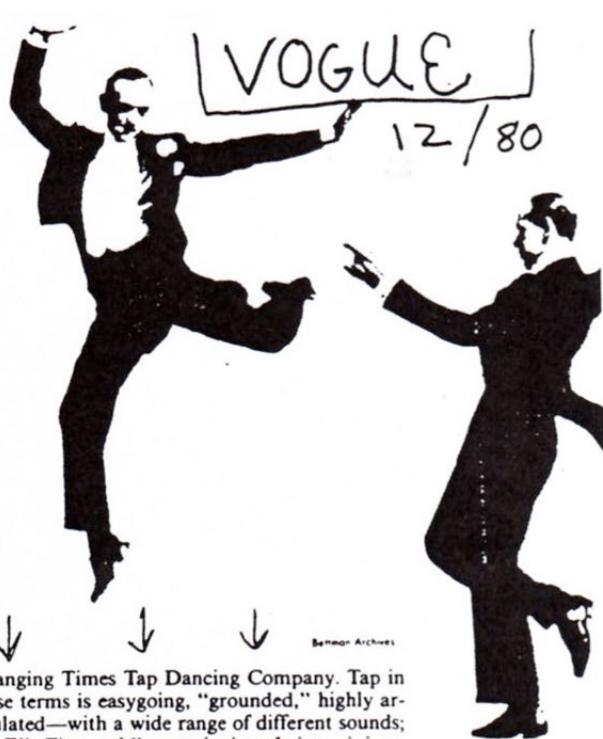


Talking
about...
Dance



Making a comeback: tap dancing!
...old and young hoofers, "42nd Street"

By Holly Brubach

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very so often, in the course of trying to make some sense about dance, it's difficult to resist the idea that Americans look at dancing from the waist down—high kicks, fancy footwork, jumping and leaping. It's also said that Americans dance from the waist down: our own national style is, according to critics of other countries, all legs, notably lacking in expression with the head and arms, the upper body. Too simple to be entirely true, this notion nevertheless never dies because it so neatly accounts for a few otherwise mysterious, peculiarly American phenomena. One of which is tap dancing.

In the nineteenth century, while the classical ballet was growing up side-by-side with music-hall entertainment in Europe, vaudeville was the only dancing American audiences knew. It was on vaudeville stages that tap, conceived as a dance "match" in the street, was first legitimized, explored, and, later, refined; so began the American dance tradition. For the first half of this century, tap was the most ubiquitous form of dance in theater and in films; but to most minds, it's synonymous with one man—Fred Astaire.

Astaire mastered the steps codified by tradition, then made them weightless, made them travel. In his films, tap dancing acquired new sophistication, invention on a par with the finest ballet and modern dance, and a different emphasis: where other performers embellished conventional tap steps with suggestions of dancing on a larger scale (high kicks, big arm gestures, turns), Astaire presupposed that any dancing could be carried out in tap shoes—that tap dancing is not so much tap as it is dancing. That these dances are preserved on film is no coincidence, for tap dancing as subtle as Astaire's is primarily a solo form, made to be seen and appreciated at closer range than most theaters today allow.

Part of the current resurgence pays homage to the steps and styles of the past. Jane Goldberg, a young woman who for her training sought out Honi Coles, Charles "Cookie" Cook, Leslie "Bubba" Gaines, and other Black hoofers whose names were made in clubs and variety shows, has coaxed many of them out of retirement and into performing again, and has faithfully perpetuated their way of dancing in work with her own

Changing Times Tap Dancing Company. Tap in these terms is easygoing, "grounded," highly articulated—with a wide range of different sounds; like Ella Fitzgerald's scat-singing, their tap is jazz.

The diffidence with which they fire off the most complicated steps and rhythms belies the real showmanship of their routines: two Cotton Club hoofers whose act didn't come on until the middle of the night worked out an entire tap routine to keep them awake while they sat in the basement waiting their turn. So what began as makeshift becomes, in their sitting-down dance, highly theatrical.

In the 1960s and '70s, while Broadway and Hollywood choreographers turned their backs for the time being on tap, a new generation was being steeped in it at local dancing schools across the country—only to discover, when they came of age, that tap had somehow been outmoded. But for dancers who had already found in tap some natural means of expression,

How Americans

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the discovery came too late; and now their own work insists on tap's viability. The best of these is Gail Conrad, who goes about tap choreography in ways as novel and inquiring as the post-modernists' dance experiments (her current project, to be seen in the spring, is an evening-length tap-dance melodrama).

On Broadway, shows like *The Boyfriend* and *No, No, Nanette*, however camp their appeal, at least saw to it that tap dancing stayed in circulation. This season, though, it's back in full force, in its own right, and in fine form—in *42nd Street*, the stage adaptation, with choreography by Gower Champion, of the 1932 movie by the same name. After the overture, a medley of already familiar songs, we overhear dancers excitedly trading rumors about a new Broadway show, then the sound of tap-dancing feet, and the curtain rises—very slowly—on an audition already in progress.

From this feet-first first glimpse of a stageful of dancers chugging out time steps, the audience is sold on this show; the exuberance is contagious and, despite its 'thirties setting, the dancing is immediate.

In recent years, virtually no major choreographer has worked with tap, though George Balanchine, Twyla Tharp, and others freely borrowed from its style and its rhythms; it seemed for a time that tap would be quietly absorbed by other dance traditions. Dance forms have declined in the past when they no longer seemed contemporary, and so tap dancing was assumed to be out of step with the times. But times at last have changed and what was not long ago dismissed as a frivolous dance form, devoid of any real meaning or content, now can be celebrated for its pure dance values, its commentary on music.

Above, Fred Astaire in action—in tap shoes; left, "We're in the Money," from the current Broadway version of "42nd Street"

Martha Swope

