

UC Irvine

Dance Major Journal

Title

Honoring the original intentions of jazz

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/58x01901>

Journal

Dance Major Journal, 14(1)

Author

Bond, Clara

Publication Date

2026-09-24

DOI

10.5070/D5.69426

Peer reviewed

Honoring the original intentions of jazz

How studying the history of jazz dance has made me a more self-aware dancer and better teacher.

by Clara Bond

Like many dancers today, I had my fair share of jazz training growing up. My first dance class at age six was a ballet/jazz combo class; my first recital dance was a jazz piece to “Boogie Shoes”, where we all got to decorate our shoes however we wanted (my mom painted mine pink and then smothered them in glitter). As I got older, I became more serious about ballet than anything else, and I had a bit of an off-and-on relationship with jazz from then on.

After a five-year hiatus starting at age nine, I picked jazz back up just before turning fourteen. The classes leaned *heavily* into what many people recognize as the competition/convention brand of jazz. Our training was heavy on turns, kicks, and leaps. The choreography was fast, sharp, precise, and extremely athletic (one year, the teacher sped up our recital music not once, but *twice*, because she felt like the music was “too slow”).

When I started my senior year of high school, my studio hired a different jazz teacher. Her teaching style still leaned commercial, but wasn’t quite as competition/convention-based. We still trained the turns and tricks, but ultimately she was more concerned with our artistry and performance quality, especially during the recital dance. The costume was simple and not nearly as flashy as others I’d worn (not a single sequin or fake feather in sight), the choreography not quite so in-your-face; it relied more on our musicality and ability to play the character to keep the audience engaged.

There were certainly differences in how my jazz training looked throughout my pre-college years; the teacher I had at age six ran her class differently than the one I had at fourteen, who taught differently than the teacher I had at seventeen. But there were a few things that most of my jazz experience had in common. The emphasis of the training was usually on tricks and flash, like high battements and complex turn sequences. I was barely taught anything about where jazz actually came from, and how it evolved into what we see today. I didn’t know its roots, the African American aesthetics it was built on, the different branches it split into over the years, or the improvisation and community-building element. As stated by Patricia Cohen in *Jazz Dance as a Continuum*, “...the term *jazz dance* is used loosely to suggest movement that is rapid, sharp, rhythmic, and sensual, if not sexy.” (Cohen, p. 3) It wasn’t until starting at a university dance program that I finally was given the opportunity to learn all of the historical context of what we know as jazz dance, and that opportunity has already made me into a more informed dancer and teacher.

In my second year of college, I took Jazz II. Dr. S. Ama Wray and Professor Ariyan Johnson trained us intensely on our musicality and deeper listening skills; encouraging us to find the different rhythms and beats in the music we were listening to in order to help us better guide our movements. Professor Johnson even included a section in our midterm rubric dedicated to

creating our own rhythms to help accentuate both the dancing and the music; she encouraged bells, hand claps, stomps, etc. Dr. Wray required us to attend a jazz music concert and write a reflection on our experience. Both professors had us research jazz's history and evolution through the centuries. Both taught us steps and dances from the African diaspora and vernacular jazz.

We also had guest teachers including Nani Agbeli and Cam Loeser, giving us the opportunity to learn styles such as Ewe West African dance and the Jack Cole technique. Through all of this research, education, and embodiment of the aesthetics that made up early jazz, I was given a more clear understanding of where some of the common elements seen today may have come from. For example, the classic warmup of torso and hip isolations may have origins in dances such as the Adowa from the Akan people of the Gold Coast of Ghana. Dr. Takiya Nur Amin quotes Jacqui Malone in the article *The African Origins of an American Art Form*, who states, "...The Akan of Ghana use the hands and feet in specific ways...strong contraction-release movements of the pelvis and upper torso..."(Amin, pp. 37-38). This is only one example; many peoples from many regions of the African continent were brought to the United States during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, all likely contributing bits and pieces of their movements into the dances that would blossom into jazz.

Prior to college, I also had very little experience with improvisation in a jazz context. Sure, I had done plenty of improv in lyrical and contemporary, which often consisted of various tasks and prompts to try and spark our creativity; as a result, I became fairly comfortable with improv in a lyrical and contemporary setting. And yes, sometimes in jazz class our teacher would put on a song and have us improvise across the floor. But because the training mostly centered around feats of athleticism and improvisation rarely involved creative prompts, for many dancers (myself included) improv often ended up consisting of a leap, pirouettes or other turns, maybe a roll to the floor, maybe a jazz walk or pivot thrown in there; because that was what our training had taught us that jazz was.

Then I started college and joined the Jazz Co-Lab, a student-led club with the goal of fostering collaboration between jazz musicians, dancers, and enthusiasts. The main focuses of club sessions were improvisation and connection. Many of the tasks we did centered around the musicians and dancers feeding off of each other to spark creativity. During our "trading fours" exercise, for example, a musician would play four bars of their choosing, and then the dancer next to them would have four bars to dance their physical interpretation of the tune, and that would continue on until everyone in the circle had had a turn. That was my first exposure to how vital the music and dancing are to each other in jazz, how they developed alongside each other and are therefore interconnected.

Later, in dance history courses, I learned about how jazz developed from communal dances where improvisation was encouraged. My movement style was challenged through my increasing experience with the improvisation, as I developed deeper listening skills and danced in a way that made sense with the music, not simply the same jumps and leg extensions I previously often defaulted to in jazz improv. It made me wonder why improvisation wasn't a bigger part of my jazz training when I was younger, and what the benefits may have been if it was.

