Swing It On

Resistance, Respectability, and Lindy Hop at the Savoy Ballroom

Hannah Rosenberg

HIST 398: Advanced Historical Writing

March 3, 2023

Savoy, the home of sweet romance
Savoy, it wins you at a glance
Savoy, gives happy feet a chance, to dance.
- Stompin' at the Savoy[1]

In an enormous and brightly lit hall in Harlem, Chick Webb's Orchestra swings up a storm as hundreds of bodies spin and jump, filling the air with an excitement that is hard to match. This was a typical night at the Savoy, one of the most popular dance halls in uptown New York City in the 1930s. Host to the biggest names in jazz, including Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald, and known as the birthplace of Lindy Hop, a Black social dance, the Savoy Ballroom became a Black community staple where entertainment, innovation, and liberation flourished in the early twentieth century.

Established during the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance, the intellectual and cultural revival of African American art, music, literature, and political thought, the Savoy encouraged the development of Black culture. It also offered cheap yet quality entertainment, a luxury that many Black Harlemites could not find elsewhere. Most significantly, it stood apart from other ballrooms for one reason: integrated from its origins, the Savoy opened its doors to patrons who were Black, white, and any other race. It brought together men and women, rich and poor, big and small, dancer and spectator alike. Even white Lindy Hopper Jimmy Valentine became famous at the Savoy for his one-legged dancing.[2] From its grand opening in 1926 to its final dance in 1958, as the lyrics to "Stompin' at the Savoy" suggest, the Savoy was a place of opportunity and fun, an escape from the dismal realities of the Great Depression and Jim Crow racism. Most importantly, it was a site where *all* people could experience the freedom and pleasures of music and dance.

---

[1] Edgar Sampson and Andy Razaf, "Stompin' at the Savoy," 1933.
[2] Frankie Manning and Cynthia R. Millman, *Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2007), 105.

Racial equality is one of the most persistent elements in the historical memory of the Savoy Ballroom. Cultural historian Joel Dinerstein, in *Swinging the Machine*, writes that the Savoy "was famous for its interracial clientele and its egalitarian treatment, and was a symbol of social equity."[3] In contrast to its contemporaries, such as the Cotton Club, which exclusively catered to whites, the Savoy did not exclude any race. Most estimates report that white patrons made up between 15 and 40%, depending on the night.[4] Not only were white guests welcome, but they were dancing among, and in some cases with, Black dancers. Considering the strict enforcement of segregation in most parts of the country, the ballroom's integration significantly influenced the Savoy's legacy. Professional Black Lindy Hopper Norma Miller remembers the Savoy's racial impartiality in her autobiography:

> The Savoy was built for black patrons; there was no separate entrance for whites, there were no balconies where the white customers would watch the blacks perform. The opening of the Savoy marked a change in the social pattern. For the first time in history, the status quo in America was challenged. At last there was a beautiful ballroom with no segregation. Black people and white people danced on the same dance floor, they sat and ate across from one another in the booths; everyone's money was the same at the Savoy.[5]

Fellow Black Lindy Hopper Frankie Manning agrees in his own autobiography:

> Although there were spots right in Harlem that blacks couldn't enter, the Savoy was integrated. In fact, as far as I know, it was the only integrated ballroom in the country at the time, and by that I mean that blacks and whites could dance with each other. It was an extraordinary place. At the Savoy, it didn't matter what color you were, black, white, green, yellow, or whatever. I don't even remember noticing people's skin color. The only thing they asked when you walked in was, "Can you dance?" They never looked at your face, only at your feet.[6]

---

[3] Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars* (Boston, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 263.
[4] "Savoy Ballroom Spends $109,000 To Capture The 'New Look,'" *The New York Age*, June 5, 1948; Dominic J. Capeci Jr., "Walter F. White and the Savoy Ballroom Controversy of 1943," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History (1977-1989)* 5, no. 2 (1981): 3.
[5] Norma Miller and Evette Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy: the Memoir of a Jazz Dancer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1996), 28.
[6] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 71.

As charming as Miller and Manning's recollections are, they raise the question as to what extent the Savoy Ballroom's policy actually enabled the space to become a sort of "racial utopia." The historical memory of the Savoy as a place of equality and opportunity obscures the complex strategies the ballroom employed to establish itself as a unique site for African American artistic expression. At the same time, Black institutions were constantly engaging in the politics of respectability, a concept articulated by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent*. Higginbotham describes respectability politics as a reform of one's behavior and attitude in order to directly challenge the prevailing racial hierarchy.[7] Navigating denigrating racial stereotypes, white conservative pressures, and increasingly tense race politics, the Savoy Ballroom and its Lindy Hoppers simultaneously cultivated and resisted an image of respectability, ultimately aiding in the recognition and legitimization of Black culture in the early twentieth century.

Scholars have written about the Savoy in the history of jazz, especially as the genre became more widely circulated in the 1920s and 1930s. Focusing on the Jazz Age, historians David Stowe and Lewis A. Erenberg emphasize the cultural significance of jazz music's expression and connection with African-derived musical styles as it created openings for Black musicians to enter the mainstream industry.[8] Although Stowe and Erenberg do not focus specifically on the Savoy, both stress its encouragement of artistic growth by introducing many new Black musicians and hosting some of the largest music competitions in the city. This support was especially important when prevailing racist stereotypes, perpetuated by entertainment forms such as minstrelsy, portrayed Blackness as primitive, hypersexual, and often dangerous.[9] As jazz

---

[7] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "The Politics of Respectability," in *Righteous Discontent* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 196.
[8] David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994); Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).
[9] Minstrelsy, an early entertainment form, sought to commodify Blackness for white audiences through exaggerated imitations of certain characteristics, leading to the proliferation of several harmful stereotypes. Jazz actually has a

rose in popularity Black musicians were often perceived as uncivilized, naturally gifted, and connected to their "African roots."[10] At the Savoy, however, there was a distinct respect for jazz musicians: "Even at the Savoy Ballroom, known for its ecstatic dancing, listening often took precedence."[11]

Home to popular dances of the early 1900s, the Savoy Ballroom has also appeared in dance history. In *Jazz Dance*, Marshall and Jean Stearns explore the Jitterbug phenomenon, taking particular interest in the Savoy's role in the creation of Lindy Hop. The Stearnses recognize the traditions of competition and invention developed on the dance floor, promoting individuality and solidifying Lindy Hop's importance as a style: "Writers have referred to the Lindy as 'the only true American folk dance,' but it is more than that. The Lindy is a fundamental approach, not an isolated step…, [that] caused a general revolution in the popular dance of the United States."[12] Danielle Robinson, in *Modern Moves*, also acknowledges the significance of Black social dances in New York and their influences in the dance industry in the early 1900s, specifically pointing out the conflict between Black dance and respectability. Brenda Dixon Gottschild further analyzes the Black dancing body and the way racial stereotypes have both developed in and informed Black dance culture throughout the twentieth century.[13]

There have also been a number of studies on swing culture since the revival in the 1980s. As Lindy Hop is now a primarily middle class white practice, there has been a push to uncover

---

deep history with minstrelsy, and many of these stereotypes influenced the early racist perceptions of jazz musicians. *See* Berndt Ostendorf, "Minstrelsy & Early Jazz," *The Massachusetts Review* 20, no. 3 (1979): 596.

[10] In 1917, *The Sun* released an article about jazz, describing it as a "mixture of acrobatics and cacophony," and an "art of rhythm that's been practically lost to all highly civilized persons." F. T. Vreeland, "Jazz, Ragtime By-Product, Revives a Lost Art of Rhythm," *The Sun* (New York, New York), November 4, 1917.

[11] Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 59.

[12] Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York, New York: De Capo Press, 1968), 329.

[13] Danielle Robinson, *Modern Moves: Dancing Race During the Ragtime and Jazz Eras* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: a Geography From Coon to Cool* (New York, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

its African American history and trace the pathway of appropriation.[14] Norma Miller and Frankie Manning, two of the Savoy's most celebrated dancers, also published their autobiographies as they spearheaded the revival. This generated a renewed interest in the political and cultural contributions of the Savoy and how Lindy Hoppers constantly engaged with popular racist discourses throughout the twentieth century.[15] In all of the literature, however, is a constant thread of racial harmony, emphasized by the Savoy's lasting legacy, its unique integration policy.

While the Savoy certainly retains a legacy of racial harmony, few scholars have looked more specifically at how that legacy has been constructed, both during the Savoy's lifetime and in the historical memory.[16] Jayna Brown, in her essay in *Big Ears*, is one of the few who challenges the history, arguing that

> Some of the work written about swing culture in the United States likes to remember the history of swing as heralding a new era of interracial cooperation and cultural exchange. But I am not so sure that we can read swing as proof that the United States was moving inevitably to its promise of full and inclusive democracy… Of course, the Savoy welcomed white participants… But this kind of statement obscures the realpolitik of race in the United States.[17]

More than just the rampant segregation and discrimination throughout the country, Harlem's own race politics greatly influenced the Savoy's existence. Harlem, once a majority white community, became a significant Black community. With the influx of Black migrants in the 1910s following

---

[14] Immersing himself in the Lindy Hop dance world, Black Hawk Hancock explores racial tensions in modern Lindy, focusing specifically on the implications of the *white* body dancing *Black*. *See* Black Hawk Hancock, *American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 95.
[15] Harri Heinilä, "An Endeavor by Harlem Dancers to Achieve Equality — The Recognition of the Harlem-Based African-American Jazz Dance Between 1921 and 1943," diss., (Helsinki, Sweden: University of Helsinki, 2016).
[16] Alexandre Abvoudaev, in his dissertation on the Savoy, writes a comprehensive history of the Savoy Ballroom, focusing particularly on the public discourse surrounding the Savoy as well as its contributions in the music and culture of Harlem. While Abdoulaev does cover the racial context of the Savoy, he does not further investigate its implications on the way the historical memory of the Savoy has been shaped. Alexandre Abdoulaev, "Savoy: Reassessing the Role of the 'World's Finest Ballroom' in Music and Culture, 1926-1958," diss., (Boston, Massachusetts: Boston University, 2014).
[17] Jayna Brown, "From the Point of View of the Pavement: A Geopolitics of Black Dance," in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, ed. Sherrie Tucker and Nichole T. Rustin (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008), 169.

the massive movement of African Americans both from rural to urban and south to north, these new demographics led to increasing prejudice about the residents, and the press often reported on Harlem's "primitive hygiene, grisly homicides, [and] religious aberrations."[18] It is within this context that this paper explores the Savoy's nuanced history and how it actively constructed a respectable reputation for its Black patrons and culture without completely surrendering to the pressures of white America.

