Swinging at the Savoy
Author(s): Barbara Engelbrecht
Reviewed work(s):
Source: Dance Research Journal, Vol. 15, No. 2, Popular Dance in Black America (Spring, 1983), pp. 3-10
Published by: Congress on Research in Dance
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1478672
Accessed: 05/01/2012 20:51
SWINGING AT THE SAVOY

Barbara Engelbrecht

With the passing of the Savoy Ballroom, a part of the show business is gone. I feel about the same way I did when someone told me the news that Bill (Bojangles) Robinson died.


Like Bojangles, by 1958 the Savoy had become an institution in the world of entertainment, and like Bojangles, it caught the imagination of thousands upon thousands of people during its 32-year history. The Savoy was a building, a geographic place, a ballroom, and the "soul" of a neighborhood. It personified a community and an era, and became a monument to the music and dance of "swing." On its huge and shiny mahogany floor, the Lindy Hop was born, a dance that took the world by storm and would become as seminal as the waltz in the history of social dance. The Lindy Hop, together with countless other dances like the Flying Charleston, the Stomp, the Shim Sham Shimmy, Rhumboogie, Suzie-Q, Big Apple, Black Bottom and the Scrontch, were taken to an extraordinary level of performing perfection at the Savoy. Within its inner circle, great dancers and musicians set trends and styles in dance and music that ricocheted throughout the world. There were other ballrooms and clubs—Connie's Inn, Small's Paradise, The Cotton Club, The Lenox Club, The Kentucky Club, and the downtown clubs on 52nd Street—but there was only one Savoy.

Situated in the heart of Harlem, the Savoy spanned an entire city block on Lenox Avenue between 140th and 141st Streets. Simply the size of the place, which could boast a dance floor as big as a city block, must have been awe-inspiring. The initial impact of the enormous space was described by dancer Leon James: "My first impression was that I had stepped into a different world. I had been to other ballrooms, but this was different—much bigger, more glamour, real class..." Dance and Jazz historian Marshall Stearns wrote:

You descended one floor to check your hat and coat at one of several ornate counters staffed by a small army of attendants. Then you climbed two mirrored flights of marble steps until you found yourself in a teeming crowd at the middle of a block-long dance floor. Directly opposite, a raised double bandstand gleamed with instruments, and one of two bands was up there in full swing.

In 1939, New York based writer Leonard Ross described his first visit to the Savoy. After paying the 75¢ admission fee and checking his coat, he hurried up the stairs.

I heard a battery of brasses blaring "Flat Foot Floogie" into infinity. The first thing I saw, on a huge oblong of a dance floor, was some four hundred black dancers going stark mad. Men lifting women way up, throwing them down, flinging them over their shoulders, tossing them over their heads, hurling them to arms' length, yanking them back, shaking them like wet mops.

The success of opening night on March 12, 1926, gave an indication of the kind of fame the ballroom would attain during its heyday from the late 1920's through the 1940's. Opening night was attended not only by lesser celebrities, but by well-known city, state and federal officials, representatives from Harlem's civic, cultural, welfare and educational groups, as well as Broadway and Hollywood stars. This opening night crowd... glided and whirled on the sleek springy unobstructed dance floor. They jumped with ecstatic joy to the music of not one, but two of the "best bands in the land," The Savoy Bearcats, directed by personable Leon Abbey, and high-hatted, clarinet-playing Fess Williams and his Royal Flush Orchestra. Few first nighters will ever forget the dynamic Fess, whose eye-catching trademark was a shimmering, glittering diamond-studded suit, and whose showmanship and musicianship eventually catapulted him to national fame from the newly-born Savoy's No. 1 bandstand.

Charles Buchanan, the Savoy's manager, who co-owned the Ballroom with the white financier Moe Gale, sought to create a palais de danse that would not only serve the local community, but would give Harlem a "luxury ballroom to accommodate the many thousands who wished to dance in an atmosphere of tasteful refinement, rather than in the small and stuffy halls and the foul smelling, smoke laden cellar nightclubs..."

