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“Is Tap Dance A Form of Jazz Percussion?”

By Aili Bresnahan

This essay will consider whether or not tap dance might be categorized as a kind of feet- and body-created jazz percussion rather than as a musical form of dance.¹ Its focus is thus primarily ontological, although there is much to be said about the experience and value of tap dance that goes beyond ontology. The question of “what” tap dance is will be investigated in both historical, functional, and culturally contextual ways. First, the historical evidence for this claim will be canvassed – it will be shown that tap dance was treated as percussion in at least one point in time in the history of jazz music in the United States, with the word “jazz” referring to both dance and musical components of jazz performance during at least the pre-bebop period of time in the 1920s through the end of World War II (1945). Second, this essay will consider tap dance’s function understood as its application, or what it *does* in performance context. This considers the extent to which what tap dance does, or how it is appreciated primarily, fits under the category of things that count as “percussion.” It will be shown in this section that “percussion” is a term that belongs to dance as well as music, with percussive dance containing auditory as well as visual and kinesthetic features and functions. Finally, this paper will consider and then reject the possibilities that jazz tap dance is either the dance component of a dance-music hybrid or that it is sometimes musical percussion. Here it will be claimed that the answers

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to the historical and functional questions are best solved by cultural and contextual considerations that make this the simplest solution to the problem at hand. The upshot of all this will be to demonstrate that yes, tap dance is a form of jazz percussion but that it still belongs primarily to dance and not to a dance-music or musical ontological category.

The Historical Argument: Tap Dance is Part of “Jazz”

The historical evidence is clear that tap dance was once part of what “jazz” meant in jazz history, in particular during the start of the 1920s through the end of WWII in the 1940s, and that remnants of this form of dance still remain today. Whether tap dance really “is” jazz in some non-historical metaphysical way will not be considered here, although I think a strong argument could be made that it is.

As Robert Crease has eloquently pointed out in his entry on “Jazz and Dance” in *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*,

In the beginning, the word *jazz* was not a noun naming a musical genre but probably an adjective describing a certain quality of movement and behavior: spirited, improvised, often sensual, and with a quirky rhythm. By the end of the second decade of this century [by which he meant at the time of his writing way back in the 1900s] the term was applied to both a kind of music and a kind of dancing. (Crease, 696; cf. Brown et al., 10, who point out that the first reference to “jazz” in print (in 1913) refer to it as “dance music”).

There is a general consensus among historians and philosophers as to this timeframe for the period of time in which jazz music and dance typically occurred together in social dance halls.

(See, for example: Crease at 696, DeFrantz at 82, Malone at 101-06, Valis Hill at 79-81, and Brown et al. at 10 and 13).

The reason why jazz dance and music separated after WWII has a number of different but jointly and severally possible explanations. Dance historian Thomas DeFrantz cites a 1945 *Metronome* article in support of his claim that an increase on post-war taxes on large dance halls contributed to this split (DeFrantz, 82) and Drummer Max Roach and Chicago-based tap dancer, Jimmy Payne, confirm this account (see Valis Hill, 158-59 and 168, and Seibert, 317).

Others blame the rise of polyrhythmic bebop for making it more difficult for tappers, particularly social and non-professional dancers, to keep up with the music (see, and Valis Hill, 159 and 169, and Brown et al., 11). Constance Valis Hill calls the tempos of bop both “schizophrenic” and “frenzied,” pointing out that Savoy dancers dealt with these challenges in a variety of ways, such as slowing down their rhythms to half-time and using “rubberlegging,” slides, spins, and larger movements that “absorbed the rhythms up into the body” (159 and 169). She also points to the post-war Cuban migration to New York, which brought mambo, rumba, and cha-cha-cha into the social dance scene, for the further decline of social jazz dance (159).

Jacqui Malone believes that tap dancers were part of creating the problem that led to the demise of tap dance as an essential part of jazz. She claims that bebop jazz music began due to the influence of rhythm tappers like John Bubbles but then the music went off in its own direction and left many of the dancers behind (116-17; see also Malone, 94-95 and 98 for more on rhythm tap in general). There were, however, new dances that emerged with bebop and at least one dance historian, DeFrantz among them, does not believe that bebop caused the end of social tap or jazz dance, pointing to the emergence of new forms of jazz tap dance, like the rhythm tap mentioned by Malone, above, that emerged from bebop once dancers learned to

adjust to the new rhythms (83). Valis Hill attests to this development as well but says that it's the professional dancers, not the regular joes, who were able to make these changes. Baby Laurence is one of the tap dancers she says was among these. She notes that he "matched the speed of bop with taps that were like explosions, machine-gun rattles, and jarring thumps; he then 'moved' these rhythms from the feet up, playing his body like a percussion instrument" (159).

