

**A COLLECTION AND RE-CREATION OF BAHAMIAN  
TRADITIONAL DANCES**

**RODERICK THEOPHILUS JOHNSON**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **A COLLECTION AND RE-CREATION OF BAHAMIAN TRADITIONAL DANCES**

This research project provides a collection and re-creation of eleven traditional Bahamian dances. Since the early eighteenth century, Bahamian folk dancing has been an integral part of the native's social life and culture and has been heavily influenced by three cultural groups: African, American and British. People from these three cultures were the first immigrants to the island and their folk dances form the underlying structural base of the Bahamian folk dance tradition. Eventually these cultural elements were synthesised into a distinctive Bahamian folk style.

In comparison to the amount of traditional dance information available from other Caribbean countries, the documentation on Bahamian folk dance tradition is sketchy at best. Adding to the lack of documentation is a continued decline in the spontaneous practice and cultural performances of these dances, plus little or no regular instruction to allow for the dances' survival in the culture. A sad consequence of cultural change is the loss or distortion of folk art. This is the present condition of the majority of traditional Bahamian folk dances. New trends in music as well as increased urbanization are causing many Bahamians to ignore or abandon their culture and heritage and as a result the dances which were once an important part of Bahamian society are now dying out. The awareness of the present condition of the dances has given me the necessary incentive to study, examine and document the Bahamian Folk dance tradition.

Central to this research project are two documentary video tape recordings of the Bahamian traditional dances. These tapes provide: necessary historical background, a step by step introduction to Bahamian dance, and important clues to the origins of them. The first tape explores the social, historical and cultural framework from which the Bahamian traditional dances have evolved. The second tape continues with a careful examination and documentation of each of the dances that will enable the viewer to actually recreate them and thus gain an even deeper understanding of the Bahamian folk style.

I chose to use the medium of video through which to present my research because of its ability to capture the dances in a way that writing could not. Recording the dances on video allowed for the documentation of each dance as a whole entity in that the mannerisms, gestures, behaviour, and steps were simultaneously recorded and preserved. As each dance has experienced a continued erosion of tradition at the hands of progress and increased modernization of the Bahamas, the video format has allowed me to record and thus preserve each dance before it is lost entirely.

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**Roderick T. Johnson**

## INTRODUCTION

This research project provides a collection and re-creation of eleven traditional Bahamian dances. Since the early eighteenth century, Bahamian folk dancing has been an integral part of the native's social life and culture and has been heavily influenced by three cultural groups: (African, American and British). People from these three cultures were the first immigrants to the island and their folk dances form the underlying structural base of the Bahamian folk dance tradition. Eventually these cultural elements were synthesised into a distinctive Bahamian folk style.

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TRADITIONAL DANCES

SCRIPT DESIGNED

BY

RODERICK JOHNSON

## INTRODUCTION

### V/S STUDIO

V/O Hello, my name is Roderick Johnson. I am a professional dancer, and dance researcher.

Although I have spent most of my adult life in Canada and the United States, I grew up in the beautiful islands of the Bahamas where I learned and performed the traditional dances of my culture.

### V/S CUT TO IMAGES OF THE BAHAMAS

V/O Although I have been dancing as a professional since I was nineteen, I have never forgotten my traditional dance heritage.

### V/S FOCUS ON DANCE IMAGES

V/O I recently returned to the islands of my youth to research and document these dances.

### V/S CLIPS OF CAT ISLAND

V/O To preserve and pass on the special traditions of Bahamian dance I have collected and reconstructed the most popular dances and presented them in an easy-to-learn video format.

I would encourage you to watch and enjoy the steps and patterns that have evolved with the Bahamian people.



### V/S CUT BACK TO THE STUDIO

V/O All of the movements are clearly broken down and explained allowing you, the viewer, to learn the dances and therefore get an even deeper understanding of Bahamian culture. Join me now as we take a journey through the exciting world of Bahamian dance. Before you view the dances, here is some important background information you should know about the Bahamas to help you understand the dances within their cultural context.

### V/S MAP OF THE BAHAMAS / ISLAND IMAGES OF WATER AND SKY

V/O Within the British Commonwealth of Nations, the Bahamas is an independent state. Its seven hundred islands stretch from the south of Florida to the northern tip of Cuba. This archipelago covers an area of 100,000 square miles and totals 5,358 square miles of land. Eighty-five percent of its population is of African origin with the remaining fifteen percent being of British, Greek, Spanish and Chinese origin. It is the integration of these cultures which makes up present day Bahamian society.

On this tape you will view a variety of traditional Bahamian folk dances all of which have been categorized. In the first category are the partner dances. Dances in this group are influenced by the European folk dances and are structured as such. In the second category are the Ring Dances which demonstrate the play dance games popular among the Bahamian children. The final category is known as the festival dances. Each of these dances is performed during a specific Bahamian festival and each also shares a strong African origin.

Now that you have learned a bit about the history of the Bahamas, we are ready to start looking at the partner, ring play and festival dances of the Bahamas.

#### PARTNER DANCES

V/S CUT TO STILL SHOT OF HEEL AND TOE POLKA WITH GRAPHIC LISTING OF OTHER PARTNER DANCES.

#### RING PLAY DANCES

V/S CUT TO STILL SHOT OF BROWN GIRL IN THE RING WITH GRAPHIC LISTING OF OTHER RING PLAY DANCES.

#### FESTIVAL DANCES

V/S CUT TO STILL OF JUNKANOO MASK WITH GRAPHIC LISTING OF OTHER FESTIVAL DANCES.

V/O From these three categories, we will look at each dance individually, see it broken down and then watch them in performance to give you a good idea of their Bahamian flavour.

