

The Charleston in relation to the Music and the 1920's

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Introduction

Through the years there have been many marriages between music and dances that share the same title: The Hokey Cokey, Grizzly Bear, Varsity Drag, Conga, Twist, Hand Jive, and let's not forget, The Macarena.

There are also dances that are named for big cities: The Boston, Baltimore, Westchester Foxtrot, Madison and in London - The Lambeth Walk, Piccadilly Strut and London Bridge Shag. But one dance with matching music became and maintained popularity more than any other. It was named for an American city – Charleston, in South Carolina. It became THE signature dance of an era – 1920's.

Ten years, it was, from Prohibition to the stock market crash, but the Twenties roared loud and fast. The dancing was wild, the music hot, and F. Scott Fitzgerald named it "The Jazz Age". It was an era of fun, freedom, and fooling around. Women won the right to vote and enjoyed new freedoms in fashion. Flappers, called "Bright Young Things" in Britain, parked their corsets, dropped their waistlines, hiked their hemlines, bound their breasts and cropped their hair in favour of the new boyish figure. Men's clothing trends became more casual and sporty. The wide pant legs called "Oxford Bags" became popular with the college crowd. The new fashion made dancing the Charleston easier and so did the syncopation in the music – one had to move.

Jazz drowned out church hymns, gin became more popular than lemonade, and for America, another war seemed not likely. It was "Life With A Kick In It" and Prohibition

was a big part of the dance's popularity. It is my belief that after a few drinks of bathtub gin, anyone could dance the Charleston.

Origins

But where did this energetic new dance come from? There are numerous conflicting theories and stories. Harlem Jazz Queen, Florence Mills, said "I have heard as many stories of the origin of the Charleston as I have heard cures for colds".¹ Most dance historians believe the Charleston has roots in the ritual tribal dances of Africa. These dance moves came to America during the Atlantic slave trade with dock workers mainly in New Orleans, Louisiana and Charleston, South Carolina. The dance moves then filtered up to the East Coast and were being performed by black street urchins in the streets. There are also many references to the moves being done on the southern plantations even before the Civil War.

There have also been efforts to trace the Charleston to the European Branle. Leo Staats, director of the Paris Opera Ballet stated in an article for the New York Times in 1926, "... the Charleston of today is basically the Branle of the sixteenth century with a few frills added."² He also links the Charleston to early Spanish dances, especially one translated as "kick the cow" and also to the Sailor's Hornpipe.

But the development and spread of the Charleston was on the stage. Many black performers were using the moves in all-black revues and cabarets even at the end of the nineteenth century. The first official documentation of the Charleston on the Broadway stage was in 1922, in the all-black

show entitled *Liza*. In 1923, Ned Wayburn, dance director for the Ziegfeld Follies claims credit for creating it and so does producer George White. But the dance truly caught the public's attention when it was featured in another 1923 all-black show called *Runnin' Wild*. After playing the New York stage the show toured the East coast. By 1925, the Charleston was an international dance craze.

Charleston champion Bee Jackson's article in Collier Magazine entitled "Hey! Hey! Charleston" states:

The Negro girls and boys of Harlem had been dancing it on the streets of the uptown Negro section of New York for weeks when [Lida] Elida Webb saw ... her ten-year-old niece, "steppin' it" in her home. She had the child teach it to her. Then she took sixteen chorus girls and three boys, showed them the fundamental steps, worked out the routine of it, and put it into *Runnin' Wild*.³

But what is most important about the show *Runnin' Wild* is the song and music "The Charston", later named The Charleston with music by James Johnson and lyrics by Cecil Mack. Johnson had written the music much earlier while working at Coney Island in Atlantic City, New Jersey, which was frequented by sailors. He named the piece after his favorite customers from Charleston. When the show wanted new music for a dance number the Charleston was dug up. It then became THE dance in America. It reached England around 1925 and spread throughout the world.

The dance became the staple of top entertainers in Cabarets, Nightclubs and Speakeasies. Josephine Baker introduced it to Paris. In the show *Lady Be Good*, Fred Astaire and his sister Adele danced it to a Gershwin tune called "I'd Rather Charleston".

Then came Charleston contests – two notable winners who went on to Hollywood success were Ginger Rogers and Joan Crawford. The contests became an instant rage on college campuses along with flagpole sitting and goldfish swallowing.