Dance historians and critics point to additional reasons for the split as well. Valis Hill, for example, points to the fading of swing bands as the cause of loss of work for jazz dance "in its traditional form of tap dancing," as well as tastes in Broadway dance switching from tap to ballet (159). She also mentions that bop "was led by the new breed of young, angry, hip jazz musicians, many of whom felt that tap dancing was a form of Uncle Tomming – nothing more than a minstrel show of grinning-and-shuffling darkies" (169). Journalist and dance critic, Brian Seibert, also claims that other economic trends after WWII also contributed to both jazz dance and music's separation and to the decline in both, as audiences moved to the suburbs and musicians and stagehands unionized. Thus, there were factors besides tax changes that made it too expensive for larger clubs to keep running them (Seibert, 318).

Lee Brown, David Goldblatt, and Theodore Gracyk mark this change in jazz music as one that changed jazz from a popular to a high art (11). This suggests a sharpening and elevating of jazz music in some ways, especially if one follows Theodor Adorno's critique of popular music, something that Lee Brown has critiqued as inapt for jazz (see Brown). Literary and jazz critic, Albert Murray, however, in his book, *Stomping the Blues*, suggests that concert jazz misses something essential about what jazz is or was as an extension of the blues (see 189). He says:

...what is at issue is the primordial cultural conditioning of the people for whom blues music was created in the first place [black people in the U.S., presumably]. They are dance-beat oriented people. They refine all movement in the direction of dance-beat elegance. Their work movements become dance movements and so do their play movements; and so, indeed, do all the movements they use every day, including the way they walk, stand, turn, wave, shake hands, reach, or make any gesture at all. So, if the overwhelming preponderance of their most talented musicians has been almost exclusively preoccupied with the composition and performance of dance music, it is altogether consistent with their most fundamental conceptions of and responses to existence itself. (189) [bracketed material supplied]

Indeed, it would seem that when jazz music became concert music (for whatever reason) it lost something of its prior identity as dance music for all intents and purposes. The way Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk have described this is as a Wittgensteinian change in what jazz meant as a form of life, suggesting that the jazz music later become associated with forms of life other than dance rhythms (Brown et al., 19).

For ease of reference the type of tap dance that was typically performed with jazz music will be referred to hereinafter as “jazz tap dance” (“JTD” for short) following Constance Valis Hill (see her section on “jazz (tap) dance,” 79-93). Please note here that the claim that JTD is “performed *with*” jazz music and not “performed *to*” jazz music as music scholars are apt to do is intentional here (see Brown et al., e.g., at 9, 11, and 18; the Stearns text does this as well). This is due to the fact that the music often accompanied the dancers and not the other way around, with the musicians changing the beats and rhythms to reflect what it was the dancers were doing (*pace*

Brown et al., 18, who refer to dancing as accompanying the music). Indeed, Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk point out that Ella Fitzgerald was first a dancer at the Savoy Ballroom before developing what they call her “rhythmic acuity” (which probably refers at least in part to her scat style), which suggests that her musicianship was influenced by dance (see Brown et al., 12). They also note, as has been here, that “jazz musicians frequently took their cues from dancers” (18). So, more apt would be to say that jazz music was often “to” the dancers rather than that the dance was “to” the music. Saying that JTD was “with” music here is intended to highlight at least in the “symbiotic relationship” between dance and music that existed during the time period at issue (see Brown et al., 18).

Thus “JTD” refers to a jazz tap dance that was with music, and it can be distinguished from the other sorts of tap dance and clogging that are not part of the jazz tradition (cf. Stearns, 190, who call “jazz” steps, rather than “flash” steps, those for which taps are not essential, although they do consider tap dance part of jazz dance writ large). As a by-the-way, the reader might note that there is also “jazz dance” that is performed either without music or without jazz music; for example, the musical *West Side Story* (1957) included jazz dance in a “modern” form that was performed to classical music by Leonard Bernstein (see Valis Hill, 168). In any event, JTD can at least be called “jazz” in a historical sense even if were decided that other forms of tap dance cannot.

According to Jacqui Malone, at the beginning of the 1930s:

...the number one hangout for jazz musicians in New York City was the Rhythm Club, where they could jam free of the limits imposed by floor shows. Young musicians would go there to be heard and to learn from the experts.

Eventually dancers and other performers joined the action. When the Rhythm Club moved further uptown in 1932, the original site, renamed the Hooper's Club, because the headquarters and stomping grounds of America's most innovative tap dancers. Dancers and musicians found a common ground for exchange and mutual enrichment at the Hooper's Club. (89)

She further points out that jazz musician Dicky Wells said, "While you're blowing, cats are dancingAnd I mean, really dancing....It would invigorate you because you'd be playing better while people were dancing" (89).

