

A New Hybrid Form:
The Evolution of Jazz Dance on the 1940s Broadway Stage

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Senior Seminar in Dance

Spring 2017

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Introduction

Many iterations of what one may consider jazz dance have existed in the United States over the course of twentieth century, yet a distinctive change took place in the 1940s, most prominently in New York City. This new jazz dance evolved from the traditions of vaudeville, Broadway tap, and swing dancing into a new theater dance form that incorporated elements of American vernacular dances and jazz musical rhythms combined with concert dance techniques such as ballet and modern dance.

The etymology of the term “jazz dance” itself is interesting. Perhaps, in an effort to understand the methods and motives behind the great changes in the dance community in the 1940s, the new genre was crafted to serve as a more general umbrella of movement practices that blurred the lines between concert or “classical” dance forms and the vernacular. The jazz dance that first emerged in the 1940s is what most people today would consider to be most representative of what we currently understand to be the genre of American jazz dance.

Jerome Robbins, Jack Cole, and Katherine Dunham are some of the most influential contributors to this new jazz aesthetic due to their shared stylization of movement in addition to the popularity of their works. This project asks: how did these specific dance makers more than others of the time have such profound influence over the field? Finally, why was what they were doing considered jazz?

Joanna Das in her work, *Choreographing a New World: Katherine Dunham and the Politics of Dance*,¹ defines this melding of forms as a “hybrid world.”¹ This hybrid world is exemplified when European ballet elements can successfully exist with non-European dance elements - more specifically, the jazz rhythms articulated in both the musical accompaniment and the dancers’ bodies. Das offers this term specifically in relation to Katherine Dunham’s use of Afro-Caribbean hip movements combined with steps from classical ballet technique in the film *Stormy Weather*. However, I believe this hybrid world can serve to define much of the significant work of the 1940s that included elements of jazz dance.

This project’s goal is to try to demystify the background and definition of the genre known today as jazz dance. Constance Valis Hill, referring to jazz dance of the 1940s, writes, “The fading of swing bands instigated a virtual blackout of jazz dance in its traditional form of tap dancing on the popular stage.”² If we unpack the major works of the 1940s that have survived at least in some form today, I argue that this “blackout” is really a more of a transitional period. This is transition evident on the Broadway stages of New York in the 1940- a transition away from the classic tap lines of the early 20th century to a new hybrid form that combined aspects of concert and commercial, folk and classical as well as black and white dance forms. Simply put, the decade of the 1940s served as the time of American dance culture that fostered the complex and ever-changing form we recognize today as jazz dance.

Review of Literature and Methodology

¹Joanna Dee Das, “Choreographing a New World: Katherine Dunham and the Politics of Dance,” Ph.D. diss. Columbia University, 2014.

²Constance Valis Hill, “From Bharata Natyam to Bop: Jack Cole’s ‘Modern’ Jazz Dance,” In *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social Popular Dance Reader*, edited by Julie Malnig: (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009) 235.

In order to understand this new jazz dance of the 1940s, I engaged with many different areas of media and research to gather my source material. Prior to the 1940s, what was identified as jazz dance on the commercial stage was essentially tap. This foundational idea is expressed most significantly in *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* by Marshall and Jean Stearns.³ Originally published in 1964, the book equates jazz dance almost exclusively with tap dancing. My argument that a change began to occur in the 1940's can be found in multiple sources. Dance scholar, Constance Valis Hill's writings proved to be the most useful in articulating my argument, especially her essay "From Bharata Natyam to Bop: Jack Cole's 'Modern' Jazz Dance" as well as her book *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*.⁴ Moreover, Hill's term "modern jazz" also served as a term that I use to describe the new jazz dancing on which this project focuses. The collection of writings compiled by Gus Giordano in 1971 entitled *The Anthology of American Jazz Dance* also provided key definitions of jazz dance and theories about the form used throughout this paper.

Joanna Dee Das' dissertation "Choreographing a New World: Katherine Dunham and the Politics of Dance" offered a phrase that became a central component of my argument: the hybrid world. A very similar concept also appears in choreographer Jean Sabatine's 1971 essay, "Jazz Dance: The American Hybrid."⁵ There is "no single source (legacy, strain, or ingredient)," he writes, of "that curious and vital American hybrid called 'jazz dance.'"⁶ It is through this lens of hybridity that I view and analyze the works of Robbins, Cole, and Dunham.

³ Stearns, Marshall and Jean Stearns. *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. 2nd ed. New York: De Capo Press, 1994.

⁴ Hill, "From Bharata Natyam to Bop."

⁵ Jean Sabatine, "Jazz Dance: The American Hybrid," in *Anthology of American Jazz Dance*, second edition. Edited by Gus Giordano. Evanston, IL: Orion Publishing, 1978, 110-113.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 113

The visual media I consulted for my background included “Part 1: Dance from the Turn of the Century to 1950” of Mura Dehn’s documentary *The Spirit Moves: A History of Black Social Dance on Film, 1900-1986* as well as the lindy hop dance scene from 1941 film *Hellzapoppin’*.⁷ I also consulted Robert Ferris Thompson’s *African Art in Motion: Icon and Art* to demonstrate the connections between African dance aesthetics and the American jazz dance.⁸ Finally, much of the background on jazz dance stylization stems from my personal training and experience with the jazz dance experts Chet Walker, Bill Hastings, and Diane Laurenson. I intensively studied jazz dance with an emphasis on Jack Cole’s technique with Walker and Hastings for two summers at the Jazz/Musical Theatre School of Jacob’s Pillow. I have also studied jazz dance for seven years with Laurenson at Steps on Broadway and other New York City dance studios as well as being a member of her musical theater company.

I was also able to find written statements by and interviews with the choreographers themselves on trends in American dance, how jazz was involved in the conversation in a novel way, and how they believed their work did or didn’t fit into this trend. Robbins wrote an article entitled “Ballet Puts on Dungarees” for *The New York Times Magazine* in 1945.⁹ Cole was interviewed for an article for *Dance Magazine* in 1963 called “It’s Gone Silly.”¹⁰ Dunham wrote an essay entitled “The Negro Dance” for the 1941 book *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes* that was republished in *Kaiso! Writings by and about Dunham*.¹¹

⁷ *Hellzapoppin’*, directed by H.C. Potter. 84 min. Universal Pictures, 1941; *The Spirit Moves: Jazz Dance from the Turn of the Century till 1950*. Produced and directed by Mura Dehn. Dancetime Publications, 2008.

⁸ Robert Ferris Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act*. Los Angeles (University of California Press, 1974).

⁹ Jerome Robbins, “The Ballet Puts on Dungarees,” *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 14, 1945, 18-19.

¹⁰ Jack Cole, “It’s Gone Silly!” in *Anthology of American Jazz Dance*, second edition. Edited by Gus Giordano. Evanston, IL: Orion Publishing, 1978, 72-73.

¹¹ *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*. Edited by Vève A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005, 217-225.

In regard recordings of works by Robbins, Cole, and Dunham, a recurring obstacle was there absence of a video archive to analyze dance pieces . My argument called for analysis of dance pieces that weren't recorded into any kind of video archive. This problem is especially acute when trying to locate works originally created for Broadway because there was no system in place to record and save Broadway dance works. This remains largely true today: after a work is performed, the dancing simply disappears unless it is circulated and taught by the performers or choreographers themselves. Therefore, in several instances where I had planned to deal with the choreography of a Broadway show, I was forced to depend upon historical literature, periodical reviews of the original productions, and personal accounts from the choreographer and cast of these works. However, it remained an essential part of my project to view works of the 1940s to identify and analyze their jazz dance elements. The primary works this paper focuses on are Jerome Robbins' *Fancy Free* (1944), Jack Cole's *Sing, Sing, Sing* (1947), and Katherine Dunham's *Stormy Weather* (1943). Although I discuss other works by these artists, these are the three I focus on with the greatest detail. Produced across the decade, in different performance venues, they offer a fairly comprehensive range of the work created by these three artists in the 1940s. I watched two versions of *Fancy Free* that were videotaped in performance by the New York City Ballet, one from 1986 and the other from 1994.¹² For Jack Cole's piece *Sing, Sing, Sing* I consulted a short clip of Cole and three other dancers performing the piece on the Perry Como Show in 1959.¹³ I also referred to a restaging of the piece by Chet Walker on members of

¹² TheBalletTapes, "Fancy Free," filmed 1986. YouTube video, 31 min. Posted [Mar. 2014]; *Fancy Free*; presented by New York City Ballet, choreography by Jerome Robbins, and music by Leonard Bernstein. New York State Theater, Feb. 18, 1994.

¹³ Dancersover40, "Alan Johnson introduces Jack Cole's Sing! Sing! Sing!" [1:57 min] Youtube. Posted [Mar. 2008].

his company, WALKERDANCE, that was performed at The Jazz Happening at Jacob's Pillow in August, 2012.¹⁴ Regarding Dunham, I mainly looked at the "Stormy Weather" number from the 1943 film of the same title. Being forced to rely on films that were recreations of the original pieces was a less than perfect solution to the absence of original footage. However, I believe that the choreography remained consistent in style across formats and over time, always remembering that they could never be exact recreations of what one would have seen in the original versions performed live on stage.

