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### Swingin' Out White: How the Lindy Hop Became White



Frankie Manning doing an air step.  
Picture from [www.savoystyle.com](http://www.savoystyle.com)

From the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem to a Gap Khaki's commercial in the 1990's—How did the Lindy Hop go from being the dance of working-class black youth in zoot suites to the dance of white, middle-class youth in khakis? According to Tricia Rose, “white America has always had an intense interest in black culture,” and white participation in black culture—particularly black music—is the reason why black music becomes popular music (4-5). Rose points to the popularity of black art forms amongst white America and the ways that these art forms then become part of American popular culture as a result of white participation. Much the same way that black musical forms are appropriated by white artists, the black vernacular dance the Lindy Hop has undergone a similar transformation. Though white involvement in the Lindy Hop may have begun simply as an interest in the dance itself, the Lindy Hop soon became a

means for making money and a product for white consumption. My research project aims to follow the means by which the Lindy Hop was appropriated by white America and changed from an African American vernacular dance to a popular dance form amongst whites.

Even though popular culture is now a more acceptable topic for scholarly work in American Studies, performance studies has only slowly been entering the field, and dance studies is even further on the horizon. For this reason, Jane C. Desmond believes that it is important to put “performance studies center stage in American studies” (526). In fact, in *American Quarterly* she reviews two books by dance scholars—Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* and Linda J. Tomoko’s *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920*—claiming that “[e]ach engages specifically with issues at the heart of current American studies research: race and class formations” (526). In addition, Desmond asserts that the neglect of dance in both performance studies and American Studies is an issue of gender: “dance studies scholars are predominantly female, as is the population of dance schools, dance studios, dance departments, and often, dance floors. Undoubtedly this has contributed to the marginalization of these works outside of dance studies” (528). Most definitely, dance studies can no longer be ignored, and dance’s ability to reveal important aspects of our culture make dance studies an integral piece of American Studies.

Besides the marginalization of dance in performance studies and American Studies, dance has also been ignored in jazz studies. In his introduction to *Representing Jazz*, Krin Gabbard claims that until this collection, those critics writing about jazz ignored the “extramusical aspects of jazz” such as dance, styles of language, and social relations (3). Likewise, Brenda Dixon Gottschild asserts that in looking at performance history, “the pivotal

role of dance has been trivialized while other performing arts (music, in particular) have been the focus of print documentation and scholarly attention” (10). Those critics writing about jazz music disregard the vital role dance played in the cultivation of jazz music. Robert P. Crease justifies his research on Lindy Hop by claiming “[i]n the beginning, jazz was dancing music,” but he also points out that research on jazz dance is very small except for that about tap dancing (207). Moreover, most musicians of the swing era affirm the symbiotic relationship between swing music and swing dance. Some musicians attest to actually watching the dancers for inspiration, and Hugues Panassie says, ““The swing of an orchestra is nourished by that of the dance; therefore the surroundings at a dance are far more apt to inspire the musicians to find the ‘groove’”” (qtd. in Batchelor 79). Thus, swing dance is a neglected area of study not only in American Studies but also in jazz studies. For this reason, my project takes an American Studies approach to the history of the Lindy Hop to investigate the cultural appropriation by white, mainstream culture of a black vernacular dance. For the purpose of this paper, I use the term “white culture” or “white youth” to mean the mainstream culture of the United States during this time period. These young people were of several ethnic backgrounds but were united in their racial privilege—because they were not African Americans, they had easier access to cultural forms like music and dance and economic forms like jobs and capital.

The story of the origins of the Lindy Hop resembles legend much more than fact. Passed down to each new generation of swing dancers is the story of the night that a New York journalist visited the Savoy Ballroom and asked the great George “Shorty” Snowden what dance the young people on the dance floor were doing. Supposedly, Snowden looked down to the newspaper on the table in front of him which featured the headline “Lindy Hops Across the Atlantic” in reference to Charles Lindbergh’s recent solo flight. Snowden replied that the

dancers were doing the “Lindy Hop.” Of course, the actual story of the Lindy Hop is far more nuanced, and scholars disagree on several aspects of the Snowden story. However, dancers Frankie Manning and Norma Miller both give accounts of the origins of the Lindy Hop in their autobiographies which closely resemble the legendary Shorty Snowden story. Since the swing revival in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, both Manning and Miller have written about their experiences as members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers—a performance group of the best young dancers frequenting the Savoy Ballroom in the 1930’s. Though they entered the dancing scene after the Lindy Hop was invented, they—particularly Manning—contributed not only to new moves in the Lindy Hop but also to its spread across the world, both during the swing era and in recent years. In addition, they may not have been present at the time the Lindy Hop was named, but Frankie Manning claims that he heard the story from Shorty George himself after Manning became a regular at the Savoy and started to “pal around with the older dancers” (79).

Manning’s account is nearly identical to the legendary story that most new dancers, myself included, are told from dance instructors and more experienced dancers: “Shorty told us that after Charles Lindbergh had flown the Atlantic, the headlines of the paper read, ‘Lindy Hops the Atlantic,’” so in response to a reporter questioning him about what dance he was doing, Shorty said, “‘I’m doing the Lindy Hop’” (79). At the same time, Manning does note that the dancers, at that point, were still doing a dance called the breakaway, but Shorty was improvising footwork during the dance to make it look different. “Shorty gave the breakaway a new name and—*voila!*—the Lindy hop was born” (79). Similarly, Norma Miller also makes the connection between the Charles Lindbergh flight and the naming of the Lindy Hop: “Charles Lindbergh became a folk hero when he made the world’s first solo flight across the Atlantic...Because of the new dance’s own delightful ‘solo hops’ the dance was called the Lindy Hop” (58).