V/O Even though all of the Bahamian folk dances shown here have their origin in Africa and Europe they are considered to be Bahamian. All these dances share certain similarities in that their movements are a combination of strong earth bound qualities and light swinging qualities which blend to create an unusual dance style only seen in The Bahamas.

To help you learn the dances, I will first break down the basic steps and patterns to describe the most important movements and elements of each dance. Most of the steps and patterns are straight forward and can be easily learned after watching the video tape a few times.

Let's focus on the first group of dances that were inspired by European ballroom tradition.

## PARTNER DANCES

V/O The partner dances are of European origin but experienced profound changes when they were repeatedly performed in the New World. The most noticeable change is the quality of the dance steps. After being exposed to the strong drum beats of early African slaves, the partner dances incorporated an earthy essence in that the steps are now performed into the floor as opposed to away from the floor the way the European partner dances are executed. Also, there exists in the Bahamian partner dances more freedom of movement in the torso and pelvis than found in the European partner dances.

### V/S STILL FRAME OF THE QUADRILLE DANCE

V/O Now let us look at the first of the Partner Dances the Bahamian Quadrille Dance.

Still popular throughout the islands, this lively social dance is usually performed in a square formation of four couples or in a longways set which is a parallel line formation of as many as eight couples. Known as the wedding dance, it received its comic style from the Bahamian slaves who observed it being performed at formal balls by their white masters during the early nineteenth century. They mimicked their masters and adapted their movements to their own rhythms played on special instruments developed by themselves.

### V/S FADE TO DANCER READY TO DEMONSTRATE THE CHORUS SETTING STEP

V/O The core of the Quadrille is the Setting Step. It has four dance elements and is performed as a chorus step before each of the six figures of the Quadrille. In 2/4 time, this step is similar to the Two Step found in North American folk dances and is counted in the same way 1&2, 1&2, 1&2.

#### V/S SHOT OF THE FEET MOVING FROM SIDE TO SIDE

V/O Now to do the Setting Step, on count 1 step flat onto the right foot, on the & count, step up onto the ball of the left foot transferring your weight and releasing the right foot; then make a second step on the right foot on count 2. Repeat to the left and continue alternating feet. It may help you if you accent the & count as is done in the familiar step ball change pattern. Now let us try it up to tempo alternating right and left feet.

Continue up to tempo: right & right, left & left, 1&2, 1&2.

The second dance element in the Setting Step is the forward and backward swinging of the shoulders with the arms moving freely. The arms are meant to add a relaxed feeling to the appearance of the setting step.

V/S SHOT OF THE SHOULDERS AND ARMS MOVING FORWARD AND BACKWARD  
FADES TO IMAGE OF DANCER DEMONSTRATING THE MOVEMENT OF THE  
HEAD.

V/O The third dance element is the upward and downward bowing movement of the head. It's an elegant quality and should coordinate well with the movement of the feet and shoulders.

The fourth and final dance element is a stamp called "Mashing the Roach." It is performed exclusively by the male dancers and is meant to punctuate the dance phrases and also to create excitement during the dance.

#### V/S IMAGE OF DANCER AS HE PERFORMS THE STAMP

V/O Now let us take a closer look at how these four dance elements are coordinated to make up the basic Setting Step.

#### V/S A FULL VIEW OF THE SETTING STEP PERFORMED UP TO TEMPO

V/O Notice how the four dance elements are performed in perfect coordination. The neat placing of the feet with little pressure on the ball of each foot as the step moves from side to side, the elegant swinging of the shoulders both forward and backward, and the natural up and down movement of the head. Added to these elements is the use of relaxed knees and free arm movements to give this Quadrille its Bahamian quality. As the dancers perform the Setting Step the combination of the head, arm and foot movements results in a relaxed and elegant style.

Now that we have established the chorus Setting Step, we will take a look at the six figures which make up the entire dance.

#### V/S FADES TO DANCERS READY TO DEMONSTRATE THE CROSSING PATTERN WITH THE NARRATION

V/O The first figure is the Crossing. Both lines of dancers perform two travelling setting steps to meet their partners in the centre. Next, taking their partners right hand, they perform two more setting steps turning clockwise and changing places with their opposite partner. With their backs towards their new position, the dancers then perform four more setting steps travelling backwards, towards their new place. The dancers then repeat this crossing pattern again taking the left hand of their partner and then returning to their original place in the formation.

V/O Now let us watch it once again up to tempo. 1&2, 3&4, 5&6, 7&8, 1&2, 3&4, 5&6, 7&8.

V/S FADES TO DANCERS READY TO DEMONSTRATE THE STRAW BASKET TURN

V/O The second figure of the Quadrille is the Straw Basket Turn.

V/S DANCERS SLOWLY DEMONSTRATE THE BASKET FIGURE AS NARRATION  
DESCRIBES THE PATTERN

V/O This figure starts with partners facing each other in a circle and holding their partner's hands. While holding hands, each couple raises the hand that is on the outside of the circle above their heads, while at the same time lowering the hand that is on the inside of the circle towards the floor.

The action should look as if the couple is tilting an imaginary basket toward the floor. As the basket tilts, the dancers continue holding hands and turn towards the centre of the circle. As they turn they pass each other back to back before returning to their starting position. In other traditional dances, this pattern is called a barrel turn. Now let us repeat it once again up to tempo: &1234 - & turn passing back to back - 1234,5678. The basket turn is lots of fun to do, and the dancers enjoy turning like a barrel. Watch for this figure when the complete dance is shown.

#### V/S LADIES' CHAIN.

V/O The third figure is the Ladies' Chain. Making a figure eight pattern around their opposite and own male partners, the ladies perform two travelling setting steps on the diagonal to meet each other in the centre of the longways formation. Next reaching and taking their partner's right hand they perform the chain by passing each other on the right side. For the remaining four bars they continue to travel in their line of direction and weave clockwise around their opposite male partner, completing one half of the figure eight chain pattern.

