# History of Dance

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Synoptic Presentation of the History of Dance in the 20th Century By Frank Regan Independence Day Ball 2008

FRANK REGAN (abbreviated bio)

Frank Regan is a former United States, Canadian and North American champion.He is the recipient of many prestigious awards including "The Legends of Dance Award", "The World Dancing Hall of Fame Award", the AMI Lifetime Achievement Award, the NDCA Lifetime Achievement Award, "The CDTA Honorary Life Award" for his contribution to stage and ballroom and "The Heritage Award" for special contribution to dance.

Frank resides in the Washington, DC area functioning mainly as a choreographer, dance coach, writer and historian.

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Early 1900s: The Waltz

This dance was, needless to say, imported into America by European immigrants. It was, however, popularized in Boston and New York by the legendary Vernon Castle who introduced a particular version that was palatable to American society and appropriate to high level social gatherings of the time. This version was known both as the “Hesitation Waltz” and “the Boston.”

The Waltz takes the form of two quite different dances. They are the Viennese Waltz and the Slow Waltz.

The Viennese Waltz is a fast Waltz which originated in Germany, and was taken from there to France by Napoleon as part of the spoils of war. The English, who were at war with France and not wanting to be outdone, forthwith adopted it and in true Anglo fashion ultimately put it through a process of discriminating analysis.

Finding its way quickly to America, the dance enjoyed a great deal of popularity at the turn of the century. Besides being recognized as the “Mother of Social Dance” it has also served an important role in the development of theatre dance, having been frequently utilized in theatrical and Hollywood productions.

The word Waltzen (derived from the Latin Volvere) meaning to revolve, succinctly describes the key character of this picturesque dance, particularly when viewed from elevation. Perhaps one of the most breathtaking spectacles of a Dancesport event is the panorama of thirty or forty couples beautifully attired in traditional tails and ballgowns revolving collectively around the ballroom in harmonious effusion.

The Slow Waltz, in sharp contrast to the speedy rotation of the Viennese Waltz, usually encapsulates a dreamy, tender quality of sentimental bliss as its exponents power themselves through controlled descents to body swings of precarious elevation.

This dance, an offspring of its faster relative, underwent a gradual slowing process as songwriters of ballads and love songs chose to compose in three quarter time to a more comfortable tempo.

Slowly but surely a technique unfolded which derived from the dancer’s necessity of controlling a more delicate mode of balance through pressure of the feet against the floor.  Thus the element of rise and fall revealed itself as an integral property of the dance as the Waltz continued to rise in popularity and fell into the category of a classic form essential to civilized social gatherings from weddings to bar mitzvahs, embassy functions to country club dances or anniversaries to graduations.

Waltz music has been instrumental in the creation of contextual properties for many film and stage productions.  One of the most notable theater productions, featuring elements of the “Boston”, Viennese Waltz, Slow Waltz in Rubato phrasing with rhapsodic interludes, the Landler, and Jazz Waltzes has been the celebrated ballet “Waltz – Our Lady of Oblivion,” performed to critical acclaim by the world-famous Miami City Ballet.

The Polka

The Polka, again a European import and essentially a folk dance, was frequently performed by exhibition teams in its authentic Middle and Eastern European form.  Straus composed some beautiful classical polkas which were utilized in both commercial stage productions and ballets.

1900 – 1910: The Turkey Trot

This lively dance, perceived as being eccentric and scandalous at the time, together with the Charleston, gave birth to some of the Quickstep figures of later years.  The dance evolved out of an expression of the popular ragtime music of the decade.

1911: The Tango

The Tango was exported out of Argentina by Europeans in the early 1900’s ending up at the Imperial country club in France where it was refined and popularized by Monsieur Camile de Rhynal under the supervision of Grand Duchess Anastasie of Russia.  From Paris, it immediately went to London where it began its process of methodic analysis by the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, soon reaching a state of orderliness and standardization that was to lay the foundation for the competitive style of today.

Meanwhile, the dance was in the process of being smuggled into America for what Boston considered to be immoral purposes. The Tango was, along with just about anything else of an enjoyable nature, banned in that city and citizens were actually thrown in jail for doing the “Argentine Glide.”

Vernon Castle introduced this dance to Boston society in 1911 whereupon it was immediately banned and people were thrown in jail for daring to engage in this provocative and highly controversial new dance.

