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Savoy: reassessing the role of the "World's Finest Ballroom" in music and culture, 1926-1958.

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It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.

Duke Ellington
DEDICATION

To Megan, coffee, and swinging out.
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ABSTRACT

From 1926 to 1958, the Savoy Ballroom in New York’s Harlem neighborhood played a critical role in the development and showcasing of African-American popular culture. During its lifetime, the Savoy Ballroom significantly affected the concurrent development of jazz music and jazz dance, and laid important groundwork for racial integration. The Savoy Ballroom served as the home base for such jazz greats as William “Chick” Webb, Lucius Venable “Lucky” Millinder, and David “Panama” Francis, and launched the careers of John Birk “Dizzy” Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk. Beyond music, the Lindy Hop, a partnered jazz dance that emerged at the Savoy during the late 1920s, was one of the Ballroom’s cultural exports; it gained an unprecedented degree of fame and recognition during the late 1930s, and is still practiced today by communities across the United States and the world.

The objective of this dissertation is to examine the cultural, social, and musical contribution made by the Savoy Ballroom to the promotion of African-American culture. The first and second chapters of this dissertation address the historical and cultural context of Harlem and the Savoy proper. The third chapter examines some of the
emerging traditions behind the Savoy Ballroom’s status as the “World’s Finest Ballroom.” The fourth and fifth chapters address the chronological and technical development of music and jazz dance at the Savoy, with particular attention given to the lasting impact of such advancements as the incorporation of swing feel into jazz. The sixth chapter examines the cultural impact of the Ballroom on contemporary and modern media, particularly print, music, film, and photography. Finally, the seventh chapter examines the Savoy Ballroom’s participation in New York’s World’s Fair exhibition in 1939, and its impact on the worldwide export of Harlem’s African-American culture.
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INTRODUCTION

Prelude: A Serenade in a Dark Room

It is 9:00 PM and the lights are dimming in the confines of a ballroom tucked away behind a couple of nondescript warehouses. The small jazz band on the stage has been warming up for the past hour and is now ready to play, yet the dancers are still entering the dimly lit space. They come in many ages and from different walks of life: younger kids of high-school or college age, middle-aged couples dressed in tailored suits and bowties, and older couples in saddle shoes. All of them gather in the recesses of the ballroom, waiting for the band to start. The atmosphere positively crackles with anticipation as the venue owner, a middle-aged man sharply dressed in a velvet suit, comes to the stage:

Ladies and gentlemen! All the way from New York, I present the Blue… Vipers… of Brooklyn!

Cheers erupt as the bandleader gives the musicians in his charge the perfunctory “one, two, three, four,” and launches them into a brisk, banjo-laden rendition of “Dinah.” The floor, empty mere seconds ago, instantly fills up with couples performing a strange yet somehow familiar and organic dance routine. They separate and come back together, the staccato of the rhythm section punctuated by sharply accented kicks, quick stops, and syncopated tap-dance like movements of the feet. In the recesses of a darkened dance hall, over one hundred couples are now dancing the Lindy Hop.
This scene would not be out of place in any American dance hall or stereotypical speakeasy of New York’s Jazz Age, were it not for the fact that this scene is taking place in the confines of Boston Swing Central, located in the center of Charlestown, one of Boston’s working-class neighborhoods, and the year is not 1933. It is 2014.

While it is no longer the premier popular music in America, swing has continued to thrive over the past century. Following the height of its popularity during the late 1930s, it fell into relative obscurity by the early 1960s, to be only occasionally unearthed at Las Vegas casino shows with the likes of Sammy Davis, Jr. and Frank Sinatra.¹ In the mid-1980s, spurred on by the precision and sparkling energy of its neoclassicism, swing energetically returned to the scene and remained in the public eye through the end of the 1990s. This was due in no small part to the efforts of a mass media exemplified by the 1998 “Khakis Swing!” commercial for GAP trousers.² By any contemporary standard, swing music and swing dance continue being relatively fringe activities reserved for die-hard aficionados of old music, vintage clothing, and peculiarly atavistic mannerisms, but showed no signs abating in spite of such anachronistic tendencies. There are currently large swing dance communities established in nearly every major urban area of the United States, as well as ever-strengthening scenes in places such as Sweden, Israel, Cambodia, and South Africa.³ According to dance historian and ethnomusicologist

Benedict M. Ibitokun, the American roots of swing dance reach back to the historic Harlem Renaissance of 1920s New York, and further: to late nineteenth-century New Orleans, the cotton plantations of the American South, and even across the Atlantic ocean to West Africa, where the rhythmic traditions are kept alive by Sabar and tribal dances of the Yoruba.⁴

The dramatic popularity of swing culture resulted in a variety of fascinating cultural developments. Among the most significant of these was a deliberate return to a neoclassical aesthetic redolent of 1930s jazz, evident in the conscious emulation of Jazz-Age musical proclivities, dress styles, and speaking mannerisms. As a result, many swing communities developed individualized aesthetic predilections for various styles of dance, particular types of swing music, and even adopted customs, traditions, and rivalries. Today, one is as likely to see individuals dress in vintage clothing as one is to enter a community where T-shirts and blue jeans define the dress style. Revivals of hot jazz are now heard with greater frequency, but as recently as five years ago, it was eighteen-piece big bands that dominated the bandstands.⁵ During 2005 and 2006, the primacy of the so-called Savoy style of Lindy Hop over that of the competing Hollywood style was hotly contested in print, online, and in person.⁶


The culturally defining traits of the modern swing scene did not emerge fully formed from the modern understanding of jazz, however. They are the extensions of a lengthy, continuously evolving tradition that started during the mid-1920s in Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom. The Savoy, formerly located in the center of Harlem, became the model institution for many things jazz during the Swing Era, and evolved much over the thirty-two years of its existence. Dubbed “America’s Finest Ballroom,” the Savoy survived a profound economic downturn, a World War, and a series of racially motivated riots. For over two decades, the Ballroom retained the status of an iconic institution representing the cultural center of swing traditions. During its lifespan it was a venue where the best dancers and musicians congregated to celebrate, perfect, and disseminate the latest in jazz culture. Over the course of its existence and beyond, the Savoy Ballroom and its legacy also brought about a set of core traditions and myths commonly associated with the venue’s original purpose. Some of these traditions are justifiably traceable to the Savoy, while others are invented.7

The Savoy Ballroom’s legacy is important for several reasons. It provides a glimpse into the development of one of the primary cultural, musical, and social centers dedicated to the growth and dissemination of swing music as popular culture. Additionally, the Savoy Ballroom is known as the birthplace of the Lindy Hop, a swing dance evolved out of a fusion of Anglo-American and African-American partnered dances. The Lindy Hop specifically reflects and personifies the physical expression of

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swing music’s rhythm and aesthetics. From a socio-political perspective, the Savoy made
an immeasurable contribution to the budding Civil Rights movement, as it was one of the
first venues in New York City to incorporate *de facto* racial integration into its business
practices, representing a “wide-scale acceptance of Black urban culture by whites in the
1930’s and 1940’s.”8 Several significant comparisons may also be made between the
Savoy Ballroom and other, similar organizations. Unlike such musical institutions as the
New York Philharmonic, which focused on the preservation of the cultural *status quo*, the
Savoy Ballroom actively emphasized musical and artistic innovation by perpetually
seeking out new talent to occupy its bandstands.9 Similarly, the Savoy specifically aimed
to incorporate the community into its day-to-day activities and processes, relying as much
on public feedback and participation as on the managerial decisions of its staff. Finally,
the Savoy represented public taste by becoming its arbiter, expediting innovation in the
musical and dance tastes by relying on the proclivities and perceptions of its clients to
gauge their relative success. In summary, the Savoy Ballroom was a culturally forward-
looking establishment and set the entertainment standard for Swing-Era America.

The primary objective of this inquiry is to explore how the Savoy Ballroom’s
cultural power manages to endure in the current world that is driven almost wholly by
progress and economics and looks to the future for greater breakthroughs. In some sense,
the concerted revival of swing culture mirrors the general state of popular arts, echoing

the big bands currently backing such artists Justin Timberlake, Harry Connick, Jr.,
Michael Bublé, and Lyle Lovett. Such parallels allow for a more focused exploration of
how and why the Savoy Ballroom made an impact lasting enough to accommodate
individuals of varying ages, ethnicities, and social statuses, and generated lasting interest
in a dance developed three-quarters of a century ago and performed to music which may
occasionally be close to one hundred years old.

Upon the Yellow Brick Road: Objective and Methodology

In light of the previous questions asked, the objective of this dissertation is to re-
contextualize the Savoy Ballroom’s role in the wider framework of contemporary and
current popular culture. The primary goal was to assess the impact made by the Savoy
Ballroom by examining its contributions to the development of jazz music, partnered jazz
dance, and popular culture. These fields were chosen based on the aggregation of artistic
and cultural output generated by the Savoy Ballroom itself, as well as public opinion and
reactions surrounding its institutional status. The Savoy Ballroom, active from 1926 to
1958 (with a brief hiatus in 1943), was an active generator, purveyor, and exporter of
popular culture. In fact, the Savoy Ballroom was so popular that it became a well-known
destination for New York City sightseeing tours during the 1930s.\textsuperscript{10} In order to sort
through the variety of information uncovered during my research, the research data were
approached from several angles.

\textsuperscript{10} Moe Gale to W. H. Lynn, November 24, 1937, World’s Fair New York 1939/1940 papers, 1547:7, New
York Public Library, New York.
The first chapter of this dissertation provides a historical framework for the emergence of Harlem’s nightlife. The focus remains particularly on Harlem’s formative years, 1900-1945. The dissertation’s second chapter addresses the establishment of Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom, and summarizes its history through an examination of various important dates in its history. Additionally, the second chapter explores such details as the Savoy’s employment records, pay schedules, attendance, and costs. The research contained in the first two chapters of the dissertation is predominantly historical, examining a variety of period primary sources ranging from personal and recorded interviews to Harlem newspapers and monographs. The third chapter discusses the Savoy Ballroom’s role as an institution, placing it within context of various cultural organizations dedicated to the formation, advancement, and preservation of cultural norms and traditions. Consequently, the discussion of the Savoy as a cultural establishment is chiefly conducted from the sociological, anthropological, and ethnomusicological perspectives, examining the Ballroom’s role within the context of greater societal tropes. Chapter 4 primarily examines music at the Savoy Ballroom through the lens of its evolution from the Ballroom’s opening in 1926 to its final year, 1956. The research shown in Chapter 4 relies primarily on musical analysis and historical comparative study of a series of recordings released during the Savoy’s lifetime. Additionally, various archival and secondary sources were consulted to ascertain the accuracy of these findings in order to provide a clear idea of the Savoy Ballroom’s musical environment. This chapter also reviews a number of important contributors to the Savoy’s musical background, providing contextual information on individual
contributions of band leaders such as Chick Webb, Lucky Millinder, Al Cooper, and Panama Francis. In Chapter 5, various dance styles practiced at the Savoy Ballroom are addressed with specific attention paid to the Lindy Hop, a form of partnered swing dance popular from the late 1920s into the early 1940s. This chapter discusses the history and evolution of the Lindy Hop by way of providing an overview of archival footage of dancers and events, and addresses the relevance and importance of several competing performance styles of the dance. The sixth chapter examines the popular reception of the Savoy Ballroom in print, photograph, and word of mouth, providing a cultural overview of the venue’s relevance within the framework of the Swing Era. Lastly, the seventh chapter summarizes one of the Savoy Ballroom’s most significant years, 1939, concluding with a thorough examination of the founding and operation of the Savoy World’s Fair Pavilion in Flushing, New York.

The research below thus addresses the development of swing and swing dance at the Savoy Ballroom over a period of thirty years. These existed in a fluid state, with frequent alterations and overlaps in style, performance practice, and repertoire. Much of my research into the rhythm, melody, harmony, and improvisation components of jazz is of an empirical nature, focusing primarily on transcription and analysis. It is, however, impossible to discuss jazz without paying attention to the musicians who performed it; therefore, I address the personalities of the performers to some degree, paying critical attention to anecdotal and apocryphal accounts. As it is not possible to state which musicians from the Savoy’s vast retinue of performers were qualitatively better and more skillful, I chose to use a comparative method for discussing music in the dissertation. In
effect, musicians are not evaluated on their skill, merit, or standing within an ensemble, but rather on the degree to which they adapted to the changing needs and tastes of the Savoy Ballroom. For instance, the work of Chick Webb, Fess Williams, and Lucky Millinder will feature prominently in the discussion of the Savoy Ballroom’s impact, while Benny Goodman’s and Artie Shaw’s contributions will be omitted almost entirely because of their lack of continuous involvement with the Savoy’s internal dynamics, culture, and musical aesthetics.11

Also, being fully aware of the malleable nature of jazz, I confine my arguments almost exclusively to swing. Swing was the musical style most directly relevant to the growth and development of jazz dance at the Savoy Ballroom and elsewhere. I will be paying particular attention to the years 1926 through 1958, but my examination will also encompass the preceding and following years to provide bookends for my argument. I shall focus mostly on Lindy Hop, since it was the preferred dance at the Savoy, and a great deal of research has been devoted to this subject.12 Other dances are less well known. These include the popular Southern practice of jookin’; the blues (as pictured for example in Mura Dehn’s documentary film The Spirit Moves); various ballroom dances such as Tango, Waltz, and Cha-Cha; and bebop dance.13 I shall refer to these dances only

on specific occasions, to point out discrepancies and similarities, or when it is contextually appropriate.

The culture of the Savoy Ballroom also needed to be examined from a variety of cultural perspectives, including traditions, customs, and insider-outsider relations. As an institution, the Savoy Ballroom relied on social, pseudo-ritualistic, and taste-related traditions in an effort to establish a purpose and an identity, rules and boundaries. Many of these social norms had a direct impact on the day-to-day operations of the Savoy Ballroom, and thus affected the social strata and their relationship with the music and dancing at the Savoy. During its time, the Savoy Ballroom accommodated a rich and multi-cultural client base comprised of many ethnicities and creeds, among them Barbadians, Jamaicans, West African expatriates, third- or fourth-generation children of slaves, gentiles, Eastern-European Jews, and more. Because of such a wide range of cultural variables, the act of isolating, identifying, and discussing the importance of specific sets of traditions in relation to the Ballroom’s operations becomes a difficult task. Therefore, I separate the authentic traditions from the invented ones, and to establish a framework for the purposes of such traditions. I also examined developmental trends in authentic traditions within the context of music, dance, taste, and popular culture by exploring their origins, evolutions, and contributions to the Savoy Ballroom’s growth and development.

The outsider’s perspective on the Savoy Ballroom plays an important role in any examination of its role in its immediate Harlem community, as well as its contemporary culture at large. Individuals with close personal ties to the Savoy Ballroom, such as
dancers, managers, former clients, and their friends and families, share accounts that differ from academic analyses to varying degrees. My own examination of the Savoy Ballroom relies heavily on the accounts of surviving dancers, as well as the family members, friends, and acquaintances of dancers who formed the roster of my informants interview over the course of my research. It became apparent during my research, however, that while their perspectives provide an intensely personal and intimate glimpse of the Savoy Ballroom, one not afforded by newspaper articles and archive materials, a purely objective account was difficult to come by, and was frequently obscured by my role as an outsider to the Savoy Ballroom’s culture. The perceptions of my informants may also have been influenced by age, memory, and cultural sensitivity to the issue at hand. It thus became necessary to verify many statements against published accounts and other sources. Nevertheless, the interviews provided a cogent and revealing outlook on many cultural issues surrounding a contemporary examination of the Savoy Ballroom as an institution.

Separating fact from fiction likewise became an issue when dealing with non-academic contemporary writing, from Carl van Vechten’s fictionalized accounts, to Leo Rosten’s early jazz criticism, to the supposedly more factual newspaper articles in *New York Age* and *New York Times*. A sizable portion of the writing from the Swing Era is racially charged and biased, providing a picture of New York, Harlem, and the Savoy Ballroom that is incomplete at best, and erroneous at worst. With a collection of

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secondary sources as my point of departure, I have attempted to gather as much additional information from the interviews, archives, and other sources as I possibly could in an effort to present a clear, comprehensive examination of the Savoy Ballroom as a musical venue, cultural institution, and public space.

In the Archive: Sources of Research

My sources are grouped into three sections: personal interviews, archival material, and secondary sources. I conducted several interviews with surviving Savoy Ballroom dancers, as well as with individuals whose strong ties to the first generations of Savoy Ballroom dancers made them reliable sources of information. Among the dancers interviewed were Sonny Allen, Ruth Ettins Rheingold, and Norma Miller; the associates, friends, and family members of the Savoy’s dancers include New York Swing Dance Society founding members Margaret Batiuchok, Robert Crease, and Judy Pritchett; Harlem Swing Dance Society founder B. Allison Jones; and swing dance researchers Sharon Davis, Juan Villafañe, Peter Loggins, and Robert E. White, III. I cross-referenced my interviews with similar, related interviews conducted by other jazz and dance scholars, as well as with archival sources and news accounts in an attempt to produce the clearest possible historical portrait of the Savoy Ballroom.

Additional primary sources include the invaluable materials available in the Fulton History and Prelinger Archives. The Fulton History Archive provided access to many issues of various Harlem and New York newspapers from the 1920s, 1930s, and
1940s. The archive featured such publications as the *New York Age*, *New York Sun*, *New York Post*, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, *New York Times*, and the *New York PM Daily*, providing various articles, advertisements, reviews, and overviews of various events and engagements at the Savoy Ballroom from 1926 to 1958. The Prelinger Archive was an excellent source for video recordings of the Savoy Pavilion, as well as for any film featuring appearances by Savoy Lindy Hoppers.\(^{15}\)

In addition to primary sources, I conducted archival research in several important collections, specifically the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Manuscripts and Archives Collection, and the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archive of Recorded Sound, all at the New York Public Library. These materials have been crucial in providing outsider information on the Savoy Ballroom. In addition, the Savoy Pavilion documents located in the 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair papers located at the Manuscripts and Archives division of New York Public Library’s Schwartzman Building have proven to be an invaluable asset in estimating the finances and expenditures of the Savoy Ballroom, as well as ascertaining certain idiosyncrasies in the Ballroom’s operations. The Mura Dehn papers at the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archive were helpful in demonstrating the Savoy Ballroom dancers’ personalities and their interpersonal relationships. In addition, the Mura Dehn archive shed a considerable amount of light on the relationship between insiders and outsiders, setting up the framework for my research. The Archive of Recorded Sound at the New York Public Library allowed me access to a series of historic recordings made at the Savoy Ballroom,

\(^{15}\) The majority of these excerpts are also available via YouTube.
among which are records by Chick Webb, Ella Fitzgerald, Bennie Moten, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Lester Young, and Fess Williams. I have also examined several archives at the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D. C. The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress provided a recorded interview with Norma Miller, archived for the American Visionaries collection; the Smithsonian Museum’s extensive collection of recorded jazz contributed to my discography, substantially expanding my list of live Savoy Ballroom recordings.

Among the secondary sources used in the research of this dissertation, I rely on a series of seminal texts for the purposes of obtaining factual information about the Savoy Ballroom, Harlem, and jazz dance of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. In addition to Marshall and Jean Stearns’ compendium Jazz Dance, I have consulted Frank Tirro’s Jazz: A History and Ted Gioia’s The History of Jazz; several musician and dancer biographies, including Dave Gelly’s Being Prez, a biography of Lester Young; Frankie Manning and Cynthia Millman’s autobiographical account, Ambassador of Lindy Hop; and several historic accounts of Harlem’s history, including Jervis Anderson’s This Was Harlem, Nat Brandt’s Harlem at War, and Jonathan Gill’s Harlem. I also examined many theses and dissertations on the subject of Lindy Hop and its interaction with music and social culture of the 1930s, as well as many scholarly articles from a variety of dance and jazz research journals. 16

16 For a full list, please see bibliography.
At the Corner of Lenox and 141st: Summary

The Savoy Ballroom established itself as a multivalent institution during its existence. It was a dance hall, a music venue, a social gathering place, a charity outreach sponsor, and a community center, establishing a core of traditions that perpetuated a set of new cultural and social standards. From 1926 to 1958, the Savoy Ballroom’s management advanced a rich cultural agenda, actively promoting social growth via cultural and ethnic inclusivity, and contributing to the growth and development of new music by hosting and promoting a variety of high-caliber big bands during the 1930s and smaller ensembles during the mid- to late 1940s. My aim is to demonstrate the effect the Savoy Ballroom had on the social, artistic, cultural, and political atmosphere of Swing-Era Harlem, and to provide as accurate and faithful a portrait of the Savoy Ballroom in all its many facets.
CHAPTER I: HISTORY OF HARLEM

If Margie Polite
Had of been white
She might not‘ve cussed
Out the cop that night.

In the lobby
Of the Braddock Hotel
She might not‘ve felt
The urge to raise hell.

She started the riots!
Harlemites say
August 1st is
MARGIE’S DAY

Langston Hughes
Ballad of Margie Polite

In his controversial 1926 novel Nigger Heaven, the art critic (and occasional social lamprey) Carl van Vechten commented that “a white prostitute can go places where a coloured preacher would be refused admittance.” Van Vechten’s remark may appear flippant in today’s culturally aware social environment, but his message resonates deeply with his times. In fact, van Vechten’s vivid description of racial inequality in early twentieth-century America reflects whites’ isolationist attitudes of that period, particularly in relation to New York’s neighborhood of Harlem. Originally a small Dutch village on the outskirts of Manhattan, Harlem had experienced a deliberate yet troubled rise from the colonial hamlet of the 1690s to the multi-cultural site it is today. The story of Harlem is central to understanding the story of the Savoy Ballroom. Over the period

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ranging from the first years of the Twentieth Century to the 1950s, Harlem was home to one of the most significant and innovative literary and artistic movements in America. It engendered many free-thinkers, cultural luminaries, and political icons; served as the foundation of the Civil Rights movement. Meanwhile, its population suffered through crippling lawlessness, poverty, and racial inequality that culminated in three major, racially motivated riots. Despite a certain degree of cultural isolation, Harlem’s contribution to the evolution of Jazz-Age arts is considerable. The Savoy Ballroom stands as one example of Harlem’s involvement in the growth of black America’s cultural output to the world beyond.

**Harlem Reborn: Prelude to the Great Depression**

Perched atop New York City’s Central Park and abutted by Morningside Heights to the south and Washington Heights to the north, Harlem sits in the center of the northern part of Manhattan. Stretching from East River to the Hudson, its boundaries are marked by 159th and 110th Streets (see figure 1). Wedged between two traditionally blue-collar white, Anglo-Irish, and Jewish neighborhoods, Harlem’s predominantly African-American population retained its own cultural voice in spite of strong Euro-American influences. Named after the Dutch town of Haarlem by its founders, it is also commonly referred to as Uptown because of its geographic location near the Northern end of Manhattan Island. At a glance, Harlem’s history during the pre-World War II years represents a vicious cycle; the economic downturns which struck the United States during

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the early decades of the Twentieth Century have impacted Uptown more harshly than most other New York neighborhoods, forcing Harlem to adjust economically and socially.\(^\text{19}\)

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Harlem was a historically white neighborhood, home to under 20,000 people after the end of the Civil War in 1868. The immigrations of the early twentieth century have bolstered its population considerably, steadily climbing towards an occupation peak in 1917 when an influx of Jewish immigrants, predominantly from Eastern Europe, pushed the number of Harlem’s residents to just over 150,000 denizens.\textsuperscript{20} According to historian Jonathan Gill, the economic and population growth that followed the Civil War benefitted Harlem’s real estate market, ushering in a considerable increase in economic, industrial, and residential development in the surrounding areas. Therefore, the strengthening economy made Harlem a more desirable neighborhood for affluent white Eastern-European émigrés, who flocked there prior to 1900 to develop its burgeoning commercial and real estate markets.\textsuperscript{21}

In a similar pattern, the early twentieth-century Great Migration of African-Americans to U. S. urban centers saw a dramatic increase in Harlem’s African-American population.\textsuperscript{22} By the 1900s, blacks from the American South, the West Indies, and the Caribbean were relocating to Harlem in great numbers. The black population of Harlem, barely reaching 60,000 in the first years of the twentieth century, nearly tripled by 1920 as Harlem became home to over 152,400 African Americans. By 1930, that number grew even larger, nearly quintupling to reach 327,700 black residents. The percentages reflect a further demographic shift in favor of the incoming African American population: by

\textsuperscript{20} Gill, Harlem, 100.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 101-103.
1920, 32 percent of central Harlem’s occupants were black. The 1930 census revealed that, a decade later, over 70 percent of central Harlem’s residents were African-American, and lived as far south as Central Park at 110th street. This expansion unofficially established a Southern boundary for the neighborhood, separating the Uptown area from Southern Manhattan.\(^{23}\)

The influx of immigrants consisted predominantly of blacks fleeing the draconian Jim Crow laws of Southern urban centers such as Atlanta, Savannah, Jacksonville, and New Orleans.\(^{24}\) They gathered in Harlem from Georgia, Florida, the Carolinas, and Tennessee, but also traveled from abroad in the Caribbean, notably Jamaica and Barbados. All the while, white Harlemites passively resisted the influx of African-American transplants. Between 1920 and 1930, over 118,000 whites moved out of Harlem, making way for 87,417 African Americans.\(^{25}\) The departure of whites from Harlem reflected the racially biased tendencies in interbellum urban America. The disruption of the whites’ majority status in Harlem presented the possibility of facing instability, social strife, and potential economic downturn. On the other hand, the African Americans who migrated to Harlem carried with them the potential of generating much-needed momentum for Harlem’s stagnating economy. White business owners’ resistance

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
in response to this demographic change had a strong adverse effect on Harlem’s financial and social growth.\textsuperscript{26}

The tensions between white and black Harlemites escalated for the first time in 1917, when a group of Irish juvenile delinquents from Washington Heights attacked an African-American man on the corner of Lenox Avenue and 118\textsuperscript{th} Street. The altercation, largely construed as a misunderstanding by contemporary historians, achieved two important milestones in the history of Harlem. First, it set a precedent for the de facto “color line” between Harlem’s soon-to-be-developed vice district and the predominantly working-class white Washington Heights neighborhood. Second, the racial motive for the assault reinforced the misperceived image of the African-American victim as the perpetrator of the crime. Race bigotry was by no means a new development in Harlem in the 1910s, with various commercial establishments and renters refusing business to African Americans, sometimes going as far as clearly demonstrating their racial policies with “No Niggers!” placards prominently displayed in their windows.\textsuperscript{27} The events of 1917, however, did establish racial discrimination as a common societal norm among Harlemites, demonstrating the precedence of race and color over bylaws and legal regulations. This was one of many events that prompted a shift towards a cultural siege mentality among Harlemites. The resulting socio-economic distancing of African Americans from whites lasted until well after the conclusion of World War II. While Harlem represented an ethnically and culturally diverse fertile ground for the

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\textsuperscript{26} Irma Watkins-Owens, \textit{Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 92-100. \\
\textsuperscript{27} Gill, \textit{Harlem}, 154, 183. 
\end{flushright}
development of liberal arts and politics, it was hamstrung by its inability to quell internal social strife fueled by holdover segregation regulations, notably the Plessy vs. Ferguson ruling of 1896.\(^{28}\) African-Americans were never truly given the opportunity to call Harlem their own, and the same laws and regulations preventing them from entering the majority of white establishments served to favor white attendance in most places. African-Americans could no more keep whites out of Harlem than they could integrate themselves into white establishments, while the whites reaped the benefits Harlem’s economy and culture in nearly complete racial isolation.

Harlem of the late 1910s found itself in a unique predicament because of its dependence on white and Jewish developers.\(^{29}\) According to Harlem historian Jonathan Gill, real estate moguls like Connie Immermann and Eduin van der Horst Koch maintained a tight grip over Harlem’s economic infrastructure and imposed a racially motivated monopoly on its commercial dealings, allowing whites unlimited access to businesses while treating African-American patronage on a basis approaching whimsy. Some African American real estate developers, among them Ed Smalls and Philip Payton, broke the traditional color scheme of Harlem as a black neighborhood dominate by white business owners, but it is debatable whether their efforts had a lasting effect.\(^{30}\) The friction between Harlem’s African-American residents and the whites’ patronizing Harlem’s establishments likely stimulated the emergence of Harlem’s artistic Renaissance, as the combined pressures of confined living space and racial inequality

\(^{28}\) *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 16 US 1138 (1896).

\(^{29}\) Gill, *Harlem*, 175.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 183.
spurred the need for personal expression. In an effort to look beyond the established societal norms, Harlem’s intellectuals and artists attempted to forge a new cultural paradigm for themselves. In an ironic twist, the subsequent success of their creative output outside of Harlem, however, may be directly traced to its export by whites from the surrounding Manhattan neighborhoods.

The economic downturn observed in Harlem’s businesses from 1914 to 1917 positively affected a previously negative employment track record. With the majority of the white workforce depleted as a result of the draft, employers resorted to hiring African-American workers to offset the shortage of young white men, in an effort to keep their businesses afloat. Whites still owned the majority of businesses in Harlem, chiefly because of racial nepotism. White landlords and property owners considered Euro-Americans to be more trustworthy, selling or renting properties to them at a fraction of the cost they would to African-American clients. This trend reached its high point in 1929, when a regional survey indicated that whites owned and operated 81.5 percent of 10,000 of Harlem’s businesses, creating a sizable economic gap in the neighborhood’s racial subdivision.31 White business owners’ dominance of Harlem’s economy forced black Harlemites to seek alternate, frequently illegal, sources of income. A rise in illicit gambling, bootleg liquor, and prostitution swept through Harlem during the early 1920s made up a large fraction of its economy. As lawful employment gradually became scarce, African-Americans in Harlem turned to organized crime as a means to stay afloat in the

floundering economy, as the formation of criminal organizations rose significantly.\textsuperscript{32} This development established Harlem as New York’s den of iniquity, leading to the emergence of an active nightlife replete with jook joints, late-night cabarets, and speakeasies. Clandestine, illegal establishments called “buffet flats” catered exclusively to white visitors from downtown who came to sample Harlem’s infamous after-hours scene. In his discussion of buffet flats, historian Jonathan Gill notes that these were glorified private residences providing food, illegal alcohol, and occasional lodging to visiting strangers; some of the upscale buffet flats provided live music, paving the way for an emerging music and cabaret scene.\textsuperscript{33} Harlem was also highly adaptive to the coming of Prohibition, quickly becoming a prime destination for whites, and enterprising African-Americans have found new (and ever gradually less legal) ways to part whites from their wallets. For black Harlemites, the buffet flats took on the guise of rent parties, or communal efforts to generate finances for the financially reduced host by paying an entrance fee to an in-home soirée.\textsuperscript{34}

The economic plight of the locals were carefully concealed from the white tourists’ eyes by local business owners in a coordinated effort to make Uptown appear cultured and appealing. Frequent descriptions of Harlem’s nightlife as a kind of Dionysian revelry abound, in which the primitivism and perceived simplicity of African-American lifestyles are extolled.\textsuperscript{35} According to the observations of Frank Byrd, a

\textsuperscript{32} Gill, \textit{Harlem}, 281.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
contributor to the Federal Writers’ Project, the blacks of Harlem were living a life of very little perceptible care:

Everything they do is free and easy; typical of that group of hard-working negroes who have little or no inhibitions and the fertility of imagination so necessary to the invention and unrestrained expression of new dance-steps and rhythms. 36

In reality, few African Americans were able to find legitimate, well-paying work in recession-era Harlem. Most were unskilled and untrained, living a life of borderline indentured servitude with menial, stressful jobs that were financially dire and unfulfilling. Such employment frequently resulted in a cycle of poverty eventually paving the way for Harlem’s ghettoization in the early 1930s, as many Harlemites sought economic liberation through political activism in local and regional Communist circles. 37

The white tourists’ amoral proclivities were not lost on downtown entrepreneurs, some of whom employed creative measures to capitalize on Harlem’s flexible approach to legality. Harlem’s reputation as a den of forbidden pleasures was so widely accepted among New Yorkers that enterprising downtown sightseeing companies took advantage by promoting safari-like excursions to the uptown neighborhoods. Advertised as “moral vacations” to see the “concrete orgies of the jungle,” these tours were intended to capitalize on white American fascination with all things redolent of primitivism and pre-modernism. Typically, Harlem’s nightlife elicited mixed emotions of revulsion and fascination in the average white New Yorker, as can be seen in Carl van Vechten’s

36 Ibid.
semiautobiographical novel, *Parties*. Van Vechten described his outing to the Savoy Ballroom as a Dionysian spectacle inducing “terpsichorean megalomania” comparable to a Stravinsky ballet.\(^{38}\) Meanwhile, the pockets of wealthy Harlem entrepreneurs were being filled with money earned from such excursions, as concerns for being seen as “primitive” and “exotic” were quickly quelled with sizable influxes of cash.\(^{39}\)

While visiting uptown, most whites lacked the proper context to grasp the dire financial and socio-political situation in uptown, and painted the suffering of Harlem’s African-American population in the most romantic of tones. In spite of their callousness, such frivolous depictions poured gasoline on the rising flames of Harlemites’ self-expression. As Harlem descended further into poverty, Lenox Avenue became more frequently lined with soapbox orators; those without the gift of public speaking frequently turned to the arts as an antidote to the dreariness of everyday existence. The Harlem Renaissance ideology promoted artistic self-identification as a means of establishing a new cultural paradigm. The movement developed largely in reaction against the *status quo*: the gambling, alcohol, drugs, and racial inequality established a tradition antithetical to Harlem’s liberal intellectualism. The artistic achievements of the Harlem Renaissance therefore partly arose as a result of the ubiquitous inequality of the area’s socio-economic stratification.\(^{40}\)

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\(^{40}\) Gill, *Harlem*, 183.
Because much of Harlem’s economy and social processes stemmed from race relations, this significantly affected the burgeoning arts scene. Harlem’s natural state at this time was one of strife between socio-economic classes that was structured around finances, work, and leisure. By 1900s, Harlem already exhibited a storied past. In 1837, for example, a Negro gardener was mistaken for a fugitive slave and captured by slave catchers to be brought back to the South. This incident spurred the New York lawmakers into action to impose regulations to protect free Negroes accused of having escaped slavery.\(^41\) In spite of these uncharacteristically supportive political actions, race relations between whites and African-Americans were strained during the decades following the Civil War. Historian Jervis Anderson notes that an influx of southern and West Indian blacks placed additional stress on the already unstable relations between white and black Harlemites and prompted a general exodus of whites from Harlem. Meanwhile, racial violence and industrial developments on the West Side of Harlem forced African-Americans to seek residence elsewhere, or leave New York altogether.\(^42\) The escalating series of such social injustices finally brought about the formation of a highly centralized and organized civil rights movement in Harlem. By 1916, the Harlem chapter of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People grew to be the strongest in the country.\(^43\) Nearly simultaneously, the Universal Negro Improvement Association founded by Marcus Garvey, rose to a similar state of prominence, establishing a strong foundation for racial equality politics in New York City. The subsequent accomplishments of

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 173
Harlem’s various civil rights movements contributed to a strong presence in the relationship between New York’s City Hall and the arts, particularly with regards to the Savoy Ballroom’s closure in 1943.44

The elevation of liberal arts to the status of political self-expression became major component of Harlem’s social development between 1919 and 1928. While *Billboard* magazine described Harlem as “the joy spot of America,” Uptown was still under siege from internal and external strife. The combined efforts of W. E. B. du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Alain LeRoy Locke contributed to an emergence of a literary and cognitive approach to the intellectual growth and improvement of Harlem’s aesthetic well-being, promoting egalitarian ideology that would eventually contribute to the rise of such artistic talent as Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, and James Van Der Zee.45 Jonathan Gill states that Harlem’s transition from working-class neighborhood to New York’s artistic center was influenced by more than ideological demagoguery, as the tremendous influx of African Americans from the South and West Indies exacerbated space limitations, scarcity of employment, and racial tensions. In 1930, Harlem existed in a state of crisis as its population consisted predominantly of African American transplants to the neighborhood. Overwhelming poverty, crime, overcrowding, failing economy, and lack of proper medical care were further exacerbated by the economic downturn following the Stock Market crash of 1929.46

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44 This history of the Savoy Ballroom’s closure will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.
46 Ibid., 227.
Historians have yet to reach a consensus on whether or not Harlem Renaissance was a stentorian cry of protest, or, as Alain Locke put it, an effort to ascend the cultural ladder by way of a “renewed race spirit” struggling to assert itself through labor and creativity. Whatever the case, the late 1920s forced the primacy of social awareness on Harlem’s artists and intellectuals, stimulating the evolution of a pronounced tendency towards acknowledging social, economic, and racial issues. Such injustices were viewed through the lens of a new artistic style, deeply rooted in a shared African heritage. The ironic twist, however, was that the earliest stages of the Harlem Renaissance represented little more than a tendency towards intellectual liberation by the intellectual élite, for the intellectual elite. The early aspirations of Harlem’s artistic uprising seldom affected the common, working-class African Americans. The questions of race, gender, inherited social status, and their expression through liberated mentalities were typically beyond the scope of the average blue-collar Harlemite’s quotidian priorities. The faintest embers of a communal liberation were, in fact, stoked in social venues, among them dance halls similar to the Savoy Ballroom:

A brawny man with a booming voice walks to the center of the floor and asks for silence. With flowing adjectives and tremor in his voice he introduces a speaker whose greatness and worth to the working class could not be bared with all of the superlatives in the English language. He is a living martyr. Who? Angelo Herndon. […] Herndon is a clean-cut, soft spoken Negro, who incessantly puffs on a cigarette. His physique doesn’t lead one to believe that he could stand the physical and mental brutalities which were heaped upon him. […] Herndon’s speech is about another martyr – Tom Mooney. Mooney was released from a

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California prison yesterday, after serving over twenty-two years on a trumped up charge.48

Despite generally affecting the lower layers of Harlem’s society, the artistic movement did have a positive effect on the African Americans. Little by little, the Harlem Renaissance generated a socially viable atmosphere for the intellectuals, in which they could assert their stance on issues of race, color, and socio-economic equality; because these changes took place over an extended period of time, their effects upon the general population were slow to be noticed. Poet and lyricist Andy Razaf’s outspoken opposition to terms like “nigger,” “darky,” and “coon,” eloquently voiced from atop a soap box on 135th Street, eventually transformed from freely voiced vitriol into creative outpourings.49 These efforts were far from the “cultural hell” described by Charles McKay in the early 1920s, and served to prime the engine of artistic development for the duration of the interbellum period.50 Most African American art of this period was defined by its creators’ breaking free from the cultural and historical tethers to the past, and their progressive desires to categorically advance the arts into a new framework of cultural perception. Theatre historian Larry Stempel indicates that the Lincoln and Lafayette Theatres, early rejecters of African-American vaudevillian tradition, resorted to the employment of all-black stock casts for the performances of jazz-based dance revues in the early 1920s. Such productions were met with a certain degree of success in their

49 Gill, Harlem, 267.
attempts to legitimize the black cultural experience through commercially viable entertainment.\textsuperscript{51}

“The Hope of All Who Suffer”: 1930-1941

The years of the Great Depression, leading up to World War II, were formative in the development of Harlem’s burgeoning arts scene. In spite of the considerable economic downturn, underground trafficking in alcohol and prostitution indirectly helped Harlem maintain a small degree of financial stability. Employment in Jazz Age Harlem treded a thin line between legality and crime, with music and arts serving as possible fronts for such activities. Harlem’s musical venues played a vital role in the proliferation of musical arts, particularly in the development and distribution of jazz.\textsuperscript{52} The migration of jazz from New Orleans to urban America, particularly New York and Chicago, can be approximately dated to the early 1920s, and roughly coincides with the Great Migration. Influenced by the early jazz combos of post-World War I American music, performers like Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong travelled to the larger, better-appointed metropolises in an effort to strike out a living among the nightclubs.\textsuperscript{53} Harlem’s vibrant nightlife became indispensable to the dissemination of jazz during the mid- to late-1920s,

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 237-8.
\textsuperscript{52} Mark C. Gridley, \textit{Jazz Styles: History and Analysis}, 9\textsuperscript{th} Edition (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2006), 48.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 48-9.
and three nightclubs, occasionally referred to by jazz historians as “The Big Three,” assisted in its rise to the status of America’s popular music.\textsuperscript{54}

Connie’s Inn, the Cotton Club, and Smalls’ Paradise were located in close proximity of one another, so it was possible to walk between them and spend generous amounts of time at each in the span of one evening.\textsuperscript{55} The cultural merchandise of these clubs, paid for in alcohol and music, was of particular interest to white visitors to Harlem, and valuable enough to be marketed directly to tourists by the managers of the Big Three. These clubs became the foremost emissaries of Harlem’s culture, trading in commodities like liquor, but relying on word-of-mouth and aggressive culturally-targeted advertising to attract and retain patrons. The decision to market jazz to wealthier white clients was at least partly racially motivated: Harlem blacks could seldom afford white nightclubs’ exorbitant rates, and preferred to go to smaller, blacks-only nightclubs anyway.

Connie’s Inn, located at the intersection of 7\textsuperscript{th} Avenue and 131\textsuperscript{st} Streets, maintained a strict whites-only policy by catering nearly exclusively to the wealthy and the famous (see figure 2).\textsuperscript{56} Established in 1923 by Connie and George Immelman, two German émigré landlords and bootleggers, Connie’s Inn represented a sterling example of enterprising white real estate developers taking advantage of Harlem’s economic downturn.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{54} Gill, \textit{Harlem}, 266-7.
\textsuperscript{55} Frank Cullen et al., \textit{Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America} (New York: Routledge, 2007), 262.
\textsuperscript{56} Gill, \textit{Harlem}, 267.
\textsuperscript{57} Frank Cullen et al., \textit{Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America}. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 262.
The establishment originally followed a strict whites-only policy, but as the Immelmans became more aware of the potential for income from local residents, they opened the club’s doors to light-skinned African American patrons in the mid-1920s, significantly increasing its attendance figures. Popular among visitors to New York, Connie’s Inn did not enjoy a similar reputation among Harlem blacks. The *New York Age* ran a series of scathing reviews, painting the establishment as a home to “slummers; sports; ‘coke’ addicts, and high-rollers of the white race.”\(^{58}\) At other times, local residents complained of rambunctious late-night soirées regularly held at Connie’s.\(^ {59}\) In addition to providing a


venue for dining and dancing, Connie’s hosted a variety of prominent musical acts, including Louis Armstrong, Peg Leg Bates, Fletcher Henderson, and Fats Waller.\textsuperscript{60} Connie’s was considerably less well-known for its musical line-ups than for its extensive and often risqué floor shows, however, which featured theatrical talent and production values on par with off-Broadway theatres \textsuperscript{61}

The Cotton Club, originally located on 142\textsuperscript{nd} Street and Lenox Avenue, stood in stark contrast to Connie’s Inn (see figure 3). Originally Club Deluxe, it opened its doors to the public in 1920 under the ownership of Jack Johnson. In 1923, it was purchased by convicted Irish mobster, boxing promoter and bootlegger Owen Vincent “Owney” Madden and moved downtown to the Great White Way.\textsuperscript{62} Open until 1940, the Cotton Club garnered a reputation among New York’s nightlife mavens as the embodiment of casual racism and bigotry masked by an expressive and qualitatively excellent jazz soundtrack. The Cotton Club maintained a strict “no blacks” policy among its customers. This standard was somewhat relaxed in the hiring process, as some of the Cotton Club employees were mulatto, chosen because of the lighter tone of their skin. One notable exception was Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, whose status as a renowned artist was deemed a necessary asset used to increase the Cotton Club’s visibility and income.\textsuperscript{63} As distasteful as they are by contemporary standards, the race policies of the Cotton Club were consistent with the social norms of their time. For example, the management

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{60}] Gary Giddins, \textit{Satchmo: The Genius of Louis Armstrong} (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 86.
\item[\textsuperscript{61}] Gill, \textit{Harlem}, 267-8.
\item[\textsuperscript{63}] James Haskins, \textit{The Cotton Club Comes To Broadway} (New York: Random House, 1977,) 62.
\end{footnotes}
deemed Lena Horne, hired by the Cotton Club at the age of 16, to be light skinned enough to pass for white, while Duke Ellington, brought on in 1927, was asked to assist in the décor by composing and playing “jungle music” for the audiences.⁶⁴

The Cotton Club’s relocation from Harlem to the Broadway theater district transformed its function from one of a nightclub to one of Harlem’s cultural embassy, specifically targeting New Yorkers who were interested in the luxurious evening nightlife of uptown, but lacked the capacity, drive, or wherewithal to physically venture to Harlem.

