TRICKSTER GODS
AND RAPPAAREES

ON A FIELD TRIP IN 1951 to the coastal region of South Carolina, the jazz historians Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns claim to have witnessed an early form of tap dance. In a small chicken shack, a tumbledown two-room store at the end of a dirt road on the ruins of an old plantation near the village of Frogmore, two young black men, Frank Chaplin and Evans Capers, were dancing on a bare wooden floor to the accompaniment of sliding washboard rhythms. Dancing in one spot, with bodies bent at the waist, knees flexed, and arms out at the side, the splinters flew from their hobnailed boots as a crowd of onlookers was drawn into a tight circle around the men, who stood facing each other. Chaplin thumped, and Capers stomped. Chaplin scraped the floor with toes and heels, and Capers countered with side-brushing wing steps. Although they hummed snatches of the spiritual “Blow Gabriel, Hallelujah” as they danced, they were focused on the rhythms spewing from their feet, which were more or less in duplet time. Stearns said you could march to them if you concentrated, but they were also complicated and polyrhythmic, with offbeat accents and bursts of staccato punctuations—enhanced by the rhythmic counterpoint of someone tapping on a gin bottle with a knife—that made them swing. No one knew where the dance came from. An old-timer said it was called the old Mobile Buck. Chaplin said, “I seen my daddy do it.” The Stearnses concluded that the men were engaged in a “jigging contest,” similar to jigging competitions on plantations in the 1850s. Jigging was the general term for that kind of dancing; the word *jig* came into English about 1560 (from French *gigue*, to frolic; from Germanic *gigue*, fiddle; and Old Norse *geiga*, to turn aside, move back and forth), describing an Irish folk dance in triple time. In America, it became associated with a “Negro” style of dancing—it was even used as an offensive epithet for Negro, because “whites confused any kind of Negro dancing with the lowly Irish Jig.”

The Stearnses’ ethnography of early forms of jazz dance instigated my earliest investigations into the origins and evolution of tap dance in America, and it stimulated a host of questions I had never considered as a dance historian. Why were these men competing against each other? How had the “lowly Irish jig” become a black rhythmic expression? Why did it exhibit a polluting influence on Negro dance, and how had the term “jigging” become an epithet for Negro dance? The image that the Stearnses conjured, of Chaplin and Capers engaged in a rhythmic battle of the feet, made one realize that their bout was not a mere staged entertainment devised to evoke visual pleasure and applause. It was a powerful mode of nonverbal interaction that held multiple layers of meaning, all of which were not immediately apparent to all who witnessed it.

Tap dance, a percussive American dance form distinguished by the interplay of rhythms and amplification of sound by the feet, has been historicized as having a neat tripartite parentage of English, Irish, and African musical and dance traditions. The resulting narrative ignores tap's more complex intercultural fusions, which occurred through the interaction of Irish indentured servants and enslaved West Africans in the Caribbean during the 1600s, African American folk and Irish American laborers in the southern United States during the 1700s, and African American freemen and Irish American performers in northern urban cities in the 1800s. It was through this three-hundred-year musical and social exchange, with its steady pattern of imitation, assimilation, and the transformation of such percussive step dances as the jig, gigue, buck-and-wing, and juba, that tap dance evolved in America. Although elements of English Clog, Scottish Highland, and early American folk dance blended elements of tap dance, Afro-Irish fusions in particular shaped and "rhythmnetized" American tap dance and established and perpetuated such key features as the tap challenge.

The tap dance challenge—much the same form that was witnessed by Stearns in Frogmore—is central to the evolution of tap dance. Motivated by a dare, focused by strict
attention to one's opponent, and developed through the stealing and trading of steps, "tap challenge" is my term for any competition, contest, breakdown, or showdown in which tap dancers compete against each other before an audience of spectators or judges. As such, the tap challenge has been the rhythmically expressive engine and driving force in tap dance. The oral and written histories of tap dance are replete with challenge dances, From jiggling competitions on plantations (staged by white masters for their slaves) and challenge dances in the walkaround finale of minstrel shows, to showdowns (between black dancers, white dancers, and black and white dancers) on the streets. There were also displays of one-upsmanishhip in social clubs; juried buck-and-wing contests on theater stages after a show; and choreographed challenges on vaudeville stages before whistling, clapping crowds. With its fiercely competitive tradition of racial rivalry and ethnic camaraderie, the challenge dance sets the stage for a "performed" battle for class—respectability and technical perfection—engaging the dancers in a dialogue of rhythm, motion, and witty repartee. Unlike ballet with its codification of formal technique, tap dance developed from people listening to and watching each other dance in the street, dance hall, or social club, where steps were shared, stolen, and reinvented. "Technique" is transmitted visually, aurally, and corporeally, in a rhythmic exchange between dancers and musicians. Mimicry is necessary for the mastery of form. The dynamic and synergistic process of copying the other to invent something new is most important to tap's development. Fiercely competitive, the tap challenge sets the stage for a "performed" battle between dancers while inviting the audience to respond with a whisper of kudos or roar of stomps. As the dancers are engaged in the act of copying and mimicry, they constantly pit their creative invention and spontaneous interplay against charges of appropriation, authenticity, and authorship.