The ladies repeat this pattern to the left and around their own partner and return to their original position in the longways formation. During the ladies' chain, the gentlemen perform the setting step in place. Let us watch the pattern up to tempo.

#### V/S DANCERS REPEAT THE PATTERN TO THE MUSIC

V/S IMAGE FADES TO DANCER PREPARING TO DEMONSTRATE THE MALE CAPER  
FIGURE TO THE NARRATION



V/O The fourth figure is the Men's Caper. This step is done as a way to try and impress the females. The basic movements consist of improvised twisting, turning and swinging one leg around the other. Also included in the improvised movement patterns are small jumps that are close to the floor and gliding movements that move side to side.

Here is a short movement phrase which typically illustrates the type of movement the men do in this figure.

#### V/S DANCER DEMONSTRATES IMPROVISED FOOT WORK, TWISTING CAPERS

V/O As you can see most of the movements are concentrated around the legs and feet. To accomplish the swinging movement of the legs it's important to keep the upper body forward with the knees bent loosely to allow one leg the freedom to swing around the other. To get the footwork quick, angular and off balance, as the caper demands, allow the torso and other body parts to move naturally in balance to the leg movements. The capers are lots of fun because the dancers are free to improvise spontaneously to the music.

V/O Now let us go on to the fifth figure, the LADIES' STAR

V/S FADES TO DANCERS READY TO DEMONSTRATE THE STAR PATTERN TO THE  
NARRATION

V/O Traditionally this formation was performed with the setting or skulling step. To form this human star, the ladies face clockwise and extend their right arms so their fingers touch in the centre. In this formation they perform eight travelling setting or Skulling steps and pivot clockwise on the last one to face the other direction and repeat the movement counter clockwise.

Let us watch this pattern done up to tempo, 1234,5678,1234,5678.

V/S FADES TO DANCERS READY TO DEMONSTRATE THE SPIN FIGURE IN  
COORDINATION WITH NARRATION

V/O The sixth figure is the Spin. Starting in the longways set the dancers take two brisk steps to meet their partners in the middle of the floor and take the traditional ballroom hold. Next, each person makes six steps spinning twice in place, then performs eight setting steps travelling backwards to retreat to their original places in the line. The dancers then repeat the Spin with the partner next to them. Now let us look at the spin figure up to tempo.

V/S DANCERS DEMONSTRATE THE SPIN FIGURE UP TO TEMPO

V/O For the finale, the dancers repeat the Crossing figure once again with more relaxed movements. Towards the completion of the dance, the emphasis is on the enjoyment of the dance rather than on the patterns. Now that you are familiar with the basic chorus Setting Step and the six Quadrille figures, you will see the entire dance.

V/S THE PERFORMANCE OF THE QUADRILLE AT TEMPO

## HEEL AND TOE POLKA

### V/S STILL FRAME OF THE HEEL AND TOE POLKA

V/O The next set of partner dances are sometimes called round dances because they move around the room in a circular pattern. They include the Heel and Toe Polka, and the Calypso Waltz. First we will see the Heel and Toe Polka. Although the basic pattern is like the English polka, in the Bahamian version the emphasis of the dance is on the heel and toe.

### V/S DANCER PREPARES TO DEMONSTRATE THE BREAKDOWN OF THE STEPS

V/O Start standing in a natural position with hands placed lightly on the waist. The first & count is a preparation. On count 1 extend the right leg to the front diagonal and tap the heel on the floor. On count 2 tap right toe next to the left foot. On count 3&4 perform one polka step, step close step, on the diagonal. The dance is counted &123&4, &567&8.

Now let us watch it up to tempo with the music.

### V/S DANCER REPEATS POLKA STEP 4 TIMES

V/O The body is tilted slightly towards the working leg and the head is focused in the line of direction. The knees are kept relaxed to allow the dancers to travel the heel and toe pattern smoothly. Now let us watch the dance in performance.

### V/S FADES TO STUDIO PERFORMANCE OF THE DANCE PERFORMED HOLDING HANDS IN FRONT OF THE BODY

V/O The dancers are free to choose any of the three arm position seen in the demonstration. In the first position, seen here, the dancers hold their hands in front of their bodies.

V/S CLIP OF DANCE PERFORMED HOLDING HANDS BEHIND THE SHOULDERS

V/O In this variation, the partners are in an open position with the gentleman dancing behind the lady.

V/S CLIP OF DANCER IN THE BALLROOM HOLD

V/O Finally, the partners may dance in the traditional ballroom position.

V/S CLIP SHOWING THIS DANCE POSITION

V/O As you will see, the dancers demonstrates the different directions of the step and travel while showing excitement, elegance and freedom as they dance. Unlike Europeans, the Bahamians are not confined to dancing the Heel and Toe Polka in the traditional round pattern, but are free to improvise as they enjoy the dance. This freedom is characteristic of most Bahamian dances.

V/S FULL DANCE IS SHOWN IN PERFORMANCE

## THE CALYPSO WALTZ

### V/S STILL CLIP OF THE DANCE

V/O The next dance is a descendent of the European Waltz. Most Bahamians call it the Calypso Waltz because this version is performed to the 4/4 rhythms of island music, and also incorporates movement in the pelvis making it distinctly Caribbean.

In the Calypso Waltz, the partners perform the traditional travelling waltz step around the room. For the purpose of demonstration, we will confine the dance to its traditional round pattern, although, like all of the Bahamian folk dances, improvisation, initiated by the gentlemen, is a big part of the dance and as such Bahamians often Waltz in any pattern they choose.

