Two weeks before the 1938 ball, an article announced Billie Holiday’s scheduled appearance with Artie Shaw. The headline declared “Billie Holiday to Be Harvest Moon Singer,” but oddly the inset photograph was of an unidentified white woman named Mary Dee. The irrelevant caption underneath Dee’s photo, “Waiting for Wednesday,” only heightened the absurdity. The article respectfully (though inaccurately) called Holiday “the most exciting blues singer in America” and also “the undisputed queen of the blues since the death of Bessie Smith.” Shaw’s band was then the artistic equal of any in the nation; but Shaw’s hiring of Holiday was itself a major act of racial transgression (and courage) in the 1930s—along with Benny Goodman’s hiring of Lionel Hampton and Teddy Wilson—and was not approved in many business circles. Holiday “rate[d] tops with swing fans,” and the newspaper promoted her “lilting vocals [that] jibe beautifully with the Shaw style,” but the paper apparently would not print her picture.90

African American dancers took first place in the lindy hop every Harvest Moon Ball between 1935 and 1950 except 1943, when a summer race riot in Harlem generated political backlash from Mayor LaGuardia. Soon after the riot, the city padlocked the Savoy as LaGuardia used the police to punish Moe Gale, the Savoy’s owner, and especially manager Charlie Buchanan, who was coeditor of The People’s Voice, a socialist weekly antagonistic to the mayor. A broad range of community leaders protested the police action and the court injunction that followed, but to no avail.91 Neither a black swing band nor a name band played at the 1943 ball, and Johnny Long and Enric Madriguera were the weakest bands in years. It seems as if local politicians and the Daily News intended to punish African Americans by withdrawing recognition of their cultural forms.

Ironically, on the day Italy surrendered—unlike Harlem, Italy was at war with the United States—an Italian American couple became the first nonblack champions of the lindy hop. The racial nature of the victory was duly noted: “For the first time in Harvest Moon history a white couple won the Jitterbug Jive.”92

**The Cultural Politics of the Lindy Hop**

There is a clear division between the vested cultural interests of the New York Daily News and the stylized cultural forces that young dancers enthusiastically engaged. The newspaper was beholden to an older aesthetic regime and its cultural guardians. For example, the lindy
hop was ignored by dance instructors until 1943. Yet as early as 1939 a radio-show host and writer for the magazine American Dancer was besieged with requests to learn the lindy, but was unable to find an instructor willing to teach it. He taught himself the dance and rented out the Roseland ballroom. A thousand people came to his first lesson.93

Professional dance instructors attacked the lindy hop as late as 1939. That year Newsweek and the mainstream press reported a “war on swing dance style” led by professional dance instructors intent on leading Americans back to old-fashioned styles, slower dances, and more discreet women’s fashions. The Dancing Masters of America issued a “manifesto” at their annual convention “consigning the jitterbug to oblivion and predicting the speedy return of the gay ’30s in the guise of the fabulous ’40s.” The sixty-eight-year-old president declared that the jitterbug had “no place in the[ir] instruction program” and claimed that dance instructors were hearing that people were tired of “the jumping dances . . . such as the ‘Shag,’ ‘Big Apple,’ and other athletic steps.” The organization hired the dancing sweetheart of the early 1910s, Irene Castle, to be its spokeswoman. Labeled the “heaviest possible artillery in its war against rug cutters,” Castle’s promotional efforts coincided with the release of The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle (1939), starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Dance educators also convinced journalists of the rising popularity of the “booms-a-daisy,” a dance invented by a British songwriter, at the climax of which partners lightly bumped each other’s buttocks. These dance instructors, and the upper-class clientele they traditionally served, were literally out of step with their time—just as Henry Ford had been in the early 1920s. By 1941, most prestigious upper-class hotels featured hard-swinging big bands such as Count Basie.94

Why would a popular dance cause such a reaction? Why would a dance be taboo? Was it simply that dance instructors could not do the dance and were threatened economically? Perhaps. But they could have learned the dance and profited from teaching it to a rhythmically hungry dancing public. It took more than thirteen years for this to happen. Barring the lindy hop from dance studios was an act of cultural segregation and signified nothing less than culture war (and class war, and race war). “In its early days the Lindy flourished only in lower strata of society,” Life reflected in 1943. “Negroes were its creators and principal exponents, and Arthur Murray would no more have taught the Lindy Hop than Rachmaninoff would have given lessons in boogie-woogie.”
Life then recounted the rise in the Lindy's prestige mediated by the white-facing of swing by Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller. "With the renaissance of swing, the Lindy climbed the social scale. New steps like the Suzy-Q, Trucking and Jig-Walk were invented... And as they spread across the land, invading colleges and dance schools, the Lindy Hop attained respectability as a truly national dance." Dance instructors and educators were fighting to maintain white Eurocentric cultural and kinesthetic values over black Afrocentric ones. African American aesthetics won, but only under the mediated term "swing," and only due to popular demand.95

