CHAPTER 1  Jazz Dance: A History

For the audiences who grew up watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals, the moments of them together on film were magical. Although Rogers was criticized for having limited technique, her dancing was impeccable. She matched Astaire step for step. Rogers once said, “I did everything Fred did except backwards and in high heels.” Rogers was the bridge between the uninhibited flappers of the 1920s and the well-trained dancers such as Cyd Charisse and Leslie Caron who appeared with Fred Astaire in the 1950s.

Cyd Charisse was one of the many Astaire dance partners to follow Ginger Rogers’s footsteps. From the age of 14, Charisse danced with ballet companies under a variety of names. Her now-famous name was established when she danced an opening sequence with Astaire in *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946). In her early career, Charisse danced with such famous names as Gower Champion, Ricardo Montalban, and Gene Kelly in *Singin’ in the Rain*. *The Band Wagon* gave Charisse her first starring role, dancing with Fred Astaire to the choreography of Michael Kidd. In 1954 and 1955, Charisse again danced with Kelly in *Brigadoon* and *It’s Always Fair Weather*. In 1957, she danced for a final time with Astaire in *Silk Stockings*. Although her career continued with a variety of performances both live and on film, the premiere compliment of her success was from Fred Astaire: “That Cyd! When you’ve danced with her you stay danced with.”

Dance became further integrated into musical theater in 1936 with the Broadway production *On Your Toes*, choreographed by George Balanchine. *On Your Toes* is famous for its ballet centerpiece, “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue.” Ray Bolger, with a comic flair, dances himself into a state of exhaustion in an attempt to elude capture by the gangster mob.

The 1940s

Just when social jazz dance was at its height, World War II put a stop to its popularity. Young men enlisted to serve in battle while young women assisted the war effort in factories. Lack of attendance plus the intricate rhythmic patterns of modern jazz music, which were too complex for social dancing, led to the closing of dance halls and ballrooms. With the demise of social jazz dancing, the growth of jazz dance as a professional dance form began. During the 1940s, jazz dance was influenced by ballet and modern dance. By blending the classical technique of ballet with the natural bodily expression of modern dance, jazz dance developed a sophisticated and artistic quality. Unlike early jazz dance, which was performed by talented entertainers without formal training, modern jazz dance was performed by professionals trained in ballet and modern dance. It was at this time that jazz dance as we know it today made its claim on the Broadway stage and gained the respect of ballet and modern dance choreographers.

In 1943, *Oklahoma!*, choreographed by Agnes de Mille, marked the beginning of dance as a major aspect of musical comedy. In the years that fol-
owed, other ballet choreographers became involved in Broadway musicals. Dance sequences in On the Town (1944) and in the ballet Fancy Free (1944), choreographed by Jerome Robbins, incorporated the newer, freer, and more rhythmic form of dance called jazz.

As jazz dance made its mark on the Broadway stage, its popularity in film continued. Gene Kelly began his movie career 10 years after Astaire established himself in Hollywood musicals. Although Kelly missed out on the heyday of movie musicals, he made an impact with his individual, energetic dance style that combined athletics, gymnastics, and dance.

Kelly’s success in the Broadway hit Pal Joey (1940) was his vehicle to Hollywood and his movie debut in For Me and My Gal. His extensive list of film credits includes Anchors Away (1945), in which Kelly combined live action with cartoon animation. In Words and Music (1948), with its amazing “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue,” Kelly rechoreographed Balanchine’s ballet, shortening it from 11 to 7 minutes. On the Town (1949) became an important film musical, as it was the first to be filmed with extended sequences on location, using the city as a set and paving the way for musicals such as West Side Story. Among Kelly’s impressive list of films are An American in Paris (1951), with the famous dream ballet finale, and Singin’ in the Rain (1952), which some connoisseurs consider the best movie musical.