### V/S DANCERS PREPARED TO DEMONSTRATE THE CALYPSO WALTZ

V/O Begin by standing in the ballroom position, the gentleman faces forward and starts on his right foot. The lady has her back to the line of direction and begins with her left foot. This dance step is syncopated in 3/4 rhythm against a 4/4 musical time signature.

### V/S DANCERS DEMONSTRATE FIRST WALTZ TURN

V/O During the first turn, the dancers are in an open position, with their inside arms around each other's waists. They make one pivot turn clockwise holding their free hands out to the side with their palms up. To return to the ballroom position, the couple releases the ballroom hold as the lady freely performs an additional pivot on the spot guided by the gentleman.

## V/S DANCERS DEMONSTRATE SECOND WALTZ TURN

V/O During the second turn, the couple takes a finger turn position with the gentleman's left hand and lady's right hand held high. As the gentleman waltzes on the spot the lady makes two turns in front of him and returns to the ballroom hold. The partners then continue to waltz around the room.

The dancers' torsos are held upright and still, but that their hips sway loosely to the rhythm of the waltz step.

While performing the turns, care must be taken to keep the correct rhythm and posture.

Notice how the dancers sway slightly from side to side. This motion is a major characteristic of Bahamian dances. The music is obviously Caribbean and the dancers have added their own island flair so this waltz is lighter and more seductive than its stately European ancestor.

## V/S SAMPLE OF DANCE IN PERFORMANCE

## SCULLING DANCE

### V/S STILL IMAGE OF THE DANCE

V/O The Sculling dance is a social dance usually performed by adults. The swaying movement which is the basic step is concentrated around the pelvis but is felt equally throughout the entire body. The dance you will see is a choreographed version that demonstrates the key movements of the dance. The basic step, performed in 2/4, is quite easy to follow and similar to the Haitian Meringue.

### V/S DANCERS PREPARE TO DEMONSTRATE THE STEP

V/O Start with feet in a natural parallel position keeping the knees relaxed to allow freedom of movement in the pelvis. As the pelvis swings from side to side, slowly allow the sway to continue up into the torso and shoulders.

Keeping both feet flat on the floor, gradually allow the weight to transfer from one foot to the other. Slowly extend this movement into small shuffles to allow yourself to travel forward. This step can also be used to travel backwards or in any other direction.

Because the side to side swaying quality of the Sculling dance is also found in all Bahamian dances it can be considered the foundation of all Bahamian dance movement.

## RING PLAY DANCES OF THE BAHAMAS

### V/S STILL IMAGE

V/O The Ring Dances typify the playful characteristics of Bahamian dance. They are more popular among the children, but adults enjoy them also. Presented on this tape are: Brown Girl in the Ring, Bellaby, The Jump-In-Dance and Knock The Conch Style.

These dances facilitate the development of an individual's identity and provide a means for children to explore group interaction within their community through dance.

Either the ring or longways set formation can be used for this dance and regardless of which formation is chosen, the dancers make improvised gestural and postural movements which help develop personality and social values in a group setting. Specifically, the children are encouraged by the lyrics of the song to interact with the centre person by clapping, cheering, singing and stamping their feet.

The first of these dances is Brown Girl In The Ring which is a cheerful dance that is performed up tempo.



## BROWN GIRL IN THE RING

### V/S CLIP SHOWING THE FORMATION OF THE OUTER CIRCLE

V/O To start the dance an outer circle is formed with one dancer in the centre. As the dancers in the outer circle clap and chant the verses of the song, the centre dancer performs gestural and postural movements that correspond to the lyrics that the dancers in the circle are singing. The basic posture of the dancers in the outer circle consists of bent knees with their upper body inclined towards the centre dancer. This stance is held while clapping and stamping their feet to a strong 4/4 rhythm of the song. In some cases the dancers will link hands and perform small gallops clockwise around the ring to mark out the circular formation. There is no set step for the Brown Girl In The Ring. Instead, this dance incorporates steps from some of the other folk dances like the Bellaby, the Jump-In-Dance and the Sculling Dance and as such this dance remains highly improvisational.

Another aspect of this dance is the interaction of the centre dancer and those of the outer ring aided by the stamping and clapping. The high energy interrelationship between the centre dancers and those that make up the ring makes Brown Girl in the Ring a favourite dance of the children. The dance is completed when each child in the circle has the opportunity to be the centre soloist. In the following clip, note how the centre dancer's movements correspond with the lyrics of the song.

### V/S DANCE IN PERFORMANCE

**BELLABY****V/S STILL IMAGE OF THE DANCE**

**V/O** Bellaby is another dance play. It is performed in a longways set and its basic movement is similar to the North American popular dance the Twist. It is performed to the familiar American folk tune "Shortnin Bread."

Here is the twisting movement.

**V/S DANCERS PREPARE TO PERFORM THE BASIC TWISTING STEP**

**V/O** From a natural position with feet slightly apart, transfer the weight onto the balls of the feet, keeping the torso forward.

Swivel the right heel forward then the left heel forward, allowing the right foot to twist naturally back. Alternating right heel forward and left heel back, continue the movement for eight counts.

Allow the torso and shoulders to respond naturally in opposition to the twisting of the feet.

Repeat the twisting movement up to tempo.

**V/O** The dance starts with two parallel lines that come together to do the twisting movement that was just shown.

**V/S DANCERS DEMONSTRATE COMING TOGETHER**

V/O Crossing their hands, the dancers link with their partners, and perform the twisting movement for sixteen counts. After this movement the dancers take four steps backwards and then execute a step close step to form the longways set formation.

V/S DANCERS DEMONSTRATE THE BACKWARD AND SIDEWAYS PROGRESSION  
STEP

V/O Next the gentleman from the head of the line improvises dance steps and gestures down the middle of the longways set with his partner following close behind him. When each couple reaches the end of the line the dance starts all over again.

