s most enduring pedagogical achievement stemming from the Columbia Pictures era was his training of Los Angeles-born Gwen Verdon, the leggy redhead who was his dance partner and rehearsal assistant prior to her long reign on Broadway.

Cole ended his career as an instructor of modern dance technique and choreography at the UCLA Graduate Dance Center from 1972-74.

Signature Cole Style

Footage of Cole’s film choreography from the mid-1940s through the early 1960s (prime period, 1950-55) reveals signature themes, trademarks, and a shared tone. In general, a Jack Cole dance is hip, hard, and cool.⁷ Cole’s scenarios tend to revolve

around a high-octane soloist—typically but not exclusively a woman—backed by all-male ‘corps de ballet.’ The soloist, a vivid song-and-dance person, comes across forcefully. She’s the boss, the pacesetter, and tells the story garbed in a highly original, body-hugging costume. Supporting the soloist is a singing, dancing, hand-clapping crew of attentive, clean-cut young men (sometimes women too). The full ensemble executes a clear and combustible dance language, moving through space at varying levels and elevations and facing all directions. The soloist, however, regularly breaks from the pack to directly address the camera and through it the audience.

Cole assembled these roving gypsies in geometric formations—lines, wedges, and clusters—and moved them about, not just presenting them dully at center frame. Freed from the proscenium arch, the self-taught cinematographer/choreographer explored many new possibilities for dance on film. He activated dancers at the camera’s edge, with heads or other body bits intruding from the sides or corners. In “Happy Ending” from *On the Riviera* (1951), the top of the frame comes alive when a row of marching heads peep above a staircase. He dispatched male dancers, scrambling, across the bottom of the frame. Set design gave Cole further elements for his canvas. Ramps, ladders, poles, platforms, and staircases (a huge Cole giveaway) stratify space horizontally, vertically, and diagonally. These simple structures lent his numbers astonishing coherence. Dancers, as well, add visual impact, attired in impeccable, shapely, ethnic- or burlesque-inspired dance wear. Hats—tall, tubular turbans, flat-pancake chapeaus, saucy feathered headpieces—complete Cole’s body architecture.

Cole’s intense and eye-grabbing choreography pulsates on the down-beat. It syncopates through body isolations,

changes direction rapidly, and dots its sound score with bursting leaps (the best detonate from low crouches). Arms reach upward, arcing and ending in pointing fingers. The head, though busy with song, also dances. Calming down to avoid interfering with lyrics, the movement then again explodes. Tension, anger, competitiveness, and outright (but stylized) brawling are all Jack Cole motifs. The choreographer was notorious for his low-to-the-ground dance language. “Jack Cole ... it was all in plié,” said George Chakiris, who as a chorus dancer backed Monroe in “Diamonds.”⁷ Cole perpetuated the infamous “knee slide” that orthopedic surgeons later banished from dance vocabulary. “Jack Cole is our choreographer on this picture,” said Marge Champion of *Three for the Show* in an L.A. Times interview. “From him we’ve even learned to run on our knees.” Her dance partner/husband, Gower, chimed in: “I have two bruised knees to prove it!” But Marge countered, “It’s so stimulating working with this man. You find yourself doing things you never could do.”⁸

Cole rode his music stylishly, rendering even banal B-movie songs memorable by converting lyrics into witty visual puns. He deconstructed scores, and then patched them together with extenuated bridges of hip-daddy rapping, reminiscent of African-American call-and-response traditions. Humor, absurdity, gobs of chic and attitude, and an alert, brainy body characterize his work. His dancers, whom he drilled in draconian rehearsals and classes, deliver at a superlative level, known as they were as the most crackling, elite bunch in the business.

The film that provides one-stop shopping for Cole’s cinematographic wit is an unlikely one, the largely unknown, out-of-distribution *The I Don’t Care Girl* (1953), a biopic about an early liberated woman, the

vaudevillian Eva Tanguay. The film includes three outstanding dance numbers—“I Don’t Care,” “Beale Street Blues,” and “The Johnson Rag”—but the sequence that combines Cole’s trademark elements at their brilliant best is the four-minute “I Don’t Care.” All of the dancers in this number are wonders, but the curvaceous Mitzi Gaynor, under Cole’s tutelage, simply kills. The sequence opens with the camera shooting upward through a mirror that cracks at the sight of the wicked Mitzi gazing down into it. She’s cuddling two black cats. We’re in new territory for dance on film both in naughtiness and the camera’s perspective—it’s underground! It then tracks Gaynor as she bumps, grinds, and shimmies her way up a rising black ramp that slices space on a long diagonal line. Insouciantly shaking her feathered head, she sends men in pork pie hats sprawling in all directions. She’s powerful, funny, saucy, confident. The sequence, which features ladders, staircases, a plunging swimming hole and a raised railway platform, begins in a blast of yellow, then swaps to red and combusts into flames.

