relaxed easy swing of the rhythmic pattern and along with it a drive of his own that runs along with the music and anticipates the restless urge of its lags, stresses, and sharp syncopations." A good dancer must, in effect, wear at least two rhythms and make them visible: he or she must register "the relaxed easy swing" of the song’s pulse but also the musical riffs with individual, personalized limb movements. Ferguson, too, lacked a dance vocabulary; but he respected the dancing at the Savoy enough that even after describing the "hopeless[ly] intricate mass of flying ankles, swirls, stomps," he simply stated that it was "really beautiful dancing."

The initial explosion of a new musical idiom is a response to a collective cultural need for a set of movements that reflect the new historical "time." In other words, one dances the new time, and by dancing, inscribes it on the body. (Isn’t this one way an American teenager becomes a member of his or her generation?) At the Savoy, sometimes the dancers led the musicians; sometimes the musicians led the dancers. When Savoy dancers would "forget dancing and flock around the [band]stand ten deep" to watch and listen to Teddy Hill’s band pile up improvised choruses to "Christopher Columbus," the music had asserted leadership. The fans were trying "to register the time... with their bones and muscles... letting it flow over them like water," and get this new industrial power into their systems. "The floor shakes and the place is a dynamo room, with the smoky air pushing up in steady waves." When the dancers took the leadership, the musicians had to exert more rhythmic force to ground them. The function of the new swing rhythm section was to create a dense, powerful "beat of guitar-piano-string-bass-drum [to] nail all this lavish and terrific energy down to the simple restraints of a time signature." To inscribe Machine Age forces on American bodies required four rhythm instruments.34

Once bands could project that kind of power, dancers such as the young Malcolm X could take flight. Writing with both enthusiasm and expertise about the lindy, Malcolm X in his memoir retains the swing hopes of black possibility inherent in the dance. Almost a quarter of The Autobiography of Malcolm X centers on swing-era dance halls such as Boston’s Roseland and the Savoy.35 On his very first visit to Roseland, Malcolm X responded to the bandleader Lionel Hampton’s "wailing" by "whirling girls so fast their skirts were snapping... Boosting them over my hips, my shoulders, into the air... Circling, tap-dancing, I was underneath them when they landed—doing the 'flapping eagle,' 'the kangaroo' and the 'split.'" He quickly became a strong enough dancer
to stay on the floor even during “showtime,” the last set in the evening
“when only the greatest lindy hoppers would stay on the floor, to try and
eliminate each other.” All the nonparticipating dancers would create a
circle for “showtime,” with the hand-clappers “form[ing] a big ‘U’ with
the band at the open end.” This is a variation of the archetypal West
African dance (and community) circle inside which dancers express
themselves, only here it is more of an oval and the band is included
within the round.

For Malcolm X, a successful lindy hop partnership depended upon
reducing the friction between partners to increase speed and enhance
the expression of horizontal flow. This was accomplished through a dy-
namic “push-pull” tension.

With most girls, you . . . work opposite them, circling, side-stepping,
leading . . . your hands are giving that little pull, that little push,
touching her waist, her shoulders, her arms . . . . With poor partners,
you feel their weight. They’re slow and heavy. But with really good
partners, all you need is just the push-pull suggestion. They guide
nearly effortlessly, even off the floor and into the air, and your little
solo maneuver is done on the floor before they land, when they join
you, whirling, right in step.

But the key to the lindy’s excitement was continuous motion, the ability
of a couple to fluidly combine different moves without a discrete pause.
Malcolm X brags of his ability to time his quick solo maneuver so as to fin-
ish the moment his partner returns (sometimes from the air), that mo-
ment “[w]hen] they join you, whirling, right in step.” His favorite partner,
Laura, taught him the importance of lightness and flexibility. With Laura,
Malcolm X only needed to “think a maneuver, and she’d respond.” Twenty
years later he still remembered clearly “her footwork . . . like some blurring
ballet—beautiful! And her lightness, like a shadow!” He did not believe
this lissome woman had the strength or stamina for the demands of the
lindy hop at full throttle during what dancers called “Showtime”; but one
night Laura wanted to compete and changed into sneakers. “They [Rose-
land dancers] never had seen the feather-lightness that she gave to lindy-
ning, a completely fresh style—and they were connoisseurs of styles.” Her
lighter, more balletic movements made them the heroes of the dance floor
that night. “I turned up the steam, Laura’s feet were flying; I had her in the
air, down, sideways around; backwards, up again, down, whirling . . . . I
couldn’t believe her strength. The crowd was shouting and stomping.”