¹⁴ *Stormy Weather*, produced by William LeBaron. Directed by Andrew L. Stone. 78 min. 20th Century Fox, 1943.

Background

Most basically, jazz dance is movement performed to jazz music. What is difficult to define is the specific elements of style that unify movement under that singular label: jazz. Therefore, in order to understand this new jazz dance of the 1940s, we first must identify its most fundamental features. What qualities are included that allow us to consider a series of movements within a jazz style? This question proves to be surprisingly difficult. While it is fairly simple to identify something as “jazzy” when you see it performed, the term jazz dance encompasses such a broad spectrum of styles and practices, it has been difficult to define in words.

A key element of jazz dance is not just that it is dance on top of jazz music but that successful jazz choreography utilizes and emphasizes the complex rhythmical structures and techniques used in jazz music. Jazz dance is distinct from other Western dance techniques because it is practically inseparable from the music. More than any other dance form, jazz choreography loses much of its essential qualities without the musical accompaniment. I plan to highlight this connection between music and choreography in the works of Robbins, Cole, and Dunham. However, to isolate and analyze all of the complex rhythmical patterns that occur in jazz music and the movement choreographed to it would be impossible. Nevertheless, it is critical to define a few key features of jazz music that help define a jazz dance aesthetic: swing and syncopation.

At its most clinical level, swing can be defined as an asymmetrical division of eighth note beats. “When music swings, it is usually the result of a combination of characteristics related to musical pulse, how that pulse is divided, phrasing, and articulation. Each of these is open to

variation on both the individual and the ensemble level... . At the level of meter, traditionally weak beats are stressed.”¹⁵ Even to an untrained ear, when musicians swing the rhythm of a song, there is a recognizable shift in the energy and mood of the piece. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Music* defines swing as “[a] way of playing music that results in a feeling of forward motion or momentum, often accompanied by a propensity to embody the music in some form of rhythmic movement.”¹⁶ It is interesting and unsurprising that the first line of the definition of swing music includes a reference to movement. The jazz dance of the 1940s emulates the ability of swing music to make you want to dance. In this form of dance, the movement is inseparable from the music. The aesthetic of 1940s jazz dance reflects a physical embodiment of what one hears when listening to swing music.

One way that choreographers display this integration of movement and music is by including the dances in the making of sound. In jazz pieces, dancers will often clap, snap, or use their bodies’ in other ways to contribute audibly to the percussive nature of the music. This element also showcases the influence of tap dancing in 1940’s jazz dance.

Based on my own personal training in addition to the commonalities in movement stylization in different pieces of jazz choreography, one can identify a few key bodily movements in the jazz dance that emerges in the 1940s. The first is the use of isolations. A jazz dancer is required to separate his or her body into specific and distinct sections and then move that one fragment independently from the rest of his or her body. For example, jazz dancers of the 1940s can be seen intricately moving their hips while keeping their rib cage completely uninvolved (or vice versa). In jazz, a dancer will most frequently isolate the head, hips, or rib cage.

¹⁵ Howard Spring, “Swing,” *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2014.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Compared to ballet technique and modern dance forms of the 1940s, jazz dance called for a greater articulation of the spine, in order to pull the dancer on and off of the center of gravity and back again. “Ballet’s rigid back is abandoned by jazz, replaced by a flexible and expressive back.”¹⁷ This undulation begins with the cervical spine, allowing the dancer to peck along to the music with a freedom in the neck, all the way through the lumbar spine and the tailbone, permitting the hips to tuck under, tilt backward, or shift side to side, allowing for a larger range of motion in the lower back and greater mobility of the hips.

Another key physical element of jazz dance is groundedness. More so than ballet dancers and even modern dancers of the 1940s, jazz dancers execute movements with their knees bent, which in turn allows for an increased range of motion in the hips, which aids the undulation of the torso and hips described above.

Finally, a twisting of the shoulders and upper spine is often indicative of a jazz aesthetic. Diane Laurenson, a veteran Fosse and Robbins dancer and expert jazz dance teacher, equates this spiraling to *épaulment* in ballet. The American Ballet Theatre’s glossary of ballet terms defines *épaulment* as “a movement of the torso from the waist upward, bringing one shoulder forward and the other back with the head turned or inclined over the forward shoulder.”¹⁸ The integration of *épaulment* in jazz dance is more severe and less specifically codified than in ballet, but the basic idea is the same. In jazz dance, there is often opposition between the upper torso and the legs, thus creating a constant spiraling action in the body. This action creates a more presentational and dynamic movement that was suitable to the presentational nature of the Broadway stage.

¹⁷ Sabatine, 113.

¹⁸ American Ballet Theatre, “Ballet Dictionary.” Date accessed: Feb. 2017, <http://www.abt.org/education/dictionary/>.

The stylization of movement that one sees in jazz dance is very closely linked to elements of African dance traditions. In *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act*, Robert Ferris Thompson analyzes the characteristics of African dance styles (specifically, those of Western and Central African cultures) based on first-hand observation and professional research. These characteristics can clearly be seen in much of the jazz dance of the 1940s, therefore demonstrating the impact of an Africanist movement aesthetic on American jazz dance. The first element is the what Thompson calls the “get-down” quality. “The trend from high to low sets up a basic opposition, inexorably resolved in favor of descent... the use of ‘get-down’ sequences in the dance, where a performer or a group of performers assume a deeply inflected, virtually crouching position, this moving in proximity to the level of the earth, is important in Africa and found in a number of societies of the western and central portions of the continent.”¹⁹ One can see this get-down quality in the emphasis on being low to the ground and in the use of bent knees in jazz dance. Moreover, in much of the jazz choreography of the 1940s, there is an extensive use of a movement called the hinge. A hinge is when a dancer bends just at the knees, while keeping the torso in line with the pelvis, so the first thing to touch the floor are the knees. This hinge movement is a fundamental element of Cole’s technique and is an example of a dance movement specific to the genre of jazz that exemplifies this African get-down quality.

The African element Thompson refers to as “looking smart” is another defining characteristic American jazz dance. Thompson describes “looking smart” as “brilliance of phrasing and vividness of enactment.” He continues, “Looking smart, therefore, partially is defined in strikingly attractive use of style, loaded with notions of preening and the making of

¹⁹ Thompson, 13.

the person sexually attractive.” He also argues that the idea of “showing off is also important to looking smart.²⁰ Just as in African dance aesthetic, it is often necessary for the jazz dancer to look attractive and sometimes even sexually appealing while performing stylized and virtuosic movement.

Although one could probably identify all ten of the elements Thompson lists in jazz choreography of the 1940s, I would argue that the element most integral to the American form is “coolness.” Thompson describes coolness as “cool-headedness” or a “collectedness of mind” that can manifest itself in multiple physical actions, many of which can be applied to jazz dance as well.²¹ According to Thompson, the performer can achieve this idea of coolness through “visibility.” He argues, “[a] cool person does not hide.”²² This idea of visibility can be seen in the extroverted and performative nature of jazz dance, arguably the result of the commercial venues in which it was typically produced.

Another feature of coolness is “smoothness.” “Smoothness is... identified in unified aesthetic impact; seams do not show, the whole is moving towards generous conclusions based on total givings of the self to music and to society.”²³ Like all of the features of African dance described by Thompson, this one can be applied to many different genres of dance. However, smoothness is central to the jazz dance aesthetic. Thompson’s definition of smoothness involves a connectedness to music, which is integral to jazz dance. He also defines smoothness as a generous relationship between the dancer and society, which is arguably also an important part of jazz dance because the genre is so closely linked to popular culture.

²⁰ Thompson, 16.

²¹ Thompson, 43.

²² Thompson, 44.

²³ Thompson, 44.

This aesthetic of coolness is often physically expressed via a small contraction of the upper spine. By hunching one's shoulder just slightly with the gaze faintly downcast, the jazz dancer gives the impression of being relaxed and unaffected by whatever else may be happening with his body or around him. Moreover, this element of coolness is often a product of the dancer's facial expression. Thompson calls this the "Mask of the Cool." He defines this mask as "the striking African custom of dancing 'hot' with a 'cool' unsmiling face."²⁴ Jazz dancers incorporate this mask of the cool when they maintain an unaffected, aloof expression, even when expending high levels of physical energy.

Another fundamental element that labels choreography as jazz is the integration of social dance forms. More often than not, these social dance forms originated in African American communities and eventually became popularized and spread into more mainstream white communities. Because jazz dance is linked with popular dance styles one must look at the popular dance styles that played a key role in the development of this new jazz dance. There are countless types of American social dances that are utilized in jazz choreography, including the Cakewalk, the Charleston, various animal dance, and ballroom styles. However, for the purposes of this paper, I limit the analysis to the form most prominently integrated into jazz dance of the 1940s: the lindy hop.