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The least prominent of the Big Three nightclubs, Smalls’ Paradise, was a drastic departure from Harlem’s nightclub model (see figure 4). Opened by African-American entrepreneur Ed Smalls, the grandson of the Civil War hero Robert Smalls, the venue greatly contributed to the growth of Harlem’s nightlife, paving the way for racial inclusivity in Harlem. One of the most important ways in which Smalls’ Paradise differed from Connie’s and the Cotton Club was represented by its admission policy. When the club opened its doors to the public in 1925, the venue’s management chose to accept black as well as white clients, effectively instating *de facto* desegregation. Similarly, whites and blacks were hired at Smalls’, contributing to a more diverse ambience. As the venue featured no door charge and kept the meal prices low, Smalls’ boasted a more socially and economically diverse client base than most concurrent establishments in Harlem. Additionally, Smalls’ Paradise also featured a small area for dancing to music occasionally provided by Willie “The Lion” Smith, Fletcher Henderson’s band, Charlie Johnson, and James P. Johnson. In addition, Smalls’ Paradise entertained its guests by employing a small staff of dancing waiters managed by Herbert “Whitey” White, an up-and-coming streetwise gangster and future talent scout for the Savoy Ballroom.65

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65 Gill, *Harlem*, 271. It is likely that White borrowed some of his organizational ideas from Ed Smalls upon his transition from Smalls’ Paradise to the Savoy Ballroom in 1926.
In addition to the Big Three, Harlem’s nightlife was supported by various smaller clubs, ranging in quality from the pleasantly appointed to the bottom-drawer. For example, Jonathan Gill mentions that Leroy’s, an exclusively African-American venue which strictly enforced a harsh blacks-only door policy, was located at 135th Street and 5th Avenue, and is to this day known as one of the origins of the style of piano playing commonly known as “New York Stride.” By contrast to the small but tidy Leroy’s, the dingy and disreputable Cellar Café, located next to the uptown Cotton Club, served as an overflow for its neighbor and was once referred to by singer Ethel Waters as “the last stop on the way down.” Finally, the Ubangi Club, one of Harlem’s few establishments catering specifically to the tastes of gays and lesbians, established its presence on
Harlem’s nightlife scene with its ribald floor shows featuring cross-dressers and highly sexualized antics.66

Harlemites often relied on Uptown’s nightlife to stave off the dread, fear, and uncertainty brought about by the dire socio-economic circumstances of the late 1920s and early 1930s. With Prohibition repealed and the Great Depression looming on the horizon, Harlem’s economic prospects were dire indeed. One in four of its residents were unemployed in 1930, and that number rose considerably higher by 1935. Tensions between Harlem blacks, the whites from surrounding neighborhoods, and the police escalated, and poverty and ghettoization were fast overtaking the emerging intellectualism of the early 1920s. The joblessness and poverty, turned from bad to disastrous by the onset of the Great Depression, finally spilled over into a notorious riot of 1935, which broke out over a Puerto Rican juvenile’s shoplifting. Mistaken for an African American, the boy was apprehended by a Jewish shop-owner and physically punished, causing the crowd of witnesses to direct their anger at the proprietor’s store and various other white-owned properties throughout Harlem.67 The riot of 1935, almost expressly rooted in property damage and minimal race clashes, stands as a manifestation of a modern form of racial rioting, in which the destruction of property became paramount. The incident also demonstrated the Harlemites’ tendency to direct their

66 Ibid., 272.
discontentment inward, opting for the undermining of Harlem’s infrastructure rather than blaming external influences.⁶⁸

“Strike Up The Band:” 1941-1945.

Harlem’s continuous civil unrest during the War Years of 1941-1945 was reinforced by the escalation of war hysteria and the rising unemployment of the 1930s. In January of 1943 the turmoil came to a head as several African-American women undertook training as machine-shop operators in an attempt to assist in the ongoing war effort, but were summarily turned down for every job they applied for. When the prospective employers’ decisions were appealed, the courts expressed unwillingness to assist, declaring that legally there was nothing that could be done. The ruling thus made Executive Order 8802, issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to promote equal opportunity and prohibit employment discrimination, seem “completely toothless and ineffective,” marginalizing the African-Americans even further by demonstrating not only their status as third-class citizens, but also effectively barring them from becoming an equal part of the wartime workforce.⁶⁹ This demoralizing development led to the eventual outbreak of Harlem’s 1943 race riot, which occurred on August 1. Margie Polite, an African-American woman, was resisting arrest by white police officer James Collins, and was assisted by Robert Bandy, a black soldier on leave. In the ensuing struggle, Collins shot Bandy, who was non-fatally injured and taken to a nearby hospital.

As false rumors of Bandy’s demise continued circulating, Harlemites’ outrage erupted into a riot that lasted two days. Roughly $5,000,000 worth of damage was inflicted on personal and public property, with six individuals killed, over 400 people injured and an additional 500 arrested.\(^{70}\) Harlem remained in a state of riot until August 3\(^{rd}\), at which point a state of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia declared a state of emergency. 8000 National Guardsmen stationed within the city were placed on alert in Harlem’s armories. Police officers patrolled Harlem’s street corners while roadblocks separated Harlem from the rest of New York until August 8\(^{th}\).\(^{71}\)

The Harlem riots of 1943 signaled the beginning of a number of important trends in Harlem’s development. First, Harlem slowly became established as a city within a city, with its own governances, culture, socio-economic and political trends, and means of interacting with the outside world. Its culture represented an exportable commodity, transferrable to the outside world via the liberal outpourings of the Harlem Renaissance for much of the 1930s and 1940s. Second, the riots highlighted the imbalance of power between Harlem’s political activists such as Marcus Garvey and Adam Clayton Powell and the greater New York City governance, and underscored the degree of disenfranchisement among Harlem’s residents. The majority of Harlem’s riots were sparked by racial inequality, but ultimately responded to socio-economic problems facing the neighborhood, as was can be observed from the financially destructive nature of these clashes. These riots made apparent Harlem’s need for continued infrastructural


\(^{71}\) Ibid., 208.
development, establishing Uptown as a kind of self-contained theme park for wealthy tourists. Harlem provided visitors with illicit nighttime entertainment at the expense of local labor. Once the veneer of artificiality was stripped, however, and the need for employment and rise in social and political standing were exposed, the tourists and downtown whites would have little to do with Harlem’s financial and social problems.

In 1929, songwriter-lyricist Irving Berlin wrote the following lyrics to his song, *Puttin’ On The Ritz*:

> Have you seen the well-to-do upon Lenox Avenue […]
> Spending every dime for a wonderful time[…] 
> That’s where each and every Lulu Belle goes 
> Every Thursday evening with her swell beaux, rubbing elbows.\(^2\)

Although meant to be witty and observational, Berlin’s words accurately represent the attitudes of many White Americans towards the social structures of Harlem in the first half of the twentieth Century, as most of them were only peripherally aware of Harlem and its troubles. When the African Americans living in Harlem attempted to elevate their living standards to similar heights, their efforts at an improved lifestyle were pedantically mocked or, at worst, violently quashed. For urban whites, Harlem existed as an elaborate playground by night, only to be replaced by a morally bankrupt purgatory after hours, as illustrated by another popular song, the 1899 *You Can Take Your Trunk and Go to Harlem*:

> You can take your trunk and go to Harlem, 
> You needn’t hang around down town no more; 
> When you meet your friends, why you can tell ’em 
> That on you I’ve forever closed my door

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When you die, I hope you’ll go to Harlem!
That'll be about all for you to say;
There’s the door, you’ve got to go,
Get a move on, don’t be slow,
Go to Harlem with your friends, Good day!  

Both Hart and Berlin chose their words carefully to maximize the contempt typically associated with white New Yorkers’ attitudes towards Harlem. Even the words “Lulu Belle” were plucked from historical annals of inequality, referencing a play by African-American playwright Edward Sheldon and Charles McArthur. The play, meant to reflect the plight of African-Americans in the United States, was savaged by critics of Sheldon’s collaboration with the white McArthur. The play was lambasted for its attempts at whiteness, its ensuing performances never taken seriously by the crowds or the critics.

Towards the Formation of a New Identity

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Harlem exhibited a series of stark contrasts; it was a land of forbidden pleasures for moneyed outsiders, but hardly more than a ghetto with limited employment opportunities, harsh living conditions, and an atmosphere of perpetual dourness and depression for its residents. At the same time, its strife supported an outpouring of liberal artistic sentiment, providing fertile creative soil for the disenfranchised musicians, painters, sculptors, literary figures, and thinkers. The contrasts engendered by these disparate viewpoints and the lifestyles resulting from them shaped Harlem into an oddly isolated ghetto with a blossoming insular culture,

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74 Anderson, This Was Harlem, 275.
wherein the oppression of the most basic social liberties was countermanded by a torrent of some of the most aesthetically unorthodox social activism to date. In contrast, the poverty in which Harlem was embedded was, in some ways, inescapable due to the deep entrenchment of white landlords, business owners, and customers within its socio-economic framework, thus obstructing any pathways to potential improvement for native Harlemites. The atmosphere of discontent, racial inequality, and disenfranchisement by the whites directly contributed to a tendency among Harlemites to deliberately isolate themselves from white New Yorkers, utilizing their artistic output to look towards new futures. The artistic output of Harlem Renaissance, however, fundamentally differs from institutional art in that it is not dedicated towards feelings of nostalgia, historicism, or preservation of the past. Quite the contrary, the African-American art of Harlem carried with it the sexual, financial, spiritual, and social liberation that its creators were hoping to achieve.75

75 Hale, “Hear Me Talking To You,” Beyond Blackface, 239-40, 245.
CHAPTER II: THE SAVOY PORTRAIT

Take the neon lights and make a crown,
Take the Lenox Avenue buses.
Taxis, subways,
And for your love song tone their rumble down.  
Langston Hughes
“Juke Box Love Song”

Running through the heart of Harlem and into the northern edge of New York’s Central Park, the modern Lenox Avenue serves as a major transportation thoroughfare for the island of Manhattan. It provides a central route for buses, subway trains, and taxis to connect the Uptown neighborhoods with New York’s bustling downtown, entertainment, and business districts. Lenox Avenue inherited this role in the early 1920s, and remains one of New York’s major traffic arteries. During the culturally vibrant years of the first decades of the twentieth century, Lenox Avenue was also an important location of musical culture, as venues ranging from upscale dinner clubs to small-time haunts lined its sidewalks and offshoots. Situated off Lenox Avenue, the Savoy Ballroom greatly benefitted from its location along one of Harlem’s busiest streets, attracting a diverse spectrum of clients from uptown, downtown, and many of New York’s outlying boroughs.76 Its location next to the original venue of the Cotton Club at the corner 142nd Street and Lenox Avenue provided it with equal parts competition and clientele, as it served as a late-night dance hall for Cotton Club clients, and an alternate performance

space for musicians like Fletcher Henderson, looking to perform a few musical numbers at a different venue.\textsuperscript{77}

According to the Savoy Ballroom’s 25\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary brochure, the Ballroom occupied the entire city block between 140\textsuperscript{th} and 141\textsuperscript{st} streets. This commercial pitch, however, was neither fair nor accurate. The building in which the Savoy was housed was indeed a city block long and wide, yet the Ballroom was not its only occupant; in addition to visiting the ballroom, patrons could join the Savoy staff after hours at Britwood, a bar on the corner of 140\textsuperscript{th} Street and Lenox and, later, at the Savoy Billiards. The building


also housed the Divak Furniture Company.\textsuperscript{80} While other businesses took up residence in the building for varying lengths of time, the Savoy Ballroom occupied the majority of the building. The building itself was owned by the brothers Moses and Charles Galewski, also known by their Americanized surname, the Gales. Moses and Charles were two prominent real-estate developers and furniture salesmen born on the Upper East Side of Manhattan Island. Although the Gales’ parents had Eastern-European roots, they considered themselves life-long native New Yorkers. In 1926, the Gales entered into a business partnership with Jay Faggen, a Broadway producer and the original Roseland Ballroom promoter; and Charles Buchanan, an African American political activist from Harlem who eventually took over as the Ballroom’s general manager.\textsuperscript{81}

When the Gales merged their business with Faggen, the objective was to compete for a portion of the entertainment business currently shared by the neighboring Cotton Club, Broadway’s Arcadia ballroom, and the more remote and less well-to-do Radium Club located on the corner of Lenox and 120\textsuperscript{th} Street.\textsuperscript{82} The Savoy Ballroom was not intended to be a venue purely designed for music and dance, but decorated with enough contemporary taste to host soirées, receive dignitaries, and serve as a gathering space for the greater Harlem community. By the late 1930s, the Savoy Ballroom was known not only as a tourist destination, but also as one of Harlem’s most often used community

\textsuperscript{81} Although the Gales invested in the Savoy Ballroom together, Charles Gale soon backed out, leaving his brother Moe in charge of operations.
venues. It hosted charity balls and events, and even had its own basketball team.\(^{83}\)

Furthermore, unlike the Roseland Ballroom and the Cotton Club, the Savoy Ballroom maintained a similar admission policy to the one at Smalls’ Paradise. The Savoy management determined it to be more financially profitable to admit patrons of every color, race, provenance, and financial standing. This egalitarian policy partly grew out of the biracial partnership espoused by Gale and Buchanan, and by 1941 the Savoy Ballroom was making national headlines, partly because of its interracial policy:

> Sober white citizens… are welcome at the Savoy, [which has] become the favorite of the tourists, along with Radio City and the Empire State Building.\(^ {84}\)

**Savoy Timeline – Important Dates**

The chronology of the Savoy Ballroom demonstrates many important cultural developments, placing the venue at the center of a number of noteworthy social and artistic events in Harlem. Because of its prominent location, the Savoy Ballroom did not exist solely as a performance space for music and the arts; it provided an area for Harlemites to gather, and its status as a prominent tourist landmark imparted it with the role of local reception area for celebrities and visiting dignitaries. Because of its distinction, the Savoy significantly affected the financial growth of Harlem, and played a significant role in establishing a high standard for entertainment venues on Lenox Avenue, in Harlem, and throughout Manhattan Island.


\(^{84}\) Maurice Zolotow, “Harlem’s Great White Father,” *Saturday Evening Post* 214, no. 13 (September 1941): 37.
The Early Years: 1926-1929

The Ballroom opened its doors to the public on Friday, March 12, 1926, and it remained in operation for over 32 years until its closing on July 10, 1958. The Savoy’s grand opening was widely regarded as a major Harlem event, and the advertisements proclaimed it to be “the world’s finest ballroom.” The opening night was a tremendous success, with over 2000 patrons waiting outside of the Ballroom’s doors at 1 o’clock in the morning, while 4000 more patrons danced inside:

So great was the throng that tried to attend the inaugural ball of the new Savoy ballroom [sic.] Friday night, March 12, a squad of police from the 16th Precinct ordered the doors closed at twelve o’clock and refused to allow any more tickets to be sold. Between midnight and 1 o’clock it was estimated that no less than 2000 people sought to enter the building.

The New York Amsterdam News reported a similar scene:

The New York Amsterdam News reported a similar scene:

The new Savoy Ballroom, which was extensively advertised throughout this section for the past few weeks, opened amidst a blaze of glory last Friday night when about four thousand sought entrance when the doors were thrown open to the public.

On the opening night at the Savoy Ballroom, two bands graced the bandstands: the Charleston Bearcats and Fess Williams’ Royal Flush Orchestra, the latter of these being the Savoy’s “house” band until 1931. A late-evening performance by Fletcher Henderson’s orchestra raised the excitement to unprecedented levels, as customers rose to

86 Bob Slater, “Savoy Turns 2,000 Away on Opening Night – Crowds Pack Ball Room All Week,” The New York Age, March 20, 1926, 6.
88 Ibid.
give the Roseland Ballroom’s house band a standing ovation at 1:30 AM.\textsuperscript{89} Despite a standing contract with Roseland Ballroom, Henderson made a point of making impromptu appearances at the Savoy Ballroom in the late hours between the years 1926 and 1931, lending further credibility to the Savoy Ballroom’s status as Harlem’s premier venue for swing music and dancing.

![Savoy Ballroom marquee, circa 1945. Photograph courtesy of Black History Album.](image)

Another major landmark in the Savoy’s history was the first official Battle of the Bands, also known as the “War of the Jazz,” held on May 8, 1929. This event, which eventually became one of the defining attractions of the Savoy, was introduced as a result of a request made to Charles Buchanan by Savoy clients. Its success generated a long-
term tradition at the Savoy Ballroom. Typically, management would hire several bands who would play against one another in alternating “heats,” or sets of songs. Informal voting was conducted by ballot submissions from the audience and, during the Savoy’s later years, by audience response and participation. The “War of the Jazz” in 1929 featured a line-up of six of the most prominent bands: Charlie Johnson’s Happy Pals, Ike Dixon’s Baltimoreans, Fess Williams and his Royal Flush Orchestra, Duke Ellington’s Orchestra, and Cab Calloway and his Missourians, hitherto unknown to New Yorkers.  

Reporter Percival Outram described the festivities in poetic tones:

The battle cry was Snap, Pep, and More Pep, each army trying to annihilate the other and gain a vote and the crown of glory. Every patron was given a ballot by which to denote a choice. […] The audience was wildly responsive to Ike Dixon’s Baltimoreans, and more so to Johnson’s Happy Pals of Virginia. […] The Missourians were successful in arousing the vast audience, not only by their excellent playing, but by the gymnastics of their leader and his acrobatic tendencies. […] Fess [Williams,] so to speak, put the ‘S’ in Savoy, having filled engagements at the house intermittently since it opened, and is always welcome there.  

The “War of the Jazz” was a resounding success for the Savoy Ballroom and demonstrated considerable business acumen on the management’s part. The event drew a crowd of over 5000 patrons to observe the session, an attendance figure which was overshadowed only by Guy Lombardo’s performance at the Savoy Ballroom the following year.  

Hired to perform at the Savoy Ballroom for an Aeolian Ladies of Charity function at the Savoy Ballroom by Wilhelmina F. Adams, Lombardo was a well-

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90 Ibid., 241.
92 Gault, Ballroom Echoes, 241.
known figure on the swing music circuit following his chart-topping recorded rendition of “Auld Lang Syne.” According to Adams’ papers, the attendance was the highest on record at the Savoy prior to 1930.93

Building an Identity: 1930-1935

The first major redecoration of the Savoy Ballroom also took place in 1930, with the Ballroom reopening on Thursday, November 13th of the same year. According to the New York Age, the redecoration cost approximately $30,000 and included, among many improvements, a repainting of the orchestra dais, new carpeting for the lobby, and a new dance floor:

The orchestra dias [sic.] presents an alluring spectacle; the entire background possessing a blue-sky appearance with white capped clouds rolling and darting in and out. The walls and ceiling are vivid pictures of rare beauty. The wide expanse of floor is covered by carpet of modernistic pattern manufactured expressly for the Savoy. A complete new dance floor of glistening white pine has been constructed.94

The redecoration of the Ballroom at such an early stage is indicative foremost of the use it had seen between its opening and 1930. The same article briefly touches on the sense of pride felt by the Harlemites over the introduction of such a sophisticated venue to the neighborhood, referring to it as one of America’s finest ballrooms.95

94 “Redecorated Savoy To Open Thursday,” The New York Age, November 15, 1930, 6.
95 Ibid.
The Savoy Ballroom’s already sterling musical reputation rose to new heights when Fess Williams’ Royal Flush Orchestra was replaced by Chick Webb’s ensemble as the venue’s house band in 1931.

By the late 1920s, Webb was a well-known musician, having performed at Manhattan’s Black Bottom Club as early as 1926. The well-known jazz pianist and band leader Duke Ellington championed Webb’s playing, and was further responsible for brokering Webb’s entry into the New York jazz scene. By 1927, Webb was recognized as one of the nation’s most prominent bandleaders. He was featured in the short film After Seben and had his performances broadcast nationwide from the Savoy Ballroom.96

By the time Webb was contracted by Gale as the Savoy’s house band leader, he commanded a strong following among Harlem’s adherents of “hot” jazz; his employment at the Savoy aided in cultivating his following by providing Webb’s ensemble with a permanent venue and by supplying music to a crowd of listeners with consistent and reliable tastes. Although Webb did not benefit financially from the arrangement with the Savoy Ballroom, the warm reception given to him by the Harlemites until his death in 1939 helped him achieve nationwide fame.  

Webb’s established hot jazz aesthetic was successfully supplemented by his profound understanding of the Savoy Ballroom’s dancers, establishing him as the reigning favorite at the vast majority of regularly scheduled dances and band battles.

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98 Ibid., 5.
Although Chick Webb was responsible for the emergence of the Harlem-based hot jazz aesthetic, a 1931 appearance by Bennie Moten’s Orchestra at the Savoy nearly swept Webb’s artistic accomplishments away. Moten appeared at the Savoy once before in 1928 to an overwhelmingly positive reaction, and returned to the Ballroom for a two-night engagement on Saturday, October 10, and Sunday, October 11 in 1931. Moten’s line-up, featuring the soloist William “Count” Basie, was completing a national tour of ballrooms and dance venues:

Moten’s orchestra on their last Savoy appearance were acclaimed as one of the best dance aggregations ever to play at that place of amusement. Bennie’s outfit, carrying fifteen musicians, is one of the few bands to feature duets, trios, quartets, and sextets in both vocal and brass entertainment.  

Moten’s appearance was important for several reasons. First, this was one of the first introductions of Kansas City-style, or “Western,” swing to the Savoy Ballroom. The Missourians’ appearance in 1929 was a similar engagement, but was met with far less enthusiasm by the Savoy crowds, to the degree that Buchanan was ready to ask the band off the stand. Cab Calloway recalled that the Savoy patrons’ reaction to his particular brand of swing was lukewarm at best:

“Dammit,” I hollered, “I tried to tell you this jive music wouldn’t make it in New York. This ain’t Toledo or Mendota, this is New York. You’ve got to come into New York swinging!”

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100 “Bennie Moten, Western Jazz King, at the Savoy,” The New York Age, October 10, 1931, 6.
101 Cab Calloway and Bryant Rollins, Of Minnie the Moocher & Me (New York: Crowell, 1976), 72-3.
On the other hand, the Savoy dancers were far more receptive to Moten’s approach, as his music effervesced with the same kinetic energy prevalent in Webb’s music, yet reflected a far more relaxed approach to the rhythmic treatment of pulse and melody.\footnote{Anderson, \textit{This Was Harlem}, 310-11. Marshall Stearns, \textit{The Story of Jazz} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 189.}

Following Moten’s critically and publicly acclaimed performances at the Savoy, a notable shift in the swing aesthetic of Harlem jazz has been observed, with the Savoy Ballroom at its nexus.\footnote{Howard Spring, “Swing and the Lindy Hop: Dance, Venue, Media, and Tradition,” \textit{American Music} 15, no. 2, (Summer 1997): 185.}

![Figure 9 - Bennie Moten’s Kansas City Orchestra, circa 1930. Photograph courtesy of Red Hot Jazz.](image)

The only time the Savoy Ballroom drew negative press for its entertainment was during an ill-advised floorshow, \textit{Savoy Vanities}, staged and produced by Leonard Harper in 1933. From the late 1920s into the early 1930s, Charles Buchanan attempted to explore alternate sources of entertainment, using the Savoy Ballroom as a launch pad for a series
of masquerade balls, public events, and variety shows. Harper, well known as a respectable theatrical producer, was contracted to stage a series of vaudeville-inspired productions at the behest of Buchanan and Gale. The Savoy Vanities was Harper’s second attempt at using the Savoy for purposes of creating a more theatrical venue (the first was an equally unsuccessful 1928 Review of Vodvil). The Vanities was meant to be a performance in the spirit of classic vaudevilles featuring “twenty four ravishing chorines, plus Twelve Glorified Savoyettes and Twelve Captivating Harlemaids along with his standard assemblage of variety acts and an augmented twenty two piece snap crackling pop jazz orchestra.”  

However, the performance failed, likely as a result of changing cultural attitudes, tastes, and perceptions of dance. Similarly, Charles Buchanan’s refusal to invest additional funds in principal talent placed the primary ingredients of the performance in jeopardy, resulting in an uncharacteristically savage review from the New York Amsterdam News. The failed revue was hastily removed from the Savoy’s circulation.


The year 1935 represents a major milestone in the timeline of the Savoy Ballroom, predominantly because of Ella Fitzgerald’s recruitment into Chick Webb’s band. At the time Fitzgerald was a teenager, fresh from her critically acclaimed series of performances at the Apollo Theatre. While Webb’s band was already at the relative peak

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105 Ibid.
of its popularity, the both Gale and Buchanan strongly felt that hiring a charismatic vocalist with popular recognition would be a wise financial decision for the band and the ballroom. Webb’s first engagement with Ella Fitzgerald was held on the 8th of March 1935, where Fitzgerald was received to critical acclaim by an all-white audience of Yale University students in New Haven, Connecticut. Fitzgerald’s subsequent two-week engagement at the Savoy Ballroom demonstrated an equally positive reception by both black and white patrons, significantly increasing attendance figures “despite her plain and awkward appearance.” Four months later, Ella Fitzgerald and Chick Webb presided over quite possibly the largest gathering held at the Savoy, when boxer Joe Louis defeated his heavyweight opponent Primo Carnera on the 25th of June. Louis’ victory represented more than an American’s victory over an Italian: purportedly, the Harlemites, who supported Ethiopia in its struggles against Mussolini’s fascist regime, saw the symbolic triumph of freedom over oppression in Carnera’s defeat. The ensuing celebration called for police to cordon off the Savoy Ballroom’s front door, but reports diverge on the exact number of attendees. Sources suggest that a minimum of 1500 individuals gained entry to the Savoy with a crowd of 35,000 to 50,000 gathered outside to greet the heavyweight champion upon his arrival to the venue. The attendance figures were most likely exaggerated, as the majority of attendees may have been present

108 Tamara Stevens and Erin Stevens, Swing Dancing (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 62.
109 George Tucker, “Man About Manhattan,” Ellensburg Daily Record, August 16, 1940, 6. “Harlem has Gala Night In Victory,” Syracuse Herald, June 26, 1935, 18. The Syracuse Herald indicates that only 1500 patrons were admitted into the venue with another 5000 waiting to be let in.
solely for the benefit of seeing Louis in person. On the other hand, the strong showing
demonstrated the Harlemites’ political loyalties, further indicating that the Savoy
Ballroom existed as a center of Harlem’s social gatherings, rather than yet another Lenox
Avenue dinner-and-dancing venue.

The Savoy Ballroom closed for yet another major renovation and redecoration in
1936. Savoy was then at its financial peak and height of popularity. The estimated cost of
renovation reached $50,000, which included an overhaul of the interior with a full
replacement of the dance floor. The interior restoration work paved the way for one of
the most significant events in the Savoy’s history, the battle between the bands of Chick
Webb and Benny Goodman, scheduled to take place on May 11, 1937. Fresh from his
engagement at the Paramount Theatre, Goodman was recently unofficially crowned the
“King of Swing;” meanwhile, Webb, the reigning “King of the Savoy,” was anxious to
defend his territory against Goodman. The resulting competition brought in a crowd of
over 5000 attendees anxious to see the performance, while another 5000 gathered
outside. Webb and Goodman were off to an even match-up, although according to the
New York Age, Goodman’s band matched Webb’s performance only in the second half of
the evening:

Goodman did not reach the heights until after he added two Negroes, Lionel Hampton and Teddy Wilson, to his aggregation. He will probably be the cause of other white leaders adding Negroes to their bands.  

\[\text{110} \text{ Stearns and Stearns, Jazz Dance, 321.} \]

\[\text{111} \text{ “A Great Spectacle,” The New York Age, May 21, 1937, 6.} \]

\[\text{112} \text{ Ibid.} \]
Webb was ultimately crowned the winner by a landslide, thanks in no small part to the established popularity of his ensemble.\textsuperscript{113}

Webb’s victory not only consolidated the primacy of Harlem jazz at the Savoy; it attested to the elevated musical perceptions of the Savoy clientele, who were able to shape the musical taste of the establishment. According to New York jazz historians Samuel Charters and Leonard Kunstadt:

Benny came into the Savoy with his greatest band, but the Savoy was jammed with Chick’s loyal fans. The Goodman band played at their best, but they couldn’t win the crowd away from little Chick. He finished with a drum solo, winning a thunderous ovation, while Goodman and his drummer, Gene Krupa, just stood there shaking their heads.\textsuperscript{114}

On January 16, 1938, Chick Webb’s ensemble was pitted against yet another seasoned veteran of swing, as Kansas City swing returned to the Savoy, this time along with William “Count” Basie’s Orchestra. The battle was not pitched in Webb’s favor, as he and his musicians were playing against a seasoned aggregation comfortable with performing for dancers with diverse and refined musical palates. In addition, Basie brought with him the young Billie Holiday, who had just finished an East Coast tour with Artie Shaw’s orchestra and was expected to be Fitzgerald’s equal in terms of skill and musicianship.

\textsuperscript{114} Anderson, \textit{This Was Harlem}, 312.
According to official sources within the press, Webb defeated Basie in the showdown, and *Downbeat* magazine reported Webb as the definitive victor over the Kansas City visitors.\(^{115}\) In spite of the official prognostication, however, it appears that the crowd cheered for Basie throughout the night, and although Webb may have been proclaimed the victor by media sources, Basie scored a decisive victory by popular vote.\(^{116}\) Some of Basie’s success may have resulted from the strong support of Herbert White and his team of Lindy Hoppers, or rather by their lack of support for Webb:

Snookie [Pettis Dotson Beasley] insisted that there was a new sound coming, and Mr. Basie was going to upset everything when he got [to the Savoy.] When [Chick Webb] heard it, it sounded like the kids were saying he didn’t have it anymore, and […] when Chick heard of this he responded in typical Chick Webb fashion saying, ‘I don’t give a good God damn what those raggedy Lindy Hoppers think or say. Who needs them? As far as I’m concerned, they can all go to hell […]’ The surprise came later that night. As we [the Lindy Hoppers] entered the ballroom, Whitey [Herbert White] met us and he told us that when Chick got on the bandstand, all dancers were to leave the floor.\textsuperscript{117}

Webb eventually relented, and the Lindy Hoppers were once again permitted to dance to his sets over the course of the evening. Nevertheless, this incident demonstrated the tremendous impact of popular opinion on the success of the bands performing at the Savoy Ballroom. Since popular opinion and public’s response was used to measure the quality of a performance at the Savoy, it was in the musicians’ best interests to ingratiate themselves to their audience by adjusting their playing style to suit their tastes in dancing. Conversely, the dancers were forced to make adjustments based on the performing ensemble’s musical styles to better accommodate the musicians.

\textit{The Decline: 1939-1945.}

The peak of the Savoy’s popularity began to wane following Webb’s death on June 16, 1939 as the Ballroom’s finances and affairs precipitously declined after the end of World War II, mostly as a result of the decreased attendance in the wake of the

\textsuperscript{117} Miller and Jensen, \textit{Swingin’ at the Savoy}, 104-5.
military draft and the Cabaret Tax act of 1944.\footnote{118} Although Webb passed away before the majority of Savoy Ballroom’s financial and political difficulties began, his death signaled a significant change to the Savoy’s musical aesthetics, directly affecting its popularity among dedicated regular clients. While the Savoy Ballroom avoided any crippling financial damage directly resulting from Webb’s death, the musical era espoused by Webb’s residency effectively ended in spite of his orchestra passing on to Ella Fitzgerald, with drummer Bill Beason replacing the late Webb.\footnote{119} After Webb’s death, Fitzgerald took the newly minted Famous Orchestra in a new direction, rescinding its status as house band, and continued making appearances at the Savoy Ballroom only periodically. Fitzgerald and her Famous Orchestra performed at the Savoy Ballroom as headliners for the last time on March 2, 1941, for a 3 P. M. matinee.\footnote{120} Nevertheless, Fitzgerald remained under the auspices of the Moe Gale’s booking agency through the end of 1942. A few weeks prior to Webb’s death, in May of 1939, Gale Enterprises invested a sum of roughly $134,000 into the promotion and construction of a Savoy Pavilion at the World’s Fair in Flushing, New York.\footnote{121} The Pavilion featured the dancing talent of several members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers; Fess Williams and Teddy Williams were hired to provide the music as Chick Webb’s failing health precluded him from exerting

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{119} Holden, “Ella Fitzgerald, the Voice of Jazz, Dies at 79,” Fritts and Vail, \textit{Ella Fitzgerald}, 42.
\footnotetext{120} Ibid., 51.
\end{footnotes}
himself.\textsuperscript{122} The Pavilion remained open only through the month of August, but in the few months of its operation it generated significant nationwide awareness of Moe Gale’s uptown venue. According to Norma Miller, the Savoy Pavilion gained additional exposure because the World’s Fair’s primary exhibition, television, was available to broadcast a short recording of Miller and her partner, George Greenidge.\textsuperscript{123} It is unclear if the recording was ever broadcast beyond the confines of the Fair, but the presence of African-American dancers among the first individuals to be recorded on video remains a remarkable milestone in the history of recorded media.

The Savoy’s prominent location as a tourist destination on Lenox Avenue was also used to great effect during a visit by Eddie “Rochester” Anderson on April 23, 1940. Although major media outlets did not provide specific attendance figures, the \textit{New York Age} stated that the crowd gathered outside the ballroom was “one of the largest crowds assembled [at the Ballroom] to greet a celebrity.”\textsuperscript{124} Like Joe Louis, Anderson was an important icon in the African-American communities of New York City, playing straight man to Jack Benny’s comedic antics on \textit{The Jack Benny Program} since 1937. Over time, Anderson garnered a tremendous amount of support and popularity by subverting the stereotypical approach to racial comedy, effectively turning around the “black man as servant” typecasting by the mid-1940s. Anderson’s iconic status made his appearance at

\textsuperscript{122} Norma Miller, public interview, Rochester, November 15, 2013.
\textsuperscript{123} Miller and Jensen, \textit{Swingin’ at the Savoy}, 142-3.
\textsuperscript{124} “Eddie (Rochester) Anderson To Be Honored At Premiere of ‘Buck Benny Rides Again’ Reception At The Savoy Ballroom,” \textit{The New York Age}, April 20, 1940, 4.
the Savoy an occasion particularly worthy of celebration for the Harlemites, as the press reported that the star was afforded a particularly lavish red carpet reception:125

‘Rochester,’ now en route from Hollywood, will arrive in New York on Thursday morning, April 18th at 10 a. m., where he will be met by a welcoming committee at the East 125th Street New York Central Harlem station. Miss “Cissy” Bowe, the glamorous “Miss Harlem-1940” will present the “Keys to Harlem” to the famous screen and radio comedian. […] At the Savoy fete to “Rochester” over 135 radio and stage stars are scheduled to appear over the NBC or Mutual network microphones in a coast-to-coast tribute to the beloved comedia [sic.]126

A significant blow to the Savoy’s integrity, finances, and future profitability was dealt on April 21, 1943. The Savoy management experienced periodic difficulties with city government prior to the early 1940s, and while the interracial mingling within the Savoy Ballroom’s walls was never officially cited as a pretense for the friction, the venue was under scrutiny by police authorities who, according to an NAACP inquiry, “had sometimes looked with displeasure at the mixed dancing in the ballroom.”127 In mid-1943, several American Navy sailors on shore leave accused one Alfred Johnson, a Savoy Ballroom restroom attendant, of being a procurer of women, after one of the sailors contracted a venereal disease following a visit to the establishment.128 Although no arrests were made, and no proof of Johnson’s activity was ever supplied by either the Ballroom management or the vice detectives of the New York Police Department, Mayor

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126 “Anderson to be Honored.”
127 Brandt, *Harlem at War*, 170.
LaGuardia closed the ballroom in spite of protestations of both the NAACP and Adam Clayton Powell. The famous *LIFE* magazine’s cover and feature of August 8, 1943 were most likely timed with the Harlem riots as well as the closing of the Ballroom, which lasted through the 5th of November of the same year (see figure 12). During the closing, the doors of the Savoy Ballroom were padlocked while all activities inside were suspended. The six-month shutdown did what neither the repeal of Prohibition nor the Great Depression could achieve, as the Savoy never fully regained its financial and cultural momentum. From 1943 through the mid-1950s, the Savoy was still used to hold dances, although its status as the jewel of Lenox Avenue gradually receded into tarnished obscurity. Reduced attendance by local Harlemites and out-of-town visitors forced the management to adopt significant policy changes, such as taking on additional third-party rental agreements, dismantling the hostess corps, reducing the frequency of band battles, and admitting smaller ensembles to play at the venue’s dances.

Figure 12 - *Life* Magazine cover featuring dancers Stanley Catron and Kaye Popp, August 1943. Photographer: Gjon Mili. Photograph courtesy of Jitterbuzz.
Despite the financial difficulties caused by the Savoy Ballroom’s closure in 1943, the Ballroom experienced enough of a pickup in business by 1948 to sponsor its sixth, most extravagant renovation costing $109,000. It reopened on June 3, 1948 to acclaim:

The once drab and inconspicuous exterior of the ballroom now features huge glass doors on the main floor costing $3,000. Keeping harmonious pace with the building’s front is the ultra-modernistic interior. The checkroom located in the basement, which formerly had accommodations for 5,000 coats, hats, and other wearing apparel, has been enlarged and a television set has been installed. […] The dance hall itself has been transformed into a breathtaking and picturesque scene of color and splendor. There are stainless steel columns supporting the new ceiling, indirect lighting, 1500 yards of magnificent plush carpeting of gold, brown, and red designs which cost nearly $18,000.132

The renovations represented a new step for Savoy Ballroom; in keeping up with an aesthetic of modern décor, Charles Buchanan was intent on demonstrating the ongoing institutional status held by the Ballroom as an example to Harlem. While the Second World War exacted a heavy toll on the venue’s attendance, an investment such as a complete renovation was expected to reinvigorate the Savoy Ballroom and make it appealing to new clients as well as revitalize the interest of existing customers.

**Final Years: 1945-1958**.

In spite of the construction’s success, business at the Savoy was rapidly declining. The instatement of the 1944 Cabaret Tax act hobbled the nightclub and ballroom business, instating a steep 30% tax, making it wholly unprofitable to hire big bands at

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such exorbitant rates. The 1947 extension of the act and the subsequent arrest of trumpeter and band leader Erskine Hawkins on June 22, 1951 further tarnished the Ballroom’s reputation among clients. Business was not picking up, and although Charles Buchanan had received $500,000 as partial payment from the City of New York for the Savoy Ballroom, with promises of relocating the Ballroom to a newer venue just across Lenox Avenue readily made, neither the remainder of the payment nor the relocation ever materialized.133 The Savoy Ballroom was forced to shut its doors on July 10, 1958, following an auctioning of memorabilia, furniture, and miscellaneous items, held at the Lenox Avenue location.134 _Jet Magazine_ wrote:

> The ancient Steinway piano, which a used furniture dealer bought for $450 at the auction, had been played by Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Fats Waller, and just about every other jazz pianist worthy of the name.135

Although only a plaque currently marks the former location of the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, its presence left an indelible mark on the history of New York City. As the foremost venue for the cultivation of swing music and vernacular jazz dance for over three decades, the Savoy Ballroom was part of the mortar holding together the surrounding community. Conceived to compete with the likes of Alhambra and Roseland Ballrooms, the Savoy Ballroom became considerably more than the initial undertaking of its construction would suggest, as the Gale-Buchanan partnership fostered an attitude of inclusivity and racial tolerance.

Further Breakdown: Costs and Finances

Because of the fire-sale nature of Savoy’s closing in 1958, it has been difficult to locate and examine the documents related to the Savoy Ballroom’s business and accounts. As a result, much of the information about the finances, costs, and employment records of the Savoy Ballroom must be assembled from a combination of primary and secondary sources. While the information below is not a comprehensive overview of the Savoy Ballroom’s financial activities, it provides a general depiction of the Savoy Ballroom’s finances. This examination of the Savoy’s finances provides a glimpse of global scope of the Ballroom’s operations, employment, cultural policy, and standing social protocol.

A multi-million dollar enterprise, constructed over a period of six months, the Savoy Ballroom was perhaps one of the more sizable real estate investments in Harlem during the 1920s. The cost of the Ballroom’s construction was appraised at approximately $475,000 in 1926, of which $100,000 was fronted by the Gales and Buchanan by their silent partner, Jay Faggen. Faggen was bought out soon after the construction was completed, with Moe Gale and Buchanan taking over the management of the venue by late 1926 (Gale’s brother Charles likewise left the management enterprise.) As the Savoy Ballroom’s main competitors were the Alhambra and

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136 Karen Hubbard and Terry Monaghan, “Negotiating Compromise on a Burnished Wood Floor: Social Dancing at the Savoy,” in Ballrom, Boogie, Shimmy-Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader, ed. Julie Malnig (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 132-3. Hubbard and Monaghan suggest that the costs and finances provided by Gale, Buchanan, and Faggen were vastly inflated, listing the existing structure as the projected space for the venue as only one of the explanations for the Ballroom’s sizable construction budget.

137 Gault, Ballroom Echoes, 238.
Roseland Ballrooms, it was constructed primarily as a venue for live music and dancing with dining and general entertainment as an afterthought. The resulting construction granted the Savoy a spacious dancing area. The official size of the ballroom’s floor is still a subject of much conjecture. Sources do not agree on the precise measurements of the floor, with the official Savoy Ballroom brochure indicating that the floor was measured at 12,500 square feet (50ft x 250ft), while the *New York Age* indicates that the area was smaller, at only 10,000 square feet (50ft x 200ft.)\(^{138}\)

\[\text{Figure 13 - A postcard showing the interior of the Savoy Ballroom. Photograph courtesy of Street Swing.}\]

\(^{138}\) Lengths over 200 feet seem suspect because New York City standard block widths do not exceed 199 feet in length. William E. Clark, “Fletcher Henderson, Eddie Rector, Other Stage Stars at Savoy,” *The New York Age*, March 6, 1926, 6.
In various interviews, Charles Buchanan suggested that the ballroom’s dancing area may have been as small as 80 feet by 30 feet. Joel Dinerstein places the ballroom’s size at a reasonable medium, suggesting it was 30 feet by 150 feet. A possible explanation for the discrepancy in the measurements might be attributed to the inclusion of the sidelines of the dancing area in some of the measurements. Furthermore, it is likely that Buchanan wished to inflate the sense of importance of the Ballroom, thus citing a larger floor size than actually existed. Regardless, the floor’s oblong shape earned it the nickname “The Track,” which stuck with the venue throughout its lifespan, along with “Home of the Happy Feet” and “The World’s Finest Ballroom.” Former Savoy hostess Helen Clarke described the ballroom as follows:

From the street you’d see a marquee; you’d walk under it and down a flight of stairs to the check-room. Then you’d come back up to the main lobby and ascend another staircase – there was one on each side – and the ballroom entrance was at the head of the stairs. Booths lined the walls, and there was beautiful carpeting and wicker lounge chairs with cushions. A one-room office was stuck in a cubby-hole at the 140th Street side. Next to it was a soda counter; after Prohibition, they sold beer, but never wine or hard drinks. Most of all, the Savoy was known for its beautiful dance floor, which spanned the entire block from 140th to 141st Streets.