V/S DANCE IN PERFORMANCE

## JUMP-IN-DANCE

### V/S STILL FRAME OF THE DANCE

V/O Now we come to the Jump-In-Dance. Popular among Bahamian adults and children, this dance typifies the Bahamians' love of life. It's a high energy social dance which promotes interaction by allowing individuals to select any partner of the opposite sex, within the ring. First we will examine the basic Jump-In-dance step.

### V/S DANCERS PREPARE TO DEMONSTRATE THE BASIC STEP

V/O The excitement of the dance occurs as the dancers interact with each other and improvise increasingly complex isolated movements against 4/4 time. The basic step is in five counts against a 4/4 rhythm.

### V/S DANCER DEMONSTRATES THE STEP TO THE COUNTS

V/O The & count is used as a preparation. On 1, hop on the right foot and kick the left foot across the body. On 2, leap onto the left foot, keeping right knee relaxed in a bent position, allowing the body to turn to the left side. On 3, hop onto left and kick right foot across the body. On 4, jump into a natural second position with the feet turned in and release the pelvis backward and pressing the torso forward with both arms held high above the head. On 5, sharply thrust pelvis forward and on 6,7,8, hold position.

Repeat step starting with the left leg.

The centre dancer chooses a partner from the opposite sex by performing the basic step in front of that person. As each person is chosen, they immediately jump into the ring and that is why it's called the Jump-In-Dance.

V/S DANCE IN PERFORMANCE

## KNOCK THE CONCH STYLE

### V/S STILL IMAGE OF THE DANCE

V/O Many Bahamians enjoy both dancing and singing the lyrics to the ring play dance, Knock The Conch Style. Although there exists no strict formations that the dancers must adhere to in terms of specific positions or shapes, there are certain steps that the dancer must perform. Specifically they must ensure that they knock the calf of the supporting leg with the heel of the opposite foot. This step is called the conch style step and requires good concentration and a high level of agility in order to execute it properly.

Knock The Conch Style is the most technically demanding of all the Ring Play Dances. It is usually performed by boys because of the amount of jumping in the dance as well as the speed at which it is executed. Often, the dance is used as a way to challenge other boy and when the dance is used in this way the boys compete with speed.

### V/S FADE TO DANCER WHO DEMONSTRATES THE STEP TO THE NARRATION

V/O Start in a standing "knocking position" with the left leg bent and the right leg extended forward with the right heel touching the floor. The torso is tilted forward and both arms are bent with the elbows tucked inward toward the waist and each elbow facing toward the ceiling.

Now let us learn the step.

On Count 1. step onto the right heel keeping the torso forward and simultaneously knock the heel of the left foot against the right calf.

On count 2. Step backward onto the ball of the left foot. On the & count, step onto the ball of the right foot releasing the left foot forward and presenting the heel.

Now you are ready to repeat the step to the left on counts 3-4&. The movements of this dance are earth bound with the accent of the dance going into the ground.

#### V/S DANCER DEMONSTRATE THE STEP SLOWLY

V/O Because of the unusual rhythm of the step it's sometimes difficult to demonstrate it slowly, but if you try a few times you'll get it. Just remember to always keep the torso tilted forward.

Now try to repeat the Conch Style step at tempo.

For variation the step can be done knocking the calf twice, or performed with a turn, or swinging the arms in opposition or with the supporting leg.

Bahamian children and adults still engage in this dance and enjoy its many variations.

#### V/S DANCE IN PERFORMANCE

## THE FESTIVAL DANCES

### V/S STILL IMAGE OF THE JUNKANOO MASK

V/O The Festival dances in this category are performed on special days set aside for feasting and celebrating. During each holiday or festival a series of cultural events, including special foods and crafts, are organized with the dance performances as the main event. The first festival dance we will see is the Junkanoo Dance. This dance and the festivities surrounding it are believed to have African origins.

V/O Junkanoo, now the national festival of the Bahamas is staged during the early hours of December 26th and January 1st. Junkanoos and special dancers parade the streets wearing colourful costumes and head dresses while beating drums and ringing bells.

The dancers consist of adults and children alike, usually grouped according to the district in which they live. In performance each group presents a social theme with elaborate masks and headdresses. At the end of the festival, one group is chosen to receive one of the top three prizes for best costume, music and dance.

The Junkanoo dance is best described as a type of warrior dance in which the dancers rush forward flinging their arms and legs in all different directions. With the knees lifted high to the chest, the basic step is accented into the ground in synchrony to the drum beat.



Since the festival and costumes have developed considerably over the past five decades, the dance movements have diminished because of size and weight of the elaborate costumes now used. However, four specific dance steps still remain and are always identified with the junkanooers. It is these dance steps which I have recorded and will demonstrate for you.

The first is the Rushing Step

V/S DANCER DEMONSTRATES THE RUSHING STEP

V/O This step has a warrior quality and is like a march in which the feet are stamped flat into the ground and the knees are lifted high to the chest. While performing this step the dancer advances forward as if clearing a path through the jungle. Each movement is performed full out.

The next step is the Pivot Step

With one foot placed on the ball and the other flat on the floor, transfer your body weight from one foot to the other keeping in time to the 4/4 beat. This step can also travel in any direction but is mostly used to turn on the spot to show the audience all sides of the costume.

V/S DANCER DEMONSTRATES THE PIVOT STEP

V/O Next is the Cross Fall Back Step

V/S DANCER DEMONSTRATES THE CROSS FALL BACK STEP

V/O Moving forward, backward and in a circle, this step allows the costumes to tilt from side to side like a pendulum.

Start standing in a natural position. On count & 1 jump and cross feet and arms, landing on the left foot with the body tilted to the left diagonal back corner. Arms remain crossed and held low in the centre of the body.