The legendary Irene and Vernon Castle took great pains to educate New York society to the civilized possibilities of this dance as a socially acceptable pastime for the genteel and respectable.  Vernon Castle was to influence America in a

way that he never imagined when he taught the dance to one of his professional students, a young man by the name of Arthur Murray who had an instinctive awareness of the public taste and effectively taught the Tango to the American public.  Hollywood did much to lionize the Tango, particularly in the person of Rudoph Valentino.

Tango music has been utilized for everything from Broadway musicals to T.V. commercials, invariably in a less than artistic way.  Indeed the uninitiated American public’s sole concept of the Tango has unfortunately been a comedic rendition featuring two people in promenade position ad nauseum attempting to grab a rose away from each other with their teeth.  Amusing as this may be, it is in piercing contrast to the myriad of highly customized distinctions that are typified by the experts, regardless of what style they may be portraying.

Early purveyors of the Tango in the person of Castle, Murray and Valentino would surely have been astounded to obtain a glimpse of the future and witness the artistic and scientific mastery of an art form that says more about cultural colonization than most sociologists would dare guess about.

1912: The Castle Walk

Vernon Castle introduced this dance with great success in New York, London and Paris.  It became an overnight hit and catalyzed various renditions of the Foxtrot. The Foxtrot per se did not show up in the public consciousness until 1913.

Foxtrot

The legendary Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, Frank Sinatra, Glen Miller and Nat King Cole had this much in common – practically everything they did was in Foxtrot rhythm.  The majority of sheet music and phonograph records in the popular music field invariably received the designation of Foxtrot for at least four decades.  Musical fads and trends come and go but Foxtrot music of all tempos remains with us.

The dance is reputed to have originated in 1913 when a Vaudeville performer by the name of Harry Fox performed a little trot which fired the imaginations of the social dance teachers in New York and the Foxtrot was born.  Since then, the dance has undergone considerable evolution.  From the speedy erratic expression of the World War I era, the Foxtrot has matured to a smooth unhurried embodiment of fluid controlled musicality.

Based on natural movement, it has developed the simple function of walking to a deceptively easy looking action which is in reality one of the most demanding of all dance skills.

Properties of subtle intonation, body flight, and rubato phrasing are the hallmark of the expert.  Far from the domain of the flashy, the blatant or the indelicate, the Foxtrot serves as an excellent medium in which to recognize the dancers of quality and when performed by experts bears testimony to the merits of purity of movement.

The Castle Walk and its correlation to the Foxtrot has been featured in many types of theater productions from variety shows to ballets.

The Maxixe (circa 1912 – 1930) was a dance of Brazilian origin and the forerunner of the Samba.  This dance was popularized by Vernon and Irene Castle.  It was sometimes referred to at that time as the Brazilian Tango.  The Maxixe

was featured as a principal piece in the celebrated ballet, “The Neighborhood Ballroom.”

The 1920s

The Charleston

The Charleston and Black Bottom were related dances that emerged from the jazz craze of the era referred to as the roaring twenties. It was the time of alcoholic prohibition and people would meet in illegal venues to drink booze out of tea cups and dance themselves into a stupor, no doubt facilitated by liberal servings of bootleg booze.

Tango

As in every decade the Tango made a comeback, particularly as a result of being thrust into public awareness through Rudolph Valentino’s Hollywood endeavors.

Dance historians have toyed with hypothetical notions as to the most basic origins of this dance but all agree unswervingly that Argentina deserves the credit for impacting our culture with this largely misunderstood yet profoundly emotional and dramatically beautiful art form.

The style of Tango performed in Dancesport events bears little resemblance to the original form, having evolved out of a different context.  The competition style Tango is loaded with impactful, dramatic action empowered by speed and staccato expression but interspersed with periodic poses of statuary stillness.

1930’s: The Rumba

The Rumba, a dance of Cuban origin, made its way into American society. It was originally played at a very fast tempo and structured either as Guaracha or Rumba Colombia.  The tempo was slowed down. The rhythm was slightly altered to a Beguine version and the spelling changed from “Rumba” to “Rhumba”.

The Paso Doble

This dance is of Spanish origin and was expressed either at parties as a “tongue in cheek” depiction of the corrida or on stage as a theatrical expression featuring the matador’s cape manipulated by a male dancer in concert with female flamenco dancers.

It is significant that as part of their cultural mores the dancers did not touch.  The ballroom version of this, however, was developed in France and the French being the romantic nation that they are immediately endorsed touching in a way that allowed this dance to show up in partnership mode.