The front-of-house operations were conducted through a ticket booth, located at the exterior of the 140th Street side of the ballroom, underneath the Savoy Ballroom marquee. The cost of admission varied during the 1926-27 period, and is generally cited as $0.50 for weeknights, and $0.75 for weekend nights (see figure 14). In 1928,

Buchanan solidified the attendance policy to reflect the hour of the patron’s arrival: $0.30 before 6:00 in the evening, $0.60 until 8:00 in the evening, and $0.85 from 8:00 onward.\footnote{Barbara Engelbrecht, “Swinging at the Savoy,” \textit{Dance Research Journal} 15, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 6.} This policy was enacted to correspond with the general attendance figures, as clients tended to patronize the Ballroom more during the late hours when the bands were warmed up. There is no indication of any additional fluctuation in cost after 1928, although the possibility of increased admission due to inflation is possible. In addition to the dancing facilities, the Savoy Ballroom also featured light dinner service with a beer and wine menu. According to advertisements prominently featured in the \textit{New York Age} newspaper around the time of Savoy’s opening, the menu contained light sandwich and salad fare at reasonable prices, as well as a selection of cold beers (see figure 14).\footnote{“Savoy: Ear, Drink, and be Merry,” \textit{The New York Age}, March 20, 1926, 6.}

The cost of admission, although low, supported a lavish set of accommodations for the Savoy Ballroom’s clients. The foyer was comprised of a descending staircase to a basement-level coat check room, opening up on a “spacious lobby with a marble staircase” leading to the second floor ballroom area.\footnote{Gault, \textit{Ballroom Echoes}, 238-9.} The ballroom’s interior, adorned with painted walls and tracked lights, was outlined lengthwise with a seating area decorated with upholstered chairs on the side of 141st Street, and booths with four-person capacity on the side of 140th Street. The overall impression must have been breathtaking, as according to \textit{New York Age}:

\begin{quote}
When one enters the building he finds himself in a spacious lobby set off by marble staircase and cut glass chandelier. The hall itself is decorated in a color scheme of orange and blue. One half of the floor is heavily carpeted. There are
\end{quote}
tables, settees, etc., where guests may rest between dances. There is a soda fountain at one end of the hall [...]. The dance floor [...] is made of the best quality maple flooring, polished to the highest degree. Two bandstands and a disappearing stage are in the rear. Above are vari-colored spotlights.\footnote{Anderson, \textit{This Was Harlem}, 308.}
Leon James corroborated this account, recalling his first night at the Savoy Ballroom:

My first impression was that I had stepped into a different world. I had been to other ballrooms, but this was different – much bigger, more glamor, real class…145

Based on the description and the existing photographs of the interior of the ballroom, one may infer that the space was designed with an Art Deco aesthetic, albeit one which prominently featured updated acoustic designs implemented for optimum sound dispersion and coverage (see figure 13). The twin stages, prominently featured in various photographs, were placed in front of sound shells whose purpose was to disperse sound throughout the ballroom in the absence of microphones and other electronic amplification. The relatively low ceilings also appear to have been included partly to assist with sound dispersal.

The floor of the Savoy Ballroom was similarly designed using the most up-to-date features. According to dancer Al Minns, the floor of the Savoy Ballroom consisted of three layers. The design allowed for redistribution of foot traffic, effectively causing the rhythmic pulse of the music and dance to be absorbed and amplified, through the entire second floor of the building:

The floor […] was made of three layers: one layer of springs, then cork on top of the layer of springs, and then this highly polished floor. And when I say bouncin’ at the Savoy, you didn’t have to dance. [You could] stand near

145 Stearns and Stearns, Jazz Dance, 321.
the bandstand, and the floor would actually push you up and down from the rhythm of people tappin’ their feet.”

The floor’s springs wore out roughly every three years, and had to be replaced. Erin and Tamara Stevens support Minns’ story, but indicate that the floor’s top layer was made of maple and mahogany, while the *New York Age* article discussing the Savoy Ballroom’s redecoration in 1930 mentions that the floor was made of pine. In addition, the same article refers to a “new, scientific, patented ‘sleeper system’” placed beneath the wood floor, designed to “make [the floor] more resilient and easier to dance upon.”

According to the brochure released by the Savoy’s management in the early 1950s, as well as an aggregate of articles published by New York press outlets, it can be estimated that the Savoy Ballroom had a maximum occupancy of 4,000 individuals. These numbers, however, would reflect that the Ballroom’s occupancy at its maximum, allowing either standing room only, or slight shuffling rather than dancing. In addition, at its peak of financial operations in 1936, the management reported annual sales of 700,000 tickets, with 250,000 paid admissions in its first year of operations. Dancer Frankie

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147 Stevens and Stevens, *Swing Dancing*, 60. “Redecorated Savoy To Open Thursday,” *The New York Age*, November 17, 1930, 6. According to a contemporary sleeper system flooring fact sheet, “sleeper,” or floating systems rest freely without anchorage to a concrete substrate. Different combinations of pad and subfloor designs provide varying levels of resiliency. True subfloor components and various elastomeric pads, these system’s key benefits is shock absorption and resiliency, however, they do not provide the stability of fixed resilient systems.
Manning attested in his autobiography that the ballroom was functioning at its peak with roughly 2,000 clients, “without anyone ever kicking anyone.”\textsuperscript{149}

**Employees and Personnel**

The personnel of the Savoy Ballroom represented the venue’s public façade. Some, like the managers Gale and Buchanan, made a considerable impact on the artistic, social, and economic development of Harlem. Others, among them the bouncers, doormen, and hostesses, served to present visitors with an image of class, thus amplifying Harlem’s appearance as an un-and-coming neighborhood. Extensive biographical dossiers are available on some of the individuals associated with running the Savoy Ballroom. Other biographical sketches were put together from various newspaper clippings, articles, and recorded personal accounts by dancers Frankie Manning, Norma Miller, Al Minns, and others. As with the financial information on the Savoy Ballroom, a complete documentation of employee rosters and dates is nearly impossible to assemble; however, the general understanding is that the Savoy Ballroom did not have a high rate of employee turnaround, and most employees remained with the venue for many years until retirement or voluntary departure. Few documented cases of firings are mentioned in the literature examined.

Perhaps one of the most important individuals at the Savoy was Charles “Charlie” Buchanan (b. 1898, Barbados; d. 1984, Toledo, Ohio), who came to New York City with his family as a child in 1904, at the age of four or five. Little is known about his

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.
childhood, save that he was educated in Harlem. Buchanan then worked in real estate in the area, where he was, by all accounts, highly respected.\footnote{In addition to career as a property manager, Buchanan pursued a joint venture with Moses and Charles Galewski and Jay Faggen at the Savoy Ballroom in 1926, where he served as house manager and secretary-treasurer until its closing in 1958. In 1929, following the stock market crash, Buchanan temporarily resigned over a salary cut resulting from accusations of the Savoy Ballroom’s mismanagement, but returned later the same year. By 1943, Buchanan took over the majority share of the Savoy Ballroom, becoming the full owner. In addition to his activities at the Savoy, Buchanan was chairman emeritus of United Mutual Life Insurance Company, and served on the boards of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund of Harlem, the Harlem YMCA, and the New York Urban League.\footnote{At the Savoy, Buchanan made significant strides in developing the Ballroom’s high-class aesthetic. An important aspect of Buchanan’s program was increasing the Savoy’s accessibility and visibility to the Harlem community as well as New York whites, an objective he reached by instating a critically acclaimed series of Courtesy Training programs. The program, developed to “teach the Savoy staff the value of courtesy and the most intelligent means of handling the public,” was designed to train the staff of doormen, service personnel, and hostesses in handling clients in the most courteous and professional way. In 1926 the \textit{New York Age} ran an article that noted: \begin{quote} In an institution as large as the Savoy it is nearly impossible for the management to watch each employee \end{quote}}
individually to see that each one is courteous and intent on helping the patrons. For this reason, a merit system has been inaugurated. This system gives each member of the organization the opportunity to share in the profits of the establishment according to their standing in this respect.\textsuperscript{152}

Additionally, Buchanan was responsible for instituting the fluctuating hourly admission fees at the Ballroom. He did this out of the belief that a flexible rate of admission would turn the Ballroom into a “community proposition,” rather than a purely business-oriented enterprise.\textsuperscript{153}

Moses Galewski (see figure 15) also known as Moe Gale (b. 1900, New York City; d. 1964, New York City), was equal to Buchanan in terms of his importance and contribution. Gale was an entrepreneur in the luggage business started by his father, prior to entering into partnership with Jay Faggen, Charles Galewski, and Buchanan. Additionally, he ran Gale Enterprises, a well-known and respected booking agency for radio broadcast and theater entertainment. Later in life, Gale continued his involvement with the performing arts and their promotion by joining the Sheldon and Advance music companies.\textsuperscript{154} Although Marshall Stearns suggests that Gale was likely involved in criminal activity, little evidence exists to substantiate this claim. While Gale was directly involved in the running of the Savoy Ballroom’s general operations prior to 1943, he gave over his share of the investment to Buchanan soon thereafter, focusing solely on

\textsuperscript{152} “Savoy Ballroom Has School of Courtesy For Its Employees,” \textit{The New York Age}, June 5, 1926, 6. Anderson, \textit{This Was Harlem}, 313.


Gale Enterprises. Gale worked out of an office located in Midtown Manhattan at 48 West 48th Street, but spent a lot of time in Harlem because of his booking-related work with African-American musicians. As an exclusive agent for Maxine Sullivan, the Ink Spots, Ella Fitzgerald, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the Golden Gate Quartette, and the bands of Erskine Hawkins, Benny Carter, Coleman Hawkins, Al Cooper, Tiny Bradshaw, and Lucky Millinder, Gale had an outstanding opportunity to book some of the most noteworthy, recognizable, and musically competent musicians for the Savoy Ballroom. Unfortunately, Gale’s undertakings in the entertainment business

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also placed him in direct competition with the Cotton Club’s proprietor, Owney Madden, who took over Cab Calloway’s contract from Gale under the threat of physical violence.\textsuperscript{156} Gale’s confrontation with Madden suggests that the Savoy Ballroom was seen as a competitive threat to the business generated at the Cotton Club, as Gale’s access to some of the more well-known musical acts drove clients away from neighboring night spots, and into the Savoy.

The Gale-Buchanan partnership was not only significant to the growth and development of the Savoy Ballroom, but also a great asset to Harlem’s African-American community. The partnership between Gale, the white Jewish entrepreneur, and Buchanan, an African-American real estate mogul of Caribbean descent, provided a sterling sample of embracing interracial business policies at a time when whites viewed Harlem blacks as second-class citizens. More importantly, the Savoy Ballroom opened as a venue specifically catering to blacks, but also offering equal admission and treatment to white clients.\textsuperscript{157} Although Smalls’ Paradise already established the paradigm of interracial patronage six months prior to the Savoy Ballroom’s opening, the Savoy represented the culmination of \textit{de facto} integration in Harlem.\textsuperscript{158} The Savoy Ballroom’s stance on integration profoundly affected the flow of race relations in Harlem, effectively

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 66-8.
\textsuperscript{157} Gertrude Jeannette, quoted in \textit{The Savoy King: Chick Webb And The Music That Changed America}, directed by Jeff Kaufman, Floating World Pictures, 2008, Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom scene.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid. As a nightclub, Smalls’ Paradise focused less on social interaction, and more on dining. On the other hand, Savoy Ballroom had a higher capacity, which bolstered interaction between clients. Savoy also welcomed patrons from every socio-economic stratum, while nightclubs tended to only admit individuals who could pay the occasionally steep door charges.
challenging the *status quo* on the local, regional, and eventually national level.\textsuperscript{159} This was accomplished by providing exposure to Harlem culture to whites, and eventually generating enough publicity to open the Savoy Ballroom pavilion at the 1939 World’s Fair in Flushing in an attempt to showcase the Savoy’s cultural accomplishments to the Western world.

Herbert “Whitey” White (b. unknown, d. September 30, 1950 in Oswego, NY) was the head bouncer, floor manager, and talent scout for the Savoy Ballroom (see figure 16). In addition to his duties as the Savoy Ballroom’s head of security, he also organized the Savoy Ballroom’s renowned, top-tier dance troupe, Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers.

\textsuperscript{159} Miller and Jensen, *Swingin’ at the Savoy*, 28. According to Miller, the progress made by the Savoy Ballroom in terms of integration became more pronounced during the late 1930s’ opening of the Savoy Ballroom pavilion at the New York World’s Fair in Flushing.
A veteran sergeant of the 369th Division in World War I and a former bouncer at the Alhambra Ballroom, White had little in the way of formal education, but his charming yet no-nonsense demeanor, amplified by his natural *savoir-faire*, made him one of the Savoy’s most valuable assets as he procured talent for the professional dancer corps of the Ballroom.160 Norma Miller recalls:

> Whenever a call came in requesting dancers, Whitey was the one who supplied them. All of the shows being packaged from the ballroom included Lindy Hoppers, and

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160 Miller and Jensen, *Swingin’ at the Savoy*, 61.
Whitey was booking his own dancers for these jobs. [...] From the beginning Whitey had a clear view of his goal. He wanted to be the man to make the Lindy Hop a famous and accepted art form. [...] Getting jobs [for dancers] without proper representation made no sense to him.\(^{161}\)

According to dancer Frankie Manning, Herbert White’s investments paid off:

Other than Shorty Snowden, Whitey’s groups were the only Lindy Hoppers out there working professionally. [...] He ran a booking agency that hired orchestras for the Savoy, placed individual bands in theaters and nightclubs, and packaged entertainers into touring shows. At the end of the ’30s, he also opened up the Golden Gate Ballroom two blocks away.\(^{162}\)

Dancer Al Minns similarly recalled that White was fully invested in the promotion of Lindy Hop as a cultural pastime, but retained a rough-and-tumble sensibility about him:

I think Whitey loved dancing [...] although he wasn’t much good on the floor, and he was a great choreographer. I always had the feeling that Whitey was born too soon, that it was a shame he didn’t get an education. He could con anybody, talk the shirt off their back, and he was no slouch in a brawl.\(^{163}\)

White’s knack for picking out young talent can be traced back to his early days as a dancing waiter at Baron Wilkins nightclub at 134\(^{th}\) Street and 7\(^{th}\) Avenue in New York, where learned the majority of his dance moves and aesthetics. Subsequently, White was employed as a head waiter at Smalls’ Paradise, where he trained the staff of dancing waiters.\(^{164}\) During the mid-1940s, White retired from show business to live in Oswego, New York. Since the majority of male members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers had been

\(^{161}\) Ibid.
\(^{162}\) Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 68, 140.
\(^{163}\) Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 317.
called into active service due to the draft, White lost many members of the core group and was unwilling to continue training the team without the presence of adequate male dancers.

White’s contribution to the Savoy was of substantial benefit to its public appearance, as he consistently appeared as the Ballroom’s public façade, and endeavored to employ only the most professional and skilled Lindy Hoppers. If Buchanan and Gale were responsible for the Savoy’s ongoing financial health, then White was the face of the Ballroom’s public relations. According to Manning, White was the front line of representation for the Savoy’s professional Lindy Hoppers, creating as much exposure as possible for the dancers and promoting the Savoy Ballroom and the Lindy Hop.165

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165 Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 68, 140-41.
Harold M. Parker, the Managing Director of the Savoy Ballroom, is mentioned several times throughout Savoy Ballroom press and literature, but little information exists about his life outside of the Savoy. By all accounts a clean-cut and professional man, Parker rose from working as a soda fountain operator in 1926 to the status of assistant to
Charles Buchanan during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Parker took over management of the Savoy Ballroom during Buchanan’s eight-week sabbatical in 1930, but resumed his role as assistant manager upon Buchanan’s return. It is unclear how long Parker remained with the Ballroom as a manager, but he continued to be involved in the Ballroom’s civic outreach program until at least 1949, when he served as Master of Ceremonies for the annual Les Seize Club’s scholarship gala held at the Savoy.166

The Savoy Ballroom staff, typically consisting of 70 to 80 employees, reached in 1941 its lowest employment figures of 35 workers, when the employment was adversely affected by the military draft. Following a major renovation in 1948, however, the venue hired additional help for a total of 150 employees. The Savoy Ballroom’s second highest rate of employment was 113 employees in 1936.167 The overwhelming majority of Savoy Ballroom’s employees were African-Americans who typically lived in Harlem, as Charles Buchanan preferred to hire locals in an effort to stimulate the neighborhood’s economic growth.168 The staff performed various duties, among them cashiers, secretaries, doormen, bouncers, hostesses, servers, and costumers. They were compensated well, and, upon Charles Buchanan’s insistence, were expected to be always well dressed, with suits to be worn by men, and high-class outfits to be donned by

168 Anderson, This Was Harlem, 313.
women. The previously mentioned Courtesy Training program instated by Buchanan helped with the women’s attendance of the Ballroom. It was Buchanan’s belief that women, when treated courteously by the Savoy’s staff and attendees, would be more likely to show up “stag,” thus raising attendance from single males, providing a boost to the business and revenues.

The Savoy Ballroom also hired 10 to 12 bouncers at any given time. Most Savoy Ballroom bouncers were former athletes, predominantly drawn from the ranks of Harlem’s prize-fighters or basketball players. All of them were full-time employees, and their earnings are reported to be among the highest of the Savoy employees, at $20 nightly by the mid- to late-1930s. The bouncers took their work quite seriously, as according to trumpeter Buck Clayton, they were some of the fiercest doormen in Harlem:

If you were wrong they would throw you out of the Savoy twice. […] Many a trouble-maker had to go to Harlem hospital with broken legs or arms after an encounter with those Savoy Ballroom bouncers.

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171 Gale Enterprises, Inc. balance sheet, November 24, 1937. World’s Fair New York 1939/1940 papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY. Data extrapolated from Savoy Pavilion spreadsheets and applied to possible nightly income of Savoy bouncers. According to Marshall Stearns, the Savoy publicity brochure stated that bouncers earned approximately $100 per night, which seems implausible, as a $1300 nightly advance for the bouncer corps would result in a higher pay for the employees than the union rate for the musicians. A possibility exists that $100 per night was paid to the entirety of the bouncer corps, and distributed evenly among the employees by the head bouncer.
George Alexander “Big George” Calloux,\textsuperscript{173} an ex-prize fighter from New Orleans, was just one of the notable Savoy bouncers who worked there from the late 1920s to 1945 (see figure 18). Although he was a prominent staple of the Savoy, serving as both doorman and head bouncer, few mentions of him exist, apart from occasional passing references by Norma Miller and Frankie Manning:

[Calloux] wore diamonds up and down his tuxedo shirt and a big diamond ring on his pinky finger. Single women knew they would be able to leave the Savoy safely, as he would see that they got into a taxi without being bothered. Nobody messed with Big George.\textsuperscript{174}

According to dance historian Terry Monaghan, Calloux retired from the Savoy in 1945, relocating from Manhattan to Long Island, where he opened the nightclub Corona.\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{173} Sometimes also Cailloux or Calleux.
\textsuperscript{174} Miller and Jensen, \textit{Swingin’ at the Savoy}, 29.
Other bouncers who worked at the Savoy Ballroom included popular singer-songwriter Emmett “Babe” Wallace, who was employed by the ballroom at age 19, and worked there from 1928 to 1930; Coley Wallace, the Harlem prize-fighter responsible for the 1948 defeat of Rocky Marciano; and James “Tiger” McWay (see figure 18).\textsuperscript{176}

The Savoy Ballroom was also home to a corps of hostesses, female attendants trained in dance and elocution, and impeccably mannered. Norma Miller attested that only Harlem’s most beautiful women could work in this position.\textsuperscript{177} At the time of its opening, the Savoy Ballroom employed a staff of twenty-five “dancing instructresses,” who could be hired at a rate of 25 cents for three lessons.\textsuperscript{178} In addition to maintaining their personal appearances, the hostesses were held to a strict set of rules governing their employment. Helen Clarke, a Savoy Ballroom hostess recalls:

\begin{quote}
You had to come on time… there was no fraternizing with the musicians and no leaving the place with anyone. And a wardrobe mistress always checked out our dresses to see if we looked all right.\textsuperscript{179}
\end{quote}

Other notable employees of the hostess corps included Madalene Allison and Cissy Bowe (see figure 19). Bowe, crowned Miss Harlem in 1940, was hired as a cigarette girl in 1928, but eventually rose to the status of hostess. Bowe was present at the Joe Louis gala, and was referred to as the “star of the Savoy staff and apple of Harlem’s

\textsuperscript{177} Miller and Jensen, \textit{Swingin’ At The Savoy}, 30. \\
\textsuperscript{178} Advertisement, \textit{New York Age}, March 20, 1926. Lewis A. Erenberg, \textit{Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 45-7 \\
\textsuperscript{179} Stevens and Stevens, \textit{Swing Dancing}, 62-3.
eye” by the *Ellensburg Daily Record*. Unfortunately, the hostess staff was dismantled in 1943 following the reopening of the Savoy Ballroom, and in the wake of allegations that some of the hostesses had been involved with the alleged prostitution ring run out of the Ballroom by Alfred Johnson.

Figure 19 - Cissy Bowe, cigarette girl and hostess at the Savoy Ballroom. Photograph courtesy of Norma Miller.

While the Savoy Ballroom employed musicians on a regular basis, it appears that they were paid according to a union scale on a per-engagement basis. According to Charles Buchanan, musicians were compensated according to fixed contracts, and were paid rates of $10 per musician, and $20 per principal (vocalist or soloist). The total

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181 Brandt, *Harlem at War*, 170. Another explanation is that the Savoy’s finances were steadily drying up following the 1943 closure, and the management laid off the hostess staff in an effort to balance the books.
proceeds from an evening of playing at the Savoy Ballroom in 1938 would net a big band roughly $3,300 per engagement.\(^\text{182}\) In 1939-1940, however, the rates for the house band were lowered, reflecting a $6.27 daily wage or a $43.75 weekly wage for all musicians.\(^\text{183}\) This underscores the nature of the musicians’ business affiliation with the Savoy Ballroom, suggesting not only that they were among the highest-paid employees at the venue, but also that they enjoyed extensive union protection while in Buchanan’s employment.

Professional dancers represented yet another link within Savoy Ballroom’s financial chain, yet it may be argued that their services provided minimal direct financial contribution to the Savoy’s well-being. Rather, the professional dancers indirectly contributed to the Ballroom’s financial health by being recruited and showcased by management, notably Herbert White.\(^\text{184}\) According to Manning himself, the dancers were seldom paid by the Ballroom directly, rather “the people watching might throw some money on the floor near the dancers, and we would divide it up.”\(^\text{185}\) In addition, the professional dancers participated in the 400 Club, a marketing strategy typically credited to Buchanan and White. The 400 Club offered a system of rewards for continued attendance, excellence in dancing, and commitment to the Savoy Ballroom. The 400 Club, which borrowed its name from the social gatherings held by Lady Caroline

\(^{182}\) New York Age, 5 June 1926, 6. Anderson, This Was Harlem, 313.  
\(^{184}\) A complete list of Savoy Ballroom professional dancers and Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers is available in Manning and Millman, Frankie Manning, 245-53.  
Schermerhorn Astor, became a staple of the Savoy Ballroom. While Manning indicated that the 400 Club of the Savoy Ballroom was by no means exclusive, and admission to the club was granted automatically upon payment of a nominal entry fee, the nomenclature implied the existence of an elite micro-culture among the dancers. The 400 Club ensured a constant influx of competent Lindy Hoppers into the Savoy, providing club members with the opportunity for practice and self-improvement while spectators were invited to watch their impromptu floor shows and demonstrations.\(^\text{186}\)

In addition to the employees and individuals mentioned above, the Savoy Ballroom employed a number of miscellaneous workers, including repairmen, electricians, secretaries, and a wardrobe mistress. A notable feature of the Savoy’s employment roster is that, beginning in 1926 and through its closing, the majority of its workers were African-American. In a predominantly white-owned Harlem, this represented a significant departure from the norm, affording African American workers the opportunity for full-time, stable wages without seeking employment as menial laborers or day-workers.\(^\text{187}\) In a sense, the Savoy Ballroom represented Harlem’s emergence from the economic quagmire of post-World War I squalor, and towards a more self-sufficient existence which was upheld inside as well as outside of the Ballroom.

**Schedules – Nightly Dances at the Savoy**

\(^{186}\) Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 66.
The Savoy Ballroom operated on a fixed weekly schedule. Unless the Ballroom was closed for renovations, dancing would be held at the Savoy every night of the week. The evenings weren’t necessarily themed, but a particular structure was applied to the week to maximize attendance and get the most use out of the space. The schedule proceeded according to the following format:

- **Mondays**: Ladies’ nights
- **Tuesdays**: Regular dance nights (400 Club)
- **Wednesdays**: Society nights
- **Thursdays**: Kitchen Mechanics’ nights
- **Fridays**: Society nights
- **Saturdays**: “Square” nights
- **Sundays**: Regular dance nights

On “Ladies’ Nights,” women accompanied by paying male companions would be granted admission without charge, creating a more balanced dynamic in the ballroom.\(^{188}\) Although seen as a regular dance night, Tuesdays were considered “400 Club” nights, and regular professional dancers were encouraged to attend as the Ballroom was less crowded, allowing the dancers to practice and exhibit their skills beyond the confines of one corner of the Ballroom.\(^{189}\) Wednesdays and Fridays were reserved as “Society Nights,” typically exchanging typical social dancing for such functions as balls, receptions, community meetings, and galas.\(^{190}\) Affectionately dubbed “Kitchen Mechanics’ Nights,” Thursdays were, for all intents and purposes, reduced-fare dances. The management felt that as most menial laborers and day-workers would receive evenings off on Thursdays, they would be more willing to spend their free time at the

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\(^{188}\) Gault, *Ballroom Echoes*, 239.
\(^{189}\) Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 66.
\(^{190}\) “Chinese Mandarin Ball to be Repeated at the Savoy,” *New York Age*, September 25, 1927, 6.
Savoy Ballroom. Meanwhile, Saturdays were commonly referred to as “Square nights,” seeing higher-than-usual attendance by casual dancers, tourists, visitors from out of town, and white Manhattanites. Saturday dances were also favored by young, liberal Jewish or Italian-American patrons seeking greater cultural awareness or a more involved means of exploring Harlem’s social scene. These patrons typically contributed to the Savoy Ballroom’s image as a culturally forward, desegregated venue. On Saturday nights the Savoy would also get flooded with sizable crowds, as visiting dignitaries, local and national celebrities, and famous individuals typically chose these nights for scheduled and unscheduled visits to the Ballroom. Finally, Sundays were a way for the Savoy Ballroom’s management to give back to the community in the form of “Opportunity Nights,” wherein contests including but not limited to dancing would be held to allow patrons to compete for cash prizes.

In summary, the thirty-two year life of the Savoy Ballroom represented a novel dynamic for Harlem. As a venue designed for purposes of community improvement, the Savoy achieved unprecedented heights of popularity for providing high-class entertainment and some of the best-known musical acts to a diverse range of clients. Unlike the nightclubs of Harlem, which typically catered to a specific social or economic demographic, the Savoy Ballroom’s involvement with the Harlem community, both as a venue and an employer, created new cultural norms and traditions, establishing itself as an important place of culture. The Savoy’s role in the Harlem community transitioned

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192 Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 313. Sundays were also Opportunity Nights. On these nights, the Savoy management would host periodic events where patrons could compete in contests for cash.
from merely providing a gathering place with entertainment to the production and preservation of various cultural traditions, which elevated it to the status of one of Harlem’s most notable institutions.
CHAPTER III: SAVOY BALLROOM AS INSTITUTION

“Say, lookie here, Lucky
What’s that place uptown
That all the hepcats rave about?
Savoy!”

Bill Doggett
“Savoy” (1941)

Context and Nomenclature

Part of the Savoy’s complex position within the history of Harlem is its role as a social institution. The Savoy stood out in white-patronized Harlem as a venue that did not cater to any specific social group, and did not provide admittance to its patrons based on race and financial standing. As Marshall Stearns pointed out, the Savoy Ballroom was a microcosm of internal structures and organizations, activities, and political strife. The Ballroom, however, also existed as a part of the larger Harlem community and the two shared an unusual symbiosis. The Savoy Ballroom’s management was deeply involved with Harlem both socially and economically, supplying jobs, entertainment, a gathering space, and generally managing the Harlemites’ morale during more trying times.

Additionally, the Savoy Ballroom was at the core of cultural outreach to Greater New York City, and existed as the center of African-American culture in New York during the height of the 1930s. Because the Savoy evolved to have its own standards, traditions, codes of behavior, and socio-political structures, it is useful to examine this evolution from the perspectives of historical growth and socio-political development.

In this chapter, I will frequently apply the terms “tradition” and “institution” to various aspects of the Savoy Ballroom. Edward Shils and Eric Hobsbawm provide a
concise, exact definition of “tradition,” while Émile Durkheim supplies the contextual meaning of the term “institution.” Shils and Hobsbawm define traditions as a series of beliefs or behaviors passed down within a social group with symbolic meaning or special significance. Typically, a tradition originates in the past, and serves as a template for behavioral structures.\textsuperscript{193} According to Hobsbawm, the majority of traditions is invented, and represents “a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”\textsuperscript{194} Therefore, Hobsbawm postulates that the authenticity of any tradition or custom is structured predominantly on precedent stemming from a commonly accepted justification for its existence. The authenticity of any tradition is thus directly related to its age and origin, with older and more evolved traditions being perceived as more authentic than those recently emerged. The Savoy Ballroom’s traditions adhere to Hobsbawm’s definition, and this chapter aims to provide considerable historical justification and precedent for their incorporation.

The term “institution” is similarly re-contextualized from a prior definition provided by Seumas Miller. Miller identified institutions as a structure or mechanism governing the behavior of a set of individuals within a given community.\textsuperscript{195} According to Miller’s definition, an institution does not necessarily represent physical space such as a

venue, but rather as a set of guidelines and parameters through which traditions emerge, and are codified and applied to social groups. Institutions provide a sense of structure and order to social organizations, and, according to Émile Durkheim, represent a significant way of studying societies because of their significant impact on day-to-day functions of a society.  

Exploring the significance of the Savoy Ballroom as an institution has permitted me to identify and examine the processes by which it, as an institution, has established schemas, guidelines, and parameters for its social structures and behaviors, and in what ways these parameters affected its development. The purpose of exploring the Savoy Ballroom’s traditions and institutional qualities is to examine the role of the Savoy as an active cultural institution in New York City during the Swing Era. Furthermore, this analytical study of the Savoy as an institution aims to catalog, evaluate and contextualize its traditions and their relationship to the Ballroom’s musical and socio-political development.

As detailed in previous chapters, the Savoy Ballroom arose out of the fortuitous conflation of cultural, social, political, and economic circumstances. The establishment existed at the center of a culturally rich community that was defined by elevated racial tension, segregation, and the community’s reaction to these norms. While one can argue that the Savoy’s existence emerged because of these factors, it seems more likely that the venue was opened in spite of them, chiefly as a result of the high economic standing of white real estate owners and their perception of Harlem as an untapped market for

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nighttime entertainment. The partnership between Gale and Buchanan, however, provided a sense of legitimacy to a white-owned business in the African-American Harlem, and its policy of admission cemented a significant precedent towards future racial equality. A historic overview of the Savoy Ballroom as a social institution therefore introduces two important concepts. The first of these is a distinction between the Savoy’s traditions, and identifying which were more authentic and which were invented. The second is to establish how the Savoy’s social structures, defined by its traditions, distinguish it from other contemporary institutions. In order to provide context for the ensuing discussion of the Savoy Ballroom as a cultural institution, however, several similar examples of establishments must be examined to place the Savoy within a larger framework of traditions and institutions. In order to understand the contextual placement of the Savoy Ballroom within the larger scope of institutional theory, I will apply the theories proposed by Hobsbawm, Durkheim, Scott, and Miller to clarify the connections between the Savoy and similar institutions promoting culture and exclusivity. Because these institutions have roots in varied cultures, these institutions will be examined not as physical entities, but rather from the perspective of their governing rules, traditions, and customs, and the application of such rules towards the creation of a functional set of societal parameters. In addition, the ideas of legitimacy, authenticity, and exclusivity will be addressed by comparing these institutions with the Savoy Ballroom’s cultural practices.
Framework: Role of Institutions in Culture

Institutions are defined by their traditions; in particular, they benefit from inherited traditions. Hobsbawm states that an institution’s validity is asserted through the relative strength of its traditions, which imply “continuity with the past.” Creative institutions such as conservatories, philharmonics, and arts organizations with their roots in Euro-American traditions and establishments typically demonstrate a strong adherence to tradition coupled with an emerging need to abdicate quick changes and evolutions to their status quo. This premise will serve as groundwork for the examination of institutions and their traditions, as well as their relationship to the main subject of this dissertation.

Unassailability

One of the first examples framing my discussion is Andrew Weintraub’s examination of the study of theory and practice in ASTI (Akademi Seni Tari Indonesia). ASTI is an example of an institution governed by invented tradition. Weintraub states that ASTI was founded as a result of collaboration between Dutch musicologist Jaap Kunst and Sundanese master musician Raden Machyar Anga Kusumadinata during the 1920s and 1930s. Much of what constitutes the basis of Sundanese music theory taught at ASTI originated when Kunst instructed Kusumadinata in the use of Javanese and Western-derived terms and concepts pertaining to music theory. According to Weintraub’s study of the theory program at ASTI, the theoretical concepts taught and

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198 Hobsbawm, The Invention of Tradition, 1-2.
proliferated by Kunst and Kusumadinata exist as a separate entity from the practical performance of Sundanese music and are rarely applied to Sundanese music performed outside of the conservatory. At the same time, however, these principles are deemed to be “unassailable” because of their connection to the institution’s founder. The popular perception is that these principles “hampered creative thinking about music” yet few musicians at ASTI felt it was appropriate to criticize them.\textsuperscript{199} Weintraub’s concludes that Kusumadinata’s ideas endured because of a lack of debate and criticism within the conservatory.\textsuperscript{200} These ideas became part of an invented tradition that define the institution and, by extension, set the standard for theoretical thought within its confines.

Bruno Nettl examines the institution of music culture and education from a slightly different perspective, evaluating Western art music and the preservation of its traditions by way of the Music Building, a semi-abstract edifice serving as a metaphoric representation of a typical Western conservatory. Nettl’s objective is to examine the mythology of Western art music from the perspective of an outsider, much in the same way a westerner would view the mythology of a non-western culture’s music. In his article, Nettl suggests that two conflicting traditions exist: one of complexity, innovation, and mysticism fueled by the myth of the musician as a misunderstood genius; and another, leveraged by “dictatorship, conformity, a rigid class structure, over-specialization, love of mere bigness,” and an over-developed cult of personality that recognizes composers as nothing more than assorted groups of biographical facts and

Nettl’s main argument is focused towards a reassessment of the commonly accepted customs and values that define Western conservatories, which he views as abstractions derived from a set of invented traditions. Like Weintraub, Nettl proposes that these invented traditions grant the typical institution of higher musical education a degree of cultural unassailability.

The analysis proposed by Henry Kingsbury in his book *Music, Talent, and Performance* varies slightly from the perspective offered by Nettl in that he views the institution (in this case, the Eastern Metropolitan Conservatory of Music) not as a repository, but as a manufacturer, of traditions. Western art music is treated much like a canvas upon which the institution superimposes its original set of traditions. Even the performance of music and musicianship, a pair of traditional, yet “highly contingent and occasionally self-contradictory” notions, play a significant part in developing the Conservatory’s identity as an institution. Kingsbury highlights this by remarking that the EMCM is “a symbol of [its] own past.” This reinforces the hierarchical quality of music brought up by Nettl, in which the validity of a tradition is measured by an ever-shifting musical heredity, and the students’ ability to adhere to the nebulous standards that are implied by this heredity.

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203 Ibid., 35.
204 Ibid., 46. Kingsbury cites an all-too-familiar story of a piano teacher invoking a musical lineage that can be traced back from Arthur Schnabel through Leschetizky to Liszt, Czerny, and eventually Beethoven, implicitly connecting a student’s ability to play “musically” with that of himself and, by proxy, his predecessors.
Judah M. Cohen offers another perspective on institutional theory. Cohen’s study of traditions of cantorial singing at Hebrew College paints a picture similar to that of Weintraub and Kingsbury. Cohen states that students wishing to become cantors are attracted by a more traditional approach to cantorial singing unhindered by academia, but tend to ignore the fact that the instructor under whom they are working is a Doctorate degree-holding product of Western academic education. One important undercurrent in Cohen’s research is that students at Hebrew College perceive institutions claiming to propagate national music as inherently discouraging of creativity, unlike learning the music in an extra-institutional setting, which adds an “organic” quality to the process.\(^\text{205}\) The duality of such thinking surfaces when the same students who show reverence to an orally transmitted tradition of cantorial singing are forced to admit that their institutional education is ultimately responsible for facile entry into the positions they occupy. As in other cases, the presence of an institution creates a “hidden tradition,” suggesting that the lines between institutional and extra-institutional learning of cantorial singing are unclear.

The implication created by these three institutions is that the culture emerging from within their halls is somehow infallible, and achieves a definitive gold standard. The common belief is that the Western musical canon, safeguarded by various conservatories, is not subject to change. An examination of tradition and cultural heredity at the Savoy Ballroom similarly reflects a strong emphasis on a high, commonly accepted standard.

but the primary divergence between the Savoy and other, similar institutions occurs when its standard is a loosely defined yet commonly agreed-upon entity. Unlike in situations described by Weintraub, Cohen, and Nettl, which discuss establishing an authoritative minority’s monopoly over education, the Savoy promoted a culture derived predominantly from plurality, as the vast majority of attendees dictated the musical tastes and evolutions of the venue.

**Cultural Dissemination**

Institutions are also examined from the perspective of their role in the development of popular culture in a seminal article by Mark Slobin, which addresses the relationship between music and cultural demographics in Afghanistan. Slobin’s research differs from the work discussed earlier in that Slobin does not treat the “institution” as a physical entity; rather, the music is an institution. Slobin suggests three types of Afghan towns in which music occupies different niches, serves different purposes, and is transmitted in various ways. All this depends on the size and demographic of the town. The institutional role of music links listeners in a wide peripheral area with the town as the center, and is reflective of the town’s economy. The economy in smaller towns focuses on stock goods available in the general area, which reflects the diverse demographic of the town, and thus the music. As the size of the town increases, so does the size of the marketplace; as a consequence, the choice of goods grows, and music

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becomes more diverse as more varied ethnic groups come into town. Curiously, the larger
towns in Slobin’s study show a disconnection from this trend, with music transmitted
primarily through radio transmissions emanating from Kabul, showing a degree of
homogeneity in the populace as well as economy and music. It can be concluded that the
institution within the context of Slobin’s research is significantly more malleable, yet it
provides a reflection of the demographic rather than its culture. Slobin remarks on the
popularity of Indian musical cinema in the small border towns of Afghanistan, regardless
of the inability of the demographic to understand the content because of discrepancies in
the language, which can be perceived as an example of invented tradition.

Stephen Cottrell presents a similar perspective on popular music in “Local
Bimusicality Among London’s Freelance Musicians.” Following a thorough review of
ethnomusicological literature dealing with bimusicality, including texts by Mantle Hood,
John Baily, Jeff Todd Titon, and Mark Slobin, Cottrell discusses the importance of
adaptive strategies in the highly competitive field of freelance music, and suggests that
musicians working in the freelance field expand their skill sets in two ways. The first of
these is the heightened demand for musical flexibility by the ever-expanding genre of
what Cottrell refers to as “hybridized” compositions. The second is the more practical
need on the musicians’ part to be able to stay competitive in the highly saturated field of
freelance music. As music evolves, Cottrell argues in his thesis, the demands it places
on musicians also evolve. This leads to a symbiotic relationship between composers and

musicians, in which the former group is constantly changing the medium, while the latter is dutifully catching up by learning new skills in order to accommodate the composers’ frequently esoteric demands. This suggests that an institution such as Western art music can evolve overtime because of the need for new source material from within, and economic demands from without.

Finally, Simon Frith’s article “Copyright and the Music Business” also examines the impact of popular culture on institutions. Unlike Slobin, however, Frith examines the recording industry in Britain from the perspective of the shifting dynamics of supply and demand. Frith points out that the music industry no longer depends on manufacture, rather viewing music as “a basket of rights,” proceeding to outline the evolution of copyright law from 1911 (“the purchaser of a gramophone record acquired with his purchase any right of public performance in that record.”) to 1984 (“Everyone who cares about their country’s musical heritage, and indeed everyone who enjoys music, should give serious thought to the damaging effects of private copying.”) Frith also indicates that the shifting market conditions in the music industry are dictating the definition of the term “intellectual property.” The proliferation of manufactured goods affected the rate at which changes took place within the music industry, eventually leading to a complete overhaul of the institution to better suit the rigors imposed on it by the increasing demand

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208 Ibid., 92. By way of an example, Cottrell provides a list of composers who challenged musicians trained in the classical Western art music realm to expand their skill sets to include non-classical or non-Western music, among them Tan Dun, George Gershwin, John Zorn, and Steve Martland.
209 Ibid., 93.
211 Ibid.
212 Ibid., 59.
from the public, as well as elevated technological standards, providing an example of an institution changing under the weight of various outside forces.

Much like Slobin’s examination of the musical culture of Kabul, the Savoy Ballroom’s soundtrack carried with it the unmistakable side-effect of catering to a wide range of homogenous tastes. Unlike the Afghan musical trends reflecting a centralized system of culture delivery catering to the broadest possible spectrum, however, the music at the Savoy reflected the shifting tastes of its client base by promoting live music through performance and competition. Meanwhile, Stephen Cottrell’s research most closely mirrors the relationship between the management, clients, and musicians at the Savoy Ballroom, emphasizing the interdependent relationship of the three groups: the clients as the consumers of music, the musicians as a system of delivery for the soundtrack, and the management in the role of the standard setter. In summary, it can be inferred that institutions discussed in the literature above share certain qualities. Many of these institutions, particularly conservatories, are situated on high aesthetic ground which grants them a degree of unassailability; others are predicated on authentic or invented tradition, and are thus touted as links to the past or cultural roots. In other cases, they serve as litmus tests of demographics and economies. Institutions most frequently are the standard for, not a reflection of, public taste, yet they reflect the changes in public taste rather than directly affect them. This puts the Savoy Ballroom in the unique position of reflecting public taste at the same time as it actively affected its evolution. The customs associated with the Savoy Ballroom defined its progressive nature. Like the institutions discussed above, the Savoy Ballroom existed partially to promote its norms and
standards; however, unlike the academic or performing arts institutions that relied on isolating their traditions to maintain integrity, the Savoy Ballroom actively promoted itself in an effort to be less exclusive to the general public.