In his autobiography Along the Way (1934), James Weldon Johnson reflected back on Euro-Americans in thrall to Harlem nightlife in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In urban dance halls, "the Negro drag[s] his captors captive." Johnson was "amazed and amused" to watch whites dance, "doing their best to pass for colored." Without resorting to blackface, Euro-Americans shed their white skins and obsolete kinesthetics for modern bodies in what has become a defining ritual for each white generation since. This cultural appropriation only became possible for large segments of young working-class Americans with the establishment of dance halls such as the Savoy rather than elite cabarets such as the Cotton Club. As Johnson rightly perceived, once the forms were appropriated they became subsumed under the term "American," effacing the black culture at its base and denying economic opportunities to the innovators and performers until "Negro secular music... was finally taken over and made 'American popular music.'"96

To take a salient example, in 1941 Whitey's Lindy Hoppers appeared in their last movie, Hellsapoppin'; both the choreography and cinematography of this scene make it the Lindy hop's finest moment on film. Logically such dancers would continue to perform in movies, but instead, a white group, "The Jivin' Jacks and Jills," started to appear in films two years later. The Jivin' Jacks and Jills appeared in fourteen B movies between 1943 and 1953 while Whitey's Lindy Hoppers broke up and performed separately over the next few years.97 In 1943 dance teachers finally began to teach the Lindy, and white Lindy hoppers began to find employment on Broadway. The cultural theft of the Lindy hop by white performers signifies the unfair labor practices that prevented African Americans from enjoying economic equity and class mobility in every industry in the United States.
Technology and Survival Technology (Redux)

Katherine Dunham studied dancing in Jamaica, the West Indies, and Haiti in the 1930s. In comparing the dances of Afro-diasporic communities, she concluded that “the transition from tribal to folk culture” had three major effects: first, African ritual patterns, ideas, and values were imposed on Christian ideology; second, African dance lost contact with its original “meanings” or functions; third, Afro-Caribbean musicians meshed their secular musical patterns with those of “whatever European nation happened to dominate the territory.”

Upon her return in the late 1930s, Dunham easily identified African retentions in much of American social dance. She recognized “almost the entire pattern” of the lindy hop in Jamaican urban popular dances such as the sha-cha and mento. She identified “a practically pure Charleston step” in “possessed devotees” of Sanctified churches and in Melville Herskovits’s field recordings from West Africa. The Big Apple dance then popular at the Savoy derived from the plantation Juba dance, one of an entire West African “category of ‘circle’ dances” featuring hand-clapping, individual self-expression within the circle, and contrasting rhythms for the group moving around the circle and the couple dancing inside it.

Dunham proudly asserted in 1941 that the potency of African dances, rhythms, and gestures within American social dance were likely to “guarantee the persistence of African dance traditions.” They had been “modified” more in the United States than the Caribbean, but African American cultural traditions had shaped American kinesthetics, physical gesture, timing, and rhythm. She celebrated the fact that African American cultural traditions existed in “a sound functional relationship towards a culture which is contemporary, rather than towards one which is on the decline.” The West African cultural legacy and the African American historical experience had been danced into the American mainframe.

Why the African legacy and not the German or the Irish or the Jewish or the Native American or the Chinese? Owing to certain aesthetic affinities, African Americans had matched the motor activity of their cultural forms to the motorized society, a legacy still represented erotically in such song titles as James Brown’s “Sex Machine,” Parliament-Funkadelic’s “Motor Booty Affair” and Prince’s “Little Red Corvette.”

The lindy hop was the “right” dance for its time, a demanding dance that made hard, fast-paced, precise work into a ritual act of deep play.
Martha Graham set these goals for the “American dance” in 1935: “No great dance can leave a people unmoved. Sometimes the reaction will take the form of a cold antagonism to the truth of what they are seeing. Sometimes an unbelievable response. What is necessary is that the dance be as strong as life itself, and of the life that is known in the country, that it be influenced by the prevailing expression of the people of a country, as well as by the geography of the land itself.” Such a dance would be “powerful” and reflect the nation’s energy and drive. “We look to the dance to impart the sensation of living in an affirmation of life, to energize the spectator into keener awareness of the vigor, the mystery, the humor, the variety, and the wonder of life.”100 Graham declared that such qualities would show “the function[s] of the American dance.” She was right—but about the wrong dances; such were the functions of tap and the lindy hop.

The children of the new chugging, dynamic technical civilization valorized the human form moving through space explosively, not ethereally; using gravity, not defying it; having fluid, continuous motion, not abstract poses or “airiness.” Swing-era dance culture broke down the European mask of sophistication; the lindy de-emphasized the idea of good form or dance rules and empowered individual self-expression and the judgment of the audience. The lindy also furthered the development of a new youth culture, especially as women developed their own uniforms to enable more athletic dancing; the now-famous saddle shoes, full skirts, and sloppy sweaters evolved for dancing the lindy, not rock and roll.101 The familiar cluster of youth culture—new slang, hip clothing, a new rhythmically driven form of music, sexual liberation—began with jazz and the Charleston in the 1920s but became codified through swing music and dance.