The conceptualization of tap dance as an Afro-Irish fusion, fueled by the competitive interplay of a challenge in a battle for virtuosity and authority, puts into focus issues of race and ethnicity; it inevitably takes on the history of race, racism, and race relations in America. In addition, class was historically an issue in tap dance. Considered mostly a popular entertainment seen on the vaudeville and variety stage and in the movies, tap dance has been placed in the category of "low" art unworthy of the concert stage. Moreover, the absence of women in early accounts of jiggling competitions forces a consideration of gender in the evolution of tap dance, which, for most of the twentieth century, was dominated by men. As the tap dancer Gene Kelly stated in a 1958 CBS television special, Dancing Is a Man's Game: "Dancing is a man's game... and if he does it well, he does it better than a woman. I don't want this to sound as if I'm against women dancing, we must have to remember that each sex is capable of doing things the other can't." That men's claim to (tap) dancing as their exclusive province has become a kind of mythologized truth is clear from even a brief look at the history of tap challenges. Look back to 1900, when Bill Robinson challenged the In Old Kentucky star Harry Swinton to a buck-and-wing dancing contest; to John Bubble's rhythm tap battles at the all-male Hoofers Club in the 1920s; to Earl "Groundhog" Basie's challenge to Chuck Green at the Village Gate in the 1960s; "Baby" Laurence Jackson's hoofers' challenges at the New York Jazz Museum in the 1970s; Gregory Hines and Gregg Burge one-upping each other on Broadway in the 1980s; and Savion Glover and Colin Dunn's battle of feet at the 1997 Grammy Awards.

And that is not all that women were told. Women were weak: they lacked the physical strength needed to perform the rhythm-driven piston steps, multiple-wing steps, and flash and acrobatic steps that symbolized the (male) tap virtuoso's finish to a routine. Women were nurturers, not competitors, and therefore they should not engage in the tap challenge. Until the 1960s, it was thought that an American woman's place lay in marriage and the home—and in the chorus line. Those rules of the game, however ludicrous they sound today, have pointed to an "aristocracy of sex," to apply the term of women's rights pioneer and civil rights activist
Elizabeth Cady Stanton in condemning the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1870 (which gave American black men the right to vote but left out American women of all races) to an authority of the male in tap dancing that has discriminated against and been critical of women—particularly women soloists. If tap dancing in the twentieth century was considered to be “a man's game,” it was also a woman’s mission; it was both a century-long engagement in evolving tap dance as an art form and as an expression of the feminine in the form. Whether choreographers or dancers (soloists, sister acts, chorus dancers), teachers or producers, preservationists or proselytizers, twentieth-century women far outnumbered men in tap. If there has been a “woman’s problem” in tap (to borrow from Betty Friedman’s The Feminine Mystique), it is that women in tap’s history have largely gone unnamed—often only as “chorus girl,” “partner to,” and “Queen of.” This history of tap dance in twentieth-century America begins the naming process.

Complicated issues of race, class, and gender are central to the historical narrative of tap dance in America. I do not attempt to resolve these issues but only to relate how bigotry, racism, and segregation were factors—in retrospect, both blessings and curses—in tap’s evolution as an American vernacular dance form. At best, I can act as mediator between the cultural historians, who need to scrutinize, analyze, and contextualize the ethnic and racial divisiveness in tap’s history, and the tap dancers, who have often turned a colorblind eye in their recounting of tap’s cultural evolution. “Tap is a universal art form, and don’t bring it to me about tap being a black art,” black tap dancer Deborah Mitchell proclaimed. “I know what African Americans gave to it, but don’t put that in my face that it belongs just to me... I know we had the drums, but what I’m saying is that when I look at the gifts that people brought to tap dance, it has all kinds of colors to it. That’s why it was born in America and not in another country.” Mitchell spoke those words to her long-time colleague Brenda Bufalino, who responded with a sentiment expressed by a number of tap elders: “There’s always been a force that wants to divide us... but our tap community has never been divided.”