**Savoy Ballroom as an Institution**

Over its remarkable cycle of operation, the Savoy Ballroom developed a sizable set of traditions. Some of its defining features were implemented early in its existence and remained active throughout its lifespan; others evolved gradually from a combination of public demand and managerial oversight. Among the Savoy’s strongest and most recognized practices is its implementation of racial integration into its business model, which was reflected in the make-up of its staff and client base. At the time of its opening, the Savoy Ballroom was one of the few desegregated public venues, and likely the only integrated public ballroom in New York and the United States.\(^{213}\) The nightclub Smalls’ Paradise, while also integrated, is typically seen as a separate entity from the traditions espoused by the Savoy Ballroom, as its purpose was not social dance and community interaction, but rather dining and general entertainment. The Savoy’s adoption of desegregation was a significant development because it potentially allowed whites and African-Americans of widely diverse backgrounds to commingle in the same space. The implementation of a racially de-stratified venue during the 1920s and 1930s was an uncommon development, particularly given the interpersonal interaction prevalent in

social dancing. Furthermore, desegregation was a major advertising point for the Savoy Ballroom, as on any given night both white and black customers attended the performances and dances. As a result, sharing the venue established a sense of identity and legitimacy for both white and African-American patrons of the Savoy.\(^{214}\) For this reason, the Ballroom’s diverse make-up often met with a strong degree of disapproval from city authorities on the grounds of possible iniquity resulting from the racial mingling.\(^{215}\) It was, however, for this exact reason that more liberal, middle class whites, particularly from the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, frequented the Savoy Ballroom. Drummer Panama Francis recalled that certain days at the Savoy were “like salt and pepper, with as many white kids as black,” and the prospect of breaking away from the norm as a form of rebellion was an implicit aspect of the Savoy’s tradition.\(^{216}\)

The most curious aspect of the Savoy Ballroom’s status as a social institution was its adoption and incorporation of existing traditions. Unlike the previously mentioned conservatories and concert venues, the Savoy Ballroom took on traditions as a means of affirming its legitimacy. Once a connection to a historic period was established, these traditions transformed in response to the established norms, rather than remain unchanged with respect to the established series of customs. The Savoy essentially represented a near-complete departure from the societal norms of segregation and preserving traditions, predicing its social structure on a series of social principles contrary to the status quo. A


place of social gathering, the Savoy was antithetical to the typical Harlem “dive,” which emphasized social stratification aimed at separating lower-class African-Americans from wealthier whites. This policy was conducted upon the insistence of Charles Buchanan, who believed that every aspect of the Savoy reflect the veneer of a respectable venue. Because Harlem drew popular comparisons to a concrete jungle filled with illicit activity since before World War I, the stigma of the seedy nightclub was a challenging to overcome for the Savoy Ballroom. Buchanan’s and Gale’s goal was to frame the Savoy as antithetical to the stereotypical Harlem night-club while still retaining an air of familiarity to the establishment. The ballroom’s title was among one of the first to come under intense scrutiny from its managers as a lengthy discussion ensued over the selecting an adequate title. Names such as Paradise, Avalon, Trianon, Palladium, Cinderella, and Dreamland were considered and eventually set aside in favor of Savoy, a reference to the upscale London hotel that, in turn, takes its namesake from the Italian House of Savoy. The connection established between the Savoy Ballroom and its namesake sets an interesting precedent in terms of defining legitimacy through connections to the European “Old World,” and serves as an evocation of not only foreign countries, but a borrowed or invented sense of tradition. The name “Savoy” was paradoxical because it drew parallels to an Old-World institution while actively

218 Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 307-8. A remarkable feature of the Savoy Ballroom’s marquee was its emulation of the London hotel’s marquee, imitating all but the size of the lettering on the font.
219 As a curious side note, this relationship was further reinforced – perhaps unintentionally – by *Life* Magazine on August 23, 1943, when the article discussing Savoy lindy hoppers was featured immediately next to an article on the Royal House of Savoy.
undermining the status quo, essentially directing the venue away from Old-World staples such as class struggle and slavery.

In addition to its association with an existing tradition, the Savoy Ballroom’s management made efforts to establish legitimacy by instating a strict code of employee conduct. While sensitivity training was common among Harlem’s nightclubs and venues, Charles Buchanan insisted that the Savoy’s Courtesy Training program dictate not merely conduct of the employees, but their interactions with other employees and the clients. Prostitution was common in some of Harlem’s less legitimate nightclubs, and was used to generate additional revenue for underpaid female employees.220 The Savoy Ballroom, however, strictly adhered to a purely professional attitude towards customers.221 Savoy hostesses were expected to maintain purely professional relationships with other staff, the musicians, and paying clients, and the management staunchly opposed hostesses leaving the venue with a paying client of the Ballroom.222 This policy was enacted for two reasons, the first of which was implemented out of self-preservation. Because the Savoy Ballroom found itself under considerable scrutiny from New York City police, Buchanan’s objective was to avoid setting a precedent for a scandal at all possible cost. The second, less obvious reason was to elevate the Savoy Ballroom’s social status above the rank and file of Harlem’s ballrooms by establishing a barrier between the customers and the staff. This was further assisted by the implementation of a dress code and a thorough employee background check of family history. The management’s precautions

220 Brandt, Harlem at War, 170.
were not unfounded, as according to Savoy Ballroom hostess Helen Clarke, “one or two girls who created a scandal could have the place closed.”\textsuperscript{223} Despite the ever-present risks of client-staff relations, the Savoy management insisted on maintaining its corps of hostesses for the purposes of attracting clients, and easing single, shy men into the atmosphere of the ballroom. Hostess Helen Clarke recalled:

\begin{quote}
The men [danced with the hostesses] because they felt safe and not embarrassed with [them.] Hostesses were there for people who were shy and unsure about dancing.\textsuperscript{224}
\end{quote}

The Savoy hostesses added another layer to the already complicated social structure of the Savoy Ballroom. As they were specifically tasked with being the public face of the Savoy Ballroom to the newcomers, it was their responsibility to introduce new dancers and visitors to the venue and its rules and traditions. This demonstrates Savoy management’s attitude towards newcomers, who were genially welcome on a superficial level, but discouraged from becoming personally involved with the establishment’s staff.

Although the Savoy management ensured that paying clients and employees interacted minimally outside of the ballroom, this was not the case with the admission policy. According to historian Joel Dinerstein, “The Savoy was a unique institution in American life: a multicultural public space without ethnic stratification where Americans learned to move together in time.”\textsuperscript{225} Jervis Anderson likewise remarked: “the hall admitted all classes and conditions of Harlem, from top professionals to truck drivers,

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid. “Savoy Ballroom Has School of Courtesy For Its Employees,” \textit{New York Age}, 5 June 1926, 6.
\textsuperscript{224} Crease et al., “New York Swing Dance Society Panel Discussion,” 1990.
\textsuperscript{225} Dinerstein, \textit{Swinging the Machine}, 263.
\end{footnotes}
shoeshine boys, and domestic servants.\textsuperscript{226} The trappings of race and economic standing were shed upon entrance to the Savoy Ballroom, and this regulation has become one of the institution’s most celebrated traditions. While it is possible that this consideration was made purely for financial reasons, there is ample evidence to suggest that the Savoy’s attendance prior to 1943 was high enough that it was not necessary to advertise to whites exclusively for fiscal gain.\textsuperscript{227} Furthermore, the cover charge was low enough that most would be admitted with little to no financial strain. Most likely, the Savoy Ballroom’s open-door policy towards whites was aimed at disseminating awareness of the status of their establishment, and towards raising awareness regarding their traditions.

Another significant tradition that defined the Savoy Ballroom as an institution was the Battle of the Bands, briefly discussed in the preceding chapter.\textsuperscript{228} Quickly becoming one of the Savoy’s main draws, the band battles featured element of tribal game-rivalries as the bands and audience tacitly agreed to a set of non-negotiable standards by which the contestants were judged. The constant one-upmanship of the competing bands fuelled the dancers’ energy and creativity by forcing the musicians to constantly hone their skills and perform at their most virtuosic.\textsuperscript{229} Frankie Manning recalls in his autobiography:

\begin{quote}
The [Battles of the Bands] produced some of the greatest nights there [at the Savoy Ballroom] that I can remember. The management would pit a big-name band against the house band in order to attract more people. There was
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{226} Anderson, \textit{This Was Harlem}, 309.
\textsuperscript{227} Stearns and Stearns, \textit{Jazz Dance}, 321.
\textsuperscript{228} The Battle of the Bands will be discussed in additional detail in Chapter IV of this dissertation.
never an official winner – the enthusiasm of the dancers
decided who won – or any prizes, but I say everybody
won.\textsuperscript{230}

The introduction of Battles of the Bands was a defining point in the development of
Savoy’s status as an institution. While other ballrooms and theatres, such as the
Alhambra, the Apollo, and the Paramount all featured prominent, big-name bands, few
Harlem venues dictated public taste based on their musical line-ups. Manning recalled
that the Savoy was the greatest ballroom in New York City “because of the fabulous
bands and the outstanding dancing,” but he also remarks on the Savoy’s outstanding
promotion of its music.\textsuperscript{231} Starting in the late 1920s, Moe Gale used his significant
influence in the recording and theater industry to promote the music at the Savoy by
means of live radio broadcasts.\textsuperscript{232} The distribution of music by way of radio broadcasts
allowed the Savoy Ballroom to act as a means of distributing the most contemporary
swing music across the city and to other parts of the country. The broadcasts of the
Battles of the Bands in particular allowed the Savoy Ballroom’s management to set the
standard in musical excellence. Meanwhile, the Savoy audience served as a litmus test,
giving their approval or disapproval of a particular band to heighten the venue’s aesthetic
standard.\textsuperscript{233} The resulting feedback defined a consistently high standard for audience
tastes, while the Savoy’s booking manager continuously improved the quality of musical
performances to cater to the rising demand for quality entertainment. The pinnacle of this

\textsuperscript{230} Manning and Millman, \textit{Frankie Manning}, 72. Manning remarks that the Savoy was the only ballroom in
Harlem that had its music broadcast on the radio. This is most likely a result of Gale’s strong ties to the
radio industry.

\textsuperscript{231} Manning and Millman, \textit{Frankie Manning}, 71-2.

\textsuperscript{232} Zolotow, “Harlem’s Great White Father,” 66-8.

\textsuperscript{233} Spring, “Dance, Venue, and Lindy Hop,” 185.
relationship may be observed in 1936-1937, when the Benny Goodman and Count Basie orchestras competed against Chick Webb in the Battle of the Bands.

The Savoy’s unofficial ”dress to impress” policy evolved concurrently with the regular scheduling of the Battles of the Bands. By 1929, the Savoy management expected not only its employees and hostesses, but also its clients to be sharply dressed. George “Shorty” Snowden recalled:

> We started getting ready for Sunday on Saturday. The deal was to get our one sharp suit to the tailor to be pressed Saturday afternoon. Then we’d meet at the poolroom and brag about what we were going to do on the dance floor the next night.\textsuperscript{234}

Manning related a similar story in his autobiography:

> Even though we were poor, we always dressed up. People in Harlem felt 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 […].\textsuperscript{235}

Norma Miller echoes an analogous sentiment:

> You was always dressed in your best […] but men in those days always were. If they didn’t have nothin’ else, they had a shine on their shoes and their suit was pressed. That was a must.\textsuperscript{236}

Although this tradition evolved partially out of the Savoy Ballroom’s prominence in Harlem, another precedent for this practice may be traced back to the traditions of Senegal, Nigeria, and the Gambia region. The use of extravagant masks and disguises

\textsuperscript{234} Stearns and Stearns, \textit{Jazz Dance}, 322.
\textsuperscript{235} Manning and Millman, \textit{Frankie Manning}, 68.
\textsuperscript{236} Norma Miller, interview by Ernie Smith, New York. September 8, 1992.
was in wide use among the Kétu-Yorùbá, its principal use was to ward off evil spirits, or Gèlèdé, during ritual drama and ceremonies. Additionally, the dressing of the dancer was performed as an elaborate ritual laden with highly specific spiritual and religious signification, and was intended to entice the onlookers towards the dancers while driving them into an energetic frenzy. This practice, like the ongoing Battles of the Bands, demonstrates an evolving tradition. According to Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, this evolution demonstrates a link to the past inherent in most African American diasporic institutions, as dance becomes a vessel for the tropes and traditions associated with a culture. These are then modified according to the environment to which they are transported. The Savoy Ballroom’s guests forced the evolution of a tradition, forcing it to become reinvented according to the standards of the new venue and to adapt to a changing environment.

The Cats’ Corner: “Too Hot to Follow”

A similarly evolved tradition can be seen in the Savoy Ballroom’s implementation of the Cats’ Corner, an area tacitly reserved for the most skilled and confident dancers of the Savoy Ballroom. The Cats’ Corner was located in the area next to the Savoy’s bandstands, at the corner of Lenox Avenue and 141st Street, inside the Ballroom. Various accounts of the Cats’ Corner exist, most of them describing it as an area cordoned off by an imaginary rope. “Only the top-tier dancers were allowed to dance there,” recalled

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Marshall Stearns, “and no one would be allowed to copy anyone else’s moves.” Jervis Anderson provided a similar account, explaining that “Leon ‘King’ James would dance in that spot, and then it would be left empty. They’d say, ‘He left the floor too hot to follow.’” Frankie Manning, however, paints a different picture of the Cats’ Corner:

> It wasn’t like that section was prohibited to us when we first began going to the Savoy. Anybody could dance there if they had the nerve. […] Maybe [other dancers] didn’t look like much, but it wasn’t as if anything would happen to them. Nobody told them to get out of the circle.  

In spite of its name, the Cats’ Corner was, in most cases, a circle formed by the audience around spontaneous dance battles or jams. Dancers engaged in acts of semi-serious one-upmanship in an effort to show off their skillfulness, or to show up their rivals. According to Manning, these competitions were conducted in a friendly atmosphere consistent with the guidelines of behavior at the Savoy, but virtuosity was always required. While virtuosity is typically a trait associated with Western performance practices and the institutions, the circular nature of the Cats’ Corner borrowed from various West African sacred and secular dance traditions, where circular formations surrounding one or two soloists can often be seen. The circle has several meanings in its original context, and usually indicates an unspoken relationship of mutual involvement between dancers, the audience, and musicians, particularly in the cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa.

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239 Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 322-23, 327. Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 309-10. Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 65. One may conclude from these that the protocol for entering the Cats’ Corner largely depended on the standing of the observer within the rank and file of Savoy Ballroom’s regulars, as outsiders were frequently stunned by the display of virtuosity, while regulars and insiders shared in the opinion that the Cats’ Corner was a regular parcel of the Savoy experience.

Africa. The circular nature of Cats’ Corner thus united two separate but related traditions, creating a balance between virtuosity and participation, and emphasizing spectatorship and community. Historian William McNeill observed that rhythmic stimuli, when listened or danced to, cause a loss of boundaries and abandonment of self. At the Cats’ Corner, the crowd’s stomping, cheering, jeering, and cat-calls in equal parts encouraged the soloists in the center of the circle, and unified the spectators and the performers in an unspoken bond. The ensuing displays were not solely confined to the Cats’ Corner, however, as Frankie Manning remarked that “during this period, if we saw anything interesting in the corner, we continued to take it back to the south side and show it to each other,” suggesting that the proliferation of the culture developed inside the Cats’ Corner extended beyond, to the rest of the ballroom.

The 400 Club: An Elite Aggregation

The 400 Club was yet another tradition which emerged at the Savoy Ballroom, yet evolved in a direction distinct and separate from its namesake. The Savoy Ballroom’s anniversary brochure described the 400 Club as an elite aggregation of dancers, ushered into the top echelon of the Savoy elite; in reality, the explanation for its existence was considerably simpler. Dance scholar Cynthia Millman remarked that elitism and separation of dancers based on skill had nothing to do with the existence of the 400 Club.

243 Manning and Millman, Frankie Manning, 67.
The name was in fact a spoof on the pinnacle-of-society gatherings of noted socialite Lady Caroline Schermerhorn Astor, who filled her guest list with 400 of her closest friends, deeming it to be the appropriate number to fill a ballroom. Historian Kenneth Jackson supplements this analysis by indicating that “The Four Hundred” was also often a name assigned to the wealthy in newspapers, after a remark made by socialite Ward McAllister’s about Astor’s gathering practices. In interviews, Frankie Manning has remarked that being a 400 Club member was not a reflection of one’s status, but rather of one’s commitment to the Savoy Ballroom:

Being in the 400 Club meant you could buy a Savoy 400 jacket and, more importantly, get benefits like reduced admission on Tuesdays. Many [Lindy Hoppers] mistakenly believe that this was an exclusive club open only to the best dancers. That is not true. Anyone who filled out the registration form could join.

The purpose of the 400 Club was not to identify and showcase the best dancers, but to create a sense of community and unity at the Savoy Ballroom. Belonging to a club would cement a feeling of partisanship in its members, a sense of pride in the institution in the regular patrons, and an aura of legitimacy in the entire establishment. Norma Miller also mentioned that the 400 Club was formed for Savoy regulars rather than the best dancers, suggesting that while a member’s ability to dance may have mattered to some

244 Ibid., 66.
246 Manning and Millman, Frankie Manning, 66-7. It stands to reason that Manning, being one of the Savoy’s best and most sought-after Lindy Hoppers, would feel that membership in the 400 Club was more or less arbitrary. Likewise, Herbert White and Charles Buchanan may well have included the best dancers in the 400 Club deliberately to boost the Ballroom’s visibility and create an artificial separation among the venue’s social strata.
extent, a member’s standing and loyalty to the Ballroom was more important.\textsuperscript{247} The presence of a connection to a high-society tradition placed the 400 Club into a specialized subset of the Savoy Ballroom’s traditions because it was a custom built upon an existing tradition from an unrelated institution. Much like the Ballroom’s namesake, the Savoy, placing regular attendees into the 400 Club provided an implied connection to Mary Astor’s social circle. Membership in the 400 Club was reinforced by the introduction of status and memorabilia such as trophies and jackets, which further strengthened the bond between the institution and its members.

**Catching the Swing Fever: Savoy’s Distribution of Culture**

Just as institutions are capable of generating traditions, they may also safeguard established traditions, maintaining cultural monopolies on their impact. An institution may frequently sustain traditions to maintain a rigid control on taste for the sake of self-perpetuation, or as an act of opposition to change. The early decades of the twentieth Century contain several notable examples, such as the case of high-society attendees of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris unilaterally opposing the performance of new works prior to the premiere of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1913. In 1911, Gustav Mahler has encountered a similar problem during his tenure with the New York Philharmonic, when his proposed program was summarily rejected by Mary Sheldon’s Programming Committee on the grounds that the composer attempted to attach less-than-

\textsuperscript{247} Miller and Jensen, *Swingin’ at the Savoy*, 109-10.
standard classical compositions to the performance.\textsuperscript{248} The discussion of legitimacy and tradition also became particularly heated amongst various performing arts societies during the height of the Swing Era. The Federal Communications Commission received several requests between 1937 and 1941 from the New Jersey Bach Society to ban “any station that violates the canon of decency by permitting the syncopations of the classics” from the airwaves.\textsuperscript{249} Although the FCC declined to follow through on the elimination of Benny Goodman, John Kirby, and Artie Shaw from the repertoire of New York-area stations, it issued a mandate requiring radio stations to use “a high degree of discrimination” in featuring such material.\textsuperscript{250} A commonly emerging trend among these institutions therefore points to the retention of the status quo through the exclusion of outside influences such as alternative performance methods, programming, and exposure of such institutions to public other than the one approved by an overseeing committee.

The Savoy Ballroom exhibits a marked departure from such institutions in several ways. While the Savoy was not a purveyor of high culture in the same way as the New York Philharmonic, it was nevertheless a carefully curated cultural establishment focused on delivering the performing arts to a receptive community. Unlike such institutions as ASTI or the New Jersey Bach Society, it actively sought the proliferation of jazz and jazz dance as its main cultural exports. The Savoy accomplished these tasks by embedding itself into the midst of Harlem’s cultural life, catering to evolving popular tastes, and


\textsuperscript{249} John White, \textit{Artie Shaw: His Life and Music} (New York: Continuum, 2004), 24.

actively promoting itself beyond Harlem through cultural exposure and public outreach.

The process of promotion at the Savoy relied predominantly on the strength of its advertising, typically published in Harlem newspapers. Such advertisements prominently emphasized the Savoy’s dancers and musicians, paying particular attention to large scale events such as Battles of the Bands. The Savoy often loaned its space to fraternal organizations, but discontinued advertising with white newspapers as a means of appeasing the New York City authorities, preferring to deliver its message to potential white clients through word of mouth.251 One noteworthy aspect of the Savoy Ballroom’s relationship with fraternal organizations was that the Ballroom’s management offered renters full use of the facilities, with the cost including the rental of the house band.252 While some organizations chose to bring their own musicians, most took advantage of this offer. After a fashion, the Savoy Ballroom’s management created a self-perpetuating form of advertising by allowing its particular brand of swing to be used for the edification of its non-regular clients.

The Savoy dancers provided yet another avenue for the distribution of the Savoy’s culture. The formation of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers by Herbert White set an unusual precedent for Harlem’s premier ballroom: it now had a professional, paid, dance troupe. The Savoy did maintain a number of dance troupes in the years leading up to the formation of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, but the majority of them were poorly managed and underrepresented.253 The presence of Savoy’s top dancers in the public eye through

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253 Miller and Jensen, *Swingin’ at the Savoy*, 61.
performances at such venues as the Apollo Theatre and various Broadway venues

elevated public awareness of not only both the Ballroom and the dances practiced there.

Such promotion of Savoy Ballroom’s culture was a common occurrence to dancers like
Norma Miller:

We used to dance in the ballroom. [Herbert White would ask] ‘Look, the Apollo Theater’s going to have a Lindy Hop contest. Why don’t you guys do the contest?’ It wasn’t Savoy. But see, we had no idea who was in the contest, we just signed up as a fluke.\footnote{Miller, interview, 1992. It seems reasonable that by the time Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers were formed, the Savoy was already a prominently visible institution in Harlem, whereas public awareness of the Lindy Hop in white neighborhoods was still low.}

In addition to a regular schedule of performances on Broadway and various Harlem venues, Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers were featured in cinema between 1937 and 1941. This elevated their exposure to nationwide levels, along with their 1939 appearance at the New York World’s Fair in Flushing.\footnote{Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers’ contributions to the cultural impact of the Savoy Ballroom are discussed in detail in Chapter VII of this dissertation.} The Savoy Ballroom’s pavilion on the Fair’s grounds attracted considerable attention over its three months of operation in an attempt to popularize the Savoy’s culture for a worldwide audience. In a letter to the Fair’s management, Gale earnestly described his intended:

For the past 11 years, I have been associated with the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, New York, which is today recognized as one of the country’s outstanding ballrooms. […] A number of Lindy-Hop teams were sent to London by me and for over a period of 8 months they were featured throughout England and the Continent.\footnote{Moe Gale to unknown recipient, February 3, 1938, World’s Fair New York 1939/1940 papers, 1547:7, New York Public Library, New York.}
With Herbert White helming the day-to-day management of the Savoy’s Lindy Hoppers at the New York World’s Fair, the Ballroom garnered considerable attention in spite of being present at the fair for a mere three months. White’s wish to reach beyond the social dance component of the Lindy Hop to a fuller potential contributed to the Lindy Hop’s elevation to the status of a nationwide pastime. By 1943, its practitioners, both black and white, were prominently featured on covers of popular magazines.

The Harvest Moon Ball: Dancing to No Rule

The watershed moment in the Savoy Ballroom’s cultural self-promotion, however, was the Harvest Moon Ball. A prominent cultural institution in its own right, the Harvest Moon Ball ran from 1935 to 1984. Under the sponsorship from the New York Daily News until 1950, it was an amateur-only dance contest held at the Madison Square Garden, a highly visible public venue which annually brought in tens of thousands of attendees to watch the dance contests. The Harvest Moon Ball represented a traditional institution of gentrified New York City. Presided over by Mayor LaGuardia, and with numerous entertainers and Hollywood stars in attendance each year, the Harvest Moon Ball enjoyed citywide partisan sponsorship, with the Daily News carrying the exclusive rights to its coverage. The Savoy’s addition to the Harvest Moon Ball was therefore invaluable as a means of joining popular culture and high-class entertainment.

257 Miller, interview, 1992.
258 Sonny Watson, “The Harvest Moon Ball,” Street Swing, accessed July 30, 2013, http://www.streetswing.com/histmain/d5harvst.htm. The first unofficial Harvest Moon Ball was held in 1927, but due to the unexpected turnout of 75,000 individuals, was shut down by the New York Police.
259 Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine, 268-9.
Officially, the Harvest Moon Ball allowed exclusively traditional dances with Euro-American ballroom roots: waltz, rhumba, tango, polka, and fox-trot. Lindy Hop, retitled “jitterbug,” was added at the request of James V. Mulholland, the supervisor of recreations for the Park Department of New York City. Mulholland argued that the African Americans represented by the Savoy were a genial, well-behaved crowd, and would make a sterling contribution to the existing Harvest Moon line-up. Given his limited understanding of African American dance, and particularly of its relationship to the Savoy Ballroom’s culture, Mulholland’s plan nearly backfired, as the traditions of the Savoy Ballroom collided with the established rules of the Harvest Moon Ball. Norma Miller recalled her introduction to the competition:

We’d never heard of dancing to rules. We couldn’t be away from our partners and had to have our feet on the floor. And the crowd didn’t decide the winner – they had all white judges and a point system!\textsuperscript{261}

The prizes for the Lindy Hoppers were quite lucrative, often resulting in performances at various Broadway theatres. Despite stiff competition from traditional Euro-American dances and a strong showing by white ballroom dancers, the Savoy Lindy Hoppers consistently took top honors in the Jitterbug division, receiving high marks for their “wild gyrations,” often becoming ‘the sole topic [of discussion] in theatrical circles.”\textsuperscript{262} While eyewitness accounts support the claim that Savoy’s jitterbugs outshone the majority of the competition, it is just as likely that the judges were unprepared to

adjudicate a dance that actively rejected adjudication. The standards governing the marking system of the Harvest Moon Ball were generally non-compatible with the Savoy’s brand of swing dance, which caused the Savoy dancers to stand out by contrast as much as because of their skill. As Lindy Hop had little exposure outside of Harlem prior to 1935, it immediately caught the attention of promoters and audiences hungry for the latest novelty, elevating swing to the status of crowd favorite. The Savoy was happy to oblige.
CHAPTER IV: MUSIC AT THE SAVOY

Rhythm is our business, rhythm is what we sell,
Rhythm is our business, business sure is swell,
Now, if you blue, rhythm's what you need
If you got rhythm you're sure to succeed,

Sammy Cahn
“Rhythm Is Our Business” (1937)

Harlem was the birthplace of Swing and the Savoy was its incubator.
Norma Miller

As one reads through the biographies of famous jazz musicians who got their start in New York during the interbellum period, the word “Savoy” pops up with considerable frequency. Charlie Parker played at the Savoy Ballroom with Jay McShann’s big band, and Dizzy Gillespie’s career was off to a solid start during a brief, energetic engagement with Cab Calloway’s orchestra, similarly performing at the Savoy.263 Big band leaders like Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, and Count Basie enjoyed Savoy engagements of varying lengths, usually squaring off against the Ballroom’s uncompromising veteran, the drummer Chick Webb.264 In a manner of speaking, the Ballroom’s interior became a hub through which musicians passed on the way to new gigs, other venues, or bigger paychecks.265 Overtime, the Savoy ballroom became one of the most respected and sought-after venues for big band jazz and swing, living up to its moniker, “The World’s Finest Ballroom” as a result not only of its opulence, but also of the quality of its music. Thousands of Harlem’s denizens may have

264 Ibid.
flocked to its gleaming chandeliers, multicolored lights, and blue wallpaper once or twice, but they would not have kept returning on a nightly basis unless something more lasting than the enticing décor would draw them there. The answer, of course, lies in the Savoy’s soundtrack.

For musicians, playing at the Savoy carried the promise of an ample paycheck, as Red Saunders recalled that he made $8 a night at playing there.\textsuperscript{266} The process of admittance to one of Savoy Ballroom’s twin stages, however, was not an easy one; both Moe Gale and Charles Buchanan were notoriously selective about their programming, and only the best of the bands were invited to return.\textsuperscript{267} The competition was certainly fierce, particularly when one considered the unspoken and elusive standards involved in keeping the management happy. Charles Buchanan explained that “the best band is the one that keeps the floor filled,” but the actual process by which bands would sustain a crowd’s interest over prolonged sets was relatively arbitrary. This is supported by Guy Lombardo’s sold-out 1930 performance, whose playing transcended dulcet and verged on the soporific, rendering his music not danceable by the Savoy’s standards.\textsuperscript{268} Nevertheless, dancers at the Savoy possessed sharply attuned musical tastes, sensitive to the music’s evolution. They alternatively clamored for new styles of swing and respected the traditional history of the Ballroom’s musical past, establishing an unusual relationship between themselves and the musicians. Once an ensemble set a musical standard over the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[266] Art Hodes, “Sittin’ In: Looking At Red,” \textit{Down Beat Magazine}, August 10, 1987, 18. Adjusted for inflation, Saunders made the equivalent of $274 per week, for twice-weekly engagements, indicating that the Savoy paid its musicians reasonably well.
\item[267] Anderson, \textit{This Was Harlem}, 310.
\end{footnotes}
course of a series of initial performances, that standard would progressively transform until it was reimagined to better suit the public’s demands.

A gradual evolution can be traced in the style of swing at the Savoy Ballroom. The changes are subtle, and take time to permeate the fabric of the relationship between the dancers and the musicians, but the pedigree of swing for which the Savoy eventually became known constantly shows through. An outline of the Savoy’s musical timeline moves from its earliest days with Fess Williams and Fletcher Henderson; to a height of popularity with an amalgamation of sounds provided by Chick Webb, Bennie Moten, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman; and then to the pre- and post-war years, where Chick Webb’s post was passed first to Al Cooper’s Savoy Sultans, then Lucky Millinder, then David “Panama” Francis. The late 1940s and 1950s, typically associated with the Savoy’s decline in popularity, are generally replete with smaller but more progressive ensembles of bandleaders such as Lester Young, Teddy Hill, and Lionel Hampton.

**Growing the Sound: Evolution of Music at the Savoy**

The three identifiable components which served as the Savoy’s musical thumbprint were the style of swing rhythm derived from the Savoy bands’ handling of their rhythm sections; the instrumentation and organization of ensemble’s sections resulting in a carefully planned balance between solos and ensemble riffs; and, most importantly, the musicians’ interaction with the dancers. Savoy Ballroom’s bands also often adopted the practice of incorporating the most innovative and noteworthy aspects of visiting bands’ and musicians’ performance practices into their own style, which lead to
the formation of a distinctive sound by 1932-1935. The complex and precise rhythmic style combined with relaxed melodic lines unburdened by complexity is frequently attributed to the amalgamation of techniques espoused by visiting bands. Count Basie, Fletcher Henderson, Bennie Moten, and Benny Goodman all made contributions to the development and evolution of the Savoy sound over the years. The natural evolution of the Savoy’s sound, however, also benefitted from a number of important contributors, who held long-term residencies at the Ballroom.

**Fess Williams: 1926-1928**

The first resident band leader at the Savoy Ballroom was Fess Williams (né Stanley R. Williams,) a native Chicagoan and a graduate of the historically African-American Tuskegee Institute, where he studied clarinet with Major N. Clark Smith. As a result of his studies, Williams demonstrated considerable aptitude on the instrument, and relocated to Chicago to pursue a career in music shortly after graduation. As a session musician in Chicago and the Midwest, Williams played alto saxophone and slap-tongue gas pipe clarinet, and was heavily influenced by the society band of Ted Lewis. Having enjoyed a successful career in Chicago from 1923 to 1924, where he recorded with Erskine Tate and Dave Peyton, Williams departed for an extended tour of the Northeast, where he performed, among other places, in Ithaca, Albany, and New York City. Eventually settling in New York City gave Williams the opportunity to finally lead his own band at the Rosemont Ballroom, a position from which Dave Peyton referred

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Williams to Savoy general manager Charles Buchanan. In 1926, upon the Savoy’s opening, Williams accepted the position of house bandleader, having played at the Ballroom’s opening gala in March 1926 with the Charleston Bearcats and Fletcher Henderson’s orchestra (see figure 20). Williams stayed at the Savoy Ballroom until 1928.270

Figure 20 - Advertisement in New York Age announcing the Savoy’s inaugural ball with Fess Williams as the headliner, 1926. Photo courtesy of New York Swing Dance Society.

During his session work in Chicago, Williams developed an affinity for imitating the highly stylized playing of the predominantly white society bands. Their idiosyncratic,

syncopated sound appealed to Williams, and he adopted the style into his own renditions and arrangements by the early 1920s.\textsuperscript{271} According to Williams’ collaborator pianist Dave Peyton, however, Williams set himself apart not only with his treatment of syncopation, but also with his sharp business acumen:

> Fess Williams and his Jazz Joy Boys of the Regal Theater made some fine recordings for Vocalion Records which will soon be released. Manager Jack Kapps says this is the first ‘sweet record’ our musicians have recorded and it was perfect. Heretofore, our orchestras have been making jazz and hokum numbers, but Fess insisted that if they wanted him to record, he would have to be given the same breaks as the white bands were getting and that is making real sweet musical song and dance records. Good for Fess.\textsuperscript{272}

Williams’ aesthetic was also significantly indebted to the Chicago style of the early 1920s. As Chicago was home to many Southern transplants, among them Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, and Armstrong’s clarinetist Johnny Dodds, Williams’ ability to alternate between sweet and hot styles was likely owed to their contribution to Chicago’s jazz scene. The music of Chicago was widely considered to be on the cutting edge of the jazz evolution of the 1920s, and represented a unique middle ground between klezmer, syncopated bands, white New Orleans Dixieland-style jazz, and African-American jazz of New York and Chicago musicians.\textsuperscript{273} It was characterized by a melding of duple- and quadruple-pulse meters, the occasional substitution of banjo with guitar, and the inclusion of introductions, vamps, codas and polyphonic improvisations into

\textsuperscript{272} Ibid., 498-9.  
arrangements. The 1928 rendition of “Dixie Stomp” demonstrates a particularly eccentric approach to musicianship on Williams’ part, as the introduction, split up into alternating phrases of two hot and four sweet bars, gives way to a highly syncopated eight-bar trumpet solo reminiscent of Louis Armstrong’s playing in its crispness, precision, and rhythm. Immediately, however, the syncopated, rhythmically precise playing is replaced by a contrasting, mellow violin duo, performed by Clarence Lee and Joe McCutchin. The meter of the music is consistently maintained by an omnipresent alternating pulse of tuba and banjo combined with hi-hat cymbal, imbuing “Dixie Stomp” with a perpetual sense of forward momentum, even during its sweeter moments. In all likelihood, the same qualities that made Williams popular during his early career in Chicago also appealed to Moe Gale in 1926. Like his contemporary and collaborator Leon Abbey, the front man of the Charleston Bearcats, Williams’ playing was indicative of a cosmopolitan sound consistent with the contemporary musical tastes of late 1920s’ New York City.

Because the Savoy did not record and broadcast performing musicians from its premises until the early 1930s, there are no known recordings of Williams and the Royal Flush Orchestra playing at the Savoy Ballroom live. Nevertheless, Williams’ recordings made in New York under the Victor and Gennett labels during the same time period suggest a style evocative of late Dixieland, albeit with a few alterations. The repertoire

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274 Tirro, *Jazz*, 201-05. All of these elements can be observed in the early recordings of Fess Williams.
275 Fess Williams, *Dixie Stomp*, Fess Williams and His Joy Boys, Vocalion 15690, CD, 1928. Although *Dixie Stomp* was recorded following Williams’ departure from Chicago, it retains a characteristic style of early Chicago jazz, and was selected as a representative example for that reason.
276 Zolotow, “Harlem’s Great White Father,” 37, 40. Abbey and Williams both performed on the Savoy’s opening night in March 1926, alongside Fletcher Henderson.
predominantly consists of standards (“Heebie Jeebies,” “Dinah,” “Caroline”), as well as a few originals.\textsuperscript{277} The pulse of these recordings is generally comprised of duple-meter arrangements of banjo, tuba, and hi-hat cymbals, with the banjo replaced by guitar in several instances. Williams’ 1926 recording of “Caroline,” made shortly after his assigned tenure at the Savoy Ballroom, demonstrates many qualities of late Chicago-style jazz: the arrangement is tight and polyphonic, featuring an introduction and a coda; the instruments, broken up into groups of varying timbres, performing specific tasks throughout the number; and a stylized vibrato singing by Lawrence Dixon.\textsuperscript{278} It is Williams’ use of the banjo, however, that suggests a greater degree of transition from duple to quadruple pulse, as Andy Pendleton’s playing emphasizes four instead of the customary two pulses per measure, which do not conform to the customary style of trading alternating pulses with a bass or tuba.\textsuperscript{279}

\textbf{Chick Webb: 1928-1939}

By 1928, Williams stepped down from his posting as the house bandleader at the Savoy Ballroom, giving way to the more contemporary sound of Chick Webb’s orchestra. Webb, affected by chronic tuberculosis of the spine since childhood, became a musical hallmark of the Savoy in spite of his physical frailty and short stature, and set the standard for the Ballroom’s newly minted sound for over a decade to come. Throughout


\textsuperscript{278} Fess Williams and His Royal Flush, \textit{Caroline}, OKeK 8322, CD, 1926.

\textsuperscript{279} Spring, “Dance, Venue, Lindy Hop,” 193-94.
his career, Webb demonstrated an indefatigable attitude, excelling at his craft and making considerable contributions to the ongoing development of the Savoy Ballroom’s musical output. Webb’s contemporary, singer Mary Lou Williams explained that:

The Savoy was a place of tremendous enthusiasm, a home of fantastic dancing. And Webb was acknowledged King of the Savoy. Any visiting band could depend on catching hell from little Chick, for he was a crazy drummer and shrewd to boot.

While Webb enjoyed a moderate degree of success in his native Baltimore prior to his relocation, he operated as a virtual unknown upon his arrival to New York. Gunther Schuller asserts that Webb became a household name among New Yorkers only by 1934, when his orchestra acquired Ella Fitzgerald. Schuller’s assertions, however, may not fully take into account Webb’s pre-Fitzgerald successes, as Webb participated in ample session work at various Harlem nightclubs and venues as early as 1926. Prior to his appointment at the Savoy Ballroom, Webb acquired his first steady position in New York by filling in with Edgar Dowell’s band playing various club sessions, indicating that he was a respected and competent drummer by the mid-1920s. Webb gradually built up his reputation on Harlem’s jazz circuit, and performed regularly at the Savoy Ballroom by 1928. By 1929, Webb’s playing style, while consistent with that of Williams’ aggregation, began diverging into explorations of new rhythmic territory, as can be seen

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283 Ibid., 293.
in the 1929 recording, “Dog Bottom.”284 In 1933, Buchanan and Gale were confident enough in Webb’s musical skills to offer him a position as the leader of the Savoy’s house orchestra. At the time, Webb was playing with a small aggregation consisting of Elmer Williams, Johnny Hodges, Ward Pinkett, Bobby Star, Slats Long, Leon England, and John Trueheart, many of whom remained with Webb’s orchestra for extended periods of time.285 At the time of Webb’s appointment to the Savoy, Moe Gale’s opinion of Webb was that his sound was not commercial enough for the contemporary tastes of the Ballroom’s audience, and this lead to some uncertainty over the length of Webb’s employment there. Gale’s doubts were quickly dispelled, however, once the crowds at the Savoy showed their appreciation for Webb, who played in a hotter, more contemporary style than Williams. Furthermore, Webb displayed the uncanny ability to engage his fellow musicians and dancers in a much clearer musical rapport. Webb’s fellow drummer Allen Paley recalled Webb’s ability to communicate with his surroundings:

When he played a break, it was here and gone. […] But the way he tied in the band – oh, you had to be there! […] Everything fit – each piece. His comments worked as drum patterns and as music. […] What he did was the beginning of the bebop thing. Instead of putting together a bunch of beats on the tom-toms […] he functioned in a more musical way, using drums to create rhythm and melody.

Artie Shaw, who encountered Webb in Boston during a big band engagement, conveyed similar feelings, albeit more succinctly: “Unlike most people, Chick realized that drums


are a musical instrument. In short, Webb redefined the conventions of swing drumming as early as 1935 by utilizing a full percussion battery on stage: bass and snare drums, hi-hat and hanging cymbals, tom-toms, and four temple blocks, eventually adding a floor tom, and an additional two to four suspended cymbals by 1937 (see figure 21).288

Figure 21 - Chick Webb in the early 1930s, displayed at his drum set, complete with snare and bass drums; tuned toms; hi-hat, hanging, and ride cymbals; and temple blocks. Photograph courtesy of New England Public Radio.

By the mid-1930s, Webb distinguished himself from his predecessor, Fess Williams, in several significant ways. Webb’s collaboration with saxophonist and arranger Edgar Sampson resulted in a multitude of innovative, charmingly simple song

287 Ibid.
charts such as “Stompin’ at the Savoy,” “Blue Lou,” and “Let’s Get Together.” Later, in 1938, the critically reviled but publicly well-received arrangement of “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” by Al Feldman propelled Webb’s band to the height of popularity, solidifying Ella Fitzgerald’s position as a consummate jazz performer. The majority of Webb’s arrangements and renditions were endowed with an energetic, hot quality, which he liberally borrowed from Williams and Roseland Ballroom contemporary, Fletcher Henderson. As Webb strode the line between the Chicago conventions of Williams and the more riff-based, precisely articulated, and meticulously organized jazz of New York bands like Fletcher Henderson’s Orchestra, he achieved an uncommon blend of sounds. Webb’s performances featured tightly orchestrated melodic segments combined with a sharp, precise rhythm section. Henderson’s influence on Webb is unquestionable, as Norma Miller recalls the adoration lavished upon his orchestra during the nights on which he came to the Savoy, following commitments at the Roseland Ballroom. Like Webb, Henderson was keenly aware of the demands and needs placed upon him by dancers, and is often credited with the development of the swing eighth-note to better accommodate the dance dynamic between 1928 and 1932. It is most likely that Webb’s musicianship was affected by Henderson’s approach to playing for the crowd at the Savoy Ballroom, as by the early 1930s Webb developed a strong unspoken bond of communication between himself, his band, and the dancers. In his autobiography, Frankie Manning remembered Webb as one of the finest musicians to play at the Savoy:

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Chick Webb always played for the dancers. There was this wonderful communication between his band and the Lindy Hoppers. [...] He would often focus on somebody doing a certain step, and he’d catch it. We’d try to do things to trick him, and he’d play back at us.  

