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# American Tap Dance History and Proposed Preservation

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American Tap Dance History and Proposed Preservation

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Commercial Dance

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Abstract:

The first form of dance conceived in the United States, tap dance, thrived throughout the era of vaudeville and the movie musical. Today's society often overlooks tap dance beyond basic or beginner dance education; the history of the art form is even more so neglected. Within these pages, I will address the question of how the history of tap dance can be honored and preserved for generations to come. I feel so grateful to have had a tap mentor that valued the history of tap just as much as the technique and steps. Others in my field may not have been so lucky. This is ultimately a major hinderance in our ability as dance educators to future students. Developing a system of tap dance training accompanied by history as well as sparking the interest of audiences new and old is the best way to further tap technique and performance.

Thanks to popular television programs such as *World of Dance* and *So You Think You Can Dance*, dance, in general, has seen a major resurgence in modern culture. Registration in dance schools, participation in dance conventions, and attendance in dance related performances is steadily on the rise with no sign of slowing down. In light of this, there has not been a better time to examine the way in which dance history is taught and conveyed; we must take advantage of the peaked interest and utilize all resources at hand. Tap dance, in particular, has seen its own small portion of this widespread dance resurgence especially due to the return of the movie musical - *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman*. With the demand of dance on an upswing, inadequate, lackluster dance education is a serious concern. Dance teachers need to make sure the knowledge they are imparting on students is both historically accurate and progressive.

In order to best educate myself and develop a viable solution, I have done extensive historical research through credible texts. I have read various books suggested to me by my own

tap mentor and other tap professionals. I have also be read through various biographies and autobiographies. Now having obtained as much knowledge as possible regarding the history of tap dance, I efficiently developed a method in which preservation can take place within the teaching of technique. Tap dance, being one of the only forms of dance originating in the United States, deserves to be sustained and honored properly and to the highest degree.

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## Introduction

Tap dance may be defined as “a percussive American dance form distinguished by the interplay of rhythms and amplification of sound by the feet” (Hill 2). Multiple interactions of cultures and traditions aided in the development of this definition. From the Caribbean in the 1600s with the mingling of enslaved West Africans and Irish indentured servants to the Southern United States in the 1700s with Irish American laborers and African American folk, tap dance has evolved. American tap dance is a social exchange, a way of communication, a union of people from all walks of life.

One account of an early form of tap dance took place near Frogmore, South Carolina in 1951. This account - recorded by jazz historians, Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns - involved two young black man, Frank Chaplin and Evan Capers (Hill 1). These young man stood face to face stomping to the rhythms of sliding washboard. It was later concluded by the Stearns that the men were, in fact, in a “jigging contest.” The word “jig” was used to describe an Irish folk dance and was adapted into American vocabulary as a style of “Negro” dancing (Hill 1). “Jigging” developed, incorporated a variety of other dances - such as gioube, buck-and-wing, and juba - and later birthed tap dance.

The key to tap dance’s evolution, which has remained the same throughout the years, is watching and listening. Tap steps are famously “shared, stolen, and reinvented” (Hill 3). There is a sense of community and unity within this art form that stems across boundaries of race and class. Tap dancers from everywhere and anywhere gather at clubs, lace up their shoes, and converse with their musicality. To draw a tree connecting tap dancers to their mentors and mentees would extend far beyond these pages. In order to better understand the history of

American tap dance, one must seek to gain knowledge on the masters and their contribution to tap dance's development and universal impact.

### William Henry Lane aka "Master Juba"

A man named William Henry Lane was born around 1825 in Providence, Rhode Island ("William Henry Lane/Master Juba" 1). Dance halls were pivotal establishments to tap dance's ongoing development throughout the 1800s. A hall named the Five Points - also referred to as Dicken's Hole - became particularly famous due to an account by world famous author, Charles Dickens in his 1842 *American Notes* (Seibert 81). It is here that William Henry Lane enters the scene and gains the acknowledgement from many as the first and best American tap dancer. In *American Notes*, Dickens describes his encounter in the dance hall as "dull until the lead dancer, 'the wit of the assembly, the greatest dancer known,' makes a move" (Seibert 81). Lane took on the name "Master Juba" and performed in multiple minstrel shows as such.