On 2. spring onto the left leg and fling both arms into the air, extending them fully above the head. On &3-4 repeat the step to the other side. The step continues to swing from one side to the other allowing the body to tilt diagonally backward.

Next is the Cross Step travelling variation of the previous step. On count 1&2 step forward on right and left foot. On count 3 cross right over left releasing the pelvis and tilting the upper body forward. On count 4 jump backward landing on both feet.

Now that you are familiar with the steps in this dance let's watch the full presentation.

V/S DANCE IN PERFORMANCE

## GOOMBAY DANCE

### V/S STILL FRAME OF THE GOOMBAY DANCE

V/O Goombay is an annual summer festival which is observed every June through to August.

The dance associated with this festival is performed by females who parade through the street in a procession formation with the male musicians at the end.

Each Goombay group may choreograph its own dance pattern which includes many of the same progression steps found in the Junkanoo dance. In addition to those steps already discussed, the Side Close Step and the Running Step have been identified specifically as goombay steps and are always highlighted in the choreographic pattern. Let us take a closer look at these two steps

### V/S DANCER DEMONSTRATE THE SIDE CLOSE STEP

V/O Start in a natural position holding one raffia pom-pom in each hand. On 1, step and open right foot to second position, On 2, return and close right to left. Repeat open close movement with the left foot, allowing the arms to also open and close with the legs. Both risk cross as the arms close and wip outward into a wide second position as they open in coordination with the leg. As you continue the sltep advance forward. Repeat up tempo 1,2,3,4. While performing this step the body is totally relaxed at the joints,which allows for a buoyant quality. You may find it helpful to picture each joint as a shock absorber as you step and that image will help you feel the bouncy quality.

### V/S THE RUNNING STEP

V/O This step helps the dancers progress much faster as well as allowing them to perform to audiences on both sides of the street.

From a natural position with the pom-poms in your hands and travelling to the diagonal make three running steps right left right. On count 3, extend both arms above the head simultaneously as you step onto the right foot, simultaneously swing both arms into the air above head, pressing the torso forward and maintaining a well arched upper back.

On count 4, whip the arms downward and contract the chest inward, allowing the knees to bend slightly. The movement finishes with the face towards the ground.

Repeat Running step to the other diagonal starting with the left foot. Continue this pattern progressing forward. Now you will see a performance of a typical goombay dance.

#### V/S SHOW GOOMBAY IN PERFORMANCE

V/O This lively dance has brought much enjoyment to the Bahamians as well as to those who choose to visit the island. The steps are only basic patterns made from our natural walking. After observing them you will see how simple they are to do. As you perform each step, allow the goombay music and drum rhythm to colour your movements as you become animated with the goombay spirit.

## FIRE DANCE

### V/S STILL IMAGE OF THE FIRE DANCER

V/O The Fire Dance is performed at wakes and other celebrations and requires group participation. A solo dance for specialist fire dancers, it has also evolved a ritual quality during performance where the dancer passes fire over his body and swallow the fire at the climax of the dance. The dance is now performed in nightclubs and during festivals.

### V/S IMAGE OF DANCER

V/O Today the Fire Dance has become a major tourist attraction. Many adult male and female Bahamians have mastered this dance and continue to perform it as a source of employment and enjoyment at festivals. Special to this dance is its five count movement phrase which evolved from the Jump-In-Dance but is performed with a ritualistic flavour. First the dancer enters the stage carrying a tray and two torches to make the fire. The dancer then marks out a circular area where the dance is to take place. The tray and torches are then set on fire. With earthbound African-style way of movement, the dancer then rubs the two flaming torches over his/her body, creating a trance like state. The climax of the dance occurs when the fire is eaten by the dancer who places one of the lit torches into his/her mouth.

### V/S FIRE DANCE IN PERFORMANCE

## CONCLUSION

I classify the dances that you have just seen and experienced as distinctly Bahamian because of the European, North American and African influences contained within them. It is this marriage of the smooth and elegant movements of the European ancestry with the robust rhythmical punctuation of the African ancestry that best distinguishes these dances as Bahamian. Added to this unique cultural mix is the freedom that the Bahamian folk dances have for improvisation. Specifically, these dances give the dancers the ability to move with flexibility and creativity within the set patterns and rhythms of the dances. In turn this creates a balanced blend of sustained, quick, controlled, and off balance movements that are supported by the polyphonic musical rhythms of the drums, bells and scrapers that comprise the musical accompaniment. Together both music and dance produce graceful articulated movements that are quite impressive. I hope that the collection of these dances will continue to stimulate Bahamians through lectures, dance classes, and choreographed dances towards continued cultural development within the area of Bahamian dance. They are an important art form for both the development of the individual and the expression of traditional Bahamian culture.

## CREDITS

Artistic Director/Producer.....Roderick T. Johnson

Producer/Director.....Peter Freele

Videographer.....Kouladie Kambiz

Narrator.....Hal Sullivan

Script Editors.....Rebecca Brasseur/Mary Jane Warner

Costume Design.....Roderick T. Johnson

Committee members.....Mary Jane Warner, Nina De Shane,  
Jeff Henry

Dance Segment Production.....Video Department/York University

Studio & Post-Production Facilities Division of Instructional Development University of Windsor

## DANCERS

Marion Eva Waldamann

Gregor Breedy

Patrick Parsons

Rebecca Brosseau

Roderick Johnson

Urie P. Thompson

## MUSIC

## PARTNER DANCES

Quadrille.....Bone Fish Medley by Kayla Edwards  
and the Research Group,1990

Heel and Toe Polka.....American Folkway Society

Calypso Waltz.....Bellmena. Bahamian traditional folk  
music, arranged by Clement Bethel  
Produced by Kayla Edwards and the Research  
Group,1990