In reassembling the memory of the Savoy Ballroom and Lindy Hop, I mainly refer to the memories of Miller and Manning. Jennifer Jensen Wallach argues that history told through autobiography offers a deeper understanding of events, as well as how narratives shift and stray from reality, as revealed in their contradictions and errors. As Wallach warns, "Frequently, autobiographers misremember or deliberately deceive. However, a complicated understanding of historical truths shows that misrepresentations can be revelatory."[19] Reading the accounts of two people who share many of the same experiences exposes the striking similarities and differences in their memory. Further analysis into these instances highlights the ways in which they have been influenced by personal experiences and expectations, as well as the passage of time. To complete the picture, I also consult newspapers, both Black, such as *The New York Age*, and white, such as *The Brooklyn Eagle*, sources that help establish the popular discourses surrounding the Savoy Ballroom and Lindy Hop.

In addition to these texts, I use analyses of the dancing body to examine how movements contribute to identity formation processes and often signify racialized frameworks of understanding. As Jane C. Desmond explains, in studying the body as a text, we can learn "how the use of the body in dance is related to, duplicates, contests, amplifies, or exceeds norms of

---

[18] David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 163-164.
[19] Jennifer Jensen Wallach, "Building a Bridge of Words: The Literary Autobiography as Historical Source Material," *Biography* 29, no. 3 (2006): 450.

non-dance bodily expression within specific historical contexts."[20] The Savoy's Lindy Hoppers navigated denigrating stereotypes of hypersexuality and savagery as they redefined the Black moving body. Incorporating African-derived motions and techniques, including a focus on the lower body (pelvis, knees, and feet) and improvisation, jazz dance rejected the rigid aesthetic of European forms. Dixon Gottschild argues, "From the Africanist standpoint, a vertically aligned stance and static carriage indicate inflexibility and sterility. By Europeanist standards, the Africanist dancing body—articulating the trunk that houses primary and secondary sexual characteristics—is vulgar and lewd."[21]

Still, Lindy Hop also borrowed from European styles, notably the coupling of a lead and follow, revealing the mutual exchange present in dance, rather than one-way appropriation narratives.[22] The Lindy Hop narrative often follows the typical story of a top-down white appropriation of Black culture;[23] however, the flow of ideas between Black social dances and ballroom dances challenges that notion by giving agency back to Black dancers. In the three decades of its existence, the Savoy Ballroom created the space for African Americans to develop Lindy Hop, encouraging a greater exploration of both African- and European-based ideas that led to its unique aesthetic.

This paper investigates the major events in the Savoy's lifespan, with a particular focus on the 1930s, the height of the ballroom's popularity and the most formative years for Lindy Hop. Each moment points to the Savoy's complex negotiations between racial stereotyping, conservative pressures, and respectability. Beginning with the ballroom's opening in 1926, I

---

[20] Jane C. Desmond, "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies," *Cultural Critique*, no. 26 (1994): 34.
[21] Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 148.
[22] Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 258; Desmond, "Embodying Difference," 41-42. The use of the terms "lead" and "follow" as nouns are commonplace in the dance world. Leads, traditionally male, initiate the move while follows, traditionally female, pick up the signal and complete the move.
[23] Kendra Unruh, "May we have this dance?: Cultural ownership of the Lindy Hop from the swing era to today," *Atlantic Studies* 17, no. 1 (2020): 40-64.

analyze the use of architecture and physical presentation as markers of propriety that supported the creation of a distinctly Black and working class dance culture. As Lindy Hop matured in the 1930s, it struggled against conservative social attitudes while it slowly made a name for itself in the dance world. By 1935, amidst growing racial tensions in Harlem, the Savoy bridged the gap between the segregated industries of white ballroom and Black social dance with its participation in the Harvest Moon Ball, seeking legitimization from the industry while actively asserting artistic resistance to its formalist structures. Gaining widespread recognition, Lindy Hop moved to national and international prominence, culminating in the Savoy's presence at the 1939 New York World's Fair, where Lindy Hoppers represented modernity for both the Black community and the U.S. The onset of World War II marked the beginning of the ballroom's decline, and the Savoy's brief closure in 1943 served as a reality check on broader race politics. Through the rest of the 1940s and 1950s, swing culture waned, as did the Savoy's significance within the community. Officially closing in 1958, the Savoy remained in relative obscurity, only to be remembered once again 30 years later.

Figure 1. Exterior of the Savoy Ballroom, 1950.[24]

The Savoy Ballroom, owned by Jewish financier Moe Gale and managed by Black businessman Charles Buchanan, opened in March 1926, giving Harlemites a new and fashionable club. Inhabiting a full block on Lenox Avenue between 140th and 141st streets, the Savoy was an impressive building.[25] *The New York Age*, a few days before the grand opening, claimed "There is no amusement place uptown to compare with the new Savoy." With a "marble staircase and cut glass chandelier," a dance floor "about 200 feet long and about 50 feet wide," and "the best quality maple flooring, polished to its highest degree," the Savoy exuded class.[26] Many institutions in the early 1900s, such as dance halls and theaters, often displayed extravagance through their architecture and decor, evoking sophistication despite the strong

[24] Austin Hansen, *View of the Savoy Ballroom at night, on Lenox Avenue between 140th and 141st Streets, in Harlem, New York, circa 1950*, 1950, still image, New York Public Library. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/644e1f78-697e-5cbb-e040-e00a18061ca4

[25] The name, "The Savoy," alluded to the upscale hotel of the same name in London, England, appealing to the European taste.

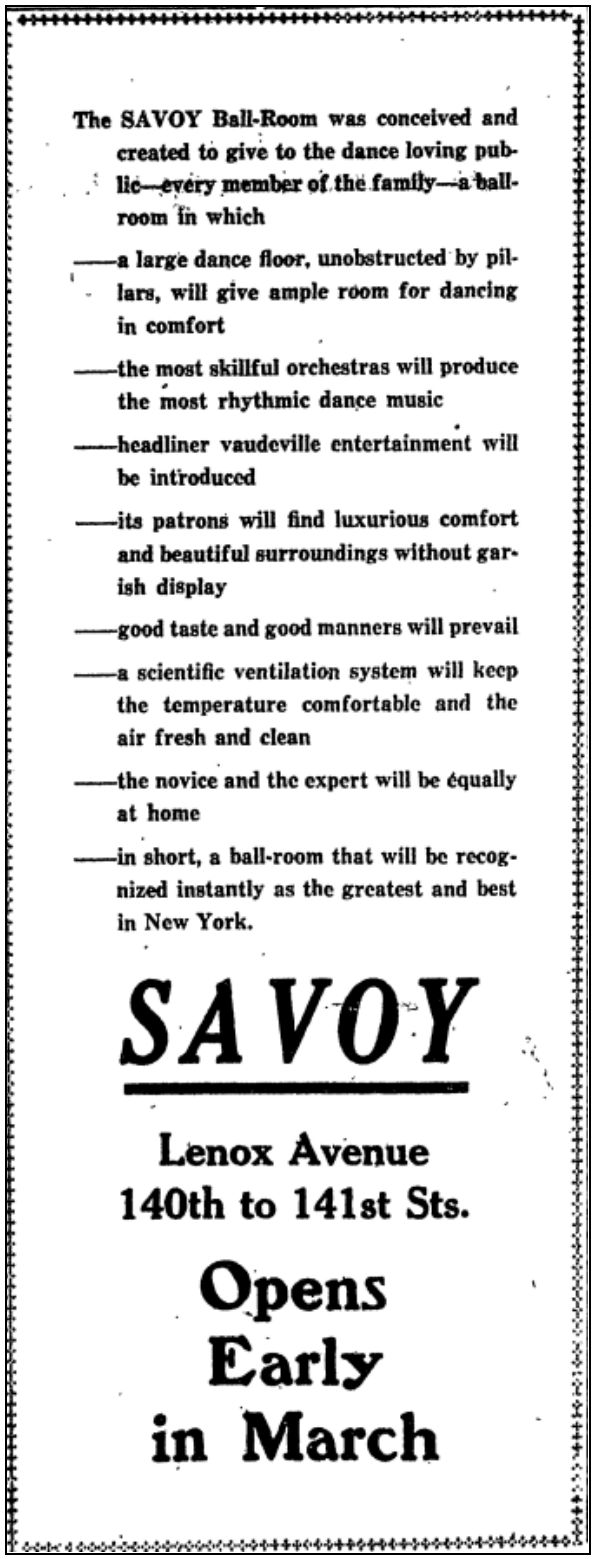
[26] William E. Clark, "Fletcher Henderson, Eddie Rector, Other Stage Stars at Savoy: Management Makes Elaborate Program for Opening Week, March 12." *The New York Age* (New York, New York), March 6, 1926.

associations between entertainment and vice. Kathy Peiss, in *Cheap Amusements*, points out the ways in which dance halls promised "excitement, glamour, and romance," and were often built as "large structures that enticed their patrons with bright lights, blaring music, and festive atmosphere."[27] Often catering to lower class audiences, these institutions constructed and conveyed elegance in their designs.[28] To distance itself from the negative connotations of popular and low-class amusement, the industry redefined the face and quality of entertainment, moving away from small dingy venues to build grand shining palaces.

The Savoy Ballroom also promoted a high class atmosphere by prioritizing respectability. Several newspaper ads reinforced the Savoy's commitment to propriety, not only stressing the importance of ambience but also patron etiquette (see fig. 2). Actively engaging in the politics of respectability, the Savoy maintained a strict policy to ensure a safe and respectable environment, as Miller writes, with "staff moving inconspicuously throughout the evening and usually posted… near the top of the stairs to keep out prostitutes, drunks, and any man not wearing a jacket and tie."[29] Frankie Manning remembers the Harlem community using this approach on their nights out, writing, "Even though we were poor, we always dressed up. People in Harlem felt that they'd get more respect if they dressed well. Guys felt that the better they looked, the more likely a young lady would be to dance with them. I only owned two suits, but I always wore them with a shirt and tie and nice shoes."[30] Manning's words reflect the sentiment that physical presentation was fundamental to gaining respect and being seen as a worthy dance partner.

---

[27] Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1986), 97-98.
[28] Vaudeville theaters also employed similar strategies, serving as a great study of the modern entertainment industry and how it developed at the turn of the century. *See* David Monod, *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment, 1890-1925* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 29.
[29] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 29.
[30] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 68.