One recent historical study of jazz fans in Nazi Germany concluded that the lindy’s embodied values were diametrically opposed to German lockstep, classical music, and rigid social planning. As early as 1917 an American journalist watching the German army march into Brussels described it as “mov[ing] . . . as smoothly and as compactly as an Empire State Express . . . [with] no halts, no open places, no stragglers.” The German jazz fans of the mid-1940s valued the opposite kinesthetics in the lindy. In the dance’s combination of self-expression, rapid motion, and fluid movement, they “discovered a living response to the terrorizing racism that lurked in the shadow of modernity . . . As the dancers spun, broke away and turned they discovered an ethical understanding which
valued the individual "off-beat"—a syncopated sensibility." Perhaps we can ideologically embody the cultural values at stake between the United States and Germany as the lindy vs. the lock-step.\

Lindy hoppers displayed a mindful body capable of abrupt stops and starts, and of continuous dynamic, vigorous motion within a cooperative social pattern. Lindy hoppers took flight (like Lindbergh) and a moment later slid on the ground like diesel-powered serpents. West African-derived dance moves are a crucial aspect of global culture today and remain misunderstood as a force of modernity. Unlike ballet or modern dance, the lindy hop does not value body type itself but rather the dynamics and expressiveness of the body-in-motion; the idea that every individual can and will put some part of his or her self into the dance is an embodiment of democratic values.

Coda: The Ruby (Dance) Slippers

I would like to conclude this chapter with a story you may recognize from 1939. On an infrequently traveled road in a mythical kingdom, three men paralyzed by their work lives—a scarecrow, a lumberjack, and a king who lacks self-esteem—are each in turn freed by a young woman newly arrived in their land. Each responds to this new freedom with a solo dance of liberation... and then joins a collective skip-march down the road toward the unknown. In "real" life, each man is a lowly Kansas farmhand trapped on the farm, and if you will, in obsolete, European-patterned folk dances; but in Munchkinland—that primitivist fantasy land of midgets—dance is a liberating force of anti-industrial play, a vehicle of self-expression. Significantly, the most powerful man in the dream kingdom does not dance, although he, too, is paralyzed by his work life. The ultimate wallflower, "the great and powerful Oz" is a pretentious, scared, knob-turning technological wizard who manipulates machinery in order to delude people into believing in his omnipotence.

What is the moral of this story? That we need more cultural history of music and dance. Then when someone such as Salman Rushdie notes the significance of Dorothy's "syncopated step" as she skip-starts down the yellow brick road, we will become more aware of the techno-dialogue of syncopation and skyscrapers on the road to the Emerald City.\

More to the point here, the actors who played the Scarecrow (Ray Bolger), the Tin Man (Jack Haley), and the Cowardly Lion (Bert Lahr) were all famous dancers of the period, and all three sat in Celebrity Row at the 1939 Harvest Moon Ball to promote The Wizard of Oz.
again in 1940 and performed for fifteen minutes.) In 1964, Bolger, the most famous dancer of the three, claimed on the Today show that he invented the lindy hop in 1927 at the Hotel Coronado in St. Louis. Again, we have a damning and embarrassing example of how the love and theft of black cultural forms and its subsequent appropriation are facts on the ground of American culture.

One of the few musical numbers cut from The Wizard of Oz was “The Jitterbug.” The Wicked Witch was to send “an evil advance agent—a little insect”—to sting Dorothy and her escorts, sending them into such an exhausting dance they would be unable to fight off the flying monkeys. This situation set up “The Jitterbug” routine, a song intended to be danced by the four principals with the participation of the trees of the Haunted Forest. The upbeat number broke the tension of the plot and was ultimately deemed inappropriate; it was dropped before release. The song is presented as a “frenzy,” an uncontrolled set of steps resulting from emotional hysteria and having neither rhyme nor reason. But what if the jitterbug was not the response of a childlike, preindustrial people, but a sophisticated response to the disruptions of modernity? What if integrating power, precision, speed, flow, and control in modern bodies makes the lindy hop a most appropriate response to the challenge of a machine-centered society?

And what if we think of Dorothy’s ruby slippers as dancing shoes? What if those erotic glittering blood-red shoes were the elusive cultural weapon for stepping out of American machined dreams into a new world cultural order that would include (and equally value) dance, sex, pleasure, individuality within a collective flow, and letting go? What if Glenda the Good Witch’s statement to Dorothy—that she has always had the power to get home right at her feet—meant that she could “go home” and put these two worlds together into a new world where the primitivist fantasies of Oz were integrated into the emerald skyscraper cities of industrial civilization? In other words, what if Dorothy could have recognized what Christopher Small calls “a need in white culture” to make pleasure and joyful self-affirmation part of her everyday life, rather than retreat back into some puritanical, patriarchal sickbed down on the farm?

Then we might really be heading toward understanding the new cultural order threatening to burst through the industrial society and the attendant fantasy worlds of the New York World’s Fair of 1933, which is the subject of the final chapter.