

BLUES DANCING AND ITS AFRICAN AMERICAN ROOTS

WHAT IS BLUES DANCING?

“Blues dance” is a new name describing a family of dances done to blues music and created within African American communities. Writing in the 1970s, African American jazz critic Albert Murray was the first to categorize these dances as “blues-idiom.” Murray’s description of reactions to blues music—spontaneity, improvisation, and control—applies to blues dance as well.

SHAPED BY THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Despite enslavers’ attempts to eradicate African Americans’ heritage, African roots persist and are evident in blues music and dance characteristics such as layering rhythms, emphasis on improvisation, and a call and response format. Lyrics and music express everyday life experiences, often reflecting themes of hardship, from racism and poverty to personal relationships. Learning by watching and copying, as well as valuing innovation and creation of an individual’s unique personal style within the given aesthetic, is also part of the cultural tradition.

Music and movement for African Americans during enslavement was often limited to activities such as Christian prayer meetings, work chants, and entertainment for plantation owners. After emancipation, African Americans gradually had more freedom to gather, play music, and dance on their own. Field hands in the South socialized in juke joints, small shacks where beer and liquor were sold, one or two local musicians played, and people danced. In Northern cities during the Great Migration of the 1920s, middle-class blues and jazz musicians and dancers gathered in small apartments for occasions like rent parties. African Americans danced—and continue to dance—on front porches and street corners, and in homes, back rooms of restaurants, community centers, and ballrooms.

Lindy Hop, which originated in African American communities of Harlem in the 1920s, was popularized in mainstream American culture in the 1930s. It saw a second revival in popularity at the end of the 20th century. At that time, Lindy Hop communities began dancing to blues music at their late-night events. As this became more popular, separate blues dance communities emerged in major cities.

BLUES DANCE STYLES

Often people just danced, unconcerned with categorizing their moves. As people traveled the country, dance changed and evolved. Older traditions were largely undocumented, as a result of the marginalization of African Americans and the absence of modern recording technologies. But some regional styles such as Chicago Triple and Texas Shuffle are remembered, while the Slow Drag, danced since the 1800s, became popular throughout the country.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION OR APPRECIATION?

African American dancer Damon Stone, a leading authority on blues dance, has this to say in his article “Appropriation vs. Appreciation”:

I want to start off by stating what follows is obviously my opinion. I can no more speak for all Black people, or even all Black Blues dancers, than you can speak for every person of your race.... The difference between appropriation and appreciation is simple to navigate if you think of it as appreciation means you come to a thing wanting to learn, be a part of, and to give back as an active participant, and appropriation means you come to sample, take, and alter to suit your personal needs.

African American culture has significantly impacted broader American culture in many ways, including in dance and music. Dance forms, including Lindy Hop, Hip Hop, The Twist, and many others were created within African American communities but later popularized within mainstream communities. These are complex histories. Blues dancers today have opportunities and responsibilities to learn, to be a part of communities, and to support other artists.

BLUES DANCING IN C-U

BluesCENTRAL, a local not-for-profit organization, was founded by community members in 2011 to conduct and promote teaching, learning, appreciation, and practice of blues dancing and its African American vernacular dance heritage. BluesCENTRAL hosts free weekly social dances with beginner-friendly lessons and an annual SnowMELT Blues Dance Festival. The Urbana Park District and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) also offer blues dance classes.

They did the boogie real slow with the blue lights way down low.

House parties were and are a common place for people to gather and dance. Colored lights added ambiance, especially for slower close dancing such as Slow Drag.

Etta James and Sugar Pie DeSanto celebrated house parties in their 1966 hit “In the Basement.” Jessie Mae Robinson and Louis Jordan’s song memorialized slow dancing with “Blue Light Boogie” in 1950. See the full lyrics in the booklet below.

Listen to the oral history video clips to hear more about how teenagers turned off the blue light to signal parents were coming—and other stories about dancing.

LEARN MORE



SONG LYRICS

“In the Basement”

Etta James and Sugar Pie DeSanto, 1966, Cadet Records
Lyrics by songwriters Carl Smith, Raynard Miner, and Roquel Davis

Basement parties were a common place for teenagers to hold dance parties. Listen to oral histories to hear stories about the type of parties described in this song.