Juba's style and technique were utterly revolutionary for the time period. He experimented with utilizing atypical areas of his feet in the creation of sounds and rhythms ("William Henry Lane/Master Juba" 1). Juba "used his heels to create the deeper tones of the bass drum, and the balls of his feet to layer softer, higher sounds" ("William Henry Lane/Master Juba" 1). Juba was a proud African American man and maintained the oral traditions of African culture within his performances; he would talk, sing and laugh adding to his innovative combinations ("William Henry Lane/Master Juba" 1). A large majority of tap dancers in the 21st century attribute their own style and technique to Juba's example.

## Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates

Born in 1907, Clayton Bates grew up in a predominately African American neighborhood in South Carolina. From a very young age, Bates recalls watching his family, friends, and neighbors gather to relax and dance; they would challenge one another and tap dance without even knowing it (Seibert 175). Bates’s mother was a Baptist woman and did not approve of his dancing antics. Bates would often go the “white part of town” and tap in front of the barbershop for pennies (Seibert 175). At twelve years old, Bates got a job at the local mill in order to save up to purchase a suit. Three days later, Bates was severely injured in a conveyor belt accident resulting in his left leg being amputated below the knee (Seibert 176). A naturally optimistic and spirited Bates did not allow this tragedy to hinder his drive in the slightest. His uncle fashioned a peg leg for Bates, establishing his nickname “Peg Leg Bates.” Bates once said “if I saw a two-legged dancer doing a step, I would copy that step. But I would do it with one leg, which made it look like an entirely different step” (Seibert 176). With a tip made of half leather and half rubber for grip, Bates and his wooden leg were able to make a sound that no other tapper could match (Seibert 176).

Bates moved to Harlem, New York in 1927. It was there that Leonard Harper - one of the leading dance directors in Harlem - sought after Bates and his talent. From there, producer Lew Leslie scouted Bates for the Broadway production of *Blackbirds of 1928* (Seibert 178). Bates success was fast-paced and considerable. His melodically sophisticated style of dancing earns him the title of “one of the finest rhythm dancers in the history of tap dancing” (Hill, “Peg Leg Bates” 1). “Life means, do the best you can with what you've got, with all your mind and heart.



You can do anything in this world if you want to do it bad enough,' he often said" (Hill, "Peg Leg Bates" 1).

### John Bubbles

In 1902 in Louisville, Kentucky, John Sublett was born. Sublett first stepped foot in a theater at seven years old and began performing with his sisters - singing, not dancing just yet (Morrison 1). He worked various jobs as a young boy including a job in a Louisville bowling alley setting up the pins. It was there that Sublett met a boy named Ford Lee Washington who so happened to be an incredible pianist (Seibert 185). Sublett picked up the nickname "Bubbles" and Washington the nickname of "Buck." The pair began performing together and got their first big break in 1918; the manager of the theater they then worked at called and asked them to fill a gap in the lineup (Morrison 1). However, African Americans were not allowed to perform at this theater, so Buck and Bubbles were forced "to fool the the public" wearing burnt cork (Seibert 185). At twelve and seventeen years old respectively, Buck and Bubbles were taken to New York with a traveling show in 1920 (Seibert 185).

When Bubbles' voice cracked on a high note, he began to think that developing another skill would be beneficial. Bubbles paid a visit to the renowned Hoofers' Club where tap dancers gathered to perform and battle. Shortly after stepping onto the floor, Bubbles was laughed off by the regulars, who added in their heckling that "he was hurting the floor" (Seibert 185). Bubbles used this experience to push himself and better his tap skills. Little did he know that this choice would forever change tap dance.

Bubbles was one of the first to cut the tempo, "trading a brisk march to a four-to-the-bar swing" (Seibert 186). Cutting the tempo allowed Bubbles more time to swing, sprinkle in new

steps, and add accents on the off-beat (Morrison 1). He did this with the audience in mind, Bubbles said “I figured out how to do a dance so the audience wouldn’t stop applauding. I hated for them to applaud, then stop, then applaud, then stop, so I made a dance all in changing tempos” (Goldberg 93). Bubbles also became known for dropping his heels. This concept was not at all new in tap dance at the time, however his choice of timing and musicality within the heel drops were revolutionary. Bubbles was idolized by the entire tap community. He recalls teaching Fred Astaire for \$400 an hour. Astaire, a huge talent in his own right, sought out Bubbles’ knowledge to expand from his typical, somewhat basic footwork (Goldberg 96). Bubbles achieved countless successes as a soloist, but remained loyal to Buck up until his death in 1955 (Morrison 2).