262 CHAPTER SEVEN
Boston’s Roseland “look[ed] small and shabby by comparison” to the Savoy, Malcolm X admitted, and “the lindy-hopping there matched the size and elegance of the place.” He also estimated a full third of the sideline booths were filled with white tourists who had come to “just watch the Negroes dance.” Harlem residents had nicknamed the Savoy “the Track” (short for racetrack), a tribute to the ballroom as an arena of excitement. In the 1930s the racetrack still retained its glamour as one of high society’s most exciting venues; it’s where the action was. In swing-era jazz slang, “stallions” and “fillies” referred to young men and women; the “track” was a nickname honoring the action on the dance floor where the smartest, fastest human beings competed for the appreciation of the “connoisseurs” of elegance, speed, and motion.57

The Savoy was a must for New York City tourists, and “visitors from all the world over . . . attended the famous Savoy Saturday Swing Sessions or Tuesday night ‘400’ Club initiations to see these amazing dance spectacles performed by talented, unbelievable fast action dancers . . . under the directorship of Herbert ‘Whitey’ White.” The lindy hopper Norma Miller remembers the visits of Lana Turner, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Orson Welles. “Press agents saw the value of having the stars come to the ballroom,” she remembered. “The boxes were reserved for them.”58 The Savoy claimed to receive ten million visitors between 1926 and 1945 (an average of two thousand a night). Nearly every big band recorded a version of “Stomping at the Savoy,” and the equally popular ballad “Savoy” was the first song recorded by Judy Garland.59

The Savoy was a unique institution in American life: a multicultural public space without ethnic stratification where Americans learned to move together in time. The lindy’s expansive use of the 30’-by-150’ gleaming mahogany dance floor reflected the excitement of cultural democracy. Nearly a dozen American social dances were created at the Savoy. The ballroom was also a community institution and the most important public space in Harlem; it was famous for its interracial clientele and its egalitarian treatment, and was a symbol of social equality. When the Savoy was temporarily closed on trumped-up political charges in 1945, the lyricist Andy Razaf penned a bitter ode in his Amsterdam News column: “Yes, the Savoy is guilty . . . Guilty of impartiality/of healthy geniality/guilty of hospitality/Guilty of syncopation/of joy and animation . . . Guilty of national unity/of practicing real democracy/By allowing the races openly/to dance and mingle in harmony.”60

For Afrodiasporic cultures, dance has always been more what Clifford
Geertz calls “deep play” than escapist entertainment or simple emotional outlet. Music and dance have a “quite different and incomparably greater significance” for Africans than for Europeans, wrote the musicologist E. M. von Hornbostel in 1928, and they do not fit “under the general headings of Art or Games . . . serv[ing] neither as mere pastimes nor recreations.” Instead, music and dance are fitted to speech and to work rhythms, and they reflect “psycho-physical conditions”; these forms help free the body from heaviness and effort through repetitive action. The desired result is that “vitality is heightened above its normal state.”

African Americans “talk back” to their environment through imitation and dance. Among Afrodisporic peoples, “mimicry is used to capture, restate, and control the ashe (soul force) of the object.” In the cakewalk, for example, African Americans mocked the formal walk and mannerisms of the southern planter class. The dance served to neutralize the cultural power of upper-class culture through irony and derision, and it captured and restated such manifestations of economic power as a high-stepping, comic, joyful, controlled display of physical control within the archetypal West African circle.