Webb’s consummate understanding of drums as a musical instrument likely assisted in the evolution of a lasting relationship between the Savoy Lindy Hoppers and the musicians who played for them. Webb’s treatment of rhythm as an organic entity, fully integrated into the harmonic and melodic components of the music, set an unprecedented standard at the Savoy Ballroom, and contributed to an already rich understanding of the complexities of improvised social dance. Webb’s constant presence at the Savoy and his ongoing interaction with the dancers lead to a more intimate relationship between music and dance, defining the long-term development of the Savoy’s musical style. Webb’s performances at the Savoy set a standard which the majority of the visiting bands were expected to follow, with the crowd’s reaction defining whether or not the band was easy or difficult to dance to, and whether or not that band would be asked to return for future engagements. “If you didn’t swing, you weren’t there long,” recalled Dicky Wells, stating that bands and musicians not in possession of Chick’s particular brand of musical savoir-faire usually did not see repeat performances at the Savoy.  

Charles Buchanan developed an appreciation for Webb’s musicianship by 1935. Performances conducted by the Chick Webb Orchestra at the Savoy consistently drew a crowd, especially on band

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battle nights. On evenings when Webb and his musicians took the stand, the floor of the Savoy was filled with dancers.293

Webb’s style evolved significantly during his tenure at the Savoy Ballroom. His earliest recordings like “Dog Bottom” (1929) and “Jungle Mama” (1929), though reminiscent of the Chicago Dixieland style of Johnny Dodds and Fess Williams, exhibit a pronounced individualistic tendency towards a four-to-the-bar pulse relying on guitar rather than banjo. It is worth noting that the double bass still plays a duple pulse throughout. A slightly contrasting aesthetic can be observed in Webb’s incidental music for the cinematic short After Seben (1929), in which a banjo provides a pronounced duple pulse, while the bass plays the downbeats. The ensemble playing is much more tightly organized than in “Dog Bottom” and “Jungle Mama,” and is embellished through the use of growls and high slides, which can be heard in Ward Pinkett’s trumpet solos in all three records.294 Nevertheless, the overall aggregation lacks the sharpness and precision of purely syncopated playing; instead, the melody pulses to a more relaxed beat than the duple pulse of the rhythm section. This melding of styles may be attributed to Webb’s exposure to Kansas City orchestras, which frequently toured in New York City during the late 1920s and through the mid-1930s. By 1929, the two most noteworthy bands to have played at the Savoy were Bennie Moten’s Kansas City Orchestra, and Cab Calloway’s Missourians (see figure 22). Moten’s ensemble had, perhaps, the more significant and longer lasting impact on Webb’s aesthetic, as Calloway’s musicians, though adequately

293 Anderson, This Was Harlem, 310.
reviewed by the press, were deemed to be too mellow and rhythmically laid back for the crowds at the Savoy.  

Figure 22 - Cab Calloway’s Missourians, pictured in the late 1920s. Calloway is pictured center, in his trademark white tuxedo. Photograph courtesy of the Cab Calloway Foundation.

Moten’s ensemble, on the other hand, was warmly received by New Yorkers in 1928, and again in 1931. Moten appealed to audiences because of the unusual rhythmic quality his aggregation brought to the music as a result of the musicians’ ability to shift seamlessly between playing styles. Moten’s Kansas City Orchestra was able to radically change energy, playing sweeter jazz for white, downtown venues while switching to hotter, more syncopated and rhythmically complex numbers for the crowds in Harlem. Harlem’s fascination with Moten’s sound promoted the orchestra to the status of national prominence nearly overnight, as crowds gathered at the Savoy Ballroom to the excess of

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the venue’s usual capacity. Moten’s commanding authority over a crowd was on full display during the 1928 performance at the Savoy Ballroom, as Moten banjoist Leroy Berry recalled:

[Moten] pounded it into our heads that we weren’t playing for ourselves but for people who paid to dance.

With Moten’s performances at the Savoy Ballroom being enthusiastically received by dancers and the management, the New York musicians experienced a sort of aesthetic epiphany. While the tendency towards a quadruple pulse was hardly new by 1931, it was relatively uncommon among dance bands. Moten’s implementation of quadruple pulse suggested a more relaxed rhythmic quality to the music than was found in the far more rhythmically rigid playing of Webb. In conjunction with a less pronounced quadruple meter, Moten’s musicians defaulted to a more relaxed treatment of melodic lines, particularly during solo segments. This was an unusual development, as the New York bands of the early and mid-1930s exhibited a tendency towards “riffing,” or playing reoccurring rhythmic figures in the accompanying horn sections to indicate rhythmic integrity within the ensemble. When compared against the solos of J. C. Higginbotham, Johnny Hodges, and Ward Pinkett, the solos of Moten’s headliners Benny

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298 Duple pulse was very much aesthetically acceptable in 1931, and even as late as 1932. Fletcher Henderson’s 1932 recording of *Casa Loma Stomp* (Melotone 11448-A) still features a prominent 2/4 pulse with alternating beats between the banjo and tuba.
Carter, Coleman Hawkins, and Lester Young generally exhibited an understated and relaxed quality, unconstrained by the rhythmic fetters of orchestral riffs.\footnote{Stearns, \textit{Jazz Dance}, 325. Bennie Moten, \textit{Band Box Shuffle}, Bluebird 6710, CD, 1929. Bennie Moten, \textit{Liza Lee}, Victor 23023-A, 1930. Stearns' description of the "musical revolution" supposedly kick-started by Moten’s orchestra was, in fact, very similar to Cab Calloway’s 1929 performance in most ways. The changing factor may was the increased sway of Midwestern swing in most urban areas (i.e., Chicago, New York), thus the changing tastes of the Savoy became more attuned to the difference between the commonly accepted, older variety of swing and its newer, more laid back Kansas City variety.}

Webb clearly learned from the competition. By 1934, his sound transformed from a typical New York-style ensemble into a formidable orchestra, which combined the finer elements of both New York and Midwestern styles. The 1935 addition of then little-known teenager Ella Fitzgerald also assisted Webb with gaining a much-needed boost of fame, as the ensemble’s tone and repertoire changed considerably following her arrival. By comparison, prior to 1935 the majority of recordings cut by Chick Webb’s various ensembles were instrumental numbers. After Fitzgerald’s arrival, only sixteen recordings between 1935 and 1939 were instrumental. The remaining 57 recordings cut with the Chick Webb Orchestra and the additional dozen made with the Savoy Eight, a smaller variant of Webb’s larger ensemble, all prominently featured Fitzgerald’s vocals.\footnote{Schuller, \textit{The Swing Era}, 293.} While Webb used singers in his ensemble prior to 1935, few of them matched Fitzgerald’s popularity both in live sessions and on recordings, which suggests a deviation from the established standard of instrumental music’s dominance at dance venues. Vocals in big band arrangements were typically seen as adjunct to the music, as Artie Shaw notably reminisced about the pointlessness of collaborating with vocalists: “[Working with a
singer] was just a job I couldn’t wait to get away from.” Fitzgerald’s introduction to an already well-known ensemble assisted Webb not only in furthering his own popularity, but bringing awareness to the previously untapped element of vocals as an active component of big band music rather than a vessel for lyrics. By 1939, however, the musical revolution started by the Chick Webb Orchestra was fading. Its bandleader’s health was failing, and Webb’s appearances at the Savoy Ballroom became fewer and further apart. With drummer Bill Beason filling in for Webb during hospital visits and episodes of poor health, Ella Fitzgerald took the reins of Webb’s ensemble, which was at this point billed as “Ella Fitzgerald’s Chick Webb Orchestra.” Upon Webb’s death in 1939, Fitzgerald became the namesake of the ensemble, renaming it to “Ella Fitzgerald and her Famous Orchestra.” The ensemble was Fitzgerald’s chief musical backer, and its members were no longer content to perform exclusively at the Savoy Ballroom. As a result, the frequency of appearances by Webb’s orchestra at the Savoy dwindled. The band effectively dissolved in 1942 after a final performance at the Earle Theatre in Philadelphia. Additionally, the toll of World War II’s draft and ensuing financial decline were felt particularly sorely throughout Harlem, as the Savoy Ballroom lost a sizable number of its prized Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers to the military. The resulting expenses associated with hiring and maintaining a full-time staff of professional musicians became too burdensome for Charles Buchanan, who began exploring other options.

302 Fritts and Vail, Ella Fitzgerald, 61.
Count Basie’s Orchestra and Radio Broadcasts: June-July 1937.

In the closing days of June, 1937, William “Count” Basie took up an extended residence at the Savoy Ballroom. While Webb was technically still the house band, the musical services for the Savoy’s evening dances and radio broadcasts were handled by Basie’s ensemble. Basie, originally from Red Bank, New Jersey, was well-known in New York’s jazz scene by the mid-1920s, and performed at the Savoy once before on April 17, 1931, under the baton of bandleader Bennie Moten. During his tenure, lasting from June 22 to July 7, 1937, Basie and his orchestra broadcast several performances over New York’s radio stations, including WMCA and the Savoy’s own afternoon broadcast, typically scheduled for the 1 o’clock slot. Basie’s Orchestra made several on-air appearances, most notably on June 22, 26, 28, 30, and July 2, 5, and 7. The already established popularity of Basie’s ensemble was bolstered by the addition of vocalists Billie Holiday and James Rushing, who were featured prominently in most of the broadcasts. According to Bob Inman, a young attendee of the June 23, 1937 dance at the Savoy Ballroom, Basie’s ensemble exhibited a rhythmic feel similar to that of Bennie Moten’s aggregation, but with a slight discrepancy in the feel:

[Basie’s playing] is so relaxed with a driving rhythm section behind all the great soloists and the sensational singer, Billie Holiday.

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305 Ibid.
306 Ibid.
The recording of the June 30, 1937 Savoy radio broadcast supports this assessment. Basie’s Orchestra performance featured such well-known Moten originals as “Moten Swing,” “Shout and Feel It,” and “Swing, Brother, Swing” alongside standards including “They Can’t Take That Away From Me,” “I’ll Always Be In Love With You,” and “I Got Rhythm.” Basie’s features a wide range of tempos, but more interesting is the more pronounced rhythm section, noticeably absent from the majority of Moten’s 1930 and 1931 recordings. In “Moten Swing,” the rhythm section, comprised of guitarist Freddie Green, bassist Walter Page, drummer Jo Jones, and Basie at the piano, provides a clear and solid quadruple-pulse rhythmic backing to Lester Young’s relaxed and effortless melodic lines. The rhythm section’s pronounced presence, audible even in spite of the poor recording quality, suggests an emphatic aesthetic shift on Basie’s part to accommodate the Savoy dancers’ needs for a clear and stable rhythmic feel. At the same time, Basie seemingly refused to compromise Young’s rhythmically relaxed, melodic style of playing, retaining the sense of individuality inherent to his ensemble prior to his appointment at the Savoy Ballroom.

The apparent stylistic incongruity created between the steady four-to-the-bar pulse of the rhythm section and Young’s melismatic figurations actually works in favor of the performance, as can be seen in the June 30, 1937 broadcast performance of “Moten Swing.” Young’s solo, performed to enthusiastic cheers of Savoy regulars, and taken at the beginning of the number, emphasizes a pronounced contrast between his

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308 The exact tempos of this recording and their implications are discussed later in this chapter.
characteristic, irregularly-shaped phrases and the nearly obsessive attention to harmonic consistency (see figure 23). Although the abundant chromaticisms characterizing Young’s solo work of the early and mid-1940s are few in this excerpt, a clear sense of structure, balance, and progression may be immediately heard. With the rhythm section consistently emphasizing each beat behind him, Young crafts his solo with an emphatic delay between the placement of his own notes and the pulses of the rhythm section. The phrase structure reflects the eventual buildup, as the first four bars reflect a fractured, noncomplex approach to melodic building. Here, Young utilizes merely five unique pitches, resolving the melodic line on the tonic (m. 3), only to leave the final bar of the phrase devoid of any sound. The second phrase stands in sharp contrast to the first, a tightly-woven network of cascading, stepwise ascents and descents, punctuated by trills, slides, and occasional chromaticisms (m. 5-7.) The positioning of Young’s phrasing is also worth noting, as the first two phrases coincide with the underlying harmonic structure of the phrases and their respective sections. By the third phrase, however, Young switches from a relatively symmetrical style of soloing to a fractured one (m. 9-14), with the third phrase reflecting an irregular shape, consisting of three sub-phrases: a short, six-note turn-around (m. 9); a primarily tonal series of arpeggiated ascents and descents outlining the section’s chord structure (m. 10-14); and a single concert C, suspended over the barline of mm. 9 and 10. The following phrase (m. 14-16), abbreviated to slightly over two bars in length, again emphasizes arpeggiated movement and sets up the transition into the bridge (m. 17-24), which consists of two contrasting sections. The first of these, a riffy section consisting of asymmetrically placed rhythmic
suspensions, presents a contrast from the rapidly moving phrase which preceded it (m. 17-20), while its consequent approaches the bridge’s harmonic structure with a renewed emphasis on sizable leaps and chromaticisms, notably in mm. 21 and 22. Also curious is Young’s highlighting of a chromatic median substitution in m. 24, which sets up his return to the home key of A-flat major via a B-diminished chord.

The presence of such subtle innovations in melodic solos was just one example of the defining qualities of Basie’s 1937 Savoy broadcasts. While it may be observed from the transcription that Lester Young was still transitioning from a more traditional, big-band approach into what would eventually become a highly chromatic pre-bop style, the shift of emphasis towards asymmetric, chromatic melodic lines was well underway. At the same time, however, the novel melodic approach exhibited by Young was inextricably tethered to the stable, unflinching pulse provided by Jones, Green, Page, and Basie. The melodic lines and the rhythm operated in tandem, effectively providing the Savoy regulars precisely the type of music their tastes demanded: rooted in rhythmic precision, yet replete with enough improvisational freedom to prevent them from locking into one single component of the music. The June 30, 1937 recording, appropriately enough referred to as “a program of ultra-modern rhythm” by the radio announcer, adequately reflects the evolution in Savoy’s musical taste from the purely rhythm-driven performances of the late 1920s to the equal partnership of melody and rhythm found in the concerts of the mid- to late 1930s.

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Figure 23 - Lester Young’s solo, "Moten Swing." Recorded at the Savoy Ballroom, June 30, 1937. Transcribed by A. Abdoulaev, March 24, 2014.
Al Cooper and Lucius Venable “Lucky” Millinder: 1939-1946

The solution to Buchanan’s post-Webb woes came in the form of a small, eight-man ensemble. Saxophonist and arranger Al Cooper, who had been playing at the Savoy since 1937 during Webb’s absences and tour engagements, took up the mantle of the Savoy Ballroom’s house band. Cooper’s Savoy Sultans played almost exclusively at the Savoy Ballroom until the ensemble’s breakup in 1946, with their only noteworthy engagement outside of the Savoy taking place at the Apollo Theatre alongside Willie Bryant.  

Cooper’s ensemble featured such regulars as trumpeters Jack Chapman, Sam Massenberg, Jesse Drakes, and Pat Jenkins; reed players Skinny Brown, Rudy Williams, Ed McNeil, Lennie Simmons, Thomas Turrentine, Sr., and George Kelly; pianist Cyril Hanes; bassist Grachan Moncur II; drummer Alex “Razz” Mitchell; and vocalists Evelyne White and Helen Proctor. Although Cooper’s musicians were “less notable for their pitch and precision than for their power and drive,” they enjoyed considerable popularity among Savoy dancers (see figure 23). Despite the absence of prominent headliners in Cooper’s ensemble, the band developed a cohesive, uniform, and energetic sound, and achieved such a degree of notoriety that Charles Buchanan was often urged by band leaders sharing the band stand with the Sultans to not be programmed immediately following them.

311 Reid, Rhythm for Sale, 4304-76. This vaudeville at the Apollo Theatre was produced by noteworthy theatre producer Leonard Harper, who had previously made several failed attempts at vaudeville productions at the Savoy Ballroom.
312 Stearns and Stearns, Jazz Dance, 317.
The Savoy Sultans typically played as an eight-man combo with three trumpets, two saxophones, and a rhythm section. Despite the relatively compact size of Cooper’s group they were capable of producing highly energetic music, as Norma Miller recalled that “there was nothing small about their sound.”\(^{314}\) Frankie Manning painted a similar portrait of Cooper’s band:

\[ \text{[The Sultans] were a good little jump band that got quite a name from playing at the Savoy in later years. They were always on the number two bandstand [sic], which I’m guessing was because Buchanan didn’t want them wearing} \]

\(^{314}\) Miller and Jensen, *Swingin’ At The Savoy*, 111.
a groove in the floor on the other stage from all their stomping.  

Trombonist Dicky Wells agreed with Manning’s assessment, commenting on the Savoy Sultans’ enduring popularity at the Savoy Ballroom:

Some of the big bands made a mistake, too. They got too heavy and their arrangements were too complicated. That’s why the Savoy Sultans remained more popular at the Savoy than bands that were bigger and more famous!  

Despite the limited degree of fame beyond the Savoy Ballroom, Al Cooper’s Savoy Sultans enjoyed widespread respect from competitors, as both Count Basie and Dizzy Gillespie remarked that Cooper had one of the “swingingest” bands next to Chick Webb.  

This was likely a result of the highly energetic sound espoused by the Savoy Sultans, who demonstrated a rhythmic quality consistent with Webb’s, but tended more towards a Kansas City sound in their harmonies and melodies. The Sultans’ recordings predominantly feature propulsive, quadruple pulse rhythms combined with straightforward arrangements with simpler solos. Although the Savoy Sultans’ recordings feature riffing during the heads and interludes of songs, the solos are often uncomplicated and rhythmically relaxed. The instruments are often organized in a manner that is consistent with the roles typically assigned to them in Dixieland combos. Finally, the guitar and banjo are noticeably absent from the rhythm section’s composition. Overall, the Sultans’ recordings tend to emphasize the rhythmic component of the music, as is the

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315 Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 69.
case in their 1941 recording of “Second Balcony Jump.” While the Savoy Sultans’ tenure at the Ballroom was brief, they made a considerable impact on the public perception of swing. Given that the smaller size of their aggregation allowed for a lesser degree of change among the instrumentation of the group and the arrangements which they played, their sharp rhythmic sensibilities elevated them to the status of one of the Savoy’s favorite bands. The Sultans succeeded because of their small size rather than in spite of it, and the emphasis placed on the enhanced rhythmic quality of their arrangements predicted the next developmental stage of music at the Savoy Ballroom. With rhythm being an important variable of the Savoy’s musical equation, the focus shifted from complicated melodic arrangements typically performed by period big bands to a smaller, self-contained aesthetic of an instrumental combo. Savoy Ballroom would not fully embrace the combo as an acceptable substitute for a large ensemble for another decade, but Cooper’s contribution ensured the proliferation of this idea.

Lucius Venable “Lucky” Millinder was the next and last of the big band leaders to take up residence at the Savoy. Millinder’s appointment may be traced back to his original 1940 performance at the Savoy Ballroom, where his ensemble was heard by Charles Buchanan and subsequently offered a permanent position. During 1940 and 1941, Millinder often filled in for Al Cooper’s Savoy Sultans. From 1934 to 1938, Millinder lead the well-known Mills Blue Rhythm Band, a medium-sized ensemble featuring a strong line-up of talented soloists like saxophonist Tab Smith, guitarist

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Lawrence Lucie, and trumpeter Charlie Shavers.\textsuperscript{320} Millinder’s tenure resulted in a modest performing career complimented by a remarkable track record of over 150 recordings, which assisted in his rise to prominence. After leaving the Mills Blue Rhythm Band in 1938, Millinder explored a brief stint with pianist and band leader Bill Doggett’s ensemble, and was offered a full-time house bandleader position at the Savoy by late 1941. Millinder captured the Savoy management’s attention as a result of his outstanding showmanship, his command of the floor, and his ability to effectively headline such popular talents such as drummer David “Panama” Francis, pianist Thelonious Monk, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, and singer and guitarist Rosetta Tharpe.\textsuperscript{321} Unlike Chick Webb, whose close friendship with Edgar Sampson allowed him to procure and perform a steady stream of creative original arrangements, Millinder preferred to perform other bands’ existing charts, often using numbers performed by Webb, Goodman, and Henderson big bands.\textsuperscript{322} Throughout his career at the Savoy, Millinder managed to keep a relatively low profile in part because of a lack of musical or instrumental training. Nevertheless, his energetic stage presence commanded a great deal of respect from his performers: “Millinder was just a front man,” recalled “Panama” Francis. “[But] you would think you were watching Toscanini.”\textsuperscript{323} Norma Miller shares a similar recollection of Millinder’s stagecraft:

\begin{quote}
Lucky was second only to Cab as a big band leader. He really pumped it up, as the kids say today. He danced while
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{321} Miller and Jensen, \textit{Swingin’ At The Savoy}, 33. Zolotow, “Harlem’s Great White Father,” 68.
\textsuperscript{322} Manning and Millman, \textit{Frankie Manning}, 69, 84.
\textsuperscript{323} O’Neal, \textit{The Ghosts of Harlem}, 382.
he lead the band, and his coat tails swung in rhythm with
the music. 324

Apart from a notable assortment of headliners and stage antics, Millinder’s
contribution was a significant departure from swing towards gospel-inspired rhythm-and-
blues music. Millinder’s eventual falling out with Tharpe in 1943 and the signing of
Wynonie Harris in 1944 caused his band to delve even deeper into the growing popularity
of rhythm-and-blues, deviating from the traditionally swing-oriented tastes of the Savoy
Ballroom. 325 The result was a riffy, jump-band style of music owing some of its
aesthetics to the performances of Al Cooper’s Savoy Sultans. In this regard, Millinder’s
eidetic memory was a tremendous asset in developing tightly scripted versions of existing
arrangements, featuring limited instrumental solos. 326 His musical aptitude assisted in the
formation of a cohesive, focused sound within the ensemble, typically featuring short but
involved improvisation interludes by featured instrumentalists. The four-pulse meter is
once again strongly present in Millinder’s music, though the second and fourth beats are
frequently emphasized with hand claps, particularly in the recordings of “Shout, Sister,
Shout!” (1941), and “Who Threw the Whiskey In the Well?” (1944). 327 In more swing-
oriented numbers such as “Savoy” (1942), Millinder’s arrangements appropriated the
established tropes of contemporary swing, but usually defaulted to a 12-bar blues form,
rather than the traditionally accepted, 32-bar popular song form.

324 Miller and Jensen, Swingin’ At The Savoy, 33.
325 Gayle Wald, Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-n-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Harpe
(Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 64.
326 O’Neal, The Ghosts of Harlem, 381.
327 The former of these owes much of its gospel feel to the vocals provided by Rosetta Tharpe. Tharpe
considerably modifies the rhythm of the vocal part, creating a rhythmic asynchronicity between the
rhythmically stable instrumental riffs and her own rubato treatment of the melodic rhythm.
David “Panama” Francis and the Late Years: 1946-1958

Millinder’s departure from the Savoy in 1946 prompted David “Panama” Francis to take his former mentor’s place as the headliner of the resident ensemble. Francis regularly performed under Millinder since 1941, but the Savoy’s dwindling finances in the wake of the Harlem Riot closing, as well as the general drop in the Savoy clients’ interest in swing music and dance, placed Francis’ ensemble’s future in financial jeopardy. After a few months of headlining at the Savoy Ballroom, Francis disbanded his ensemble.328 In the wake of Francis’ departure, the Savoy’s management elected not to maintain a stable residence for a swing orchestra for financial reasons, and opted to hire out individual, small combos. This practice was more fiscally conservative, and, given the ballroom’s diminishing attendance throughout its final decade, a practical move from a logistic perspective. With the declining attendance, the issue of volume became less problematic, and as audio amplification was still in nascent stages during the late 1940s, the bands’ ability to project at reasonable volumes was significantly bolstered by the Ballroom’s reduced attendance. The need for a solid rhythmic backbone thus became significantly less pressing, shifting the music’s emphasis towards solo instrumental work, as represented by Lester Young’s live performance of the Savoy Ballroom in 1950. The performance, which, sadly, exists only as part of a private collection, and is not released under any label, was broadcast over the radio on February 22, 1950.329 The recording is

328 O’Neal, The Ghosts of Harlem, 382.
329 Lester Young, “Pennies from Heaven” (music video), posted May 25, 2010, accessed August 21, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElOn2Jm2pZA. This is distinct and separate from the 1950 Complete Savoy Sessions, which were done in a studio. Although the two recordings are similar in tempo, style,
rhythmically relaxed, with the drums’ light figures almost entirely obscured by the bass. The rhythm section’s playing is extremely sparse, allowing ample harmonic and rhythmic space for Young’s and former Savoy Sultans trumpeter Jesse Drakes’ improvisations, which usually tend to rhythmically fall slightly behind the pulse. This recording demonstrates an interesting contrast to the traditional, rhythm-heavy Savoy aesthetic and in some ways represents a departure from an established performance practice. The bass still emphasizes the pulse, yet the steady chromatic ascents and descents played by bassist Aaron Bell are more indicative of a bebop-influenced approach to the treatment of bass lines as independent melodic content. Rhythmic riffs, having previously played an important role in the arrangements of Basie, Moten, Goodman, and Webb, are conspicuously absent and are replaced by a small set of cadential polyphonic variations played over a more pronounced percussion line.

Given the aesthetic qualities of this recording, one might conclude that the musical tastes at the Savoy Ballroom shifted significantly over the course of three decades. It is true that the weekday on which Young and Drakes recorded “Pennies from Heaven” was a Wednesday, which usually earmarked the Savoy Ballroom for society gatherings, most of which were held well into the early 1950s. Regardless of the intended purpose of the performance, however, a shift in the perception of swing and its rhythm is clearly noticeable; jazz at the Savoy no longer had to be, strictly speaking, inflection, and exhibit a similar execution of the song’s head arrangement, they diverge significantly at the end of the first chorus.

330 Betty Granger, “An Afternoon to Remember,” The New York Age, April 16, 1949, 4. “Need ‘Jacks Or Better’ For A Smile,” The New York Age, October 25, 1952, 14B. Social functions at the Savoy increased in frequency, with the Ballroom apparently frequently resorting to leasing its space to various clubs and organizations for social gatherings.
danceable. With the fading popularity of partnered jazz dance and Lindy Hop, the needs of the venue favored passive involvement with the music, rather than an active, participatory role.\textsuperscript{331}

\textbf{“Hey, Pops, Keep That Beat A-Beatin”’: Relationships between Dance and Music}

During interviews, talks, and panel discussions, the late Frankie Manning often recalled the swing bands of the 1930s and 1940s with great affection, frequently referring to one or another as “the swingin’est [sic.] bands” at the Savoy, occasionally also including such contemporary ensembles as the Tom Cunningham Orchestra in this group.\textsuperscript{332} These exclamations were far from the misty-eyed memories of an aged dancer yearning for the past, however; Manning was always meticulous in choosing his terminology, and meant something very specific when he defined music as either “swinging” or “not swinging.” Naturally, this dovetails into the important question of what “swing” means to a dancer and to a musician, and how the two might be related or separate. The issue becomes problematic when one begins sorting through countless definitions of the term “swing,” each one dramatically different from the last. Perhaps the most all-encompassing (and yet, strangely abstracted of any quantitatively concrete values) definition of the term comes from the Jazz in America glossary: “when an individual player or ensemble performs in such a rhythmically coordinated way as to command a visceral response from the listener (to cause feet to tap and heads to nod); an

\textsuperscript{331} The numerous snippets of conversations and whistling which can be heard from 0:00 to 0:31 suggest that the performance may have been lightly attended.

irresistible gravitational buoyancy that defies mere verbal definition.” The relationship between jazz, swing, rhythm, and motion provided by this statement is hardly accidental; as noted in the previous section, swing music often evolved alongside rhythmic movement, with one stimulating and promoting the evolution of the other. The relationship between swing music and dance, however, was catalyzed by two specific factors: the venue in which these activities were performed and the individuals who performed these activities. Without dancers and, specifically, Lindy Hoppers there would likely be no swing, yet without the concurrent evolution of swing, Lindy Hop would never coalesce into anything more than a fad dance akin to the Turkey Trot or the Elephant Walk. The relationship between the Savoy dancers and musicians was highly symbiotic, and Dizzy Gillespie best described its full impact in recollections related to Hank O’Neal:

I loved that place. I had a ball at the Savoy. I learned all the dance routines. The Lindy Hop, everything. […] When I wasn’t playing I was dancing, and the girls used to show me all the steps. […] You had to know the dancing to play the music. If you don’t know how to move to music you don’t know how to play the music – you’ve gotta know dancing to play our music. […] A lot of musicians [can’t dance.] They’re disjointed and they get off time, they’re down there when they should be up here. You can’t have your body going one way, your instrument another way, and the music still another way. You have to know how to move.333

From the dancers’ perspective, Sonny Allen shared a nearly identical sentiment:

The most important thing in dancing is… if you can’t hear it [in your head.] it ain’t going to make no sense [in your

feet.] [...] If you learn by counts, once you hear it, the music has gone south. And with me, well, you know, I sing everything I do.  

Both Allen and Gillespie provide a sensible perspective on music, emphasizing that music bound rhythmic movement, musical performance, and the cultural roots of swing. The respective natures of swing dance and swing music connect these activities in such a way that, on the most fundamental level, the music provides the dancer with the impetus for movement, while the dancers affect the musicians’ capability for continuing the momentum through to the musical phrases’ logical conclusions. The “swing eighth” rhythmic pattern, which became so fundamental in defining the rhythmic feel of swing and setting it apart from pure syncopation during the late 1920s, is partly responsible for this dynamic. Its timing is such that the emphases placed on the second and fourth beats of every bar create a sense of perpetual momentum, while the syncopated anacruses of the second and fourth beats propel the rhythmic figure across the bar line. The resulting correlation between these rhythmic elements generates a sense of perpetual motion central to the performance of swing. With the gradual replacement of the loud and unwieldy banjos and tubas with considerably mellower guitars and double basses, the rhythmic emphasis in swing defaulted to a quadruple pulse. Such a change was only possible with the relegation of these instruments to the background dynamic of an

Allen, interview, 2013.
The connection between music and dance was discussed in greater detail in the third chapter of this dissertation. In traditional Yoruba circle dances, music and dance exist together, complimenting one another. In traditional dances with Western and Euro-American roots, the music frequently exists as a separate entity from the dance.
Spring, “Dance, Venue, and Lindy Hop,” 192-93. Howard Spring rightly states that this linear momentum in the music, along with the departure from a traditional 2/4 time signature provided by the early syncopated bands’ rhythm sections, was responsible for the continued development of swing to its contemporary iterations.
ensemble. The melodic (and often more assertive) playing of drummers like Webb, Gene Krupa, and Buddy Rich replaced the banjo and tuba as the primary providers of pulse, allowing for greater degree of agility, rhythmic variation, and performance flair. The skewed unevenness in the rhythm emerging from this change satisfied the Lindy Hoppers’ gradually increasing need for continuous, extended momentum combined with a more room for rhythmic improvisation in their own dancing.337

If one is to operate on the assumption that dance exists as a physical manifestation of the music, the logical supposition that follows is that the majority of music at the Savoy Ballroom emphasized rhythm over melody, harmony, and complex improvisation. The visceral rhythm provided by a drummer perched upon one of the Savoy Ballroom’s twin bandstands would be amplified ten-fold and carried across the hall by the simultaneous impact of 4000 pairs of feet, dancing in near-perfect synchronicity to the band’s pulse. Without adequate amplification provided for the melodic instruments, the rhythm became central to the music, thus negating the need for excessive melodic and harmonic complexities. Evidence suggests that the bands most favorably received at the Savoy Ballroom were ones capable of generating enough stable rhythmic momentum or “swing,” rather than deluging their audience in needlessly complex arrangements.338 Veteran Lindy Hopper Al Minns supported the undisputed significance of unity of rhythm at the Savoy by saying:

When I say ‘bouncing at the Savoy,’ you didn’t have to dance. All you had to do was, people would just stand in

337 Ibid.
338 Cab Calloway’s 1928 performance at the Savoy Ballroom was unsuccessful for this specific reason.
front of the band stand, and the floor would actually push you up and down from the rhythm of people pattin’ their feet.  

Furthermore, the interaction between the musicians and dancers at the Savoy Ballroom largely depended on a mutual understanding and satisfaction of tastes. For the musicians, communicating with the dancers ostensibly involved an awareness of contemporary trends in repertoire, the ability to read and react to the crowd, being able to maintain a solid and prominent rhythm, diversifying the musical output of the ensemble. Some musicians and bandleaders, having developed a kind of sixth sense about the crowd’s potential reactions, were able to put together a variety of popular melodies for the dancer’s entertainment. Nevertheless, satisfying a broad spectrum of tastes was a complicated proposition, and the musicians at the Savoy often found themselves relying on the dancers’ feedback to identify whether or not a particular song was adequately entertaining. Dicky Wells recalled the complications of playing in a dance band as follows:

If you’ve got two or three thousand people in front of you at a concert, it’s hard to imagine what they like, what rhythm they like. But when you’ve got people out on the dance floor and dancing you know what they like – you’ve got ‘em!

The noticeable feedback from the dancers became a clear indicator to the musicians about the degree to which they succeeded or failed. The dancers on the floor became a litmus test for the musicians. Conversely, the Savoy Ballroom’s management also observed

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dancers in an effort to gauge the success rate of a given ensemble. For all intents and purposes, the dancers became the active ingredient in the bands’ success formula.

Things were a little different for the dancers themselves, however. Dancing to music required an understanding of the tropes and idioms of jazz, leading to a creative reinterpretation of the melodic, rhythmic, and spatial elements contained in the music. As the Lindy Hop was a dance fundamentally based in the improvisational aesthetic of jazz, a competent Lindy Hopper would have to be as well versed in the idiom of jazz as a musician, demonstrating a subconscious understanding of form, melodic line, phrasing, rhythm, and improvisation. The integration of these musical qualities into rhythmic movement also required a thorough understanding of traditions vis-à-vis their relationship to swing, and a dancer’s ability to subvert and reinvent those traditions through creative improvisation. While the core of the Lindy Hop does consist of a few basic structural elements, such as the syncopated footwork, the alternating open and close variants of connection between partners, as well as certain moves such as the swing-out and the Lindy circle, these elements are rooted in fundamental eurhythmic movement. Beyond the fundamentals, however, the non-performance aspects of the Lindy Hop are typically devoid of pre-choreographed routines, instead focusing on the improvisatory aspect of jazz. The dance improvisations of one dancer or couple would often be adopted, reconstituted, and appropriated for future use. According to Marshall Stearns, Al Minns recalled that few dancers copied one another’s moves in exactly the same way, but degrees of variation were abundant on the dance floor:

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341 The mechanics of Lindy hop will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.
I never could do steps like the other guys anyway. I’d just wiggle my legs and it came out different.\(^\text{342}\)

Frankie Manning similarly commented on the process of continuously developing improvisation, indicating that it was a significant part of the Lindy Hop culture:

> If we saw anything of interest in the [Cats’ Corner] we continued to take it back to the south side [of the Ballroom] and show each other. Of course, we didn’t copy the steps exactly. […] You could really make some changes with other types of steps, those with a lot of footwork.\(^\text{343}\)

The improvisatory character of the dance depended on emulation, as the aesthetics, techniques, and practices of the Lindy Hop emerged out of an evolving network of emulation assisted by its practitioners’ efforts to adjust a perpetually evolving series of improvisations to fit the musical accompaniment. Thus, the music and dance developed a deeply interdependent symbiotic relationship with close ties to the improvisatory qualities of jazz, rooted in rhythmic precision and interpretation.\(^\text{344}\)

**Restless Feet: Tempos at the Savoy Ballroom**

Much discussion has been conducted on the topic of relative tempos of the music at the Savoy and the specific predilection of the Ballroom’s dancers towards faster tempos. The misconception arises from a comment made by Leon James, quoted by Marshall Stearns, stating that, at the Savoy Ballroom, dancers “had to be able to dance to

\(^{342}\) Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 325.

\(^{343}\) Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 67.

very fast tempos.\textsuperscript{345} The remark is misleading for a variety of reasons. First, James does not specify (and Stearns chooses not to elaborate) what the relative top range of the tempos at the Savoy Ballroom would have been. Second, the interpretation of James’ comment by Frankie Manning and Norma Miller suggests an alternative point of view, as Manning remarked that:

\begin{quote}
Bandleaders knew the tempos that would keep people on the floor, and played a range from slow to fast that appealed to us. Savoy patrons liked variety.\textsuperscript{346}
\end{quote}

The assertion that the Savoy’s musical \textit{modus operandi} was “all fast tempos, all the time” is somewhat preposterous. Miller, Manning, and Jervis Anderson all note with certainty that all tempos were played at the Savoy in order to accommodate as broad a range of dancers and dance styles as possible. Furthermore, all three state that the Savoy was home to a variety of equally popular dances, among them the Tango, Cha-Cha, and the Fox trot, none of which are danced to fast tempos. It is therefore entirely possible that what James suggested, and Stearns failed to pick up on, was that the rhythmic energy of various Savoy bands rather than the actual tempo was set very high. As shown earlier, much of the music at the Savoy Ballroom was recognized for its rhythmically precise backing combined with highly energetic, riff-based instrumental sections. These musical qualities provided ample opportunities for dancers to experiment with complex and involved variations in footwork, momentum, repertoire, and partnership. As such intricacy usually requires a tremendous degree of control over one’s body, the amount of

\textsuperscript{345} Stearns and Stearns, \textit{Jazz Dance}, 323.
\textsuperscript{346} Manning and Millman, \textit{Frankie Manning}, 69. This directly contradicts Marshall Stearns’ assertion in \textit{Jazz Dance} that the Savoy dancers danced exclusively to fast tempos.
finesse exhibited by all but the most seasoned of dancers degrades in proportion to the elevation of the tempo. Given that Frankie Manning spoke of being able to experiment with complex variations fairly early on in his experiences at the Savoy Ballroom, the indication that the tempos to which Savoy dancers danced were not overly brisk appears to be supported. In fact, it is possible that rather than suggesting that all of the Savoy Ballroom’s tempos were fast, James may have implied that the speed of the music, which can occasionally be related to the propulsive rhythmic energy of swing, may have remained average to up-tempo without pushing the boundaries set by Chick Webb’s blistering “Harlem Congo.”

This claim is further supported by an examination of the tempo ranges found in various recordings of bands, whose sessions were captured at the Savoy Ballroom. These consist of selections from Fess Williams’ recordings made between 1926 and 1928 in New York, Ella Fitzgerald’s 1939 and 1940 recorded performances at the Savoy Ballroom with Chick Webb’s Orchestra, various recordings of Fitzgerald with the Savoy Eight, and a number of records made by Al Cooper’s Savoy Sultans between 1938 and 1941. These recordings were selected because of their proximity to the source of the Savoy Ballroom’s aesthetic. Williams was actively performing at the Savoy during the time of the recordings, and Cooper’s limited range of venues beyond the Savoy Ballroom made him an ideal candidate for the representation of the Savoy’s median period sound. Fitzgerald’s recordings provide the most accurate and complete perspective of the tempo ranges likely enjoyed by patrons at the Savoy Ballroom. The two dozen songs found on the 1939-1940 album, in addition to the ten songs found on the 1940 series of recordings
do not feature a full set-list, but provide a compelling overview of the musical style popular at the Savoy during the late 1930s. The 1950 private recording of Lester Young’s quintet was excluded partly because it falls outside of the commonly agreed-upon swing aesthetic of the period, and because it is uncertain whether or not it was performed specifically with dancers in mind. In any case, the average range of tempos found in Williams’ recordings extends from just below middle range to above it.\(^{347}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Year and Location</th>
<th>Tempo (BPM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ozark Blues</td>
<td>New York, 1927</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta Black Bottom</td>
<td>New York, 1926</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alligator Crawl</td>
<td>New York, 1927</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phantom Blues</td>
<td>New York, 1927</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Ten</td>
<td>New York, 1927</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Mama’s In Town</td>
<td>New York, 1927</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Pretty Girl</td>
<td>New York, 1927</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fitzgerald’s recordings, on the other hand, exhibit a much more remarkable variance of tempos. In addition to having an overall higher mean tempo, the recordings made by Fitzgerald with Webb’s orchestra in 1939 demonstrate much higher upper and lower extremes of tempo:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Year and Location</th>
<th>Tempo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peg O’ My Heart</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1939</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Thing Called Love</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1939</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Lou</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1939</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugarfoot Stomp</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1939</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raggin the Scale</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1939</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After You’ve Gone</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1939</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{347}\) For reasons of succinctness, I chose to round off the numbers of beats per minute to the nearest 5 or 10 beats. Additionally, I treat the tempo range of 150-190 as medium speed, which provides maximum amount of dance comfort in Lindy Hop.
Fitzgerald’s 1940 recorded performance at the Savoy Ballroom provides a similar variety of tempos, featuring a slightly more restrained lower range, but a greater upper-extreme tempo:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Year and Location</th>
<th>Tempo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Want the Waiter</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1940</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh, Johnny, Oh!</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1940</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Lou</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1940</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limehouse Blues</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1940</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diga Diga Doo</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1940</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic Jam</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1940</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Count Basie’s 1937 recording at the Savoy Ballroom is yet another important source supporting a variety of tempos. This recording, which features vocalist Billie Holiday, provides a thematic and musical contrast to the driving, charged rhythms of Fitzgerald and Webb’s aggregation, but coincides with them in terms of tempo ranges:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Year and Location</th>
<th>Tempo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They Can’t Take That Away</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1937</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Me and You…</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1937</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swing, Brother, Swing</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1937</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moten Swing Theme</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1937</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shout and Feel It</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1937</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Count Steps In</td>
<td>Savoy Ballroom, 1937</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, the recordings of Al Cooper’s Savoy Sultans are indicative of a similar pattern of varying tempos throughout two-dozen recordings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Year and Location</th>
<th>Tempo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeep’s Blues</td>
<td>New York, 1938</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See What I Mean?</td>
<td>New York, 1941</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumpin’ At The Savoy</td>
<td>New York, 1939</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stitches</td>
<td>New York, 1939</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Balcony Jump</td>
<td>New York, 1941</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumpin’ the Blues</td>
<td>New York, 1939</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frenzy</td>
<td>New York, 1940</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen from the above breakdowns, the range of tempos was actually quite extensive, with many of the recordings falling into the range of 150 to 200 beats per minute. The energy was sustained at elevated levels, excepting the slower songs, which usually tended towards more mellow moods. Therefore, it would appear that a conscientious bandleader most likely performed to a wide range of tempos in order to keep the crowd from both physical and aural fatigue. Doing otherwise would demonstrate callous disregard on the musicians’ part, and would result in a quick emptying of the dance floor.