Kelly’s career spanned the next two decades with a combination of dancing, choreography, and directing. In That’s Entertainment, Part II, Kelly (age 64) and Astaire (age 70) proved that they could still dance with youthful agility. Kelly also contributed to the world of dance with the television special for Omnibus, Dancing—A Man’s Game (1958), which
Katherine Dunham rekindled interest in the ethnic origins of jazz dance. Photo from Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

was devised to educate the public and remove the stigma attached to male dancers. In 1983, Kelly became an honoree of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Dance stars became popular during the 1940s. Some stars humorously called themselves “hoofers” (those who concentrate on the feet, without making hand and body movements); others considered themselves serious dancers. Whatever title they chose, numerous stars became popular because of their dancing ability: Betty Grable, June Allyson, Dan Dailey, Mickey Rooney, Shirley Temple, Judy Garland, James Cagney, Rita Hayworth, and the remarkable Jack Cole.

Jack Cole, trained in modern dance, is often considered the father of jazz dance technique. With the increased demand for jazz dance in film
and on the stage, it became necessary to develop a more serious and defined approach to jazz dance. Cole developed an innovative style and training technique that involved isolation of body parts and natural body movements that flow from one action to the next. Besides his work as an innovator of jazz dance technique, Cole choreographed for films and Broadway; his most famous productions are *Kismet* (1953) and *Man of La Mancha* (1966).

Also at this time, Afro-Haitian, West Indian, and Latin dance forms fused with jazz dance, rejuvenating the primitive and earthy style of early jazz dance movements and incorporating a rhythmic drumbeat as the primary source of music. Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, two black dancers involved in the study of anthropology, researched these dance forms and contributed their findings to the growing vocabulary of modern jazz dance. Their work created a new respect for the ethnic beginnings of jazz dance. Dunham combined modern dance techniques with Afro-Caribbean techniques and is best noted for her performance in *Cabin in the Sky*, which she co-choreographed with George Balanchine.

**The 1950s**

The decade opened with a new attitude: The public wanted musicals with serious themes. More than any other musical produced in the early 1950s, *Guys and Dolls* epitomized the new stature of American musical comedy as a form of dramatic art. Every song, dance, and line of dialogue developed the plot.

Other notable examples of the fusion of dance and drama in film are *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), both choreographed by Gene Kelly. Michael Kidd is also among the outstanding names of those who produced motion picture choreography in which dance furthers the story line. His dance expertise is well noted in *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955), starring Gene Kelly. His film work includes such superb titles as *Where's Charley?* (1952), *The Band Wagon* (1953), *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), *Guys and Dolls*, *Li'l Abner*, and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969).

Debbie Reynolds was another familiar name in movie musicals of the 1950s. Although not a trained dancer, Reynolds possessed a stage charisma that was backed by unrelenting enthusiasm. Her breakthrough in 1950 was in *Two Weeks with Love*, starring Jane Powell and Ricardo Montalban. Because of this success, Gene Kelly chose her to star with him in *Singin' in the Rain*. In 1953, she choreographed and danced in *Give a Girl a Break*, with Gower Champion. Also in 1953, she starred opposite Donald O'Conner in *I Love Melvin*. Over the years, Reynolds continued her career on stage and as a top Las Vegas entertainer. Her training studio in Hollywood today is a major site for professional auditions.
As the decade continued, the influence of Latin American music and dance enriched jazz dance and music immeasurably. In 1957, Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins used Latin American rhythms in *West Side Story*, a landmark in American jazz dance Broadway productions. Choreographer Robbins thrilled audiences by using jazz dance to show the brutality and bravado of warring street gangs and the exuberance of Latin culture. Robbins adapted a step from the Black Bottom to capture the style of west side ghetto kids. The new move, called the pimp walk, is unmistakable: The dancer leans forward at the waist, shoulders and knees high, and snaps his fingers.

Social dance had suffered a decline in the early 1950s. Perhaps, with the Korean War, McCarthyism, and the hydrogen bomb, Americans had little to dance about. But by 1955, youngsters were beginning to dance to a new musical style: rock and roll. Rock and roll was a re-creation by white musicians of the kind of music black musicians had been performing for 50 years. Teenagers now danced in their homes and at record hops to popular music that had a big and often monotonous offbeat.

