Jazz Dance Styles

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Here is a brief overview of jazz dance styles that are all part of the jazz dance tree. Styles are grouped in a way that suggests shared roots and aesthetic principles. Readers are encouraged to refer to this section as a glossary, but keep in mind that, just as branches of a tree intertwine and give way to new branches, many of the styles fall into more than one category and can overlap with other styles in their group.

Authentic Jazz Dance

Authentic jazz dance developed alongside the jazz music of the 1920s–1940s. There is always a visible connection to African movement qualities and jazz music. Some examples include the Lindy Hop, Charleston, and the Camel Walk.

The main movement characteristics of authentic jazz include a grounded swing quality, an inclined torso, syncopation, polyrhythms, polycentrism, and articulation of the torso. Syncopation is the accenting of the offset in music, or the space in between the beats. Polyrhythm means multiple rhythms; in authentic jazz dance it refers to the fact that the dancer may be dancing two or more rhythms simultaneously with different parts of the body (i.e., the torso and the legs). Polycentrism (many centers) refers to the fact that the movement may emanate from more than one place at a time, with different body parts moving independently of each other. Articulation of the torso means that instead of the torso moving as one piece (as we usually see in ballet), particular portions of the torso may move in isolation (e.g., the ribcage) or the entire torso may move with a flow that emphasizes the flexibility of the spine.

Social characteristics include (but are not limited to) the circle, improvisation, friendly competition, vocal encouragement, individuality within the group, “high affect juxtaposition,” and “aesthetic of the cool.” These last two terms were coined by scholar Robert Farris Thompson, who outlined ten characteristics of African art, most of which apply to authentic jazz dance as well. “High affect juxtaposition” refers to contrasting elements used within a single piece, for instance, a switch from one rhythm to another or from a serious to a humorous mood. “Aesthetic of the cool” is Thompson’s term for a specific attitude: “coolness is an all-embracing positive attribute which combines notions of composure, silence, vitality, healing, and social purification.”

Tap Dance

An American indigenous style of dance that materialized as enslaved peoples of African descent fused their native dances with European elements including Irish step dancing. Tap dancing in all of its variations centers on the special agility of feet to floor contact based on simple and intricate rhythmic structures. The style grew to be synonymous with authentic jazz dance in the jazz era and then branched out in an increasingly theatrical fashion as tappers found homes on Broadway stages and in American movie musicals. Today the form is characterized by its use of shoes with metal taps on the balls of the feet and heels that act as percussive instruments. Styles range from the more commonly recognized Broadway-theatrical style with a focus on whole body movement, to rhythm tap, which uses the feet as the primary means for communication and is more closely related to its jazz roots. Tapping can be performed with or without musical accompaniment. It often includes elements of improvisation and makes use of syncopated rhythms.

Club Jazz Dance

Club jazz developed in Britain in the 1980s as a response to classic American jazz music of the early 1900s. The complexity of the music intrigued some club dancers, who then sought out authentic jazz dance in movies featuring dancers such as the Nicholas Brothers, Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, and Mama Lu Parks. The main characteristics of the club jazz style are fast, intricate footwork, syncopated breaks, knee drops, spins, and splits.
Jazz-Influenced Dance

Jazz-influenced is an alternative term for any type of jazz dance that is not authentic jazz dance. Some practitioners believe that all jazz dancing which evolved after the advent of bebop in the 1940s, when jazz dance ceased to grow alongside jazz music, should be called jazz-influenced dance. Jazz-influenced dance is distinctly different from its roots in “authentic jazz,” but is still commonly referred to as jazz dance.

Rhythm-Generated Jazz Dance

This form is rooted in the African-American dance and musical traditions that gave rise to early jazz expression where music and dance were equal, conversational partners. Rhythm-generated jazz dance begins with a grounded body that generates movement and rhythm from the inside out. Those who make and perform rhythm-generated jazz dance often have a deep understanding of musical form and complex rhythms, and movements embody the “groove” of jazz, blues, or any jazz- or blues-based contemporary music. This integral relationship to the rhythmic foundation of music depends on incorporating factors such as relaxing the joints of the body so the body’s weight can sit into the music’s beat, making visible rhythms that play against as much as with the rhythms and affirming an intimate relationship with the concept of swing. Additional central qualities may include improvisation, call-and-response, high-contrast dynamics, and the simultaneous affirmation of the individual voice and the collective group.3

Theatrical Jazz Dance

Theatrical jazz dance includes many styles that are to be performed for an audience or are suited for a stage. Jack Cole is considered the father of theatrical jazz dance, and his work marks a period (1940s) where there was a shift from authentic jazz to jazz-influenced dance. The term theatrical jazz represents a fusion of styles, usually borrowing from ballet and vernacular jazz at the foundation, but it can also include ethnic styles, modern dance, tap dance, and any blend of jazz dance styles. Over time the style has evolved and become increasingly broad. The jazz dance styles below can all fall under the theatrical jazz dance umbrella:

Afro-Caribbean Jazz Dance

A blend of African, European, and indigenous movement and aesthetics, infused with movement vocabulary specific to the Caribbean and performed to music of the Caribbean. Katherine Dunham was the main proponent of this style in the United States.