The SAVOY Ball-Room was conceived and created to give to the dance loving public—every member of the family—a ball-room in which

——a large dance floor, unobstructed by pillars, will give ample room for dancing in comfort

——the most skillful orchestras will produce the most rhythmic dance music

——headliner vaudeville entertainment will be introduced

——its patrons will find luxurious comfort and beautiful surroundings without garish display

——good taste and good manners will prevail

——a scientific ventilation system will keep the temperature comfortable and the air fresh and clean

——the novice and the expert will be equally at home

——in short, a ball-room that will be recognized instantly as the greatest and best in New York.

SAVOY

Lenox Avenue
140th to 141st Sts.

Opens
Early
in March

Figure 2. An early advertisement from *The New York Age* announcing the Savoy's intentions as a new community space.[31]

[31] "The SAVOY Ball-Room," *The New York Age* (New York, New York), February 27, 1926.

Though the Savoy reached towards upper class style and elegance, it remained a fundamentally Black working class space. *The New York Age* published a price ad shortly after the opening that spotlighted the establishment's accessibility: "The Price List above should convince everyone that the Savoy is not to be regarded as a place where you are compelled to spend a lot of money in order to enjoy yourself."[32] Understanding that many Black visitors could not afford much, the ballroom emphasized its unique inclusivity. In fact, certain nights were free for women, especially working class Black women, who were disproportionately domestic laborers. Thursday night was "Kitchen Mechanics' Night" as the majority of the female patrons were maids and cooks with the night off before working through the weekend. More than just a courtesy, "Kitchen Mechanics' Night" gave Black women an opportunity to experience joy away from the difficulty of domestic labor. Dance scholar Kendra Unruh argues that "the dancers were rejecting the expectations of the middle-class and its values, and, instead, constructed their own working-class set of values—privileging leisure time over work time—and reclaiming their bodies for their own use."[33] These women were experiencing what feminist historian Stephanie Camp calls the "pleasures of resistance," the way the oppressed body can become a site of both resistance and enjoyment.[34] And soon enough, the best way for Black women, and the rest of the Savoy's patrons, to have fun was through the newest dance craze, Lindy Hop.

Lindy Hop is a syncretic dance that combines European and African elements, creating a distinctly African American aesthetic. Lindy Hop movements have traces back to both West Africa and the southern U.S., its strongest influence coming from the popular dance craze of the

---

[32] "Savoy," *The New York Age* (New York, New York), March 20, 1926.
[33] Kendra Unruh, "From Kitchen Mechanics to 'Jubilant Spirits of Freedom': Black, Working-Class Women Dancing the Lindy Hop," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 6 (2011): 217.
[34] Stephanie M. H. Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861," *The Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 3 (2002): 540.

1910s, the Charleston.[35] These movements were incorporated into jazz dance, including outward use of limbs, bent knees, articulating pelvis, shoulder shaking, angular shapes, and playful interaction between dancers.[36] From Europe came the coupling of a lead and follow, allowing for the unique use of "centrifugal force, torque, and momentum to keep the partners spinning smoothly."[37] Lindy Hop's defining moves, the swing out and breakaway, are what distinguished it from other forms. The swing out "involves pulling into and away from one's partner to gain momentum as a couple spins counterclockwise around an invisible central axis between them."[38] While the partners move together in the swing out, in the breakaway, they step away from each other and are given room for improvisation, a signature of African American-derived dances that challenges the European-influenced partnering.[39] Ironically, while the dance did not stray far from its African American heritage, it ended up named after a white folk hero.

In 1927, when news of Charles Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic reached the Savoy Ballroom, Lindy Hop was born. This is the story that is so often remembered as the origin of the dance's name, but the truth is more complicated. Some newspapers credit Charlie Buchanan as the first to name it, while others actually credit white celebrities of the time.[40] Even Norma Miller recalls the age-old tale, though she does not specify who is responsible.[41] Frankie Manning fills the gap in his own retelling, involving one of the first Lindy Hoppers, George "Shorty" Snowden. Manning remembers,

---

[35] Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 12; Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: In the United States From 1619 to 1970* (Palo Alto, California: National Press Books, 1972), 221; Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 50.
[36] Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 175; Robinson, *Modern Moves*, 9.
[37] Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 258.
[38] Jonathan David Jackson, "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing," *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2001): 47.
[39] Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 324.
[40] Jesse DeVore, "Has Time Run Out For Savoy, Harlem's Home of Happy Feet?" *The New York Age* (New York, New York), July 12, 1958; Danton Walker, "Broadway," *Olean Times Herald* (Olean, New York), June 28, 1941; "The latest brand," *Moving Picture World* (New York, New York), September 24, 1927.
[41] Miller and Jensen, *Swinging' at the Savoy*, 58.

> One night, this reporter came over to him and asked, "Hey Shorty, what's that dance you're doing?" Shorty told us that after Charles Lindbergh had flown the Atlantic, the headlines in the paper read, "Lindy Hops the Atlantic," so he said, "I'm doing the Lindy Hop."[42]

Although Manning insists that he "got this one from Shorty himself," his version is discounted by most scholars who instead believe it to be a myth mistaken for the truth.[43]

Through all of the confusion, most historians have suggested that the Lindbergh connection may have done more harm than good. Although Snowden is found in most of the stories, his unreliability as a source reveals the fragile nature of the narrative. The Savoy co-opted America's aviation hero most likely as a marketing strategy to attract white clientele by celebrating the news of American progress.[44] Its reference to Lindbergh, unfortunately, also diminished the dance's African and African American roots. Karen Hubbard and Terry Monaghan argue that

> Presenting the Lindy Hop as an anonymous, novelty response to Lindbergh's flight, rather than an aesthetic expression of evolving African American consciousness in Harlem, in effect obscured its true identity. Any real appreciation of the epic character of the movement imagery of this dance that rhythmically harmonized the improvisational

---

[42] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 79.

[43] Gena Caponi-Tabery explains, "In one version, Snowden was at the Savoy Ballroom the night Lindbergh landed in Paris… Spying some couples still dancing, Snowden is said to have remarked: 'Look at them kids hoppin' over there. I guess they're doin' the Lindy Hop.'" However, Snowden himself refuted this, as Kendra Unruh points out: "Snowden claims that he named the Lindy Hop on the night of 17 June 1928 during a dance marathon at the Manhattan Casino. When an interviewer from Fox Movietone News asked him what dance he was doing, he replied, 'the lindy.'" This anecdote is further contradicted by Snowden, as Marshall and Jean Stearns reveal that "Shorty Snowden describes it this way: 'We used to call the basic step the Hop long before Lindbergh did *his* hop across the Atlantic.'" Norma Miller also confirms that it was "at first simply called the Hop," although she may have been remembering Snowden's words. To make things even more complicated, Karen Hubbard and Terry Monaghan assert that there was in fact a separate dance actually called the "Lindbergh Hop" which "did not create any great stir in Harlem let alone turn social dancing upside down around the world as the Lindy subsequently did." Gena Caponi-Tabery, *Jump for Joy: Jazz, Basketball, and Black Culture in 1930s America* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 52; Unruh, "May we have this dance?," 42; Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 323; Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 58; Karen Hubbard and Terry Monaghan, "Negotiating Compromise on a Burnished Wood Floor: Social Dancing at the Savoy," in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 132.

[44] Unruh, "May we have this dance?," 42; Leading up to World War II, the Savoy abandoned the association with Lindbergh for a while because of his involvement with the Nazis. The story resurfaced a few years later after the scandal subsided. Terry Monaghan, "Why Study The Lindy Hop?" *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2001): 125.

> creativity of two people in a dancing partnership with the social mass of other people with whom they responsively shared the dance floor was blocked.[45]

The association with white culture, whether purposeful or not, ultimately helped conceal the Black origins of the dance. Nevertheless, the name caught on, and the dance slowly entered the public consciousness.

As Black dances like Lindy Hop became more popularized in the 1930s, especially among the younger generation, they faced various levels of disapproval from the white population. Lindy Hop was often associated with both the lower class, because of where it was danced, and overt sexuality in the use of the lower body, considered by many as vulgar and obscene. In 1931, at Brooklyn College, the dance sparked a protest as it represented a threat to the campus' conservatism. A dance teacher, quoted in a newspaper, opined that Lindy Hop "is danced in cheap dance halls… or behind closed doors in Harlem. Certainly it isn't a ballroom dance."[46] Not only does the teacher emphasize the lower class culture in "cheap dance halls," but the phrase "behind closed doors" alludes to the assumption that Lindy Hop was sexual in nature, referring to it as something forbidden and possibly dangerous. In this way, much of the early discourse surrounding the dance drew on the stereotypes of the Black working class and hypersexuality and created a clear distinction from more upstanding practices such as ballroom dance.

Similar to jazz musicians, Lindy Hoppers were also often associated with primitiveness. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, covering a Barnard College dance controversy involving Lindy Hop in 1931, reported on the college's return to dances such as Minuets and Rondos because Lindy

---

[45] Hubbard and Monaghan, "Negotiating Compromise on a Burnished Wood Floor," 131.
[46] "Mixed Dances Taboo at Brooklyn College," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, New York), November 15, 1931.

Hop's "freedom of rhythm and emotion are fit only for savages and barbarians."[47] Earlier that year, *The Olean Evening Times* directly compared the Savoy Ballroom to Africa: "It was quite another Africa in quite another scene but, still with something of the wailing of flutes and the beating of drums."[48] The high energy, fast footwork, and playfulness that defined Lindy Hop often solidified white assumptions about the connection between Black bodies and primitivism. The dancers were also often referred to as jitterbugs, a combination of the words "jitter," to describe the convulsive movements, and "bugs" to refer to the rapid spread of the dance. David Stowe explains that "jitterbugs combined two unsavory tendencies in American culture: the hedonism and uninhibited exhibitionism of African-American culture coupled with the mindless 'mass-man' behavior symptomatic of and conducive to totalitarian societies. 'Bugs' thereby conflated a racial and political threat."[49] Yet, amidst all of the negative stereotypes surrounding Black jazz dance, the talent of Black Lindy Hoppers did not go unnoticed.