Though Frankie Manning and Norma Miller confirm the connection between the Lindy Hop and Charles Lindbergh, scholarly work about the Lindy Hop challenges this story and often names it a myth. The first deviation comes from Shorty Snowden's account in Marshall and Jean Stearns' *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*—perhaps the most famous scholarly work featuring the Lindy Hop. First published in 1968 and then revised in 1994, the book remained the only scholarly work to discuss the Lindy Hop for many years, and it continues to be referenced in nearly all academic work about the dance. The book attempts to recount the history of jazz dance—which the authors feel is the American vernacular or folk dance—through the synthesis of a series of interviews. Part ten contains three chapters about the Jitterbug, a term Stearns and Stearns use interchangeably for the Lindy Hop, which draws on interviews from original Lindy Hoppers like Leon James, Shorty George Snowden, and Al Minns. Thus, their description of the origins of the Lindy stems from one 1959 interview with Shorty Snowden. Interestingly, the story does not reference Charles Lindbergh; instead, Snowden claims that he named the Lindy Hop on the night of June 17, 1928 during a dance marathon at the Manhattan Casino. When an interviewer from Fox Movietone News asked him what dance he was doing, he replied, “The Lindy” (qtd. in Stearns and Stearns 316). Furthermore, Snowden explains, “I was really doing the regular steps, just like we did them at the Savoy, several of us, only maybe a little faster...It was just the speed that confused them maybe, but of course most people had never seen anything like it, fast or slow” (qtd. in Stearns and Stearns 316). Dispelling the myth about the naming of the Lindy Hop after Charles Lindbergh, Snowden explains that “[w]e used to call the basic step the Hop long before Lindbergh did *his* hop across the Atlantic...It had been around a long time and some people began to call it the Lindbergh Hop after 1927, although it didn't last” (qtd. in Stearns and Stearns 323). Thus,

Snowden's story varies somewhat in his account for Stearns and Stearns from the story Manning heard from Snowden himself.

More recent scholarship attempts to dispel the myth of the Charles Lindbergh link altogether. Terry Monaghan claims, "Probably devised by the Savoy Ballroom's effective publicity machine as a gimmick to attract downtown white audiences in the mid-1930's, the story has now taken on a life of its own. Despite having no structural coherence and negligible empirical verification from the key people involved, it has survived but places the dance into a novelty category that has no further need of explanation" (125-126). In an article included *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake* (2009), Karen Hubbard and Terry Monaghan assert that the story "obscured [the dance's] true identity" by presenting it as an "anonymous, novelty response to Lindbergh's flight, rather than an aesthetic expression of evolving African American consciousness in Harlem" (131). In a way, this story begins the process of erasing the cultural ownership of the Lindy Hop by proposing that "Harlem was supposedly imitating rather than originating" (131). Hubbard and Monaghan challenge the long accepted legend with accounts from Dr. Conrad Gale, brother of one of the Savoy's owners, that no connection between Lindbergh and the Lindy Hop had been found. Likewise, the authors claim that the celebration in the streets around the time of Lindbergh's homecoming consisted only of the Cakewalk and Charleston, and rather than honoring Lindbergh, "Harlem, and especially the Savoy, was adorned with decorations for the first major convention to be held in New York of the black nonprofit charitable fraternal organization of the Elks—Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World" (131).

To add to the confusion of the origins of the Lindy Hop, another dance called the Lindbergh Hop was invented in reference to Charles Lindbergh. According to Hubbard and

Monaghan, the Lindy Hop could not have been invented at the Savoy because Charles Buchanan, the manager, had strict rules about the styles of dancing performed at the Savoy that “precluded exuberant dance innovation” (132). However, by the end of 1928, the Lindy Hop had “surreptitiously” made its way onto the Savoy dance floor (132). At the same time, a dance was invented at the Savoy and was named the Lindbergh Hop when Buchanan jokingly asked the young dancers “if they were trying to hop like Lindbergh” (qtd. in Hubbard and Monaghan 132). The Lindbergh Hop was an entirely different dance and did not change the face of social dancing as the Lindy Hop did. In fact, it was a short lived dance that began to disappear or at least merge with the Lindy Hop by late 1929. Hubbard and Monaghan clarify Shorty Snowden’s story by saying that he invented the Lindy Hop not at the Savoy but at the Rockland Palace, another Harlem dance hall, and “gave a confusing account” of the Lindy Hop and Lindbergh Hop in his interview for *Jazz Dance*. They claim, “it reads as if Snowden was trying to salvage the memory of the critical role he played in creating this dance without challenging the popular, if far from accurate, claims about Lindbergh’s involvement” (132-133). Because of the fifteen-month time difference between Lindbergh’s flight and the naming of the Lindy Hop, the two events could not have coincided (133). Although the Lindbergh connection makes for a convenient, interesting cultural story, recent scholarship disputes it and marks the story as a way to diminish the African American presence in the dance.

While disputes remain about the naming of the Lindy Hop and whether or not it originated in the Savoy Ballroom, some other ballroom, or rent parties, it is commonly known as a black vernacular dance that emerged in Harlem. In fact, it was “the first noteworthy African American dance to be created in the North as opposed to being brought from the South” (Hubbard and Monaghan 133). As most scholars agree, the Lindy Hop developed out of a

number of other African American dances, and it emerged out of tradition that included dances like the Cakewalk and the Black Bottom. In her supplemental historical notes in Frankie Manning's autobiography, dance scholar Cynthia R. Millman discusses the emergence of the Lindy Hop from three social dances of the 1920's—the Charleston, the collegiate, and the breakaway. The Charleston in particular has roots in Central Africa, and similar steps can be found in dances of the West Indies, Ibo ethnic groups, the Ashanti, and Bari speakers (45). To this day, Charleston steps are often used in the Lindy Hop, and line Charleston (a line dance in which one person calls out the moves) and solo Charleston are often done at social dances.