Although I have endeavored to conceive tap’s evolution in America as an Afro-Irish fusion, I intend this neither to equalize the contributions of Irish and African Americans nor to privilege one over the other—as if equalizing that complex intercultural exchange were so simple or as if there were one unifying narrative that would set in concrete each culture’s contribution. Much as I set out to distinguish the cultures of Irish and African dance and musical forms and rhythmic sensibilities, and as carefully map the two streams of musical theater dancing that evolved from those musical cultures—one based in black vernacular dance and black rhythmic sensibilities, the other in the jig and clog tradition of white Broadway—it became clear early on that the distinctions were not along racial lines but rhythmic sensibilities. Although “the great wave chain of black and white traditions” headed down dual paths of development and “formed a twin chain of dancers and comprised a sort of double helix that wound around the core of tap without ever joining into a single strand,” as Jerry Ames and Jim Siegelman explained in The Book of Tap, the so-called black and white traditions were in constant interplay. The amount of borrowing and imitation was so considerable between the two that the distinctions articulated at the turn of the twentieth century were indistinct by that century’s end. When the great African American dance pioneer Katherine Dunham was asked if she had any misgivings about her collaboration with the Russian American ballet master George Balanchine on the 1940 Broadway musical fantasy Cabin in the Sky, which he had staged and she had choreographed but received no program credit for, she said only that she would have preferred (in the correcting of the historical record) to be credited as “co-choreographer” with Balanchine. When pressed with questions about whether Balanchine, who worked with dancers from her company whom she had trained in Afro-Caribbean dance forms (of which he had no prior knowledge), might be justly accused of appropriating black cultural materials,
Dunham was most intriguing in her response. She did not feel that Balanchine had been unethical or had committed any act of stealth. She described their process of intercultural collaboration as being “a bit like mixing a cake batter smooth, and trying to get all the lumps out.” Dunham’s intercultural mix can aptly be applied to tap’s twentieth-century Afro-Irish fusions; despite the mixing, the “lumps” in tap’s batter thankfully remain.

The story of relations between indentured Irish and enslaved Africans in early America and, later, Irish immigrants of the Great Potato Famine era and African American freemen in American history is extraordinarily complex, so filled with conflict, competition, and lesser-known collaboration as to make the story of tap’s naissance ever more fascinating.

**Afro-Irish Fusions in American Tap Dance**

In the 1650s, during the thirteen-year war between England and Spain (1641–1654), Oliver Cromwell shipped an estimated forty thousand Celtic Irish soldiers to Spain, France, Poland, and Italy. After deporting the men, Cromwell succeeded in deporting their wives and children. Thereafter, thousands more Irishmen, women, and children found themselves hijacked, deported, exiled, or sold into the newly colonized English tobacco islands of the Caribbean.

Within a few years, in a development independent of what was going on in England, substantial numbers of Africans along the Atlantic coast were chained into the so-called coffin ships and transported as slaves to the Caribbean. In an environment dominated by English sugar plantation owners, the Irish indentured servants and the West African slaves worked and lived together. “For an entire century, these two peoples are left out in the fields to hybridize and miscategorize and grow something entirely new,” wrote tap historian Leni Sloan. “Iho men playing bodhrans and fiddles and Kerrymen learning to play jubi drums, set dances becoming syncopated to African rhythm, Saturday night celi dances turning into full-blown voodoo rituals.” The cultural exchange between first-generation enslaved Africans and indentured Irish continued in the British colonies of the Americas through the late 1600s, on plantations and in the surrounding villages and towns, as white indentured servitude was replaced by African slave labor.

On the island of Montserrat, in the Lesser Antilles of the Caribbean, southwest of Antigua, the Africans’ first European language is believed to have been Gaelic Irish, and retentions and reinterpretations of Irish cultural forms are thought to have been pronounced in their music, song, and dance. In Joseph Williams’s book *When the Black Irish of Jamaica?* the sheer number of Irish surnames belonging to former African slaves—Collins, Kennedy, McCormick, O’Hare—supports the contention that enslaved blacks and indentured whites lived (and thus danced) together. They also rebelled together. The 1741 St. Patrick’s Day Rebellion in New York was led by John Cory, an Irish dancing master, and Caesar, a free African, who together burned down the symbols of British rule—the governor’s mansion and main armory. Corey and Caesar died together in the brutal suppression that followed.

