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## Tapping into the 21st Century

*Given that tap dance offers so much Afrocentric history and expressive potential for today, shouldn't it have a more solid presence in universities as a foundational American dance form?*

by Ashton Craven

Imagine, if you will, a room full of tiny girls wearing pink leotards with dark biker shorts and little black shoes, all smacking their feet against the floor as hard as they possibly can. This was one of the few places where I was encouraged to be LOUD. Tap class was one of my earliest, fondest memories in dance. I could produce a whole song with my feet and slide around in my metal-soled shoes. Tap class was so different from any other style of dance I had trained in. It was an environment where I didn't have to crank open my turnout or suck in my stomach. It was a space that made me feel free.

As I grew older, I noticed that fewer people seemed to be signing up for tap training. The ballet techniques would be packed, the modern classes crowded, but tap was practically empty. I was confused as to why my friends didn't want to take this class anymore. Growing from a child to a young adult, I recognized that tap dance is about so much more than just creating noise, rather the opportunity to become an incredibly musical, coordinated, social, and intelligent dancer. I found myself always thinking about counts in the music, noticing my movement naturally driven by rhythm. I also found myself feeling the most confident doing improvisation in tap dance, since tap jam circles create such a strong sense of community, support, and belonging.

Dance in general has always had the unique ability to bring people from all backgrounds together, and in tap this is especially done through the Shim Sham Shimmy. This short, rhythmic phrase is practiced by tappers worldwide and is famously used to end performances. Knowing this universal routine extends my sense of community to dancers around the world with a passion for tapping. With all the beneficial qualities and experiences I gained as a tap dancer, I was puzzled why it seemed to be the least popular style at my childhood dance studio.

Only recently, while attending a university known mostly for their ballet, modern, and jazz programs, did I start to understand why tap dance seems to be less relevant. At the University of California, Irvine, tap is offered with only one level and serves as an elective class. This style of curriculum is common at most college dance programs in which "tap is treated like an outlier... while ballet is considered the foundation of training for all students" (Watson). Although not every dancer should be forced to take numerous levels of tap, there is inequity in requiring students to complete a year or more of ballet training while labeling other genres like tap "optional electives." Beyond curriculum, many departments have improper flooring for tap, prioritizing studios with marley flooring over wood. Tap shoes can damage marley flooring, so institutions commonly prohibit tap dance from being practiced in most of their studios. To accommodate students who wish to pursue tap dance, facilities should provide portable wooden

tap boards to protect marley covered studios and to encourage proper sound acoustics for tap shoes. Tap boards are a more affordable and realistic option that caters to the surface-related needs of different dance forms. It is important to acknowledge that many dance programs have evolved to push for more ‘well-rounded’ movement education, yet there are still institutional marginalization issues that need to be addressed.

Tap dance is an artform that is uniquely American and deeply rooted in African culture. While the world is still learning how to shift away from Eurocentric practices and give more recognition to Afrocentric dance, a long history of racism and segregation often bars such styles from gaining the same level of respect. In order to match the widespread grasp that genres like ballet and modern hold, educational institutions must incorporate tap history into their curriculums. According to the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, tap history can be used to enhance students’ education since the birth of tap dance is “intertwined with American history, having evolved from cultural traditions brought into this country by immigrants and slaves” (Hernandez). Tap education supplements students’ understanding of United States history, specifically regarding how the African diaspora influenced numerous dance genres, structures, and movements that are still widely practiced today. Essentially, as the artistic director of the American Tap Dance Foundation, Tony Waag states, tap history uncovers more than just the development of a dance technique, rather it “parallels the American experience” (Casey).

Tap dance originated from a combination of African percussive dance with Irish clogging, initially used as a strategic form of maintaining cultural identity through expression. When educational institutions teach tap technique but fail to recognize the origins of this style, the struggles of these historically marginalized populations are ultimately erased. Tap instructors, in particular, need to know the history of tap, since their job extends far beyond simply teaching movement. They are responsible for passing on the heritage of this style, paying respect to the ancestors that paved the way for tap dance to exist as it does today (Rolnick). By acknowledging the roots of tap dance, both instructors and students can find a greater appreciation for a style that was created as a powerful tool of expression.

One of the most effective ways to spread knowledge and admiration for dance is through the media. In the mid-20th century, tap dance existed in countless popular movies and musicals; however, now this genre is severely lacking televised representation. A few TV shows or movies, like *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Happy Feet*, have given some recognition to tap dance, yet it remains perceived as a special skill rather than a regularly produced dance form. How can tap dance reach the level of media relevance it once had? By catering to the evolved digital preferences of newer generations: social media. TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are all highly used applications that can reach a much wider and newer audience than television. On these platforms, small clips of polyrhythmic complexity and fast footwork can catch the interest of younger viewers, especially since current viral dance trends rise to fame quickly from only one original video. Tap history can also be incorporated into short reels, possibly as a voiceover for footage of eye-catching choreography, to pass on bits of information while maintaining the observer’s attention. With popular digital platforms as tools, tap dance has the potential to gain

attraction through internet sharing, encouraging the reemergence of tap in the next generation.

Since tap dance is so often associated with the nostalgia of the past, it is up to our generation to bring it into the 21st century. This requires changes in dance institutions to accommodate the needs that are essential for tap dance, such as proper flooring and historical education for both students and teachers. This also requires the push for a stronger media presence, to engage with younger audiences and inspire dancers to find the same passion in pounding their feet that I found as a child and still carry with me. After all, who wouldn't want to train in an art form where they can be a musician, an athlete, and a vessel for the legacy of Afrocentric expression, all at the same time?



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