

HISTORY OF TAP DANCE 1: ORIGIN

For a good understanding of tap technique, it is handy to know some of its history. Where did tap dance come from? How did it develop? Where did the names of steps come from? Many names have been taken from other dance forms. Others thank their names to famous dancers. But most are simply what they say: tap, brush, jump, step. It is wonderful to see how much can be achieved by combining these simple steps. The history of tap dance in the United States is really a testimony to creativity in dance. Tap began as a pastime, but was soon adapted to the taste of theater and film audiences. Originally, making rhythm was the main object, but now the presentation also became important. In this respect we can also distinguish a black style from a white style of tap. The difference is not accidental, but stems from the cultural backgrounds of Afro-Americans and European Americans and the way dance developed in these various cultures as well as how it was handed down from generation to generation.



Tap originated among Afro-Americans who used the dance forms they brought with them as slaves from the Sudan and West Africa: *stamping dances*. We often say *Afro-American dance* to refer to all the genres of dance (*jazz and tap*) which grew out of the exchange of African and American influences. The Irish *Jig*, was danced on wooden soles, just as the English *Clog*. The *soft-shoe*, a black dance form, was danced in six-eight measures and was much like the *Jig*. It was danced on bare feet or on soft cloth soles and in *syncopation*, meaning that the accents in measures shifted and did not fall on the first and fourth beats of the bar but on unexpected places in the measure. This last feature, *the syncope*, is still one of the most characteristic parts of tap dance.



The *minstrel show* stemmed from the French theater. This white genre was imitated by blacks (mainly because black performers were very adept at this style of dance and attained more recognition than with other lines of work done by Afro-Americans). Of course they added their own elements, which were then adopted by white actors, singers and dancers. This cross-pollination between the races often aroused bitter feelings. People accused each other of stealing steps. To this day, veterans like the Nicholas Brothers still hurl this kind of accusation.

The differences between black and white tap will not fade away for the time being and black dancers are still well aware of their roots. In Africa people learn to dance (folk dance) by imitating others as long as it takes until the dance, so to speak, takes hold of their bodies. This process, *collective participation*, can also be heard in songs with their alternating questions and answers. The soloist calls and the choir answers. Those who have witnessed this process can attest that it goes perfectly. No one ever sings out of time. In the West where tap dance has become a cultivated form, there is a different pedagogical principle. Based on analysis and description of the content, the curriculum is set out and practiced step by step. Once one step has been mastered, the next one starts to be acquired.

Irish, Scotch and English settlers also followed the *participation principle* when learning their own folk dances but showed disdain for *non-white* varieties. They viewed *African stamp dances* as a poor, clumsy version of their own *jig*. They found the black man's movements backward, believing that they could get the footwork right but kept botching up the rhythm (it was of course syncopated). They called it *Congo dance*.



On the other hand, the black versions of dance remained inimitable for the white populous well through the Victorian era. They could not make head or tails of the ever-present *syncopation* and neither could they fathom the separate use of hips, shoulders and head (*isolations*). Especially the hip isolations were found to be sexual and obscene and, naturally, forbidden by the church.

It was not until about 1920 that white American *modern dance* started to adopt these techniques. In separate exercises, dancers learned to isolate one part of the body from the rest, by using *contractions* (sudden tensing of the muscles on one side of the body). This *isolation technique* is a foundation in modern dance genres. For a good understanding of the meaning of America for tap dance and for dance in general we must not lose sight of this land as a melting pot for immigrant cultures. Whereas new immigrants could only experience their own music and dance in their lands of origin, in America they could now see many forms juxtaposed simultaneously. And because it was always possible to recognize common features in all forms, they naturally assumed that others had appropriated these features from their own form. One of these common features is tapping the foot on the floor, which is done in almost every culture. A few well known examples are the *flamenco* from Spain, the Hungarian *czardas*, the Dutch *clog dance*, the *katak* from India and of course the rich variety of dance rhythms found in Africa.

It is interesting to note that, next to the common element of tapping on the floor, there are also very distinct differences in the way this is done in different cultures. The way the tap is executed can indicate the person's temperament. Spanish *zapateados* - foot rolls - are done straight down under the dancer. This is a sign of reticence, pride, being introvert. *Tap dance*, by contrast, with its footwork spattering all over the place, is outgoing, extrovert and happy.