Millman sees the Lindy Hop as a result of the melding of the Charleston with the breakaway. The primary difference between the Lindy Hop and the breakaway was the amount of space each of them used. The breakaway required a ballroom hold (with little room for the partners to move away from each other), but partners were allowed to step apart slightly for a short period of time. As the dance evolved, the partners moved further and further apart, and they would release one hand—the left for



George Greenridge and Ella Gibson doing Charleston. Picture from *A Day at the Races*.

women (follows) and the right for men (leads). With the Lindy, this separation grew even greater and sometimes even included the release of both hands (49). Most Lindy scholarship discusses this position—in which the couple is separated in a one-handed release—as the “breakaway step,” the distinguishing feature of the Lindy Hop since it allows for each person to improvise. According to Millman, the music is what drove the breakaway's transition to the Lindy Hop: “As the vertical, staccato impulses of ragtime and early jazz began to elongate into



Leon James and Norma Miller in the breakaway step. Picture taken from *A Day at the Races*.

the elliptical, smoother sounds of swing, uptown social dancing also began to broaden. In the breakaway, dancers' feet circumscribed a small circle, but the Lindy soon lobbed out into a larger, oblong floor pattern" (49). In addition, this breakaway step can be seen as a "comprehensive and rhythmically charged critique of the European

partner-dancing tradition, it articulated a new aesthetic of cultural equality. Dominated by

continuous rhythmic play in its defining swing-outs, the two partners rhythmically improvised while separating apart and drawing back together" (Hubbard and Monaghan 133). Similarly, Stearns and Stearns believe "the breakaway is a time-honored method of eliminating the European custom of dancing in couples, and returning to solo dancing—the universal way of dancing, for example, in Africa" (324). Thus, in the basic step of the Lindy Hop—the swing-out—the two partners were able to both pull apart and establish their individuality through improvisation (on counts one and two and then again on counts 7 and 8) and then pull together for the triple step on counts three and four as a means of working together.

Like Millman, Lynne Fauley Emery in *Black Dance From 1619 to Today* sees the connections between the Lindy Hop and other African American dances: "traces of Afro-American origin may be seen in the hip movement or shimmy, the shuffling steps, and the time allowed for improvisation during the breakaway phase of the dance" (235). In fact, she claims that "the origin of the Lindy Hop could be credited to the black American" based on the hip-shaking and improvisational steps—particularly the Geetchie Walk—which it contains (235).

Barbara Glass also discusses the African characteristics in the Lindy Hop: “the dance combined elements of both the European and African dance heritage—couple dance, solo dance, improvisation, orientation to the earth, and swinging rhythms” (28). In fact, many of the African dance characteristics that Glass gives at the beginning of her article—including African Movement Vocabulary, Orientation Toward the Earth, Improvisation, Importance of the Community, and Competitive Dance—can be applied to the Lindy Hop. Glass describes the African Movement Vocabulary as moving all parts of the body as opposed to just the arms and legs as in European types of dancing (8). The movement of the hips and shoulders as well as the stomping and hoping steps in the Lindy Hop correspond with this description. Similarly, the Lindy Hop, unlike European dances which are upright and facing the sky, is oriented towards the earth. Frankie Manning talks about his own bent over posture in the Lindy Hop: “I was dancing almost horizontal to the ground” (81). Of course, with the breakaway step as the basic characteristic of the Lindy Hop, improvisation was a very important aspect in the Lindy Hop as well as other African-derived dances. For the importance of the community, Glass explains that “[s]olo performers were supported and affirmed by the group through singing, hand clapping,



Horizontal posture. George Greenridge and Ella Gibson. Picture taken from *A Day at the Races*.

and shouted encouragement” (8). Joel Dinerstein asserts that “[t]he social function of nearly all African American musical practice before 1945 was to create a public forum that provided the following: social bonding through music and dance, an opportunity to create an

individual style within a collective form, and a dense rhythmic wave that imparts ‘participatory consciousness’ to the audience” (Dinerstein 7-8). Finally, the Lindy Hop did have a competitive side to it as Frankie Manning illustrates in his autobiography. A good portion of his book is devoted to descriptions of the Harvest Moon Ball competitions as well as those at the Savoy—including the one in which he out-performed Shorty Snowden with his invention of the air steps.

Therefore, the Lindy Hop was an African American dance not only because of its African roots but also because it was invented in Harlem by black dancers like Shorty Snowden. In its early years, very few people other than the young dancers at the Savoy like Frankie Manning, Norma Miller, Leon James, and Willa Mae Ricker even knew about the dance, let alone could dance it themselves. In fact, both Frankie Manning and Norma Miller’s books discuss the Lindy Hop not only with an attitude of ownership but also of surprise at its later success. Both young dancers claim they never thought of the Lindy Hop as a means of making a living but were only doing it to have fun. Though they did earn some money while competing in small contests, their involvement in Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers and subsequently the Harvest Moon Ball competitions was what led to their status as professional dancers. Yet even in the midst of their success in the Harvest Moon Ball competitions, Norma Miller expressed her sense of ownership of the dance: “We were gonna let the world know about the Lindy and that it belonged to us!” (57). She wanted the world to know about the Lindy Hop, but she was unaware of how its popularity would lead to the cultural appropriation of the dance by white, mainstream culture. In fact, Black Hawk Hancock interviews one dance instructor who claims that Norma Miller is no longer invited to dance camps because she apparently publically proclaimed that whites stole the dance (“Put” 798). So how did the Lindy Hop swing from being a black vernacular dance to a mainstream, white dance?

The transformation of Lindy Hop from its position as a black vernacular dance to one embraced by white culture appears to have begun when business owners realized the financial potential of the Lindy Hop. While the Savoy Ballroom primarily catered to the African American dancers, places like the Cotton Club “drew its audience largely from the monied white downtown population that came to see staged entertainments by black jazz musicians and performances” (Engelbrecht 6). In this way, clubs like the Cotton Club were able to make money off of the white consumption of staged performances of the Lindy Hop. Moreover, radio broadcasts and the recording industry also contributed to the spread of the Lindy Hop amongst white America: “The immense popularity of both Swing music and the Lindy Hop among the whites was due in large part to the impetus the burgeoning recording industry and radio gave to it. Both industries were controlled by whites who appropriated these uniquely black forms that were beginning to catch the public’s fancy” (Engelbrecht 8). According to Ralph G. Giordano, “By 1940, over 90 percent of American homes owned at least one radio,” and “dance music consumed more radio airtime than any other type of program” (86). These programs of dance music were often “broadcast from a dancehall, and so the national growth of music and dance occurred simultaneously, as broadcasters described and even delivered instructors for performing the new dances” (Caponi-Tabery 53).