Broadway Jazz Dance/Musical Theater Jazz Dance

Although technically this term could include any type of jazz dance that has ever appeared on Broadway, it has usually referred to a blended dance form that includes some jazz elements mixed with either modern dance, ballet, tap, or any other style of dance appropriate to the particular show in question. This style is often narrative and usually serves an entertainment purpose. Broadway jazz became the foundation for choreography done in shows beginning in the 1940s.

Classic or Classical Jazz Dance

There are two definitions for classical jazz dance.
1. Same as “authentic jazz dance”; dance that developed alongside jazz music from the 1920s through 1940s. The Lindy Hop is an example.
2. Jazz dance originating at the time of Jack Cole, Matt Mattox, Luigi, and Gus Giordano; a time when jazz dance was codified, or developed into techniques that blended vernacular jazz elements with ballet, modern dance, and other forms.
Latin Jazz Dance

Latin jazz dance has a Latin American inflection that can be expressed through specific movements, musical accompaniment, and costume choices. It is usually a blend of African, European, North American, and South American influences. This style can be danced theatrically or in a social setting.

Lyrical Jazz Dance

A style of jazz dance which began in the 1960s and is rooted in the lines of classical ballet. There is usually an emotional context, and the movement style is characterized by its fluidity and expressiveness. The movement is usually inspired by the lyrics or the lyric quality of the song, although it is possible to dance in a lyrical nature to instrumental music.

Pop Jazz Dance

Pop jazz dance is performed to popular music. This is the style most commonly seen today in jazz dance competitions, conventions, and private dance studios.

West Coast Jazz Dance

A style popularized by Joe Tremaine in the 1980s, West Coast jazz has influenced contemporary jazz styles and continues to be very popular today. The style is often performed to popular music and is usually flashy, funky, and well suited for commercial purposes. Since the 1980s, the style has evolved so that it embraces what is new, hip, and trendy.

Vernacular Jazz

Vernacular jazz refers to everyday dances done by ordinary people. It grew out of dances from Africa and the West Indies, but it has visible European influences. It grew to reflect the free-spirited nature of America in the early 1900s through improvisation and with an emphasis on personality. Dances at that time were typically done in social settings and often with a partner. The term vernacular jazz often refers to the style of jazz danced in the early 1900s, yet essentially it includes any social dance styles that reflect a time, culture, and community. The form has changed, as it continuously and fluidly adapts to changes in society and culture. Popular music and vernacular jazz are often related, as seen in Elvis Presley's gyrating hips, the Twist, and Michael Jackson's Moonwalk. Hip-hop and authentic jazz dance are both examples of styles that can be considered vernacular jazz, as they do not necessarily require studio training or ballet technique, and they grew out of American culture and music. Hip-hop, authentic jazz, and other vernacular
forms can range from recreational movement to disciplined forms studied through rigorous training.

Vernacular and authentic jazz are similar but not exactly the same. All authentic jazz is vernacular jazz, but vernacular jazz is not limited to authentic jazz. While authentic jazz is vernacular jazz from the early twentieth century, vernacular jazz refers to more than one period. It is fluid and constantly evolving.

The following styles are all branches of vernacular jazz dance:

Hip-Hop Dance
Hip-hop is a social dance form with particular aesthetic principles, but the term hip-hop is also used as an umbrella describing forms that have grown alongside a broad hip-hop culture (including rapping, break-dancing, graffiti, deejaying, and beatboxing). The forms derive from African-American and Hispanic roots and borrow from early vernacular forms. But they are different from most jazz dance styles in their movements, rhythmic structures, and relationship to the music. Other elements often present in hip-hop dance include battles, improvisation (or freestyling), and ciphers. Breaking, popping, locking, party dancing, tutting, animation, ticking, strobing, and get-lite are all styles that fall under the hip-hop umbrella.

Funk (Urban Funk)
Funk is a style of dance influenced by rhythm and blues. A strong emphasis is placed on the downbeat and grounded movement close to the floor. This style combines body isolations in an angular and disjointed manner. Pedestrian movements such as walking, clapping, and finger snapping are incorporated into the movements. Funk is commonly seen in club dancing. Projected “attitude” poses are common.

Street Jazz Dance
Street jazz is derived from pedestrian movements with an emphasis on attitude or “funk.” It is a form that is vernacular in nature, so it is constantly changing as a reflection of popular culture. Over time street jazz has been used as a label for three distinctly different styles of jazz dance:
1. A style that emerged in early music videos, it absorbed influences from hip-hop dance and culture while becoming commercialized for mainstream popular culture. This urban style is characterized by percussive isolations, non-locomotor movement, and its connection to pop music. It was used by artists including Michael Jackson and Paula Abdul, and it has since evolved alongside popular music.
2. Vernacular dancing performed in a social setting.
3. Another term for club jazz.

Notes
2. Definition courtesy of Michèle Scott.
3. Definition courtesy of Jill Flanders Crosby, Michèle Moss, and Billy Sieginfeld.
4. Definition courtesy of Tom Ralabate.