**JIG AND GIJUBE**

As Africans were transported to the Americas, African religious circle-dance rituals, which had been of central importance to their lives and cultures, were adapted and transformed. The African American juba, for example, derived from the African *djouba* or *gioube*, moved in a counterclockwise circle and was distinguished by the rhythmic shuffling of feet, clapping hands, and “patting” the body, as if it were a large drum. With the passage of the Slave Laws in the 1740s, which prohibited the beating of drums for fear of slave uprisings (Africans communicated on “talking drums”), creative substitutes were developed such as bone-clapping,
TAP DANCING AMERICA

jawboning, hand-clapping, and percussive footwork. There were also retentions by the indentured Irish, as well as parallel retentions between the Irish and enslaved Africans, of certain music, dance, and storytelling traditions. Both peoples took pride in such skills as dancing while balancing a glass of beer or water on their heads and stepping to intricate rhythmic patterns while singing or lifting those same rhythms. Some contend that the cakewalk, a strutting and prancing dance originated by plantation slaves to imitate and satirize the manners of their white masters, borrowed from the Irish tradition of dancing competitively for a cake; and that Africans may have transformed the Irish marriage custom of “jumping the broomstick” into their own unofficial wedding ceremony at a time when slaves were denied Christian rites.

JIGGING

The oral traditions and expressive cultures of the West Africans and the Irish that converged and collided in America can best be heard in the lilting 6/8 meter of the Irish jig, which was played on the fiddle or the fife. The fusion produced black and white fiddlers who “ragged,” or syncopated, jig tunes. Similarly, the African American style of dance that angled and relaxed the torso, centered movement in the hips, and favored flat-footed gliding, dragging, and shuffling steps, melded with the Irish American style of step dancing, with upright torso, minimized hip motion, and dexterous footwork that favored bounding, hopping, and shuffling.11

By 1800, “jigging” became the general term for this new American percussive hybrid, and it was recognized as a “black” style of dancing in which the body was bent at the waist and movement was restricted from the waist down; jumping, springing, and winging air steps made it possible for the airborne dancer, upon taking off or landing, to produce a rapid and rhythmic shuffling in the feet. Jigging competitions—featuring buck-and-wing dances, shuffling ring dances, and breakdowns—abounded on slave plantations, where dancing was encouraged and often required. As James W. Smith, a slave born in Texas around 1830, remembered after Emancipation:

Master . . . had a little platform built for the jigging contests. Colored folk comes from all around to see who could jig the best . . . . On our place was the jiggerist fellow ever was. Everyone round tries to git somebody to best him. He could . . . make his feet go like tripphammers and sound like the snaredrum. He could whirl round and such, all the movement from his hips down.12

Any dance in the so-called Negro style was called a “breakdown,” and these dances were a favorite with the white riverboat men. Ohio flatboat crews indulged in the Virginia breakdown. In Life on the Mississippi (1883), Mark Twain wrote that “keelboatmen got out an old fiddle and one played and another patted juba and the rest turned themselves loose on a regular old-fashioned keelboat breakdown.”

CLOG AND HORNPIPE

In the early 1700s, great numbers of Scotch-Irish, or Ulster Scots (descendants of British families planted by Protestant Britain in Roman Catholic Ireland to create a Protestant bastion), began to arrive in North America. They settled lands on the frontiers, and, within the colonial amalgam, there were numbers of black “involuntary immigrants” who had come from a wide variety of African cultures. Of the one-quarter to one-third of a million Irish that emigrated to North America between 1700 and the American Revolution, most were Ulster Presbyterians, and almost half eventually settled in the Southern colonies. A minority of those
arriving directly from Ireland aboard ships disembarked at Southern ports, but the majority first landed at Philadelphia, moved west, and then south, often over several generations, down the Great Wagon Road into the backcountry of Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. There, they mingled with smaller streams of immigrants coming up the rivers from Charleston and Savannah. From the migration of Irish and Scots to the southern Appalachian Mountains region and the blending of their step-dancing styles with those of Africans and Native Americans, there evolved what is now called Appalachian Clog dancing. That form of hard-shoe clog dancing used bluegrass “old-time” music, based on Irish and Scotch-Irish fiddle tunes. The interplay of African American and Scotch-Irish dance styles prevailed in the mountain areas of Appalachia, where white settlers and blacks (free and slave) shared their music and dance styles. The resulting potpourri of dance steps resulted in wild and noisy forms (clog shoes made high-toned trilling taps) of African American jiggling, which soon gained prominence over the lighter, controlled forms of Irish jig dancing.

Because white settlers of the Appalachian region were isolated from the influences of urban culture, which depended on professional dancing masters for their dance education, each of the national groups (British, Irish, Scottish) tended to cling to its own cultural identity and folk traditions. As a result, Appalachian Clog dancing—although African influenced—retained much of the authentic, “uncorrupted” style of rural dance as it came from the European homelands. “Isolation tended to preserve older country dance which probably came from the regions around the north of England and the lowlands of Scotland.”