Buchanan and Gale were aware of the popularity of Roseland, The Acadia, and other famous downtown ballrooms that flourished in the 1920's. They set out to make in Harlem not only a ballroom that would rival these other establishments in the scale and sumptuousness of its interior, but a ballroom that would enthral the public with the excellence of its musicians and the brilliance of the dancers that came to "cut the rug" with some of the greatest bands of the period. Their choice of location can only be described as ingenious.
Harlem in the 1920's was rapidly becoming a cohesive black community—a community that was a mecca for black musicians, performers, artists and writers. At the time of the opening of the Savoy Ballroom in 1926, big-band jazz sound—swing—was in ascendancy. Around 1923 the Fletcher Henderson Band with Louis Armstrong, was playing at the Roseland Ballroom. These evenings were often broadcast live on radio. And, in 1926, Fletcher Henderson recorded The Stompede which "is almost an archetype of the swing band score: written passages that separate the ensemble by sections, antiphonal phrases between sections, a written variation-on-theme ... solo improvisations at designated points in the music."  

The people dancing to popular swing bands like Fletcher Henderson's, downtown at Roseland Ballroom, were predominantly white. Inasmuch as the phenomenon of swing constituted a part of the continuous tradition in jazz music among black musicians, there was a similar tradition among black dancers. These dancers from the black community in Harlem had, with the opening of the Savoy Ballroom, a venue of the calibre of Roseland Ballroom. The timely opening of the Savoy Ballroom coincided with the most prosperous years of swing—the Depression years. While breadlines formed throughout the city, the entertainment business boomed. As Duke Ellington said, "Night life had a song and a dance." Dancing to live bands was one of the least expensive and most popular nighttime activities during the Depression.

The Savoy Ballroom was one of the more important ballrooms where black musicians and dancers converged and defined a period: music and dance at the Savoy drew attention to the fact that the tradition of black musical and dance forms were interrelated, and together were responsible for the swing phenomenon.

Harlem's famous image spread until it swarmed nightly with white people from all over the world. The tourist buses came there. The Cotton Club catered to whites only, and hundreds of other clubs ranging on down to cellar speakeasies catered to white people's money ... The Savoy, the Golden Gate, and the Renaissance Ballrooms battled for the crowds—the Savoy introduced Thursdays Kitchen Mechanics' nights, bathing beauty contests, and a new car given each Saturday night. They had bands from all over the country in the Ballrooms and the Apollo and Lafayette theaters. They had colorful bandleaders like Fess Williams in his diamond-studded suit and top hat, and Cab Calloway in his wide-brimmed white hat and string tie, setting Harlem afire with "Tiger Rag," and "hi-de-hi-de-ho" and "St. James Infirmary" and "Minnie the Moocher." Blacktown crawled with white people, with pimps, prostitutes, bootleggers, with
hustlers of all kinds, with colorful characters, and with police and prohibition agents. Negroes danced like they never have anywhere before or since. I guess I must have heard twenty old-timers in Smalls Paradise swear to me that they had been the first to dance in the Savoy the "Lindy Hop" which was born there in 1927.11

The Lindy was named after Charles Lindbergh in the euphoric aftermath of his famous "hop" across the Atlantic to Paris in 1927. The crowds in Harlem, captivated by the event, celebrated at fever pitch in the Savoy Ballroom. Describing this period Charles Buchanan said:

One year... the boys and girls began to break out in all kinds of wildcat steps. It was an epidemic. Well Lindy flies to Paris and the next night up here [at the Savoy] it is like they have 104 fever. You never saw such jumping up and down.... I wanted to stop wildcat dancing— they called it the Lindy Hop and it swept the nation.12

By the time the Savoy Ballroom reached its 25th anniversary in 1951, an estimated 15,000,000 people had danced there, an annual average of about 700,000. The ballroom could actually hold 4,000 at a single time. To keep abreast of changing taste and style, it had been redecorated five times. The enormous sprung floor, worn down by constant use, had to be replaced every three years.13

The cost of admission remained remarkably inexpensive throughout the Savoy's history. Charles Buchanan stressed the fact that, from its beginning, the Savoy "developed into a community proposition... where we could give the public two orchestras, a beautiful place and an opportunity of interpreting the rhythm of the drum and music that exist through the ages, all for cheap admission."14