The lindy, also known as the swing or a jitterbug, is a dance style that originated in 1920s Harlem and is danced to swing music. "Done in couples with the man traditionally leading, the lindy incorporates a common vocabulary of steps danced in an unset order as well as improvisational dancing... Done in a modified ballroom position, partners dance in a circular

²⁴ Thompson, 45.

path around a shared central axis, exploiting centrifugal force and momentum.”²⁵ Based on my training, the basic step of a lindy is a triple step, resembling a *chasé* ballet technique, followed by a ball change, sometimes referred to as a “rock step.” “The rhythm, originally an eight-count structure with six-count variations, is given vitality through intricate footwork and syncopated movements.”²⁶ The lindy is an essential movement utilized in jazz dance. The basic six-count step rhythm is used and often altered to make up much of the jazz dancing one sees in the 1940s. The circular and frenetic energy of the lindy also carried over into much of the era’s jazz choreography.

Moreover, the second part of the basic lindy step, the ball-change, plays a critical role in identifying jazz dance. Not only does the movement indicate a switching of weight that is reminiscent of the lindy, but the ball-change has an inherently syncopated rhythm. Syncopation is a key distinguishing quality of American jazz musical rhythms. Because the rhythms of jazz music are present in the most fundamental steps in jazz dance, a viewer can look to the inclusion of the ball-change when trying to determine why a piece of choreography has a jazzy feel.

The 1941 film *Hellzapoppin’* features a scene that exemplifies the lindy hop of the early 1930s. Choreographed by Frankie Manning the piece for Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers,²⁷ the number so frenetic and fast that it is nearly impossible to identify the basic lindy step. One sees fleeting traces of the foundational swing steps and the dancers frequently utilize the ball change to shift weight, but the choreography is not centered around this fundamental step. The number begins with a single couple who alternate between holding hands in an open position and breaking apart

²⁵ Cynthia P. Millman, “Lindy Hop,” *International Encyclopedia of Dance*.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

before coming back together again. The piece continues with other couples showcasing their wildest moves. One couple suddenly breaks into an exaggerated Charleston step in the midst of a series of fast-paced turn sequences. The piece contains gravity-defying, fast footwork, jumps, and floorwork. There are multiple instances in which the men either lift and throw their partners into the air or between their legs, and other moments when the women fearlessly hurl their bodies at their partners to be caught and thrown immediately into the next step. In one instance, a male dancer flips upside-down and his female partner performs the task of catching him in mid-air. The partners utilize one another's weight and momentum to achieve incredible quick spins and changes of weight. The piece ends with all the couples dancing together in a lively unison phrase. The entire piece is so fast-paced and energetic that the dancers seem to buzz vibrating just above ground, never stopping to take a breath. The number is enormously entertaining, but not especially presentational. The dancers are focused in on one another in an informal setting, and they dance together as a jubilant response to the music. The audience is just lucky enough to view this dance party from the outside.²⁸

The new jazz dance emerged at a time when tap dance began to decline on Broadway. It was replaced, in part, by narrative driven dance. The tradition of including dance as a central and essential element of the stories being told on Broadway began with choreographer Agnes de Mille's "Dream Ballet" in Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's 1943 Broadway musical *Oklahoma!* The "Dream Ballet" occurs in the middle of the play, and fleshes out key dramatic relationships between the leading lady, Laurey, and her two suitors Curly and Jud. Before *Oklahoma!*, dance was largely used as a decorative and dramatically superfluous element. De

²⁸ *Hellzapoppin'*, 1941.

Mille changed this practice by utilizing dance as a tool to deepen the audiences' understanding and interest in the characters on stage. Moreover she set a precedent for choreographers and directors that followed her to use dance in addition to dialogue and song to drive the plot forward through a physicalized method of storytelling. Furthermore, de Mille's work in *Oklahoma!* introduces a key term to understand the evolution of jazz dance in the 1940s: the "choreographer-director."²⁹

The new director of the 1940s (or at least the most successful directors of the 1940s-1960s) was now not only tasked with translating the words from the script and the melodies from the score to the stage, but also responsible for creating *movement* moved the plot forward and showcased key themes and relationships from the script. This director-choreographer played an important role in the inclusion and metamorphosis of the use and status of jazz dance on Broadway.

In an essay on Jack Cole, Constance Valis Hill' summarizes the great change jazz dance in the 1940s. "The post-World War II period saw a radical transformation in American jazz dance as the steady and danceable rhythms of 1930s swing gave way to the dissonant harmonics and frenzied rhythms of 1940s bebop."³⁰ Hill discusses how the evolution in jazz dance was intrinsically linked to the progression of jazz music. The social dances born in the twentieth century associated with jazz dancing can be seen as a physical reaction to the changing techniques of jazz music. The fading popularity of swing music into bebop style jazz influenced the jazz dance aesthetic, "A postwar federal tax on dancer floors closed down most big

²⁹ Robert Emmet Long, *Broadway The Golden Years: Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors: 1940s to Present*, New York: Continuum, 2001, 21.

³⁰ Hill, 235.

ballrooms, and the big swing bands that played them were eclipsed. The fading of swing bands instigated a virtual blackout of jazz dance in its traditional form of tap dancing on the popular stage. Many vaudeville houses converted into movie theaters. Popular tastes on Broadway turned from tap dance to ballet. And jazz musicians moved into small clubs, playing a new and virtually undanceable style of jazz called bebop.”³¹ Hill describes the transition from tap dance to a new modern jazz dance in the 1940s on the Broadway stage. The transition of new dance styles is directly linked to the changing in jazz music techniques, and that popular tastes strayed from tap dancing on the Broadway stage. However, I would argue with the statement that these tastes then turned toward ballet. Instead, tastes evolved into a new dance aesthetic often referred to as “modern jazz.”³² Ballet did play an integral role in the formation of this style, but it only one of multiple factors that contributed to this new dance. My project deals with discovering what really was happening during this “virtual blackout” to which Hill refers that provided this transition from tap dance to a new jazz dance form: What about this time period led to a desire to create a new American dance aesthetic? Moreover, who were the major figures in this transformation? And why were they the ones to succeed?

Jerome Robbins

Jerome Robbins is the model of successful interdisciplinary choreography at the time. One can view his work in comparison to that of other choreographers of the time period. When looking at choreographers who successfully integrated various dance forms in their work, Robbins can be considered the standard for success not only due to the wide range and breadth of work he created over the decade in various platforms, but also the critical and public acclaim he

³¹ Constance Valis Hill “From Bharata Natyam to Bop” 235 in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, and Shake*.

³² Ibid.

received for such work. This integration of forms, upon which this new jazz of the 1940s was dependent, was demonstrated prominently in his works *Fancy Free*, *On The Town*, and *Interplay*.

The diversity of dance training Robbins received in his early life helps to explain the hybridity of his choreography. Growing up, Robbins' parents had him study music, and by a very young age, he was considered a musical prodigy, composing music as well as excelling in both piano and violin.³³ His older sister Sonia began dancing at a very young age. She studied ballet and modern dance and eventually joined the modern dance company of Isadora Duncan's successor, Irma Duncan. With the encouragement and help from his sister, the teenage Robbins began to study dance. He first took dance lessons with Sonia's teacher Alys Bentley who taught in the style of Duncan. After graduating high school, Robbins went to New York University but was forced to leave in 1936 after his family faced economic difficulties in the wake of the Great Depression. Without the money to pay for school and without a job, Robbins decided to follow in his sister's footsteps and try to make a profession out of dance. "He knew from his lessons with Alys Bentley that he had an aptitude for dancing; now he proposed to follow Sonia in trying to turn that into a paying proposition."³⁴ Although he was very inexperienced, Sonia was able to get her brother an audition with the choreographer Gluck-Sandor, who hired him an unpaid apprentice for the company. With the company, he had the opportunity to observe the acting master teacher, Sanford Meisner, and in doing so Robbins was able to learn how to create a character. Gluck-Sandor possessed experience in a wide range of dance techniques and styles, "Gluck-Sandor was a hybrid as a choreographer — ballet-trained, dedicated to modern dance, but also a veteran of Broadway, burlesque, and vaudeville — and his expressive, theatrical style

³³ Amanda Vaill, *Somewhere: The Life of Jerome Robbins* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

attracted Robbins from the outset.”³⁵ It seems no coincidence that the first major influence in Robbins’ life as a dancer came from an artist who was in many ways similar to the kind of artist Robbins would eventually become.

Meanwhile, Robbins was also training in various dance styles: Spanish with Helene Veola, “Asian” with Yeichi Nimura, and “modern” at the WPA and the New Dance Group, “an avant-garde Olympus where the gods of modern movement, Martha Graham and Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey and Helen Tamiris, and their disciples danced and taught.”³⁶ Gluck-Sandor also encouraged Robbins to supplement his modern dance training with ballet, so he began studying with a former dancer with the Pavlova company, Ella Daganova.³⁷ Before Robbins even began choreographing, his upbringing was filled with music, dance, and even acting training. One could argue that his exposure to such a wide variety of dance styles and other performing arts directly influenced his desire and ability to choreograph works that blurred the boundaries of genre.