*Oh, now tell me where can you party, child, all night long?
In the basement, down in the basement, yeah.*

*Oh where can you go when your money gets low?
In the basement, whoa, down in the basement.*

*And if a storm is taking place, you can jam and still be safe.
In the basement, down in the basement, yeah...*

*Where can you dance to any music you choose?
In the basement, whoa down in the basement.*

*Oh, you got the comforts of home, a nightclub too.
In the basement, whoa, down in the basement.*

*There's no cover charge or fee and the food and drinks are free,
in the basement, down in the basement.
In the basement, that's where it's at.*

*Where they don't, where they don't check your age at the door.
In the basement, whoa, down in the basement.*

*Barracuda and Jerk till your feet get sore.
In the basement, whoa, down in the basement.*

*Do any dance you want to do, there's no one under you
in the basement, I know it, you tell em, I wanna go.*

In the basement, that's where it's at, I wanna go...

“Blue Light Boogie”

Louis Jordan, 1950, Decca Records

Lyrics probably written by Jessie Mae Robinson

As the singer tries to Lindyhop, the young dancers at this party with the blue light for ambiance remind him that they prefer to slow dance. Listen to the oral histories to hear how turning off the blues lights at similar parties was used by teenagers to signal parents were coming and to return to less intimate dancing.

They did the Boogie real slow with the blue lights way down low.

I went to a party, with the bobby socks.

At the party, I really got a shock.

They did the Boogie real slow with the blue lights way down low.

I started swingin', all she did was rock.

I kept on swingin', she said 'Now, now listen Pop,

I like to boogie real slow with the blue lights way down low.

I looked around, the shades were down.

The chicks were in the groove.

*I didn't see how those cats could dance when their feet
didn't even move.*

*I started swinging, I swung my left foot out.
Kept on swingin', I heard somebody shout:
You got to Boogie real slow with the blue lights way down low.*

*The house started rockin', we really had a time.
The house was rockin', I almost lost my mind.
I couldn't boogie real slow with the blue lights way down low.*

*The girls and boys made so much noise!
They even had a raid.
The only thing those cops could find was ice cream and lemonade.*

*Oh, what a party! I should have stayed at home.
Oh, what a party! I was like a chaperone.
I couldn't boogie real slow with the blue lights way down low.*

They did the Boogie real slow with the blue lights way down low.

*The folks kept a-knockin' kept on coming in
The folks were knockin' til it was half past ten.
They did the Boogie real slow with the blue lights way down low.*

LEARN MORE ABOUT BLUES DANCE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE

A Blackness and Blues Blog



By Grey Armstrong, African American blues dance instructor

Learn more about blackness, black culture, blues music and blues dancing.

Appreciation Versus Appropriation



By Damon Stone, African American blues dance instructor

Read the full article quoted on the wall above.

BLUES DANCE CHARACTERISTICS

Groundedness

Downward, balanced, and solid movements are emphasized. Dancers use the floor to drive off of, as well as sink and compress into. Feet stay in contact with the floor much of the time.

Pulse

Dancers reflect the main beat of the music with a constant pulsing motion, often in repeated downward movements from the knees and hips or pendular motion of the hips.

Lag

Dancers respond to rather than anticipate the music. For example, the dancer may press off the floor with the beat of the music, allowing the foot to land just after the beat. The follower's step can be a reaction to the lead's movement and may even land after them. Drawn-out notes in the music can inspire the dancer to allow parts of the body to lag behind other parts.

Shape

Dancers create asymmetrical yet balanced shapes with their bodies, juxtaposing contrasting movements or shapes and emphasizing angles in the knees, hips, arms, feet, and torso.

Rhythm Play

Dancers express the complexity and layers of rhythmic patterns in the music through their steps and body movements, sometimes expressing multiple rhythms at the same time. Playing off each other, they creatively match, contrast with, and react to their partners' movements.

Polycentric Movements

Movements emanate from different parts of the body simultaneously. For example, a dancer may create a pattern with the feet while rolling the chest.

Improvisation

Dancers use, combine, and create steps and movements to express the music, rather than relying on a codified pattern of steps repeated throughout the dance.

Individuality

Dancers express their personal and individual style within the framework of the dance. This may come in the form of intentionally breaking a pattern or rhythm or adding a twist to a move.

Apart Play

Dancers respond and elaborate upon their partners' steps and moves, rather than copying identically.

Call and Response

Dancers react to the call and response format in the music. They may create a call and response series of movements within their own body or alternate movements with their partners.

Coolness

Dancers appear to move energetically yet effortlessly, expressing a relaxed and laid back yet strong and confident attitude.