Benny Goodman’s nationwide success is even attributed to a radio program called *Let’s Dance* which included three different types of music on Saturday nights. Goodman’s band was featured in late September 1934, and Americans heard his performance coast to coast (Giordano 87). By the time the band played the Los Angeles’s Palomar Ballroom in 1935, “they were met with a crowd of over 2,500 enthusiastic dancing teenagers and a nationwide radio audience” (88). Of course, this sort of nationwide attention was what gave Goodman his “King of Swing”

title, but other black musicians of the time were not given the same broadcasting opportunities. In fact, even consideration for the program was closed off to black bands while giving Goodman a large enough budget to buy arrangements from Fletcher Henderson (Erenberg 3-4). Moreover, “since sponsors did not want their products linked to black performers, especially in the South. Opportunities for black musicians to record, moreover, fell off as the depression wiped out the race record market” (Erenberg 26). Perry A. Hall explains that even though black bands were the original swing bands, they had adapted “hot” jazz to appeal to a white audience. Rather than these musicians gaining success from their innovation, “the very popularity among white audiences of the arranged, ‘riffing’ style that emerged between 1929 and 1935 contributed to its eventual appropriation and domination by whites” (Hall 40). In addition,

[t]he combination of the effects of the Depression on recording, broadcast, and performance and the appropriation of the swing style by white bands, led by Goodman’s but including Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, and the Dorsey brothers, and a host of others, severely limited Black exposure in this mainstream market and led to disproportionate distribution of the rewards and recognition of swing. (Hall 40)

As swing music was separated from its black roots, it was broadcast and appropriated by whites.

In Lewis A. Erenberg’s opinion, the switch between jazz music and swing music took place partially because of the Depression. Because of the bleakness of the time, many people’s taste moved away from “hot” jazz onto the sweet bands and crooners. Though there was originally fear that jazz was primitive music, these misconceptions about jazz began to change as “the middle classes turned away from the more organized realms of work and civic life to new forms of leisure” (6). In addition, Erenberg gives a lot of credit to Paul Whiteman’s band for

making African American music more acceptable to white audiences. According to Erenberg, “[w]hite audiences...were ambivalent about jazz. They often considered the new music a racial and ethnic attack on middle-class, Protestant values of self-discipline, sexual propriety, and self-advancement” (10). At the same time, “white audiences found ‘hot’ music an exciting, exotic means of personal expression,” but they “preferred Paul Whiteman’s refined, symphonic jazz” (11). Whiteman’s band was able to use some aspects of jazz, but appealed to upper-class audiences by featuring very little improvisation and kept the “hot stuff” to a minimum. Moreover, Whiteman refused to hire African American musicians, did not even acknowledge the racial origins of jazz in his autobiography, and removed African Americans from the melting pot scene of his film *King of Jazz*. By removing the black faces from jazz, Whiteman created a new form of music that was palatable to white audiences: “Whiteman legitimated the big-name professional white orchestra that drew on jazz but linked it to ordered white civilization and European refinement” (11). Thus, the new swing bands, separated from their black jazz roots, dispelled white American’s fears and became the popular music of the time.

This acceptance into mainstream, white American culture most definitely led to the acceptance of the Lindy Hop into white culture. Not only did white Americans latch onto swing music, but they also wanted to learn how to dance to it. Radio broadcaster Thomas E. Parson received a massive number of requests to teach the Lindy Hop on his radio dance program on WOR in New York, but he was unable to find a dance instructor willing to teach him. After a year, he finally learned it by watching others and then taught it over the air to his listeners (Giordano 93). Thus, the radio served as a primary method of spreading the Lindy Hop all over the country and into white American culture.

In addition to Paul Whiteman's contributions to the "whitening" of swing during the Depression, other aspects of the Depression also led to the rise of swing culture. Erenberg credits the New Deal for some of swing's success. He claims that "popular music underwent a powerful renaissance after 1935. Central to that resurgence were New Deal programs that stimulated the economy and brought back a measure of prosperity" (29). Also, because there was a lack of jobs, many youth stayed in high school and, thus, had the ability to take advantage of forms of entertainment. According to Erenberg, "it was high school students who composed the largest following for swing bands. Middle-class high schools had been important centers of youth culture in the 1920s, but in the 1930s lack of jobs forced even more working-class teens to stay in school" (39). Perhaps even more importantly, the repeal of Prohibition encouraged the opening of many nightclubs and ballrooms with the promise of liquor profits. With the new revenue from alcohol sales, ballrooms could afford to bring in big bands for dances (30-31).

Moreover, Erenberg believes that the Depression sparked an attraction for black culture amongst white youth. The Depression opened this door because now youth of all races and ethnicities felt that they were constrained by their economic position: "even well-off families were forced to cut back" and "they did so in areas of great importance to the new adolescent lifestyles" such as entertainment and leisure (16). This situation created "antagonism toward their parents" and "they certainly felt constrained by their environment" (16). Likewise, "both sexes found hallow the advice of parents and business sages to work harder and uphold more traditional, ascetic values" (17). With this resistance toward their parents, embracing new ideas about music, class, and race was more plausible than before: "swing attracted young people aspiring to establish their independence from their families and to affirm a more vigorous personal experience that cut across ethnic, class, and, at times, racial lines" (39). During the

Depression, “white youth from varied class and ethnic backgrounds identified less with traditional icons of wealth and more with a musical expression created by those who had been left out of the American success story” (40). Thus, the economic constraints of the Depression left room for white youth to reject their parents’ beliefs and embrace black culture.