Buck and Bubbles constantly broke racial barriers throughout their nearly forty year career together. They were the first African American team to perform on Broadway at the Palace Theatre (Hill 101). The team ventured into the film industry and made over a dozen feature films and short films - some of their most notable being *A Song is Born*, *Cabin in the Sky*, and *Varsity Show* (Morrison 2). Buck and Bubbles were vaudevillian stars, effortlessly combining song, dance, comedy, and pure entertainment.

#### Bill “Bojangles” Robinson

Born in 1878 in Richmond, Virginia, Luther Robinson would grow up to contribute tremendous innovations to tap dance as Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. From a very early age, Robinson knew he could dance; he was also quite the troublemaker. After being taunted for his given name, Luther, Robinson beat up his younger brother, Bill, took his name, and forced Bill to take the name “Percy” (Seibert 130). Robinson quickly became prominent in the vaudeville

circuit with his star-like personality. Even the acclaimed jazz musician Louis Armstrong knew of Robinson and noted his style saying “that man was so sharp he was bleeding” (Seibert 133).

Robinson’s footwork was exceptionally light bringing tap dance out of the flow and “up on it toes” (Hill 65). He maintained an upright posture while executing swing and ragtime - a perfect example of Afro-Irish fusions within American tap dance (Hill 66). Robinson’s clarity, control, and timing was truly masterful and highly admired. Nevertheless, Robinson’s development of the “stair dance” is perhaps his most noteworthy and well-known accomplishment.

The “stair dance” has been said to originate in 1918 while Robinson performed at the Palace in New York City. Spotting a few friends in the audience, Robinson danced down the stairs and into the audience to say hello (Seibert 133). In addition to this action, Robinson has also stated that the idea of the “stair dance” was manifested in a dream, “I dreamed I was getting to be a knight, and I danced up the stairs to the throne, got my badge, and right down again” (Hill 66). Using stairs as a prop drastically reduced the stage space and highlighted Robinson’s impeccable technique. A story was told by the visual of Robinson traveling up and down the staircase allowing the audience to follow and listen to the rhythmic progressions being displayed (Hill 67). Robinson’s “stair dance” was captured on film in the 1932 short film *Harlem is Heaven* (Seibert 136). In the 1935 film *The Little Colonel* starring Shirley Temple, Robinson is shown teaching and performing the routine with the young dancer.

Unfortunately, Robinson did not receive all of this notoriety until he was nearly sixty years old due to the color of his skin (“Bill “Bojangles” Robinson” 1). It was in his sixties, however, that he was most active. Robinson would perform various acts at a variety of theaters

in the same day. He never turned down an opportunity to dance no matter if it was for pay or charity; he reportedly performed in 400 benefits in one year (“Bill “Bojangles” Robinson 1). Following his initial successes in the film industry, Robinson would earn \$6,600 a week for his films in 1937 - a staggering number for the African American performer at the time (“Bill “Bojangles” Robinson). No one says it better than Brian Seibert in his book *What the Eye Hears*: “Bill Robinson came in at the right time. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that when the right time came, he was still there, on beat and instep.”

### Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers

Throughout the prime years of tap dancing’s rise, entertainers formed two person acts with marvelous triumph. A specific duo that would be a travesty to go unmentioned is that of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The pair’s fame and success made them household names recognized by not only dancers, but everyday people alike. Astaire and Rogers had distinguished solo careers as well that influenced tap dance and its history.

Astaire was born on May 10, 1899 in Omaha, Nebraska. Astaire’s older sister, Adele, was such a skilled dancer that their mother brought her, and subsequently, a young Fred, to New York to pursue professional training in 1904 (Hill 113). The Astaires enrolled both children in Claude Alvienne’s dancing school and developed a vaudeville act earning \$150 a week. Fred and Adele were then enrolled in Ned Wayburn’s dancing school. Wayburn developed an act for the siblings called “A Rainy Saturday” that soon thereafter, got them booked at Proctor’s Fifth Avenue (Hill 113). Adele and Fred debuted on Broadway in the 1917 *Over the Top* followed by *Lady, Be Good!* in 1924 with a score by George Gershwin - Fred’s vaudeville buddy (Seibert 148). The pair would dance in a way that combined ballet, ballroom, soft-shoe tap dance, and

characterization (Hill 113). Adele received a majority of the critical acclaim, however her “gangly, big-eared, already balding brother” would rise in due time (Seibert 147).