Ephibism

Youthful energy and vigor regardless of actual age of the dancer.

BLUES IDIOMS

Blues idioms are blues dance styles that evolved historically and regionally. They are often grouped into two categories, Jukin' and Ballroomin'.

Jukin' Blues Dance Idioms refer to informal social dances, often done in small spaces such as juke joints, with minimal traveling around the floor. They were typically danced to the local style of blues music.

The Funky Butt is referenced in literature and music as early as the late 19th century. The dance involves interspersing side steps with extending the hips backward in a rocking motion, counter balancing the weight of the partner. It is typically done to funkier styles of blues music. Obsidian Tea Blues Dancers demonstrate.



The Grind is a dance done in place. The main movement is a step with a circular hip movement up and to the side. Obsidian Tea Blues Dancers demonstrate.



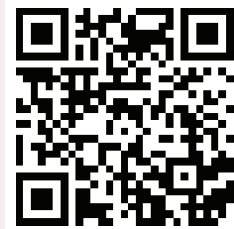
Struttin' developed in the Memphis area in the 1940s and 1950s is danced to faster Delta blues music. An inward leaning embrace between partners allows a large amount of space for fancy syncopated footwork. Damon Stone describes Struttin' and its origins.



Nick DeWitt and Grace Jones-Taylor demonstrate.



Piedmont is danced to the finger picking style of Piedmont blues music originating in the 1920s in the rural areas of the Piedmont plateau that runs between the Atlantic coast and the Appalachian Mountains from Alabama to New York. The basic step is a relaxed but fast shuffling triple step. Obsidian Tea dancers demonstrate.



Texas Shuffle is danced to a style of West Coast blues music played by Texas musicians in California. The style involves a sliding and shuffling motion with a subtle triple pulse throughout. Dancers alternate between stretch and compression to implement turns and other moves. Kenneth Shipp and Gwen Bone demonstrate.



Chicago Triple was created in Chicago to the more electrified Chicago Blues with a shuffle rhythm. Dancers articulate the triple as the basic step, from which they diverge and return. The Blues Dance London Group demonstrates.



Ballroomin' Blues Dance Idioms includes blues dance styles done in more formal places such as ballrooms especially to 1920s blues and jazz music. Dancers would typically move counter clockwise around the dance floor.

Savoy Walk was danced to slow jazz-blues music. In close embrace, dancers move with a slow-quick-quick step pattern, interspersed with sudden creative and flashy turns or other embellishments that temporarily disrupt the step pattern. Read a brief introduction to Savoy Walk by Damon Stone (article with video clips).



Shawn Hershey and Laura Chieko demonstrate.



The Strut often favored New Orleans style jazz blues. Dancers walk in close embrace with a showy rolling motion of the upper torso with intermittent flowing turns and spins as they move around the floor. Obsidian Tea Dancers demonstrate.



The Stride involved early jazzy blues music. Dancers in close embrace elegantly walk across the floor with forward driving long reaching steps. Nick DeWitt and Grace Jones-Taylor demonstrate.



Slow Drag is one of the earliest blues dance idioms and it was done both as a Ballroomin' and Jukin' style dance. Read "A Landscape of Slow Drag" by Julie Brown (article with video clips).



Shawn Hershey and Julie Brown demonstrate.



AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC AND DANCE

African American music and dance has dramatically impacted the evolution of American music and dance. Many forms of dance, like blues, originated in African American communities and were later popularized, adapted and integrated into mainstream culture.

Ballin' the Jack
Barracuda
Big Apple
Black Bottom
Boogie Woogie
Bop
Bounce
Break Dancing
Bump
Bunny Hug
Bus Stop
Buzzard Lope
Cabbage Patch

Cakewalk
Camel Walk
Charleston
Conga
Continental
Disco
Disco Duck
Dog
Electric Slide
Fishtail
Freak
Funky Charleston
Funky Chicken

Grind
Grizzly Bear
Harlem Shake
Hip Hop
Humpty Hump
Hustle
Jerk
Krumping
Lindy Hop
Fish Tail
Madison
Mashed Potato
Monkey
Moonwalk
Mooch
Pigeon Wing

Pony
Rumba
Running Man
Shimmy
Slop
Smurf
Snake Hips
Stepping
Stroll
Tap Dance
Texas Tommy
Turkey Trot
Twerking
Twist
Walkin' the Dog
Wobble

SONGS

“Blue Light Boogie,” Louis Jordan, 1950.

Composers: Louis Jordan, Jessie Mae Robinson.