From the perspective of dancers, musicians, and onlookers alike, however, the most significant element of the Savoy’s music was undoubtedly the rhythmic quality of the music. Three notable accounts of the treatment of rhythm at the Savoy stand out, and while two of them discount much of the professional musical terminology in favor of a consumer-friendly, poetic approach, these descriptions nevertheless paint a vivid image of how rhythmically saturated Savoy Ballroom’s music was. Van Vechten provides his readers with a very common representation of an upper middle-class white person’s view of the African-American lifestyle during the latter years of the 1920s, remarking on the “epileptic” nature of the Lindy Hop, describing it as consisting “in a certain dislocation of the rhythm of the fox trot,” and comparing the dance to the virtuosity of a coloratura singer of the early nineteenth Century.348 The primitivist viewpoint espoused by van Vechten, however unenlightened by twenty-first century standards, nevertheless warrants careful consideration, partly because it touches on several important features of the

Savoy’s musical aesthetic. Carl van Vechten’s attention was first and foremost drawn to the rhythm of the dance, and secondarily to a fleeting comparison between the melodic improvisation and the flights of a Romantic soprano, two of the most distinguishing features of 1920s jazz.\footnote{Gridley, Jazz Styles, 33. Gridley remarks that early jazz, particularly ragtime, was most appealing to dancers because of the codependent relationship between its steady pulse and “ragged” and syncopated melodic rhythms.}

Van Vechten’s assessment of the Savoy’s music is not unique in its perception of the swing bands’ rhythm. Leo Rosten, a contemporary of van Vechten’s, made similar observations during an early 1930s visit to the Savoy Ballroom. Rosten noted that: “A battery of brasses [was] blaring ‘Flat Foot Floogie with the Floy Floy,’ [and] frenzy ruled that ballroom,” further remarking that dancers occasionally egged on the best Lindy Hoppers “with shouts of encouragement, adding vocal and percussive rhythms to the big band’s steady rhythm.”\footnote{Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine, 260.} Rosten confessed to being unable to withstand the sonic and rhythmic assault of the venue, admonishing his readers to follow in his lead lest they are overcome with insanity. Nevertheless, his observation overlaps with van Vechten’s in that it perceives the significance of rhythm and rhythmic lamination to be of paramount importance to the Savoy aesthetic. Rosten says little of the melodic and harmonic make-up of the Savoy’s soundtrack beyond the initial sentence, but even without excessive elaboration it is evident that rhythm was more perceptible – and important – than the melodies and harmonies.

Of the non-dancers who visited the Savoy, jazz critic Otis Ferguson had perhaps the most objective assessment of the Savoy’s rhythmic feel: “When the band gets pretty
well into it, the whole enclosure, with all its people, beats like a drum and rises in steady
time, like a ground swell.” Ferguson further remarked on the importance of polyrhythm
in music vis-à-vis its relationship to dance: “The relaxed easy swing of the rhythmic
patter and along with it a drive of his own that runs along with the music and anticipates
the restless urge of its lags, stresses, and sharp syncopations.” Ferguson specifically
emphasized the primacy of the beat in the soundtrack of the Savoy, suggesting that
rhythm, especially polyrhythm, defines both a good dancer and a good song. From these
three accounts, it becomes apparent that the unequivocal importance of rhythm was at the
forefront of the Savoy experience. Van Vechten, the least versed in music of the three
writers, readily observed the rhythmic “dislocation,” by which one may assume he
referred to the polyrhythmic feel of jazz. Rosten likewise noticed the superimposition of
one rhythmic layer on another and remarked on it within a similar context. Both of these
assertions were supported by Ferguson, who made a connection between the
polyrhythmic nature of swing and that of the Lindy Hop. Similarly, all three overviews
place the emphasis on rhythm rather than melodic development. It follows that rhythm
was the primary musical element guiding the performances at the Savoy and, ultimately,
served as a backbone for its dances.

351 Ibid.
“Play That Number You Played Last Tuesday, Chick!” – Band Battles at the Savoy

Although the Savoy Ballroom’s trademark Battles of the Bands have been already discussed from the standpoints of historic timelines and the development of traditions, it is important to note that their contribution to the development of the Ballroom’s music was equally significant. Started in 1929 by popular request, these were continued until at least 1945. By 1946, Charles Buchanan found that the high costs and union fees made it impractical to hire more than one band per night, and the practice of pitting ensembles against each other in battle was abandoned in favor of hiring smaller ensembles on single-engagement bases.352 While the Savoy’s Band Battles stand as a sterling example of head-to-head confrontations between competing orchestras, the practice was neither invented at the Savoy Ballroom, nor exclusive to it. The practice of pitting bands in direct juxtaposition was a common occurrence, happening regularly at venues across the nation. Louis Armstrong engaged Charlie Barnet in Washington, D. C., while Jimmie Lunceford confronted Count Basie’s orchestra at the Larchmont Casino, and so forth.353 The Battles of the Bands conducted at the Savoy Ballroom, however, typically stood out as some of the most well-attended and enthusiastically competitive events in Harlem’s history. The competitors’ objective was to demonstrate their musical superiority over one another by drawing as much of the crowd’s attention away from their opponent. The bandstands were periodically moved to the opposite narrow ends of the ballroom in an effort to provide an uninterrupted flow of sound throughout the ballroom. The primary difference

352 Anderson, This Was Harlem, 313. Charles Buchanan remembered discussing rates with Benny Goodman. Goodman insisted on being paid union rates, which Buchanan could not justify at the time.
353 Lewis Erenberg, Swinging the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 58.
between Band Battles at the Savoy and elsewhere was that the Savoy’s audience judged
the contests through an informal adherence to unspecified but tacitly agreed upon rules.
Ballots were passed out for the sake of formality, ostensibly to provide legitimacy to for
the sake of press covering the Battles of the Bands, and to provide a numerical count of
the votes.

The battles were representative of musical progress achieved through innovation,
short- and long-term planning, organizational technique, musical ability, and command of
the crowd’s affection. Webb owed his indomitable standing in the Savoy Ballroom’s
Band Battles to his ability to play blistering drum solos and execute feats of impressive
musical dexterity, but his aptitude was only partially derived from his musicianship.
Webb meticulously crafted his song sets in a manner consistent with his opponents’
playing style, and derived his tactics from listening to others’ performances, whether they
were direct competitors like Goodman, or potential sources of admiration, like Artie
Shaw.354 Having studied his opponents’ strategies, Webb would hold back his flashiest
numbers during the competition, waiting for his opponent to “blow his hottest,”
unexpectedly bringing his band to the stand revitalized, and ready to overtake the
competition.355 Webb’s bassist Beverly Peer recalled the seriousness with which Webb
launched himself into competitions against challengers at the Savoy, remembering the
particularly confrontational Battle of the Bands between Webb and Benny Goodman:

354 Korral, Drummin’ Men, 20.
355 Shapiro and Hentoff, Hear Me Talkin’ To Ya, 194. According to Mary Lou Williams, Webb was an
astute student of his opponents’ tactics. This probably made him very successful in gauging the energy and
performance levels of his band battle opponents, as well as the enthusiasm of the participating dancers.
[The Webb-Goodman battle] was strictly a band against a man. Benny wanted the best stand – the one on the 141st Street side. [...] A guy named Scrippy played the first two sets for Chick. Those sets were like blood. [...] Nobody [in Webb’s band] was drinking whiskey. We were in good shape for all the sets. So Benny never got a chance to really get it together.356

The fullness of the competitors’ commitment to the idea of a band battle for musical supremacy ultimately reinforced the relationship between jazz music and dance as one based on participation rather than observation and exhibition. It is invariably true that the band leaders expected their soloists to commit to these performances fully and unquestioningly, and that the most creative soloists provoked others to a contest of musical one-upmanship. As the musicians were performing for an actively dancing audience, however the unspoken expectation of expressive freedom perpetually reigned over the Savoy Ballroom’s band battles, as the musicians’ competition upon the bandstands was funneled to the Savoy’s floor for the benefit of the dancers. Just as the dance Charleston and its subsequent incarnations changed the direction of the flow of jazz dance from performance to participation, operating under the belief that no “wrong way” to perform them existed, jazz at Battles of Bands at the Savoy Ballroom enjoyed a similar degree of freedom.357 The removal of didactic restraints directly affected the relationship between swing music and dance, as both retained their performance-oriented focus to some degree. At the same time, the underlying traditions of music and dance

356 Korall, Drummin’ Men, 26.
357 Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine, 254.
were relegated to the status of stylistic affectations, allowing improvisation and expressive freedom to surface as the main component of the musicians’ rivalry.

The band battles were also a significant development in the musical chronology of the Savoy Ballroom because of their prominent role. Charles Buchanan planned to maintain high volumes of activity on the dance floor, and the bands (which generated attendance), allowed the management to assess the crowd’s approval. Continued bookings following a similar format would likely result in continued attendance, but they also established a much more important paradigm by developing the audience’s taste.

At the Savoy Ballroom, taste created a separation between audiences of Lindy Hoppers and “squares” based on their perception and interpretation of swing music, lending a greater degree of legitimacy to the Savoy Ballroom as a cultural organization.

Meanwhile, the constant process of one-upmanship among the dancers and musicians resulted in a process of ever rising expectations, and a demand for newer, more fresh, and more inventive repertoire both on and off the dance floor. The dancers’ role cannot be overstated in this regard, as they were a crucial component of a successful Battle of the Bands. According to a story related by Norma Miller in her autobiography, on the eve of his band battle with Count Basie, Chick Webb entered into an argument with Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers manager, Herbert White, over an overheard statement by one of the dancers. Frustrated by the dancers’ apparent lack of loyalty to his musicians, Webb asserted that he did not need the Lindy Hoppers in order to put on a good show. White,

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359 Don Slater, Consumer Culture and Modernity (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 153, 156. Slater argues that taste and distinction play a prominent role in the process of defining status.
whose primary role at the event was to promote the dancers, informed his charges that they were to do absolutely no dancing to Webb for the duration of the dance. Watching the *esprit de corps* slowly drain from his ensemble for the duration of his orchestra’s first set proved to be highly demoralizing for Webb, who asked White to resolve the situation. With the Lindy Hoppers’ return to the dance floor, Webb apologized for his unkind words, earning the return of the fullness of his energetic sound.\textsuperscript{360} Miller’s narrative conclusively demonstrates that dancers directly affected a band’s degree of success during the band battles at the Savoy. Similarly, their participation placed them on equal footing with the musicians whose performance would normally be the sole defining component in a band battle held elsewhere.

Lastly, as a typical Battle of the Bands held at the Savoy Ballroom would draw anywhere between 4,000 and 10,000 potential attendees, the possibility for cultural dissemination was extraordinary.\textsuperscript{361} The *impresario* and Benny Goodman manager John Hammond astutely observed that the most significant contribution to the development of jazz was the cross-pollination of musical ideas between bands of different geographic backgrounds and ethnic make-ups.\textsuperscript{362} Hammond, whose presence was noted by Norma Miller in the 1937 battle of Goodman and Webb, knew that a blending of the music as well as races was of utmost importance to the development of jazz, and encouraged the

\textsuperscript{360} Miller and Jensen, *Swingin’ At The Savoy*, 102-6.
\textsuperscript{361} “A Great Spectacle,” *The New York Age*, May 21, 1937, 6. Multiple articles published in the *New York Age* suggest that, on average, 4,000 to 10,000 individuals attended the more prominent among the Band Battles.
participation by African-American musicians like Teddy Hill and Lionel Hampton in Goodman’s aggregation. The resulting interpolation of aesthetics and musical ideas thus elevated the Savoy Ballroom to the status of being one of the most musically cosmopolitan venues in New York City and possibly the United States. Benny Goodman’s band walked away from its battle with Webb having acquired new musical knowledge and, similarly, having taught Webb’s musicians a few novel concepts of their own. The free exchange of ideas was, perhaps, one of the most central components of Savoy Ballroom’s band battles. The musicians, spurred onward by the need to succeed and to be asked for a repeat performance would actively learn from their mistakes.

“Panama” Francis recalled a subsequent confrontation:

What usually happened at the Savoy when visiting bands came up there, especially the white bands, well, we just washed them away, and I had a lot of features with Lucky [Millinder’s] band, but I wasn’t prepared for Buddy Rich. […] When Gene Krupa came [in 1942] I kicked his ass. 363

Francis’ words resonate strongly with regards to the relationship between the performance of jazz and dance. As the music developed, the various jazz dances practiced at the Savoy thrived alongside the bandstand. The evolution of jazz dance similarly assisted in the promotion, growth, and popularity of big-band swing and small ensemble jazz, helping it emerge as a generation-defining musical style. Side by side, the evolution of these two art forms assisted in the Savoy Ballroom’s continued prominence and its status as one of the most notable dance halls in Harlem.

CHAPTER V: DANCE STYLES OF SAVOY BALLROOM

Some dance, some prance,
I’ll say there’s nothing finer.

James P. Johnson
“Charleston” (1917)

In 1930, Carl van Vechten made the following observation about the Lindy Hop in his semi-autobiographical novel, Parties. The description addresses an outing made by van Vechten and several of New York’s socialites to an unnamed dance hall, tacitly understood to be the Savoy, where the bored white socialites watched African-American dancers enjoying the night’s festivities:

The Lindy Hop consists in a certain dislocation of the rhythm of the fox-trot, followed by leaps and quivers, hops and jumps, eccentric flinging about of arms and legs, and contortions of the torso only fittingly to be described by the word epileptic. After the fundamental steps of the dance have been published, the performers may consider themselves at liberty to improvise, embroidering the traditional measures with startling variations, as a coloratura singer of the early nineteenth century would endow the score of a Bellini opera with roulades, runs, and shakes.\[364\]

Van Vechten’s fast and loose description of the Lindy Hop, which already achieved a certain degree of prominence among Harlem’s nightclubs by 1930, is accurate in that he observed the dance as improvisation superimposed upon a core set of movements. It is, however, van Vechten’s misperception of Lindy Hop as an unstructured, chaotic activity redolent of semi-religious revelry that places his observations at a disadvantage. The organized, meticulously constructed nature of early 1930s’ swing was reflected in the

\[364\] Van Vechten, Parties, 184.
Lindy Hop of the time, and the effortless complexity of the dance often mirrored that of the music to which it was done.

Dance scholar and musicologist Terry Monaghan once posed the seminal question: “Why study the Lindy Hop?” In response, some would surely argue that a dance based on the movement and music of a specific group of individuals from one particular location dating back just under a hundred years ago would have little significance to the greater scope of the development of contemporary jazz. Monaghan reflects on this by stating that “The way America fails and succeeds in preserving and developing [the] many-faceted tradition [of Lindy Hop] provides a valuable insight into the social well-being of the nation.” Monaghan correctly points at the social functions the Lindy Hop performed in Harlem during the 1930s and 1940s: social and financial liberation, the ability to express one’s individuality, and cultural promotion and preservation. In short, the need to understand the Lindy Hop on mechanical, social, and aesthetic level comes from several factors.

The first of these is the Lindy Hop’s reflection of the social undercurrents of individual liberty, self-expression, and individuality, traits on which Americans placed great value during the pre- and post-World War II years. As Monaghan suggested, one can learn a considerable amount about a people and their culture based on their forms of artistic expression, and if the Lindy Hop is treated as a representative cultural aspect of Harlem’s African-American social structures, one may predicate much of the social and

366 Ibid., 124.
artistic norms on the way Harlemites engaged in this particular pastime. Furthermore, the Lindy Hop represents a fusion of several earlier American, European, and African dances. Elements borrowed from these dances provided the Lindy Hop with a delicate balance between improvisation, refinement, acrobatics, and poise. Finally, the Lindy Hop was aesthetically consistent with the music of the period; according to accounts by van Vechten, Rosten, and Howard Johnson, the “smoothness and flow” of Lindy Hop were paramount, as was the body’s polyrhythmic response to the rhythmically complex music.367 Thus, the stipulation that an understanding of the Lindy Hop’s past leads to the construction of a better future underlies the desire to better grasp the structures of Lindy Hop through rigorous examination.368

Monaghan’s original assertion presents only half the story. Lindy Hop not only reflected the United States’ musical, social, artistic, and political ideals, but influenced their growth, development, and prosperity. With Lindy Hop, musicians and dancers not only sought to unify two art forms, but to generate a lasting time capsule through which a prior age’s endeavors into culture-building could be studied. An examination of the development and cultural significance of Lindy Hop would therefore invariably have to begin with the roots of the dance in the United States. While the Lindy Hop’s African roots must be recognized, they will not be addressed to the extent of jazz dance and Lindy Hop proper. This is the case for two reasons: first, the dances of the Yoruba, despite their influence on African-American dances in the 1930s and 1940s, are not jazz

dances in themselves; second, these dances are covered to a greater extent and in more
detail by Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, Benedict Ibitokun, and other African dance scholars.
Thus, while sources addressing African origins of American jazz dances will occasionally
be cited, this section will focus on the development of jazz dance in the United States.\textsuperscript{369}
As this dissertation primarily focuses on the parallel evolution of the Lindy Hop and jazz
music, as well as the evolving social and political norms during the Swing Era, these
topics will be presented in the context of primarily the first half of the twentieth
century.\textsuperscript{370}

\textbf{Origins of Lindy Hop: From Street Corner to the Savoy}

Common understanding indicates that the origins of the Lindy Hop in the United
States can be traced to the first decade of the twentieth century. In the early 1910s a new
dance craze, the Charleston, was sweeping through urban and rural areas of America.
Charleston’s popularity was strong enough to turn it into a truly nationwide fad, to the
point of incorporating it into various Harlem theatrical productions. Foremost among the
venues that hosted shows prominently featuring the Charleston was the Lafayette
Theatre, located at the corner of 132\textsuperscript{nd} Street and 7\textsuperscript{th} Avenue in Harlem. The general
public widely considered Lafayette Theatre to be of higher class than its competitors. In
her recollections, dancer Ida Forsyne suggested that, when compared against the
competition, the Lafayette Theatre was considered much more upper-tier:

\textsuperscript{369} For an in-depth look at the African roots of jazz dance, consider Marshall and Jean Stearns’ \textit{Jazz Dance}.
\textsuperscript{370} For the purposes of this dissertation, I will occasionally refer to the period of 1926-1958 as the “Savoy Era.”
The Lafayette was considered higher class. Society people went there, and the management didn’t present off-color blues singers, comedians, and Shake dancers […] like they did at the Lincoln.\(^{371}\)

The Lafayette’s desegregation, instated in 1910, a few months ahead of the competing Lincoln Theatre, was conducted in the hopes that the Lafayette would cater to mixed crowds. Despite the management’s best efforts to capture the attention of whites patronizing Harlem establishments, however, the Lafayette’s stock company played almost exclusively to African-American audiences as late as 1924.\(^{372}\) Despite its relative invisibility to white New Yorkers at the time, the Charleston continued as a major component of the Lafayette Theatre’s productions, as well as other theatres on and off Broadway. The Charleston was prominently featured in the 1923 musical *Runnin’ Wild* and *Ziegfeld Follies*.\(^{373}\)

The early popularity of Charleston is periodically offset by the lack of clarity over the dance’s origins. While James P. Johnson (see figure 24) is credited with writing the original song, which first appeared in *Runnin’ Wild*, there is no clear consensus on the origins of the Charleston rhythm and footwork. In a conversation with jazz critic and scholar Tom Davin, Johnson stated that he drew the syncopated rhythm of the song from “a regulation cotillion step,” and had slightly altered the original to better reflect the many variations of similar footwork.\(^{374}\) In contrast to Johnson’s claim, the earliest known

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\(^{372}\) Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 126.

\(^{373}\) Ibid., 111.

\(^{374}\) Tom Davin, “Conversations with James P. Johnson,” *Jazz Review* 2, no. 6 (July 1959): 16. In all likelihood, this suggests that the rhythm of the Charleston was not conceived by Johnson, but rather appropriated to fit a more accessible and uniform melodic line.
instance of the Charleston was brought up by dancer Thaddeus Drayton, who claims to have seen the dance as early as 1903. Noble Sissle recalled watching and learning how to Charleston in Savannah in 1905, while dancer Bill Maxey asserts that the dance was only taught as late as 1917. It was, however, musicologist and historian David Wallace who proposed one of the more likely explanations for the emergence of the Charleston. Wallace suggested that the Charleston originated in New Orleans in 1907, where it was danced under the moniker of “Jacksonville Rounders’ Dance.” The original music, composed by Perry Bradford, predates the syncopated meter of the Charleston by nearly fourteen years, and reflects a similar series of alternating asymmetrical emphases. Conflicting reports regarding the origins of the Charleston aside, the syncopated rhythm of the Charleston most likely originated during the plantation days, whence it spread to eventual popularity.

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375 Ibid., 112.
376 David Wallace, *Capital of The World: A Portrait of New York City in the Roaring Twenties* (Guilford: Lyons Press, 2011), 120-21. Wallace suggests that Bradford was inspired by the time he spent in Jacksonville, Florida, where he frequently observed the dance performed by groups of “rounders,” or pimps.
There is only a vague connection shared by pre-Broadway Charleston and the later Lindy Hop, but their most prominent similarity may be traced to the rhythmic propulsion. While the emphasis in most swing dances was placed on the second and fourth beat of every bar, creating a sensation of moving across the bar line and thus generating continuous forward momentum. Meanwhile, the Charleston rhythm emphasizes the upbeat to the third beat in addition to the downbeat, which creates a similar tendency for momentum contained within the bar (see figure 25). The asymmetric syncopations of the Charleston rhythm thus dictated the dancer’s footwork, which was combined with a contralateral movement of the limbs. The Charleston rhythm also generated a more prominent downward pulse, very similar in execution to the pulse evident in the Lindy Hop of the late 1930s.377 Structurally, the Charleston’s movement

377 *Jazz Dance*, directed by Roger Tilton (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1954), VHS. *Roxie Hart*, directed by William A. Wellman (20th Century Fox Studios, 1942), VHS. In stark contrast to the African-American Charleston dancers such as Leon James and Al Minns, white practitioners of Charleston seemed to have reduced pulse and contralateral movement in their limbs.
and posture were antithetical to European-based aesthetics of dance forms such as the waltz, which achieve non-emphatic pulsatile movement through horizontal rather than vertical propulsion. The unsyncopated footwork, unilateral body movement, and an extremely upright posture found in dances of European origin point to aesthetics opposed to the relaxed disconnectedness of most jazz dances of African diaspora. Dance scholar Sally Sommer also differentiates the Charleston from its Euro-American counterparts by suggestion that the Charleston typically includes a number of “playful” features typically absent from European counterparts. Such improvisatory ornamentations were typically omitted from European dances for reasons of decorum, or resulted from a lack of corresponding musical cues. According to Sommer, an emphasis on improvisation and whimsy in Charleston thus served to liberate American jazz dance from its European influences “once and for all.”

![Figure 26 - The rhythmic figure commonly associated with the Charleston.](image)

The Charleston owes its intrinsic popularity to theatre. While it was considered to be a busker’s street dance in the Southern states, particularly among African Americans, the legitimacy of the Charleston was soon affirmed by its appearances in various shows and revues. By 1925, the dance was the latest rage in New York City:

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Proprietors of employment agencies are being importuned to supply cooks, waitresses, laundresses and maids ‘who can Charleston.’ Women who employ Negro servants adept in the combination wing and step are implored by friends to obtain for them servants similarly skilled. The domestic helper who works by one day and ‘sleeps out’ and she who is always at hand and ‘sleeps in’ need offer no excuses for tasks uncompleted if they can show their employers how to do a passable Charleston. The visiting laundress will hear no complaint about her slowness if she can ‘shake a leg.’ Burned food, late luncheon or dinner, dust in the corners and even forays on the icebox and the disappearance of the remains of Sunday’s ham intended for Monday consumption are forgiven if the offender can only impart to her mistress that elusive winging movement of the legs without which there is no authentic Charleston. The mistress humbles herself in her own domain and seeks with eagerness as a pupil the approval of her social inferior. Broom and vacuum cleaner gather dust instead of routing it while the rug is turned back, the music machine is started, and maid and matron, holding their skirts above their knees, go through the evolutions of a modern version of a form of primeval jungle ritual.

The Charleston’s popularity may be directly traced to its appearances in various African-American stage musicals running from 1922 to 1924, particularly those at the Lafayette Theatre. Among the shows that featured the Charleston, six make a prominent appearance: *Liza* (1922), *How Come* (1923), *Ziegfeld Follies* (1923), *Runnin’ Wild* (1923), *Shuffle Along* (1924), and *Chocolate Dandies* (1924). These musicals drew on a rich tradition of African-American music and dance, and were universally praised by critics, audiences, and participants for making a justifiable cultural appeal to their viewers by way of “making jazz rhythms visible.” Years later, ragtime pianist and notable

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382 Ibid.
theatre musician Eubie Blake vividly recalled how a musical at the Lafayette differed from its Euro-American counterparts:

Ziegfeld, George White, the Shuberts… These shows did not have a real [dancing] chorus. So we came in with our own show. Our girls were beautiful, and they danced!!! They danced!!! And they sang!!! Those others didn’t do nothing but ‘A Pretty Girl Is Like A Melody…’ But our girls were… hoofers – these girls DANCED!!!

The improvisatory nature of the Charleston facilitated its transition from a purely performance-oriented dance to a participatory activity to be engaged in by all able-bodied individuals. Marshall Stearns points out that the improvisation in Charleston yielded some unexpected developments and results, as the absence of a “correct” way to perform the dance diverted its execution to a more open format. This allowed dancers to make unique contributions to its repertoire of steps, significantly expanding the dance’s catalogue of movements while keeping the core of the dance intensely individual and personal.384

The Charleston has been frequently criticized in the press as a result of its popularity, mostly on grounds of morality. For example, in 1922, the New Orleans States newspaper published a scathing polemic aimed at denouncing Charleston and its practitioners as “cherry pickers, tack-hammers, cheek-pressers, hip-swingers, and lemon-rollers of the fierce jazz dance invaders,” asking for “anti-vulgar dance ordinance.”385

The July 4, 1925 collapse of the Pickwick club in Boston’s Chinatown district was likewise originally blamed on overeager practitioners of Charleston:

383 Ibid.
384 Stearns and Stearns, Jazz Dance, 111-4.
385 Dr. Edmond Souchon, untitled dispatch, New Orleans States, July 8, 1922.
There were many similar cases cited to substantiate this supposition. The description in the Bible of the taking of Jericho tells how, when the seven priests, preceded by a force of armed men, compassed the city seven times "the wall fell down flat." Even to-day when soldiers march across a bridge they are required to break step, for engineers assert that the strongest bridge built can not [sic.] withstand the strain of rhythmic vibration. A violin chord, if tuned to exactly the right pitch, will shatter a vase. It is regarded by some, therefore, as not only a possibility but a fact that the 'Charleston' was responsible for the Boston tragedy.  

**Breaking Away into Partnered Dance: the Early 1920s.**

The transition of Charleston into Lindy Hop may likely be attributed to the growing popularity of the Charleston throughout the height of the 1920s. Aided by the rising popularity of society ensembles and big bands of the early 1920s, the dancer duo of Irene and Vernon Castle endeavored to elevate jazz to the cultural levels previously enjoyed by Euro-American ballroom dances. Joel Dinerstein further suggests that Lindy Hop’s evolution paralleled the Charleston rather than emerged directly from it, indicating that it bears a closer resemblance to the Texas Tommy, a 1913 dance made popular after the release of *Darktown Follies* at the Lafayette Theatre. In her recollections, dancer Ethel Williams shares a similar view on the Lindy Hop’s origins, but re-emphasizes the communal aspects which lead to the dance’s development: “There

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386 “The Dance that Demolished a Building,” *Kingsport Times*, July 5, 1925. The accident was subsequently shown to be a result of faulty support pylons used in the building’s original construction.  
387 Tirro, *Jazz*, 108-9. Also, see Chapter IV of this dissertation.  
was a basic step – a kick and hop three times on each foot. […] You add whatever you want in there.”

Meanwhile, Margaret Batiuchok points out that the Lindy Hop likely has the majority of its roots in West African rhythms primarily expressed through a corruption of the Charleston footwork, while African American and Yoruba-derived elements such as a tipped ninety-degree posture and bent knees, are predominantly responsible for the aesthetic interpretation found in the modern understanding of the dance. Furthermore, the distinctly Euro-American practice of dance partnership significantly contributed to the development of a partnered element in post-Charleston jazz dances such as the fox trot, couples’ Charleston, Breakaway, and Lindy Hop.

The adaptation of the Euro-American partnered dance aesthetic to American jazz dance rhythms initially proved difficult. The traditional Fox Trot footwork was wholly dependent on an evenly timed sequence of alternating long and short steps executed in a six-count pulse, placing the dance in ¾ time. This directly conflicted with the quadruple meter of most popular music of the period, which placed the emphases on the second and fourth counts of a four-beat measure. The Charleston, however, neatly fit the eight-count patterns of jazz, emphasizing the feeling of perpetual motion while tethering the dance to the music from which it drew its creative inspiration. The transition from solo to partnered dance can therefore be most closely associated with the fusion of the Euro-American aesthetic with an African-American one. The transition from solo to partnered Charleston was therefore characterized by the impact Euro-American partnered

389 Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 127. Ibid., 323.
392 Monaghan, “Why Study the Lindy Hop?,” 125.
dance made on its development, splitting the performance practice into uptown and downtown variations. ³⁹³

The lasting appeal of the Charleston among white dancers was primarily derived from the cultural norms and mores of the period. To many downtown whites, the Charleston reflected the supposedly loose, relaxed, and somewhat lawless lifestyle they assumed was habitually practiced in Harlem. Young white women in particular enjoyed mocking their “dry” elders with the Charleston during the years of Prohibition, thus expressively and outwardly rebelling against the established social norms. ³⁹⁴ To the African-American dancers, however, the Charleston represented the emancipation from the yoke of historic oppression of Jim Crow and its associated injustices. ³⁹⁵ The transition from Charleston to its subsequent evolutionary stages, therefore, was equally influenced by the respective social meanings of the Charleston to whites and African Americans, as well as the associated techniques the different ethnic groups brought to its performance practice.

After Charleston: The Breakaway and Lindy Hop

In 1927, the convention of partnered Charleston, in the chest-to-chest, closed position, may have been broken by Savoy Ballroom dancer George “Shorty” Snowden. With his partner Mattie Purnell, Snowden claimed to have invented the Breakaway, a step that separated the partners from close connection by allowing them to remain

³⁹³ White, interview 2013. The downtown variant is also commonly referred to as 1920s Charleston, while the uptown variant is occasionally called 1930s Charleston.
tethered to each other at arm’s length for a brief period of time. He explained his contribution in the following manner:

The Hop [a step done before the Lindy Hop] had been around a long time and some people began to call it the Lindbergh Hop after 1927, though it didn’t last. Then, during the marathon at Manhattan Casino, I got tired of the same old steps and cut loose with a Breakaway. Anything you could dream up was okay for the Breakaway, you tried all kinds of things.\footnote{Stearns and Stearns, \textit{Jazz Dance}, 323-4.}

While it is impossible to confirm whether or not Snowden was the first to break away from his partner during a dance, he was the first one to capitalize on it by claiming it as his creation.\footnote{Hubbard and Monaghan, "Social Dancing at the Savoy,” 132-3.} The Breakaway was a simple, elegant, and highly convenient means of adding variety to the traditional close-connection partnership of Fox Trot and partnered Charleston. The antecedents of Breakaway reinforced precise rhythmic footwork while leaving the upper body more or less as an anchoring point for the connection between dancers. The mirrored footwork and the seesawing momentum of the Charleston also permitted only small directional movements. Thus, separating from one’s partner was more logical than revolutionary, as this practice was consistent with the underlying qualities of solo Charleston. By disengaging from the usual full upper-body connection, dancers were able to create new footwork patterns independently of each other’s actions, while contributing to the free expression of the music by adding upper-body styling at will.
Snowden’s incorporation of the Breakaway into partnered dancing soon became a commonly accepted practice. This can be seen in the 1929 film *After Seben*, in which Snowden and Pauline Morse perform the Breakaway manoeuvre. The first two couples in the film remain almost entirely connected in close position through their upper bodies, and, although the leaders exhibit a small degree of variation in their footwork, the followers default to the commonly practiced Charleston footwork with minimal alterations. Therefore, Morse and Snowden’s appearance is made all the more startling by their absence of hesitation at the entry into Breakaway patterns. Snowden adds a heel rock on the first two counts, while Morse is able to mirror her partner’s footwork and add a series of kick-ups throughout the first part of the segment. The emphasis immediately shifts towards flashier individual improvisation rather than tightly coordinated mirroring of the partners’ footwork and body placement. While Morse and Snowden end their partnered routine with an impeccable flourish and a cakewalk off camera, the ending is far less significant in the greater scope of their performance than the opening. Snowden’s communication of leading signals to Morse is not perfect, and an observant watcher will find that Morse is unable to clearly interpret her partner’s intention during Snowden’s first stop. That matters little, however, as she not only recovers, but is able to carry through the breach in connection by embellishing her footwork to allow Snowden to catch up with her within the next two counts. This brief interaction demonstrates impressive control of improvisatory faculties by both Morse and Snowden, and

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398 *After Seben*, directed by S. Jay Kaufman (Paramount Pictures, 1929), VHS.
399 Ibid.
foreshadows a practice of turning missteps into graceful recoveries associated with Lindy Hop.

Snowden’s participation in disseminating the Breakaway extends to the Savoy Ballroom, where he allegedly developed the Lindy Hop in or around 1928. A dance named the Lindbergh Hop had already been circulating at the Savoy, but was distinct and separate from Snowden’s creation. According to various apocryphal stories, Snowden proudly announced the title of his newly developed dance step after a reporter asked him what the new step he was performing was named. 400 A similar story told by Charles Buchanan is also circulated among dance historians, as both Snowden and Buchanan are claimed to have referenced Charles Lindbergh’s flight in their discourse. The origins of the Lindy Hop’s nomenclature remain enigmatic, and little conclusive evidence demonstrates an existing connection between Snowden’s moniker of the new dance and Lindbergh’s flight. 401 Without conclusive proof of the stories’ veracity, the only thing one may glean from them is the approximate date of the Lindy Hop’s appearance in public rotation. 402 Snowden’s repurposing of the Charleston footwork in conjunction with the Breakaway emerged out of the need to repurpose the 4/4 patterns to adjust it to the evolving rhythmic practices of contemporary music. Lewis Erenberg stresses that Snowden was not alone in his efforts to redirect the Breakaway towards the emergence of Lindy Hop; it is, however, plausible that Snowden’s popularity and renown as “the best

402 Monaghan, “Why Study the Lindy Hop?,” 125.
dancer” at the Savoy ballroom rendered him in a better position to disseminate the newly found practices.\footnote{Erenberg, \textit{Swinging the Dream}, 48.}

The Savoy could be seen as the ideal venue for the emergence of Lindy Hop for several reasons. First, the evolution of jazz dance from partnered Charleston to Breakaway prompted an evolution towards improvisation. In the interim, as African-American dancers borrowed elements of ballroom dance, the linearity of the Charleston and the choppy nature of the Breakaway gave way to a smoother, though equally pulse-oriented, style of dance.\footnote{Monaghan, “Why Study the Lindy Hop?,” 126.} Second, the changing musical tastes, indicated by the shift from the downbeat-centric music of Fletcher Henderson and Fess Williams to the lighter, more propulsive Kansas City rhythms of Bennie Moten and Count Basie, created a series of parallel developments. These developments directed the Harlem dancers away from sharply pulsatile back-and-forth movement, and towards one with predominantly horizontal and circular qualities.\footnote{For more information on Savoy ballroom’s musical style, please see “Music at the Savoy” in this dissertation.} Third, an increased reliance on improvisation, founded upon the music at the Savoy Ballroom and combined with the scalable complexity of the Lindy Hop, guided the Savoy Lindy Hoppers to develop a dance that accommodated a wide spectrum of styles and skill levels. Marshall Stearns indicated that the need for air steps affected the evolution of Lindy Hop, but that no concrete evidence
existed to suggest that dancers were ranked exclusively on their ability to execute aerial maneuvers.  

Lindy Hop at the Savoy

The performance practice of Lindy Hop evolved continuously over a course of twenty-five years and grew alongside the musical and aesthetic tastes of the Savoy Ballroom’s clients. Individual style and technique played a significant role in the performance of the Lindy Hop, and prominent Savoy dancers developed unique styles. The stylistic evolution of the Lindy Hop’s interpretation by Savoy dancers, the Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers in particular, became one of the most important aspects of jazz dance. According to Frankie Manning, a skillful dancer was able to mold his style, technique, and partnership to the sound, feel, tempo, and energy of the music, and to convey a high degree of improvisational mastery.  

As a result, the general evolution of Lindy Hop at the Savoy Ballroom can be traced along a continuous path, and may be separated into five distinct interconnected eras.

1929-1931: Breakaway

From 1929 to 1931, the Savoy Ballroom’s dancers began the foray into Lindy Hop, which may best be characterized by the development, introduction, and refinement of the Breakaway. The Breakaway, predominantly pioneered by such Savoy dancers as

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“Shorty” George Snowden, Albert Leagins, Beatrice Gay, “Twist Mouth” George Ganaway, and Pauline Morse, served as a foundation for the eventual rise and evolution of Savoy’s signature dance.\textsuperscript{408} The Breakaway’s characteristic vertical pulse stemmed from the dance’s association with “hot” jazz, whose sharp duple pulse can be heard in the music of Fletcher Henderson, Fess Williams, and early Chick Webb.\textsuperscript{409} The triple steps that characterized 1930s and contemporary Lindy Hop had not yet entered emerged at the Savoy during this period, but the earliest developments in the transition from Breakaway to Lindy Hop may be seen in Snowden’s dancing. While the alternating single steps featured in his footwork limit the rotational movement that eventually becomes central to the propulsion of Lindy Hop, there is a clear direction towards circular movement between the partners.\textsuperscript{410} Therefore, the absence of a downward pulse in the dance kept the partners from establishing a stable connection with the floor, thus precluding them from achieving a more rounded movement more commonly seen in the early Lindy Hop of the 1930s.

1931-1936: Early Lindy Hop

The post-Breakaway period of 1931 to 1936 is typically characterized by the emergence of a new group of Lindy Hoppers, among them Al Minns, Leon James, and “Long Legged” George Greenidge. “Shorty” George Snowden, now a seasoned veteran of jazz dance and a Savoy regular, is likewise credited with the creation of the swing-out,

\textsuperscript{408} Ibid., 245-6.
\textsuperscript{409} Spring, “Dance, Venue, and Lindy Hop” 186.
\textsuperscript{410} After Seben, 1929.
a defining move of the Lindy Hop. According to Howard Spring, Snowden’s appropriation of swing-out mechanics arose in conjunction with the Savoy’s musical tastes veering away from the angular “hot” jazz, and towards the more relaxed pulse of Kansas City swing. Marshall Stearns similarly suggests that the swing-out likely evolved from an earlier dance step, the Texas Tommy, known as a popular fad dance during the mid-1920s. In all likelihood, the swing-out effectively emerged from a combination of evolving musical styles and existing steps, driven by the need to imitate the constant momentum of the music in the accompanying dance. The relatively upright postures redolent of the Breakaway and partnered Charleston is still widely perceptible in social and performance dancing, but is used in a more relaxed fashion among social dancers.411

1936-1941: Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers

The period from 1936 to 1941 is typically characterized by the transition of Lindy Hop from the Savoy Ballroom to the stage and cinema. The formation of Herbert White’s Savoy-based dance troupe, the Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, propelled a number of important Savoy dancers from relative obscurity to nationwide awareness. Such awareness was reached through staged performances at various non-ballroom venues in Harlem, the Savoy dancers’ performances at the Harvest Moon Ball, and the eventual transition of the

Lindy Hop to film. During this period, Frankie Manning, Norma Miller, Billy and Willamae Ricker, Mildred Pollard, Thomas Lee, and Wilda Crawford share recollections of schedules full of performances, tours, and engagements in various films. Their exploits were accompanied by an earlier generation of dancers, among them Al Minns and Leon James. By 1941, Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers were joined by the first white dancers, among them Jimmy Valentine, Ruth Rheingold, and Harry Rosenberg. The Savoy Ballroom’s music had by this time become firmly embedded in the ethos of swing, with such bandleaders as Andy Kirk, Cootie Williams, and Earl Hines taking up week-long residencies at the Savoy Ballroom. As the general public’s interest in the Lindy Hop grew, it became apparent that the dance was quickly shifting from a social pastime to a performance-oriented style. Norma Miller remarked that faster tempos were becoming commonplace at the Savoy by 1940, and the booming popularity of films like Hellzapoppin’ brought them even higher, occasionally past the mark of 260 beats per minute. The Savoy Ballroom’s social dancers, however, seemed to favor more conservative tempos featured across a variety of genres. As the Lindy Hop’s tempos increased, the aesthetics of the dance underwent a number of significant changes. The first of these was the transition from a more upright posture associated with the Breakaway and partnered Charleston to an athletic crouch with a 90-degree angle formed between the dancer’s legs and abdomen. In addition to providing a certain degree of flash

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413 Ibid.
414 Ibid., 69.
415 Miller and Jensen, *Swingin’ at the Savoy*, 108.
to performances, a crouched posture assisted dancers in retaining a lower center of gravity in an effort to remain in control and compensate for the rapid motions of up-tempo Lindy. The second notable change is represented by an emphasis on greater extension of limbs, which emerged as a byproduct of localized relaxation of the outer body, particularly the arms and the legs. While photographs and films from this period support this claim, they also indicate that this performance style of Lindy Hop uncommon, as dancers still engaged in social aspects of the dance with more upright body positions. The emergence of the air step also characterized this period, as dancers devised increasingly creative ways of taking their partners and themselves off the ground.

The early 1940s lead to a decline in the Savoy’s social and performance dance. With most of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers either drafted into the military or retired, the Savoy Ballroom lost its status of prominence, its Lindy Hop performances overtaken by Hollywood films featuring white dancers like Dean Collins, Jewel McGowan, and Hal and Betty Takier. With the popularity of an established aesthetic dissipating, a new approach to Lindy Hop began to emerge. Promoted by Alfred “Pepsi” Bethel, a new performance practice of Lindy Hop emphasized the use of hips, which subtly but significantly altered the nature of the dance’s pulse. While earlier versions of the Lindy Hop were driven by full-body downward propulsion, its subsequent pulse shifted from

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417 The Film Era of the Savoy ballroom also contributed to the eventual emergence of the so-called “authentic” Lindy Hop aesthetic during the 1980s. While the existence of a uniform aesthetic performance practice in lindy hop seems to countermand the highly individualistic, improvisation-oriented roots of the dance, the films on which it was captured made significant contributions to the rise of a common performance practice of the lindy hop. This aesthetic emerged partly due to the efforts of Stephen Mitchell and Erin Stephens, and partly resulted from the reconstructions of historic choreographies by the Swedish dance troupe, the Rhythm Hot Shots.
the full body to the waist. The direction of the weight from the hips downward no longer propelled the body’s momentum into the floor, creating a less pronounced pulse. The newly introduced pulse partly contributed to the enhanced horizontal momentum of the dancers, and created a smoother, more gliding means of moving across the floor.\textsuperscript{418} The results were documented as early as 1942 in \textit{The Outline of Jitterbug History}, a film featuring several members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers.\textsuperscript{419} The short film demonstrates African American dancers performing with a noticeably upright posture and a reduced emphasis on downward pulse. The notable presence of upright postures in the film suggests that a more upright way of dancing had been around prior to its release in 1942, and possibly entered widespread circulation by the late 1930s.\textsuperscript{420}

\textbf{1941-1950: The Decline}

Although the Lindy Hop was in a state of steady decline throughout the mid-1940s, the Savoy Ballroom continued hosting dancers. It retained a sizable portion of its client base by promoting Latin dances such as the Rhumba and the Cha-Cha, while relegating swing-based dance forms like Lindy Hop to a secondary status.\textsuperscript{421} Despite the waning popularity of the Lindy Hop, however, many of the alterations seen in the dance during the early 1940s endured. The transition to a fully upright posture that characterized this period can be seen in the social dancing of Marcella Washington, Sugar

\textsuperscript{418} White, “Savoy Style vs. Hollywood Style: A Fight to the Death (Hopefully?)” By the mid-1950s, most African American dancers have been dancing in a mostly upright posture, a practice that persisted into the 1980s.
\textsuperscript{419} \textit{The Outline of Jitterbug History}, directed by Josef Berne (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1942), VHS.
\textsuperscript{420} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{421} Hubbard and Monaghan, “Social Dancing at the Savoy,” 139.
and George Sullivan, George Lloyd, Barbara Billups, and Sonny Allen. Similar tendencies are exhibited throughout the 1950s and beyond by Savoy veterans Bethel, James, and Minns.