Bessie Schonberg was his first composition instructor who taught and encouraged him to make choreography.³⁸ Robbins also worked at Camp Tamiment, a summer resort that hosted young artists as they created and performed work. Robbins did some of his earliest dance works at Tamiment. In 1938, Robbins landed his first job dancing in the chorus of a Broadway show titled *Great Lady*, choreographed in part by George Balanchine. He then went on to dance in *Stars in Your Eyes* (1939) and *Keep Off the Grass* (1940), the latter also choreographed by Balanchine. In 1940, Robbins was hired to dance in the corps of a newly formed company, Ballet

³⁵ Vaill, Amanda. “A Biography in Brief.” <http://jeromerobbins.org/a-biography-in-brief/>.

³⁶ Vaill, *Somewhere*, 33-34.

³⁷ Doris Hering, “Robbins, Jerome,” *International Encyclopedia of Dance*.

³⁸ Vaill, *Somewhere*, 15.

Theatre. With Ballet Theatre, Robbins thrived as a character dancer and performed many roles including “the Young Man in Agnes de Mille’s *Three Virgins and a Devil*, an apple-munching Hermes in *Helen of Troy*, and — the role which made him famous — the tragic puppet in *Petroushka*.”³⁹ Within a few years of joining the company, Robbins was given the opportunity to choreograph a piece of his own; he created *Fancy Free*, and thus began his career as the choreographic giant. This career was spread across multiple realms of the dance world and exposed him to a wide variety of styles, dancers, and dance-makers. Moreover, Robbins at a young age had made significant connections with multiple important dance artists of the time in both the concert and commercial fields, which could partially explain how he would later travel successfully and fluidly between the two worlds. It is clear that the hybridity of styles Robbins encountered in both his training and his professional dance experience would have a substantial impact on his career as a choreographer.

Fancy Free is one of the first major works of the 1940s that successfully integrated jazz rhythms and social dance practices with both classical and concert dance movements. In *Broadway: The Golden Years*, Robert Long states, “In 1943 he conceived his first ballet, *Fancy Free*, and it would change his life overnight... since what the work seemed to call for and what Bernstein could bring to it was jazz.”⁴⁰ One can see jazz stylization throughout the ballet, but where I found that most clear examples of jazz aesthetics were the opening trio for the three sailors and the duet between one of the sailors and the second. In the opening trio, the three men enter the stage one after another with a cartwheel and a flying assemblé. This serves as just one example of the virtuosity and even “showing-off” in the choreography of *Fancy Free*. As each

³⁹ Vaill, “A Biography in Brief.”

⁴⁰ Long, 66.

sailor finishes his entrance, he runs to join his buddies, all of whom are un-phased by the virtuosic acts they have each just performed. One can interpret this display of virtuosity followed by their relaxed response as an example of Thompson's notion of "looking-smart," and therefore link it to an American jazz dance aesthetic. Furthermore, this element of showing-off adds to the theatricality of the dance because at the start of the piece, Robbins immediately introduces the three main characters as energetic, athletic, and playful, and in doing so, Robbins uses the jazz-styled choreography in this opening to give the audience clear information about what they are about to watch. In addition, by linking the movement of the characters to the overall narrative, Robbins is also straddling the boundaries between ballet and Broadway because the strong storytelling nature of the ballet is reminiscent of what one would see in musical theater. Therefore, Robbins is pioneering this hybrid world that will eventually form into what would be recognized as jazz dance today.

The opening trio of *Fancy Free* exhibits additional elements of jazz dance via the quality of the steps performed by the three sailors as well as the rhythms Robbins' highlights. The three soldiers travel together in a jazzy walk. Their upper backs are hunched over just slightly to give a cool and casual stance to the body. They drag their feet behind them as they walk, swaying loosely to the music, and walk with a kind of swagger that embodies the coolness described by Thompson. Moreover, the choreography of the trio also includes hinges as well as a soft-shoe tap rhythm phrase that repeats throughout the dance. One can see examples of this hybridity throughout *Fancy Free*, but this opening trio exemplifies Robbins' integration of jazz into this ballet piece.

Long also discusses the importance of composer Leonard Bernstein in bringing Robbins' idea to life:

The score is striking particularly in its use of jazz, which has a driving energy and creates the sense of a world in commotion. It has an extraordinary freshness and excitement that complements the adventure of the sailors on a brief shore leave in New York City, visited for the first time. It evokes the city's moods, both strident and lyrical, and the sailors' bravado and artlessness. Interesting, too, is the fact that the score is influenced by symphonic music, with echoes of Stravinsky and Copland, among others, and has considerable musical complexity despite its directness. But the composition reflects equally Bernstein's immersion in Broadway music and jazz. Two cultures- classical and vernacular- interact with a continuous nervous intensity." (68)

Here we see how Bernstein's integration of musical forms - European symphonic music and American jazz syncopation - in the score for *Fancy Free* supported Robbins' choreography and its hybrid dance styles. Like the music, the choreography includes the key elements of swing and syncopation necessary to consider this a work of jazz dance.

Humphrey Burton, Leonard Bernstein's biographer, describes Robbins' proposal to Bernstein, "He brought with him his story outline for a one-act ballet called *Fancy Free*. He intended to create something distinctly American, observed from real life in wartime New York and derived from such social dances as the boogie-woogie, the lindy hop and the soft shoe shuffle."⁴¹ Robbins was praised for his successful intertwining of social dances forms and jazz stylized movements with classical ballet steps. The New York Times dance critic John Martin praised, "Fancy Free' is utterly colloquial, but it would be a serious mistake to consider it for that reason as merely vaudeville high-jinks. Though it employs jazz idioms at will, scorns nothing in the way of sidewalk gesture and dance-hall practice, and utilizes the techniques of the popular theatre in terms of timing." Here Martin describes how Robbins utilized tap rhythms

⁴¹ Ibid., 67.

previously found on the Broadway stage into his ballet in addition to American vernacular dance-hall forms. Martin continues by calling *Fancy Free* “an artistic entity and a modern ballet in the best sense of the phrase.”⁴²

Following the success of *Fancy Free*, Robbins was approached with an offer to develop the ballet into a Broadway show. “There wasn’t a note of *Fancy Free* music, Bernstein pointed out, in *On the Town*. Although capturing the edgy excitement of New York City, Bernstein’s music, with its jazz rhythms and syncopations that combined with the harmonic intricacies of classical music, was unusual for Broadway.”⁴³ This example again showcases how the music Robbins used for his choreography emulated his vision of integrating social and classical dances. Although, Robbins and Bernstein were working together in a different venue, a Broadway show instead of a touring ballet company, the duo still collaborated in creating work that was influenced by the many different musical/choreographic styles that they felt reflected New York City at the time. The fairly seamless transition this composer-choreographer team made from concert dance to commercial theater demonstrates how successful they were in creating work that blurred lines of genre and style.

Robbins himself describes the trend of ballet including both American themes and musical styles in his 1945 article for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “The Ballet Puts on Dungarees.” He says, “What has happened is that ballet, that orchidaceous pet of the Czars, has come out of the hothouse and become a people’s entertainment in our energetic land. A democratic people’s mark on the ballet is directly evidenced in its subject matter, its dancers, and

⁴² John Martin, “The Dance: ‘Fancy Free’ Does It,” *New York Times*, Apr. 23, 1944, X8.

⁴³ Long, 73.

the kind of audiences that attend it.”⁴⁴ Here and throughout the article, Robbins argues that ballet has evolved in part due to its inclusion of American vernacular dance as well as jazz rhythms; however, these evolutions in choreography could also be used to showcase the change in jazz dance. The new integrated form it begins to reveal in the 1940s was due in part to its melding of classic ballet technique and movements with jazz style, rhythm, and cool.

At the conclusion of the article, Robbins says, “And as the ballet and the theatre draw closer to each other, an exciting prospect opens in which not only musicals, but theatre pieces with vital ideas, will combine drama, dance, and music to the benefit of all three.”⁴⁵ Robbins proposes this dance form as an inevitable future for American dance. In his mind, jazz dance, with its ideal blending of dance and theatrical forms, represents the American dance aesthetic.

Jack Cole

Jack Cole is another example of the cross-pollination of concert and commercial dance. Cole, a dancer who trained with leading modern dance figures, became known as the “Father of jazz dance.” Though not widely remembered as a critical figure in the historical dance canon, Cole greatly influenced dance on Broadway as well as in the film industry, blurring of the forms modern dance and jazz dance.

Cole began his career as a modern dancer, training primarily with Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn at the Denishawn school in the New York City in the early 1930s. He then worked with Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey, and was also an original member of Shawn’s Men Dancers at Jacob’s Pillow. Cole was deeply integrated into the New York modern dance scene,

⁴⁴ Robbins, 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

yet he left that world in 1934 to create his own works for nightclubs, his first being Manhattan's Embassy Club. The work he subsequently created demonstrated the influence of Ruth St. Denis, especially his use of "exotic" dance forms. Moreover, one can see elements of modern dance in almost all his commercial work, this is especially evident in the grounded-ness of his choreography.