In 1956, Elvis Presley arrived from the South as a new teen idol, and he transformed the sound of rock and roll. Presley presented a blend of hillbilly, gospel, blues, and popular music and introduced his sound to TV audiences. As the enthusiasm for rock and roll music continued, dancing increased, accelerated by Dick Clark’s television program “American Bandstand.” In the foreground was a group of authentically awkward young
dancers with whom any teenager could identify; in the background, groups lip-synched to their own recordings. A wave of new group dances became popular: the Madison, the Birdland, the Bop, the Locomotion, the Chicken, and the Mashed Potato. Surprisingly, however, many of these dances were throwbacks to earlier eras. The Chicken was a parody of the lindy-hop; the Mashed Potato was reminiscent of the Charleston.

During this period, Matt Mattox emerged as a major talent in the development of professional jazz dance. Mattox’s technique involves the isolation of body parts and the view that the body, in its simplest form, is a straight line from which designs can be created. (Mattox may have developed the straight-line idea from Jack Cole’s study of the linear design of East Indian dance.) The Mattox style is percussive, with strong angular movements and sharp accents, rebounds, and turns. Mattox choreographed for Broadway, television, and ballet companies.

In the late 1950s, jazz dance was theatrically presented on the concert stage by Alvin Ailey. In his choreography, which primarily reflected black experiences, Ailey used a variety of jazz dance styles. One of the classics of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater—Revelations, a suite of African American spirituals—premiered in 1958.

The 1960s

The early 1960s introduced the Twist. The Twist, characterized by Presley-like hip gyrations and partners never touching but responding to each other’s movements, brought adults back to the social dance floor. The Twist became an overnight craze because it was so easy to perform.
While adults twisted with Chubby Checker, the 1960s teenagers were ready for a new movement and a new sound. Out of Detroit came a new musical revolution: Motown. Motown groups featured a chorus that performed choreographed routines while the lead singer was spotlighted in the forefront. On the dance floor, teens copied the choruses by performing line dances. The most popular was the Stroll, which reemerged in later years as the Hustle.

The innovative and danceable music of the Beatles rocked American culture like an explosion. The teenage population especially was attracted to the dance floor by the immense popularity of the Beatles' music, which incorporated a variety of rhythms and interesting, relevant lyrics. Following in the wave of success of the Beatles, a flood of look-alike, sound-alike musical groups gave social dance yet another boost.

The youth of America found another style of dance expression in the popular depictions of California. TV offered "77 Sunset Strip," and Hollywood cranked out an endless stream of beach blanket movies. The music reflected the craze with songs by the Ventures, Surfaris, Jan and Dean, and the Beach Boys. A whole new wave of dances emerged: the Swim, the Jerk, the Monkey, and the Hitchhiker. The explosion gave social dance yet another boost. By 1965 there were 5,000 discotheques in America. Dance studios flourished as dance enthusiasts attempted to keep abreast of dance fads that came and went from week to week.

The hippie, "flower child," years of the late 1960s brought a new style of rock music influenced by psychedelic drugs and political protest, and a revival of old dance halls—now the scene of live rock music, psychedelic light shows, and solo improvisatory dancing.

More and more television shows featured music and professional dancing. Most notable were "Shindig," "Hullabaloo," and "Laugh-In." Hosts of other TV variety shows—Dean Martin, Jackie Gleason, and Ed Sullivan—often featured a line of dancers as backup for a star performer. Television thus helped to popularize dance crazes while giving dancers a steady income. As the alternatives for a dance career increased, so did the need for formal training.

During the 1960s, two major names appeared among the ranks of professional jazz dance greats: Eugene Louis Faccuito—dubbed Luigi by Gene Kelly—and Gus Giordano. Both men achieved continuing fame as developers of jazz dance technique and choreography.

Luigi developed his technique as a result of an auto accident that left him paralyzed on the right side. Doctors claimed he would never walk, let alone dance, again. But Luigi persisted with operations, physical therapy, and his own study of body development based on dance exercise. He attained the ability to move and dance again, and he began to teach the technique he had learned. Luigi taught a series of exercises that used the total body in each movement phase. His technique requires that the body be exercised to its fullest to develop the strength necessary for muscle control, yet still look beautiful. The Luigi technique, influenced by ballet training, is lyrical. It is best described in his own book, *Jazz with Luigi*. In 2003,