The Savoy was open every night of the week. Mondays, Tuesdays they [the dancers] came early because the admission price rose at 6 p.m. from 30 cents to 60 cents and rose again at 8 p.m. to 85 cents. Monday was Ladies Night and Thursday was Kitchen Mechanics Night, when maids and cooks had the night off. The crowds were thin then, and the relatively open dance floor was great for practice. On Saturdays the middle-aged white squares showed up to watch the dancers. On Saturday afternoons the dancers sent their best clothes out to be pressed for Sunday night. In their second best suits they gathered in front of the Savoy, wisecracking and waiting for manager Charles Buchanan to rush out and offer to pay them to go in and dance for the people. On Sundays, dancers, musicians and actors from Broadway shows jammed the Savoy. Now, dressed in their
best, dancers executed steps too fast for the eye to follow. Shorty Snowden tightly clutched his partner, Big Bea, who was a foot taller than he, while his feet shot out in all directions. Stretch Jones danced with Little Bea, who was a foot shorter than he and was always getting lost. The folks downtown loved it and showered tips upon the dancers.15

Buchanan claimed that the Savoy never consciously sought out a white clientele: “We’re not partial to white people who come to gawk...besides we’re not geared to make money out of them. They can’t spend more than the admission fee and a couple of drinks.”16 Whites were not catered to specifically at the Savoy, unlike the Cotton Club, which drew its audience largely from the monied white downtown population that came to see staged entertainments by black jazz musicians and performers. Whites who made the trip uptown to the Savoy came not only to hear the vanguard of America’s jazz musicians—musicians like Chick Webb, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Benny Goodman, and any number of name bands and singers of the time—but to watch and emulate the black dancers who were inventing and developing intricate and brilliant dances with an astonishing prolificacy and performing virtuosity.

For young black dancers who went to the Savoy night after night, and more particularly those dancers who became the “elite” and were therefore able to dance in the Cats’ Corner, dancing at the Savoy became a way of life. The Cats’ Corner was a substantial area situated in the northeast corner of the ballroom and clearly delineated by an unspoken rule that reserved it for the best dancers. Nobody could blunder into this part of the ballroom. Dancers graduated into this corner by the sheer inventiveness of their dancing and the finesse and distinction of their performing style. Therefore, a great deal of time had to be spent working on the invention and perfection of new steps and partnering maneuvers before exhibiting them to fellow dancers in the Cats’ Corner. Once a dancer was accepted into the corner, the competition was intense and the drive to invent new steps, to perfect technique, and excel was paramount.

The presence of this regular group of dancers at the Savoy meant that night after night presented a new challenge. In this spirit of competition and mutual admiration, technical proficiency and showmanship was not only attained but had to be maintained as well. For serious Lindy Hoppers, the most crucial part of the evening was “showtime”: “A third of the way or so through the evening the main vocalizing and instrumental styling would come—and then showtime, when only the greatest Lindy-hoppers would stay on the floor, to try to eliminate each other. All the other dancers would form a big “U” with the band at the open end.”17 Describing a “showtime” performance Malcolm X wrote:

And finally the Duke (Ellington) kicked off showtime. I knew and Laura knew that she couldn’t match the veteran showtime girls, but she told me that she wanted to compete. And the next thing I knew she was among those girls over on the sidelines changing into sneakers. I shook my head when a couple of free-lancing girls ran up to me. As always the crowd clapped and shouted in time with the blasting band: “Go Red, go!” Partly it was my reputation, and partly Laura’s ballet style of dancing that helped turn the spotlight—and the crowd’s attention—to us. They never had seen the feather-lightness that she gave to lindyng, a completely fresh style—and they were connoisseurs of styles. I turned up the steam, Laura’s feet were flying; I had her in the air, down, sideways, around; backwards, up again, down, whirling... The spotlight was working mostly us. I caught glimpses of the four or five other couples, the girls jungle-strong, animal-like, bucking and charging. But little Laura inspired me to drive to new heights. Her hair was all over her face, it was running sweat, and I couldn’t believe her strength. The crowd was shouting and stomping. A new favorite was being discovered; there was a wall of noise around us. I felt her weakening, she was lindyng like a
fighter out on her feet, and we stumbled off to the side-
lines. The band was still blasting. I had to half-carry her;
she was gasping for air. Some of the men in the band ap-
plauded. And even Duke Ellington half-raised up from
his piano stool and bowed.18