Unlike Robbins and Dunham, Cole had a particular fascination with East Indian Dance technique. Cole began studying the classical Indian form Bharata Natyam with La Meri, an American expert of "authentic" East Indian dance in the 1930s.⁴⁶ "The strict discipline of Bharata Natyam technique enabled Cole to tilt, shift, and isolate the head, shoulders, ribs, and hips into a dozens of small, sharp changes of directions."⁴⁷ He took his understanding of East Indian dance and mixed it with other elements of his training.

Sabatine writes, "It may appear strange that East Indian Dance should also make its contribution to the American jazz dance, but through the inventive work of Jack Cole and his disciples, this anomalous influence has permeated jazz movement: the important stress on isolation and angular physical shapes are the two central legacies of East Indian."⁴⁸ Isolations are a fundamental characteristic of the jazz dance aesthetic, and this core element of the jazz genre can be almost entirely credited to Cole's incorporation of East Indian isolations into his choreography.

Cole's life and his work demonstrates his flexible approach genres of dance and to the connections between commercial and concert dance. Hill states that Cole was "determined to

⁴⁶ Hill, 237.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Sabatine, 113.

make ‘art dance’ palatable to blasé supper-club habitués”⁴⁹. Cole served as a leader of genre blending in the New York City dance community. In 1948, critic John Martin discusses Cole’s use of many dance styles in creating his own aesthetic,

Cole fits in no easy category. He is not of the ballet, yet the technique he has established is probably the strictest and the most spectacular anywhere to be found. He is not an orthodox “modern” dancer, for though his movement is extremely individual, it employs a great deal of objective material- from the Orient, from the Caribbean, from Harlem. Certainly, however, he is not an eclectic, for the influences he has invoked have been completely absorbed into his own motor idiom.⁵⁰

Here, Martin touches on multiple aspects of Cole’s background: his modern dance training, his interest in exotic forms (“the Orient”) his use of African diasporic forms from the Caribbean as well as his integration of African American vernacular dances such as the lindy.

“Sing, Sing, Sing,” choreographed for his company, The Jack Cole Dancers, exemplifies his aesthetic and its relationship to jazz. The piece premiered at the Latin Quarter in New York City, accompanied by a recording of the song “Sing, Sing, Sing” by Benny Goodman and his Big Band.⁵¹ There are discrepancies among historians about how many dancers Cole generally used in this work, but the versions I have seen are performed by a quartet of men. I looked first at a brief segment of the piece as it was performed in 1947 by Cole and three of his dancers on the *Perry Como Show*. I also saw a live performance of a reconstruction of the work by members of Chet Walker’s company at Jacob’s Pillow in 2012, of which I have a full recording.⁵² Hill

⁴⁹ Hill, 236.

⁵⁰ John Martin, “Jack Cole: The Dance,” in *Anthology of American Jazz Dance*, second edition. Edited by Gus Giordano. Evanston, IL: Orion Publishing, 1978, 27.

⁵¹ Hill, 234.

⁵² *A Jazz Happening*, produced by Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival Archives, DVD, Aug. 19, 2012.

successfully summarizes the hybridity of styles all blended together into Cole's "Sing Sing Sing."

"Sing, Sing, Sing" – in its eclectic mix of American modern and African American social dance forms and classical East Indian dance technique and danced to the rhythms of swing in the tempos of bop- is illustrative of a postwar style of modern jazz dance that would be emulated by choreographers of the concert and musical stage, commercialized in the Hollywood musical film, and codified into a dance technique that to this day be taught to jazz and musical theater dancers.⁵³

An exemplary work of 1940s jazz dance, "Sing, Sing, Sing" is a hybrid of many different forms.

Hill also explains how the piece utilized lindy "Sing, Sing, Sing,' however, was not a pat reproduction of the jitterbug. Cole had captured and distilled its energetic spirit. He codified its movement, disciplined its form, and tamed and readied it for the stage."⁵⁴ Throughout the piece, one can identify moments when Cole utilizes the lindy: the frenetic energy of the dancers just barely keeping up with the tempo and his integration throughout of the foundational steps of lindy. Cole himself identified the central position of the Lindy when he is asked to define jazz dance, "It's what we used to see in the dance halls in the twenties and thirties, that is what real jazz dance is.... All stemming from African dance, and all filled with authentic feeling. And the root of all these elaborations was the Lindy. Whatever is danced in the name of jazz dancing must come from the Lindy, necessarily theatricalized and broadened for the stage, of course."⁵⁵ Cole's idea of "real jazz dance" exemplifies the difficulty attempting to define a jazz dance aesthetic. Although Cole draws concrete connections between jazz and African forms as well as the lindy, he leaves so much room for interpretation by proposing that the most defining factor is an "authentic feeling."

⁵³ Hill, 236.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 235.

⁵⁵ Cole, 73.

One can also see this element coolness in *Sing, Sing, Sing*. Martin describes, “The dancer, whether it is Cole himself or a particular member of his company, is a depersonalized being, an intense kinetic entity rather than an individual.”⁵⁶ This depersonalized being in the state of frenetic choreography is directly linked to Thompson’s description of African coolness. One can also see elements of Thompson's “get down” quality throughout the piece. This is especially clear in Cole’s use of the hinge. The dancers hinge to the ground, slide on their knees, and perform various pieces of choreography while standing on their knees. In addition, the dancers almost always have their knees bent. Cole created movement that made this flexion of the knee necessary in order for the dancer to complete the choreography within the tempo of the music as well as to match Cole’s grounded, athletic style. Martin elaborates, “He is not afraid of the floor, of falling or sliding on foot or knee or back.... With bent knees he seems ready always to jump, with a tremendous emotional and muscular tonicity he is prepared for even greater expenditure.”⁵⁷

Cole uses the body as a percussive instrument throughout “Sing, Sing, Sing.” The dancers slap their thighs in time with the music and at one point articulate the accents in the music pumping up and down off their knees. Hill describes the complex relationship Cole creates between his movement and the music in the piece, “Strutting in slow motion, sliding over the measure, pulsing in double and triple time, flick-kicking off the beat, and snapping out of precision-timed isolations to the beat, Cole drummed the body.”⁵⁸ As Hill shows, the movement is simply a physical expression of the music. Furthermore, there is a clear use of *épaulement*

⁵⁶ Martin, 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁸ Hill, 244.

throughout the piece. In fact, the dancers rarely in the entirety of the piece have their shoulders facing in the same direction as their hips. Each time a dancer takes a step, his torso twists in opposition.

There are many examples of vernacular and “exotic” forms in “Sing, Sing, Sing,” but it also reveals influences of concert dance. At the very top of the piece, two dancers enter after the music starts with slinking walks that showcase a jazz twist in the torso, but quickly break out into a straight legged *battement* to the side followed by a double pirouette. The dancers continue to exaggerate the twist in their shoulders during the *battement*, and the pirouette is performed in a parallel position, so the movements are not strictly balletic. Still this first phrase is fundamentally built on movements one finds in ballet or modern dance. Cole simply alters them slightly to fit into his jazzy aesthetic. The assimilation of both vernacular and concert forms is what makes this piece occupy a space in Das’ hybrid world.

In the article “It’s Gone Silly,” Cole elaborates on an earlier claim that jazz dance is anything danced to jazz music by arguing that “the essence of jazz... is its *feeling*.” He continues describing what he believes to be this jazz feeling, “Jazz is urban folk music. It is the great articulation of the inarticulate. By inarticulate, I mean those who lacked the technical training to express themselves through formal music... . Jazz has always remained accessible to the urban, technically untrained folk. It always must, or it will lose its validity.”⁵⁹ Cole himself in this quote explains the centrality of American folk dance to jazz. He also argues that jazz dance is a dance of ordinary people. Although his use of “inarticulate” is problematic, he uses it to express the sentiment that jazz dance, like the folk dances performed by untrained peoples, is both familiar

⁵⁹ Cole, 73.

and accessible to a large number of people. Therefore, Cole argues that jazz dance can be enjoyed by dancers and non-dancers alike.

Katherine Dunham

Katherine Dunham is the anomaly in many ways in this trio of jazz choreographers. First, she is the only woman and the only person of color in this company. She was a pioneer of the new jazz dance, and studying her movement vocabulary helps to give a more comprehensive understanding of this period of jazz dance. Dunham offers an essential and often overlooked lens through which we can understand this hybridity of forms in the 1940s.

In 1929, Dunham enrolled as an anthropology major with a focus on dance at the University of Chicago, where she would eventually earn bachelor and masters degrees in Anthropology. It is also important to note that she was one of the first African American women ever to attend the school.⁶⁰ As a young adult, Dunham studied many different movement forms, which informed her choreographic style. Dunham's backgrounds in dance and anthropology both heavily informed the work she would later create as a choreographer. Although Dunham expressed interest in dance and theater from a young age, she did not begin any consistent, formal training until 1928. Just before entering college, Dunham started studying ballet with Mark Turbyfill and Ruth Page. She also studied modern dance and acting with Ludmilla Speranzeva, a modern dancer from Russia. Dunham also studied with Vera Mirova, who specialized in "Oriental" dance.⁶¹

⁶⁰ "Chronology," in *Kaiso!*, xvii.

