



About Jazz Dancing

Younger than ballet, tap, or modern, jazz is a peculiarly American dance form. Like American culture, jazz incorporates the traditions, history and attitudes of many different countries, reflecting ethnic influences, historical events, and cultural changes. Like tap, jazz has movements that grew from many African dance traditions; like modern, jazz developed from experimentation with classical ballet. Unlike either of these forms, jazz also reflects the changes in the musical culture of the 20th century. The inception of jazz dance can be pinpointed to the beginning of jazz music. Dixieland jazz music, with its fast ragtime beat, spread from New Orleans north to Chicago and New York, and dance went with it. Early types of jazz dances were social dances such as the Shimmy, the Big Apple, and the Black Bottom. In the Charleston, a dance introduced to the American public in the 1920's, dancers used body isolations for the first time in social dance.

The history of jazz dance is closely linked to the development of musical theatre. As musical theatre grew in popularity and diversity, steps from social dances found their way into theatrical dancing. As dance was incorporated more naturally into the storyline of musicals, dancers had to find new ways to use their bodies expressively. Consequently, choreographers created the techniques of jazz as they created shows. Choreographer Jack Cole was the first to really define jazz technique. Trained as a modern dancer, he was heavily influenced by Hindu dancers, and combined their style with jazz music. Agnes DeMille incorporated jazz technique with that of modern, tap, and ballet to create dynamic, "American" showpieces. Her choreography for the Broadway play *Oklahoma!* revolutionized the way dance was used in Broadway musicals. Choreographer and theatre director Jerome Robbins (*West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, *On the Town*, *Peter Pan*) is noted for the indissoluble link in his choreography between movement and music. Both Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire combined jazz with tap and ballet for some innovative routines in film musicals. Another famous dancer/choreographer in jazz style was Bob Fosse. A stage and film director and dancer, Fosse won acclaim for his imaginative dance sequences in *Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*, and *Sweet Charity*. He won both Tony and Oscar Awards for his work in *Cabaret*. Fosse jazz style is recognized by the use of hunched shoulders, turned-in legs, and pelvic isolations.

Jazz dance is still developing. The pioneering efforts of teachers and choreographers like Luigi, Jack Cole, Michael Kidd and Gus Giordano developed the form's athleticism and artistry, and gave technique to its spontaneity. Jazz continues to be influenced by developing music in a way that modern historically is not.

Today, jazz dancing incorporates many styles and techniques, including ballet and tap. There is Afro Jazz, Funk, Disco Jazz, Balletic jazz, Tap Jazz, and Musical Comedy Jazz, just to name a few. New forms are developing all the time. Remember the break dancing fad of the middle 1980's?

Jazz dancers never stop finding new ways to move — and they probably never will!

JAZZ!

Why Do They Call It "Jazz?"

There are many fascinating opinions about the origins of the word "jazz." Some think it was named after a musician by the name of Jasper (Jas for short) who played in a spasm band, a popular type of band in the early 1900's that used washboards and other homemade instruments. Originally, the bands did call the music "jass." Another version of the same story is that the musician's name was Charles, who was called "Chas" by his friends. Some think "Chas" was mispronounced or misread as Chaz or Jaz.

Still others think the name came from Razz's Band, and became Jazz Band. Yet another group of people think the word comes from an African word.

In any case, a man named Tom Brown took his band from New Orleans to Chicago in 1915, and used the word "jass" to identify the music they played. They called themselves Brown's Dixieland Jass Band — and the name "jazz" stuck.

In 1919, a popular song of the day was *Take Me To The World Of Jazz*. Finally, the music had a name, and people began to identify and call music of the same type "jazz." The social dances that people did to the music began to be identified as "jazz" dances. A new dance form was born!

What Makes Jazz "Jazz?"

Much of the jazz dance technique we use today has its roots in the folk dances of the African people. Of course, the dances they did were not dances for the theatre — they were social dances in which the entire community took part. They had a dance for every aspect of life, from birth to death.

The characteristics of those dances are still with us today, in the dance form we call jazz. Those characteristics are:

1. Bent knees, making the body center closer to the ground than it is in everyday posture;
2. Isolation of body parts, such as the hips, shoulders, head, and rib cage;
3. Syncopated rhythms of movement;
4. Two and even three movement rhythms going on at the same time in one body;
5. Use of the entire body instead of just legs and arms as a means of expressing yourself through movement, with the expression and movement rippling out from the center of the body.

JAZZ!

Learning About Isolations

Isolations are a very important characteristic of jazz dance technique. Isolation exercises are meant to develop the dancer's ability to easily move one or more parts of the body, while the rest of the body remains still.

Isolation exercises can be done for major body areas — the rib cage, hips, shoulders, head, legs, feet, and arms — as well as for small areas like fingers.