Sculling Dance.....Brown Skin Gal, Joseph Spence

## RING PLAY DANCES

Brown Girl in The Ring.....Traditional Bahamian Ring Play Folk Song

Bellaby.....Traditional Bahamian Ring Play Folk Song

Jump-In-Dance.....Traditional Bahamian Folk Song

Knock the Conch Style.....Traditional Bahamian Folk Song

## FESTIVAL DANCES

Junkanoo Dance.....Bahamian Junkanoo Band

Goombay Dance.....Bahamian Goombay Band

Fire Dance.....Traditional Bahamian Folk Music. Recorded  
by Marshall Stern, American Folkway  
Society (1953)



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**Dedicated to Millicent & Victor Johnson**

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS RELATED TO TRADITIONAL BAHAMIAN DANCES

- Ball change:** As its name implies, the dancer transfers his/her body weight from the ball of one foot to step onto the whole of the other foot. This step can be performed on the spot or travelling and is counted & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 when performed consecutively.
- Balance:** The balance step is executed slowly or quickly in 3/4 time. The step swings from side to side, or forward and back. When performed, the dancer first steps on the whole foot, accenting the first beat. If properly performed, the entire body weight transfers downward onto this foot. On count two, the dancer steps onto the ball of the free foot one count before transferring to the ball of the other foot. When transferring from one foot to the other, the body is tall and suspended for one count before stepping down onto the other foot. The first step occurs on the first down beat of each musical bar. The high lifting of the knee makes it different from the Setting Step.
- Balance à vos dames:** Partners perform the two step facing each other for sixteen counts.
- Bellaby:** A traditional Bahamian folk dance performed in a longways set; usually performed by children who sing and express different personalities.
- Bonefish melody:** The traditional Bahamian folk song that is used when the quadrille is performed.
- Bowing:** The curtsy used when the dancers first acknowledge their partners and opposites. During the Quadrille dance this curtsy imitates the dipping movement of the male.
- Break:** The dancer stamps his foot accenting the end of a figure; a movement and musical signal punctuating the dance.
- Caper:** The making of a variety of expressive gestures during the dance; an improvised vigorous solo performed mostly by male dancers.

- Chaine Anglaise:** The couples walk to centre, meet each other giving their right hands, they then change places with their partner and then return to their original places using their right hand; 36 counts to change places.
- Chassez and Dechassez:** A gentleman and lady go to the right side and immediately return on the left.
- Chant:** Gospel Songs that are usually sung at funerals and wakes in which one singer calls and the group answers.
- Charm:** An expressive gesture towards the partner and can be made by either a male or a female.
- Clap:** Hand clapping while singing and dancing; an added instrument; an expression of gaiety.
- Concertina:** A hand held organ which carries the melody line in the Rake and Scrape Band.
- Cross back Fall:** A Junkanoo dance step in which the dancer jumps and crosses his feet and arms before landing onto one foot and extending his arms above his head. The step swings from side to side and allows the body to tilt diagonally. In 4/4 rhythm the step is counted &1&2&3&4 to complete the step once.
- Crossing:** The couples walk to centre, meet each other and give their right hand. Next, they change places using the right hand and complete the movement by returning to their original place using their left hand. It takes 36 counts to complete a Cross and it is similar to the Chaine Anglaise.
- Cross Step:** Travelling forward: step right, left, cross right foot over left, jump backwards landing with two feet apart; arms swing forward and backward on the first two steps, cross in front of the chest and finish with arms open at chest level.

- Courting Walk:** An elegant stride usually performed by individuals or couples during courting dances.
- Cow bell:** A seven inch metal cow bell made by Bahamians and played in the Junkanoo band.
- En Arriere:** In a longways set, the lady and gentleman cross and pass each other from the right to change places, then return to their places crossing once again to the right; this figure takes 16 counts to complete.
- En Avant Deux De Vis-a-Vis:** While performing the balance step, dancers take eight counts to advance towards each other, and eight counts to retreat, returning to their original place; gentleman and opposite partner advance and retreat; it takes 4 bars to complete.
- Figure:** Formations during the different sections of the dance usually called for by the leader of the dance. Instead of the name of the figures, they call numbers of the Quadrille Dance.
- Fire Dance:** A ritual dance using two flaming torches. It was once a group social dance in which the dancers moved in, out, around and over the fire. Today it has evolved into a solo dance performed in night clubs.
- Five Count Step:** The five count step is the basic step of the Jump-In-Dance. An allegro step with high kicks and an accented thrusting of the pelvis both forward and backward. It is usually accompanied on the goatskin drum and done in five beats.
- Flirt:** A romantic folklore expression that is used by Belinda the female character, in Clement Bethel's folk dance *Sammy Sween*; a gay folkloric expression.
- Fox Hill Day:** A traditional Bahamian holiday that celebrates the liberation of the African slaves. It takes place on the first Monday in August and encompasses all aspects of cultural expression.
- Goat Skin:** The material used to make the Goombay drum.

**Goombay:** A Bahamian summer cultural festival; a generic word which identifies the Bahamian cultural activities and the folk songs of the Bahamas. See also Goombay drum.

**Goombay Drum:** A round drum made out of a wooden keg with a goat skin pulled over one end and nailed; the drum is tuned over a fire before playing.

**Goombay Music:** Goombay music usually speaks about the social and political occurrences on the Islands; it often contains a lot of off beat Bahamian humour.

**Goombay Steps:** A series of high energy warrior-like steps where the dancer lifts his knees as high as possible; a gay travelling step in which the dancer taps his toes before stepping on the whole foot.

**Hand-A-Kimbo:** Holding hands next to waist while in the centre of the ring dance; the hand position of "Motion."

**Heel and Toe Polka:** A folk dance found on the Bahamian Islands. It is performed both individually or with a partner and it is the sixth figure in the Cat Island Quadrille.