⁶¹ Clark, Vève A., "Dunham, Katherine," *International Encyclopedia of Dance*.

Dunham both directed and danced in companies during the early 1930s. In 1935, she applied for a grant from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation to support her project of forming a dance institution that taught authentic movement through anthropological research.⁶² Her initial application requested funding to further her training in ballet and modern dance. “She had long believed that these techniques could be the scaffolding upon which to build a black dance company.”⁶³ Thus Dunham requested funding to study at the School of American Ballet and at the Wigman School of Modern Dance, both in New York City. The third and final aspect of her proposal was “funding to study ‘primitive rhythms’ in the field, ideally in Egypt or Ethiopia... Dunham argued that so-called primitive dances would serve as a ‘stimulus’ to the art of modern dance.”⁶⁴ Dunham scholar Joanna Dee Das goes on to describe the significance of Dunham’s request to study in Egypt or Ethiopia: “The two nations loomed large in the New Negro Imagination, for they represented ‘great civilization[s] of antiquity’ that could serve as sources of inspiration for black art.”⁶⁵

Although the foundation rejected her proposals for ballet and modern dance study, they did support her research of primitive forms. However, instead of sending her to an African country, they sent her to investigate Africanist dance in the Caribbean. Thus she traveled to Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Martinique to study dance in these countries of the African diaspora.⁶⁶ Sending Dunham to the Caribbean instead of Africa introduced her to a wide range of African diasporic styles, rather than dance techniques from specific regions of Africa itself. Therefore,

⁶² Das, 40.

⁶³ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 40-41.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

one can view Dunham as even more entangled in the evolution of the new jazz dance of the 1940's because, like Robbins and Cole, much of her work stemmed from an African diasporic tradition.

Dunham's anthropological studies served as a critical source of inspiration for the movement she put on stage. As Das explains, "Her focus on dance as an embodied form of knowledge opened a new avenue of intellectual conversation about the cultural practices of black communities in the Americas. By the end of her ethnographic fieldwork in the Caribbean, Dunham had become an important voice articulating new dimensions of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in the African diasporic world."⁶⁷ Following her initial research in the Caribbean, Dunham would make many subsequent trips back to continue her investigations in Caribbean movement. Das explains, "Dunham's ten months in Jamaica Martinique, Trinidad, and Haiti radically changed her life.... Whereas she began the trip searching for African survivals, she soon shifted her attention to contemporary iterations of Caribbean dance."⁶⁸ In her early years of ethnographic research in the Caribbean, Dunham was introduced to many dance styles including dances of the Jamaican Maroons, as well as Voodoo and Carnival dance traditions from Haiti.⁶⁹ In addition to observing and documenting her experiences in multiple formats, Dunham also "participated in the dancing and used that embodied knowledge to choreograph for the concert dance stage."⁷⁰ Das also notes a clear evolution of Dunham's choreographic philosophy and style following her return to the United States from her first trip that is directly linked to her studies of the African Diasporic styles she witnessed in the Caribbean. Dunham's work shifted

⁶⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 42-43.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 42-43.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 43.

from a focus on African movement to African diasporic movement, which as Das explains is more closely linked to the American popular culture of the 1940s, from which the new jazz dance party derives.

Dunham returned to the United States after her first trip to the Caribbean with new physical as well as anthropological information. “She knew how to move her hips in the subtle, seductive manner of the Haitian *congo paillette*. She could expertly shimmy her shoulders in the ‘*zepaules* as if possessed by a Vodou *loa* and sinuously ripple her spine in the *yonvalou*.... Her task now lay in applying this knowledge to her choreographic practice, synthesizing what she called ‘primitive rhythms’ with ballet and modern dance.”⁷¹ As a choreographer, Dunham’s first successful integration of concert and Afro-Caribbean dance forms was in a piece called *L’Ag’Ya* that she choreographed and produced in Chicago in 1938.

The Broadway show *Cabin in the Sky* (1940) additionally serves as proof of Dunham’s early forays into a hybrid choreographic environment. “Her decision to appear as the scandalous Georgia Brown in the 1940 Broadway hit *Cabin in the Sky*, with choreography by George Balanchine, drew Dunham away from a career in anthropology, although her interest in the field continued, and the humanistic approach she brought to dance was founded on anthropological method.”⁷² The hybridity of this show is clear: she performed on Broadway, on the commercial stage, while collaborating with the prolific ballet master, George Balanchine, to achieve a fusion of movement styles. In an interview with Dunham, Constance Valis Hill discusses why *Cabin in the Sky* played a major role in the revolution of dance on Broadway. “Miss Dunham, it has been claimed that with *Oklahoma!* [1943], the so called ballet Americana gained prominence on the

⁷¹ Ibid., 69.

⁷² Clark.

Broadway stage. But when I look at *Cabin in the Sky* [1940], I see there was this fusion of American vernacular dance, ballet, and Broadway show dancing.”⁷³ , Hill argues it was, in fact, Dunham, not de Mille, who prompted the integration of concert forms on the Broadway stage as a storytelling tool. In this quote, Hill also establishes Dunham’s integration of concert and vernacular traditions in some of her earliest work in New York.

Joanna Dee Das clearly articulates the melding of forms one sees in jazz works of the 1940s. She describes Dunham and her company in the “Stormy Weather Ballet” from the 1943 film of the same title. “We are in a hybrid world, in which Dunham’s extended legs, pointed feet, and upright carriage, signifying European ballet, move to the melody in juxtaposition with her dancers’ bodies pulsating to the blues rhythm,”⁷⁴ Through her analysis of “Stormy Weather,” Das defines this “hybrid world” she mentions as a dance realm in which European ballet elements can successfully exist with non-European dance elements, and, more specifically, the jazz rhythms articulated in both the musical accompaniment and the dancers’ bodies. Das goes on to give an example from the number in which Dunham combines Afro-Caribbean hip movements with steps from classical ballet techniques.

She sinuously moved her hips as she walks down the ramp, kicking every third step to an orchestral rendition of a blues beat. As the melody begins, she stops on a platform and performs a sequence of adagio ballet steps: she développés to the side, extending her leg high and pointing her foot, does a contretemps catch-step, and circles her leg in a rond de jambe en l’air... As Dunham continues to dance in a balletic style to the melody, the blues beat returns.⁷⁵

One can also identify key jazz elements in Dunham’s “Stormy Weather Ballet.” At the top of the number, following Dunham’s grand, balletic entrance, a man enters the frame with two

⁷³ Hill in *Kaiso!*, 242.

⁷⁴ Das, 120.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

balletic jumps, runs to the foreground, sees something either terrifying or magnificent (or both), and arcs back with a hand above his head in reaction until he falls into a hinge. This moment allows us to recognize this work as belonging to a 1940s jazz dance aesthetic. First, a hinge is used. Moreover, it immediately follows two jumps that stem from ballet vocabulary, showcasing, once again, the hybridity of the piece. Finally, it relates to the new jazz dance because it is clearly expressive. The choreography communicates the emotion of the performer in an expressive, yet wordless manner that is still related to the overall narrative of the piece. There are many such moments throughout the piece that accomplish this same task. For example, the dancers seldom face squarely in one direction. Dunham utilizes this jazz épaulement towards the end of the piece when the melody changes from a lyrical, flowing quality into a more driving, percussive beat. The clarinet plays the same melody, but with more freedom and sensuality and Dunham reflects this in her movement. At this moment, a line of women file out of the frame in a repeating pattern of one turn followed by alternating shoulder raises that accentuate the vocals in the music. Not only does Dunham use this element of a twisting torso, but she uses it to accentuate the rhythms in the music. The hybridity of movement styles, the expressivity of the steps, the use of the hinge as well as a jazzy épaulement, and the clear relationship between the movement and the music are all clear pieces of evidence that allow us to think of the “Stormy Weather Ballet” as within a jazz dance aesthetic.⁷⁶

Das also relates Dunham’s choreography to American modern dance of the 1930s. “Though borrowing from other aesthetic idioms, Dunham perfectly captured an imperative of modern dance in the 1930s: express one’s inner emotion through movement. The dancers

⁷⁶ *Stormy Weather*, 1943.

embody both the rhythm and melody of an orchestra version of the blues song, moving seamlessly from ballet to Africanist aesthetics.”⁷⁷ Not only does this idea further demonstrate Dunham’s integration of concert and commercial forms in her work, it also calls attention to a different, yet important problem one finds in both academic and practical studies of Dunham’s work and dances: sometimes her movement is considered within a “modern” dance aesthetic while other times she is considered within the context of jazz dance. For example, at the Ailey School, Dunham technique is taught to intermediate-level students to introduce the fundamentals of an Africanist-influenced movement practice as well as modern dance. This discrepancy in the categorization of her work demonstrates just how deeply the integration of multiple dance forms is woven into Dunham’s body of work.