Furthermore, the film industry also contributed to the dissemination and “whitening” of the Lindy Hop. According to Gena Caponi-Tabery, the “technical innovations” of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers were spread across the country through films like *A Day at the Races* (1937), *Merry-Go-Round* (1937), *Radio City Revels* (1938), *Keep Punching* (1939), *Hellzapoppin* (1941), and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) (59).

She also claims that dance critics agree that “it was the air steps that propelled the Lindy to nationwide fame” (64). Air steps, credited to Frankie Manning, are moves in which one of the dancers, most often the follow, jumps or is thrown into the air, over the other dancer’s back or shoulder, or



An air step featured in *A Day at the Races*.  
Snookie Beasley and Willamae Ricker.

flipped. Capino-Tabery believes that once the air step was invented, the Lindy Hop was “a high-flying, high-jumping dance, and the music continued to change right along with it” (58). The film *A Day at the Races* (1937) “introduced air steps to a national audience” (60). However, “a large segment of America did not get to see...the Lindy Hop scene” in this Marx brother’s film because “these scenes involved ‘racial mixing’” which were “censored out of distribution copies throughout the South and other areas of the United States” (Giordano 93). If this dance scene, and perhaps other dance scenes with Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, was not seen by a good portion of

Americans, then many Americans probably did not see Lindy Hop performed on film until white dancers were featured. For these people, Lindy Hop would appear to be a white dance, and the history behind it erased.

Though Whitey's Lindy Hoppers from the Savoy were the original Lindy Hoppers in film, as Robert P. Crease notes, by 1942 the dance troupe was beginning to be replaced by more and more white dancers (225). One of the most popular of these white dancers is Dean Collins who is credited with not only more than 30 movie appearances but also the invention of the Hollywood-style Lindy Hop. As Juliet McMains and Danielle Robinson have noted, "swing dancers themselves seldom refer to the two styles in black and white terms," but the difference in origins and aesthetics makes the divide clear (88). As the Hollywood-style became more widespread and accepted as the "real" Lindy Hop because of its visibility in film, dance studios began offering lessons in Jitterbug. Terry Monaghan claims that "downtown dance instructors"—white dance instructors—"having changed the name of the dance from 'Lindy Hop' to 'jitterbug,' then proceeded to argue that the Lindy Hop was just a step within the jitterbug" (126). Ralph G. Giordano marks 1943 as the first year that the New York Chapter of Teachers of Dancing, Inc., started teaching Lindy Hop and the Jitterbug. However, "[i]t was simplified, and almost all the energetic jumps and swivel hip movements were removed...Eventually dance instructions adapted a toned down version called Triple Swing or sometimes East Coast Swing" (95). The "toning down" of Lindy Hop testifies to the "whitening" of the dance. Gena Caponi-Tabery focuses her book *Jump for Joy: Jazz, Basketball and Black Culture in 1930s America* on the importance of the jump in African American culture. The simplifying and removing of jump steps from the Lindy Hop along with the renaming of the form as the Jitterbug indicates a step in the process of changing Lindy Hop into a white dance.

In addition to feature-length films, newsreels were another way that white Americans across the country could see the Lindy Hop. According to Ralph G. Giordano, “[m]ost Americans saw the Lindy Hop only in newsreels of the Harvest Moon Ball competitions” (92). In particular, the 1938 newsreel “Jitterbugs Jive at Swingeroo” captured the year’s biggest jazz concert: a Carnival of Swing. The event, with twenty-five bands, “introduced the Lindy on Randall’s Island in New York City” while the newsreel “transmitted news of the concert and details of the dance to the nation” (Caponi-Tabery 63-64). In addition to these newsreels, the Lindy Hop could also be seen in “soundies”—“short musical clips played on machines called Panorams”—such as *Air Mail Special* (1941), *Hot Chocolate* (1941), *Outline of Jitterbug History* (1942), and *Sugar Hill Masquerade* (1942) (59). With this technology, the Lindy Hop was no longer confined to the Savoy Ballroom or even New York; instead, people across the country could see the dance for themselves and try to replicate it.

Similarly, print media—notably *Life* magazine—offered white Americans not only a glimpse of the Lindy Hop in its early stages but also a reaffirmation in the 1940’s of its white status. *Life* magazine first featured the Lindy Hop in December 1936. The December 14<sup>th</sup> edition’s “Life Goes to a Party” focused on the Savoy ballroom and included photographs of black dancers and the Savoy’s female hostesses. According to the article, “the Savoy is noted for its barbaric dancing, its absence of brawls, its 15% white clientele” and a “pink color scheme which is supposed to be especially flattering to black backs” (64). The photographs as well as the text portray the Lindy Hop as a black dance firmly positioned in black culture. In fact, the only mention of the white clientele of the Savoy says that the “Hopping and hoofing... at the Savoy causes many a white fun-seeker from downtown to look on in admiration at the Negroes’ contortion” (67). These comments from the text of *Life* magazine illustrate that “[f]or all the

Savoy's popularity, the white primitivist gaze at black culture stubbornly remained" (Dinerstein 259). Using terms like "barbaric" to describe the Lindy Hop correlated with the both fear and fascination of African American culture. Labeling the dance as barbaric allowed the white audience to position African Americans as more primitive and barbaric, and thus, less human than white Americans. At this point in history, the Lindy Hop still remained an African American dance that white spectators safely watched rather than participated in.

Likewise, the December 28, 1936 issue of *Life* also describes the Lindy Hop as an African American dance only. The article "Lindy Hoppers" follows the multiple steps of the Lindy Hop through pictures of Leon James and Willamae Ricker—identified only as "Harlem Negroes"—dancing together (30). The text claims that the dancers perform with a "native gusto and grace that no white couple can hope to duplicate" once again positioning the dance as inherently black (30). At the same time, the photographs with brief descriptions of the steps as captions provided white American far from Harlem with a visual image of the dance. Such articles might have not only peaked white interest in the dance but also provided an initial introduction to the movements involved in Lindy Hop.