Now that one kind of tap dance (JTD) can be identified as "jazz" in a historical sense this essay can consider whether at least JTD is "percussion." Doing this does still consider what percussion means in terms of music history but the focus will also expand here to consider whether JTD functions primarily as a percussive rather than other type of artform, which would make it primarily auditory rather than visual in how it is appreciated (as well as kinesthetically, of course).

The Functional Argument: JTD is A Percussive Art

JTD does, in fact, function according to the set of things to which the term "percussion" refers, which makes this a culturally contextual sort of functional argument. In the arts, "percussion" typically and most commonly refers to "percussion instruments" in music, such as drums, cymbals, and (technically) piano. The reason these instruments got their name, however, is because of another definition of percussion: "The striking of one solid object with or against another with some degree of force" as in medicine, where "percussion" refers to "the action of tapping a part of the body as part of a diagnosis" (Oxford English Dictionary online,

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/percussion>, accessed April 6, 2019.) JTD is percussive in the sense that it typically strikes the floor with either a metal tap or the wooden “clunk” or “swish” of a soft-shoe tap shoe. Soft-shoe tap is quieter than the tap dance that uses metal taps but it is still percussive because it relies essentially on a sort of rhythmic beating or “tapping” (see Valis Hill, 161). Thus, JTD’s percussion has both strongly audible and non- or mildly audible rhythmic features.

Indeed, there are many forms of dance beyond JTD and that are performed and appreciated for their rhythmic as well as auditory aspects as their primary mode of appreciation. Thus, what will now be called “dance percussion” includes forms of dance that highlight audible percussion with the feet (such as clogging and tap dance) as well as body percussion and the use of musical instruments or sound-making objects while dancing. Examples of body percussion include stepping, gumboot, and juba (also known as “pattin’ juba” or “hambone”), or stomping, snapping, or clapping (see Seibert, 57, for a discussion of juba). Examples of the use of percussion instruments or objects in dance include the use of castanets in Flamenco dance, wearing leggings containing seeds that make sounds (as in Aztec dance), the use of pellet bells tied around dancers’ chests in Nigeria, and the use of bells tied around ankles in some forms of Indian, Asian, and Middle Eastern dance (see Hanna, 60 and 68; Brown and Parsons, 82-83). The hit Broadway show, *Stomp!*, first performed in 1991, also uses a form of dance they call “trash percussion” (where dancers use trash can lids on their feet to make percussive sounds) (“Percussive Dance Around the World” <http://stomplondon.com/article/percussive-dance-around-the-world/>, dated March 16, 2015, accessed April 6, 2019).

Thus, JTD can at least be categorized as a type of percussive dance. Is it part of a dance-music hybrid or musical percussion as well?

Should JTD Be Categorized as Part of Dance-Music Percussion?

This essay will now consider the possibility that JTD is not really properly categorized as *dance* at all but is really the dance component of the dance-music hybrid known as jazz, at least as jazz existed at one point in history. The inspiration for this idea comes from Jerrold Levinson's article, "Hybrid Art Forms," which appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* in 1984. Here is Levinson's definition of a hybrid art form taken in that article:

An art form is a hybrid one in virtue of its development and origin, in virtue of its emergence out of a field of previously existing artistic activities and concerns, two or more of which it in some sense combines. Hybrid artworks always manifest significant structural or dimensional complexity to be sure, but that they are hybrid works, and what manner of hybrids they are (i.e., what they are hybrids of), can be made clear only by reference to historical conditions at the time of creation and in terms of media that have already been constituted as such. The components of a putative hybrid must be locatable somewhere in the preceding culture and must be plausibly seen as having come together in the result. In short, hybrid art forms are art forms arising from the actual combination or interpenetration of earlier art forms. Art forms that have not so arisen, though they may be intellectually analyzable into various possible or actual structural or mediumistic components, are not hybrids in the primary sense. (Levinson, 6)

On Levinson's definition, then, for JTD to be a component of jazz as a dance-music hybrid it needed to have preceded the jazz phenomenon at issue, and so would the music, and then come together as hybrid art form. This means that the history of JTD would have to show (and