There was some early resistance to the characterization of Lindy Hop as erotic in nature. Carl Van Vechten, a famous author and dance critic, wrote an article in 1930 describing Lindy Hop and recognizing its virtuosity and merit. Although Van Vechten uses primitivist language to illustrate the body movements, he opposes the assumption that the dance is erotic, stating that "the dance is not of sexual derivation, nor does it incline its hierophants towards pleasures of the flesh… It is danced, to be sure, by couples, but the individuals who compose these couples barely touch each other during its performance."[50] Van Vechten defends Lindy Hop as an artistic and impressive expression of the body, identifying the breakaway as evidence of its nonsexual nature. Dance researcher Maya Stovall points out the androgynous nature of Lindy Hop,

[47] "Minuets and Rondos Suggested in College Dance Controversy," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, New York), November 19, 1931.
[48] Gilbert Swan, "In New York," *The Olean Evening Times* (Olean, New York), March 19, 1931.
[49] Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 30. Quick note: Jitterbug, although initially referring to any swing dancer, eventually became the name of a whitened version of Lindy Hop, popular in the 1940s and 1950s.
[50] Carl Van Vechten, "Lindy Hop Comes Into Own," *The Brooklyn Citizen* (Brooklyn, New York), August 17, 1930.

believing it to be a "method of survival, in an effort to contest stereotypes of hypersexuality perpetuated by racist agendas."[51] Stovall supports Van Vechten's understanding of the breakaway as departing from normal gendered notions of dance: "The shifting back and forth from a partnered style to an individual style shows the play of gender roles and the dialectic exchange between Africanist and European social dance idioms. The women exhibit just as much athletic prowess as the men, and their movements are equally virtuosic."[52] In some ways, despite common impressions of the inherent sexuality in Lindy movements, Lindy Hoppers resisted those stereotypes through their display of a more nuanced gender dynamic between lead and follow, tied to the sheer athleticism of the dancers.[53]

The dance industry also slowly began to notice Lindy Hop. Lindy was included in several dance studio advertisements in white newspapers, often alongside ballroom dances such as Tango, Fox Trot, and Waltz.[54] Most likely taught by white instructors, these dance schools' versions of Lindy Hop would have been altered to conform to white standards of body

---

[51] Maya Stovall, "African American Cultural Technology: The Lindy Hop, the King of Pop, and the Factory Worker's Experience," *Transforming Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (2015), 3.
[52] Stovall, "African American Cultural Technology," 8.
[53] Lindy Hop, like many other Black dances, can occasionally be found in queer histories, as many historians have researched into the complex gender roles of the lead and the follow, especially in its modern manifestation. Manning recalls dancing with other male Lindy Hoppers as he taught new moves, taking on both roles. At the 1939 New York World's Fair, there are several images and videos of white women Lindy Hopping together in the Jitterbug contest. During World War II, there were more instances of women dancing with each other as more men were sent abroad. Also, in the 1920s and 1930s, the Savoy Ballroom was known to have hosted several drag balls. *See* Lisa Wade, "The emancipatory promise of the habitus: Lindy hop, the body, and social change," *Ethnography* 12, no. 2 (2011): 224-246; Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Bone-Breaking, Black Social Dance, and Queer Corporeal Orature," *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 1 (2016): 66-74; Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Switch: Queer Social Dance, Political Leadership, and Black Popular Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, ed. Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund, and Randy Martin (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1-24; Magdalena Fürnkranz, "Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject in Jazz in the 1920s," in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender*, ed. James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr (New York, New York: Routledge, 2022), 43-53; Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 87-88; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1994).
[54] "Sunset Dancing Studio," *Home Talk the Item* (Brooklyn, New York), March 18, 1931; "Modernize Your Dancing," *The Brooklyn Daily Ealge* (Brooklyn, New York), April 20, 1932.

movements.[55] Brenda Dixon Gottschild writes, "the 'new unknown' is obliged to take on characteristics of the 'familiar-and-known' in order for assimilation to occur. Many of us would characterize this as a watering down of the appropriated culture's aesthetic."[56] Fitting with Dixon Gottschild's argument, in 1933, an ad for Howell's Dancing School offered "conservative Lindy Hop" lessons, implying that the actual, unaltered version of the dance challenged the respectability encoded in the white middle class body.[57]

Although white dance schools began to acknowledge Lindy Hop, there was an explicit understanding that it was best learned at Black dance clubs, most notably the Savoy Ballroom. In 1933, *Harper's Bazaar* published an article that gave more merit to the Savoy than to influential dancer and businessman Arthur Murray:

> At Arthur Murray's where there are six refined teachers consecrated to the task of teaching [Lindy Hop], they say that it takes twenty-five lessons to master the art. At the Roseland dance hall on Broadway they say you can learn it in one. Up at the Savoy in Harlem the manager says, "My good child, no one can teach it. You have to come up here and hang around and watch it until it gets into your blood"… go to the Savoy if you want to see it in its purest form.[58]

The Black community as well had an explicit understanding that the Savoy was the best place to go to dance. Comparing the Savoy to other popular Black clubs, Frankie Manning remembers, "We used to say that the Alhambra was like elementary school; the Renaissance was like high school; and the Savoy, well, now you're up in the big time. Going there was like going to college."[59] Manning's use of the school analogy not only places the Savoy at the top of the hierarchy of Harlem's ballrooms, but also draws a connection between education, especially

---

[55] There were very few Black dance teachers in New York during this time, although a couple of enterprising Black male dancers were able to create organizations that hired Black instructors and focused particularly on ballroom styles. *See* Robinson, *Modern Moves*, 108-113, 124-126.
[56] Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 22.
[57] "Learn to Dance," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, New York), March 1, 1933.
[58] "In One Ear, Out—," *Harper's Bazaar* (New York, New York), June, 1933.
[59] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 74.

higher education that was not easily accessible to the Black population during this time, and dancing.

The Savoy dancers mainly refined their skills through the spirit of competition, a common practice among Black social dancers. Dance professor Nadine George-Graves charts the history of dance contests in Black communities from antebellum Southern plantations to turn-of-the-century Northern ballrooms. She demonstrates that contests were a method for proving not just ability, but also social value.[60] The Savoy was famous for its Saturday night dance competitions, showcasing the best dancers. Manning recalls,

> After each team had danced separately, Buchanan would line them up and hold his hand over each couple's head in turn. If you didn't get much applause, you were out immediately… The team that got the most applause won. This crowd was very knowledgeable about Lindy hopping and they were fair. If you were good, you got it; if you weren't, you didn't.[61]

Manning emphasizes the role of the audience as judge, highlighting the way in which Lindy Hop promoted community-building, rather than exclusivity, with both spectators and non-competing dancers. His memory also demonstrates the informality of Lindy culture: without a standard set of rules, contests were won simply based on the dancers' ability to impress the crowd. Oftentimes, this involved comedy, an important element in Lindy Hop. Shorty Snowden and Big Bea were famous for their hilarious gag that accentuated their height difference, with Snowden at five feet and Big Bea towering over him at six.[62] Lindy was about having fun with and making fun of oneself and the audience, emphasizing the bodily dialogue between both lead and follow and dancer and spectator.

---

[60] Nadine George-Graves, "Taking the Cake: Black Dance, Competition, and Value," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition*, ed. Sherril Dodds (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20.
[61] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 82.
[62] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 76.

Through these battles, dancers like Manning began to spark the interest of Herbert "Whitey" White, the Savoy's floor manager. Gathering much of the young talent, White created an informal dance group in the early 1930s that soon became the representatives of the Savoy, competing in many Saturday night contests. However, the most important competition for the Savoy's Lindy Hoppers came in the mid-1930s, right as the racial tensions of New York City came to a head.

On March 19, 1935, Harlem experienced a major race riot instigated by the police apprehension of a sixteen-year-old Black Puerto Rican boy named Lino Rivera.[63] Although the Rivera incident served as the trigger, the rising anxieties of Harlemites during the Depression, which disproportionately affected Black families and businesses, had already begun raising the political consciousness of the Black community.[64] Harlem's Black residents took the opportunity of the Rivera case to vent their frustration through rioting and the destruction of property, triggering an equally uncontrollable white counterreaction.[65] The riot resulted in over 100 injuries and thousands of dollars in property damage, and the city remained on edge for the next couple of months as the growing disparity between Black and white residents remained largely unaddressed.

Announced in July 1935, the Harvest Moon Ball, a city-wide ballroom dance contest sponsored by *The Daily News*, is sometimes believed to have been the answer to the riot, although there is no supporting historical evidence. Norma Miller's version is the only account that explicitly connects Lindy Hop's inclusion in the competition to the growing resentment of Black Harlemites. Miller remembers,

---

[63] Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots: in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 141-142.
[64] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots*, 140.
[65] "Harlem Race Riot: 1 Dead; Cops Fire," *The Daily News* (New York, New York), March 20, 1935.

> The Savoy was damaged in the riot and closed to repair the damage. This caused further discontent and concern within the community… A meeting was called between Savoy owner Moe Gale, manager Charlie Buchanan, and Whitey to discuss what could be done about the damaged property and the community's damaged morale… Whitey, Mr. Buchanan, and two men from the *Daily News* met to discuss a dance contest that the paper wanted to sponsor as their contribution to boosting morale after the riot.[66]

While Miller implies that the Ball was a morale-boosting strategy to bring together the white and Black communities through dance, news reports from that time give no indication of that being the case. *The Daily News* first announced the Ball on July 7, only featuring Tango, Waltz, Fox Trot, and Rhumba, styles already well-established in the ballroom industry.[67] Norma Miller incorrectly asserts that "It was the popularity of the Lindy Hop that inspired the contest," even though it was not until a few days later, on July 13, when it was added.[68] Still, her confusion points to the significance of Lindy's addition to the Ball as a bridge between the increasingly antagonistic Black and white communities of Harlem.

The Harvest Moon Ball, on both an individual and community scale, presented a great opportunity for Black dancers not only to showcase their talent and innovation, but also to achieve relative financial success as performers. The competition pitted amateur dancers against each other to win fancy prizes, and, more importantly, future bookings in the entertainment industry, which was largely white-dominated.[69] Aside from the tangible benefits, the Ball also offered a more symbolic reward: the official induction of Lindy Hop into the ballroom tradition. Lindy had begun to make its way around New York City in the early 1930s, but it was not until after the Ball when it was able to break through the barriers of prejudice by way of mass publicity. Manning recounts,

---

[66] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 55.
[67] "The News requests the pleasure," *The Daily News* (New York, New York), July 7, 1935.
[68] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 65; "Lindy Hop Is Added To NEWS Contest," *The Daily News* (New York, New York), July 13, 1935.
[69] "Do You Dance? Then Win Both Fame, Riches," *The Daily News* (New York, New York), July 8, 1935.

> It was the first time we had been exposed to so many people at once, and the contest was filmed for newsreels that were shown in the theaters… This was the beginning of the spread of Lindy hopping—some people had never seen it, only heard of it—and the audience was very enthusiastic about the way we danced, especially those of us from the Savoy.[70]

In addition to the widespread exposure, the competition also solidified Lindy Hop, as performed by Black dancers, as a ballroom dance, and therefore provided a degree of legitimization in the dance industry.