Succeeding Adele’s marriage and retirement from show business in 1932, Fred went solo and traveled to Hollywood. He first appeared in the 1933 *Dancing Lady* alongside Joan Crawford and then *Flying Down to Rio* that same year with a Miss Ginger Rogers (Hill 113). Rogers was born in 1911 in Independence, Missouri as Virginia Katherine McMath. She was an outstanding Charleston dancer - winning her first Charleston contest at fourteen years old (“Ginger Rogers: Biography” 1). Rogers worked vaudeville until she was seventeen, transitioned to Broadway, and continued on to Hollywood (“Ginger Rogers: Biography” 1).

Together, as Fred and Ginger, they appeared in nine more films together after *Flying Down to Rio* (Hill 113). Astaire’s style of dancing involved the entire room and a flat foot; he was a “master of the broken rhythms” and had a way of winning the audience with his relatable demeanor (Seibert 240). Rogers was a stunning woman dancing with the ultimate elegance; “she never appears to be working hard, and seems to dance in the beauty of an illusion” (Hill 115). Collectively, Astaire and Rogers performed duets with emotion and emphasis on the tension between a man and a woman - a novel idea in tap dance at this time. It is important to note that the sounds of tap dancing seen in films is added in postproduction, or dubbed over. Unlike Astaire, who was known to be a perfectionist in the dubbing process, Rogers would not dub her own sounds at all. Instead, Hermes Pan, who aided Astaire in the creation of routines, is the one heard tapping for Rogers in the films (Seibert 242). Rogers was by no means a great tap dancer, but at that time in Hollywood, it did not matter; her starlet qualities were of more importance.

Despite this, Rogers and Astaire's joint contribution to tap dance and the way it is performed emotionally is of the utmost significance.

### The Nicholas Brothers

Continuing along with influential pairs, there is Fayard and Harold Nicholas. Fayard was born in 1914 and Harold in 1921 into a family of musicians - their mother, a pianist, and their father, a drummer ("Nicholas Brothers" 1). The family formed a band called the Nicholas Collegians at the Standard Theatre while living in Philadelphia. Fayard would watch acts performing at the theatre, including that of Buck and Bubbles, and learn the steps; Nicholas, although he was young, possessed the ability to mimic what his brother practiced (Seibert 193). After the brothers began triumphing in vaudeville, the family moved to Harlem and the boys performed at the Lafayette. The brother act launched into a six nights a week show at the Cotton Club (Seibert 194). The Nicholas Brothers were thriving and dipping into all aspects of the entertainment industry.

The Nicholas Brothers style of dancing is very complementary. Fayard tapped rhythmically and would move in and out of double time, while Harold had charisma to cover the both of them (Seibert 195). Their routines were incredibly athletic and theatrical. An excellent example of their talent is the 1943 film *Stormy Weather*. The brothers execute a technically difficult tap routine with additional elements of physicality while Cab Calloway and his orchestra performs the "Jumpin Jive." It was defining routines like this one that placed a spotlight on the Nicholas Brothers in tap dance's history.

## Gene Kelly

Gene Kelly was born in 1912 to a large Irish family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (“Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer” 1). The third of five children, Kelly was a natural dancer with a wonderful singing voice even though his early career aspirations included ball player, priest, and lawyer (Hill 152). Kelly’s mother was adamant that all of her children attend dancing school. The siblings began performing together in a vaudeville act, the Five Kellys (Seibert 283). Gene and his brothers were ridiculed for dancing by neighborhood boys who called them “sissies.” Tired of fighting, the brothers convinced their mother to let them quit dancing school. Kelly was known to be sensitive to the suggestion that dance was not a manly activity for the remainder of his life (Seibert 284).