Das also compares the Nicholas Brothers, the famous tap dance duo of the 1930s and 1940s, to Dunham to show how her work expanded the definition of jazz dance. “Even the Nicholas Brothers, with their clearly choreographed, carefully put-together, elegant routines, fit within circumscribed notions of black dancers as tap artists.”⁷⁸ Dunham breaks from this categorization of the black dancer as a tap dancer. Until the 1940s jazz and tap dancing styles were essentially conflated into one genre. In the 1940s, the two styles separated into distinctive forms of dance expression. Dunham abetted this process because she chose not to include tap dance among the Euro-American and African diasporic forms she incorporated into her project. Instead, she engaged with the black dancing body through Afro-Caribbean forms. This choice was essential to the development of the new jazz dance because Latin rhythms, such as the clave, and Latin hip motion are key elements of the new hybrid jazz dance.

⁷⁷ Das, 121.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Dunham's interest in "primitivity" can be linked to the pedestrian and folk element that many attempt to articulate when defining the aesthetics of jazz dance. "Dunham believed that 'primitive' peoples could reveal the secrets of how all human beings were meant to move if stripped of artificial layers of civilization."⁷⁹ Dunham believed that primitive movement represented human movement in its most basic, "pure" form. Dunham investigated this idea of primitive movement while researching dance styles in the Caribbean, and she included primitive movements that she gathered from her travels in American works such as "Stormy Weather." One can link the pedestrian, untrained aesthetic that is commonly associated with jazz dance with this primitive idea that Dunham explores in her choreography.

In her 1941 essay "The Negro Dance," Dunham clearly expresses her thoughts on African American vernacular dance and its emerging relationship with commercial jazz. Dunham recalls how both Afro-Caribbean dance practices as well as African American vernacular dances play central roles in an American dance aesthetic. She cites social dance traditions such as the *méringue* from Haiti and the *béguine* from Martinique as well as American folk forms such as minstrel dances, the cakewalk, the Charleston, ballroom dances, and the lindy hop as the basis for popular dance traditions in the United States.⁸⁰ Dunham concludes her essay discussing the influence of black folk dance (stemming originally from African dance traditions as a result of the African Diaspora) on American popular dance. "In America, the inevitable assimilation of the Negro and his cultural traditions into American culture as such has given African tradition a place in a large cultural body which it enjoys nowhere else."⁸¹ This "cultural body" would

⁷⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁰ Dunham, "The Negro Dance," 220-225. This was originally published in *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes*, 1941.

⁸¹ Ibid., 225.

certainly include the new jazz dance in New York City at the time Dunham wrote this essay. Dunham continues, “The curious fact is that it will be the American Negro, in his relatively strong position as part of American culture, who, in final analysis, will most probably guarantee the persistence of African dance traditions.”⁸² Das too cites this final line of Dunham’s essay “The Negro Dance,” explaining, “[i]n the case of the United States, Dunham observed, Negro music and dance had a powerful effect on the mainstream American popular culture, and thus ‘curiously’ were the most likely to guarantee the persistence of African dance traditions. In that sense, Dunham saw cultural change and syncretism not as the destruction of a tradition, but rather a way of ensuring its vitality and survival.”⁸³

Dunham’s influence on the evolution of jazz dance differs from that of Robbins and Cole and is more complicated. Furthermore, Dunham’s aspirations and philosophies as a black, female choreographer differed from theirs. “Her choreographic work brought a transnational perspective to the New Negro Movement in Chicago and altered fellow intellectuals to pay attention to the body as part of their investigations into the black experience in the diaspora.”⁸⁴ Dunham’s choreography served as a platform to share her research findings as well as a place to explore her personal identity.

Although Das introduces and defines the term “hybrid world” in relation to Katherine Dunham, it can also be applied to Robbins and Cole. By looking at works created in the 1940s by all three of these choreographers, one can see examples of this “hybrid world” in both their concert stage and in their commercial work.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Das, 45.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 43.

Connections and Conclusion

Robbins, Cole, and Dunham all played a significant role in the creation of the new jazz dance aesthetic. Certain vital characteristics shared by these three artists, as both performers and choreographers, help explain why they became the foremost pioneers of the new jazz dance aesthetic. The first factor that links these artists together is the limited success they would each encounter as dancers in the concert world because of personal idiosyncrasies.

First, due to their training, physical appearance, dancing ability, and temperament, neither Robbins, Cole, nor Dunham were ever considered to be “ideal” concert dancers, meaning that early in their professional careers they realized they would never dance the romantic lead in a ballet. For example, at Ballet Theatre, Robbins always played character roles because of the late start of his dance training and his “exotic” dark features.

It has been noted that Cole was extraordinarily able as an athlete, but his physical appearance was unusual, especially for a performer of his time. As Cole scholar, Debra Levine writes, “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-cheek boned visage and moody gaze reader, even today, as theatrical and exotic.” She goes on to describe his physical body: “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.... Cole stretched his limbs with expansiveness and sensuality unusual for his era.”⁸⁵ Levine describes how Cole’s appearance and physical body, though athletic and expressive, did not match the expectations of an ideal male modern dancer.

⁸⁵ Debra Levine, “Jack Cole (1911-1974),” Dance Heritage Coalition, 2012.

Perhaps more important than his physical oddities was his temperament. Barrie Chase, who worked with Cole in multiple films, reflects on his difficult personality: “Jack Cole was sadistic. He’d start rehearsals at 9:00 AM and not break for hours. He worked you until you collapsed. I’d be so exhausted I couldn’t get up off the floor. I’d be lying there heaving, gasping for air. He’d tell what he wanted, but make you figure out how to do it yourself.” She goes on to discuss Cole’s tortured relationship with alcohol. She says, “It would be his undoing.”⁸⁶

Dunham’s race and gender involving the limited amount of roles she could play. That being said, Dunham did not begin formal training in modern or ballet until she was a teenager, and because of her academic and choreographic pursuits, her training was never especially consistent. As a result, while she worked hard at her concert dance training, she lacked the high level of technical ability necessary to perform principal roles in a prominent concert dance company. While her late introduction to dance training may have influenced the opportunities she received, the fact that she was an African American woman living in the United States before the Civil Rights Movement had the greatest impact on why her artistic pursuits were restricted and often marginalized. Dunham wished to dance and choreograph dances for the American public free of the stereotypes associated with black artists.

Although the obstacles facing these artists varied, the mechanisms they employed to transcend their limitations were very similar. All three found ways to choreograph roles for themselves that featured and often even celebrated the qualities that made them unfit for starring roles in mainstream dance. In addition, Robbins, Cole and Dunham pursued roles that showcased their personal strengths. One would imagine that Robbins created the sultry and stylized role for

⁸⁶ Rose Eichenbaum, *The Dancer Within: Intimate Conversations with Great Dancers*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleya University Press, 2008).

himself in *Fancy Free* because it provided him with the chance not only to demonstrate his proficiency within the ballet vocabulary, but also to exploit the very qualities that limited him to only playing character roles.⁸⁷ As a result, Robbins introduced other dance idioms utilizing the idea of hybridity in *Fancy Free* and amplifying the jazziness of the work. Similarly, Dunham highlighted her blackness, the very thing that limited her from achieving stardom in the concert world, by integrating into her choreography the African diasporic traditions she had studied in the Caribbean that were exotic to American audiences. Cole was a difficult man, and his transition into commercial work came, at least in part, from his personal dissatisfactions with the Humphrey-Weidman company.

All three of these artists illustrate how choreographic hybridity partly emerged as a result of their desire to make works that highlighted their gifts as dancers. In their choreography they highlighted skills that each of them possessed that lay outside the concert dance form they were initially trying to embody.

Furthermore, one could argue that these artists succeeded in creating new works in which they (and their idiosyncrasies) were prominently featured because, as individuals, they were all such charismatic performers. Broadway scholar Robert Long includes this anecdote about Robbins' ability as performer, "A fellow dancer at camp, Dorothy Bird, describes what his performances were like: 'In a cabaret environment, he was a spellbinding performer on the dance floor.'"⁸⁸ Debra Levine regards Cole as a "riveting, powerhouse performer with a chiseled physique."⁸⁹ In a 1948 article about Dunham, Peter Waddington's says, "[s]he understands the

⁸⁷ Vaill, 15.

⁸⁸ Long, 68.

⁸⁹ Levine, 1.

language of the theater, and this is evident in her dance technique, choreography and in the choice of her assisting artist.” He also cites the “universal appeal of her art.”⁹⁰ Clearly, these three artists were admired for their exceptional stage presence.

Robbins, Cole, and Dunham all shared a special talent for engaging audiences as performers. They were expressive artists and this expressivity carried over to their choreographic. Expressivity, of course, is a key element of the new jazz dance as well, and it resulted in part from the integration of exotic forms in their works . In addition, all three choreographers introduced sensuality in their works that was far more overt than in concert dance or in Broadway dance of the 1940s. Moreover, each other these choreographers used narrative to elicit an emotional response from their audiences. *Fancy Free*, “Stormy Weather,” and “Sing, Sing, Sing,” though very different, either told a narrative drawn from contemporary American life, or as in Cole’s work that harnessed a general emotion shared by the era’s public.