In 1784, John Durang, a white British American who was the first American-born man to win widespread recognition as a professional dancer, introduced his “Sailor’s Hornpipe—Old Style,” a clog dance that mixed ballet steps with African American shuffle-and-winging steps. Performed in burnt cork makeup, Durang’s “Hornpipe” became a popular solo stage dance, one of the earliest prototypes of tap dance on the American stage. Born in York, Pennsylvania, in 1768, in an area that had been densely settled by Scots-Irish, or Ulster Scots, John Durang and family moved to Philadelphia in 1778. In 1784, at age sixteen, he made his debut at the old Southwark Theatre, dancing between the recitations, scenes, and spectacles; his favorite number, then and throughout his career, was the “Hornpipe.” It was published in 1835 by his son, Charles Durang, in a pocket guide to social and theatrical dancing titled “The ball-room bijou and art of dancing, containing the figures of the polkas, mazurkas, and other new dances; with rules for polite behaviour.” It contained a step-by-step description of the dance under the fancy title “Pas de Matelot, A Sailor’s Hornpipe—Old Style.” The enumeration of steps in the choreography proved to be a mongrel mix, as it combined a number of gliding and aerial steps taken from French ballet (glissades, sissonne, and entrechat) with Scotch steps that also drew from the French ballet lexicon. Traditional Scotch country dancing steps include pas de gavotte, pas de bourée, demijs contretemps, and chasse à cote, along with a number of “special Irish steps”—back step, double Irish footing and double cut, double Irish footing and back step, double Irish footing and three shuffles, and single and double Irish footing and running footing for traveling. Although one step, the Whirligig, an early form of the Elizabethan jig, is English, the vast majority of the steps drew from Irish traditional step dancing, such as heel-and-toe, cut-the-buckle, running forward on the heels, beating toes back; also used were variations on the African-derived Shuffle, in which the ball or full foot brushes or scrapes the floor (danced by African slaves, it evolved in the United States into various forms of plantation dances, such as Ring Shout, breakdown, and pigeon-wing)—seven of the twenty-two steps in “Hornpipe” were shuffling steps. The dance was probably performed in soft shoes or slippers, especially Durang’s staged Hornpipe version; introduced in Philadelphia in 1790, it was danced “on 13 eggs; Blindfolded, without breaking one,” making it one of the first soft-shoe dances.
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ETHIOPIAN Delineators and Irish Dancing Masters

By the 1830s, “Ethiopian delineators,” many of them English and Irish actors, arrived in America. By 1820, they had established the singing-dancing “Negro Boy” as a dancehall character; as blackface impersonators, they performed jigs and clogs to popular songs. By 1820, other new forms of entertainment emerged on the American stage for a new and increasingly democratic Jacksonian American population, and royalty and its symbols had been replaced by frontier images of Davy Crockett or even tough urban images of the Irish gangland Bowery Boys. By the end of the 1820s, minstrels (singing and dancing musical men) were copying the latest new song and dance, “Jim Crow,” which had been made a phenomenal success by the white actor and hornpipe dancer Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice (1808–1860).

“DADDY” RICE

Born in New York City in 1808 in the Seventh Ward (a black and Irish ghetto in downtown Manhattan), Thomas Dartmouth Rice spent his early years just blocks from Catherine Market, where he first saw black dancers. His interest in African American folklore, music, and gesture were furthered while touring the South as a young actor. There are a number of conflicting stories about how Rice first saw a black livery stable boy, who was crippled, do a little song and dance—which the actor quickly copied and transformed into one that consisted of limping, shuffling, and jigging movements, with a little jump at the end of each refrain, in which he “set his heel-a-nickin,” in a step known as “rockin’ the heel.” The lyric, set to an old English Morris dance tune, was as follows:

First on de heel,
Den on de toe,
Every time I wheel about
I jump Jim Crow.
Wheel about, turn about.
Jump just so,
An’ every time I turn about.
I jump Jim Crow.

The dance combined the hops of the Irish jig with a jump and a shuffle. The jump came from the custom of the broom jump, which took place when black slave couples were about to get married on the plantation (they would jump over a broom, backwards; if they kicked the broom, they could not marry). The shuffle was the plantation slave’s creative substitute for dancing without crossing the legs, which was forbidden. Wrote the Cork Herald (May 13, 1837) about Rice’s “jump Jim Crow”:

Mr. Rice has all the velocity of a dancing master, with the quaint capers of a clevel-boy—the bewitching grace of Douvernay, in partnership with the sylph-like movement of Taglioni. He varies his jumpings to an infinite extent, starting with different steps, and terminating with different positions in each verse.