The dance continues to exist socially as a Spanish One Step within Hispanic culture in various countries, but as a competitive dance bears little resemblance to the authentic item. This is neither good nor bad but simply an inevitable aspect of the development of any competitive art sport, particularly as the Paso Doble has become more than a dance and is now largely governed by its criteria as a piece of theater.

1940’s: Samba and Swing

This decade spawned various expressions of Swing dancing, the Samba, and World War II.

Samba

This stimulating rhythm is utilized either in its authentic form or in a somewhat diluted format in many types of contemporary music. Samba is the national dance and music of Brazil. The dance falls generally into two categories: 1) Street Samba, and 2) Salon Samba. The movements and step patterns are essentially symbolic of different aspects of the Mardi Gras festival.

The Street Samba version is perceived usually as wild, uninhibited, and invariably danced in a solo mode, i.e. not a partner dance. The Salon Samba, on the other hand, is as the name suggests danced in salons, night clubs, cafes, and ballrooms, and is danced with a partner. The traditional expression of this dance within the world dance community is a combination of both Street Samba moves and Salon Samba.

This dance was introduced into America by Vernon Castle. The initial structure was in the shape of a Brazilian dance called the Maxixe (pronounced Mashishe). The Maxixe was the forerunner of the Samba and was whimsically referred to as the “Brazilian Tango”. Orchestra directors and the leaders of dance bands, during the period of introduction of the Maxixe (circa 1911 – 1914), made a point of featuring the melody more than the rhythm.

The authentic rhythm forms of Brazilian music were just a little too pulsating and sensuous for the relatively reserved society of the New England and New York areas. Needless to say, the dance was, like everything else of a pleasurable nature, banned in Boston, along with other things like the Tango. People were actually thrown in jail for engaging in dances of what was then seen as being of a “scandalous nature”!

If the elite of Boston society at that time could have been privy to some of the 21st century expressions of what we are quite comfortable with, i.e. music video production etc., they would probably have choked to death or had a fatal stroke at one of their tea parties. Anxiety attacks notwithstanding, the Maxixe grew tremendously in popularity and continued through the 20’s and 30’s, evolving gradually into the Samba as we know it today, a delightful and animated social dance.

The rhythm and percussive distinctions of the Samba originated in Africa. The slaves who were forcibly imported into Brazil brought this fascinating rhythm with them. They also brought a form of martial arts called Capoeira.

Capoeira as a martial arts form was banned by the authorities in Brazil. The slaves consequently turned it into a dance. Many of the moves of Capoeira have trickled down into the acrobatic elements of today’s hip-hop scene. Once again we experience a renaissance of the past as dance is discovered and rediscovered by a new generation. Capoeira is executed to a tempo of a variable nature but which contains the fundamental rhythmic distinctions of the Samba.

The slower version of the Samba is known as the Baion and is a rhythm very strongly correlated to the Lambada, a dance which emerged in America during the 1990’s.

An extremely sophisticated music form which showed up in America circa 1963 was the Bossa Nova. The Bossa Nova was derived from jazz Samba expressions and owed its development to Brazilian jazz musicians in New York who superimposed their jazz arrangements over the wonderful Samba rhythms of their native country.

Jazz Sambas took on a further flavor of the interesting and sophisticated through the aspect of featuring the clave (pronounced cla-vay). The dance per se was based on simple figures of Salon Samba but featured a movement called the “Cuban lift” as opposed to the “Naniego”-based character of African expression. The Bossa Nova was introduced at a huge teachers’ convention and taught by a famous New York dance teacher by the name of John Luchesse who had expended considerable energy and resources to research the subject.

Hollywood invariably had a great deal to do with the promotion and social availability of the Samba in the form of the legendary “Carmen Miranda” during the 1940’s. Next to the Rhumba, the Samba became all the rage and became exceptionally popular in America and Britain.

Since the 1960’s, the Samba has spread worldwide and has become a popular part of the repertoire of beginners and advanced dancers in most of the civilized countries in the world. The exquisite music of Brazil, which either has a direct or remote correlation to the Samba has been used as the musical context for film TV and stage productions. Notably, the Brazilian composer and icon Egberto Gismonti has created magnificent arrangements on a level of unquestionable excellence. His music has been utilized in a famous ballet performed by the world-famous Miami City Ballet under the direction of the celebrated Edward Villella. This ballet features Capoeira, Street Samba, and other Samba-based renditions of both the classical and jazz idioms. International dance competitions feature the Samba as an integral part of the program, inevitably creating a response of palpable enthusiasm in the audience.