A similar ethos of mimicry underlies the stylization of machine aesthetics. In African American culture, dance moves have always “imitated the work routine.” In the late nineteenth century, former slaves remembered calling out such phrases as “pitchin’ hay,” “corn shuckin’,” and “cuttin’ wheat” to dancers performing the cakewalk. Stevedores on the docks and track-laying gandy dancers used rhythm to stylize repetitive work. In the cotton fields, blues vocalization and song forms grew out of field hollers, turning work calls into personal cries that helped lessen the drudgery and neutralize the anomie caused by an implacable dominant culture.

If the work routine suddenly centered on machines, then machines themselves had to be brought into the dance. If machines have too much power in everyday life (too much ashe), human beings must pump up their soul force to compete with the new power in order to survive. This is what the bandleader Vincent Lopez meant when he realized jazz in 1917 created an immediate shift in the tempo of show business from music of the “heart” to that of the “adrenal glands.” Lindy hoppers did not self-consciously stylize machine aesthetics into a hard-swinging artistic dance; but if Afrodisporic dance traditions work within a philosophical framework based on signifying on the soundscape through music and
dance, the new machine-driven tempo had to be aesthetically integrated. One has to ritualize that which runs wild in the environment.

Within a tradition of propulsive rhythms, improvisation, and revitalization through dance, there is no reason to believe the machine represented an unintegratable set of rhythms and aesthetics. The host of a talk show once joked to Frankie Manning, “A ton of bricks could fall on you and you wouldn’t lose the rhythm.” Manning accepted the compliment shyly and replied: “Well, I don’t know about that... I think I might teach the bricks the rhythm.” The best African American dancers bring this attitude to the dance floor.

The Speed and Flow of the Lindy Hop

The most distinctive element in the lindy was the low-to-the-ground horizontal flow. Compared to the back-and-forth, up-and-down moves of the Charleston or the turkey trot, the lindy emphasized smooth, continuous, fluid motion. Frankie Manning danced from a crouch, bent low, his knees flexed, and he pivoted from this lower posture. “I like to dance slow, and have a buoyancy,” he explained. “Other folks [that is, whites] dance upright—without getting their knees into it.” Manning’s crouch is the standard opening posture for the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, and it is antithetical to the upright European posture. The upper torso is bent forward at an angle of ninety degrees to the thighs, which flex forward at the knees. In contrast to a statuesque ideal, such a relaxed posture prepares a dancer for intricate lower-body manipulation, large trunk movements, and propulsion from the pelvic center. As Stearns has pointed out, Africans dance with their center of gravity in the hips and pelvis, and the energy explodes out through the legs. Nearly all lindy hoppers dance from the crouch today, as one can see even in the popular 1999 television commercial for The Gap that anachronistically featured all white dancers. But in the 1930s there was a distinctive difference between white and black lindy hoppers. Howard Johnson, a sociology professor and former Cotton Club dancer, recalled that “the smoothness and flow was unfamiliar to whites.” Ernie Smith, a white lindy hopper from Pittsburgh and later a dance historian, recalled that young white middle-class dancers jitterbugged “more up and down, more staccato.” Black dancers, “instead of hopping up and down, [made] everything [look] smooth. It’s effortless dancing, really.” The term “jitterbug” is thought to derive from black observers describing the
jerky, up-and-down (vertical) accentuation of white lindyers, and it was codified in Cab Calloway’s 1932 hit, “I’m a Jitterbug.” According to Smith, white dancers “weren’t what we call “cool”—a term also coined in the late 1930s (“a cool cat”) that always contains associations with smooth motion, relaxed rhythm, and emotional control.30

The two most difficult characteristics of the lindy for whites to master were “the pelvic motion” (“the gyrating hips”) and the polyrhythmic response of the body. “You have to sway forwards and backwards, with a controlled hip movement,” Smith recalled, “while your shoulders stay level and your feet glide along the floor.” A dancer thus must keep the shoulders squared, the hips rolling, and the legs and feet in constant motion. The pelvic motions felt “obscene” to Smith at the time, and whites generally “couldn’t stand the gyrating movements.” The lindy hop was a black dance; “even when whites are doing it, it’s still a black dance.”31