In high school, Kelly, insecure about his short stature, compensated by becoming a strong, competitive athlete. At fifteen years old, Kelly’s interest in girls increased and he noticed their admiration for boys that were able to dance well. In 1929, Kelly’s brother, Fred, taught him to tap dance (Hill 152). Kelly, Fred, and their mother took ownership of a dance studio while the boys simultaneously created routines and entered competitions. Attending the University of Pennsylvania, Kelly graduated with a B.A. in law in 1933 (Hill 153). By 1938, Kelly had bought a one-way ticket to New York City and landed the title role in the original Broadway production of *Pal Joey*.

Kelly’s performance in *Pal Joey* set up his trademark and overall impact on tap dance. The *New York Times* columnist John Martin said of Kelly, “a tap dancer who can characterize his routines and turn them into an integral element of an imaginative theatrical whole would seem to be pretty close, indeed, to being unique” (Seibert 286). Tap dance, up to this point in time, was a

speciality skill that could be easily removed from a show without consequence to the plot. Kelly performed dance in a way that made it integral to the plot. In addition to this revelation, Kelly understood how to solve the tap dancer's ongoing problem of not moving the arms and torso while dancing (Seibert 286). He understood his body, kept a low center of a gravity, and maintained a manly sex appeal at the aid of his working class physique (Seibert 288).

Hollywood quickly snatched Kelly up and turned him into a heartthrob of the screen. In the movie musical *Anchor's Aweigh*, Kelly danced with the cartoon character Jerry the Mouse - a routine that was the very first of its kind ("Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer" 1). Other notable performances include the 1951 *An American in Paris* and the 1952 *Singin' in the Rain*. Kelly's career was certainly filled with all kinds of success as a dancer, actor, choreographer, and director, however, at the same time, tap dance was slowly leaving Hollywood's forefront.

#### Sammy Davis Jr.

Born in Harlem, New York, in 1925, Sammy Davis Jr. would bring tap dance to Las Vegas. Davis was born into show business with dancing parents Elvera "Baby" Sanchez and Sammy Davis Sr. (Hill 188). He learned to dance at a very young age from his father and self-proclaimed "uncle" Will Mastin. At only four years old in 1929, Davis joined his father and Mastin's act, thus becoming the Will Mastin Trio (Hill 188). Davis remained in vaudeville with the trio till the end of the vaudeville period (Seibert 347).

In 1941, while performing in the opening act for Tommy Dorsey, Davis met Frank Sinatra. Sinatra became a close friend of Davis and encouraged him to sing and do impressions more (Seibert 349). Davis soon began releasing records in addition to dancing with the trio. The Mastin trio headlined New York's top nightclub Copacabana and Davis, furthermore, appeared



all over the entertainment industry in television and film (Seibert 349). Now as a member of Sinatra's Rat Pack in the 60s, Davis was quite possibly the most famous African American man in the country. Although tap dance was no longer the primary focus of his act, it has been said that Davis always kept his tap shoes under the piano just in case (Seibert 350). Davis became the headliner at the Frontier Casino in Las Vegas and drew in a huge audience wanting to witness his dazzling act of song and dance (Hill 190).

### Gregory Hines

Tap dance was at a standstill in American culture following the "death" of the movie musical. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the need for another extraordinary tap dancer to surface and succeed as a tap dancer grew exceptionally. Gregory Hines was born in 1946 in the Washington Heights area of New York City. Hines and his older brother, Maurice Hines Jr., were brought to their first tap dance lesson with Henry LeTang at three and five years old (Hill 226). It was only natural that the grandsons of Cotton Club chorus dancer Ora Hines took on the art as well. Hines' mother, Alma, asked LeTang to teach her children tap routines in addition to steps (Hill 226). LeTang rarely taught children to begin with, however he knew these boys were special. The Hines Brothers duo found success on Broadway, television, and in Las Vegas.

In 1973 at twenty-seven years old, Hines quit tap dance; he did play rhythm guitar and sang in lieu of dance (Seibert 412). After a difficult time period of drugs, loss, and inner conflict, Hines chose to return to New York City in 1978. With the help of his brother and LeTang, Hines was cast in the Broadway production of *Eubie!* earning him a Tony nomination (Seibert 412). His next big role was in the 1981 *Sophisticated Ladies*. Frank Rich of the *Times* asserted in a review of the show, "it's no secret that Mr. Hines may be the best tap dancer of our day, but he's

more than a dancer; he's the frisky Ellington spirit incarnate" (Seibert 413). This was a pivotal movement - the first time in quite a long time that a tap dancer was starring on Broadway.