One may enjoy the Samba on many levels. It is important to note that an absolute beginner can enjoy and gain therapeutically from engaging in some of the simplest movements in this dance. It is for all practical purposes a fun dance. Let fun be your priority. Whether you picture yourself dancing on stage, dancing a competition on TV, impressing your friends at a party, being totally cool in a nightclub or fooling around in the privacy of your room with a pineapple and some fruit on your head, be sure to acknowledge the enormous contribution that you are making to yourself as a transformed human being who is living the aesthetic and kinetic benefits of one of those truly great properties of the universe which derives from the experience of dance.

Swing

The Swing genre catapulted out of the 20’s into the 30’s, gathering blatant momentum and climaxing with considerable impact on the world scene during the 40’s.

Jive, Swing, Jitterbug, and Lindy are all different names for overlapping forms of a similarity so unmistakably sculpted from a congruous raw material as to be dubbed members of the same family. As American as apple pie, this dance emerged exuberantly on the surface of our culture in the thirties with the swing music of Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Glen Miller. It snowballed profusely in the forties and was involuntarily exported to Europe during World War II via the GI’s. It became an immediate hit in the United Kingdom; and in Glasgow, Scotland, which was full of American servicemen during the war, a dancing school opened which specialized in this new American import, teaching the authentic Lindy Hop and acrobatic Jive indigenous to the famous Roseland and Savoy Ballrooms of New York City. The high energy expression of this dance in competitions is directly correlated to its

up tempo character. Swing competitions take place with the tempo somewhat slower and encompass fascinating offshoots such as West Coast Swing and shag that feature a designedly slow tempo.

1950’s: The Mambo, Guajira, Cha Cha, and Bolero

The music for all of the above comes out of Cuba, but the didactic version of those dances was developed in New York by two dance musicians by the names of Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez. They were superb artists whose bands were featured at the famous Palladium Ballroom in New York at Broadway and 54th St.

The philosophy of the Mambo was that on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th beats you were doing, but on the 1st beat you were being. This resulted in an internalization of feeling on “1” and featured a partial immobilization.

The didactic expression was taken to a higher level by Tito Puente. The clave (pronounced cla-vay) influence, which initially brought about the aspect of breaking on “2”, now took on a flavor which was even more closely aligned with the total concept of the music and became the hallmark of the expert.

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    1st  measure      2nd  measure       3/2 CLAVE      1  &   2  &  3   &  4  &
^       ^       ^     1  &   2  &  3   &  4  &
      ^     ^
    1st  measure      2nd  measure       2/3 CLAVE      1  &   2  &  3   &  4  &
      ^     ^     1  &   2  &  3   &  4  &
^       ^       ^
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The Palladium was an extraordinary phenomenon. It was a democracy of cultural and racial properties (a unique factor at that point in our somewhat retarded state of social evolution). The average working person would enjoy the process of donning their best threads and enjoying the exciting environment of the Palladium, particularly on a Wednesday night. They would rub shoulders with celebrities and major players of the dance world. One would frequently see such personalities as Sammy Davis Jr., Kim Novak, Lena Horne, Rita Hayworth, Elizabeth Taylor, Sarah Vaughan, Dizzie Gillespie, Arthur and Katherine Murray, Edward Villella, Augie et Margo Rodriguez, Mike et Elita Terrace, Cuban Pete and Millie, Killer Joe Piro, and many more. Marlon Brando was totally addicted to the Palladium and latin music. He was in fact a really good conga player and Candido (reputed to be one of the greatest if not the greatest conga players in the world) would allow him to sit in with him and jam with the orchestra.

To be seen at the Palladium was the cool move of the day and show biz personalities would show up in profusion to dance to the sound of latin jazz. Mambo mania was loose in the city and soon spread to other areas: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Detroit. The Catskills, Florida, and other resort areas featured Mambo dance couples. The resorts became a haven for the survival of some of the truly superb dancers who were suffering from the scarcity of work on Broadway, theater activity being diminished as a result of the innovative explosion of television. Many of those dancers (most of them Hispanics) had a background in ballet, jazz, and flamenco, which, when combined with their innate feeling for the wonderful music of their culture, produced something of tremendous artistic consequence.

