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Admiring the dancestors of tap and jazz

by Tara Louise Devera

One time that I channeled ideas about dance history was in my Jazz II class, when Professor Ariyan Johnson had our class working on incorporating African boot dance and social dance in our final for the course. For a group project, I worked with a few others to recall and how to do some African vernacular social dances, like the cakewalk, boogie back, bee's knees, cow's tail, and charleston.

The part of history that I was considering during this time was the history of tap dance. When tap dance was born it grew as a fusion of Irish, English, and African musical traditions. Early on, Africana and Irish people used dance as a form of expression and survival when they were either enslaved or indentured servants. I found it honestly very inspirational that during these difficult times in which these people, especially African Americans, were being disrespected and not even seen as human, they depended on dance for emotional support. These social dance steps that we are continuing to learn about and execute in class are the same steps that were created by the African American community to preserve their own culture and traditions. It reinforces the idea that dance is also an art but also a language between people in communities, and can bring people closer together.

What I believe happens when I try to incorporate the past history in my current dancing is that I feel a lot more grounded into the floor. I feel like I can let my body give into the music more. In the past, I have a strong tendency to rush ahead of the music, so by being more grounded into the floor, I feel more stabilized and more relaxed with the flow of the music. Another concept that I really began to understand because of dance history was the idea that jazz is a social dance. Even in class, when we start with a warm-up we are engaging in a call-and-response. In addition, a big part of African vernacular dance is improvisation. As a social dance, I have learned that through improvisation, to become my own individual self as a dancer. I can combine body contractions, undulations, and stomping to create a phrase that reflects my own individual self.

Tara Eloisa Devera is a junior at the University of California, Irvine, pursuing a double major in Dance Performance and Psychology, and is expected to graduate in June 2028.