Hines passed along his role in *Sophisticated Ladies* to his brother as he headed to Los Angeles to open a production of the show there and pursue a career in film. Francis Ford Coppola's 1984 film *The Cotton Club* was Hines' first big cinematic role. Hines wanted the role so badly that he dressed in time-specific costume, went to the producer's home, and tapped on his coffee table (Seibert 414). *The Cotton Club* conclusively proved Hines to be "a modern representation of tap's past" (Seibert 415). Hines' next role in the 1985 film *White Nights* is legendary in the dance community. The film features a duet between Hines and Mikhail Baryshnikov - a Russian ballet star considered to be the greatest dancer in the world - choreographed by the renowned Twyla Tharp (Seibert 416). Gregory Hines was incredibly instrumental in tap dance's commercial resurgence and laid the groundwork for modern American tap dance. Hines once said in conversation with Jane Goldberg, recorded in her book *Shoot Me While I'm Happy*, "one of the great things that separates tap dancing from everything else is that you see the body move and you hear the body move." Hines' star emerged at the time the community needed a reminder of tap dance's beauty the most.

#### Dianne "Lady Di" Walker

In 1951 in Boston, Massachusetts, Dianne Walker was born ("Dianne 'Lady Di' Walker" 1). Walker went about life as women typically did at this time - went to school, got married, and had children. By 1978, Walker was a proud mother of two and working as a psychologist ("Dianne 'Lady Di' Walker" 1). Walker's world was altered when she met Willie Spencer at the Prince Hall Masonic Temple; she recalls, "he was doing some rhythmic pattering, and it tickled

me to hear it” (Hall 230). Spencer introduced Walker to Leon Collins who became her mentor and greatest influence. Collins was a phenomenal rhythm tapper in his own right; his style revolved around intricacies and a tremendous knowledge of music (Hall 231). Walker embodied Collins technique while adding a graceful, feminine quality never really seen before in rhythm tappers. It may be argued that Walker was the female voice of tap’s resurgence opposite of Gregory Hines. Walker performed for thousands while also taking special interest in teaching the upcoming generations; “Lady Di” is the mother of modern American tap dance.

#### Brenda Bufalino

Tap dance’s revival period - the 1970s into the 1980s - brought more than a few trailblazing women. A contemporary of Gregory Hines and Dianne Walker, Brenda Bufalino was filled with ideas for the future of tap dance. Born in Massachusetts in 1937, Bufalino began dancing at six years old (“Brenda Bufalino” 1). At eighteen, Bufalino moved to New York City to further her dance education studying modern and jazz dance in addition to tap dance (“Brenda Bufalino” 1). Bufalino danced on countless stages before “burning out” in 1957 at twenty years old; she got married, moved upstate, and raised two children (Seibert 385). However, by no means did Bufalino abandon tap dance. During this time she developed a fine tuned technique and planned for the future of the dance.

When tap dance was ready to rise again, so was Bufalino. She dreamed of a tap dance orchestra. “It was to be big - twenty, forty dancers - so that she could divide the company into sections, each section holding its own rhythm, all of the rhythms interlocking” (Seibert 388). With that, Bufalino founded the American Tap Dance Orchestra and performed at the Statue of Liberty Festival in Battery Park on July 4, 1986 (“Brenda Bufalino” 1). The American Tap

Dance Orchestra soon became the American Tap Dance Foundation - a staple in the tap community. Bufalino continues to be one of the most influential forces in American tap dance. She is considered an innovator of jazz tap dance and choreographic composition. Mastering the shuffle scale, articulating flaps, and identifying the swing rhythm are just a few of Bufalino's contributions to American tap dance's progression ("Brenda Bufalino" 1).

### Savion Glover

Born in 1973 in Newark, New Jersey, Savion Glover is one of the most influential, living tap masters (Hill 283). Glover was raised by his mother, Yvette, who happened to be a gospel and jazz singer (Seibert 448). Around four years old, Glover began taking drumming classes and was considered something of a prodigy (Seibert 448). By 1980, at only seven years old, Glover joined the band Three Plus as a drummer ("Savion Glover" 1). Glover was first introduced to tap dance in 1982 and the rest is history. Glover made his Broadway debut in the *Tap Dance Kid* in 1984; the following year Glover performed in the Paris production of *Black and Blue* and then the Broadway production in 1989 ("Savion Glover" 1). It was there that he met many of his mentors including Dianne Walker. Fellow tappers started referring to Glover as the Sponge (Seibert 449). Glover eventually became a regular on Broadway and grew close to Gregory Hines as well.