The inclusion of Lindy Hop in the Harvest Moon Ball was huge, but it was not exactly an easy induction. One *Daily News* reporter wrote, "The waltz, the tango, the rhumba and the fox-trot are all right, but what about the Lindy Hop? I never saw better dancing than I saw by those couples doing the Lindy Hop in Harlem. It was a fine, well-behaved, carefree crowd, and we certainly want them represented in this contest."[71] Despite the enthusiasm, one cannot ignore the language that defines Black dancers as a "fine" and "well-behaved" group, revealing that their participation was contingent on their acceptability to the broader white audience. Jayna Brown explains that "Although the lavish Harvest Moon Ballroom annual competitions… did allow black couples access, the vast majority of the huge dance marathons held in the United States between 1923 and 1933 were segregated, designed solely for white participants. *Black dancers* could be barred, though *their dances* were always welcome."[72] Aside from the Savoy's dancers, there were no other Black competitors. The entire competition itself, almost exclusively advertised in *The Daily News*, was most likely a majority white crowd.[73]

---

[70] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 90-91.
[71] Robin Harris, "Lindy Hopper Aces Welcome to Dance Test," *The Daily News* (New York, New York), July 14, 1935.
[72] Brown, "From the Point of View of the Pavement," 169.
[73] Black newspapers such as *The New York Age* had little to no mention of the contest, except to briefly report on the winners. Then, in 1937, it released an article stating "If you are one of the thousands that were unable to attend the Harvest Moon Ball sponsored by the Daily News recently, then don't fail to grasp this opportunity to attend a dance of the same name sponsored by the Yellow Rose Bridge Club at the Lido Ballroom." The announcement of *The New York Age*'s own competition suggests that *The Daily New*'s ball may not have been as inviting to the Black community. Eric von Wilkinson, "Gallivanting About Brooklyn," *The New York Age* (New York, New York),

The biggest challenge, however, was figuring out how Lindy would be judged. *The Daily News* had "arranged for outstanding figures in the dance world to pass judgment at the preliminaries and at the finals."[74] This made sense for the other four dances, which already had well-established professionals and formalized aesthetic qualities, such as upright torsos, fluid movements, and constant contact between partners. Lindy Hop was not only a constantly developing style, but it also followed a different set of rhythmic and partnership principles and body movements compared to the other styles. Miller writes, "All of the other categories had the same standards: elegance, smoothness, grace, and fluid lines. Partners were always to touch each other and their feet had to remain on the floor at all times. None of these applied to the Lindy Hop."[75] During one of the preliminary contests that took place at the Savoy, Buchanan was able to bring in judges with backgrounds in both dance performance and Harlem nightlife, allowing the dancers to be judged by people more familiar with Lindy, as well as some of the conventions of Black dance culture.[76] Unfortunately, this was not the case for the final competition, set to take place at Madison Square Garden on August 28, 1935.

As the only Black dancers in the Harvest Moon Ball performing for five white judges, including Arthur Murray, the Savoy's Lindy Hoppers engaged in racial work as they simultaneously conformed to the contest expectations and asserted their agency as representatives of the dance and the broader Black community. Miller remembers the discomfort of preparing for a performance with strict and formalized rules: "We were all a bit apprehensive about it, because for the first time we were to be judged by people outside our own audience. We were dancers used to being crowd pleasers, but not accustomed to being given rules such as

---

September 7, 1935; "Yellow Rose Bridge At Lido, Next Month," *The New York Age* (New York, New York), September 25, 1937.

[74] "Do You Dance? Then Win Both Fame, Riches," *The Daily News* (New York, New York), July 8, 1935.

[75] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 65.

[76] Jack Turcott, "Harlem Dance Contest Ends Preliminaries," *The Daily News* (New York, New York), August 10, 1935.

those that the dance committee was setting down for us."[77] The actual dance proved to be difficult for Manning, and his attempt to meet the judges' standards may have cost him:

> We had been told that we were going to be judged by the same rules used for ballroom dancing, like we couldn't separate from our partner or jump up off the floor. Even though we had protested—"What are you talking about? We're Lindy Hoppers!"—that was the way it was supposedly going to be. But Leon and Edith, who went out there and did their own thing, won. I had tried to adhere to the rules, but it just didn't work. Maggie and I came in second. Norma Miller and Stompin' Billy came in third.[78]

Manning may have been bitter about not winning first place;[79] yet, his memory points to the very real double standard that the Black dancers were working against.

The dancers were acting with what famous activist W. E. B. Du Bois called "double consciousness." Writing in 1903, Du Bois introduced the concept as a way to describe the relationship between African Americans and white society. He explains it as "a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."[80] Miller furthers this notion with her brief assertion that "The dancers who were the best in Lindy contests knew how to play for the judge's eye because they were used to being on display."[81] Miller's use of the term "display" emphasizes the aspect of spectatorship, of being an object of the gaze, and in this case, the white gaze. The Lindy Hoppers, performing in front of five white judges, and a majority white crowd, experienced a double consciousness that required

---

[77] Miller and Jensen, *Swinging' at the Savoy*, 66.
[78] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 90. Although both Manning and Miller recall winning second and third place respectively, the newspaper evidence suggests otherwise. Leon and Edith still won first place, but Frankie and Maggie actually came in third place, with Norma and Billy not placing in the top three.
[79] Manning writes, "It's a funny thing, but I didn't feel sorry for myself. The Harvest Moon Ball was just a contest that we needed to win for the Savoy, and we got the top three spots. It didn't phase me that someone else won first place." He was so deeply invested in the Savoy community that it is very likely that these were his true feelings. Still, given the scale and the stakes of the Harvest Moon Ball, it is reasonable to assume that Manning may have felt at least some disappointment. Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 90.
[80] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Toronto, Canada: Ryerson University, 1903), 14. Interestingly, Dixon Gottschild further complicates the notion of "double consciousness," arguing that "one of the white underlying fears… was the incipient sense that bodies are *not* ignorant—that black bodies were, indeed, thinking bodies that could express a world of views in the turn of a shoulder, could parody and demean their white detractors with the switch of a hip." Given the nature of Lindy Hop, the dynamic between Black dancers and white spectators would have been quite complex. Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 44.
[81] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 66.

them both to adhere to the strict rules of ballroom dancing and, even more importantly, to perform to the expectations of the audience.

In spite of the pressure, the Savoy's Lindy couples maintained the spirit of the dance through their crowd-pleasing tactics, learned from Savoy contests. Before the dancing started, the Lindy Hoppers had already begun to engage the audience, as Miller and Manning recall:

> The noise increased as the Lindy Hoppers, the last in line, entered. We could hear the audience was with us, and we responded to their yells by swinging when we walked. Harlem was on parade.[82]

> The other dancers for the other competitions… came out before us during the grand march. They looked beautiful and walked on very properly to thunderous applause, but when they announced the Lindy hoppers, a wild commotion erupted in the crowd. Naturally, we danced through the house—not swinging out, but holding our partners' hand and laughing, skipping, jumping, cutting little steps, carrying on. We didn't walk out like kings and queens; we were the jesters.[83]

Both make reference to the playfulness of Lindy that distinguished it from the other styles. Rather than conforming to the ballroom standards, the Lindy Hoppers resisted those impositions and instead fed the audience energy with their clowning.

Although their behavior in some ways affirmed negative stereotypes of Blackness, the dancers still evoked respectability. The reputable stage at Madison Square Garden and the presence of several celebrities afforded all participants the role of presenting a high class act. Even more importantly, the Savoy representatives defeated the other white Lindy competitors.[84] The Black dancers displayed their outstanding ability and professionalism as they took the top places in the category, affirming their status as the best Lindy Hoppers in the city.

---

[82] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 80.
[83] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 89-90.
[84] Harry Rosenberg, one if the first white members of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, competed in the 1935 Harvest Moon Ball. He eventually became good friends with Frankie Manning, and the two had a fun and healthy rivalry. Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 105-107; Jack Turcott, "356 Tangoists Strut Tonight to Win Fame," *The Daily News* (New York, New York), August 5, 1935.

Ultimately, though none of the Savoy's couples won cash prizes, the Harvest Moon Ball proved to be extremely successful as a springboard for Lindy Hop. There was a sharp increase in the demand for Lindy performers at other clubs and theaters, leading to the creation of the famous troupe, Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, led by Herbert White and based out of the Savoy.[85] This was also the time when the Lindy Hoppers, including Norma Miller, toured Europe, the first international opportunity. Frankie Manning stayed behind to continue expanding Lindy Hop's local presence, performing around the city. After the dancers came back from overseas, the gigs continued, including a show at the Cotton Club, one of the most renowned white clubs in the city. Manning remembers thinking, "*If they're going to book me in* here*, maybe I can dance a little bit. Maybe this* is *leading somewhere*."[86] With their newfound fame, the group gained even more recognition and legitimization in Hollywood films such as *A Day at the Races* (1937) and *Hellzapoppin'* (1941), and became the leading figures of the Lindy scene.[87]

Although never considering himself a choreographer, Manning incorporated the notion of ensemble dancing and aerial moves in the second half of the 1930s, signifying a simultaneous formalization of Lindy Hop and confrontation to ballroom aesthetics. In a new routinized version, the Lindy Hop could be packaged and replicated not only by dancers in the same performance, but, eventually, by anybody who wanted to learn. Just as the choreographic turn marked the absorption of European dance traditions, the aerial moves, or "air steps," as Manning calls them, were a distinct divergence: "People say 'aerial' nowadays, but I called my invention an air step. I wanted to distinguish it from ballroom dancing, where the male lifts his partner

---

[85] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 86.
[86] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 123.
[87] *A Day at the Races*, directed by Sam Wood (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1937); *Hellzapoppin'*, directed by H. C. Potter (Universal Pictures, 1941). A 1943 *New York Times* article, quoted in *Jazz Dance*, stated "The white jitterbug is oftener than not uncouth to look at… but his Negro original is quite another matter. His movements are never so exaggerated that they lack control, and there is an unmistakable dignity about his most violent figures." The language both displays an acknowledgement and respect for Black Lindy Hoppers and their talent, especially in comparison to their white counterparts. *The New York Times* qtd in Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 331.

gracefully, twirls her above his head, and gently lowers her to the floor… In the Lindy hop, you *throw* the girl in time with the music, and she's got to land right on the beat and start dancing again."[88] These moves, requiring extreme athleticism and technique, resisted rigid ballroom styles in their physicality and expression.[89]

Figure 3. Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, 1937. Frankie Manning is holding up his upside-down partner on the left.[90]

The Savoy Ballroom's business flourished throughout the second half of the 1930s, and in 1939, it was officially asked to participate in the New York World's Fair. Historian Marco Duranti argues that the Fair, themed as "The World of Tomorrow," represented "an attempt to reconstitute a national narrative of progress shattered by a traumatic past experience (the Great War), an unstable present (the Great Depression), and uncertain expectations for the future (the spectre of ascendant totalitarian ideologies and another world war)."[91] Exhibiting the latest