Some of the bands at that time chose to create music which had a gypsy Rumba character. This was a combination of Flamenco and Rumba, essentially featuring latin percussion and Spanish guitars. This grew into Mambo-Flamenco and a slower version done to Guajira and Son Montuno with a Spanish guitar predominance. This ultimately came to be known as Flamenco-Cha. This format never became an expression of social dancing but was utilized most effectively for show work in night clubs and theaters.

The combination of classical and Spanish Port de Bras (arm styling) became an integral aspect of a very slow type of Rhumba music called the Bolero. This type of Bolero had nothing to do with the original Spanish Bolero or Ravell’s Bolero. It was Cuban music of a rich, romantic and oft times dramatic flavor. The Bolero had a rotary character, governed by an oscillating dynamic. Superb dancers would empower themselves with principles of spatial dynamics that permitted them to work with the space around each other to produce beautiful and fluid moments of exquisite artistry. It was a romantic dance within a dramatic context usually performed in a blue light and guaranteed to elicit a positive emotional response from even the most jaded eye.

During the 1970’s, the Arthur Murray Organization attempted to revive this dance which had, like many things, drifted away during the 1960’s. Videos were produced and breakdowns written. They served the purpose of providing a structure which permitted the Bolero to be available to beginners and the American dance community at large. This structure opened up immediate but limited possibilities for the mediocre dancer. As such, the chain studios, Murrays and Astaires, contributed a valuable teaching aid, but the initial beauty and art of the Bolero was lost and may not be rediscovered for decades to come. This is an artistic tragedy which may in fact never be resolved without the intervention of an altruistic entity.

Bolero, Mambo and Son Rhumba were the featured dances at the Palladium. The Guaracha (fast Rumba) and the traditional Mambo could be exhausting if danced to excess. Due to popular demand, the bands began to slow down the tempo until the single rhythm Mambo gave way to double Mambo and eventually a relatively slow expression showed up, known as the triple Mambo.

The triple Mambo involved an additional hip movement on the 4 and 1 beats. This form of rhythmic expression eventually moved down into the feet. Lo and behold, the Cha Cha was born. Guajira music was now played with emphasis on a rhythmic character that was conducive to the expression of this new dance. Old standards were re-written in Cha Cha rhythm with emphasis on the cow bell and martillo rhythms. Needless to say, commercial versions of the Cha Cha minus the bass lines and clave influence began to emerge in a less than flattering way and were of course looked down upon by the authentic aficionados as being impoverished pseudo Cha Chas.

1960’s

A time of social revolution and rebellion towards everything, including the dance traditions of one’s parents. This was catalyzed by the Twist, which befell us in 1961. There was no longer a need to take dance lessons and many of the ballroom studios simply went out of business.

The introduction of two new partnership dances, namely the Pachanga and the Bossa Nova, were received enthusiastically by a small percentage of the dance community, but the new generation continued to tune in, drop out, and hallucinate while executing the Frug, the Mashed Potatoes, the Monkey, the Jerk, the Philly Dog and other terpsichorean blunders of the day.

Dance between a man and a woman was conspicuous by its absence on the social scene. The consequence of this was that the public became much more appreciative of dance performances on stage in the romantic mode. Great adagio dance teams such as Augie and Margo Rodriguez and the legendary Francois Szony (with his many partners) became integral to high level “show biz” endeavors, particularly in Las Vegas. Augie and Margo were the opening act for Sammy Davis Jr. for ten years. Legendary celebrities such as Judy Garland and Noel Coward insisted on Francois Szony being the opening act for their appearances in Vegas.

Ballroom dancing continued to survive and drifted out of the public consciousness to the extent that it became the best kept secret in America.  It was kept alive by a few die-hards who refused to give in to contemporary trends.

We owe the success of competitive dance to those crusaders who laid the foundation for today’s dance scene. Let not history forget those intrepid souls.

The renaissance of dance in the late seventies as a result of John Travolta and other Hollywood ingredients has been integral in the revitalization of the wonderful world of ballroom dancing, but that is another story.

The author has spent over a half a century in the world of dance as a professional dancer (stage and ballroom), choreographer, producer, director, writer, lyricist, and latin percussionist.  During the early sixties he had the opportunity to be privy to firsthand knowledge handed down by teachers from the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, thereby contributing to his success as a dance historian.

Having grown up during the 1930’s and 1940’s, his background is founded on a rich tapestry of invaluable experience.  His main motivation at this point in his life is to ensure that the historic elements of dance at a level of artistry are not lost to future generations.