Cole’s Artistic and Cultural Significance

Cole carved a distinct space for jazz dance in theater and film. Others soon followed in his wake, notably [Jerome Robbins](#), [Bob Fosse](#), Michael Kidd, [Alvin Ailey](#), Gower Champion, Peter Gennaro, and [Michael Bennett](#). Cole dancers (several became choreographers) included Rod Alexander, Anna Austin, Nita Bieber, Ron Field, Malcolm Goddard, Carol Haney, Bob Hamilton, Beatrice & Evelyne Kraft, Florence Lessing, Bambi Lynn, George Martin, Ethel Martin, Matt Mattox, Buzz Miller, Marc Platt, Alex Romero, and Paul Steffen. But his successors could not replicate his verve for movement invention, fine eye for sculpting space, or capacity for

enriching choreography with production design.

Beyond the dance world, Cole was a trendsetter with lasting impact on American culture. In his set and costume designs, he pioneered the use of bold primary colors that characterized the Technicolor 1950s. Pedal pushers, halter-tops, sarongs, exposed skin, marvelous hats, and Keds sneakers were all Cole signatures. His influence on gender archetypes was immense, propagating a version of female strength powered by sexuality. Cole eschewed nice girls, opting instead for sexy jokes, bumps and grinds, double entendres, street smarts, and a tinge of violence. Cole transferred the finger snaps, hand-clapping, and cool-daddy jive of African-American culture to the cinemas of Peoria, Portland, and Pittsburgh. His openly gay lifestyle, particularly remarkable in the fifties, a time of paranoia and overt homophobia, nudged the culture toward the gay liberation movement that would explode around the time of his death.

Talented, ambitious, a fearsome taskmaster but a respected professional, Jack Cole was an American dance genius. "[Mr. Balanchine](#) admired Jack Cole," Barbara Horgan, long-time assistant to the [New York City Ballet](#) founder and choreographer, told this writer.⁸ This statement means even more given Balanchine's own forays to Broadway and Hollywood. Admiration from the dance world's divinity (Balanchine) notwithstanding, Jack Cole, the so-called "father of modern jazz dance," suffers a significant legacy problem. With no company, school, pedagogy, or organization to advocate on his behalf, and with his abrasive—even abusive—personality contributing, he vanished from the scene in one generation's time. Even Gwen Verdon, Cole's great protégée, broke from her mentor after five years of battle fatigue and emotional abuse and attached her fate to Bob Fosse, whom she married. Now Fosse's

name is nearly synonymous with theatrical jazz dance, and Cole's a footnote. Cole seems to have been absorbed into the well-accepted genre that he pioneered. He delivered as a learned, modern, intense, risk-taking dance artist when no one asked this of him. How we wish we could treasure Jack Cole in person today.

Appendix

Jack Cole filmography, credited and uncredited: *Moon Over Miami*, *Cover Girl*, *Kismet*, *Eadie Was a Lady*, *Tonight and Every Night*, *Gilda*, *The Jolson Story*, *Tars and Spars*, *Thrill Of Brazil*, *Down To Earth*, *David and Bathsheba*, *Meet Me After the Show*, *On the Riviera*, *Lydia Bailey*, *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *The I Don't Care Girl*, *The River of No Return*, *There's No Business Like Show Business*, *Gentlemen Prefer Brunettes*, *Kismet*, *Three for the Show*, *Designing Women*, *Les Girls*, *Some Like It Hot*, *Let's Make Love*.

Jack Cole is credited with choreographing and/or directing the stage musicals *Alive and Kicking*, *Carnival in Flanders*, *Kismet*, *Candide*, *Ziegfeld Follies*, *Jamaica*, *Donnybrook!*, *Kean*, *Magdalena*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Zenda*, *Foxy*, *Royal Flush*, *Man of La Mancha*.

For full references to works cited in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

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¹ Loney, Glenn. "The Legacy of Jack Cole: Rebel with a Cause" (part 2, "An Artist's Beginnings") *Dance Magazine*, January 1983, page 40.

² Hill, Constance Valis. "From Bharata Natyam to Bop: Jack Cole's "Modern" Jazz Dance." *Dance Research Journal*, Winter 2001/02, page 31.

³ IBID.

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<http://www.bobboross.com/page76/page83/page83.html>

⁵ Jacob's Pillow archival research, American Dance Machine event on Jack Cole.

⁶ Kobal, John. *People Will Talk*, New York: Knopf, 1985, page 604.

⁷ An obvious exception is his sumptuous Franz Lehár waltz in *The Merry Widow* (1952), which prefigures Balanchine's Vienna Waltzes (1977).

⁸ Scheuer, Philip K. "Champions Won't Rest Even at the Top" *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 14, 1954.

⁹ Interview with Chakiris, 2011.

¹⁰ Phone conversation with Horgan, 2010.