[88] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 101.
[89] Interestingly, Langston Hughes was not as impressed by the air steps, believing them to be a product of the white gaze: "The lindy-hoppers at the Savoy even began to practise acrobatic routines, and to do absurd things for the entertainment of the whites, that probably never would have entered their heads to attempt merely for their own effortless amusement. Some of the lindy-hoppers had cards printed with their names on them and became dance professors teaching the tourists. Then Harlem nights became show nights for the Nordics." Frankie Manning, however, refutes this perception with his story about inventing the first air step, a process that was meant to one-up the esteemed dancing couple, Shorty Snowden and Big Bea, reigning champions of the Savoy's Saturday contests. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: an autobiography* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 215; Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 96-100.
[90] *Whitey's Lindy Hoppers*, 1937, publicity photo, Frankie Manning Foundation. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/whitey-s-lindy-hoppers-publicity-photo/cwGlcwlah8IhAg?hl=en
[91] Marco Duranti, "Utopia, Nostalgia and World War at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 4 (2006): 663.

technological and artistic advancements, such as television and impressive architecture, the Fair sought to convey an ideology of American rationality and intellect through its celebration of the future, despite the turbulent socio-political conditions of the 1930s. The Savoy Ballroom, with their own pavilion, presented African American culture within this broader narrative: "At the Savoy ballroom, Harlem projected into the World of Tomorrow, 50 couples swung into the dance of tomorrow."[92] For six months, the Savoy provided Lindy Hoppers to showcase and celebrate Black culture as they directly engaged with and resisted prevailing racial stereotypes.

In spite of the inclusion of the Savoy Ballroom in the "World of Tomorrow," the New York World's Fair maintained a white supremacist frame that greatly influenced the presentation of Black art through swing music and dance.[93] The Fair not only employed unfair hiring practices that disproportionately affected Black workers, but it also actively alienated its Black participants.[94] The Fair's manager, Grover Whalen, barred jazz music for the first few months in an attempt to promote Western European, and white, folk music. The only place where fairgoers could see big band jazz was at the Savoy Pavilion.[95] However, it was located deep within the Fair, a long, dark, and partially unpaved walk from the main attractions of grandeur and technological advancement.[96] The venue itself was just as shabby as the location, and the Savoy dancers, including Norma Miller, were deeply disappointed: "It was not a ballroom, it was a theater, and a tacky theater at that. The atmosphere was gloomy and cold, the seating was on

---

[92] "First Day's Cold Cramps Style of Special Dancers," *Dunkirk Evening Observer* (Dunkirk, New York), May 1, 1939.

[93] In her analysis of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, historian Gail Bederman asserts the concept of the "discourse of civilization," a social hierarchy that placed white races as the "most civilized," and darker races as the "most barbaric." At the Exposition, the architecture of the White City, as Bederman states, "was intended to suggest a millennial future—what a city might look like as advanced white races worked toward a perfect civilization." Four decades later, at the New York World's Fair, it appears that the architecture was once again evoking the discourse of civilization, especially in the 1940 rebrand, "Great White Way." Gail Bederman, "Remaking Manhood Through Race and 'Civilization,'" in *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 31.

[94] Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 298.

[95] Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 303.

[96] Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 294-295.

plain benches, and the stage was bare and uninteresting. The set was nothing more than a cheap, papier-mâche looking prop that somewhat resembled a bush—this was supposed to represent the jungle and our roots."[97] Not only was the pavilion the complete opposite of the elegance and sophistication of the Savoy, but, as Miller points out, it was overshadowed by race politics.

Before even stepping inside the pavilion, fairgoers were met with a display of Black dance that, in many ways, played into the primitivist frame. In order to advertise the show, the dancers were required to ballyhoo the audience, staging a brief demonstration of what was to come later inside the pavilion, in a carnival-like manner. Miller provides more insight into the experience: "One of my main concerns was appointing dancers to bally—to bally-hoo the show. This is where it became a carnival… While [a barker] did the spiel, a couple would dance to let people know what was going on inside. This was degrading—the dancers felt they had risen above this kind of exhibition."[98] Miller frames the ballyhoo as a spectacle that evoked the memory of minstrelsy, a detraction from the dancers' artistry and expertise.

Inside the pavilion, the Savoy's show was based on a narrative of Black dance, starting in Africa and evolving into the swing culture of Harlem, that simultaneously evoked and resisted racial stereotypes. Miller recalls that "It was to be an anthology of the dance, from the roots of black dancing in Africa to the Lindy Hop. The production had an African jungle scene, feathers and all."[99] Simplifying the history of the Lindy Hop by emphasizing its supposed "evolution" directly from Africa not only obscured the unique fusion of African, African American, and European dance traditions, but also reinforced the primitivist lens through which Black dance

[97] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 137.
[98] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 140.
[99] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 136.

was often viewed during the early twentieth century.[100] Miller further elaborates on the performance, remembering how

> The show opened with drums, tom-toms, to set the mood. Our drummers were the best. We had Motorboat and Stewbeef, drummers from the Cotton Club show who could be heard all the way through. Then the African princess would make her entrance, Tanya. She was supposed to be an authentic representation of our roots, but as far as we could see, she looked like a regular shake dancer, and we doubted she'd ever seen Africa![101]

Interestingly, Miller's memory points out the subtle elements of the production. She jokes about the ironic identity of Tanya, the "African princess," who most likely had little to no connection to the continent, highlighting the ways in which the white gaze superimposed ideas of authenticity onto the Black body.[102] In addition, the employment of Cotton Club performers imbued the show with a degree of professional respectability.

Despite the racist overtones of the production, the Savoy's Pavilion at the World's Fair represented progress for the Black community of New York. As the only venue at the Fair that employed a largely Black staff and celebrated African American culture, the pavilion placed Black Harlem into the narrative of national progress and inspired the Black community to look forward into the future, just as the Fair promoted. After the initial invitation to the Savoy to participate in the World's Fair, the *New York Age* announced the exciting news in early 1939: "Harlem's famous Savoy Ballroom will be represented at the New York World's Fair… Dances of today and tomorrow will be featured in the twenty-minute performances by the country's greatest rhythm dancers."[103] The author not only adopted the language of the Fair ("Dances of today and tomorrow"), but also displayed their sense of pride in Whitey's Lindy Hoppers as

---

[100] Josephine Baker, the internationally-acclaimed Black singer and dancer, came to represent the "jungle aesthetic" that was often imposed on Black performers. Dixon Gottschild writes, "she was the embodiment of 'the primitive trope' (the constellation of ideas, images, and associations that constructed black peoples as savage)." Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 43-44.
[101] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 140.
[102] Robinson, *Modern Moves*, 145-146.
[103] "Harlem's famous Savoy Ballroom," *The New York Age* (New York, New York), April 15, 1939.

representatives of Black dance. In a similar tone, the newspaper released the personal account of a Black fairgoer and his experience of the Savoy's Pavilion on opening day, asserting that "the Savoy Ballroom open air theatre is perhaps the greatest attraction entirely manned by members of our racial group."[104] Considering the lack of Black representation at the New York World's Fair, the Savoy's Pavilion and its talented musicians and dancers marked a significant moment of racial progress for the African American community.

Although the Savoy Ballroom's pavilion only stayed open for a few months, Whitey's Lindy Hoppers continued to impress audiences through their participation in another performance at the Fair, *The Hot Mikado*. Produced by Mike Todd and starring Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, one of the most famous Black tap dancers, the Broadway show *The Hot Mikado* was centered around its Black cast, including several Lindy Hoppers. In contrast to the Savoy Ballroom's Pavilion, the Hall of Music, the venue for the show, showcased the elegant aesthetic of "The World of Tomorrow." Dinerstein states, "Built to highlight the nation's cultural heritage, the Hall of Music was one of the Fair's most beautiful and expensive buildings; it was envisioned as a beacon of highbrow culture for the masses."[105] Although Whitey's Lindy Hoppers were not the main act, they were considered a crucial part of the show by Robinson, a fact that both Frankie Manning and Norma Miller recall.[106] The Lindy Hoppers' involvement in such a high class act as *The Hot Mikado*, alongside such a respected entertainer as Bill Robinson, ensured that the Savoy's legacy at the World's Fair was one of talent and reputability.

From the end of the 1930s and into the early 1940s, the Savoy's heightened popularity led to an increase of white interest and presence at the club.[107] Both Miller and Manning remember

---

[104] Floyd G. Snelson, "Harlem: 'Negro Capitol of the Nation,'" *The New York Age* (New York, New York), May 6, 1939.
[105] Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 300.
[106] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 161; Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 144-145.
[107] In 1941, *Hill News* reported on a sociology class of white students from St. Lawrence University taking a trip through Harlem to study the conditions of its Black residents. Interestingly, the Savoy Ballroom was one of the

several white celebrities who showed up at the Savoy in the late 1930s, including Lana Turner, who coined the name "Home of the Happy Feet," Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Orson Welles.[108] The Savoy became a local tourist attraction, showcasing the formidable talent of the Lindy Hoppers. As impressive as the dancers were, however, they were still often viewed through a racial lens. Leo Rosten, famous Jewish humorist, wrote of his trip to the Savoy in 1939, describing the Lindy Hoppers as going into "a series of convulsions that would make whirling dervishes look like septuagenarians with the gout. It was extraversion writ large, a flying wheel of legs and arms and feet and hands. The audiences went wild. They screamed, writhed, beat their fists on the floor or on their breasts and or thighs."[109] Clearly impressed by the dancers, Rosten's account still illustrates a chaotic atmosphere of Black moving bodies, both as dancers and audience members, that alludes to the primitivism that was often associated with swing dance.

It was also during this time that Rosten and others acknowledged the racially diverse crowd, signaling a normalization of the Savoy's integration policy. Rosten recalls, "There were a few white girls cavorting with gentlemen of the opposite hue, and several white men dancing with tawny-skinned women in lovely gowns."[110] Black and white patrons danced together, an intimate interaction to which Rosten does not add any further observation, more impressed by the fashion and high energy atmosphere.[111] Roi Ottley, a famous Black journalist, describes the diversity of Harlem in his 1943 book *New World A-Coming*, noticing the many different types of people in the city: "Asiatics in Harlem are mainly Chinese, and number about two thousand or

---

stops. "Hollman to Direct Sociology Seminar," *Hill News* (Canton, New York), March 19, 1941; "Students, Over-Laden With Memories, Return to Canton with Tales of Brokendown Cars, Taxis, and Fishing Trips," *Hill News* (Canton, New York), April 23, 1941.

[108] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 107; Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 259.