The transition to the Lindy Hop’s final years at the Savoy was signaled by the introduction of sliding footwork and less pronounced pulse, likely prompted by an increased presence of smoother, non-swing music. The dancers’ pulse similarly became less forceful and pronounced, becoming a standard practice by 1950. In addition, the late dancers of the Savoy typically resorted to interpreting the rhythm of the music not as a separate entity, but as adjunct to the melodic qualities of the music. As dancers evolved to rely less on the numerical nature of the music, and more on the contours and shapes of the melody, the Lindy Hop became a smoother, more free-flowing dance form with the emphasis shifting away from practiced routines and downward pulse to more open, free improvisation and less literal interpretations of rhythm.422 The resulting unevenness and angularity of 1950s’ swing assisted in the formation of a new approach to the interaction between music and dance. This depended predominantly on the dancers’ ability to tether their overall bodily pulse to the bass, and emphasize the syncopated rhythms of the drums with their footwork, body movement, and arms. The result was a much smoother, vertical style of Lindy Hop, which seemed highly articulated in spite of its comparative stillness.423 The creative processes involved in the constructs of this period’s Lindy Hop

422 Allen, interview.
423 Ibid.
run parallel to the musical developments of small combos which performed at the Savoy during this period.

1950-1958 and Contemporary Times: Beyond the Savoy

After the closing of the Savoy, Lindy Hop temporarily found a new home in various shows and revues on Broadway, and as a show dance at a variety of resorts in New York’s Catskills. Records indicate, however, that Lindy Hop was rarely practiced as a social pastime beyond the walls of the Savoy even prior to its closing. In 1985, the Rhythm Hot Shots, a group of Swedish dancers under the tutelage of Lennart Westerlund, returned retired Savoy champion Frankie Manning to the limelight after rediscovering a number of his films. With films like *Hellzapoppin’, A Day At The Races*, and *Radio City Revels* as the few extant guides to Lindy Hop performance practices, Westerlund and the Rhythm Hot Shots based their technique on late film-era Lindy Hop with some assistance and coaching from Manning. Following Westerlund’s advances into a neoclassic revival of Lindy Hop as a social pastime, considerable effort was undertaken by the groups such as the New York Swing Dance Society, the Jivin’ Lindy Hoppers, and the Silver Shadows to reinvent and reintroduce the Lindy Hop into the social dance scene.

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424 Ibid.
426 Lennart Westerlund, public interview, Arlington, August 26, 2013.
Social Significance of Lindy Hop

In spite of some commonly accepted misconceptions, the Lindy Hop was not the sole dance to emerge from the Savoy Ballroom, nor was it the most prominent or popular form of dance entertainment during the Savoy’s thirty-two years. Other dances were frequently enjoyed at the ballroom, among them the fast-moving Peabody, the Fox Trot, and the waltz, as well as some more obscure dances known as “the blues,” and “the Ballroom,” a languid, smooth version of the Lindy Hop. In addition, Savoy Ballroom patrons also frequently enjoyed fad and line dances such as the Shim-Sham Shimmy, the Tranky Doo, the Big Apple, and the Turkey Trot. Most of these were attributed to eccentrics like “The Sheik,” who insisted on dancing tango with his partner even during the more up-tempo swing melodies. In addition to social dancing, the Savoy Ballroom management made several abortive attempts at introducing cabaret-style performances to the Savoy, the most notable among them the short-lived “Savoy Vanities,” produced by Leonard Harper. Gale and Buchanan also frequently attempted to combine social dancing with themed nights, staging elaborate Russian-, Chinese-, and Arabic-themed masquerades complete with exotic dancing, costume contests, and prizes. These masquerades attracted considerable attention, particularly from tourists visiting Harlem. Ultimately, these productions backfired as the floor shows and masquerade balls at the Savoy Ballroom drew business away from gang-owned area nightclubs like the Club

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Deluxe. Once the threats of violent reprisal were made, the vaudevilles, revues, and masquerades quietly slipped into obscurity, to be replaced by making the space available for rotary functions and club socials. The early 1940s similarly saw a brief, energetic, and somewhat unsuccessful rise of Bebop dance. As an antecedent of the practice of eccentric dancing of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Bebop aesthetically borrowed from the Lindy Hop, but was a unique construct, whose primary conceit was deemphasizing the stability of rhythm as a driving force behind the dance. The emergence of Bebop dance in the wake of the Lindy Hop was predictably unsuccessful, appealing predominantly to a white crowd during the brief period between the decline of large-scale swing bands and the release of Bill Haley’s definitive 1956 rock ‘n’ roll single, “Rock Around the Clock.” During the Depression era, and during the late 1940s, as New York saw a surge in Latino immigration to East Harlem and South Bronx, Latin dances like the mambo, the rhumba, and the cha-cha became popular enough that there was widespread concern that they would dethrone the Lindy Hop from its perch of popularity. The Latin dances practiced at the Savoy were similarly imbued with the Lindy Hop’s aesthetic, and were predicated on the established technicalities of connection, partnership, and style frequently found in Lindy Hop. This made the transition from swing to other forms of dance a much easier proposition for skilled Savoy dancers, allowing them to almost seamlessly shift between dance types without compromising their techniques.
Another frequently overlooked detail about Lindy Hop is its apparent lack of a direct Southern antecedent. While the Charleston and the Cake-Walk emerged as plantation dances with roots in Western African movement, the Lindy Hop borrowed in equal parts from African and Euro-American heritage, paying homage to both, but directly identifying with neither. Its spiritual roots borrow from elements of Charleston and Cakewalk, but these elements were usually concealed underneath layers of theatricality and embellishment. The connection, therefore, is more aesthetic than technical, as improvisation was already a critical component of individually-danced Charleston, and the majority of skilled Lindy Hoppers began their careers experimenting with a variety of improvised Charleston moves on various Harlem street corners. The combined aesthetic of various plantation dances such as the Cakewalk, and the entrenched tradition of vaudeville performances’ exaggerated moves and expressions likely also found its way into the Lindy Hop, as reflected in the general looseness of the dancers’ bodies. Therefore, Monaghan and Hubbard’s assessment of the Lindy Hop as “a comprehensive and rhythmically charged critique of the European partner-dancing tradition” is slightly off-mark, as it observes the integration of Western and African dance idioms, but ignores the considerably more significant reliance on the practice of signifyin’, or reflecting upon and responding to changing cultural and social paradigms while incorporating aspects of past culture.  

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437 In his 2013 interview, White mentions Al Minns’ start as a solo Charleston dancer. White, interview, 2013.  
amalgamation of partnered dance idioms and tropes would be to do it a disservice; instead, a more proper assessment of the Lindy Hop would be to view it as a blend of various cultural attributes, experiences, and occasionally stereotypes, adjusted for contemporary tastes. From another perspective, the Lindy Hop represents a form of what Dinerstein and Clifford Geertz refer to as “deep play,” wherein lighthearted elements are taken to serious and transcendent heights, often subconsciously accompanied by serious undercurrent motifs, such as displays of strength or socio-political motivations.\(^{439}\) The Lindy Hop’s continued refusal to disappear into fad dance oblivion was testament to its relevance; it existed in step with culture.

From a standpoint of relevance, the Lindy Hop never occupied a stable cultural niche at the Savoy, perpetually competing for attention against at least half a dozen other dance fads. Its introduction to the ballroom in 1928 via various promotional pathways is considered to be one of the greatest underhanded plays made by Gale and Buchanan. The Lindy Hop allegedly rode in on the coattails of Charles Lindbergh’s iconic transatlantic flight a full fifteen months after said event took place; although a dance called the Lindbergh Hop was already in existence, the Savoy management chose to allow (and eventually openly promote) the tenuous association and, once Lindbergh’s involvement with the Nazi Party were discovered, cynically refused to acknowledge the earlier precedent.\(^{440}\) Seen as a direct threat to the Savoy Ballroom’s decorum and propriety, professional and amateur Lindy Hoppers alike were generally approached with a

\(^{439}\) Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 264.

\(^{440}\) Hubbard and Monaghan, “Social Dancing at the Savoy,” 132.
Machiavellian attitude: they were an annoyance that was called upon to put forth a thrilling exhibition when important figures were present. The wild aesthetic of the dance, along with a performance style that contradicted the boundaries of ballroom-proscribed decency, resulted in occasional friction between Charles Buchanan and the crowds of Lindy Hoppers who frequented the venue.\footnote{Anderson, \textit{This Was Harlem}, 313. Charles Buchanan, undated interview by Jervis Anderson, New York. Although Terry Monaghan claims that there was outright hostility towards the Lindy hoppers and their dance at the Savoy Ballroom, various accounts and interviews suggest that the attitude was closer to one of salutary neglect. Buchanan needed the Lindy hoppers to maintain a high profile at the Ballroom and beyond, just as Moe Gale needed the Lindy hoppers to bring in profits from various Broadway shows and professional engagements. Apart from these occasions, the Lindy hoppers usually received no preferential treatment, and were seen as adjuncts to the Ballroom’s financial success. Additionally, Terry Monaghan recalled that George Snowden and his fellow dancers frequently stood outside of the Savoy Ballroom on Squares’ Nights until Charles Buchanan “begged” them to come in and demonstrate their dance skills.} It was, however, the significance of the Lindy Hop’s social structure that made it stand out among the other dances practiced at the Savoy Ballroom. Modern preconceptions of the Lindy Hop dictate that it is a joyful, exuberant dance fuelled by a friendly, welcoming, and hard-working community striving towards a common goal. Such rosy readings, though comforting and charming, are also often misguided. While the Savoy Ballroom may not have exhibited the cutthroat, borderline criminal qualities described by Marshall Stearns with regards to such gangs such as the Jolly Fellows, the Ballroom’s social hierarchy was structured and complex enough to warrant further examination. In an interview with Camille Cosby, Norma Miller recalled that social dancing at the Savoy served as a sort of social lubricant among singles interested in finding dates:

\begin{quote}
How else would you meet someone? You’re a person who works a day job, doing housework, and you go out one day a week. That’s carried on at the Savoy Ballroom when you had what they called “Kitchen Mechanic’s Night,” which
\end{quote}
was Thursday night. Women would come from work and where would they come to? The Savoy Ballroom.  

The unspoken social structure governing the Savoy Ballroom did not extend only to etiquette and dating, however. The level of hands-off, casual involvement on the part of some Savoy attendees was always balanced by the obsessive, borderline all-consuming drive to dance at the Savoy Ballroom every night for others. As there were no dance classes from which one could learn dancing, and on occasion the only way to work one’s way into the upper social strata of the Savoy Ballroom was by means of being a noteworthy dancer, learning to dance became an exercise in obsessive trial and error for some regulars, often to the exclusion of other activities. Frankie Manning recalled spending nearly every night at the Savoy Ballroom as a youth, not noticing the visiting dignitaries and celebrities who, to him, just occupied valuable floor space. “To me,” Manning recalled his encounters with Moe Gale, “he was just some white guy who couldn’t dance.”  

Charles Buchanan voiced a similar sentiment in a series of interviews with Jervis Anderson:

To a certain group of young people the Savoy was their life. That’s all they had. We used to see the same kids come there every day. Some of them had holes in their shoes [from dancing.]  

The prospect of social rejection loomed large for a sizable portion of Savoy’s dancers. The modern assumption that dancers of any skill level should be able to dance with anyone is a construct emerging out of the need to re-contextualize Lindy Hop in the

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442 Miller, interview, 2006.
443 Manning and Millman, Frankie Manning, 68.
444 Anderson, This Was Harlem, 313.
framework of contemporary venues. Meanwhile, social interaction at the Savoy Ballroom was often predicated on one’s quality as a dancer. In order to be truly “accepted” at the Savoy Ballroom, a newcomer had to demonstrate his aptitude as a Lindy Hopper or be summarily rejected. The general attitude espoused by the Savoy’s elite Lindy Hoppers seemed to be “get good, or get out,” and multiple accounts of being spurned by female dancers were recounted by George Snowden, Albert Leagins, Frankie Manning, and Sonny Allen:

I decided to go to the Savoy Ballroom one night. I went to the Savoy, and first time there I saw this girl, and I asked her if she wanted to dance. And she said, “You don’t know how to dance.” And I said to myself: “One of these days you’re gonna beg me to dance with you.” So I saw them doing the swing, so I started learning.445

**Techniques of Lindy Hop: More Than Swing-Outs**

Since the Lindy Hop began at the Savoy Ballroom, and was subsequently appropriated by cultural institutions like Broadway and Hollywood cinema, the majority of the discussion of technical and performance traits of Lindy Hop it is essential to discuss in the context of its presence at the Savoy Ballroom. The contributions of Broadway and Hollywood performances, while significant to the dance’s overall development, fall outside of the scope of the examination of its technical evolution, and are discussed elsewhere. A similar caveat exists regarding the examination of the Savoy Ballroom’s Lindy Hop techniques. Over the course of the Lindy Hop’s development, no

consensus has been reached with regards to its performance and execution, and there is no perceivable, uniform “style” which includes every performance practice of Lindy Hop. The multitude of technical judgments on the so-called “Savoy Style” of Lindy Hop emerged during the late 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first Century, notably during a particularly sharp schism between dancers favoring styles espoused by African-American or white dancers of the 1930s and 1940s. At the time, these styles were perceived to be polar opposites by many modern dancers. They were, however, distinguished only by two guidelines. The first of these was their respective adherence to single sources of information, such as Frankie Manning and Dean Collins. In both cases, the source material was considered unassailable in its authenticity, a belief that contributed in large part to the stylistic arguments. Second, the emergent ideology that the two styles are somehow opposing and irreconcilable became a popular point of debate among modern dancers. The truth, however, is more complicated than was initially thought, as no specific Savoy or Hollywood has ever existed. Additionally, the emergent techniques of the early twenty-first century Lindy Hop are a result of the corruption of the original context of Lindy Hop’s performance, as the dance has considerably evolved since its origins in the late 1920s. Thus, the in-depth examination of the techniques of Manning and Collins has given birth to a variety of contradictory, conjecture-based opinions on the execution of such fundamental elements as footwork, repertoire, connection, and partnership. The discussion contained in this section is not intended to

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446 The lineage of a Collins-centric style of dancing is even further suspect as Collins, born Sol Ruddosky, frequented the Savoy Ballroom, where he learned to dance during his residence in the New Jersey area.  
dissect these contemporary techniques and teachings. It is, however, an examination of the historical and cultural precedents from which these techniques are formed.

Techniques of Lindy Hop: Building Blocks

The fundamental elements derived from the Lindy Hop at the Savoy Ballroom fall into several categories: footwork, repertoire and posture, connection and partnership, improvisation, and the acrobatic air steps. The process by which Lindy Hop techniques evolve is such that every complicated maneuver, concept, or repertoire item depends on the dancer’s ability to understand and execute the fundamentals with an instinctive aptitude. Therefore, the most fundamental element of the Lindy Hop is the “triple-step” footwork, which controls the majority of concepts and techniques hierarchically placed above it in terms of complexity and breadth. The “triple-step” footwork, also commonly referred to as the eight-count basic, differs from the earlier Breakaway and Charleston footwork styles. The rhythmically distinct eight-count basic footwork relies on a series of three syncopated steps, performed on the counts 3, 4, as well as 7, and 8. The lateral alternation of this pattern gives the eight-count basic footwork quality similar to a timed step, allowing the dancers to execute it on either the left or the right foot. The triple-step is also a remarkable departure from the Charleston and Breakaway footwork in that it mimics the syncopated rhythm of the swing eighths of swing, thus allowing the dancers to retain a greater degree of connection to the floor. This is significant, as staying grounded and maintaining a closer contact with the floor allows the Lindy Hoppers to
better perceive the pulse of the music, and, in some cases, directly interact with it.\textsuperscript{448} Furthermore, the triple step allowed a greater degree of connection to various swing-based rhythms via its continuous momentum. The combination of these traits provided dancers with a greater sensitivity to one’s rhythmic surroundings, and enhanced their ability to imitate the musical pulse while maintaining close contact with the floor.

Additionally, a number of swing-era dancers observed that, in spite of common misconceptions about the pronounced pulse supposedly practiced by African-American Savoy Ballroom dancers, the majority of amateur Lindy Hoppers of the 1930s and 1940s demonstrated smooth, non-pulsatile movement on the dance floor. Ernie Smith, a white Lindy Hopper from Rhode Island, remarked that African-American dancers at the Savoy “instead of hopping up and down, made everything look smooth.”\textsuperscript{449} This assessment indicates that, unlike the more pulsating footwork of the Breakaway and the Charleston, the triple-step footwork of Lindy Hop allowed for greater spatial and lateral movement. This, in turn, allowed the dancers to create more space between themselves and their partners, leading to greater flexibility in connection and improvisation.

The footwork of the Lindy Hop also directly affected the posture of a typical dancer. This posture is traditionally considered to be a slight forward bend, but with the back held straight, the sternum thrust slightly forward, and the shoulders rolled slightly back. Practitioners of the modern Lindy Hop aesthetic claim that such posture places the

\textsuperscript{448} At the Savoy Ballroom, where the floor was sprung and responsive to vibration, the triple steps were likely a highly efficient and finely tuned method of keeping time with the rhythm of the band, and represented a means for the dancers to receive sensory feedback from their partner as well as the couples dancing around them.

\textsuperscript{449} Dinerstein, \textit{Swinging the Machine}, 265.
gravitational center of the dancer lower to the ground, while allowing for an equal
distribution of mass throughout the body. During group instruction, Frankie Manning
frequently referred to the default Lindy Hop posture as “bowing to the queen,” adding:

You know when you go the racetrack and you see the
horses all ready to start a race? They’re all ready to go,
right? We’d all be standing there, looking down the line,
like the horses do at the starting point. When do we start?450

The use of such posture in Lindy Hop is not accidental. Apart from being more
ergonomically suited for establishing directional momentum and allowing dancers to
move in the direction of the bend, the slightly bent posture is consistent with the dance
practices imported to the Savoy Ballroom by way of street-corner Charleston dancers
and, prior to that, imported dances rooted in West African cultural tradition.451 Joel
Dinerstein states that Frankie Manning’s traditional crouching posture, which can best be
seen in the 1941 film Hellzapoppin’, is part of a lengthy Yoruba dance tradition, and is
antithetical to Western dance performance practices. This points to the Lindy Hop’s
heritage as a vessel for cultural preservation among the early adopters of the dance.452

Thus, the crouching posture’s presence affects the execution of Lindy Hop’s most
fundamental moves, the swing-out and the circle. As a foundational partnered move, the
swing-out greatly depends on the partners’ ability to share each other’s weight and
balance one another’s momentum by way of centrifugal force. As partners move through
the swing-out, their relationship alternates between a close connection, wherein partners

450 Frankie Manning, interview by Chiles VandenBosche, Baltimore, February 25, 2006. Stevens and
Stevens, Swing Dancing, 9.
451 Ajaji, Yoruba Dance, 35.
452 Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine, 265.
hold each other in relatively close embrace; and an open one, wherein partners separate to the distance of an arm’s length. The Lindy circle operates on similar foundations, but rather than alternating between open and closed position, it remains a closed, rotational move which relies on continuous rotational momentum between the dancers. The ongoing dependence on pronounced pulse and crouched posture throughout the swing-out and the circle can be interpreted as purely a method by which partners share weight, but Robert White points out that this practice is equal parts idiosyncrasy and aesthetic holdover.\textsuperscript{453} White points out that Savoy Ballroom dancers Al Minns and Leon James have frequently fallen back to using more upright stances even at faster tempos.\textsuperscript{454} This practice can be seen in still images below, and becomes particularly apparent when contrasted against the crouched postures typically seen in film.\textsuperscript{455} The conclusion is that the bent posture was a byproduct of performance practices designed for film, and contingent on personal preference of each individual dancer’s perception of the music. White also notes that late Savoy Ballroom dancers like George Lloyd and Sonny Allen danced almost exclusively upright in social situations, which suggests that Manning’s crouch may have been an aspect of cinematic Lindy Hop performance practice.\textsuperscript{456}

The degree of communication between dance partners in Lindy Hop occurs non-verbally in social situations. A substantial amount of verbal communication exists in

\textsuperscript{453} Robert E. White III, interview by author, Arlington, August 26, 2013.  
\textsuperscript{456} White, “Savoy Style vs. Hollywood Style.”
preparing for a choreographed routine, however. The non-verbal component of Lindy Hop is typically communicated between partners through physical contact, commonly referred to as “connection.”

Mathematician and swing dancer Sommer E. Gentry describes the particulars of connection found in Lindy Hop as follows:

In open position, the contact between the leader and follower is maintained only at a single point: the leader’s left hand holding the follower’s right hand. Messages and energy are transmitted through the connected hands. For instance, if the leader holds the follower’s hand and takes a step backward, then the leader’s hand has moved back and thus the follower’s hand will move forward. An expert follower will not let her hand move very much relative to her body position, and so because her hand has moved forward she will take a step forward. An inexperienced follower might let her arm extend while she stays in place, in which case she has lost the opportunity to use the leader’s energy to translate her center of mass. The inexperienced follower will now have to use her own energy to move forward and return to the typical open position. In either case, some message is transmitted through the connection hand. This is in essence how leading happens. Expert followers and leaders perform very well when deprived of visual cues, so the physical connection of hands is a sufficient means of communication between the partners.

The particular variation of partnership found in Lindy Hop most likely developed from concepts often seen as mutually exclusive. The antecedent dances of the Lindy Hop generally emphasize individual movement, spontaneity, creativity, improvisation, and style over strict adherence to rules, etiquette, performance practice, and partnership. In dances of European and Euro-American origin such as most traditional English pub

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457 Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 324.
dances, the waltz, the Fox Trot, and the Quadrille, however, mastery and virtuosity comes from the dancer’s ability to memorize and flawlessly execute patterns and communicating with one’s partner. Thus, the difference occurs when tropes found in traditional European dance intersect with the aesthetics of Lindy Hop. In Euro-American dances, connection exists as a means of merging the partners into a unified entity, with much emphasis placed on unity of movement, quality of lines made by the partners, and various other aesthetic elements dictated by the connection. In Lindy Hop, however, individual creativity carries as much significance as partnership, and partners are frequently considered qualitatively “good” not if they mirror each other thoroughly, but rather manage to stay connected and in time while performing a series of improvisatory movements. Effectively, the partners in a Lindy Hop dance engage in a non-verbal dialogue, complimenting each other’s movements, improvisational ideas, and phrases. The inclusion of an open position in this situation plays a critical role in this partnership, as it is during this phase of the dance that the majority of improvised footwork and styling is traditionally incorporated into the dance.

The act of improvisation is similarly a central element of Lindy Hop, one that sets it apart from the more pattern- and routine-based Euro-American dance forms. While the foundations of the Lindy Hop are built upon basic vocabulary, the relative complexity of the partners’ interaction depends entirely on the spontaneous creativity, embellishment, and expressiveness on the part of the dancers. Improvisation in Lindy Hop functions as an element of response, wherein dancers may be able to react to musical nuance created

459 Stevens and Stevens, Swing Dancing, 111.
by the musicians, or musicians, in turn, may respond to the dancers’ actions.\textsuperscript{460}

Improvisation foundationally assisted Lindy Hoppers in the proliferation of the dance by being the driving force behind the development of new steps and repertoires. Much of the creativity and spontaneity perceived in Lindy Hop by van Vechten, Rosten, and Ferguson during their visits to the Savoy was rooted in rhythm, but the expressive improvisation was derived from the dancers’ responses to the musicians. Such interactions were frequently the result of embellishments, elaborations, and the occasional mistake.

Marshall Stearns cites a recollection by George Snowden:

\begin{quote}
I’ve put together new steps in the Breakaway by slipping and almost falling. I was always looking for anyone dancing in the street or just walking or doing anything that suggests a step. If I could see it, I could do it.\textsuperscript{461}
\end{quote}

Snowden’s anecdote carries a considerable amount of truth, in that the majority of improvisation in Lindy Hop seems to have emerged from imitation of natural movement rather than contrivances. Such improvisations were typically developed as a personal accent, keeping stride with that which was comfortable for dancers. Lindy Hop thus proliferated through improvised movement and, as Frankie Manning recalled, the adaptation of others’ repertoire was available freely to all dancers – provided they were physically capable of imitating it:

\begin{quote}
There was a friendly competitiveness when we got out on the floor, but I never heard anybody say, “You shouldn’t do that step because it’s mine.” Nobody ever thought of copyrighting their moves, making people pay them for a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{460} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{461} Stearns and Stearns, \textit{Jazz Dance}, 324.
step, or saying “I’m the only person who’s going to do this.”

Lastly, the aerials, or airsteps, are frequently mentioned within the context of the Savoy Ballroom’s performance dancing. In his autobiography, Manning relates the story of the first airstep he executed with his partner, Frieda Washington. Although Manning is commonly considered to have been the first dancer to introduce airsteps to Lindy Hop, the actual introduction of airsteps most likely predates Manning, and can most likely be traced to first generation Savoy dancers George Snowden and Beatrice Gay. However, according to Manning’s own recounting of the story, he most likely appropriated the technique used by Snowden and Gay, and followed through towards the completion of their choreographic ideas. For all intents and purposes, the airsteps, which likely grew out of the Savoy dancers’ occasionally flamboyant performance style, can be seen as the pinnacle of evolution for Lindy Hop’s techniques. Widely considered to be some of the most complex elements in the Lindy Hop repertoire, airsteps required a tremendous amount of communication between partners, as well as an in-depth understanding of connection, pulse, rhythm, and a fundamentally intimate familiarity with the music. Quite possibly one of the crowning achievements of swing dance, these represented the process of adapting previously existing mechanics to evolving norms by process of improvisation.

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462 Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 100-1.  
463 Ibid., 99-100. The complete story as told by Manning is highly entertaining, and reflects on the relationship between the dancers, Chick Webb, and the Savoy clients. For the sake of brevity, the story will not be repeated here.
CHAPTER VI: SAVOY BALLROOM IN POPULAR CULTURE

In August of 1943, *Life* magazine published an eight-page spread featuring a series of photographs, captioned by a bold headline: “A True National Folk Dance Has Been Born in the USA!” This brash lead-in referred to the Lindy Hop, which has existed in Harlem’s cultural consciousness since the late 1920s, but was only just beginning to gain popularity in the public eye. The spread featured two separate sets of photographs by Gjon Mili. The first featured Stanley Catron and Kaye Popp, a gawky, awkward-looking couple of white teenage dancers engaged in an exaggerated, affected version of the dance, complete with stooped postures, over-stretched limbs, and facial expressions of feigned, vaudevillian exuberance. The other half of the spread, meanwhile, featured Al Minns and Willamae Ricker, longtime Savoy regulars, veterans of a number of Harvest Moon Ball dances, and film actors, engaged in a much more visibly controlled and unaffected dance. Despite the exuberance clearly shown by Minns and Ricker, their postures, lines, and suggested movements are controlled and natural, albeit also displaying a degree of calculated theatricality (see figures 26 and 27).464

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Figure 27 - Stanely Catron and Kaye Popp demonstrating the swing-out, 1943. Photographer: Gjon Mili. Photo courtesy of Life Magazine.

Figure 28 - Willamae Ricker and Leon James demonstrating the swing-out, 1943. Photographer: Gjon Mili. Photo courtesy of Life magazine.
The article and photographs effectively sum up the cultural impact of Lindy Hop on swing-era America. The superficial message was that swing was a unifying art form, enjoyed and participated in by whites and African-Americans, a great racial equalizer. The reality was more complex, however. As white America was just beginning to discover the Lindy Hop in the 1940s, Harlemites had been practitioners of this dance in local dances halls, gatherings, and contests since the late 1920s. Lindy Hop was something engaged in for fun and entertainment by whites starting with the early to mid-1930s, but its deeper meanings and cultural significations were ignored. Both the Savoy Ballroom and the Lindy Hop, however, have made considerable progress in embedding themselves into popular culture by 1943, having been prominently featured in films such as *Hellzapoppin’, A Day at the Races, Hot Chocolates,* and *Keep Punching*; commemorated in such popular songs as “Stompin’ at the Savoy;” and achieving considerable public exposure on and off Broadway in musical revues like *Hot Mikado.* The annual Harvest Moon Ball showcased Savoy and Lindy Hop to New York and the rest of the world as early as 1935, with Savoy Lindy Hoppers routinely placing among the highest-ranking amateur dancers in the city. In short, the Lindy Hop was not, like the press claimed at the time, born in the USA in 1943; it had been around for considerably longer. The real question is: through what cultural avenues did it arrive at this destination?

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^465 Sonny Watson, “Harvest Moon Ball.”
Savoy in Popular Culture: At Home Among Strangers

In order to chart the journeys of Savoy ballroom through the cultural currents of early twentieth-century New York City, some preconceptions of jazz dance must be addressed. The insider-outsider relationships between Savoy regulars and visitors evoked by the *Life* magazine article play a significant role in this regard. The writer of the article quips: “Out of American impatience with the restrictions of conventional forms, the buoyant choreography of the Lindy Hop was born,” hinting at the perceived carefree excitement of Lindy Hop to a casual bystander. White writers have frequently been known to wax poetic about the velocity, joyfulness, and exuberance of Lindy Hop without stopping to assess that what its meaning really was. To them, it was, as Katrina Hazzard-Gordon put it, “dancing to rebalance the universe.” In reality, African-American dancers like Norma Miller offered a very different perspective:

This is how your countrymen met each other in a foreign country. Boy meets girl. My father and mother met on the dance floor. […] In those days, you’d go to the ballroom.

Frankie Manning echoed this sentiment by reminding his audiences that “These were the depression years […] and dancing was an outlet for people because there wasn’t much else to do.” It seems dancing at the Savoy Ballroom was never about engaging in a quasi-religious ritual to Harlemites. They congregated, socialized, and danced at the

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467 “The Lindy Hop,” 103. An equally misguided and amateurish, though considerably more racially insensitive, evaluation was given by Carl van Vechten in 1928, showing that white opinion of African-American jazz dance did not evolve much over the course of fifteen years.
469 Norma Miller, interview, 1980.
Savoy because it was an outlet, a social lubricant, and a means of financial rebellion. All of these activities were simple means providing social interaction.\textsuperscript{471} The Savoy’s eventual rise to prominence during the 1930s became Harlem’s source of cultural pride and a vessel for the retention of the African-American cultural identity.\textsuperscript{472} It is possible that the perception of the Savoy as the litmus test for music gave its clients a justified sense that their musical tastes were superior to those of individuals who attended Savoy rarely, or not at all.\textsuperscript{473} Be that as it may, no mention of spiritual or religious experiences exists in the verbal or written accounts of African-American Savoy patrons. Nearly all of them attended for the same reasons—a mixture of inexpensive entertainment and social interaction.

By the end of the 1930s, the Savoy Ballroom consistently made the list of must-see tourist destinations in Harlem, and New York’s tourism companies routinely stopped at the Savoy ballroom during their sightseeing tours of the neighborhood. Meanwhile, the Savoy’s popularity, built up by the splendor of its interior decorations, and hailed by its patrons and management as “one of the country’s outstanding ballrooms,” continued attracting more equally outstanding musicians.\textsuperscript{474} With the Savoy’s preeminent dance team in the Hollywood spotlight as of 1937, the Ballroom remained in the public eye as more than yet another tourist trap; it was slowly entrenching itself into the Zeitgeist of

\textsuperscript{471} Hale, “Hear Me Talking To You,” 245.
\textsuperscript{472} Refer to chapter on Savoy’s role as cultural institution in this dissertation.
\textsuperscript{473} Spring, “Dance, Venue, and Lindy Hop”, 186
\textsuperscript{474} Moe Gale to George P. Smith, March 2, 1938, Savoy Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair papers, 1547:7 New York Public Library, New York.
popular culture as an artistic institution.\textsuperscript{475} The words “Savoy Ballroom” and “Lindy Hop” thus became a major part of everyday culture as its dancers and musicians continued to demonstrate ongoing excellence.\textsuperscript{476}

As the Savoy continued to be the center of public attention, it experienced a critical shift in perspective between the African-American insiders and visiting white outsiders. Curiously, it was mostly the white, semi-regular patrons who were mostly responsible for the majority of the Savoy Ballroom’s word-of-mouth promotion and dissemination of Lindy Hop to the masses. For actress Lana Turner, the Savoy became the “home of the happy feet,” and a place she “came to be left alone.”\textsuperscript{477} Similarly, Jean Harlow made sure to conclude each of her USO shows abroad by Lindy Hopping with a soldier of a different race.\textsuperscript{478} Finally, in spite of the racial integration of the Savoy, white upper-class patrons almost always preferred to keep to themselves, preserving the spirit if not the letter of the Separate But Equal doctrine. Norma Miller recalls:

The boxes were reserved for [stars such as] Alice Faye, Lana Turner, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Dolores Del Rio [and] Orson Welles.\textsuperscript{479}

In the meantime, Savoy insiders regarded the majority of the white patrons with a noticeable air of hostile indifference. Frankie Manning frequently pointed out that color...
didn’t have much bearing on one’s status at Savoy; rather, the regulars were only interested in a celebrity’s ability to dance:

The [black Lindy Hoppers] never looked at your face, only at your feet. […] We didn’t pay much attention to famous people if they couldn’t dance. I don’t even remember noticing people’s skin color.480

Nearly in the same breath, however, Manning acknowledges the presence of at least half a dozen white celebrities at the Savoy: “Carol Landis, Tyrone Power, Claudette Colbert, Mickey Rooney, Orson Welles, and Lana Turner came to be entertained, not bothered.”481 Malcolm “X” Little voiced a similar sentiment in his biography recalling his days at the Savoy ballroom, indicating that at least half of the booths at the Savoy were filled with white tourists who came “just to watch the Negroes dance,” proceeding to remark that “A few of the white men around Harlem, younger ones whom we called ‘hippies’, acted more Negro than Negroes. This particular one talked more 'hip' than we did.”482 Manning’s and Little’s subtle undertone of indignation over the incursion of whites on traditionally African-American cultural territory eventually gave way to outright hostility (“They [white people] couldn’t take this away from us. They had everything else.”) and distrust (“As long as they behave, we ignore them [the whites.]”)

480 Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 71.
That is our policy.”) The supposedly integrated Savoy, it seems, was no stranger to racial stratification on both sides, even if it was subtle, undercurrent, and unspoken.

This dynamic of mutual distrust is illustrated most vividly in Mura Dehn’s unpublished notes on a performance at New York’s Cooper Union. According to her autobiographical essay “First Concert at Cooper Union with Savoy Dancers,” Dehn planned to bring some of the Savoy Ballroom’s Lindy Hoppers out of retirement to put on a performance of jazz dance with local Harlem musicians. Dehn’s efforts to organize the event were met with frustration, however, as the African-American dancers, among them Al Minns, Pepsi Bethel, and Leon James, exhibit an attitude towards the affair that can be only charitably described as lackadaisical: “The meeting was spent in jiving steps and settling beefs, among themselves. Jokes and laughter bursting at times, or hostile sullenness settling on some.” The event stumbles on numerous occasions, as dancers take hours to get dressed, come unprepared, or don’t show up at all in spite of promises of payment and glory as “concert artists.”

Dehn’s story is as classic an example of outsider-skewed perception of Lindy Hop as one is ever likely to find. As a white, classically trained dancer and scholar, Dehn was incapable of understanding why former champions of jazz dance would be unwilling to perform for a paying audience. At the same time, it appears that Dehn’s efforts appeared equally laughable and vainglorious to the Lindy Hoppers, who only put stock in

485 Ibid.
performance dancing if it was spontaneous, unguided, unrehearsed, and not staged for the purposes of passive observers’ entertainment. This sentiment was echoed by Norma Miller’s bitter attitude towards white Lindy Hoppers, who she felt were outright robbing the African-American dancers of their heritage.\(^{486}\)

In summary, it may be easy to minimize the Savoy Ballroom’s place in popular culture as yet another institution whose culture and traditions were subverted by the white-controlled American media. It is nevertheless important to remember that the management deliberately chose the name “Savoy” to reflect the grandeur, grace, nobility, and elegance of a bygone age by deliberately referencing a wealthy, prominent hotel in predominantly white London. Little conclusive evidence exists to reinforce the suggestion that whites were more eager to patronize a venue named after a wealthy hotel or an Italian royal house. Similarly, no conclusive evidence demonstrates that the Savoy’s management specifically intended to isolate themselves from such external interests, naming their venue after a more ethnically relevant place. The Savoy Ballroom was a venue culturally relevant to the African-American patrons, while the white visitors could boast of having attended the greatest ballroom in the United States and experienced the excitement of Harlem’s finest tourist attraction. In the end, the insider-outsider relationship that appears to have indicated Savoy’s place in the context of American popular culture of the 1930s and 1940s assisted in promoting the Savoy as a venue. This was achieved by indirectly catering to the tastes of Anglo-Americans by promoting excellence intended for African-American consumption.

\(^{486}\) Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 267.
Popular Culture, Savoy, and Lindy Hop

In 1998, the American clothing retailer GAP released a television advertisement intended to sell its new clothing line of khaki pants. The ad featured two couples of swing dancers in what looked like an impromptu jam circle, dancing and performing acrobatic tricks reminiscent of authentic Lindy Hop. The ad’s intent was to popularize GAP fashion and to propel swing music and dancing back into the mainstream by capitalizing on the swing revival of the late 1990s. Despite these generally positive intentions, the ad featured “Jump, Jive, and Wail,” a 1958 song by Louis Prima that is widely considered to be post-swing jump blues, which featured an eight-to-the-bar pulse commonly associated with boogie woogie rather than swing. Furthermore, although the spot featured African Americans in the background, both pairs of dancers in the commercial were white.

In spite of this incongruity, the GAP khaki ad performed the important function of transmitting neo-swing to consumers by popularizing it as a cultural idiom, demonstrating the media’s ability to reinforce popularity by mass dissemination. In many ways, the GAP advertisement parallels Savoy’s methods of distributing its culture during the Swing Era: while the real dancing came from the professional Savoy Lindy Hoppers, its popularity owed much to white media personalities and socialites. Specifically, the Savoy’s media saturation can be traced to four individual sources: film, live performance, music, and press.


**Hellzapoppin’: Lindy Hop in Film.**

Most popular movies featuring dancers from Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers troupe were filmed between 1937 and 1941 for purposes of entertainment, rather than documentary, newsreel, or educational footage. The earliest film to feature Lindy Hop in a form resembling its state during the swing era was the 1937 film *Ask Uncle Sol* (also known as *See Uncle Sol*). This film features a short, one-minute sequence of George “Shorty” Snowden and Beatrice “Big Bea” Gay engaging in a semi-choreographed Lindy Hop routine. This is considered to be Lindy Hop’s first official foray into film, and is one of the first examples of Lindy Hop documented in cinematography. Subsequent films include such productions as The Marx Brothers’ *A Day at the Races* (1937), featuring dancers Dorothy Miller, Johnny Innis, Leon James, Norma Miller, Pettis Dodson “Snookie” Beasley, Willamae Ricker, Ella Gibson, and George Greenidge; *Manhattan Merry-Go Round* (1937) with various members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers; *Radio City Revels* (1938) with Frankie Manning, Lucille Middleton, Eddie Davis, Mildred Pollard, George Greenidge, Eleanor Watson, John “Tiny” Bunch, andDot Johnson; *Keep Punching* (1939) with Billy Williams, Ann Johnson, Joyce James, Joe Daniels, Eleanor “Stumpy” Watson, Sonny Jenkins, Lucille Middleton, Frankie Manning, Thomas “Tops”

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489 *Ask Uncle Sol*, directed by Raymond Kane, Educational Films Corporation of America, 1937, VHS.

490 Ibid.

491 *A Day at The Races*, directed by Sam Wood (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1937), VHS.
Lee, Wilda Crawford, Norma Miller, and George Greenidge, and two films that shared nearly identical casts: *Hellzapoppin* (1941) and *Hot Chocolate* (1941), featuring William Downes and Frances “Mickey” Jones, Norma Miller and Billy Ricker, Al Minns and Willamae Ricker, and Frankie Manning and Ann Johnson. An additional series of two short segments featuring Thomas Lee and Wilda Crawford dancing in front of a band also exist, although it is impossible to determine which film they come from, and what year they were released. After this time period, as per White’s indication, films featuring Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers taper off. The primary reasons behind this are revealed to be the African-American dancers’ recruitment into the army, their subsequent retirement from public dance performance following World War II, and the decline of large swing bands’ role in the participation in various dance venues. The eventual vacuum created in the absence of African-American dancers from Lindy Hop drove the growing white dancer corps led by Dean Collins to take over the production of dance in cinema, a process which proved both more popular and lucrative among white movie-goers.

Three important exceptions apply to the list above. The first is a 1929 film, *After Seben*, which features George Snowden with his partner Pauline Morse, performing an early version of Lindy Hop. The relationship between music in dance is prominently emphasized in *After Seben*, as the dancers perform very upright, bouncing movements to

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492 *Keep Punching*, directed by John Clein (M. C. Pictures, Inc.), 1939, VHS.

493 *Hellzapoppin*, directed by H. C. Potter (Universal Pictures, 1941), VHS. *Hot Chocolate*, directed by Josef Berne (unknown distributor, 1941), VHS.

494 Ibid. White suggests the “Tops & Wilda” segments may have been recorded for a 1941 film, but were eventually cut from the final product.

495 Batchelor, *This Thing Called Swing*, 266-7.

496 Ibid.
hot jazz played by members of the Chick Webb orchestra.\textsuperscript{497} The second exception is Gjon Mili’s 1944 cinematic short, \textit{Jammin’ the Blues}, featuring the musical talents of Marie Bryant, Lester Young, Barney Kessel, and Illinois Jacquet.\textsuperscript{498} In addition, Bryant doubles as a Lindy Hopper in the second half of the film, partnering with Archie Savage. While the film accurately represents the nature of the relationship between dance and music during the swing era, it omits two crucial components. First, Savage and Bryant, both accomplished dancers, were not Savoy Lindy Hoppers. Bryant was a jazz dancer at the Cotton Club who eventually joined Katherine Dunham’s company, where she met Savage, who was already a member of Dunham’s troupe. Therefore, their dancing, although reminiscent of Lindy Hop, lacks the momentum, evenness, and pulse consistent with the aesthetic of the dance. Second, the music to which the dancing is performed cannot be described as swing in the strictest sense. Instead, the fast tempo and melodic complexities make it more closely related to bebop or pre-bop. The rhythm section lacks the genre defining, pronounced 4 beats-to-the-bar pulse of swing, and Jacquet’s and Young’s solos exhibit chromatic qualities and structural variety previously unassociated with swing. Therefore, the aesthetic of \textit{Jammin’ the Blues} can be attributed to Mili’s deliberate artistic sensibilities and his intention to highlight the music rather than emphasize the Lindy Hop.

