The Pattern of Diffusion

When African dances reached the United States, what happened to them? Did they change and spread, and in the same way? If we knew the answer we could analyze the extent of African influences more easily. Enough evidence can be found to make a start, however, and to suggest general trends based upon a brief discussion of a few key dances in this country.

A dance known in the South as the Buzzard Lope, for example, has just about disappeared. It may have been quite similar to a West African buzzard dance, since the buzzard is common in both Africa and the South, and the dance is a close imitation of the bird. In Africa the members of the tribe “went about in a circle,” according to Melville and Frances Herskovits, “moving with bodies bent forward from their waists and with arms thrown back in imitation of the bird from which their spirit took its name.”

In the United States the Buzzard Lope turns up as part of a dance-story—with a running commentary—in which a turkey buzzard quite realistically goes about eating a dead cow. Mrs. Lydia Parrish saw the dance performed by the Johnson family on isolated Sapelo Island, Georgia, where it had existed for many years. They supplied their own dramatis personae: “Of the twins, Naomi did the patting while Isaac did the dancing; an older brother rhythmically called out the cues in a sharp staccato, and another one lay on the floor of the wide veranda representing a dead cow.”

March around!
Jump across!
Get the eye!
So glad!
Get the guts!

(think)
(see if she's did)
(always go for that first)
(cow did)
(they like 'em next best)
Go to eatin'  
All right!—cow mos' gone!  
Dog comin'!  
Scare the dog!  
Look aroun' for mo' meat!  
All right!—Belly full!  
Goin' to tell the res'.

"Mr. Herskovits tells me," adds Mrs. Parrish, "that he has seen a similar dance in Dahomey."

Mrs. Parrish observes that the performance offered "a combination of the old dance form with rather more modern steps than the African original pantomime warranted." In other words, Isaac is improvising, adding a few "modern steps" of his own, and achieving a new blend. Of religious origin, the dance is now entirely secular, rural, and swinging with the combined accents of the hand-clapping and the "sharp staccato" directions of the older brother, "rhythmically called out."

The transition to a solo dance takes place early. The Buzzard Lope was discovered (and later recorded) in the little town of Sunbury, Georgia, when WPA researchers asked some old Negro women about harvest festivals. The women replied (in the overwrought phonetic approximation used by the interviewers): "We do git together an hab dance an pahties an big suppahs... we does duh Snake Hip and duh Buzzard Lope... an addalas [at the last] dance we did duh Fish Tail and duh Fish Bone and duh Camel Walk." This interviewer adds that "all efforts failed to persuade the women to describe these dances"; and for good reason. Snake Hips and the Fish Tail are compounded of Congo pelvic movements that would probably have shocked the white interviewers.

The shift from country to town occurred a little later. Around 1901 Coot Grant saw the Buzzard Lope in her father's honky-tonk in Birmingham and could still describe and demonstrate it sixty years later: "That dance had arms high and wide like the wings of a bird, along with a cute shuffle and hop; why, I remember one little ol' girl did it all the time, spread her arms and yelled 'C'mon and grab me, Pap!'" As she performed the dance, Coot Grant retained the original arm movements and supplied a birdlike hop, but there was no conscious attempt to imitate a buzzard.

Why did the Buzzard Lope vanish? A partial explanation is that the Eagle Rock, another dance with winglike arm movements, body rocking from side to side, took its place. City folk looked down on the Buzzard Lope because it was associated with plantation life. "The Buzzard Lope was old fashioned," says New Orleans cornetist Charlie Love, "we danced the Eagle Rock to Buddy Bolden's music."

The Eagle Rock was named after the Eagle Rock Baptist Church in

Kansas City, according to Wilbur Sweatman: "They were famous for dancing it during religious services in the years following the Civil War." The dance may well have been much older, but like the Buzzard Lope and a religious dance known as the Shout (which later popped up as part of the Big Apple), it has the high arm gestures associated with evangelical dances and religious trance. In any event, the Eagle Rock spread north and south, discarded the hop for a shuffle that could be performed at a crowded house-rent party, and also died out—in turn—among the city folk during the early twenties. White people seldom if ever danced the Buzzard Lope, Eagle Rock, or Shout.

A small but ubiquitous detail from another African dance has shown considerable powers of survival. In Africa scratching is part of a dance to Legba, Guardian of the Crossroads, who was identified with St. Peter by Negro folk in New Orleans because both are depicted carrying a bunch of keys. "Each went round and round in the circle," writes Melville and Frances Herskovits of a Winti dance in Suriname, "arms crossed from time to time over his breast, the fingers twitching at the clothing, as though scratching to relieve an itching sensation."

This gesture became a standard routine known as the Itch in Negro dancing, accompanied by eccentric footwork. "Bull Frog Hop," a song published in 1909 by Perry Bradford, describes the Itch as part of its routine, and Butterbeans of the team of Butterbeans and Susie used it in the teems to the tune of "Heebie Jeebies" as the climax to his vaudeville act. "I borrowed it from a great dancer named Stringbeens," says Butterbeans.

