

African american history of dance assignment



The history of African American dance is colorful and varied. Not only have we created some of the most popular dances, but we have excelled in ballet and modern dance.

Dance and music were an integral part of African life. They were associated with religion, birth and death, weddings and other ceremonies. Dance brought communities together. These historical traditions were carried on by African Americans in slavery.

Keeping slaves healthy so they could fetch a good price was important to the captains of slave ships. While the hold was being cleaned, slaves were brought on deck to “exercise.” This exercise was dancing. Music was played by a crew member or a slave beating a drum.

Traditional African dances survived intact in some areas like the West Indies and the Caribbean, where slaves were allowed to retain some elements of their culture. Although slaves in the North American colonies adapted dances to the region, the colonists of North America were determined to break their spirit.

There were many different types of dances: competitive dances, wedding dances, harvest dances, funeral dances and religious dances. One of the competitive dances was known as Juba. Juba was a jig in which dancers would challenge each other with their agility and skill. The winner outlasted the other dancers. Other dances included the ring dance where slaves danced in a circle, counterclockwise, without lifting their feet.

Until 1740, dancing was accompanied by the beat of drums. Drums were also used by slaves as a means of communication. When the colonists realized that signals were being given for uprisings, the Slave Codes were enacted. These codes banned drums for use by slaves. With no instruments to play, slaves used their bodies. The dance "Pattin' Juba" was developed by patting the side of the thigh and the hip and clapping to produce a syncopated rhythm.

Dancing was an integral part of slave life. They danced when and where they could. Slaves usually had Sunday off and they danced in their slave quarters. When dancing in church, they had to be careful. Some of the Protestant sects, to which the colonists belonged, felt dancing was a sin. Dances in church were usually ring dances. At harvest time, masters sometimes danced with the slaves. One of the harvest dances was known as the Cakewalk. The winning couple would receive a cake as the prize. Other dances included mimicking work motions and dances that involved balancing items on the head like buckets or a glass of water. Traditional African dances also involved mimicking animals. These dances continued in North America.

Funeral dances were similar to ring dances. Slaves marched to the burial site and moved around the grave. The purpose of the dance was to ward off unwelcome spirits or to keep the spirit of the dead in.

Traditional dances were kept alive due to the steady stream of slaves arriving in North America.

The 1920s, known as the "Jazz Age", featured jazz dancing. African American dancers were gainfully employed between 1921 and 1939. There

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were about forty African American musicals playing onstage in New York. Exclusive clubs in Harlem that catered to rich whites, such as the Cotton Club, had floor shows that featured African American entertainers.

Shuffle Along, the Broadway show by Sissle and Blake, started the craze for jazz dancing. White New Yorkers were suddenly interested in Black dancing. "Colored" dance studios opened in New York to teach Black dance to whites. The most popular was a studio owned by Billy Pierce. Pierce, a white man, hired African Americans to teach whites. The studio director was Buddy Bradley, an African American. Bradley, a tap dancer, created routines for many Broadway musicals. He later became a popular choreographer in London.

The most famous dance of the period was the Charleston. The roots of the Charleston have been traced back to dance movements of the Ashanti people. Katherine Dunham, the dancer and anthropologist, saw similar steps in Haiti. The name may have been taken from Charleston, South Carolina, where the New York version might have originated.

The Charleston became popular after James Weldon Johnson wrote the song "Charleston" for the Miller and Lyle musical *Runnin' Wild* in 1923. Elida Webb was the choreographer. His dance used the whole body in a shimmying motion. The dance featured fast kicking steps, both forward and backward, with the hands slapping the body and the knees.

African American dance studios could not keep up with the demand for Charleston lessons.

Word of the new dance craze spread to Europe in a short time. African American dancers in Europe who could dance the Charleston were in great demand. Josephine Baker, dressed in scanty costumes, performed wild renditions of the dance which made her famous. The Duke of Windsor was taught the Charleston by Bricktop (Ada Beatrice Queen Victoria Louise Virginia Smith), who later opened a nightclub in Paris.

There were other popular jazz dances during this time, such as the Black Bottom introduced in 1924. It was based on challenge dancing. The steps featured slapping the backside while hopping forward and backward. But it was the Charleston that defined the period.

African American dancers faced problems with stereotyping when they entered the art of concert dance.

Tap, soft-shoe and jazz routines were considered acceptable for African American dancers. The image of Black dancers was that of natural rhythm.

The Harlem Renaissance inspired Black artists in every field, including dance. Among the early pioneers in concert dance were Hemsley Winfield, Edna Guy and Charles Williams.

The Negro Art Theatre in Harlem, organized by Hemsley Winfield, gave its first concert on April 29, 1931. The group was later renamed the Negro Art Theatre Dance Group.

In 1925 Charles H. Williams formed the Creative Dance Group at Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia. Williams was director of the physical education department.

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The Negro Dance Company founded by Wilson Williams in New York City was another pioneer group in concert dance. It gave its first performance in 1943.

Eugene von Grona, a German, founded the First American Negro Ballet Company. He ran an advertisement in a Harlem newspaper in 1934. The advertisement resulted in one hundred and fifty responses. von Grona narrowed the group to twenty-two. The company made its debut on November 21, 1937.

Reviews of Black concert dance performances were mixed. White audiences were uncomfortable with Blacks dancing in any form other than tap or jazz.

Just as early artists had a difficult time getting their works exhibited, African American concert dancers struggled for recognition.