One can see the cultural difference in the photos of the white and black couples in the 1943 Life cover story. Almost every photo of Leon James and Willa Mae Ricker, of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, capture the couple in step and yet in flux. In half the photos, one of the two dancers is airborne. In one shot, Ricker is flipped over in a 135-degree angle to the floor, yet her legs are straight and together. In a Gjon Mili photograph that later became famous, the dancers appear to be hanging in mid-air; exuberant smiles on their faces, bent in well-defined crouches, and attached only lightly by one hand, they seemingly defy gravity. By contrast, Stanley Catron and Kaye Popp, the white professional dancers on the magazine cover, feature barely bent knees and an upright orientation. When alleged to be showing the “swing-out” move and the “jig walk,” they seem to be making only vaguely undulating movements; in the over-the-back move, Popp seems to be struggling not to land head-first on the floor. Certainly, according to all accounts, there were dozens of excellent white lindy hoppers. But the white dancers photographed in Life reveal none of the torque, whirl, and precision of Leon James and Willa Mae Ricker.32

The lindy was a social dance built for speed. Euro-American critics sometimes thought the fast numbers in a black band’s repertoire—the “flagwavers” or “killer-dillers”—were gratuitously flashy, and lacking in precision and musical substance. But younger dancers requested these songs; according to Norma Miller, the goal was the “perfect attunement between dance and music.” Miller enjoyed the competition and imita-
tion of the white dancers at the Savoy. “We didn’t mind that people came from downtown to watch us. No white kids could ever cut us up on the floor. But we liked that they tried. When they came close, we’d just ask the band to up the tempo.” Her confidence belied a hostility related to the racial realities of the time: “They [whites] couldn’t take this from us. They had everything else.”

More than speed and horizontal flow, the continuous motion of the lindy thrilled dancers and audiences. Manning worked with his partner Freda Washington day after day to create the first air step, the “over-the-back” move in which the couple locked arms and Manning pulled Washington over his head. The key artistic aim was to land in time with the music and continue through to the next move. When the couple could land on the beat every time—“Now I’m ready,” Manning recalled thinking—they went to compete in the Saturday night Savoy contest. The moment after they completed the over-the-back move and powered through to the next step, the entire audience—dancers, musicians, spectators—stopped. “No one cared about the contest no more,” Manning recalled with pride. With the creation of a few more air steps like the “hip to hip” and the “side flip,” the lindy’s success was complete, and teams of professional lindy hoppers spread the dance through vaudeville, night clubs, and Broadway musicals.

The contrast of the vertical accents of the air steps with the smooth, continuous horizontal motion was thrilling, a mix of skyscraper aspiration and steady locomotive power. The dancers “toss[ed] each other around with what appeared to be fatal abandon,” Stearns recalled, “[and] no matter how high a dancer soared, he hit the deck right on the beat and swung along into the next step.”

The lindy hoppers were “a kind of folk avant-garde,” to use Marshall Stearns’s term. They were often teenagers who worked for hours every day on their routines and on creating new steps. Norma Miller remembers that tourists thought the lindy was “a spontaneous exhibition by a regular group of dancers . . . [but] what they were watching was rehearsed and choreographed dance.” The lindy hop did not achieve its professional form overnight, but in conjunction with the growing rhythmic power and sophistication of big bands.

The machine aesthetics of the lindy helped devalue what the dance historian Sally Banas terms “the eterealized bodies of Euro-American culture.” An anthropologist who analyzed ballet as a white European ethnic dance form identified its aesthetic emphasizes: “the long line of
lifted, [upward-] extended bodies,” “the total revealing of legs,” “[the importance] of small heads and tiny feet for women . . . [and of] slender bodies for both sexes.” Of primary importance was “the coveted airy quality . . . best shown in the lifts and carries of the female.” Airiness, petite bodies, lack of contact with the ground—a dance aesthetic that valorized such ethereal qualities could not hope to contain the energies of mass production or reflect a dynamic, speeded-up tempo of life. A *Vanity Fair* critic noted disparagingly in 1929 that “the classic ballet was the expression on tiptoe of a sigh.” Isadora Duncan claimed ballet was already sterile in 1900 because the goal of its dancers was “to create the delusion that the law of gravitation [did] not exist for them.”