The Itch is described by Elise Marcus as "a spasmodic placing of the hands all over the body in an agony of perfect rhythm." It is the rhythm, of course, that makes the motions effective.

Other and later dancers adapted the Itch to suit their own purposes. Clarence "Dancing" Dotson, who played the Keith circuit, combined elements of the Itch and the Quiver with singular success to create what he announced as "Throwing a Fit." James Barton's "Mad Dog" act also utilized the Itch. By the late 1940's at the Savoy Ballroom, the Itch was incorporated in the breakaway of the Lindy as part of the improvisation, and turned up again at the Palladium Ballroom in the fifties and sixties as an improvised addition to the Mambo. Indeed, the gesture has a universality that could lead to its appearance—with or without syncopated rhythms—almost anywhere.

Another dance, the Gouba, was changed radically in the United States, losing most of its African characteristics before taking on new movements, some of which outlived the original and survived in popular dance. "The goudo [sic] was probably the famed Juba of Georgia and the Caro-
bining the call-and-response pattern, dancing in a circle (generally counterclockwise), the Shuffle, improvisation, and the rhythms of cackling and clapping. These characteristics are a fair list of the major Afro-American traits in the blend of vernacular dance.

In minstrel days the name Juba was used for dancers as well as the dance, and the Negro pioneer William Henry Lane, called "Juba," received higher billing than his white colleagues before the Civil War. At this time the Juba dance was spoken of as a jig, indicating the direction in which minstrelsy would go, and many dancers began their careers featuring it.

Patting Juba, which started as any kind of clapping with any dance to encourage another dancer, became a special routine of slapping the hands, knees, thighs, and body in a rhythmic display. (In Africa, of course, this function would be performed by drums, but in the United States, where drums had frequently been forbidden for fear of slave revolts, the emergence of patting seems to have been inevitable.) Patting was known from Dutch Guiana to New Orleans and the Cincinnati levees, where Lafcadio Hearn found it in the 1870s.

Mark Twain describes raftsmen on the Mississippi in the 1840's: "Next they 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."

By the 1890's a minstrel and vaudeville team known as Golden and Graydon—white men in blackface—performed Patting Rabbit Hash to the tune of "Turkey in the Straw." According to Douglas Gilbert, it consisted of "patting and slapping the hands on the knees, hips, elbows, shoulders, and forearms, producing triple time and rolls almost like a snare drum."

A minor detail attached itself to Patting Juba in the course of its evolution into a display piece, and then became a part of the more pretentious style of Charleston: crossing and uncrossing the hands on the knees as they fan back and forth. Encouraged by Joann Crawford's example as a Charleston-dancing flapper in Our Dancing Daughters, most teen-agers of the twenties mastered this trick. Thirty years later, the same thing turned up in a rock-and-roll dance named the Charley-Bop, a revival of the Charleston.

Patting still has the power to attract popular attention. In 1952 a tune named "Hambone," with patting by a group of children, was recorded by Chicago drummer Red Saunders. The youngsters, led by eleven-year-old Sammy McRae of Evanston, Illinois, were also a success on television, working up a fine, swinging rhythm—Pattin Juba. Sammy told Ebony magazine that he got the idea from a new kid at school who had just arrived from the South. The trade press called it a novelty hit.

Perhaps the best-known example of an African survival in the United States is the Ring Shout, derived from the African Circle Dance. It survived
partly by accident. The Baptist Church prohibited drumming and dancing, which ruled out most African religious observances. But the Ring Shout happened to employ clapping and stamping instead of drumming, as well as a shuffle step in which the legs did not cross. Since the Baptists defined dancing as a crossing of legs, the Ring Shout was considered acceptable.

We are not dealing here with a dance that disappeared long ago. The present writers have seen it quite recently in South Carolina, and John and Alan Lomax saw it—and recorded it—in Louisiana, Texas, and Georgia. The song is ‘danced’ with the whole body, they write, ‘with hands, feet, belly, and hips . . . with a focus on rhythm. This “shout pattern” is demonstrably West African in origin.’ The Ring Shout exists in various nooks and crannies of the South to this day.

How was the Ring Shout danced in the early days? We have a few brief descriptions. ‘This step . . . is something halfway between a shuffle and a dance,’ writes H. G. Spaulding. ‘At the end of each stanza of the song the dancers stop short with a slight stamp on the last note, and then, putting the other foot forward, proceed through the next verse.’ Here, a shuffle is combined with a pause and a stamp.

They begin “first walking and by-and-by shuffling round, one after the other, in a ring,” according to an unsigned article in the Nation in 1867. “The foot is hardly taken from the floor, and the progression is mainly due to a jerking, hitching motion which agitates the entire shouter.” This observation is quite accurate, as any amateur who has tried to execute the Shuffle—or Truck—knows. The step seems to combine so many contrary movements that the usual result is a frustrating “jerking, hitching motion,” although the seasoned performer does it with fluid ease.