The passion of the moment, the hard-driving “hot” sound
of the music, and the excited mob watching and spurring the
dancers to new heights contributed to the elements of daring,
risk, speed, and ingenuity of a “showtime” performance.
Everything a great Lindy Hopper worked for came together
in moments like these: “If a showtime crowd liked your per-
formance, when you came off you were mobbed, mauled,
grasped, and pummeled like the team that’s just taken the
series.”19

Most people frequenting ballrooms in the 1930’s and 1940’s
who danced the Lindy Hop did not execute the aerial maneu-
vers described above by Malcolm X. They demanded a tech-
nical skill that was beyond the realm of the average dancer.
And, even among those dancers admitted into the Cats’ Cor-
ner at the Savoy, there remained two distinct Lindy Hops—
the floor Lindy and the aerial Lindy. Marshall Stearns claims
that “a crucial point in the evolution of the Lindy at the Savoy
took place in the middle to late thirties, splitting the dancers
into two groups: those who used floor steps and those who
used air steps.”

George “Shorty” Snowden was one of the old guard of
Lindy dancers at the Savoy. Together with his regular partner
Big Bea and another couple, Stretch Jones and Little Bea,
these dancers had “between them, breathtakingly and hilari-
ously, exhausted... every combination of floor steps that
could be brought to the Lindy.”20

Snowden was a remarkable Lindy Hopper who produced a
style of Lindying at the Savoy that antecedent the Aerial
Lindy. He and those he influenced changed the appearance
of the dance. He executed familiar steps, such as the two step,
with such tremendous speed that his fast syncopated footwork
seemed all the more precipitous as it exploded with an ever-
expanding momentum.21

An impressive aspect of the Lindy is the speed with which
the partnering takes place. The partnering maneuvers are
kept strictly within the tempo of the music and the accelerat-
ing insistency of the swing sound. This rhythmic continuity is
one of the most outstanding features of the dance, and the
dance phenomenon at work is the same as the swing element
in the music.

Once the speed of the tempo has been decided on, its
quality is up to the musicians in the rhythm section. I
mean by this that the tempo should not vary enough for
the ear to notice. A noticeable acceleration or a slacken-
ing, however brief, is usually enough to destroy the
swing. Swing is possible, in classical jazz, only when the
beat, though it seems perfectly regular, gives the impres-
sion of moving inexorably ahead (like a train that keeps
moving at the same speed but is still being drawn ahead
by its locomotive).22

The Lindy Hop incorporated the “swing” characteristic
from the Charleston’s basic step—the Charleston Swing. This
“swing” infused the Lindy Hop’s basic step—the syncopated
two step, with the accent on the off-beat—with a relaxed and
ebullient quality. And this relaxed and ebullient style of ex-
cution gives the impression, like the music, of the beat mov-
ing “inexorably ahead.” The dancers’ feet appear to “fly” in
syncopated rhythms, while the body appears to “hold” the
fine line of balance in calm contrast to the headlong rush of
the feet.

One should not underestimate the volume and loudness of
the big band sound, and its effectiveness in raising the “tem-
perature” in a ballroom. As André Hodeir observes: “... one
doesn’t ‘get hot’ by playing pianissimo.”23 And the dancer
responds. For the Lindy Hopper the “heat” of the music and
the “temperature” in the ballroom were important aspects of
the dance. Both these elements relied on the musicians and

Dance Research Journal 15/2 (Spring 1983) 7
dancers to “let loose,” and “blow their wigs.”