Isolations are also used in other forms of dance, such as tap and modern dance. Even ballet technique requires the ability to isolate one part of the body from the rest.

It might even be said that all steps used in dance are comprised of many different isolations executed either in sequence or in conjunction with others!

Warming Up Is Important!

Warming up properly is critical for any dancer, no matter what form of dance they are practicing. Dancers who have not warmed up properly can easily be injured, because their muscles and joints have not been prepared for the strenuous and difficult movements that are required when dancing. Think about it! Have you ever tried to tie your shoes or write your name when your hands were really cold?

Warming up also helps prepare your brain for what you are about to do as well. It allows you to clear your mind of everything except your dancing, so you can focus your energy on your dancing.

Warm-up exercises also allow us to practice some very small parts of steps that we use all of the time, so that when we work on the big steps, we can concentrate on the execution of the whole step, rather than just the smaller parts. For example, how many jazz steps require the use of a properly executed plié or stretched foot? A lot! A good dancer must be able to do a simple plié properly without even thinking about it! You can't jump or land safely and easily from a leap if you can't plié properly. If you have to put all your brain power into thinking about something as simple as stretching your feet, how can you think about everything else that goes into whatever step or dance you are doing?

JAZZ!

Jazz & Ballet DO Mix!

The demands on jazz dancers are so great that most choreographers and professional dancers feel that a dancer must have excellent training in many phases of dance other than jazz dance itself — especially ballet. While it's fun to improvise jazz movements, it requires great skill to be able to do all the forms of jazz dance, and to learn someone else's choreography quickly. You need two opposites - incredible physical control of your body and complete freedom of movement.

The "freedom" you can get from jazz classes, as well as classes in tap and/or modern dance. The control comes from ballet. Classical ballet is the most difficult and disciplined of the performing dance forms. It demands incredible precision and an extraordinary ability to control what your body is doing. For this reason, many classically trained dancers who have never studied jazz in their lives can usually learn a jazz routine fairly quickly. On the other hand, dancers trained solely as jazz, modern, or tap dancers have a much more difficult time trying to learn the clean lines, turnout, and intricate technique of classical ballet.

As well, many of the steps used in many choreographers' jazz techniques were developed out of classical ballet technique. A jazz pirouette, for example, is a ballet pirouette that's turned in. A turned-in ballet battement is a jazz battement. Take many of the ballet steps, move the turn-out, change the rhythm, use different music, and voilà — jazz!

Incidentally, jazz dancers are not the only ones who have recognized the need for a strong ballet technique. Many of today's champion figure skaters and gymnasts will tell you they spend almost as much time in the ballet studio as they do on the ice or in the gym!

Jazz Dance Vocabulary

Let's Talk Jazz! (A - L)

1. Ball Change
A way of transferring weight quickly from the ball of the back foot to the foot in front.
2. Battement
A big kick from the hip to the front, side, or back with a straight knee. The supporting leg can be straight, or in plié. The supporting foot may be flat on the floor, in relevé, or in a forced arch.
3. Chainé
A quick series of linked turns on relevé, or in plié with two steps to complete one turn.
4. Chassé
A sliding movement in which one foot chases the other. Can be done forward, backward, or to the side.
5. Cuban Walk
A sideways walk in which the feet do "step-together" repeatedly, while the hips move in opposition to the feet.
6. Fan Kick
A battement that makes an arc in the air, either from left to right or reversed.
7. Flat Back (table top)
Bending forward from the hips with a straight back. Feet are parallel, no wider apart than the hips, arms by side.
8. Flex
Bending the hand or foot at the wrist or ankle.
9. Forced Arch
Foot or feet are in relevé with the knee(s) bent.
10. Grapevine
A sideways walk or run that begins with the leading foot stepping to the side, next foot steps behind, then step side again with the first foot. Can finish with a propped foot, or continue with another step crossing in front.
11. Hinge
Knees are bent, the body is in one line from the head to the knees. This includes the pelvis. Can be executed on the floor, or with heels lifted in a forced arch.
12. Isolation
Moving only one part of the body while everything else remains still.
13. Jazz Hand
Fingers stretched with the palm facing front.
14. Jazz Split
A slide to the floor with the front leg extended and back leg bent and turned out. The back arm supports the weight of the body, and the back arches slightly.
15. Jazz Square
Steps that make the shape of a square. Right crosses over left, left steps back, right steps side, and left steps front. Or done reversed.
16. Jazz Walk
Feet are parallel, knees bent. When stepping forward shoulders twist in opposition of feet.
17. Layout
Kicking a leg to the front, side, or back while the upper body arches or bends in the opposite direction.