[109] Leonard Q. Ross [Leo Rosten], *The Strangest Places* (New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), 190.

[110] Ross [Rosten], *The Strangest Places*, 182.

[111] Ross [Rosten], *The Strangest Places*, 183.

more. Uniformly they make the best adjustment to the Negro community, even stomping the lindy hop at the Savoy Ballroom."[112] He also mentions that the "Jewish youth move normally in the stream of community, even to stomping at the Savoy Ballroom."[113] Not only had the Savoy become a multiracial attraction, but, as Ottley's words suggest, it also served as a way for other minorities to assimilate into the Harlem community. The Savoy's inclusivity was becoming its defining feature in the discourse.

Figure 4. Ella Fitzgerald performing at the Savoy Ballroom in front of an interracial crowd, 1940.[114]

In the 1940s, with U.S. entry into World War II, many changes happened in the swing world: Frankie Manning and other male members of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers were drafted in the war;[115] Jitterbug, a slightly altered version of Lindy Hop, became a popular and white symbol of American patriotism;[116] and the Black community experienced a rising political consciousness as a result of the atrocities and inequality in Europe, and the increasing racial polarization led to a

[112] Roi Ottley, *New World A-Coming* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 53.
[113] Ottley, *New World A-Coming*, 148.
[114] Otto F. Hess, *Ella Fitzgerald performing with Chick Webb at the Savoy Ballroom*, 1940, still image, The New York Public Library. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/3c37e350-7315-0139-8284-0242ac110003#item-data
[115] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 191.
[116] Sherrie Tucker, "Swing: From Time to Torque (Dance Floor Democracy at the Hollywood Canteen)," *Daedalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 142, no. 4 (2013): 83.

number of riots in major cities that affected several important entertainment institutions, including the Savoy.[117]

The widespread publicity of the Savoy Ballroom's integration unfortunately attracted the wrong kind of attention, leading to a brief closure in 1943. On March 18, 1943, following undercover investigations, the New York City Police Department revoked the Savoy's license, starting the beginning of a long scandal that resulted in a six-month-long closure of the Ballroom from April to October.[118] Accused of prostitution, vice, and spreading venereal disease to soldiers, the ballroom soon became the subject of a protest involving prominent figures such as Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), A. Philip Randolph, and even Malcolm X.[119] As the community rallied behind the Savoy, racial politics in New York City, as well as in the broader U.S., were thrown into the spotlight.

Although the city insisted on the charges, Harlemites were well aware of the underlying prejudice that influenced the closure. A *People's Voice* article from May informed its readers that

> the Savoy management had been advised NOT to advertise in White papers because it would draw white patrons to Harlem. There is the added odd situation that various officials have reportedly posed the question to the management of whether or not whites and Negroes DANCE TOGETHER at the Savoy. There have also been "suggestions" that the Savoy management refuse admittance to white patrons.[120]

Considering the ballroom's upstanding reputation and strict discipline, the Black community found more evidence pointing to white discomfort with its integration, seeing the scandal as an attempt to further segregate the city. Another reporter went so far as to draw a distinct connection between the war and the conflict in Harlem: "While Negroes are losing their lives abroad, Hitler

---

[117] Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 162.
[118] "Deny War Dept. Took Part In Closing Of The Savoy," *The New York Age* (New York, New York), May 8, 1943; Capeci Jr., "Savoy Ballroom Controversy," 4.
[119] Malcolm X, on the topic of the Savoy closure, said "Harlem said the real reason was to stop Negroes from dancing with white women." Malcolm X qtd in Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 207.
[120] "What's Behind Savoy Closing: Is It Police Move to Bar Whites from Harlem?," *The People's Voice* (New York, New York), May 1, 1943.

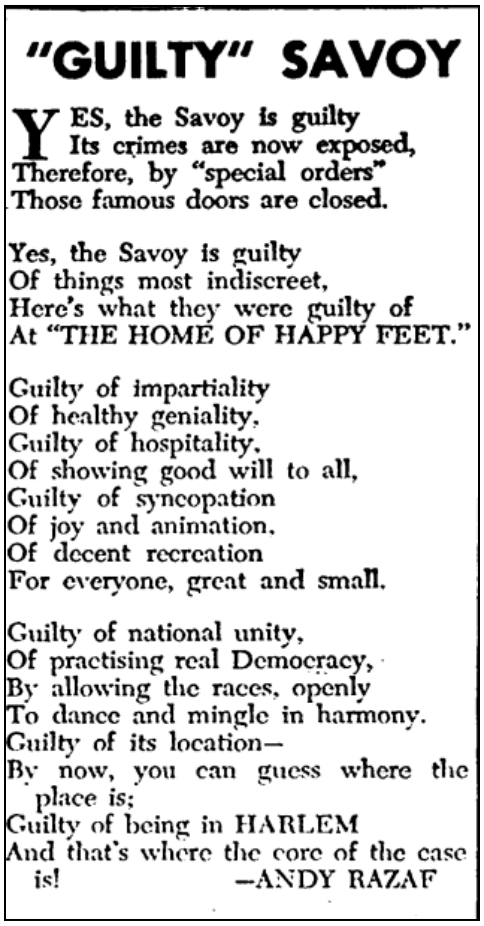
has scored a jim-crow victory in New York."[121] Informed by the atrocities of the Holocaust in Europe, Black Americans recognized the Savoy closure as a direct attack on their community.

The Savoy scandal was not an isolated incident, but rather part of a broader moment of high racial antagonism. The summer of 1943 saw two major race riots, one in Detroit and one in Harlem. Although most scholars believe the Detroit riot to have been initiated by rumors of racial violence, Eileen Boris argues that the violence was instigated by the lynching of a Black dancer. On a crowded bus in Belle Island Park, a Black young man got up to dance with a white woman, igniting the anger of white servicemen who stopped the bus and threw the man over a bridge.[122] As news of the brutality spread to other cities, Harlem soon experienced its own eruption.[123] Historian Dominic Capeci Jr., placing the Savoy closure within this context, writes, "On the eve of the Detroit riot, reporter Peter Dana noted that 'a surplus of insults, proscriptions, and patent inequities,' such as the Savoy's closing, had produced 'a definite, bitter cynicism' throughout Harlem."[124] Although the scandal may have not been the direct cause of the Harlem riot, the association points to the social and political significance of the Savoy in New York City, not just as an integrated establishment, but also as a site for Black pleasure and culture.

While many people stressed the corruption of the Police Department, the incompetence of Mayor La Guardia, and the growing animosity between Black and white New York residents, there were others who instead focused on the unique contributions of the Savoy as a strategy of resistance.[125] Famous African American author Ann Petry, in a letter to La Guardia, states, "The Savoy Ballroom has been closed for several weeks now. I wondered if you realized exactly what that means to Harlem. You see organizations like… the NAACP… [and] the National Urban

[121] "Savoy Closing Step Backward in Race Relations," *The People's Voice* (New York, New York), May 8, 1943.
[122] Eileen Boris, "'You Wouldn't Want One of 'Em Dancing with Your Wife': Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II," *American Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1998): 89.
[123] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots*, 149-150.
[124] Capeci Jr., "Savoy Ballroom Controversy," 9.
[125] "Investigations Refute Savoy Closing Excuses," *The People's Voice* (New York, New York), May 8, 1943.

League have held benefits there that netted sizable sums. That money was used for the benefit of Negroes."[126] Petry particularly highlights the political and economic influence of the Savoy, contextualizing its importance within broader activist circles. Andy Razaf, Black poet and lyricist of "Stompin' at the Savoy," composed a poem about the closure, emphasizing that the only "crime" the Savoy was "guilty" of was providing equality and freedom (see fig. 5).



"GUILTY" SAVOY

YES, the Savoy is guilty
Its crimes are now exposed,
Therefore, by "special orders"
Those famous doors are closed.

Yes, the Savoy is guilty
Of things most indiscreet,
Here's what they were guilty of
At "THE HOME OF HAPPY FEET."

Guilty of impartiality
Of healthy geniality,
Guilty of hospitality,
Of showing good will to all,
Guilty of syncopation
Of joy and animation,
Of decent recreation
For everyone, great and small.

Guilty of national unity,
Of practising real Democracy,
By allowing the races, openly
To dance and mingle in harmony.
Guilty of its location—
By now, you can guess where the place is;
Guilty of being in HARLEM
And that's where the core of the case is!

—ANDY RAZAF

Figure 5. Poem by Andy Razaf, posted in *The People's Voice* during the 1943 Savoy scandal.[127]

After a very long summer and several protests, the Savoy Ballroom reopened in October 1943; however, the scandal, along with the oncoming cultural shift of the post-war era, led to the decline in the Savoy's relevance.

[126] Ann Petry, "An Open Letter To Mayor LaGuardia," *The People's Voice* (New York, New York), May 22, 1943.
[127] Andy Razaf, "'Guilty' Savoy," *The People's Voice* (New York, New York), May 22, 1943.

As the country became swept up in the hottest music of the 1950s, rock and roll, swing bands were becoming outdated, and the popularity of Lindy Hop sharply declined. The Savoy was able to maintain steady business, but it was not the same lively, overcrowded dance floor as in the 1930s. And then, in 1958, a diverse crowd of Lindy Hoppers danced their last dance at the Savoy as it lost out to city redevelopment.[128] At that time, most of the original generation of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers had already grown up: Norma Miller went on to lead her own troupe of swing dancers through the 1950s and 1960s, and by the 1970s, Frankie Manning had begun working at a post office.[129] It seemed as though the country had moved on, and the Savoy Ballroom became merely a vestige of the past.

Yet, in the 1980s, something miraculous happened: as swing dancing once again swept up the country, albeit on a much smaller scale than in the 1930s, the old veterans of dance were brought back together, realizing that Lindy Hop, and the Savoy, had never been lost. Reuniting Miller, Manning, and several other original Lindy Hoppers, the revival stirred up old memories of the Savoy, focusing not just on the origins of the dance, but the way the ballroom fostered a uniquely inclusive atmosphere that continues to prevail in modern Lindy. That is not to say that the current swing dance culture fully embodies equality; rather, the legacy of the Savoy and its Lindy Hoppers has inspired a movement to recover the history and recognize the structural issues within the dance community, moving towards a more democratic Lindy Hop.[130]

By recognizing the many complex ways in which the ballroom engaged in and confronted respectability politics as it navigated persistent racial stereotypes and white conservatism from 1926 to 1958, we can begin to understand the significance of the Savoy's

---

[128] John Briggs, "The Savoy Era of Jazz Closes on Auctioneer's Brief Reprise," *The New York Times* (New York, New York), October 1, 1958.
[129] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 202; Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 217.
[130] For more information about the revival and race politics, *see* Hancock, *American Allegory*.

historical memory. At an institutional level, through visual displays of elegance, whether that be in architecture or clothing, the Savoy created a fashionable space that allowed for Black working class patrons to experience the pleasures of swing. Lindy Hop, a product of the exchange between African and European dance traditions, became a uniquely African American source of cultural pride, despite the prevailing negative white attitudes. Asserting themselves in the dance world, the Savoy's Lindy Hoppers became representatives of Black artistic expression and modernity at the Harvest Moon Ball and World's Fair, showing New York City, and the rest of the world, the innovative and virtuosic talent of Black dancers.