Historian Hans Nathan commented on Rice’s loose body styling: “How strained, sprawling, and distorted his posture was, and yet how nonchalant. How unusually grotesque with its numerous sharp angles, and yet how natural. . . . In the windmill fashion, he rolled his body
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TRICKSTER GODS AND RAPPAREES (1650–1900)

BLACKFACE MINSTRELS

After "Daddy" Rice, the Irishmen George Churty and Dan Emmett organized the Virginia
Minstrels, a troupe of blackface performers that consolidated Irish American and Afro-American
song and dance styles on the minstrel stage. By 1840, the minstrel show—a blackface act
of songs, fast-talking repartee in Negro dialects and shuffle-and-wing tap dancing—became
the most popular form of entertainment in the United States. From the minstrel show, the
theatrical tap act inherited the walkaround finale, with dances that had competitive sections in
a performance combining songs, jokes, and specialty dances. Unlike the improvised ecstatic
dances of the slaves, "minstrel dances were consciously worked out, for the stage demanded
planned variety and it encouraged showmanship. The dancer was expected to excel in precision,
speed, near-acrobatic flexibility and endurance, and to stress jolliness and clownishness
for their own sake."

FAMINE IRISH, BLACK SLAVES, AND FREEMEN
ON THE RAILROADS

The year 1845 began the fearsome hunger that Ireland experienced during the Great Potato
Famine, which lasted for five years; it provoked a mass exodus from Ireland (some 1.6 million
to the United States); the population was reduced by death (some 1 million) and by emigration
from 8.1 million in 1840 to 6.5 million in 1850. Thousands of immigrants arrived in America's
port cities of Boston and New York, and New York was considered the most Irish city in the
Union. As English speakers, Irishwomen found work as domestics and became fixtures in the
homes of upper- and middle-class Americans while remaining the backbone of immigrant
families. Irishmen went to work building canals (more than half a million Irish helped to build
the Erie Canal in 1826, the nation's first transportation network) and railroads, often laboring
alongside black slaves.

The construction and maintenance of railroad tracks was the sector of the industry that
employed the greatest number of workers. This so-called section work was often arduous,
unpleasant, and dangerous. Wages were low, and contractors sometimes paid laborers inter-
mittently or not at all. Life in mobile and isolated camps was primitive and violent; the outdoor
work exposed laborers to harsh temperatures and bad weather, and mortality from accidents
and disease was high. Because native-born white workers avoided section work, railroad com-
panies and their contractors sought other sources of low-wage labor. Those who worked the
jobs usually had few alternatives. For much of the nineteenth century, African Americans and
people from Europe, Asia, and Mexico graded the roadbeds, laid the track, and ensured their
upkeep over rail networks that extended tens of thousands of miles.

The ethnic or racial composition of construction or section gangs varied by region and
reflected the sources of available labor. In the North and some border states, Irish constituted
the mid-nineteenth-century construction labor force. From the 1830s through the 1850s and
beyond, contractors building the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad drew mainly on Irish newcom-
ers, Germans, and briefly, a small number of black slaves to grade roadbeds and lay track
across Maryland and western Virginia. The Illinois Central Railroad addressed its serious labor
shortages in the 1850s by recruiting Irish and German immigrants from eastern cities and the
Midwest and, in 1880, answered its section-gang shortages in southern Illinois by employing
blacks. A far different racial and ethnic force was used in the West and Southwest. The con-
struction of the transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869 by the Union Pacific meeting up

with the West Coast–based Central Pacific, required an army of laborers, including a small number of blacks, a larger group of Irish, and some twelve thousand Chinese (of the 13,500 Central Pacific workforce).22

In the American South, railroad construction and maintenance labor usually meant black labor. The relatively small Southern railroad systems in the antebellum era depended almost exclusively on slave labor to lay and repair track. The slave labor force on Southern railroads is estimated to have been more than twenty thousand just before the Civil War.23 Antebellum Southern railroad management might hire whites or purchase their own slaves. Irish immigrants were preferred, particularly in the North and the border states, and even at times in the South. Beginning in 1850, the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad’s grading was done by Irish laborers and hired slaves as it pushed into southwestern Virginia. In much of the South, however, efforts at employing immigrants proved unsatisfactory. Forced to hire white men temporarily when slaves were unavailable, the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad was quickly disappointed, finding “the class of white men secured was less reliable than the slaves.” At other times, clashes between Irish and slave workers or between different groups of Irish immigrants contributed to the railroads’ decision to purchase their own bondsmen. By the Civil War, the North Carolina Railroad hired 318 slaves from their owners and, when further hiring became difficult, finally purchased twenty-eight slaves. “This is the way to build railroads,” a New Orleans newspaper concluded in 1859, when some eighty-eight slaves were put to work on an Alabama construction project. These men would “probably do more work, and for one-fourth the cost, than double the number of hired laborers.”24