African American dancers work with, not against, the laws of gravity, and the torque of the “swing-out” was functionally compelling because of its dynamic integration. Instead of a set pattern danced repetitively (as in a waltz) the lindy contained a common vocabulary of moves to be used in any order and improvised by each individual couple. The lindy’s fast tempos and propulsive circular motion—the torque of it—added to the illusion of speed, generating a sense of smooth, dynamic motion. In African American communities, a new dance often precedes a new rhythm, and if necessary the dancers clap their own rhythms to cue the musicians. The dance director Lida Webb brought this practice to the Broadway stage in *Runnin’ Wild*, having the dance chorus provide “hand-clapping and foot-patting” to “beat out the irresistible . . . rhythm in a veritable Charleston seminar for white Broadway audiences.” The musicologist Howard Spring has suggested that lindy hoppers *caused* the musical innovations of big band swing, that young black dancers “called” for a faster, more propulsive, more rhythmically sophisticated music. According to Spring, lindy hoppers similarly created the impetus for the musical shift from the New Orleans two-beat to the articulation of an even four beats and swing tempo. A number of jazz musicians provide testimony supporting this possibility.

**The Harvest Moon Ball**

The lindy hop entered a new phase of recognition and popularity when members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers swept the lindy hop division of the first Harvest Moon Ball in 1935. Sponsored by the *New York Daily News* at Madison Square Garden between 1935 and 1950, the Harvest Moon Ball was a unique swing-era cultural event that highlights the importance of dynamic social dance to Depression-era young Americans.
The event sold out within hours every year, a fact that never failed to shock New York City's theater and entertainment professionals. The comedian Milton Berle hosted the program for the first two years; the *Daily News* columnist Ed Sullivan took over for the next six. Some seventy-five or so couples competed in six ballroom events (waltz, fox trot, tango, rumba, lindy) to live music provided by two name dance bands; the second band played expressly to accompany the lindy hoppers. The prize for the all-around champion couple, and each division champion, was a one-week-long contract to perform at the Loew's State Theater. The all-around champions received $750 and the division champs $250.\textsuperscript{54}

The biggest stars of Hollywood and Broadway provided entertainment between rounds of the competition. In 1939 they included Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, and the Andrews Sisters. Celebrity dancers, movie stars, sports figures, and political leaders sat in a row of celebrity boxes, and tap-dancing actors (George Raft in 1939, James Cagney and Ray Bolger in 1940) were known to give the crowds a quick thrill when called upon to dance.\textsuperscript{55} The five-member panel of judges were "all world-renowned authorities in the professional dancing world." In 1935 they included the dance teacher Arthur Murray, the founder of the Rockettes, a senior producer at Radio City, and the owner of New York's Roseland.

The Garden not only sold out quickly every year, but more than five thousand fans often stood outside and heard the festivities over loudspeakers. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia presided every year; at the end of the debut ball, he told a live radio audience it had been "one of the most interesting evenings of my life. . . . The quality of the dancing is far beyond what I imagined amateurs could do. . . . It is truly a splendid event."\textsuperscript{56} Theatrical professionals were still shocked ten years later. "The pulling power of the amateur dance contest is no longer a novelty," the *Daily News* observed in 1944, "but it is still a source of amazement to veteran showmen."\textsuperscript{57}