“I shall never forget the night at the Hall of the Queen of the South Society when I first saw the ring-shout,” writes Lydia Parrish of her adventures on the isolated Sea Islands of Georgia. “Little had I suspected, when Margaret took care of my room at the Arnold House years before, that she could outdo the Ouled Nail dancers of Biskra—if she wished. . . . She wriggled her hips shamelessly, held her shoulders stiff—at the same time thrust them forward—kept her feet on the floor, and with the usual rhythmic heel tapping, progressed with real style around the circle.”

Margaret’s stance closely resembles what Courtland calls the “Congo pose.” The “tapping” of the heels, according to the present writers’ observation, is heavy, more like a stamp than a tap, while the stiff shoulders and flat-footed Shuffle are typical. The phrase “with real style” covers a multitude of intangible, improvised movements, which reveal a dancer’s skill and personality.

Like Lomax, Mrs. Parrish is one of the few who mention hip movements, a basic part of the Ring Shout, which later spread far and wide. Early authors were hesitant about mentioning pelvic motions. Writing about the dancers on a Georgia plantation, actress Fanny Kemble notes “certain outlines which . . . they bring into prominence and most ludicrous display,” and H. R. Sass, describing dances on a Carolina plantation in the 1890’s, mentions a “swaying motion of the hips.”

While it originated and continued as a religious dance, the Ring Shout also contributed at an early date to the Walk Around of the minstrel show, where it was employed as the closing number and performed by the entire company singing and dancing. At this point the Ring Shout has become a secular group dance. (Krehbiel calls the Walk Around a “secular parody” of the Ring Shout.) During the long popularity of minstrelsy, the Walk Around received considerable exposure and became a great influence on later styles.

“The Northern towns had a holdover of the old Southern customs,” says pianist James P. Johnson, who heard shouts when he was a youngster in Brunswick, New Jersey, around 1900.

I’d wake up . . . and hear an old-fashioned ring-shout going on downstairs . . . somebody would be playing a guitar or a Jew’s harp or maybe a mandolin, and the dancing went . . . “The Spider and the Bed Bug Had a Good Time,” or “Suzie Suzie.”

They danced around in a shuffle and then they would shove a man or a woman out into the center and clap hands. This would go on all night and I would fall asleep sitting at the top of the stairs in the dark.

The pattern of forming a circle around a dancer or dancers and clapping occurred in the previously discussed Juba (the setting is now urban rather than rural) and may be found to this day in the less genteel ballrooms from coast to coast.

By 1913 one of the first all-Negro revues, The Darktown Follies, which was produced in Harlem, employed the entire cast, shuffling in a circle counterclockwise across the stage, around behind the scenery, and out front again to a tune called “At the Ball.” Ziegfeld saw it, bought the entire number, and added it to his show on the roof of the New Amsterdam Theater. The Ring Shout had made Broadway.

Almost anything can happen to an Afro-American dance in the United States. It can vanish almost without a trace, like the Buzzard Lope, giving way perhaps to similar dances; it can persist as a minor detail in a variety of surroundings, like the Itch; it can take on new characteristics that survive alone, like patting in the Juba; and it can splinter and spread into popular dance while still retaining its original form, like the Ring Shout.

Nevertheless, certain changes in most of the dances seem to take place more or less consistently. Religious dances become secular, group dances become solo, rural dances become urban, and the literal style of the dance is
lost in individual expression. These changes are wrought in part by the influence of the British-European tradition on African dance in the United States. At the same time, certain basic characteristics of Afro-American dance persist and grow; improvisation, the Shuffle, the counter-clockwise circle dance, and the call-and-response pattern (in voice, dance, and rhythm).

Because they are a fairly reliable sign of African influence, and at the same time, the source of confused responses, Congo hip movements are another characteristic of great importance. They may be found almost anywhere, from the dances of rural women of Sunbury and the urban honky-tonks of Birmingham, through the movements observed by Fanny Kemble and Lydia Parrish, to the celebrated performances at Congo Square in New Orleans. Perhaps one of the greatest single influences in the spread of these movements is the Ring Shout.

The one common and constant factor in all these Afro-American characteristics is a powerful, propulsive rhythm, which can appear in the singing, the stamping, the clapping and the dancing all at one time. This is the rhythm that is found in the music of jazz.

The over-all pattern of diffusion is certainly unusual, and may be unique. Writing about "the law of regeneration in the dance," Curt Sachs points out that "when the dance in a too highly refined society becomes anemic," it turns first to "the peasantry of the country." If it cannot find nourishment there, it turns to "foreign peoples, who are more primitive in their way of life and superior in physical mobility and expressiveness." 27 In the case of American vernacular dance, Negroes have been the equivalent of "foreign peoples" and the "peasantry" at one and the same time, which gives their dances double force and effectiveness. Perhaps this is the reason why their style of dancing is so vital and enduring.

PART TWO

Beginnings