In the South, Irishmen were occasionally employed when it did not make sense to risk the life of a slave. Irish immigrants came to the cities and crowded into low-rent and squatter districts, which often bred crime, vice, and disease. There, the Irish lived among African Americans; they fought each other and the police, socialized, and occasionally intermarried. Together, they developed a common culture of the lowly. There were such black Irish ghettos as the Five Points in lower Manhattan, Dandy Hall in Philadelphia, Bucktown in Cincinnati, and in mixed neighborhoods from Boston to the South. The Greek American journalist Lafcadio Hearn’s 1876 description of folks in Picket’s tavern in the levee town of Bucktown, Cincinnati, tells it all:

A sharp-faced Irish girl . . . a ruddy-faced young white woman, the wife of a colored bar-keeper; a white brunette who feigns having colored blood in her veins . . . . Every conceivable hue possible to the human skin might be studied in the dense and motley throng . . . dancing breakdowns, dancing jigs.25

Both the Irish and the blacks suffered the scorn of those better situated. Along with the black-mocking Jim Crow and Jim Dandy figures, the drunken, belligerent, and foolish Pat and Mike or Pat and Bridget were stock characters on the early American stage. In antebellum days, it was speculated that if racial amalgamation was ever to take place, it would begin with the Irish and blacks.26

**SEAN-NOS (OLD STYLE) IRISH STEPPING**

Many of the Irish immigrants who sailed to America in the wake of the Great Potato Famine came from the western Connemara Gaeltacht region of Ireland. The western region was home to much of the traditional music, characteristically played on such instruments as the fiddle, uilleann pipes, wooden flute, tin whistle, accordion, concertina, tenor banjo, and mandolin, often accompanied by guitar, piano, bouzouki, bodhran, or bones. It was also
home to a style of step dancing called sean-nos, or "old style." Sean-nos was unlike the northern style of step dancing, recorded from Donegal, Fermanagh, Tyrone, Cavan, Meath, Sligo, and the region of Ireland north of a line drawn from Galway to Drogheda that was described as a noisy "series of batters" because of its association with English clog dancing. Sean-nos was also unlike the southern (or Munster) style of step dancing, a "heightened" style that poises the dancer on the balls of the feet and rarely drops onto the heels. The Southern style was the only one that was codified and systematically taught by traveling dance masters, many of whom came to America; it forms the basis of the style used by today's Irish dancing schools. Sean-nos was a flat-footed shuffling style, in which the dancer used the heel and ball of the foot in rapid rhythmic movements, with a relaxed torso, arms swaying with the body's movements.

The western sean-nos style of Irish step dancing, which angles and relaxes the torso and favors flat-footed gliding, dragging, and shuffling steps, bears many striking resemblances to the African shuffle and some African American styles of jiggling. Thus, it splinters the narrative that Mark Knowles explains in his 2002 book, *Tap Roots*—that tap dance was created as "a mixture of the African and Anglo-Celtic cultures." Knowles writes that Irish minstrels "first co-opted African dance movements, and then counterfeited them," and that there may have been "a germ of authenticity" in the reproductions but the movements "were reinvented out of the social misconceptions about African-Americans of that time, and were presented in overstated, burlesque parody with show business in mind...as a distortion and a heightening of the various elements within each." The word "distortion" is problematic and misleading. It is more appropriate to say that, within the mother tongue of Irish dance, immigrant Irish minstrel dancers added to their own native source materials some African American source materials. In other words, their dances were, first and foremost, Irish dances—jigs and reels—to which had been added "color," fully camouflaged to reference popular African American styles of movement. Knowles's statement that "Irishmen [were] drawing not so directly from Irish tradition as on their experiences and exposure to the Afro-American folk and cultural traditions, a tradition that had, in so many critical ways, grown up along lines parallel to the Irish tradition," is just misleading. The reality is quite the opposite. Irish minstrel dancers could base their new material only on Gaelic-Irish tradition.