Album: *The Best of Louis Jordan*; MCA Records, MCAD-4079, 1989

“In The Basement, Part One,” Etta James & Sugar Pie DeSanto, 1966.

Composers: Raynard Miner/Carl William Smith/Billie Davis (Chevis Pub Corporation, Chevis Publishing Corp BMI).

Album: *Her Best: The Chess 50th Anniversary Collection*; Geffen Records, 1997

“100 Days 100 Nights,” Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings, 2007.

Composer: Bosco Mann.

Album: *100 Days, 100 Nights*; Daptone Records, DAP-012

“Boogie Chillun,” John Lee Hooker, 1948.

Composer: John Lee Hooker (La Cienega Music).

Album: *Various Artists: All Time Greatest Blues Songs*; AAO Music, 2012

“Born Under a Bad Sign,” Chris Thomas King, 1999.

Composer: Booker T. Jones/William Bell (Cotillion Music, Inc, Irving Music, Inc. - East Memphis, BMI).

Album: *Me, My Guitar & the Blues*, Blind Pig Records | BPCD 5064

“Bring It On Home To Me,” James Cotton, 2004.

Composer: Sam Cooke (BMI).

Album: *Baby Don't You Tear My Clothes*; Telarc, CD-83596.

“Buck,” Nina Simone, 1967.

Composer: Andy Stroud.

Album: *Sings the Blues*; RCA Records, 82876 73334 2.

“Chain of Fools,” Aretha Franklin, 1967.

Composer: Don Covay (BMI)

Album: *The Best Of Aretha Franklin*; Atlantic Records, 7 81280-2, 1984

“Got My Mojo Workin’,” Brother Yusef, 2003.

Composer: Preston Foster (Dare Music, Inc. BMI).

Album: *Blues By Request*; Fatt-Back Unlimited – cdFB 103

“I Don’t Know”, Ruth Brown, 1959.

Composers: Brook Benton & Bobby Stevenson (Raleigh-Tiger, BMI).

Album: *The Essentials: Ruth Brown*; Atlantic – R2 76162, 2003.

“I’m Your Breadmaker, Baby,” Lazy Lester, 2001.

Composer: James Moore (Campbell, Connelly & Co., LTD. BMI).

Album: *Blues Stop Knockin’*; Antone’s Records – TMG-ANT 0051

“Am I Wrong,” Keb’ Mo’, 1994.

Composer: Kevin Moore (Kebnote Music, Warner Chappell Music, Inc, The Bicycle Music Company BMI).

Album: *Keb’ Mo’*; Okeh/Epic EK 57863

“Let Me Go Home, Whiskey,” Amos Milburn, 1957.

Composer: Henry Shifts (Aladdin Music/BMI).

Album: *Down the Road Apiece - The Best of Amos Milburn*; EMI Records USA – 7243 8 27229 2 2, 1993

“No Bread, No Meat,” Katie Webster, 1988.

Composer: West, Conroy & Webster (UMPG Publishing, BMI).

Album: *The Swamp Boogie Queen*; Alligator Records – ALCD 4766.

“Rock Me,” Muddy Waters, 1956.

Composer: McKinley Morganfield (Arc Music/BMI).

Album: *The Best Of Muddy Waters*, MCA Records MCAD-11946, 1999

“St. James Infirmary,” Allen Toussaint, 2009, Composer: Traditional.

Album: *The Bright Mississippi*, Nonesuch Records 480380-2

“Step Into The Light,” Mavis Staples, 2004.

Composers: Robi Rosa, Jim Tullio, Dave Resnick, Mavis Staples (Tools Music, Moonhaw Music, Staples Music).

Album: *Have A Little Faith*, Alligator Records – ALCD 4899

“Sugar Blues,” Preservation Hall Jazz Band, 2009.

Composers: Clarence Williams and Lucy Fletcher.

Album: *New Orleans Preservation, Vol. 1.* - Preservation Hall Recordings – VPS-20084

“Sweet Home Chicago,” Buddy Guy & Junior Wells, 1972.

Composer: Robert Johnson (MPCA King Of Spades (SESAC) and Claud L. Johnson (SESAC).

Album: *Buddy Guy & Junior Wells Play the Blues* - RHM2 7894, ATCO Records – RHM2 7894, 2005

Cover image:

African American Man Dancing in a Crowd, Chicago Blues Festival, Chicago, Illinois, 1978. By D. Shigley. J. D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi.

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