This is not to say that improv should be the focus in studio-level jazz training—but including more improvisation work would be a way to honor the original intentions of jazz. And, students could be taught *how* to improvise, not simply be left to figure it out. They would learn how to really key in to what the music is offering and generate their movements from that. For example, telling them to focus on the saxophone first, then the piano in the background, then the drums. This would teach them a way of improvising that's less “move however you want with no rules,” and more “move in tandem with the music and the people surrounding you.” I've tried this as a teacher and have seen fun results out of the students. Do some of them struggle at first? Yes. But ultimately they get more creative when truly focused on the music and the moment, which is a step towards strengthening the skill of artistry.

Academically, there were three classes where I got to really dig into the history of jazz; Music for Dancers taught by Alan Terricciano, Dance History taught by Dr. Alyson Cartagena and Dr. Jennifer Fisher, and Jazz II taught by Dr. S. Ama Wray and Professor Ariyan Johnson. What I was taught in these classes opened my eyes to where jazz started, the various influences it received, and how it evolved through the centuries. It was where I learned that enslaved people on plantations shared their dances with each other and the mixing of elements eventually contributed to jazz. I learned about Congo Square, a location in New Orleans where African Americans performed these dances socially and then picked up influences from European social dances.

The history of jazz was sometimes shocking, like finding out about the practice of minstrelsy, and the horrifyingly racist caricatures of African Americans that came about from white people wearing blackface (and even African American performers were forced to perform in blackface). I learned about vaudeville, and how segregated shows had several short acts, many of which used shock value to gain and keep the attention of restless audiences. But despite years of bias, upheaval, and oppression, artists continued to develop. I learned about jazz's “golden years” in the 1920s, its connections to the flapper movement, how jazz was condemned as unimportant due to its associations with both African Americans and the flappers who were championing female sexual empowerment. I learned about the close relationship it shares with tap dance. I learned how 20th-century choreographers like Luigi and Bob Fosse blended jazz with ballet and modern technique, creating distinct new styles. About how MTV changed the way dancers had to perform and choreograph, as the dancing now needed to translate well on screen.

Throughout all of these different centuries and decades, jazz encompassed the influences and culture of the time period. Even now, in the twenty-first century, it continues changing based on regional and global influences. After learning the roots of jazz, I was able to look back on and realize a regional style that had been developing in my hometown. I come from a rural town in Southern California. Five surrounding reservations (Pauma, Pala, Rincon, La Jolla, San Pasqual) representing three groups of Indigenous peoples (Kumeyaay, Luiseno, Cupeno) fed into the school district. Due to both the rural location and many families in the area being socioeconomically underserved, many people I knew didn't have access to the resources for formal dance education. Many only had access to our small high school's dance program and videos they saw online. As a result, I saw them develop their own “styles” of jazz and hip hop. For Indigenous students in the program, I noticed that the hip hop and jazz choreography they

came up with was a creative blending of the tribal dances they had grown up learning, and whatever online videos they could get their hands on.

In learning the history of jazz, I have newfound context and appreciation for where this art form came from and how it has evolved over time, which has allowed me to put all of my training into perspective. In ballet class growing up, I learned about ballet's origins in European royal courts, which explains the emphasis on elegance and upright posture. Knowing that background information made it easier for me to absorb what I was learning because I knew the steps I was being taught had purpose in the original context of the style. Knowing the history of jazz has given me the same benefit. I intentionally make sure I am tuned in to the music, so I can make sure I stay on the correct rhythm. I am much better at grounded movements, and knowing when I need to be upright versus when I need to stay lower to the ground.

My movement quality feels bigger and more polished. I feel more aware of my body and how to move it, partly due to having mirrors covered in jazz class specifically to challenge us to focus on feeling the movements, not on our reflections. I also feel less nervous about taking up space when I dance. And these principles are not solely confined to my jazz practice; plenty of what I learned can be applied to my practices of ballet and modern dance.

As a teacher, this deeper knowledge has allowed me to teach a richer class for my students. Currently, I often work as a substitute, and my goal is not to override what their regular instructor is teaching them, but to add to it. I do still have the students do battements, pas de bourrees, and leaps across the floor, because those steps are still a very real and very valid part of today's dance training. But, I also have them do undulations, and work on spine and shoulder articulation; things that I've learned from taking jazz in college and learning more about the foundations of the style. One of my main corrections lately for students is to keep their body weight lower into the ground, and I focus on that because it is one of the things that I was mostly corrected on. After many years of primarily studying ballet, I had a hard time learning how to move my spine and get out of the upright posture. Jazz training with the education and foundation of jazz's roots has allowed me to broaden my movement and performance quality, and now I have an opportunity to pass that on to younger students.

Jazz dance has an incredibly rich and complex history and continues to develop and change today. As a dancer, jazz has helped me gain more confidence in my movement, be more willing to take up space, and be able to find richer connections and transitions between my movements no matter the style. Growing up taking dance, I learned very little about the history of jazz, where it came from and how it evolved. As a teacher, going forward, I hope to incorporate some of my newfound knowledge into my practice of teaching jazz and help raise a more informed generation of jazz dancers about how this dance form became what it is today.



Clara Bond is a third-year Dance major at the University of California-Irvine, set to graduate in 2028. She is a freelance performer and children's dance teacher, and plans to continue performing, teaching, and choreographing after graduation. Later down the line, Clara plans to either open her own dance studio or direct a public school dance program.

Works Cited

- Amin, T. N. (2014). The African Origins of an American Art Form. *Jazz Dance*, 35–44.
<https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813049298.003.0006>
- Cohen, P. (2014). Jazz dance as a continuum. *Jazz Dance*, 3–7.
<https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813049298.003.0001>