

**The Evolution of Tap Dance**  
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Young dance students study many styles of dance such as ballet and jazz, but have you ever wondered how tap got its start in the dance world? I've decided to research tap dance because I am interested in the evolution of tap dance changing into what it is today. In my project I'm discussing evolving and changing tap dance from the 1700's until today, the history of tap shoes, people who are important to tap history, and a reflection on a modern tap performance.

### 1700's

Tap started in the 1700's in as a combination of English, African, and Irish steps, which came to America and evolved over a period of some three hundred years after joining jigging, Irish dancing, and gioube. Nobody at this time period considered tap as a dance style, but as a theatre and art form. People thought of tap as a combination of West African and British musical steps.

### 1800's

Tap in the late 1800's became a competition as well as an entertainment style. Contests and forms of competition were brought into New York and Philadelphia. Many old styles were popular around this time such as 'Buck and Wing' dancing, (this eventually became modern tap) clog and soft-shoe dancing, flashy dances, and many tricks, like kicks and shuffles.

## 1900's

In the 1900's, people started to call tap a form of 'dance.' In the 20th century, dancers who had mastered the art in tap dance began collaborating with jazz musicians, encompassing new and spontaneous syncopated rhythms, beats and accents in their movement. During this era, theatre tap dance was very common with jazz steps. Almost every television station would feature tap dancing. Classical tap dance also became popular, which used upper body movement, which ballet and jazz dancers were known for. They had syncopated footwork, which was very common in shows and movies during this time.

Street competitions in Philadelphia were born around the 1930s, where tap dancers would gather on city street corners to trade steps and "challenge one another." In different city street corners there were certain reputations for their skill level, so if you were new to the art form of tap, you would go to a specific corner to dance with other tap dancers at your level. If you were more experienced in the style, you would compete against higher level dancers on another street corner.

## 21st century

Today tap demonstrates a variety of movements and styles that are unique in their own way. Most pieces focus on rapid footwork and having clean steps that serve as a beat or sound. One popular performance today that incorporates tap rhythms and

movements is *Riverdance*. The purpose of the choreography is to evoke the flow of the river, just like how in tap dancing we demonstrate a continuous chain of movement.

### History of Tap Shoes

In the early 19th century, tap shoes, as well as clogs and hobnailed boots had shoes where the bottom part came in direct contact with the ground. Early tap shoes had wooden soles, and some people would even put pennies on the heel and toe to create more sounds from the shoe. Around the early years of the 1900's, people started to put metal plates on shoes of dancers. It was around this time that tap dancing became a musical match with jazz music, because they shared rhythms and melodies. In the late 1920s, almost all tap dancers wore metal soles on their tap shoes. Nowadays, tap has combined with hip-hop and jazz rhythms. Instructors and teachers might prefer a certain type of shoe, so they tell their students buying tap shoes to choose a specific type of shoe. This allows the instructor to express their individual dance style.

### Popular Tap Performers

Tap performer, Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson performed at *Hooper's Club* in 1884 at the age of just six. He is one of the most popular performers because he was by far the most highly paid African-American tapper in the beginning of the twentieth century. By the time Bill was in his twenties, he was performing in a stage comedy show for song and dance on a competitive team, tapping in shoes that had wooden soles and heels.



Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Bill Robinson." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 21 Nov. 2018, [www.britannica.com/biography/Bill-Robinson/media/505693/123887](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Bill-Robinson/media/505693/123887).

Edith Edwards, born in South Philadelphia, lived from 1922 to 2000. Edith taught her and other neighborhood kids to tap dance in their kitchens. In the 1930's, she was the first black performer to dance on the Sunday morning "*Horn and Hardart Kiddie Hour*," where she sang and tap danced for five years. In 1939 she performed on Broadway in *Swingin' the Dream*, a jitterbug-swing version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She loved performing and everybody that watched her were in awe of her work.

Shirley Temple Black was a dancer, singer, actress, and a executive level businesswoman, and at one point Hollywood's number one child actress. She was born on April 23, 1928, in Santa Monica, California. When she turned 14 up until 21, she had appeared in 14 different films. Shirley was known for tap dancing '*The Stair Dance*,' which she performed with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. At the age of 22 in 1950 she was able to retire. In 1958, she went back into show business at the age of 30, where she filmed a sitcom (which was never released,) appeared as a guest star on multiple television shows, as well as organizing companies and foundations.



Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Shirley Temple." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 19 Apr. 2019,

[www.britannica.com/biography/Shirley-Temple/media/586866/93145](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Shirley-Temple/media/586866/93145). (This image is Shirley Temple performing with Bill Robinson in *The Little Colonel*)

Charles "Honi" Coles, was a tap dancer who lived to be 82 years old. He learned to tap dance on the streets of Philadelphia, where dancers challenged each other in time step contests. He moved to New York where he performed in the *Lafayette Theatre* in 1931 as one of the *Three Millers*. His two other partners replaced him, and hired a man that they thought would have been a better fit instead of Charles. He eventually moved back to Philadelphia, where he continued his tap performances.

### Modern Tap Performance

I recently attended a tap performance called *Tap Dogs*. *Tap Dogs* is designed like a construction site, just like the Steel Work sites located in Newcastle, England. They beam danced on a construction site during the performance. They are made up of 6 dancers and 2 musicians. Each dancer played a different role of a character. All together, they demonstrate what seems to relate to tap in Philadelphia in the 20th century. This related to tap in Philly because the beginning was a lot like the street dance competitions they had in Philadelphia, where the men in the streets taught "the kid" (the character) how to tap dance to different steps. The characters all had a certain place and they all had their own style and fit in certain ways. This performance seemed to be set more around a modern era, because they were dressed in casual clothes such

as jeans, tank tops, shorts, and t-shirts. Parts of the performance were casual and a lot like a street competitions. They tap danced in puddles of water which they got all over the first row, as well as on an inclined stage, beams, ramps, and bridges. Everything they did was a way to make tap dance more modern, and to keep tap dance relevant and exciting for today's audiences.

In conclusion, tap dancing originated as a theatre and art form from Africa and Ireland. Since then, it has evolved into a energetic, expressive style of art. Tap is always evolving, and learning about the history has given me more of a respect for the style. I am excited to continue to learn more about tap.

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