Jazz Dance Vocabulary

Let's Talk Jazz! (M - Z)

1. Parallel Referring to the feet. Feet are parallel to each other, with toes pointing to the front.
2. Pencil Turn A turn on one leg, on relevé, with the body and legs straight, legs together. The raised foot is flexed, with the arms by the side.
3. Pirouette A turn on one leg, with supporting leg either straight or in plié. Other leg is usually in a turned in passé.
4. Pivot Turn A movement that makes only half a turn. Step forward on one foot, turn to face opposite direction, and transfer weight to other foot. Legs end open rather than crossed.
5. Prissy Walk A type of walk done on relevé. Also called "L. A. Walks" or "Struts." One leg lifts to a turned in passé, knee swings to opposite side, shoulders remain front, and hips twist with leg.
6. Propped Foot Placing one foot on the floor with only the toes touching. Sometimes referred to as a toe touch.
7. Scoop A downward movement in a curved line. Usually applies to the head and rib cage in order to straighten the back.
8. Seat Spin Sitting on floor, legs crossed, spinning on backside. Hands push to turn.
9. Sharp Strong, striking energy used to accent a movement or step.
10. Side Jazz Walk One foot steps side, the other steps in front of first. Upper body twists in opposition of legs.
11. Sit Turn A turn done in plié. Step side with no turn, then other leg comes together to turn, feet finish in parallel (sixth position).
12. Stag Leap Foot of front leg raised to back knee when leaping. Rear leg can be extended or bent.
13. Sustained A lengthened and slow movement.
14. Three Step Turn A turn in which three steps are used to complete the turn. First step side facing the front. The next step completes half a turn to face back. The last step completes the half turn to face front.
15. Triple Any three walking or running steps taken to two counts of music. Triples in specific directions are also called chasseés, pas de boureés, step-ball change, or triplets.

Let's Talk JAZZ! (from M to Z)

Write the jazz dance term from the list at the bottom next to the definition that best describes it.

1. _____ Referring to the feet. Feet are parallel to each other, with toes pointing to the front and heels to the back.
2. _____ A turn on one leg, on relevé, with the body and legs straight, legs together.
3. _____ A turn on one leg, with supporting leg either straight or in plié. Other leg is usually in a turned-in passé.
4. _____ A movement that makes only half a turn.
5. _____ A type of walk in which one leg lifts to a turned in passé, knee swings to opposite side, shoulders remain front, and hips twist with leg (also called L.A. walks or struts).
6. _____ Placing one foot on floor with only the toes touching.
7. _____ A movement in a curved line.
8. _____ Sitting on floor, legs crossed, spinning on backside. Hands push to turn.
9. _____ Referring to strong, striking energy used to accent a movement or step.
10. _____ One foot steps side, the other steps in front of first, with an upper body twist.
11. _____ A turn done in plié.
12. _____ Foot of front leg raised to back knee when leaping. Rear leg can be extended or bent.
13. _____ A lengthened and slow movement.
14. _____ A turn in which three steps are used to complete the turn.
15. _____ Three steps taken to two counts of music.

- | | | | |
|----------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------|
| Triple | Parallel | Seat Spin | Pivot turn |
| Concave Turn | Scoop | Stag Leap | Prissy Walk |
| Side Jazz Walk | Pirouette | Sustained | Sharp |
| Propped Foot | Sit Turn | Three Step Turn | |

Let's Talk JAZZ! (from M to Z)

Write the jazz dance term from the list at the bottom next to the definition that best describes it.

1. _____ Referring to the feet. Feet are parallel to each other, with toes pointing to the front and heels to the back.
2. _____ A turn on one leg, on relevé, with the body and legs straight, legs together.
3. _____ A turn on one leg, with supporting leg either straight or in plié. Other leg is usually in a turned-in passé.
4. _____ A movement that makes only half a turn.
5. _____ A type of walk in which one leg lifts to a turned in passé, knee swings to opposite side, shoulders remain front, and hips twist with leg (also called L.A. walks or struts).
6. _____ Placing one foot on floor with only the toes touching.
7. _____ A movement in a curved line.
8. _____ Sitting on floor, legs crossed, spinning on backside. Hands push to turn.
9. _____ Referring to strong, striking energy used to accent a movement or step.
10. _____ One foot steps side, the other steps in front of first, with an upper body twist.
11. _____ A turn done in plié.
12. _____ Foot of front leg raised to back knee when leaping. Rear leg can be extended or bent.
13. _____ A lengthened and slow movement.
14. _____ A turn in which three steps are used to complete the turn.
15. _____ Three steps taken to two counts of music.

- | | | | |
|----------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------|
| Triple | Parallel | Seat Spin | Pivot turn |
| Concave Turn | Scoop | Stag Leap | Prissy Walk |
| Side Jazz Walk | Pirouette | Sustained | Sharp |
| Propped Foot | Sit Turn | Three Step Turn | |