**If you Know um when you Meet um, hol um:** This phrase denotes that the dancers, having changed partners, should return to their original partners.

**Jaw Bone:** An instrument in the Rake And Scrape band. It is usually made out of a goat's jaw bone and is usually scraped with a knife.

**Jig:** A quick stepping dance of Irish origin in 6/8 time.

**Jumping:** The improvised continuous movement that encompasses the whole body as if in a trance.

**Jump-In-Dance:** A Bahamian traditional folk dance form involving African ritual movement; a circular group dance; a mating dance in which the dancer in the ring gets to choose a partner and the movement accents the five beats of the drum.

**Junkanoo:** The national festival of the Bahamas staged during the early hours of December 26 and January 1st. Junkanoos parade the streets wearing colourful costumes and head dresses, beating drums and ringing cow bells.

**Junkanoo Dance:** A warrior type dance which consists of the flinging of arms and legs in all directions and the knees are usually lifted high to the chest.

**Knock The Conch Style:** An agile dance in which the dancer knocks the calf of his supporting leg with his other foot. There are five variations of this step: basic, travelling or in place; same arm and supporting leg working together; opposite arm and leg working; danced with a double beat; performed with a turn. A solo dance with African and Irish flavour performed to a brisk 4/4 rhythm; song to accompany dance.

**Ladies' chain:** The third figure in the Quadrille dance in which the ladies perform two travelling setting steps on the diagonal to meet each other in the centre of the line. Next reaching and taking their partners right hand they perform the chain by passing each other on the right side. This pattern is repeated before they return to their original places in the formation.

**Longways Set:** Dancers form two parallel lines with each dancer situated opposite from his/her partner; formation used for the ballroom style Quadrille.

**Mashing the roach:** A big stamp during the dance to accent and signal change in the dance formation.

**Men's Capers:** The fourth figure of the Quadrille dance; to leap and skip about in a sprightly manner during the dance; an improvised vigorous solo performed by the male dancers.

**Motion:** An improvised movement phrase performed by the dancer in the ring.

**Quadrille:** A 19th century dance executed by four couples in a square; first became popular in Paris, and France; the dance was introduced into England by Lady Jersey in 1816.

**Rain catch um:** Refers to the last couple to arrive in place when the music stops.

**Rake and scrape:** A traditional Bahamian folklore band comprised of a goat skin drum, a concertina, and a carpenter saw.

**Ring Play:** Hand clapping and singing dance performed mostly by children. Every child has a turn to be "it" in the centre of the ring.

**Ripple:** The manipulation of the upper body causing the torso to ripple like a wave; usually performed in the Fire Dance.

**Rushing:** A warrior like high energy Junkanoo dance step used to rush through the crowd; to rush means to be transformed by the Junkanoo spirit.

**Saw:** A carpenter's saw used as a musical instrument in the Rake and Scrape band which is usually the time keeper.

**Schottische:** Believed to be of German origin it is danced as a ballroom dance or as a folk dance; usually performed to 4/4 time. The step pattern is step close step, hop swing.

**Scraping:** The sound of scraping a carpenter's saw rubbed vigorously with a knife; the dancer glides his heel, toes on the floor.

**Scuffle Step:** Not a dig but a scooping movement which slides across the floor, usually performed by males during the Quadrille Dance.

**Secular Dance:** Non-religious dances.

**Set Dance:** These dances are usually European influenced and encompass a physical formation, the most common are the longways set and the square set.

- Setting Step:** The chorus step in the Quadrille Dance. In 2/4 time this step is similar to the Two Step found in North American folk dancing. There are three elements to the step: Side ways movement of the feet, forward and backward movement of the shoulders, and the up and downward movement of the head. On count 1, step flatly onto the right foot, on the &, step up onto the ball of the left foot transferring your weight and releasing the right foot, then make a second step on the right foot on count 2. Repeat to the left and continue alternating right and left. The & count is syncopated like the familiar step ball change pattern.
- Shaking:** Usually performed in the Jump-In-Dance, it is a continuous circular movement of the pelvis while maintaining a stationary torso.
- Shimmie:** Quick small backward and forward movements of the shoulders while maintaining a still pelvis.
- Skulling:** A Bahamian partner dance performed mostly by adults at social gatherings. The movement starts with the sideways swinging of the hips and travels upward to the torso and shoulders and downward to the knees and feet. The basic step consists of the feet flat on the floor alternating as they shuffle forward. The step can travel in all directions.
- Slap:** Slapping parts of the body when making a caper.
- Solo Movement:** A solo improvised movement initiated by the dancer.
- Spin:** The sixth figure in the Quadrille dance. Starting in the two line formation, dancers take two brisk steps, and reach across the line for their opposite partners and take the ballroom hold. Gentlemen place their right hands around the ladies' waists, ladies place their left hands neatly on the gentlemen's right shoulders, partners left and right hands are extended outward with elbows slightly bent. Each makes six steps spinning twice in place.
- Square:** A square formation of four couples used in the Quadrille dance.



- Straw Basket Turn:** The second figure of the Quadrille dance. This figure starts with partners facing each other and holding both hands to form the opening of a basket. As if emptying the basket, the dancers lower their hands near the circle allowing the outer hands to raise above their heads. Keeping their hand position, the dancers turn back to back before returning to their starting position. A slow or swift barrel turn with your partner, usually initiated by the male partner; 16 counts complete one turn or tour de mains.
- Stop At Every Grave Yard:** A direction to both dancers and musicians that a stop will be made at the end of each figure as opposed to dancing them as a continuous unit.
- Tour De Mains:** A slow or swift barrel turn with your partner, usually initiated by the male partner; 16 counts complete one turn.
- Traversez:** The gentlemen and lady re-crossing regain their places; this move takes four bars.

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