Carton and Popp featured on the cover of *Life* magazine. Picture from [www.life.com](http://www.life.com).

On the other hand, the August 23, 1943 issue of *Life* changes the face of the dance. Unlike the other issues which only featured short stories about the dance, this issue ran a picture of two white dancers, Stanely Catron and Kay Popp, who were performing in the Broadway musical *Something for the Boys* at the time (96). The inside article entitled

"The Lindy Hop: A True National Folk Dance has Been Born

in U.S.A.” no longer portrays the Lindy Hop as an African American dance, but “America’s national dance” (95). Though the article does describe the Lindy as a dance that “flourished only in the lower strata of society” where “Negroes were its creators and principal exponents,” it claims “with the renaissance of swing the Lindy climbed the social scale” and has “attained



James and Ricker featured in *Life* magazine. Picture from [www.life.com](http://www.life.com).

respectability as a truly national dance” (96). The pairing of the photographs of white dancers with the text about “respectability” and “national dance” is telling of the emerging understanding of the Lindy Hop no longer as a black dance—described as “barbaric” in that first article—but as a white dance representative of American [read white] culture. The second half of the article does feature Leon James and Willamae Ricker (this time named) in photographs of air steps. However, the text positions the air steps as the moves that are primarily done by professional dancers, like James and Ricker, not in social dance situations. Therefore, the moves that the white dancers perform in the photos are positioned as the “norm” on the dance floor whereas the performance of the black dancers is positioned as the focal point for the audience to view and consume.

In addition, World War II also facilitated the spread of the Lindy Hop and, thus, the adaptation of it as a white dance. According to Ralph G. Giordano, American troops spread the dance both within the U.S. and overseas. The American dance was soon taken to other parts of the world as troops were deported, and in England, the Jitterbug was converted into the Jive, which is now part of standard ballroom dancing (94). For American servicemen, dancing became an important form of recreation. Carl Zebrowski believes that “Swing dancing really

came into its own when the United States entered the war. As GIs flocked to port cities and railroad hubs around the country on the way to service overseas, they sought parting moments of fun and companionship.” Meanwhile, civilians were dancing for recreation as well. Like servicemen and servicewomen, civilians used dancing as a form of recreational escape from the pressures of the war, but they also took up dance because they had more money to spend on entertainment because of shortages and rations (Giordano 114). Along with the greater number of white Americans (and Europeans) taking up Lindy Hop/Jitterbug, the films of the time period featuring white dancers, like Dean Collins, as soldiers also contributed to the visibility of the Lindy Hop as a white dance.

At the same time, the war also led to the demise of the swing era: “Ironically, it was the war that was most responsible for the end of swing music” (Giordano 116). Because so many band members were drafted for war and gas prices were too high to stay on the road, bands broke up. Additionally, many people wanted to hear more sentimental ballads and hold their dance partner tighter than big band swing music would allow (116). The war appeared to have the same effect on Lindy Hop because many dancers, like Frankie Manning in Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, were drafted. Manning explains that the music changed as well: “By the time I came out of the Army, the music scene had changed...People were trying to adapt the Lindy to bebop, trying to mix the two, but they ended up doing this jerky kind of dance” (203). While black dancers like Manning eventually gave up on the Lindy Hop, its emergence in white America continued through the 1950’s as young whites adapted it as Jitterbug or East Coast Swing for rock ‘n roll.

Though the reason for the decline of the Jitterbug or Lindy Hop in the 1950’s through 1980’s is not completely understood, many believe that its demise was partially due to the

disinterest in partner dancing during this period. As music styles changed, so did the dancing, and people felt more comfortable dancing by themselves than in couples. At the same time, the Lindy Hop never officially died. The New York Swing Dance society as well as older dancers like Norma Miller and Al Minns were still dancing and teaching in small venues across the country. In fact, Frankie Manning remembers 1984, in particular, as the year that Norma Miller called him to invite him to come dancing at Small's Paradise, an old nightclub in Harlem (225). As Manning reintegrated himself into the swing scene in New York, a bigger movement was going on in Southern California—neo-swing. Though this movement did not focus on the Lindy Hop, as I will show, without it, mainstream America would probably not have become re-interested in the Lindy Hop.

The swing revival of the late 1980s and early 1990s grew largely out of the rockabilly, punk, and ska movements. Black Hawk Hancock explains why this revival primarily drew white dancers: “The Lindy Hop dancing revival of the 1990s was part of a much larger ‘Retro Revival’ within white America: the resurgence of mainstream white America’s interest in the Rat Pack and Sinatra, the cocktail nation or ‘swingers subculture’ of the 1940s and 1950s, and the cigar and martini atmosphere of indulgence, traditional gender roles, styles, and decadence” (786). V. Vale sees the swing movement as a result of the “New Great Depression *of the spirit*” in the 1990’s (5). During this time, homelessness was on the rise, AIDS has made social interaction more complicated, and there was an overall lack of job security. Though Vale argues that the swing movement is not about nostalgia, his explanations of the reasons for the swing revival appear nostalgic. He claims, “[w]ith the swing movement a bit of ritual has been restored: dancing is the way to meet girls and guys, and with the emphasis on manners and grace borrowed from earlier decades, radically improved social relations now seem accessible and near

at hand” (5). Similarly, McMains and Robinson found that most of the dancers of the swing revival would “imagine they are dancing themselves back into a so-called simpler time” and this “romanticized past...neglects the racial strife that divided a segregated America at mid-century” (89). With values like traditional gender roles at the forefront, these swing revivalists found solace in the security that the idealized past offered them.