The people kept shouting for Hamp’s “Flyin’ Home,” and finally he did it. . . I had never seen such fever-heat dancing. After a couple of slow numbers cooled the place off, they brought on Dinah Washington. When she did her Salty Papa Blues, those people just about tore the Savoy roof off." 

Duke Ellington observed that:

Some musicians are dancers . . . You can dance with a lot of things besides your feet . . . The reason why Chick Webb had such control, such command of his audiences at the Savoy ballroom, was because he was always in communication with the dancers and felt it the way they did. And that is probably the biggest reason why he could cut all the other bands that went in there.  

The relationship between the musicians and the dancers was based on mutual challenge. No evening was considered successful until the “joint was jumping,” and the yardstick for measuring that was not only the number of people on the floor, but the frenzy with which they were dancing. Bands at the Savoy battled each other in order to get the dancers to raise “heat.” Earl Warren, alto sax player in Count Basie’s band, recalls just such an evening when Basie’s band beat Chick Webb’s “unbeatable” band in a battle of jazz.

Swingin’ the Blues was built to be a house breaker . . . to create real emotion in the audience. We began working on it when we were on the road and getting things together for a battle of jazz with Chick Webb at the Savoy. The battle of jazz was something to be reckoned with and we had to have something fresh and new to bring to the Savoy or we would falter at the finish line . . . At the Savoy we saved it until about halfway down in the program. Chick did his thing, God Bless, and then we reached into our bag and pulled out this powerhouse. When we unloaded our cannons that was the end. It was one of those nights—I’ll never forget it. 

It is highly probable that the Aerial Lindy was born—probably exploded—from this kind of mounting exhilaration and “hot” interaction of music and dance. However, air steps had to be carefully worked out. They required great physical ingenuity and utmost trust between partners, since they were acrobatic, and often dangerous. Most couples had a repertoire of aerial maneuvers, which included such moves as the Hip to Hip, Over the Head, Over the Back, and Back Flip. There was never any rule governing their appearance within the framework of the dance. This happened by the “feel” between partners and the music.

If you have ever lindy-hopped, you’ll know what I’m talking about. With most girls, you kind of work opposite them, side-stepping, leading. Whichever arm you lead with is half-bent out there, your hands are giving that little pull, that little push, touching her waist, her shoulders, her arms. She is in, out, turning, whirling, wherever you guide her. With poor partners, you feel their weight. They're slow and heavy. But with really good partners, all you need is just the push-pull suggestion. They guide nearly effortlessly, even off the floor and into the air, and your little solo maneuver is done on the floor before they join you, whirlng right in step. 

The “push-pull suggestion” referred to by Malcolm X is the key to the flow and the flawless timing of an aerial move. Since the vital force of the Lindy Hop is the speed of the execution of all the steps within the tempo set by the music, the trajectory of the woman had to take place within the same time structure of the basic steps of the dance.

An important aspect in the structure of the Lindy Hop is the breakaway section. Its significance to the Lindy’s development is overwhelming, because within this improvisational section, new steps and maneuvers were discovered, then incorporated into the dance.

The breakaway, as its name suggests, is literally a break in the partnering, as each dancer goes into a solo riff. These solos often occurred with a solo section in the music. This focus in the action heightened the concentration of the moment, unifying sound and movement. The tense excitement in the ballroom as a great dance maneuver was authorized added to the frenzy of the dance once the partnering began again. For the Lindy Hopper, this was a moment for exposition, a chance to demonstrate the inventiveness and distinction of individual style.

Moves that contrasted with, or interrupted the syncopated accents of the Lindy’s basic step—such as a split, a stop/freeze, or a retard—were risky since they could shatter the rhythmic continuity. However, great Lindy Hoppers like Shorty Snowden—who remarked that he had, “put together new steps in the breakaway by slipping and almost falling”—played with these rhythmic dynamics. These dancers “lived dangerously” by threatening the powerful impulse of the steady rhythm in the music and the frenetic flight of the dance. The thrill of reverting back to the basic rhythm with split-second timing after a declivitous move, then to take off again required dexterity and control. Great performers rarely faltered in these moments, and their inventions had the appearance of . . . not an organized composition, not even the product of creative meditation, but the result of a crystallization of thought in the course of successive improvisations.