Owing to the event's partisan sponsorship, the ball has perhaps escaped historical scrutiny; no other city newspaper except the *New York Daily News* mentioned it. The *Daily News* covered it at the level of a major championship athletic event, and its staging had much in common with the boxing matches that made the Garden famous. The dancers competed in an enlarged boxing ring, a "raised platform, 30 x 40 feet . . . perched in the middle of the floor." The first Harvest Moon Ball was "charged with the gala air of a championship boxing battle."\textsuperscript{58} The entire back page of the August 29, 1935, edition was taken up by a
panoramic photograph of the Garden’s interior showing the huge crowd and the central ring. Photos from the ball—of dancers in midstep, of celebrities, of the crowd—dominated the tabloid’s front page, back page, and centerfold every year until the outset of World War II. Even during the war, the “king and queen . . . of the ball” were often pictured on the front page beneath such headlines as “Laval, Nazis’ Friend, Shot” (1941) and “Bomb 9 More Jap Ships” (1944).69

Nor was it a cheap event, or one just for “the bobby-soxers” or “the kids” (as teenagers were often termed). Prices for the first year were 55¢, $1.10, and $2.20 for box seats, at a time when a top price for a Broadway show was about $3.30. The average age of the audience was roughly twenty-three (if the winners are representative), and many of the winning couples were engaged, married, or planning to tie the knot. The marriage angle was a staple of the coverage, as reporters constantly asked the winning couples the status of their relationship. Winners were listed by occupation: clerk, bookkeeper, machinist, salesman, nurse, secretary, hairdresser.70

The event’s origins are unclear. Norma Miller claims it was part of a series of responses to the Harlem race riot that took place in March 1935. The Savoy sustained some damage during the riot, and a meeting of the owner and managers resulted in the idea of a big dance. They met with the management of the Daily News and discussed “what could be done about the damaged property and the community’s damaged morale” and “how to raise Harlem’s tattered spirits and to restore the ballroom’s business.” They decided on a citywide contest as a way to popularize the lindy and restore morale. The city agreed to build a bandstand for two orchestras at Central Park and to provide a large dance floor. There was to be one white society band (first year, Abe Lyman) and one swing band for the lindy hoppers (Fletcher Henderson). Miller saw it as “our chance to put the Lindy on the map. . . . We were gonna let the world know about the Lindy and that it belonged to us!” Rehearsing for the ball “became the main focus of our lives.”71

Certainly it is possible that community and municipal leaders believed the event would encourage young African Americans to spend their free time in the summer practicing for the competition. Moreover, all profits from the event went to the News Welfare Association to pay for two-week summer vacations for the city’s underprivileged children, as administered by the Children’s Welfare Federation.72 But the coverage in the Daily News suggests the lindy was a late addition to the Harvest
Moon Ball. The idea to include “Lenox Avenue’s favorite step” came at the insistence of James V. Mulholland, the supervisor of recreation for the Park Department (the municipal department supporting the event). Neighborhood competitions for the ball were held at outdoor dancing parties throughout the city that summer, and Mulholland witnessed “the enormous success of the city’s first Harlem dancing party at Colonial Park” in mid-July. “The waltz, the tango, the rhumba and the fox-trot are all right, but what about the Lindy Hop? I never saw better dancing than . . . those couples doing the Lindy Hop in Harlem. It was a fine, well-behaved, carefree crowd, and we certainly want them represented in the contest.” Mulholland personally requested the creation of a lindy division in the dance competition and “were we glad to oblige!” the reporter editorialized.75

Whatever the motivation for the first Harvest Moon Ball, the response took everyone by surprise. Called for Central Park on August 15, 1935, the first event drew a huge crowd of 150,000 people; because the police had no means to control such a crowd, the ball was postponed for two weeks and rescheduled for Madison Square Garden. Miller remembered the contrast between what she called the “ballroom people” and the lindy hoppers. “You couldn’t imagine a bigger contrast. . . . First of all, the clothes: they had tuxes and evening dresses, and we were in sneakers and short skirts. Then there was the noise. The ballroom people danced silently, maybe swishing their gowns a little. But there’s no such thing as a quiet lindy hop. We grunted and screamed, like martial arts people do today. We’d never seen people dance quiet before.” Her memories are reflected in the Daily News coverage. Statuesque Anglo-Americans in “tuxes and evening dresses” usually won the overall competition, and were also the most photographed. But the crowd favorites were the hard-working, “grunt[ing] and scream[ing]” lindy hoppers in “sneakers and short skirts.”

