The History of Jazz Dance

The Early History of Jazz Dance

- Jazz dance is often credited as an American creation, however in actuality it originates from African American vernacular dance that came about during the late 1800s.
- The first official American “jazz dancer” was Joe Frisco around the year 1910, who performed in Vaudeville Minstrel Shows, however its roots trace much further back than this, with many moves being created by the slaves as a much needed physical and emotional outlet.
- Europe lent elegance to the technique, Africa gave it its movement and rhythm, and America allowed it to have the exposure and growing popularity that has sustained it as a cherished dance style today.

Modern Day Enjoyment

- After being passed down through plantation ancestors and early restaurants and night clubs, jazz dance began to be taught in studios.
- In the 1930’s, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers & Gene Kelly made dance appealing to the masses by gliding across the silver screen, providing many an escape from the Great Depression.
- The 1940’s brought a revolution of jazz dance, increasing its demand for studio instruction and causing it to rival the popularity of classical ballet.
- Jazz began to appear more and more in not only Vaudeville acts, but also in Broadway shows and musical comedies.
- Still, even up until this time, jazz dance was sometimes confused with tap dance, due mainly to the similar music used.
- The development of jazz dance mirrored the changes in jazz music and followed it “hand-in-hand”, through the Charleston, Swing, Lindy Hop, and even, Rock-and-roll.
- Modern jazz dance was developed by choreography greats such as Bob Fosse, whose work is emulated in the ultimate of jazz dance shows such as Chicago and Cabaret.
Jazz Performance

- Jazz dance is constantly evolving, and tends to follow the popular music of the time.
- Many dancers have contributed to the development of jazz dance from the 1950’s to present day: Kathryn Dunham, Jack Cole, Alvin Ailey, Twyla Tharp, Gus Giordano, & Luigi.
- To properly execute jazz dance steps, many teachers still believe in teaching a firm classical ballet foundation so that bodies can develop with strength and agility.
- Turns and leaps are prevalent in jazz, so understanding the history of jazz dance and the different styles it is derived from, is vital in performing it properly.
- Jazz dance is able to be traditionally peppy and bright, but can also take on a flowy and soulful feel. There are no limits to its creativity, and this has continued to rank it as one of the most popular forms of dance available in studios today.
- Modern elements and Jazz elements are combined into today's Contemporary style.
- Individuality and improvisation are crucial elements of both jazz dance and jazz music.
- Jazz dancers are encouraged to add their own attitude and personality to each step, making the basic turns and signature 'jazz walk' look unique every time.