The Irish minstrel dancer's "translation" of his experience of seeing blacks dance in America was revisionist. His stage costume may have referenced the black livery stable boy, and his burnt-cork blackface mask may have adapted the performance tradition of minstrelsy—which in a ludicrous way referenced the black male dancing body. His stump speeches may have comically caricatured the Southern black speech (profoundly funny for the Irish brogue through which black speech was spoken), and his dances may have aped the multitude of "nigger breakdowns." Still, the Irishman's basic and reigning aesthetic—his orientation and musical intelligence—was informed by Irish culture, despite any desire for acceptance and for citizenship in the United States. I daresay that in many instances, New World Irishmen did not study black men, their social world, or dance celebrations (and rarely, if ever, visited the American South). For their blackface impersonations, they relied on secondary source materials—other Irish Ethiopian delineators of the popular stage. In fact, despite the masking and the costuming, Irish minstrels were never mistaken for black men. Burnt-cork makeup may have masked their Irishness—acting as a convenient disguise for masking Irish identity and the Irish presence in performance, in terms of stepping vocabulary, wit, musicality, and the speed, clarity, and precision of battering—but it did not eradicate it. Those core generic elements were unmistakably Irish, and they were the integral features of what was staged, blackface minstrel dance.
MASTER JUBA

Largely because of William Henry Lane (c. 1825–1852), tap dancing in the minstrel period was able to retain its African American integrity. Born a free man, Lane grew up in the Five Points district of lower Manhattan (now the area northwest of the South Street Seaport). Many thoroughfares were then lined with brothels and saloons frequented by free blacks and indigent Irish immigrants. Lane, who learned to dance from “Uncle” Jim Lowe, a skilled African American jig and reel dancer, was unsurpassed in grace and endurance. He became popular for imitating the steps of famous minstrel dancers of the day, then executing his own specialty steps, which no one could copy. He was also a first-rate singer and a tambourine virtuoso. By 1844, after beating the reigning Irish American minstrel John Diamond (1823–1857) in a series of challenge dances. Lane was hailed “King of All Dancers” and proclaimed “Master Juba” (after the African juba, or gioube, a step dance resembling a jig with elaborate variations; the name had often been given to black slaves who were dancers and musicians).

In 1843, Lane had the unprecedented distinction of touring with the all-white Ethiopian Minstrels and receiving top billing. He traveled to London in 1848 with the blackface minstrel troupe Pell’s Ethiopian Serenaders, enthralling English critics and audiences, discerning judges of traditional jigs and clogs. He performed without blackface for the young Queen Victoria. “Far above the common performances of the mountebanks who give imitations of American and Negro character, there is an ideality in what he does that makes his efforts . . . poetical, without losing sight of the reality of representation,” wrote the Theatrical Times. In America, Juba’s influence kept the minstrel show dance in touch with its Afro-American source material at a time when the stage was dominated by white (and largely Irish) performers. His grafting of African rhythms and loose body styles onto the exacting techniques of jig and clog dancing helped to create a new kind of dance that was neither African nor European; it was a new rhythmic blend that became one of the earliest forms of modern American tap dance.

With the rare exception of William Henry Lane, African American dancers were typically banned from performing in minstrel shows until after the Civil War (1861–1865). Then they gained access to the minstrel stage, and African American minstrel troupes advertised themselves as “genuine” and “real” to set themselves apart from the white troupes. Despite having to abide by the blackface convention that had been established by white minstrels, these performers struggled to redefine their own post–Civil War identities; thereby they created new onstage representations of African American life. So, too, old dances that had been minstrel favorites were renovated, stripped of their more grotesque qualities. New ways of dancing, such as tapping to stop-time and dancing on sand, were also introduced, and the emerging tap vocabulary was infused with a variety of new steps, rhythms, and choreographic structures from African American social dance forms. In the 1870s, such dances as “Essence of Old Virginia,” originally a rapid and pigeon-toed dance when performed on the minstrel stage, was slowed down and popularized by the African American minstrel Billy Kersands; it was later refined by the Irish American minstrel George Primrose into a graceful soft-shoe, or song-and-dance, the most elegant of tap dances on the musical stage.

At the turn of the twentieth century, when the syncopated and duple-metered rhythms of ragtime were introduced on the musical stage, tap dance underwent its most significant transformation, one resulting from a new and unprecedented blending of European melodic and harmonic complexities with African-derived syncopation. Tap dance, developing in direct relationship to jazz music—sharing its rhythmic motifs, polyrhythms, multiple meters, elements of swing, and its structured improvisation—would evolve into one of the earliest forms of jazz dance. But it did so only after a two-hundred-year evolution as an Afro-Irish fusion,