Miller and her fellow Harlem teenagers were shocked to find out there would be rules—and judges—at the first Harvest Moon Ball. “We’d never heard of dancing to rules. We couldn’t be away from our partners and had to have our feet on the floor. And the crowd didn’t decide the winner [as at the Savoy]—they had all white judges and a point system!”76 Miller points up the conceptual difference in European-derived and African-derived concepts of art, between classical training and an oral tradition of embodiment, challenge, and participatory consciousness. In the latter, the audience decides the winner and there is no
correct way to dance; the audience chooses according to the excitement generated, to the syncing up of dancers to the music, to the physical control and execution of moves.  

The dancers first came out in a “grand parade.” All the contestants were white except the lindy hoppers, yet the Harlem dancers drew the loudest cheers from the crowd, and “responded to the yells by swinging when we walked.” Miller thought all the white dancers looked stunning in their formal gowns and tuxedos, and reflected that most of the dancers were working class with “low-income jobs . . . dancing was their way of escaping.” She was surprised at how well the men fit their clothes, “carpenters and janitors . . . looked as if they were born for that attire.” Yet when the same dancers began to lindy hop, she became belligerent: they “seemed clumsy to us . . . and watching them butcher our dance made our tempers flare.” When the Fletcher Henderson band began to play, Miller recalled her competitive response. “Harlem came on . . . we were like a group of caged animals, ready to burst from the box.”

The lindy hop was always the hit of both the Harvest Moon Ball and the subsequent Loew’s State Theater program. In 1936, the reporter Jack Turcott wrote that “it was the Lindy Hop which really set the audience on fire. Shoulders swayed and 22,000 pairs of feet tapped in unison as the competing couples swung into this infectious step.” In 1937, lindy hoppers “brought down the house with their wild gyrations.” In 1939, “The amusing Lindy Hop . . . brought down the house as usual, and the show closed with all the champions doing . . . the Conga.” Once the lindy hoppers repeated their debut success of 1935, they became, according to the Daily News, “the sole topic [of discussion] in theatrical circles.”

To recognize the dance’s popularity in 1936, the second-place lindy-hopping couple also received a one-week contract to appear at the Loew’s State Theater; no such offer was made to any other second-place couple. Beginning in 1938, the first three lindy-hopping winners were signed to one-week contracts at the Loew’s; they “brought down the house” there, too, on a program that included a first-run movie, a music act, professional tap dancers, and comedy skits. Despite the importance of the lindy hop to these events, the dance and the dancers were noted only at the end of the articles in the Daily News. In 1940 Roger Dakin concluded his review of the Loew’s program by saying it was a “must-see on the week’s Broadway show list.” “The fast-moving show closed, as usual, with the lindy hoppers from Harlem.
bringing down the house. Wilda Crawford and . . . Thomas Lee, abetted by the other speedy teams . . . [had] the audience on the verge of hysteria.” He repeated the template the following year: “The swiftly paced lindy hoppers from Harlem [brought] down the house. . . . [They] had the audience on the verge of hysteria.” In 1938 he had reported that for an “agreeable surprise” encore at the Loew’s, the second and third place
lindy couples (Joyce James and Joe Daniels, Bunny Miller and George Ricker) “brought down the house doing the Lindy Hop in slow motion with the champions, Miss Pollard and [Mr.] Minns.”