In addition to the nostalgic influence on the new swing movement, a sense of rebellion also factored into the rise of retro culture. Scott W. Renshaw notes that “[a]s the national and local modern Swing dance scene emerged, it did so with the energy of rock ‘n’ roll musicians and an accompanying dance that blossomed with the edgy attitudes blended through the music cultures of ska, rockabilly, and punk rock” (Renshaw 69). Looking at the formation of identity amongst participants in the modern swing movement, Renshaw finds that the original swing revivalists inhabit an attitude of rebelliousness and rowdiness that corresponds with their backgrounds in rockabilly and punk. More so than an appreciation for the music or dance, the excitement and uniqueness associated with the modern swing movement—particularly the drinking and vintage fashion—is what drew these individuals to reclaim swing. “As the nation’s punks began to age, the flavor of the old punk scene was giving way to a ‘softer’ rebellion, and Swing crept in on the ducktails of the greasers’ pompadours promising excitement, spontaneity, and cohesion” (Renshaw 72). Paul Parish agrees that the swing revival grew out of a dissatisfaction among ex-punks; he asserts that “[t]he revival got fully, officially underway after California punk bands, tired of the grunge look and turning to an earlier era’s style of clothing, began grooving on the clever lyrics and melodies of the jump-blues style of swing music” (50). In addition, Ben Ratliff says that “[t]he swing scene’s innovation has been to redirect the self-

loathing sexuality implicit in white rock from Lou Reed to Marilyn Manson back toward something more positive” (1).

Similar to Renshaw’s association of modern swing with the rebelliousness of punk and rockabilly, V. Vale, author of a comprehensive book of interviews with central characters in the swing revival, also sees the swing movement as one of rebellion:

At first glance this movement seems to be more about nostalgia than social criticism, but a closer look will reveal a different form of rebellion: one that chooses optimism for building community and a sense of its own unique identity. The swing movement is about cultural rebellion in its most subversive form: one that uses the symbols of the status quo for its own intents and purposes. This is achieved through the simple means of rejecting corporately-dictated consumption and embracing forgotten and/or ignored aspects of the American experience. (4)

In addition, he believes that “at the foundation of the swing movement is its search for American history, a search for its lost roots” (4). However, neither Vale nor many of the people he interviews make more than a passing comment about the key characters in the original swing era. In his introduction, Vale briefly mentions the Savoy Ballroom and that black musicians and dancers performed there, but he fails to even explicitly credit African Americans with the rise of swing music and dance. Instead, his, as well as the people he interviews for his book, seem far more concerned with the fashion and “values”—traditional gender roles, primarily—than the key players in the development of swing.

This attitude toward the swing movement coincides with Eric Martin Usner’s observations about the ignorance of the racial past of swing. He believes that “it is within the American past of the swing era—known through its representations in popular culture as a

predominantly white phenomenon—that the American [read white] youth in neo-swing are able to connect to a heritage that implicitly fosters a sense of identity akin to ethnicity” (90).

Moreover, these youth’s “[p]opular knowledge of the [swing] period is also not derived from experience with historical texts or deep realities of economics and race relations, but mostly within the idealized popular representations of the period” (98). The interviewees in Vale’s book continuously discuss these popular representations of the period—the pulp fiction novels, magazines, fashion, automobiles. In looking only at popular representations, “neo-swing practices recover styles of music, dance, and fashion along with particular values, but leave the deep realities behind” (98). In neglecting the racial history behind swing, these white youths are “reaffirming the dominant narratives of the racial and cultural ownership of swing and, indeed, of whatever is labeled as American culture” (98). Usner asserts that this phenomenon can only occur “because of the power of whiteness, and forgetting the fundamental blackness of ‘American’ culture” (99). Because the swing revival took place as a form of nostalgia for white youths looking to find their identity in “American” culture, they are able to erase the black history behind the dance, so it is no wonder that African Americans are absent from the recent swing dance revival.

Interestingly, these participants in the revival seem more concerned with rebellion, fashion, and drinking than the aesthetics of swing music or dance. In fact, in Renshaw’s study of the modern swing scene in Phoenix, Arizona, the originators of the swing revival showed great dissatisfaction for the scene once swing became mainstream—particularly when “dance geeks” got involved. These “dance geeks” came primarily with the purpose of learning the dance: “As the scene transformed, the socializing was primarily about the dancing. Swing as a lifestyle, once characterized by retro-vintage dressing, drinking, smoking, and club socializing, gave way

to a cleaner more mainstream brand of socializing. Many of the new Swing dancers were just that, dancers. They danced, and they drank very little” (Renshaw 78). Gabrielle Sutton, publisher of *Screamin’* magazine, echoes the disdain for dancers in the swing movement in her interview with V. Vale: “People here have been doing the lindy-hop and jitterbug for years but weren’t sophisticated enough to call it ‘swing.’ Now there’s a bunch of people out there calling it ‘swing’ who suddenly show up in their old clothes to see a band like Royal Crown, and I think, ‘Where have you been? I’ve been doing rockabilly night for six years [at Dja Vu] and I’ve never seen you people before” (15). Michael Moss, publisher of *Swing Time* magazine also establishes a difference between the “swing people” and the dancers: “The Lindy Hop people are direct *benefactors* of the swing movement. I don’t want any confusion about this: the swing people brought this music into the public’s eye, and *then* the Lindy Hop people discovered this was happening and, consequently, moved in. But they had nothing to do with the *creation* of this movement” (qtd. in Vale 9).

Obviously, the originators of the swing revival were not concerned with Lindy Hop, and Sutton’s comment shows a particular apathy toward not only learning the specifics of the Lindy Hop but also the history behind it. Instead, their focus was on a way of life which they had constructed from their understanding of rockabilly, punk, ska. Because these forms were primarily white, most of the originators of the swing revival were white as well. The history of the Lindy Hop was not of importance to them because they were looking for an alternative subculture to be a part of—like that of punk—rather than looking to revive music or dance that they particularly loved. Interestingly, the people in Renshaw’s study as well as Sutton and Moss are somewhat vehement about the authenticity of *their* swing movement. They see themselves as the creators of the movement and the dancers as invaders and even destroyers who do not

understand the meaning behind the movement. In other words, they feel that they *own* the swing movement; they are more authentic because they know the “history” which they display in the way they dress, style their hair, and what cars they drive. Ironically, they are unaware that not only is this history inaccurate but also includes a cultural theft much greater than that which they complain about in the modern swing movement.