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.

The record industry was a prime disseminator of and fuel source for swing. From small beginnings, the U.S. recording industry grew to a $50 million-a-year business in the 1920’s, then slumped to 1/20th of that in 1932 under the impact of radio and the Depression. It came back strong with the advent of the 35-cent 78-rpm record, the development of the electric-powered record player and the sudden ubiquity of the jukebox. By 1939 there were 225,000 jukeboxes in the U.S. using 13 million discs a year. Youngsters thronged record stores each week when new shipments arrived, to listen, comment and buy.

Radio stations quickly understood the value of playing recordings of vastly popular music. Whole programs could be built on nothing more than a stack of records and a good talker. The disc jockey became a figure of national importance, ardently wooed by musicians and record manufacturers. Disc jockeys and the boxes helped launch some great bands to fame.

Although hours were spent listening to recordings, dancing remained the central activity among most swing fans in the 1930’s and 1940’s. People crowded into ballrooms all over the country to dance to the live sound of their favorite bands. Jitterbugging or Lindying was synonymous with Swing music and “everywhere from theater aisles to living-room floors sprinkled with sugar to reduce friction, white youngsters were doing the black inspired dances of the day, while black young-sters were adding even greater inspiration to the original conceptions.”
Some of the most powerful images that remain with us and seem to encapsulate this period in American popular music and dance are connected to the visual aesthetic of the jazz age. The splendor of the Big Band, its members dressed impeccably in suits, seated in a bank—often surrounded by a spectacular set—their brass instruments gleaming; images like these remain with us in photographs and films. These photographs and films kindle a nostalgia for what appears to be an uncomplicated enthusiasm for life, and somehow relieve us of the memory of the Depression era as a time when it was difficult for performers, especially black performers to launch a career. What then is our residual image of the Lindy Hop—people flying through the air, crowded ballrooms, clusters of young people around radios, big bands, zoot suited “cool cats,” Count Basie at the piano, Cab Calloway in his white zoot or leaning nonchalantly up against his Lincoln, in his Homburg hat?

Although aspects of the visual and musical aesthetic were marked by an exaggerated style, an outlandishness and opulence, the Lindy Hop must be remembered within its context—Black Culture, the Depression, and the Savoy Ballroom. It is a product of its time—perpetually astonishing those who watched it and those who danced it.

“Now here’s a story ’bout Minnie the Moocher
She was a low-down hoochy coocher
She was the roughest, toughest frail
But Minnie had a heart as big as a whale.”
That’s how I’d start out; then somewhere in the middle of it, I’d start to hi-de-ho. You know, singing:
“Hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-ho.”
Then the band would answer:
“Hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-ho.”
Then I’d sing back again:
“Hi-de-doo-de-way-de-ho.”
And the band would swing, and sing:
“Wah-de-doo-de-way-de-ho.”
When it really got to feeling good, I’d holler for the audience to join in.
“Wah-de-wah-de-wah-de-doo,” I’d sing.
“Wah-de-wah-de-wah-de-doo,” the band and the audience would holler back.
By now the place is jumping. I’m dancing and leading the band. The horn section is hitting it. The drummer is driving us. The piano player is vamping. And the place is really rocking.
“Bee-de-doo-de-dee-de-dow,” I holler
“Bee-de-doo-de-dee-de-dow,” everybody shouts back.
“Teedle-do-de-dee rah-de-dah-de-dah.
“Teedle-do-de-dee rah-de-dah-de-dah.”
Then I’d bring it back home, with everybody stomping and clapping and singing:
“Hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-ho.
Hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-ho.
Now here’s a story ’bout Minnie the Moocher
She was a low-down hoochy coocher
She was the roughest, toughest frail
But Minnie had a heart as big as a whale.”

— Cab Calloway
NOTES

4. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
17. X and Haley, p. 64.
18. Ibid., p. 66.
19. Ibid.
20. Stearns and Stearns, p. 325.
23. Ibid., p. 230.
25. Ellington, p. 100.
27. X and Haley, p. 63.
31. Ibid., p. 17.