The ballroom dancing teachers at first refused to recognize it. The American Society of Dancing Teachers agreed to teach it because their paying customers demanded it but vowed they would make it "more of a dance and less like a fly-bitten mule's protesting kicks".⁴

Arthur Murray standardized steps for the Charleston and taught it at his studios into the 1950's. He also promoted his "learn to dance" program on the radio and by mail – 5 lessons for 10 cents.

In 1925, it was introduced to English dancing teachers by exhibition dancers Annette Mills and Robert Sielle at a Tea Dance arranged by the London Dancing Times to consider "... the possibilities of dancing it ourselves ... what a lot we have to be responsible for ..."⁵

By toning down the dance it was made available to everyone, not just the stage performers and became safer on the dance floor. It also brought more men and new students to the dance schools.

Reaction to The Charleston – For and Against

"The Charleston craze infected all levels of society from shop girl to debutante, from factory worker to royalty. It seemed like everyone was doing the Charleston."⁶ Even the Prince of Wales (future King Edward VIII) danced it. But like many new crazes before and after, many were against it.

Newspaper editorials, magazine articles, sermons and speeches, labelled the dance as vulgar, degenerate and of an erotic nature.

"*The Catholic Telegraph* of Cincinnati called the dance nothing more than a syncopated embrace ... and the female only half dressed"⁷

The Archbishop of Eastern Poland even went so far as to declare: "Dancing the Charleston is an unpardonable sin." He added that he would "... refuse absolution to women who confess indulging in this dance".⁸

Dance Masters meeting in Paris labeled the Charleston "... immoral, unspeakable, and unworthy".⁹

In England, *The Daily Mail* called the Charleston "... a series of contortions without a vestige of grace or charm".¹⁰

Many physicians argued that the over-enthusiastic contortions of the dance were detrimental to one's health. Doctors reported a variety of ills because of too much Charleston dancing. *The Sheboygan Press* in Wisconsin warned "Keep on and that dance will soon be as dangerous as football".¹¹

Many dance halls began posting signs reading PCQ, which meant "PLEASE CHARLESTON QUIETLY" because of the building collapse of the crowded floor of the Charleston dancers at the Pickwick Club in Boston, Massachusetts. Forty-four were confirmed dead and the Charleston was labelled "the dance of death". This began the decline of the dance. It was being replaced in popularity by the Black Bottom.

Today

But The Charleston is still with us today. On the stage in musicals such as *Showboat*, *The Boyfriend*, *The Wild Party* and *The Lion King* to name a few. On the big screen in *Singin' in the Rain*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *The Great Gatsby* plus many more. Poirot danced it on one of the TV episodes and they are even doing it on *Dancing with the Stars* and *Strictly Come Dancing*. It still remains part of the Ballroom Quickstep and also led the way to Lindy Hop followed by Swing Dance.

In closing, I would like to again quote Harlem Jazz Queen Florence Mills:

"... I like to see the nice quiet way you do it [the Charleston] because it reminds me that there is someplace a common tie, linking all the races which make up mankind."¹²

So, let's go back to that "Jazz Age" and Charleston!

End Notes

1. Bill Egan, *Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), p. 182. A biography of Mills who was an African-American cabaret singer, dancer, and comedian, 1896-1927
2. Fred Austin, "The Charleston Traces Its Ancestry Back 400 Years," *The New York Times*, 8 August, 1926, Magazine section SM2
3. Bee Jackson, "Hey! Hey! Charleston", *Colliers Magazine*, 10 December, 1927, p. 34
4. *New York Daily News*, 11 October, 2004, p. 29. Clipping File [Charleston], Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, Dance Division, New York City
5. *The Dancing Times* (London), "In the Ballroom-The Past Season," August, 1926, No. 191, p. 438
6. Mark Knowles, *The Wicked Waltz and Other Scandalous Dances* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., Inc.), 2009, p. 166
7. *Ibid.*, p. 168
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. David Hinckley, "Celebrating New York's Musical Heritage-Dancing the Charleston," *The Sheboygan Press* (Wisconsin) 25 January, 1926, p. 14.
12. Egan, quoting Florence Mills, pp. 270-271. The quote in the book was originally from the programme for the Grand Charleston Ball held at the Royal Albert Hall, 15 December, 1926

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SEE ALSO:

Clipping Files [Charleston] New York Library for the Performing Arts, Dance Division, New York City.

Dancing Times Magazine (London)
Dance Magazine (New York)

DISCOGRAPHY OF MUSIC FOR 1920's DANCE

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