Levinson's account is a historical one) that there was some form of dance activity, and some form of music activity, that pre-existed and that came together to form jazz. If, however, the historical account of jazz previously provided is correct then it seems to negate this possibility. Yes, jazz history shows that as it originated it had both a dance and a musical component. But pointing to some sort of artistic practice in the larger domain at issue (dance or music respectively) as pre-existing cannot be enough in order to establish that a hybrid art form in Levinson's sense has emerged from the two. There is no form of art that does not have its existence in some other pre-existing artistic practice or proto-artistic practice and all art develops in new ways with influences from other domains of activity. Artists are not, *pace* Plato perhaps, empty vessels who create new practices after a muse fills it with content. Instead, and as Joseph Margolis has eloquently argued, they are cultural agents who create new artforms out of their culturally developed capacities as artists in some domain or other. (See Margolis 1999 and 2010 for a full account of this view.) The most charitable view of Levinson's account, then, must be that the art forms in question have to be more concretely and definitely jazz-like in some way for jazz to then be a dance-music hybrid. To put it another way: one would have to identify the historical precursors of dance and music as separate jazz-like strains and then show that when jazz arose it blended these two separate strains into a stream that became the new dance-music hybrid.

If it is the case, however, that distinctively jazz-like dance and music arose together collaboratively as part of jazz then jazz fails at least Levinson's criterion for a hybrid art form, although there might be other good reasons for thinking of it as a hybrid art form informally or in a non-Levinsonian sense, such as the fact that in this case what was once a sort of organic hybrid later split into discreet components of jazz dance and jazz music.

In fact, this possibility will be rejected for reasons that involve simplicity a bit later in this paper, after the discussion of the JTD as (sometimes) music percussion section below.

Is JTD at Least Sometimes Musical Percussion?

If JTD often provides auditory percussion, which is something more typical to music than to dance, and in fact sometimes functions as a percussion instrument in music in auditory conversation with other musical instruments then why not say that at least when it does so that JTD is music rather than dance percussion?

Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk say that “[t]he sounds of dancing with metal taps on shoes was tantamount to playing an instrument with one’s feet” (Brown et al., 16). They then quote jazz critic, Whitney Balliett, who wrote in a 1973 obituary for Baby Laurence: “A great drummer tap dances sitting down. A great tap-dancer drums standing up” (Brown et al., 16). Valis Hill also calls the tapping Baby Laurence did with his feet “strict drum rhythms,” although she also notes that he would add slow and flowing upper-body movements from Asadata Dafora, a musician and dancer from Sierra Leone, to offset this (Valis Hill, 159). Laurence’s tapping was also appreciated in some cases for its auditory qualities alone – he even recorded an album of his tap dancing called *Dancemaster* (Photo and info about it is provided in Valis Hill, 202).

Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk have also noted that the sounds of tap dancing were sometimes used in place of drumming (Brown et al., 17).

Saying that something is “like” playing a musical instrument, though, or that a dancer “drums with their feet” is to employ simile or metaphor, however, not to make an identity claim. Similes and metaphors are literary (and sometimes philosophical) devices in order to call attention to the qualities that something has that make it akin to something else. Indeed, Nelson

Goodman famously claimed in his 1968 book, *Languages of Art*, that it was the hallmark of all art that it employs metaphorical exemplification. And yet JTD seems closer to *actual* “drumming” or musical percussion than metaphorical drumming since it is designed simply to create the auditory qualities of a drum rather than refer us to the idea of a drum in some way. It is the writing about JTD that refers us to drumming when referring to the tap dance. The JTD just makes some percussive sounds that are akin to drumming but do not reference drumming. JTD is itself auditorily percussive so the question then becomes whether an artform that is appreciated in a primary way for these qualities is music rather than dance. The section below will answer this question more fully with a resounding “no” after providing a fuller answer to the JTD as component of jazz-music hybrid question.

Why JTD Is Dance Percussion (and Not Dance-Music or Musical Percussion)

Here the questions of whether JTD is a dance-music hybrid or is (at least sometimes) musical percussion will be analyzed and rejected in a fuller way than was done in the sections above. To raise and reject these views is not to set up arguments of straw and knock them down but it is responsive to live possibilities that exist due to the unique history and function of JTD that was previously discussed. The answer to the question of whether JTD should be treated as a dance-music hybrid or as often musical percussion will rely, in part, on the principle of Occam’s Razor, which is used in both science and in philosophy. This principle holds (roughly) that if there is more than one plausible theory at play that can account for a given phenomenon then one ought to select the simplest theory that can do the task. Philosophical support for this principle can be found in Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (Baker). The answer also relies on the Wittgensteinian idea (discussed

in one form by Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk and in another by Margolis) that it makes sense for philosophy not to depart too extravagantly from the terms used within the life-worlds where they exist. Finally, there is support for the idea among philosophers of art that when we are attempting an application of philosophic theory to a domain that exists apart from philosophy (like art) that it makes sense to use terms as they are used in practice.