Rather than simply reading the Savoy as a "racial utopia" that was one of the few truly integrated ballrooms in the early twentieth century, it is important to acknowledge the impressive strategies employed by both the ballroom and its Lindy Hoppers in resistance to the pressures of prejudice and discrimination, creating a distinct memory of freedom and equality. Yes, the Savoy ballroom maintained an impressive amount of racial diversity throughout its 32 years of existence; however, that was not just because of a policy. It was through a constant engagement in the fluctuating race politics in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century that the Savoy was able to create an incredible space that truly *felt* equal. And that is how it is remembered.

Norma Miller wrote, "Although Harlem created it, the Lindy belongs to everyone."[131] Frankie Manning wrote, "When I die, if I got to heaven, I want it to be just like the Savoy."[132] Though they are no longer with us, Miller, Manning, Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, and the Savoy Ballroom live on in each swing out at every swing dance.

---

[131] Miller and Jensen, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 248.
[132] Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 74.

Figure 6. Norma Miller and Frankie Manning dancing at the Roseland Ballroom in 1999.[133]

Figure 7. Plaque commemorating the Savoy Ballroom, in its original location on Lenox Avenue, in Harlem.[134]

[133] Screenshot from Alan Sugarman, "Frankie and Norma Performing at Frankie's 85th, Roseland," YouTube, May 23, 2019, 5:27. https://youtu.be/U_2q1rXXEcE

[134] *Savoy Ballroom Commemoration Plaque*, 2022. Personal photograph. Text reads: "Here once stood the legendary Savoy Ballroom, a hothouse for the development of jazz in the Swing era. Visually dazzling and spacious, the Savoy nightly featured the finest jazz bands in the nation, and its house bands included such famous orchestras as those of Fess Williams, Chick Webb, and Teddy Hill. The great jazz dancers who appeared on its block-long floor ranged from professionals like Whitey's Lindy Hoppers to everyday Harlemites. During a time of racial segregation and strife, the Savoy was one of the most culturally and racially integrated of institutions, and its fame was international. It was the heartbeat of Harlem's community and a testament to the indomitable spirit and creative impulse of African-Americans. It was a catalyst for innovation where dancers and musicians blended influences to forge new, wide-spread, and long-lasting traditions in music and dance. Whether they attended or not, all Americans knew the meaning of 'Stompin' at the Savoy.'"

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Briggs, John. "The Savoy Era of Jazz Closes on Auctioneer's Brief Reprise," *The New York Times* (New York, New York), October 1, 1958.

"First Day's Cold Cramps Style of Special Dancers," *Dunkirk Evening Observer* (Dunkirk, New York), May 1, 1939.

Hansen, Austin. *View of the Savoy Ballroom at night, on Lenox Avenue between 140th and 141st Streets, in Harlem, New York, circa 1950*. 1950. Still image. The New York Public Library. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/644e1f78-697e-5cbb-e040-e00a18061ca4

Hess, Otto F. *Ella Fitzgerald performing with Chick Webb at the Savoy Ballroom*. 1940. Still image. The New York Public Library. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/3c37e350-7315-0139-8284-0242ac110003#item-data

"Hollman to Direct Sociology Seminar," *Hill News* (Canton, New York), March 19, 1941.

Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: an autobiography*. New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940.

"In One Ear, Out—," *Harper's Bazaar* (New York, New York), June 1933.

Manning, Frankie and Cynthia R. Millman. *Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2007.

Miller, Norma and Evette Jensen. *Swingin' at the Savoy: the Memoir of a Jazz Dancer*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1996.

Ottley, Roi. *New World A-Coming*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943.

Potter, H. C., dir. *Hellzapoppin'*. Universal Pictures, 1941. Film.

Ross, Leonard Q. [Leo Rosten]. *The Strangest Places*. New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939.

Sampson, Edgar and Andy Razaf. "Stompin' at the Savoy." 1933. Song.

Savoy Commemoration Plaque. 2022. Personal photograph.

"Students, Over-Laden With Memories, Return to Canton with Tales of Brokendown Cars, Taxis, and Fishing Trips," *Hill News* (Canton, New York), April 23, 1941.

Sugarman, Alan. “Frankie and Norma Performing at Frankie’s 85th, Roseland.” Screenshot from YouTube video, 5:27. May 23, 2019. https://youtu.be/U_2q1rXXEcE

“Sunset Dancing Studio,” *Home Talk the Item* (Brooklyn, New York), March 18, 1931.

Swan, Gilber. “In New York,” *The Olean Evening Times* (Olean, New York), March 19, 1931.

The Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Brooklyn, New York), 1931-1933.

“The latest brand,” *Moving Picture World* (New York, New York), September 24, 1927.

The New York Age (New York, New York), 1926-1958.

The People’s Voice (New York, New York), May 1943.

Van Vechten, Carl. “Lindy Hop Comes Into Own,” *The Brooklyn Citizen* (Brooklyn, New York), August, 17, 1930.

Vreeland, F. T. “Jazz, Ragtime By-Product, Revives a Lost Art of Rhythm,” *The Sun* (New York, New York), November 4, 1917.

Walker, Danton. “Broadway,” *Olean Times Herald* (Olean, New York), June 28, 1941.

Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, 1937. Publicity photo. Frankie Manning Foundation. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/whitey-s-lindy-hoppers-publicity-photo/cwGlcwlah8IhAg?hl=en

Wood, Sam, dir. *A Day at the Races*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1937. Film.

Secondary Sources

Abdoulaev, Alexandre. “Savoy: Reassessing the Role of the ‘World’s Finest Ballroom’ in Music and Culture, 1926-1958.” Dissertation. Boston, Massachusetts: Boston University, 2014.

Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Race, Space, and Riots: in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Bederman, Gail. “Remaking Manhood Through Race and ‘Civilization.’” Chapter. In *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, 1-44. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Boris, Eileen. “‘You Wouldn’t Want One of ‘Em Dancing With Your Wife’: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II,” *American Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1998): 77-108.

Brown, Jayna. “From the Point of View of the Pavement: A Geopolitics of Black Dance.” Chapter. In *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, edited by Sherrie Tucker and Nichole T. Rustin, 157-179. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008.

Camp, Stephanie M. H. “The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861,” *The Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 3 (2002): 533-572.

Capeci Jr., Dominic J. “Walter F. White and the Savoy Ballroom Controversy of 1943,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History (1977-1989)* 5, no. 2 (1981): 1-11.

Caponi-Tabery, Gena. *Jump for Joy: Jazz, Basketball, and Black Culture in 1930s America*. Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York, New York: Basic Books, 1994.

DeFrantz, Thomas F. “Bone-Breaking, Black Social Dance, and Queer Corporeal Orature,” *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 1 (2016): 66-74.

DeFrantz, Thomas F. “Switch: Queer Social Dance, Political Leadership, and Black Popular Culture.” Chapter. In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, edited by Rebekah J. Kowal et. al., 1-24. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Desmond, Jane C. “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 26 (1994): 33-63.

Dinerstein, Joel. *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars*. Boston, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003.

Dixon Gottschild, Brenda. *The Black Dancing Body: a Geography From Coon to Cool*. New York, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Toronto, Canada: Ryerson University, 1903.

Duranti, Marco. "Utopia, Nostalgia and World War at the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 4 (2006): 663-683.

Emery, Lynne Fauley. *Black Dance: In the United States From 1619 to 1970*. Palo Alto, California: National Press Books, 1972.

Erenberg, Lewis A. *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Fürnkranz, Magdalena. "Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject in Jazz in the 1920s." Chapter. In *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender*, edited by James Reddan et al., 43-53. New York, New York: Routledge, 2022.

George-Graves, Nadine. "Taking the Cake: Black Dance, Competition, and Value." Chapter. In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition*, edited by Sherril Dodds, 17-40. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Hancock, Black Hawk. *American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination*. Chicago, Illinois; University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Heinilä, Harry. "An Endeavor by Harlem Dancers to Achieve Equality — The Recognition of the Harlem-Based African-American Jazz Dance Between 1921 and 1943." Dissertation. Helsinki, Sweden: University of Helskinki, 2016.

Higginbotham, Evelyn Brook. "The Politics of Respectability." Chapter. In *Righteous Discontent*, 185-229. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Hubbard, Karen and Terry Monaghan. "Negotiating Compromise on a Burnished Wood Floor: Social Dancing at the Savoy." Chapter. In *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, edited Julie Malnig, 126-145. Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Jackson, Jonathan David. "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing," *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2001): 40-53.

Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.

Monaghan, Terry. "Why Study The Lindy Hop?" *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2001): 124-127.

Monod, David. *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment, 1890-1925*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina, 2020.

Ostendorf, Brendt. "Minstrelsy & Early Jazz," *The Massachusetts Review* 20, no. 3 (1979): 574-602.

Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1986.

Robinson, Danielle. *Modern Moves: Dancing Race During the Ragtime and Jazz Eras*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Stearns, Marshall and Jean Stearns. *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. New York, New York: De Capo Press, 1968.

Stovall, Maya. "African American Cultural Technology: The Lindy Hop, the King of Pop, and the Factory Worker's Experience," *Transforming Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (2015): 1-13.

Stowe, David. *Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Tucker, Sherrie. "Swing: From Time to Torque (Dance Floor Democracy at the Hollywood Canteen)," *Daedalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 142, no. 4 (2013): 82-97.

Unruh, Kendra. "From Kitchen Mechanics to 'Jubilant Spirits of Freedom': Black, Working-Class Women Dancing the Lindy Hop," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 6 (2011): 213-233.

Unruh, Kendra. "May we have this dance?: Cultural ownership of the Lindy Hop from the swing era to today," *Atlantic Studies* 17, no. 1 (2020): 40-64.

Wade, Lisa. "The emancipatory promise of the habitus: Lindy hop, the body, and social change," *Ethnography* 12, no. 2 (2011): 224-246.

Wallach, Jennifer Jensen. "Building a Bridge of Words: The Literary Autobiography as Historical Source Material," *Biography* 29, no. 3 (2006): 446-461.