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Reclaiming Black Spaces in Jazz Dance

Jazz has never been about who can do the most pirouettes into a side aerial, or making sultry faces to earn competition points—it has been a creative space for freedom and healing, and could be again

by Mercedes Hicks

Growing up, I spent a lot of time taking free music lessons at Central State University, my local HBCU in Wilberforce, Ohio. I would sneak out of my piano lessons to listen to my brother play the marimbas alongside his mentors. From all the different rhythms being played at once, to the trumpets shrieking—in need of tuning—and the pulse of the drums that kept everyone in time, everything about what they played fascinated me. After months of snooping, I started to notice the ways in which some of the musicians would move with their instruments. Their torsos would do one thing while their legs did another, some would sway their hips, while others would sink to the floor, just to get right back up and make it all look so easy.

These are some of my fondest memories of jazz music, and a formative experience for thinking about jazz and dance. Many years later I quit piano lessons so that I could travel with my competitive dance team. I did not think that I would see jazz dance onstage. In a way I was right; I did not see the kind of dancing to jazz I grew up around. Instead, I saw white girls leaping, doing tilts, and occasionally flexing a foot when doing a grand battement. Thus began my inquiry to better understand jazz movement, question its history, and re-envision it as a healing space for Black people.

As jazz first gained popularity in the 1920s, white people dehumanized Black dancers to delegitimize jazz culture as a whole. They referred to jazz dancers with derogatory language and described the movement as sexual or animalistic. They failed to appreciate the convergence of West African dances that survived the slave trade, movement inspired by elements of slave life, and later, influences from other dances across the globe. Jazz dance, like all other dances coming from the African diaspora, is reliant on polyrhythm and polycentrism due to its close relationship with the music. For instance, if the music is a work song that only utilizes vocals and clapping (or drums if they could be hidden) the dancing is slow and reflects the exhaustion felt by enslaved people who worked from sunrise to sundown, 6 to 7 days a week. If the music is fuller and utilizes all the instruments found in a jazz band, the dancing becomes more exaggerated and flashier with lots of release and close proximity to the ground. In contrast, the cakewalk is a dance that mocks European dance aesthetics, such as uprightness and bound movements.

Much of jazz dance today looks nothing like its historical precedent. Africanist aesthetics such as bent knees and the aesthetic of the cool have been replaced with Eurocentric aesthetics, like straight knees and pointed feet. Often, the relationship with actual jazz music no longer exists, as many “jazz” pieces are performed to pop or even hip-hop songs. The most jarring change is that self-proclaimed jazz dancers are often white women learning this genre of dance from other white women (Netting). The centering of nonblack people as jazz practitioners strays from jazz’s roots and obscures a deeper understanding of its history. Americans are obligated to learn that “Jazz dance offers passage into the traditions, structures, expressions, folklore, rituals,

characteristics, and the heritage of displaced peoples from the continent of Africa...” (Oliver et al).

I think that the contemporary offshoot of jazz could be re-branded into something else so that African Americans can reclaim the term jazz as a Black space. The virtuosic balleticization of jazz makes Black culture less accessible and seemingly disposable. Jazz is not about who can do the most pirouettes into a side aerial, or who can make the sultriest faces to earn a good mark from the judges at a competition. It was a creative space for freedom and healing. For me, movement is integral to Black culture which is why it is so important to center Blackness in jazz.

My call to action requires people to engage with anti-racist work in dance education. This means teaching dance students that jazz is not a Eurocentric dance style like contemporary or ballet (Wendy et al). Furthermore, dance educators need to hold one another accountable. If someone is teaching jazz in a way that does not articulate its Africanist aesthetics, they should be called out and corrected. Non-Black people should acknowledge their positionality when teaching jazz and commit to the work and research required to diminish the impact racism on jazz.

Making archival information more accessible would be another great way to dismantle systemic racism. We need to confront the discomfort of racist wording by critics in archival newspapers and pay attention to perpetuations of that language today. I would also like to see the dance community approach jazz as a movement therapy for Black people. Treating jazz dance as movement therapy would create a safe space for Black people to reacquaint themselves with an important aspect of African American history, and empower themselves through dance as a narrative of resiliency.

It is important that we continue conversations about jazz history. The appropriation and commodification of jazz can and should be taught because it exemplifies a broader pattern of commodifying Black culture in America. Understanding this process gives us insight on how to correct ourselves so that future generations can avoid making the same mistakes; in this case, knowing more about the evolution of jazz helps us ascertain why Blackness matters in this dance form. I think a different approach to jazz dance could provide a healing experience for Black dancers. This does not mean nonblack dancers cannot learn jazz dance—in fact, I would encourage nonblack jazz dancers to fund Black educators and learn from them. The goal is not to rewrite the history of jazz, but to expand upon what has already been written. While we cannot change the past our actions now can contribute to a much better future.

Mercedes Hicks is a third-year dance major and disability studies minor at Ohio State University. During her time there she has had the opportunities to study abroad in Denmark and perform at the east central American College Dance Association. She is looking forward to completing the BFA program, with the expected graduation date being May 2024.

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