As Glover continued to perform and then choreograph, his own unique style developed. Glover was always driven by the beat and the underlying funk; every square inch of his tap shoe is fair game and heavily utilized. He called this style "hitting" ("Savion Glover" 1). Glover's entire body is invested in his tap dancing with elements of hip hop dance present. His concern is

in the rhythm rather than the audience. Glover has brought tap dance back to its urban roots and simultaneously, into the future.

### The Future

With people like Savion Glover leading the way, the future of tap dance is nothing short of bright. In 2016, Glover choreographed the Broadway musical *Shuffle Along, or the Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed* - earning a Tony Award nomination for best Choreography. Tap companies such as Syncopated Ladies and Dorrance Dance are also paving the way for tap dance. The Syncopated Ladies, headed by Chloe Arnold, pride themselves on adding femininity and urban culture to the dance. Meanwhile, Dorrance Dance, established by Michelle Dorrance, is bringing tap dance into the concert dance scene and exploring more contemporary themes. This is a truly exciting time for tap dance. There is an abundance of potential for growth and advancement within the art form if properly utilized.

The fairly recent rise of dance within popular culture has caused an inflation of young dancers. Dance education in itself is a highly debated topic due to mental maturity and the physical demands of the art. Beyond that, there is a disconnect in understanding the origins which aids in the progression and future of dance. How do we properly educate the coming generations in a foundational, historical, and technical context?

Focusing in particularly on tap dance's preservation and corresponding education, the solution lies in front of us. The American Tap Dance Foundation, or ATDF, was founded in 1986 by Brenda Bufalino with the goal of providing a commonplace for tap dance. The foundation's mission statement describes it as "a non-profit organization committed to establishing and legitimizing Tap Dance as a vital component of American Dance through creation, presentation,

education and preservation” (“Mission” 1). ATDF is responsible for various pillars in the tap dance community such as Tap City, the Tap City Youth Ensemble, the International Tap Dance Hall of Fame, and the Gregory Hines Collection of American Tap Dance archives at the Lincoln Center Library. In addition, the foundation has developed a Tap Teacher Training Certificate Program which provides comprehensive training and education to prospective teachers. ATDF has made incredible strides, however, this is only the tip of the iceberg in tap dance’s overall preservation.

Some other notable contributors to tap dance are the Chicago Human Rhythm Project and the relatively new DC Tap Festival - who just celebrated their seventh year. The Chicago Human Rhythm Project, or CHRP, not only provides opportunity to tap dancers, but to all percussive artists and musicians (*Chicago Human Rhythm Project* 1). While tap dance is their primary focus, CHRP celebrates rhythm in all facets. The DC Tap Festival is an annual event offering master classes, jam sessions, history classes, and showcases (*DC Tap Fest* 1). The festival was founded by Chloe and Maud Arnold; two highly prominent, present-day tap dancers. The Arnold sisters especially gained fame by utilizing the power of social media and creating “viral” tap dance videos. These organizations are tremendous tools to learn and cultivate both knowledge and skill within the tap community.

The following lists the two core concepts of American tap dance and their corresponding subcategories.

## Rhythm

What remains constant throughout American tap dance history is the importance of rhythm. Tap dance, by nature, is a musical art form; without an understanding of rhythm, you are simply left with noise. The subcategories of rhythm include music theory and rudiments. By teaching tap dance students basic music theory and rudiments in a systematic progression, the history may be layered on top to solidify the practice.

The study of music theory provides the student with the ability to appropriately identify and create musical compositions. Beginning tap dancers need this skill to move forward in their education. Working with a metronome is quite possibly the best thing an aspiring tap dancer can do. The metronome - when set to a specific time signature - keeps the beat, slow or fast. Tap dance is a skill mastered by repetition. To take a step, repeat it slowly, and then again faster and faster, is tap's bread and butter.