While the practitioners of the new swing movement generally ignored the African American roots of the music and dance they so loved, they did revive an art form that would have otherwise been lost. In *Waltzing the Dark*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild examines the Lindy Hop revival in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. From her personal experience with white, middle-class undergraduates at the time, Dixon Gottschild explains how whites took over swing dance: “in the swing era the Lindy was appropriated and modified by whites and became the Jitterbug; in the last decade of the twentieth century, there is a Lindy revival but it is termed ‘swing dancing’” (205). She claims that her undergraduate students not only accepted the new name of the Lindy Hop, but in so doing, ignored the history of the dance (something I have seen first hand amongst the undergraduate dancers in Purdue’s swing dance club). She believes that this reaffirms an “interesting pattern: African Americans develop innovative forms of vernacular music and dance and then leave them behind, moving on to create new forms; whites adopt older African American forms and revise, codify, reconstruct, ‘academicize,’ and perform them” (206). Dixon Gottschild believes “[i]t is a bizarre, interdependent relationship predicated upon and determined by race etiquette and power politics but, ruefully, one for which we must be grateful: without it, the Lindy and tap dance would be dead, too great a loss to imagine” (206). Without the white ex-punk rockers to create the new swing movement, mainstream culture may have continued to ignore the Lindy Hop, but because of its popularity, more and more dancers

got involved and more and more people wanted to learn from an “original” swing dancer like Frankie Manning. Though popular culture representations of swing dance in the past ten years—the Gap commercial, *Dancing with the Stars*, and scenes in various movies—has primarily shown a style of dance quite different than the “original” Savoy style, the social dancing I come in to contact with each week closely resembles the Frankie Manning style. Though most of these social dancers are white, many of them have been to workshops taught by Manning, heard stories about him told during instruction, watched videos of his dancing, and perhaps know a little bit of history behind the dance.

This past Monday as I was frantically searching for articles for this paper, I came across the news of Frankie Manning’s death in New York—just a month before his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday which he planned to celebrate with Lindy Hoppers across the world. Since then, swing dance communities across the world have been mourning this great loss and planning memorial dancers in honor of him (the one at Purdue is going on as I write this). As evidenced by the massive response to this man’s death, Manning’s influence on the Lindy Hop—both during its original evolution as well as its more recent revival—is unsurpassed. Because of him, swing dancers across the country learned the “real” swing dance rather than just the version pumped through popular culture forms like the Gap commercial. The difference lies in the focus on lead-follow skills and footwork in the Savoy style Lindy while popular media typically displays a version of only acrobatic aerials that no social dancer could do on the dance floor. Frankie Manning himself, the inventor of the air step, often said that air steps/aerials were only used in competitions and performances, never on the social dance floor. Because of Manning’s teaching workshops, the Lindy Hop—in its authentic Savoy style—survives today. All is not lost—white,

mainstream culture may have appropriated the Lindy Hop, but swing dance communities across the world still dance this African-American art form in the best way they know how.

Whether a purposeful attempt to earn money off of the black cultural forms of jazz and Lindy Hop or simply a profound interest in these forms, the Lindy Hop has gone from being a black vernacular dance to one danced primarily by white, middle-class youth. Broadcasting forms like radio, films, and newsreels allowed swing music and Lindy Hop to gain national popularity in the 1930s, which meant more and more white Americans were embracing the music and dance. Print Media like *Life* magazine also contributed to the spread of the Lindy Hop as the steps and moves were photographed and featured in the magazine. The ultimate spread of the Lindy Hop took place during World War II as American G.I.'s danced on military bases all over the world. By the time white youth took up the dance again in the 1990's, the Lindy Hop and the Jitterbug were firmly placed in white American culture. Thus, the revival itself could ignore the racial history behind the dance and, instead, adopt it in a nostalgic effort to recapture the non-existent "good ol' days" when life was simpler, gender roles were defined, and morals values respected.

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Named after Charles Lindbergh, the Lindy Hop married swing music's traditional eight count with the fast-paced, free-form movements of African-American dances at the time: spins, slides, thrilling flips and kicks — steps Ms. Miller mastered as a child. Born in 1919, she grew up in an apartment building behind the Savoy Ballroom. At 15, she was invited to join the troupe on tour to introduce the Lindy Hop to clubs and ballrooms in Europe. The camp soon became a platform for black performers whose popularity had waned stateside, including the master drummer George Reed, who played behind jazz giants like Charlie Parker; the singer and tap dancer Mable Lee; and the tap dancer Skip Cunningham. White rappers. How many of us love them? To be a white rapper is a tough row to hoe in an industry with a complex overlay of cultural, social, and capitalist demands. Questions get raised: Are you real enough? Does your background matter? Is it harder or easier for you to succeed in the industry because you're white? Did you just get signed because the record company knows that concerned white parents are way more likely to buy your stuff for their kids than the music made by some dark-skinned dude with diamond grills? Can you say the n-word? Should you? Who knows how accurate this idea of early hip-hop ever was? The fact remains that it's still clung to today by academics and historians who have cemented a narrative of a music that does not see color. Whitey's Lindy Hoppers was a professional performing group of Savoy Ballroom swing dancers, started in 1935 by Herbert "Whitey" White. The group took on many different forms, with up to 12 different groups performing under this name or one of a number of different names used for the group over the years, including Whitey's Hopping Maniacs, Harlem Congerero Dancers, and The Hot Chocolates. In addition to touring both nationally and internationally, the group appeared in a number of feature films and Broadway productions and counted Dorothy Dandridge and Sammy Davis Jr. among ... With Manning's death in April 2009, Miller alone remains to teach and lecture at dance workshops and Lindy Hop conventions.