The inclusion of American diasporic forms is a clear link between the works of these choreographers. However, the forms themselves differ depending on the artist. Most notably, while Robbins and Cole included the Lindy and other African American vernacular dance styles into their choreography, Dunham most frequently included Afro-Caribbean forms. This is not to say that Robbins and Cole never drew upon Afro-Caribbean movement. For example, one can see Cuban hip motion in the third solo in *Fancy Free*, “a seductive loose-hipped Latin American danzon (something like a rumba).”⁹¹ Moreover, although his training in Afro-Caribbean forms is less clear than in East Indian forms, Cole is described as using Latin American or Cuban

⁹⁰ Peter Waddington, ‘Katherine Dunham Raises Primitive Dance Art to New Height of Sophistication,’ in *Kaiso!*, 302. This was originally published in 1948.

⁹¹ Long, 69.

movements by critics such as Margaret Lloyd, Walter Terry, and John Martin.⁹² Hill works to debunk the idea that Dunham was exclusively interested in Afro-Caribbean forms. In her interview with Dunham, she refers to Dunham's work of the 1940s, stating, "There is a general awareness that you were translating indigenous Afro-Caribbean dance forms at the time, but much less awareness that you were motivated to do the same with American vernacular dance forms."⁹³ Dunham responds by saying that after her first trip to the Caribbean in the late 1930s, she realized that her interest in African dance could also be found within the black dance traditions of her own home country, "'We have that in our own country. I might as well put it on stage.' That's when I began the plantation dance. The square dances, plantation square dances, cakewalk, all of that set of Americana, as I called it, was our third act in the show [i.e. performances of the Dunham Company] from then on."⁹⁴ All three of these choreographers displayed a great interest in black dance traditions and found ways to integrate them with concert forms in the 1940s. The ability to include these black traditions is related to the desire to create work focused on themes of Americana, a key dance trend of the 1940s.

This new jazz dance was reflective of its time; not only did its narratives deal with American life of the 1940s, but the movement itself echoed the energy of New York City during World War II. The energy and speed, the beginnings of an integration of African-American dance and musical forms, and the patriotism of the narratives all were aspects of the new jazz.

⁹² Margaret Lloyd, "Swinging the Hindu Dance: Dance in Show Business," *The Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 3, 1943, 9; Walter Terry, "Dancing in the Supper Club; Jack Cole and His Dance Group," *New York Herald Tribune*, Mar. 1947, C4; John Martin, "The Dance: 'Fancy Free' Does It," *New York Times*, Apr. 23, 1944, X8.

⁹³ Hill in *Kaiso!*, 243.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Robbins' use of the Americana theme is clear in works such as *Fancy Free* and *On the Town*. In his review of the premiere of *Fancy Free*, critic Edwin Denby wrote, "Its sentiment about how people live in this country is completely intelligent and completely realistic. . . . The whole number is as sound as a superb vaudeville turn: in ballet terminology it is the perfect American character ballet."⁹⁵ Cole's work of the 1940s centers less on American plotlines, mostly because much of it was for nightclubs, not Broadway or ballet. However, his dances did exemplify an American movement style that was emblematic of the 1940s. In his review of "Sing, Sing, Sing" Walter Terry argues that Cole harnesses the "energetic spirit of the jitterbug, codifies and polishes the movements, gives discipline and form to otherwise rambunctious, instinctive actions."⁹⁶ Equating Cole's process to de Mille's in *Rodeo*, Terry immediately places Cole within the context of Americana ballet. The critic also describes the piece as simulating feelings of "tribal dances of African." Meanwhile, in the same sentence, he describes the piece as "of course twentieth Century and American."⁹⁷ Terry's description not only demonstrates the hybridity in Cole's choreography, but also its contemporary and national character, a reason the dance resonated so strongly with American audiences. The energy and drive of the piece were symptomatic of its cultural surroundings.

Dunham also explored the theme of Americana throughout her career. As mentioned before, she presented a theatricalized form of African American life in *Cabin in the Sky* that showcased American folk dances. Like Robbins and Cole, Dunham used Americana to translate t American contemporary society to the stage. However, Dunham's Americana differed from that

⁹⁵ Edwin Denby. "The Ballet: Jerome Robbins." *New York Herald Tribune*, Apr. 19, 1944, 17A.

⁹⁶ Terry, C4.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

of her contemporaries because she used the black bodies to portray contemporary African American life. Dunham was criticized throughout her career for not explicitly portraying the struggles related to the African American experience. Das counters this criticism, “She may not have choreographed about lynching or segregation, but her movement suggested freedom - freedom to engage in Africanist, black folk aesthetics on a concert dance stage; freedom to be sexual, sensual, serious, glamorous, or whatever else the choreography called for; freedom to express joy, sorrow, laughter in a naturalistic rather than exaggerated manner; in essence, the freedom to embrace a full humanity.”⁹⁸ Dunham was, in fact, commenting on the black experience in American life and performing her own act of resistance rejecting the limitations, expectations, or preconceived notions of what it meant to be a black choreographer. “Dunham felt no need to stage an explicit social message. Her mere presence as an artistically accomplished black woman, she believed, would change existing perceptions; racial progress would come naturally as a result of her excellent dancing.”⁹⁹

By the mid-1940s, the unprecedented fusion of concert techniques and vernacular forms blurred the strict boundaries of concert and commercial dance. Robbins, Cole, and Dunham were the most influential figures in this evolution. The new jazz dance aesthetic permeated numerous areas of American dance culture in the mid-twentieth century. Each of these artists brought together African diasporic forms, African American vernacular forms, concert dance techniques, and tap rhythms to create a new form dependent on this novel fusion. In turn, the difference among these three choreographers explains how they were acclaimed during their careers and their legacies today. It is near impossible to determine why certain works of art survive and

⁹⁸ Das, 106.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

others do not, but I would argue that the legacies of jazz dance are, at least partly due to the lack of preservation of Broadway dance history. Robbins is often regarded in the historical dance canon primarily as a ballet choreographer, and most of his work that has survived was created for the ballet stage. For example, it is possible to access the original choreography of *Fancy Free* because New York City Ballet has made a concerted effort to preserve it. Meanwhile, the most recent Broadway revival of *On the Town* was re-choreographed by Josh Bergasse. Robbins' original choreography for *On the Town* has been lost because Robbins didn't choreograph the film version of the show.

Cole's legacy is a tragic example of how works of the Broadway (and commercial work, more generally) tend to disappear because there is no precedent for preservation. Debra Levine writes, "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. . . . Cole seems to have been absorbed into well-accepted genre that he pioneered." Cole created a lot of choreography for films, but many of which he is unaccredited. Moreover, much of his film work was focused on the leading actress. For example, Cole worked personally with Marilyn Monroe on every detail of the movement in the number "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend" from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*; however, Cole's work in this film is overshadowed by Monroe's stardom.¹⁰⁰ Cole's New York works have been completely lost or, in the

¹⁰⁰ Debra Levine, "Dance: Hollywood's Dance History; Moving Marilyn Monroe; Choreographer Jack Cole had an Unsung Hand in the Actress' Films," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 9, 2009, E5.

case of “Sing, Sing, Sing,” his choreography only exists in fragments of blurry clips of performances on television variety shows.

Like Robbins, Dunham’s legacy depends mostly on concert work, but in Dunham’s case, the context is modern dance rather than ballet. Dunham’s dance technique, which is rooted in her studies of Afro-Caribbean forms, is taught in modern dance training institutions such as the Ailey School. I reference *Stormy Weather* for this paper because I believe it to be one of the most truthful remaining representations of her work in the 1940s.

There are vast discrepancies in how these artists are remembered and immortalized in dance history. However, their crucial influence on the modern form of jazz dance is largely forgotten. Jazz dance barely exists as a documented form, making it difficult to decipher the major players in its early development and the influences they drew upon to create a style, that seems to appear out of no where in the 1940s. Finally, I would argue that this lack of preservation accounts of Hill’s “blackout period” with respect to tap. In fact, it was a period of intense development that produced a novel hybrid form that included vernacular dance traditions as well as techniques gleaned from the concert world. The blackout period suggests that new works weren’t being made in the 1940s, when, in reality, that decade was a pivotal moment in jazz dance history.

In sum, there are clear differences among Robbins, Cole, and Dunham, but their similarities help to define American jazz dance. We can look to the innovative works of these three choreographers to better comprehend the essential elements of jazz dance. The dances of the 1940s created by each of these artists give us tools to understand what we identify today as jazz dance.

The new jazz dance of the 1940s reveals a heightened expressiveness in movement, a distinct relationship to jazz music, the articulation of an American aesthetic, and, perhaps most significantly, hybridity of form. The choreographic works of Jerome Robbins, Jack Cole, and Katherine Dunham from this period possess all of these qualities, and demonstrate the significant, enduring, and distinct influence each of these artists had on this quintessentially American art form.

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