## Style

When thoroughly examining American tap dance history, it is evident that multiple styles of tap dancing have developed and evolved. From the subcategories of Golden Age soft shoe to more modern hoofing, it is vital for today's tap dancer to be versatile. Distinguishing style from style is a difficult task, however it is made much easier with proper knowledge of tap dance history and roots. Each master perviously listed was a part of a very specific era in tap dance history. Their style in combination with the techniques they refined and mastered defines these eras and sets the groundwork for the future.

## Rudiments

The integration of rhythm - music theory and repetition - and style takes form in rudiments. Rudiments are set exercises designed to a particular rhythm or time signature. These rudiments can always be further advanced. Mastery only comes when the dancer is able to execute a rudiment forward, backward, on the right foot, on the left foot, slow, or fast. Many of the tap masters previously discussed created their own signature rudiments. By teaching these rudiments with the knowledge of tap history behind it, preservation may be done at the same time that skill is being built. I have created and borrowed a complete series of rudiments inspired by the tap masters to be taught and practiced for mastery as well as history.

One rudiment is an ode to William Henry Lane or “Master Juba.” Because of his strength in using his heels in addition to the ball of the shoe, I chose cramp rolls to be the subject of this exercise. The exercise is fairly basic, but can be made more difficult for variation. Ideally, this rudiment would be one of the first added to the tap dancer’s repertory to coincide with Lane’s place in tap dance history.

The “Shim Sham Shimmy” is another rudiment originally created by Leonard Reed. It is highly regarded in the tap community as being the universal step. When teaching this particular rudiment, there are various opportunities to discuss the vaudeville tap masters such as Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates, Jimmy Slyde, and Bunny Briggs. The complete routine involves simple steps in a pattern designed to maintain rhythm.

Playing off of John Bubbles and his innovation in cut time, I developed a rudiment concerning the basic swing step with changes in time signature. This rudiment incorporates music theory and stresses the importance of staying in time. An homage to Bill “Bojangles”



Robinson's stair dance, I formulated another rudiment with the paradiddle step. This series is to be done in a small space simulating the space that Robinson had on a single stair. Focusing on precision as well as maintaining time is the challenge within this specific exercise.

Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, and Gene Kelly were all stars of Hollywood's Golden Age. To pay homage to their legacy, a sequence of time steps may be taught while discussing this portion of history. To enforce the physicality brought to tap dance by the Nicholas Brothers, I came up with a pattern of running flap steps. This simultaneously encourages proper footwork execution and builds stamina.

During a lull in tap dance's popularity, Sammy Davis Jr. kept the art alive. I created a rudiment based off of the jazz music of this time. The pattern of steps is simple, the obstacle is the music itself. Jazz music is notorious for abrupt changes in time signature, this exercise practices just that. The resurgence of tap came along with Gregory Hines. At this point, I would add improvisation as the next step in my teaching. Although Hines is certainly not credited as the first to improvise, it was a skill that he mastered and held of significant importance. Dianne Walker and Brenda Bufalino both contributed strong female perspectives to American tap dance. Within the discussion of improvisation, their influence may be elaborated on - offering other points of view and approaches. My final rudiment is inspired by Savion Glover's "hitting" technique of tap dancing. It is the most expressive and expansive of all of the exercises, mimicking Glover's signature.

The ultimate goal in creating these rudiments is to set them with a teaching syllabus. A tap teacher must be well versed in tap dance history before beginning to teach any student. By utilizing the rudiments I have set forth, a teacher may both demonstrate specific skills and

technique, as well as discuss the history. Showing a child a step followed by the answer to where that step originated, will solve the disconnect between the tap youth and tap dance history.

### Conclusion

The complete history of American Tap Dance is vast with countless contributors and influencers; the discussion is truly never ending. Hopefully, by better preserving American tap dance history, this incredible art form will not be lost. The logical next step for this research and proposition is filmed footage. As I enter the professional world, I plan to further this work and create a video series in which I can educate aspiring tap teachers and students alike. Tap dance, being the first American form of dance, is vital to history whether you are a dancer, audience member, or neither. Savion Glover once said, "Tap dancing is like... it's equivalent to music, not only for the African American community, but also for the world. Tap dancing is like language; it's like air: it's like everything else that we need in order to survive." Let us preserve the art, preserve the life.

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