Not until 1940 did a Daily News reporter attempt to actually describe the lindy. All the dance genres had their points, noted William Murtha, but the one that “brought the audience to the edge of its seats was— you guessed it—the Lindy Hop.” Murtha dismisses the dance as a cross between gymnastics and a sporting event. “They call it dancing, but it included everything from the old-fashioned airplane spin to something that looked like a baseball slide, preceded by a cartwheel.” The following year, Murtha described the dance within a familiar primitivist discourse. “The lindy hop [is] a bit of terpsichore that combined the best features of a windmill, a three-ring circus and a whirling dervish . . . legs, arms and midriffs flew dizzily with sundry bits of anatomy just missing your correspondent’s writing machine. When it was over, three teams of colored whoop-de-doers bagged the prizes.” Murtha did not call rumba dancers “whoop-de-doers,” for example, referring simply to the “swishy, swaying strains of rumba band leader Xavier Cugat.”

In 1942 Murtha equated the lindy with both childishness and insanity, the ultimate conclusion of the primitivist, “out-of-control” discourse. “After the tango came the madhouse, which is another way of saying jitterbug jive. In the name of rhythm . . . [couples] tossed each other around in a screaming array of shagging, pecking, big appling, Lindy hopping and any miscellaneous gyrations you care to mention. The crowd howled and all but fell out of the balconies as the jitterbugs did their stuff, and . . . [soon] the crowds of jive rested on the heads of three colored couples.” Murtha had learned enough about black dances to spot moves quoted by individual lindy hoppers (“shagging, pecking, big appling”), but clearly his new expertise did not upgrade the dancers (or the dance) to a level he felt bound to respect.

Every year the Daily News reported that the lindy hop brought down the house, and every year lindy hoppers appeared in the fewest photographs of all the contestants. All of the winners were designated by name, occupation, and age. Although many of the contestants had Irish, Spanish, Jewish, and Italian surnames, only the ethnicity of the lindy hoppers was listed (as “colored”). For example, in 1937 the three lindy hop couples were named and “all the winners named in this event were colored.” Again, despite the varying ethnicities of the winners, the most-photographed winners were statuesque Anglo-Americans often
described as “king and queen” or the “royal couple” of the ball. The winning couple often graced the front and back pages of the paper, were inevitably dressed formally, and were photographed in ways that highlighted their attempts to look like English nobility or, at least, like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Lindy hoppers appeared in at least one photograph a year, usually in demeaning poses or with minstrel gestures (eyes rolling, mouths wide open). The first year was an exception: 1935’s lindy hop winners, Leon James and Edith Matthews, were depicted respectfully in two centerfold photos in the midst of their swing-out move; James was listed as “a superintendent” and Matthews as “a housemaid.” In 1936 the lindy hop champs George Greenich and Ella Gibson were pictured “rehearsing” even though they were not dancing; Gibson hung from Greenich’s arms and both smiled widely at the camera, as if they were just goofing around. In 1937 Joe Daniels was shown holding Joyce James nearly upside down, her feet high in the air and her thighs exposed. Third-place winner Norma Miller was shown almost completely upside down in 1938, with George Ricker bending over her; Miller’s waist, buttocks, and legs hung in the air over their heads. That year’s lindy hop winners, Mildred Pollard and Albert Minns, were photographed standing still with Pollard holding Minns high off the floor and their mouths hanging wide open. In 1938 all three winning lindy hop couples were photographed together, all bending forward with overly wide, unnatural, minstrel-derived smiles. There were no such corresponding photos of white dancers in any division.88

Not a single dignified photograph of an African American musician or dancer appeared in ten years. In 1935 Ginger Rogers was shown smiling and leaning over her box to shake Bill Robinson’s hand. Robinson was also a movie star at the time but he was not seated in a celebrity box; nor was he described as a movie star but instead as “Harlem’s #1 tap dancer.” Rogers’s engaging smile notwithstanding, the photo frames the two as mistress of the house and servant. In 1944 Robinson was shown “capering” for his long-time co-star Shirley Temple (who did not perform). In the newspaper’s promotional articles, the black bandleader was never pictured, regardless of his local fame: neither Fletcher Henderson, a New York favorite since the early 1920s, nor Cab Calloway appeared in these articles. On the other hand, a photo of the white bandleader Abe Lyman appeared in a 1935 article.89