In short, it does not seem that there is anything to be gained conceptually by treating jazz as either a dance-music hybrid or as (sometimes) musical percussion. This is due to the fact that dance and music so often, historically and practically, go together, not just in the case of jazz but in the case of a vast number of cases (indeed, there are dance-musicologists who can attest to this). Like “jazz,” for example, the “polka” refers to both a type of dance and a type of music, as does the “waltz,” and “hip hop,” and a great many other music-dance combinations. Do we need to identify all of these as dance-music hybrids or, even more confusingly, as musical percussion in order to understand the deep connection between dance and music in these cases? Wouldn’t it make more sense to say that it is often the case, as it is, that dance and music are in conversation when performed together in many cases of both social and concert dance?

Complicating this analysis of jazz as a hybrid art form is that some jazz performers might themselves be described as hybrid performers, functioning as both musicians and dancers or who contain both movement and musical sensibilities, and this complicates the separation of the categories of music and dance. Duke Ellington believed that some jazz musicians were “really” dancers, for example. When describing Chick Webb, for example, one of the jazz musicians who played at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, once called “The Home for Happy Feet,” (Brown et al., 12) Ellington said this:

Some musicians are dancers, and Chick Webb was. You can dance with a lot of things besides your feet. Billy Strayhorn was another dancer – in his mind. He was a dance-writer. Chick Webb was a dance-drummer who painted pictures of dances with his drums....The reason why Chick Webb had such control, such command of his audiences at the Savoy ballroom, was because he was always in communication with the dancers and felt it the way they did. And that is probably the biggest reason why he could cut all the other bands that went in there.

(Malone, 105, quoting Duke Ellington.)

Tap dancers Fred Astaire, and perhaps today's most rhythm-focused tap dancer, Savion Glover, were both trained drummers (see Valis Hill, 283, Glover and Weber, and Decker). Astaire also often sang or played piano and sometimes drums along with tap dancing. The two-volume set, *The Fred Astaire Story*, first produced on LP and now available on CD, features Astaire both singing and tapping.

In answer to the question of whether JTD is sometimes musical percussion, which as the reader will recall used rhythm tapper Baby Laurence as an example (who published an entire album of just the auditory sounds of his tap dancing), one might first respond that Laurence appears to be a tap dancer who is outside the purview of the vast majority of JTD. Laurence was a rare rhythm tapper in the bop era who *did* try to match his dance “to” bebop jazz in the concert jazz dance era. This dates him in history as post-JTD, with JTD defined in the narrow way that this essay has defined it. But even if Laurence were a JTD dancer, the audible nature of tap dance in conversation with music need not make it “music” any more than the bodily aspect of musical performance makes it “dance.”

What makes the percussion in JTD dance percussion rather than musical percussion has more to do with cultural and contextual features of how it has been perceived and labelled in practice than because of its perceptible features. This suggests either the Wittgensteinian “form of life” idea from Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk mentioned earlier or a contextual and what David Davies has called a “pragmatic constraint” that refers to how the terms are actually used in practice (see Davies). In addition, Julie Van Camp has suggested “that the identity of works of art be understood pragmatically as ways of talking and acting by the various communities of the art world” (2006, 42) (see also Conroy for a similar view). What this means is that we can and should, where practicable, take a look at how the term “percussion” is used in the artworlds at issue, here dance and music, and not deviate too far from these practices unless there is some overriding philosophical reason to do so (this goes back to Occam’s Razor).

In the danceworld, there is such a thing known as “dance percussion” that is sometimes appreciated for its auditory features alone (as in auditory records of tap dance), as has been demonstrated earlier through the dance examples provided. In addition, the use of the word “dance” here changes how it is perceived by appreciating audiences – as a particular sort of practice that is now sustained in a usually dance-only context rather than, as in the JTD era, in a dance-with-music context. This shaping of interpretive and appreciative practice by virtue of the concept at issue makes use of Arthur Danto’s institutional theory of art in his 1981 book, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. (Please see that book for more on this) Thus, JTD is jazz historically, percussive functionally, and dance pragmatically, contextually and institutionally.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the answer to the question of whether tap dance is jazz percussion can now be answered in the affirmative so long as the constraints of understanding that the terms “jazz” and “percussion” do not belong to music alone, either historically, functionally, or in cultural context. Tap dance is truly dance. And there is a version of tap dance that is truly jazz. Perhaps this “truly” language also suggests some sort of authenticity and value claim. It at least suggests that there is something about jazz which can be true of it or not. And in this sense at least this has been an ontology of jazz, showing where tap dance fits in to it, as well as an ontology of one kind of tap dance.

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