The final exception to the Lindy Hop film canon is Mura Dehn’s documentary, \textit{The Spirit Moves}. Chiefly filmed in a studio but interspersed with occasional footage

\textsuperscript{497} \textit{After Seben}, 1929.
\textsuperscript{498} \textit{Jammin’ the Blues}, directed by Gjon Mili (Warner Bros., 1944), VHS.
taken at the Savoy Ballroom, the film features several former members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers performing various African-American vernacular dances in front of a white backdrop. In addition, the documentary emphasizes social dancing between Lindy Hoppers Leon James and Sugar Sullivan. Between scenes of dancing, Dehn’s narration explains the origins, development, and current states of various jazz dances. In summary, *The Spirit Moves* was filmed not for mass entertainment but for documentary purposes. The recordings of Savoy dancers, however, are both fascinating and informative in their own right.499

A curious commonality among the majority of these films is that, with a few rare exceptions, all of them portray the African American dancers in a manner consistent with Jim Crow caricatures: as farm hands, servants, or ragamuffins who nevertheless display uncharacteristic *joie de vivre* and exuberance (see figure 28). Films which do not portray the Lindy Hoppers this way are guilty of not portraying them as much of anything at all; in these cases, they exist as props on a set, intended to occupy a space and provide a function, in this case, dancing, for the audience’s amusement. In fact, the majority of scenes featuring African-American dancers were segments inserted post-production, intended to be left in for accepting audiences, but cut out of the film for showings in states where African Americans prominently displayed on a movie screen would be deemed distasteful or objectionable on racial grounds.500

499 *The Spirit Moves*, directed by Mura Dehn (Dancetime Publications, 1987,) VHS.
500 Norma Miller, *Swingin’ at the Savoy*, 187.
Live at the Madison Square Garden: Lindy Hop in Public Performance.

Apart from cinema, there are three additional sources for public dissemination of Lindy Hop: the annual Harvest Moon Ball held at the Madison Square Garden; the Savoy pavilion at the 1940 World’s Fair held in Flushing, New York; and the Broadhurst theatre on Broadway, which hosted the musical revue *Hot Mikado* during its two-month engagement in 1937.\textsuperscript{501} The annual Harvest Moon Ball was perhaps one of the most significant events to occur during the late 1930s, and potentially drew more attention to the Savoy ballroom and Lindy Hop than the dance’s cinematic presence. The Flushing World’s Fair, also contributed much to the exposure of the Savoy to the world, showing swing dance through the lens of progress. Finally, the musical revues exposed the multifaceted nature of the Savoy Lindy Hoppers to Broadway audiences, and emphasized the adaptability of Lindy Hop to a variety of media and entertainment genres.

\textsuperscript{501} Stempel, *Showtime!*, 358.
An examination of Harvest Moon Ball proves to be of particular interest, partly because of its significant impact on the perception of Lindy Hop and the emergence of a tradition. Jitterbug and Lindy Hop were introduced to the Harvest Moon Ball for the first time in 1935, and remained a featured component of the competition through 1950. The championships were held in an atmosphere somewhat reminiscent of a boxing match, on top of an elevated platform surrounded by the audience on all sides, adapting the aesthetics of a boxing ring.\textsuperscript{502} Norma Miller states that the Lindy Hop may have been included in the Harvest Moon Ball as part of an effort to raise the tarnished spirits of Harlemites in the wake of the 1935 race riots.\textsuperscript{503} Thus, the introduction of an African-American dance form to what was predominantly intended to be a forum for white amateur dancers performing Euro-centric ballroom dances such as the Fox Trot, Waltz, and Polka not only had its roots in an alleged public relations campaign, but also provided the Lindy Hoppers with a newly acquired form of legitimacy.\textsuperscript{504} The Lindy Hoppers did not much care for this reconceptualization. At the root of African-American vernacular dance there rests the kernel of a group-oriented consciousness, which precludes the dictation of rules and thus rejecting the premise that there is only one “correct,” way to dance.\textsuperscript{505} Moreover, the inclusion of Lindy Hop into the dance line-up of the Harvest Moon Ball ensured that the legitimacy of “Lenox Avenue’s favorite step”

\textsuperscript{502} Jack Turcott, “20,000 Hail Royal Couple of Dance At Harvest Moon Ball,” \textit{New York Daily News}, 7 September, 1944, 3.
\textsuperscript{503} Miller and Jensen, \textit{Swingin’ at the Savoy}, 56-7.
came at the price of replacing its original spirit with a set of proscribed regulations.\textsuperscript{506}

The similarly appointed Savoy Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair in Flushing had a similar effect on Savoy’s Lindy Hop. The pavilion performed a function specifically designed to go beyond simple entertainment, as it provided an educational experience to the attending audiences by providing a cross-section of African-American vernacular dance and music of the period. Despite being constructed far from the central region of the fair, the Savoy pavilion generated considerable revenue until its closure, and remained highly popular among fair attendees.

Less can be said about the behind-the-scenes working conditions at the pavilion. Norma Miller recalls the various hardships of working there: “By the time evening rolled around and we had done six shows and had six more to go.”\textsuperscript{507} While the dancers were the highest-paid employees at the pavilion, the grueling performance schedules, the rules imposed by the fair’s management, and constant dance-related injuries prevented them from rising above the status of what was essentially indentured servitude. When the pavilion was shut down by mid-summer of 1940, few of its dancer employees lamented its closing.\textsuperscript{508} Nevertheless, the Savoy Pavilion demonstrated several important advancements in the field of publicizing Lindy Hop as a national pastime. The Savoy Pavilion and its main competitor, the Hot Mikado Pavilion, were the among first African-American arts exhibits at the World’s Fair. Since the fair’s primary focus was the introduction of media to the masses via the invention of television, it is also significant

\textsuperscript{506} Ibid., 271.
\textsuperscript{507} Miller, Swingin’ at the Savoy, 139.
\textsuperscript{508} Ibid.
that Norma Miller and her partner George Greenidge were among the first African Americans to appear on a television spotlight hosted by George Jessel.⁵⁰⁹

The presence and exposure of the Lindy Hop at the World’s Fair cemented its status as an important artistic institution in pre-World War II United States. Nevertheless, despite the Savoy Pavilion’s considerable success, the fair’s management treated Buchanan and Gale’s promotional enterprise with skepticism and aloof contempt. The Savoy Pavilion’s presence at the fair was handled with a staggering degree of racially charged ignorance and insensitivity:

> With a commercial tie-up there is occasional resentment. It is not desirable to have negro names sell products for white consumption, but as pure entertainment value the story is quite different.⁵¹⁰

**Guilty of Syncopation: Music at the Savoy**

The Savoy was one of the rare musical institutions in the 1930s that actively broadcast its music to the audiences via live radio. Moe Gale used his considerable influence in the radio and recording industries to broadcast the rehearsals of bands booked by Buchanan to local radio stations, from where they were disseminated to the homes of potential patrons. Gale frequently stated that he believed that radio was a realistic means of exposure for Savoy culture, as well as for African-American popular music. His intent was to increase the popularity of the Savoy through mass distribution of

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.
the bands booked at the Savoy. Unfortunately, Gale’s primary concern with regards to the Savoy’s radio broadcasts appears to have been generating revenue for the Ballroom, as well as bankrolling the construction of the World’s Fair Savoy pavilion. The burden of realizing Gale’s concept ultimately rested with the lower management: according to Norma Miller, it was Herbert White and Charles Buchanan who ended up organizing the radio broadcasts, booking the bands, and handling the technicalities of the process.

The Savoy broadcasts were significant to the Ballroom’s placement in Harlem’s culture because, like the Harvest Moon Ball, they brought the venue even more into the public spotlight. The Savoy Ballroom, already popular among swing music connoisseurs, was projected to the status of utter stardom after the Edgar Sampson and Andy Razaf’s song, “Stompin’ at the Savoy,” was performed by the Benny Goodman Orchestra in 1934. The song was also recorded twice by Chick Webb, and became a popular jazz standard in subsequent years. Additionally, the Savoy Ballroom is mentioned by name in the songs of two bands similarly affiliated in name with the Ballroom: Al Cooper’s “Jumpin’ at the Savoy” (1939), and Lucius Venable “Lucky” Millinder’s “Savoy” (1943). Millinder composed his title during his residency at the Savoy, which directly contributed to his recording contract with Decca the very same year.

512 Miller, Swingin’ at the Savoy, 133-48.
513 Other notable performances of “Stompin’ at the Savoy” include Judy Garland (1936), Charlie Christian with the Benny Goodman Sextet (1941), Art Tatum (1941), Clifford Brown & Max Roach (1954), Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong (1956), Jim Hall (1957), and Ahmad Jamal (1958).
All That’s Fit To Print: Savoy in Other Media

Keeping with the spirit of the Swing Era, Savoy Ballroom’s treatment in the press ranged from naïve miscomprehension to brazen racial condescension. The majority of articles in the white press referring to the Savoy Ballroom were editorialized with the same air of supercilious disdain as was previously seen in Vechten’s Parties and Nigger Heaven. Representative news articles from the period reflect a casual disregard for the cultural discrepancies between downtowners and Harlemites, attaching extreme perspectives to the otherwise apolitical activity of social dance. The New York Post referred to the Savoy-frequenting Harlemites as “revolutionary cadres,” and went as far as to accuse the Lindy Hoppers of being the backbone of the Communist revolution in America. The author further notes that:

The incubator, the source of infection, and the fountain head, Harlem’s own Savoy Ballroom, has never ceased manufacturing Lindy Hoppers since the beginning, which was about seven years ago.514

The pencil sketch of George Snowden accompanying the article clearly reflects the less-than-positive tone of the piece, likening “the world’s finest ballroom” to an infectious diseases ward. Snowden is yet again drawn in a style consistent with the Jim Crow vaudeville depictions of African-American minstrels; the accompanying caption indirectly emphasizes his short stature and apparent sickliness, stating that Lindy Hop is “not for the weak. Strong men have fainted. Weak ones have died” (see figure 29).515

515 Ibid.
A similar article from *Music Makers* magazine reflects a nearly identical view, perhaps rendered in a more extreme light by the author’s blatant racism, stating that “Sure, someone has to plant the cotton, and someone has to pick the corn, […] to shine shoes, and wait on table, and do housework, but that ain’t all. Someone’s gotta dance.” The remainder of the article provides the essential information on the dances done at the Savoy, the music that accompanies them, and the associated costs of admission. Some written accounts of the Savoy and Lindy Hop demonstrate remarkable restraint and fairness in the objectivity of their treatment of the subject matter, but nevertheless tend to ignore the underlying cultural significance of the venue and the dancing therein. These

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517 Morris, “Harlem Swing Club.”
articles also highlight the dancers’ active involvement with political activism and African-American rights, at times emphasizing it too transparently and abundantly.\footnote{518}

Despite its attempts at establishing racial equality and a genuine effort on the author’s part to defend the Ballroom’s dignified atmosphere and emphasis on political activism, the article nevertheless hints towards the torrid nature of swing culture, portraying the dancers in question as “dancing with abandon” to the accompanying music.\footnote{519} These writings are permeated by the authors’ tone of moral superiority, coupled with their profound lack of contextual understanding. Given that the African American Civil Rights movement was still in its infancy, the appearance of such attitudes in print is commonplace. Overall, the printed media’s treatment of the Savoy Ballroom and its cultural effect on contemporary society demonstrated a lack of understanding and an abundance of contempt that could be effectively summed up in Andy Razaf’s angry rebuttal to the Savoy’s critics:

Yes, the Savoy is guilty… Guilty of impartiality / of healthy geniality / guilty of hospitality / Guilty of syncopation / of joy and animation … Guilty of national unity / of practicing real democracy / By allowing the races openly / to dance and mingle in harmony.\footnote{520}

**Savoy in Photography**

Despite the printed media’s tendency towards a racially divisive slant, the photographers who captured the Savoy and its dancers remained more or less objective in

\footnote{518} Ibid.  
\footnote{519} Ibid.  
their portrayals of the venue. The Savoy’s narrative has been captured by Cornell Capa, Gjon Mili, and Aaron Siskind, all of whom were active in New York City during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Their visions of the Savoy and its dancers are fascinating partly because of their ethnicity: all three are white Americans of European origin. Mili and Capa were first-generation Eastern-European Jewish immigrants, while Siskind, also Jewish, had second-generation European roots.

The contributions of Siskind, Mili, and Capa are most notable because of how successfully they penetrated mass print and explored the spirit of their times. While many amateur photographs of the Savoy Ballroom’s exterior abound, Capa’s and Mili’s photographs of the Savoy were unusual in that they captured the Ballroom’s interior. Their photographs of the Savoy Lindy Hoppers achieved nationally recognized status by appearing in the New York Times and Life Magazine at the height of World War II-era segregation frenzy.521 Mili’s photographs in particular accompanied the now-famous 1943 article on Lindy Hop, and demonstrated the racially inclusive qualities of America’s “True National Folk Dance.” Siskind, in turn, captured the Savoy during and after the height of its activity, and some of his most poignant and descriptive photographs of the Savoy take place during the after-hours of unspecified dance events.

Upon first glance, Cornell Capa’s photographs capture the Savoy and its dancers in a way that is much more organic and expressive than those of either of his contemporaries. Capa photographed his subjects at the height of their momentum, primarily during dance events (see figure 30 and 31). Most of his photographs depict

521 “The Lindy Hop,” 95-103.
members of the 400 Club: Gladys Crowder, Eddie “Shorty” Davis, Al Minns, Sandra Gibson, Joyce and Joe Daniels, and several unidentified Lindy Hoppers, with other members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers seen in background (see figure 32). Of the six photographs in the series, four were taken during a prior private session, as they show no background activity in the form of observers or dancers. Capa appears to emphasize the exuberance and spontaneity of the Lindy Hoppers’ movement in the photographs featuring the evening dances at the Savoy, their relevance further magnified by the presence of a racially mixed crowd, intently observing the dancers’ acrobatics. The relative racial and political neutrality in Capa’s photographs is strictly implicit; however, the photographer’s awareness plays prominently into such photographs as the 1939 capture of Russell Williams and Connie on the floor of the Savoy Ballroom. The couple, surrounded by a crowd of white onlookers, are engaged in highly energetic dancing, their glances concentrated solely on each other.

Figure 31 - Lindy Hoppers at the Savoy Ballroom, circa 1939. Photographer: Cornell Capa. Photograph courtesy of International Center of Photography.
Figure 32 - Lindy Hoppers at the Savoy Ballroom, circa 1939. Photographer: Cornell Capa. Photograph courtesy of International Center of Photography.
Gjon Mili’s photographs of Al Minns and Willamae Ricker parallel Capa’s in some respects, but diverge in others. While Capa attempted to capture the distilled essence of African-American vernacular dance in his series of Savoy photographs, Gjon Mili focuses more on the interaction between dancing couples and the backdrop. As colleague of Harold Edgerton, Mili was particularly interested in capturing the movements of his subjects using stroboscopic instruments and a specifically arranged
sequence of lights. While the 1943 *Life* magazine photographs lack the aesthetic of continuous momentum featured in a subsequent 1944 *Life* Magazine Gene Kelly series, they nevertheless present a compelling picture of two contrasting glances at mid-1940s Lindy Hop.523

Mili’s series consists of two subsets of photographs, the first of which features Stanley Catron and Kaye Pop, white Broadway actors and dancers with no prior exposure to the Savoy ballroom, or active experience in Lindy Hop (see figure 33).524 Catron and Pop’s exaggerated poses and expressions of feigned enthusiasm hint at the exciting quality of African-American partnered jazz dance. However, artificiality appears to be the overbearing feature of these photographs, as they are served up almost exclusively to contrast with the authentic stylings of Willamae Ricker and Leon James (see figure 34).525 Unlike Capa, however, Mili specifically ensconced his dancers in a studio space with a white sheet backdrop, allegedly to generate contrast between the foreground dancers and the background, and to emphasize the fluidity of the dance motions. An interesting side-note to Mili’s contribution to *Life*’s article on Lindy Hop is the cover photograph chosen for the August 23rd issue; rather than featuring the qualitatively superior, authentic look of Ricker and James on the front cover, the editorial board of *Life* elected to feature Popp and Catron instead. While this claim is based almost entirely on conjecture, given the prior context demonstrating the treatment of African American

523 “The Lindy Hop,” 95-103.
524 Stevens and Stevens, *Swing Dancing*, 110.
http://www.savoystyle.com/willamae_ricker.html
dancers in mass media, the decision seems consistent with the cultural mores of the mid-1940s.\textsuperscript{526}

Figure 34 - Kaye Popp and Stanley Catron doing “the drag,” 1943. Photographer: Gjon Mili. Photo courtesy of Life Magazine and AllPosters.

\textsuperscript{526} White, interview, 2013.
Figure 35 - Willamae Ricker and Leon James, 1943. Photographer: Gjon Mili. Photo courtesy of Life Magazine and AllPosters.
Aaron Siskind, the third of the prominent photographers responsible for capturing the Savoy in his work, is known for only a handful of black and white stills, taken during the late 1930s. Notable pictures portray the dancer John “Tiny” Bunch with his partner Dorothy “Dot” Moses on the floor of the Savoy in 1937 (fig. 6.10); an unidentified African American dancer in a light-colored dress, in the middle of a slow drag with a Savoy employee dressed in a porter’s uniform (fig. 6.11); and various photographs of the Savoy ballroom’s marquee, prominently featuring the names of various bands and musicians. The second of these is, perhaps, one of Siskind’s most candid images of the series, as it adequately captures the after-hours atmosphere at the Savoy, portraying a casual, quotidian calmness, which stands in direct opposition to the chaos and energy so prominently on display in the series by Capa and Mili. The photograph imparts a humanizing quality to the dancers and the scene, exploring a rare moment of calm in what most white Americans of the period would normally consider a whirlwind of raw physical energy.

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Figure 36 - John “Tiny” Bunch and Dorothy “Dot” Moses at the Savoy Ballroom, circa 1940. Photographer: Aaron Siskind. Photo courtesy of the estate of Aaron Siskind.
Figure 37 - Dancers, Savoy Ballroom, circa 1940. Photographer: Aaron Siskind. Photograph courtesy of the estate of Aaron Siskind.
Culturally, photographers of the period reflected some of the most objective views of African-American culture during the swing era. This is hardly accidental, as the photographs discussed in this section, as well as many others, are presented without authorial comment, and only infrequently accompanied with a byline or a caption. The contributions of Capa, Siskind, and Mili are only a small fraction of the significant photographic content available from this time period, but they successfully demonstrate an alternative take on African-American culture during this period – one of socio-political awareness coupled objective fascination, rather than editorialized condescension that seems to permeate the printed media of the late 1930s.\textsuperscript{528}

**Coming Full Circle: A Rose-Tinted Spectacle**

Examined from the vantage point of popular culture designed for entertainment, The Gap’s 1998 khaki commercial did breathe new life into the otherwise dormant cultural phenomenon of partnered jazz dance. It is, however, easy to overlook the Swing Craze of the late 1990s as a purely artistic endeavor when it was anything but. With the consideration of commercial enterprise as a factor, one may see the relevance of swing in modern insider-outsider cultural relations: a simple khaki commercial did launch a nation-wide fascination with an art form a full half-century old, paving the way for a number of *nouveau* swing musical acts, such as the Cherry Poppin’ Daddies and Royal Crown Revue, prominent features in such movies as *The Mask*, and even Nabisco’s

“Chips Ahoy!” cookies. The brilliance and ingenuity of the swing revival rested in its safety and marketability. As an art form past its expiration date, swing was primed to be readily marketed to a clientele of predominantly white, middle-class customers, whose lack knowledge and understanding of the roots and cultural significations of the music or the dance it accompanied was not only helpful, but essential.

The invented tradition that accompanied neo-swing of the late 1990s seemed to be free of the racially charged undertones of its Harlem counterpart. Gone were the segregated clubs of the 1940s, the Jim Crow laws governing admission to particular venues, and the stigma that emerged alongside being seen in disreputable company at a mixed-race dance gathering. In spite of the marketing campaigns, however, the invented traditions that emerged alongside the Swing Craze were just as culturally oblivious as their Swing-Era predecessors. An evolution of dance fashion emphasized zoot suits over the fashionable American-cut two- and three-piece outfits of the 1940s, and two-toned saddle shoes over the comfortable leather-soled monochrome oxfords and sneakers. In fact, the fashions of 1930s’ Harlem leaned contrary to the Neo-Swing aesthetic:

I always wore [my suits] with a shirt and tie and nice shoes, not two-tones, just black or brown ones. 529

The rise of 1990s swing has changed the nature of dancing, as well. The previously purely improvisatory dance became interlaced with musings on theory, technique, and a self-perpetuating debate on technique and regional styles, which

529 Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 68.
countermanded the original dance’s spirit and aesthetic.\textsuperscript{530} The majority of these changes were institutionalized through a renovated aesthetic, and inadvertently targeted a specific demographic of participants who could take part in Lindy Hop with as little cultural awareness as was suitable for their tastes. In short, the post-1990 iteration of partnered Lindy Hop existed primarily as a construct designed specifically to imitate the artistic legacy of the Savoy’s dancers and music without emphasizing the associated cultural standards of the period. The current generation of swing initially focused on borrowing from the past in order to understand and reconstruct it in the present. It was only recently that the cultural understanding of the relationships between the original practitioners of swing and the modern generation came to light, and brought a more profound comprehension of the philosophies of jazz dance with it.

\textsuperscript{530} White, “An Index of Basic Dance Clips,” accessed February 7, 2013. White postulates that the debate over the validity of Savoy and Hollywood styles is based almost entirely on personal predilection, rather than which style is more “right.”
CHAPTER VII: SAVOY PAVILION AT WORLD’S FAIR, 1938-1939

“Dawn of a New Day!”
New York World’s Fair slogan, 1939.

Finest Hour, 1938-1939.

The period from January 1938 to July of 1939 was arguably one of the most important time spans in the history of the Savoy Ballroom. The Ballroom was at its peak popularity, consistently operating at capacity while the most distinguished swing bands performed at its dances. Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, Herbert White’s widely recognized and critically acclaimed troupe of professional dancers, were performing abroad and domestically, entertaining at the movies, at the theater, and at the Savoy proper. With World War II still only a distant, menacing shadow on the horizon, the final years of the 1930s treated Moe Gale, Charles Buchanan, and, by association, everyone associated with the Savoy Ballroom, exceptionally well. The January 16, 1939 battle between the Chick Webb and Count Basie orchestras went down as one of the most memorable, iconic, and important events in Savoy’s history. In addition to drawing a record attendance, the event allowed the Savoy’s clients to witness one of the most heated band battles in its history:

[…] Hundreds were turned away at the box office with the crowds tying up traffic for several blocks in that vicinity. Applause for both bands was tremendous and it was difficult to determine which band was more popular.531

By this time, the annual Harvest Moon Ball (started in 1935), was becoming considerably more prominent in the promotional stability of the Savoy Ballroom. With Savoy dancers winning every Lindy Hop contest since the dance’s introduction to the event, attendees at the 1938 Harvest Moon Ball saw three Savoy couples take the finalists’ spots: Albert Minns and Mildred Pollard in first place; Joe Daniels and Joyce James in the second place; and George Ricker and Norma Miller placing third. This was a significant victory for Harlem and Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers (of which all three finalist couples were members), and the finalists were given an opportunity to perform in one-week contracts at Loew’s State Theatre. While the Lindy Hop and the dancers were typically only noted in the news coverage of the Harvest Moon Ball as an afterthought, typically displayed in stereotypically vaudevillian, rather undignified poses, the promotion was a tremendous success among the theater-going audiences; the Savoy dancers consistently “brought down the house” during variety shows, and the resulting publicity greatly benefited the visibility of White’s dancers.

The rising prominence of the Savoy Ballroom domestically was soon to be matched by its rise to international recognition at the 1939 New York World’s Fair in Flushing, Queens. Widely recognized as one of the most prominent events of this nature, the Flushing World’s Fair of 1939 was expected to revolutionize mass media and introduce a number of significant innovations. Plans had been laid in place for the 1939 New York World’s Fair as early as 1937, and by 1939 the World’s Fair commission

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532 Batchelor, *This Thing Called Swing*, 138.
534 Previously, only the top couple would be given this opportunity.
secured the endorsement of its signatory nations, including the Soviet Union and Germany.\textsuperscript{536} In the meantime, the Recording Corporation of America was slated to introduce television at the Fair, with public telecasting in the New York City area scheduled to begin the same day as television’s introduction.\textsuperscript{537} The 1939 New York World’s Fair also marked the first major, worldwide media promotion of Lindy Hop via mass broadcast and exposure; Moe Gale had been in talks with the World’s Fair commissioners since 1937 about possible plans for the construction of a Savoy Ballroom pavilion at the exposition. According to Gale, the inclusion of the Savoy Ballroom’s dancers into the World’s Fair’s line-up would considerably improve the Savoy Ballroom’s standing in the United States and abroad, as well as raise awareness of African-American dance and music.\textsuperscript{538}

During the early 1930s the Savoy Ballroom emerged as a kind of regional cultural curiosity, embodied as a purveyor of a specific brand of entertainment based on a number of social, political, and aesthetic norms. By 1939, the Savoy developed into a cultural powerhouse. In addition to its status as a tourist attraction and noted celebrity haunt, the Savoy Ballroom played host to a variety of musical acts, and multiple teams of professional Lindy Hoppers. With Herbert White’s delegation of Lindy Hoppers, chaperoned by Frankie Manning, away on a tour of Australia and New Zealand, the Savoy was domestically represented in a broad swath of theatrical and variety shows,

\textsuperscript{537} Ibid. Miller and Jensen, \textit{Swingin’ at the Savoy}, 142.
staged predominantly at various theatres around Harlem and on Broadway. Members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers performed at such well-known venues as the Cotton Club, the Roxy Theater, Radio City, as well as took part in such productions as the Ethel Waters Show, the Broadway production of Hot Mikado, and Billy Rose’s variety showcase, Casa Manana. Of the three critical developments occurring between 1938 and 1939, the Savoy Ballroom’s induction into the World’s Fair was, perhaps, the most significant. It represented a subtle, intriguing and unconventional method of promoting niche popular culture, and demonstrated that Gale was not only still directly involved in the affairs of the ballroom he started, but also – at least to some extent – took a keen personal interest in its product and public appearance. The Harvest Moon Ball, likewise, promoted the Savoy Ballroom and its dancers on a local and regional level. Unlike the Savoy’s involvement with the World’s Fair, however, the few minor setbacks experienced by the Savoy management and dancers during their involvement with the contest soon escalated into considerable difficulties. As the Harvest Moon Ball was almost entirely covered by the New York Daily News, which, as per instructions given by Fiorello LaGuardia, was the sole owner to exclusive coverage rights, the discussion of Harlem’s involvement was biased and parenthetical at best, and crude and offensive at worst. Joel Dinerstein notes that “not a single dignified photograph” of Savoy Ballroom dancers appeared in the Daily News over the course of a decade. The participation of Harlem’s dancers in the Ball from 1935 to 1945 was punctuated by photographs of the performers portrayed in poses

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539 Manning and Millman, Frankie Manning, 154-5.
540 Miller and Jensen, Swingin’ at the Savoy, 136.
541 Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine, 275.
and expressions redolent of early minstrelsy. In the meantime, the Harvest Moon Ball V.
I. P.s, among them the 1938 “King and Queen of the Ball” Mickey Rooney and Judy
Garland, usually received front-page treatments with formal, dignified photographs.\textsuperscript{542}
beyond the superficial implications of such terms as “colored” or “whoop-de-doers”
consistently used to describe the Lindy Hoppers at the Harvest Moon Ball, the true depths
of cultural separation between the covering press’ bias and the dancers’ involvement in
the event begin to show through.\textsuperscript{543} The predominantly white \textit{Daily News} editorial staff
was incapable or unwilling to fully grasp the cultural divide between the Lindy Hoppers’
performances and their audience; meanwhile, the similarly white \textit{Daily News} reader base
seemed unconcerned with the subtleties of the dance, focusing chiefly on the associated
theatricalities, antics, and acrobatics. Therefore, while the Harvest Moon Ball was not
explicitly rigged against the African-American dancers, many of them faced significant
cultural obstacles in competing. The 1943 backlash against Harlem following the race
riots, in which Harlem’s dancers were banned from the Harvest Moon Ball contests, saw
a white couple to win in the Lindy Hop division in nearly a decade.\textsuperscript{544} Norma Miller and
Frankie Manning were likewise taken aback by the discovery that the Harvest Moon Ball
was governed by a set of rules enforced by a panel of judges, a tradition the Savoy
dancers were completely unaccustomed to. In later years, Manning recalled his
frustration with the regulations of the Harvest Moon Ball:

\textsuperscript{542} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{543} “20,000 Jam Garden to See Harvest Moon Ball Final Winners,” \textit{New York Daily News}, August 28, 1941, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{544} Ibid., 276.
How the hell can we do Lindy Hopping without separating? That is what Lindy Hop is all about! They had this kind of stuff. So, we just said, to heck with the rules, we got to dance the way we dance, Lindy Hopping is different, so it had to be judged different.545

The 1938 Battle of the Bands between Count Basie’s and Chick Webb’s orchestras, the Savoy Ballroom’s other prominent event of the year and previously described, represented a similar conflict of cultural interests. Although the event was expertly organized, managed, and conducted, the inherent bias present in the coverage of the Harvest Moon Ball events was also apparent during Basie’s and Webb’s showdown. The lack of agreement in opinion between the Savoy client base and the press covering the event colored the public’s opinion of the evening. Meanwhile, *Down Beat* magazine indicated Webb had been victorious over Basie.546 According to a poll supposedly conducted at the ballot boxes following the battle, the crowds and dancers of the Savoy Ballroom declared Basie the clear winner.547 Similar inconsistencies plagued Gale Enterprises’ production at the New York World’s Fair; the Savoy Pavilion, however, also represented a counter-normatively bold venture for the Savoy Ballroom’s upper management. While it was not a resounding success from either the managerial or the financial standpoints, the promotion generated from this venture was an unqualified success as the Savoy Pavilion achieved the important objective of solidifying Harlem swing dancers’ place in the spotlight of worldwide cultural awareness.

545 Batchelor, *This Thing Called Swing*, 138.
547 Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 74.
The Savoy Pavilion: An Analysis

The Savoy Pavilion represented a joint effort on the parts of various members of Gale Enterprises, as well as the Savoy’s Charles Buchanan, and various members of the 1939/1940 New York World’s Fair commission. In a 1937 statement to the Fair’s managers, Gale claimed that the primary reason for promoting the Savoy Ballroom through the World’s Fair was to raise awareness of African-American culture, and to place the Savoy Ballroom within a greater context of contemporary performing arts. It should, however, be noted that although Gale was a popular and successful promoter of musicians, and gained respect during his tenure as the manager of the Savoy Ballroom, he had minimal hands-on experience in operating performance venues and managing dancers.  

Although Herbert White’s involvement is not noted in any of the correspondence between Gale Enterprises and the World’s Fair commission, Norma Miller notes that White “managed the whole production,” likely referring to his involvement with training and organizing the dancers for the event. Regardless of White’s official involvement, the majority of communication regarding the construction, management, and operations of the Savoy pavilion was conducted between Moe Gale himself, agents representing Gale and Gale Enterprises, and George P. Smith, the commissioner of the Fair. According to telegrams and letters exchanged between Gale and Smith, plans for the pavilion had been in the works since 1937, starting with the

549 Miller and Jensen, Swin gin’ at the Savoy, 137. Given that the Savoy Ballroom professional dancers who comprised Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers were consistently placed under White’s supervision, it stands to reason that White was at least tangentially involved with the management of the dance component of the pavilion.
550 Gale to unknown recipient, February 3, 1938.
proposal of a financial analysis of projected construction and hiring costs.\textsuperscript{551} A follow-up letter, dated February 3, 1938, indicates that the initial proposal was successfully approved, and demonstrates Gale’s commitment to the project. In the letter, Gale, typically a hands-off manager, is uncharacteristically descriptive and assertive in his desire to promote African-American culture at the Fair:

> With the recognition of swing music as America’s contribution to modern music, one cannot fail to acknowledge the effect swing music has had on modern dancing. Dancing has measured the progress and art-advancement of Races through the ages; and whether it be for amusement of exhibition, dancing has always played an important part in the entertainment of all peoples. […] It is our desire to present at the Fair the modern art of dancing as created by the rhythm of swing music, and we hope therefore to contribute something unique, educational, and fascinating as well as spectacular.\textsuperscript{552}

Gale’s excessively poetic missive, no doubt penned to make himself appear culturally progressive and experienced, does provide strong evidence of his involvement with the Savoy pavilion. Regardless of the true sentiment behind it, Gale’s earnestness is almost disarming, and his letter demonstrates considerable understanding of the Lindy Hop’s cultural value. Furthermore, Gale addresses the issues of the Savoy Ballroom’s social and performance dancing from a perspective curiously similar to his perception musicians, suggesting that he espoused an integrated view of music and dance at the Savoy. Therefore, the perceptions of Gale by contemporary dancers as a hands-off, silent partner are partly or mostly untrue; Gale may not have been an active fixture in the day-to-day

\textsuperscript{552} Gale to unknown recipient, February 3, 1938.
small-scale management of the Ballroom, but he had a firm comprehension of the Savoy Ballroom’s role in Harlem’s turbulent cultural climate, regardless of whether or not he sought to financially capitalize on the Savoy’s cultural exports.

This utopian view of music and dance was not immediately shared by the World’s Fair commission. The consideration given to Gale’s proposal, while generally favorable and demonstrating awareness of the potential value of what was one of America’s quickest-growing cultural enterprises, was still colored with severe racial undertones. The commission’s enthusiasm over the highly inflated financial projections supplied by Gale was understandable: the Fair’s objective was to make money. It was likely for this reason that most of the racially motivated misgivings, expressed by the Fair’s management about the earning potential of the pavilion, took root. A follow-up missive to George P. Smith states that:

[...] the question of race has been raised that certain groups—particularly in Southern states—object to negro entertainment. My answer to that is, if you ask any experienced agent [...] you will find the most lucrative territory for negro talent—both name values and run-of-the-mill—is the South. With a commercial tie-up there is occasional resentment. It is not desirable to have negro names sell products for white consumption, but as pure entertainment value the story is quite different. [...]There is a crying need for a few fast, human shows. These negro dancers certainly have that quality. Whether one cares for their dancing or not, they are exciting.553

It was ultimately Gale’s self-professed familiarity and experience with African-American musicians and dancers that motivated the Fair’s commission to allow Gale’s pavilion to

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participate in the production.\textsuperscript{554} As a music agent with a lively studio in Midtown, Gale likely had little interaction with the professional dancers in Harlem, but his understanding of the arts and their promotion indicated his competence to his future business partners. Even so, throughout the course of the preparation for the pavilion’s construction, the management Fair has expressed continued concern over the potentially non-viable nature of the enterprise:

As an entertainment feature, I believe that the Savoy, which has introduced dancers of a popular nature, finds a place in our Amusement area. In a way, the gamble lies in the ability of a producer to discover and popularize a new “fad” dance and the experience of Gale and his associates in this field is an assurance that he can repeat his past success.\textsuperscript{555}

Such concern was rightly justified; while Lindy Hop and its associated culture have become a way of life for some Harlemites, to the vast majority of Savoy clients the Lindy Hop was still largely a dance fad. The management at the Savoy, while less hostile towards the Lindy Hoppers’ antics than they were during the early 1930s, were still reluctant to openly promote the dance to the public.\textsuperscript{556} The majority of whites visiting Harlem continued to treat the venue as little more than a tourist trap, curious to observe from afar but unwilling to engage with the complex social and cultural layers the Savoy provided. Meanwhile, professional African-American Savoy Ballroom dancers expressed only thinly veiled hostility at the mere mention of mass distribution of “their” chosen

\textsuperscript{555} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{556} Hubbard and Monaghan, “Social Dancing at the Savoy,” 133.
The proof of the Savoy pavilion’s success ultimately rested with Gale and Buchanan: if Gale Enterprises’ financial projections held, the pavilion would generate additional awareness of African-American jazz dance, and, in the end, bring additional funds and attention to the pavilion’s backers and the Savoy Ballroom.

The construction project of the Savoy pavilion began in the winter of 1938-39. A cursory overview of the associated construction costs and financial analyses demonstrates a thorough, well-planned, albeit highly optimistic estimate of the pavilion’s monetary and special needs. In a curious (and not fully understood) decision, Gale Enterprises opted to construct the Savoy Ballroom pavilion in the form of a small theatre, rather than pursue a ballroom format for the structure. Naturally, the presence of a dedicated seating area and a smaller stage increased the pavilion’s capacity, but severely limited the space allowed for performances. According to the planning documents, the dimensions of the pavilion area were set at 7,500 square feet, with two thirds of the pavilion’s total area allotted for the performances and seating.\footnote{Gale Enterprises, “Project Name: Savoy Ballroom,” November 24, 1937.} The 75 x 125 ft. plot originally given to the pavilion for construction was later adjusted to 75 x 100 ft., and was significantly smaller than the Savoy Ballroom’s active area.\footnote{Ibid.} The placement of the Savoy Ballroom pavilion relative to other amusements was quite prominent, with an open view overlooking Fountain Lake, in the southern part of the Fair. It was, however, still relatively far from the prominent attractions of the Great White Way, and its proximity to various other American cultural amusements, notably the World’s Fair Music Hall, made it difficult to access the pavilion.

\footnote{557} Gale Enterprises, “Project Name: Savoy Ballroom,” November 24, 1937.
\footnote{558} Ibid.\footnote{559}
(fig. 7.1 and 7.2). According to the projected Savoy pavilion floor plan, the area indicated as “net space exclusive of stage” is given as 2,435 square feet, plus an additional 5 feet per person, with a projected seating capacity of a maximum of 487 patrons per performance.\(^{560}\)

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\(^{560}\) Ibid.
Figure 38 - Map of the 1939 New York World's Fair. Courtesy of *New Yorker* Magazine.
Figure 39 - Savoy Ballroom is #24 in section I-4.
Amateur videos and eyewitness accounts of the fair demonstrate that there were two performance areas, one of which was reserved for evening indoor performances, and one for outdoor shows, primarily used for ballyhooing and enticing the crowds. The exterior was expertly designed, featuring tall, art-deco style pillars and moving mannequins of the Savoy dancers (see figures 39, 40, 41). The interior, however, was shabby in stark contrast to the lavish décor of the exterior, and, judging from the dancers’ accounts, largely unsuitable for lively performances. Norma Miller recalled that the interior was small, dingy, and, at times, borderline offensively inappropriate:

We walked in slowly, and as we did, our enthusiasm hit the floor. It was not a ballroom, it was a theater, and a tacky theater at that. […] The stage was bare and uninteresting. The set was nothing more than a cheap, papier-mâché looking prop that somewhat resembled a bush—that was supposed to represent the jungle and our roots.

In an effort to cut some of the costs, the management asked the construction companies to leave the interior of the pavilion less decorated, likely in an attempt to cut production costs. The backstage area and dancers’ green room were designed after a similar fashion: Miller recalls unfinished wooden chairs, a single shelf, and a mirror with make-up lights lining the walls. The unfinished state of the backstage and performance areas likely prompted a decrease of morale which not even Herbert White could elevate for long, and the overall sense of annoyance with the working conditions almost certainly contributed

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561 Miller and Jensen, *Swingin’ at the Savoy*, 140.
562 Ibid., 137.
to the dancers’ eventual mass defections to the neighboring production of *Hot Mikado* at the World’s Fair Music Hall.\textsuperscript{563}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{savoy_pavilion_exterior.jpg}
\caption{Savoy Pavilion exterior. Photograph courtesy of Prelinger Archive.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{563} Ibid.
Figure 41 - Savoy Pavilion exterior. Photograph courtesy of Prelinger Archive.

Figure 42 - Savoy pavilion interior. Photograph courtesy of Prelinger Archive.
The initial period of operation for the Savoy pavilion’s opening was scheduled to last twenty-seven weeks, from its opening on April 30, 1939 until late September or early October, 1939. Because of numerous shortcomings in the planning, operations, and performance quality of the venue, the pavilion was shuttered in late July, 1939, more than two months before its scheduled closing date. The projected income over the 185-day period of the pavilion’s operations was expected to yield $134,865 in income, with the estimated construction costs comprising only a fraction of the projected earnings: $47,000 for the building, and $11,000 for the equipment, contingencies, and extra costs. The projected weekly cost of utilities was broken down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>$70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning supplies</td>
<td>$20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric bulbs</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office supplies</td>
<td>$5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repairs</td>
<td>$50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>$45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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An examination of the costs associated with the construction and maintenance of the Savoy pavilion demonstrates a striking similarity to the construction process of the Savoy Ballroom’s Harlem venue. The maintenance costs appear slightly high, with even the smallest necessities meticulously accounted for and processed, while the costs of erecting and constructing the pavilion proper seem to be grossly inflated. Considering the World’s Fair provided the Gale Enterprises with both a plot of land and a basic structure which the

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564 Gale Enterprises, financial analysis, February 24, 1939,
565 Ibid. The numbers provided include only the evening costs and receipts to put the pavilion on equal footing with the uptown Savoy. The uptown Savoy was predominantly an evening-only venue. This analysis also excludes the cost of the band and the dancers.
architects could then decorate according to Gale’s specifications, the price of $47,000 for the construction of what turned out to be an essentially bare-bones structure seems extravagant in hindsight.\(^{566}\)

The additional operational cost of hiring personnel, performers, and paying for utilities would add an extra $37,900 to the above sum, which made the earnings projection seem relatively unrealistic, given that the rate of admission to the pavilion matched the average fair rate: 75 cents for adults and 25 cents for children. The pavilion’s first weeks provided net revenue of $3,500 per week, a generous return on Gale Enterprises’ investment. Given that the numbers were probably vastly inflated upon Gale’s initial submission of the proposal paperwork to the World’s Fair, the resulting sum suggesting a sizable profit ($106,070.00 over the course of the pavilion’s six months of operation) must be considered with caution. Evidently, however, Gale spared no effort to ensure his employees would receive adequate payment, and specifically requested that the Fair reimburse the dancers a minimum of $32 per week each, specifically indicating that the Savoy Ballroom’s employees are “accustomed” to higher compensation rates. Gale’s demands were not met: instead of the original weekly $640 requested for the dancing operation, only $500 materialized.\(^{567}\)

The disappointing salary was to be the dancers’ least concern. With the majority of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers engaged in promotion and shows overseas, the work schedule

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for the remaining dancers was nothing short of grueling.\(^{568}\) Norma Miller recalls the “brutal” working schedule, with one dance group of 20 performers working around the clock, with shows lasting close to an hour apiece with short breaks between sets.\(^{569}\) According to the Savoy pavilion plan of entertainment, however, the morning shows, running from noon to 5 in the afternoon, were only twenty minutes in length, with ten-minute breaks between sessions; meanwhile, the evening shows, running from 5 in the afternoon to 3 in the morning, were more brief, clocking in at mere fifteen minutes.\(^{570}\) In addition to what appears to be a tedious, monotonous working schedule even by today’s standards, injuries were a common occurrence, so much so that in early July 1939, Conrad Gale, Moe Gale’s brother and physician, duly advised the Savoy pavilion management to close down the exhibition and discontinue the show at the earliest juncture out of concern for the dancers’ health. The Fair did not provide dancers with any health benefits or financial recourse in case of injury. The daily rate of $9 to $10 was hardly sufficient to cover the costs of medical care, and provided only a meager financial cushion after a hard day’s work.\(^{571}\)

Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers persisted, carrying on with the performances in spite of their injuries, doing upwards of a dozen daily shows at the Savoy pavilion. Each show was a dance revue similar to a variety show, demonstrating a number of African and

\(^{568}\) Miller and Jensen, *Swingin’ at the Savoy*, 137.
\(^{569}\) Ibid.
\(^{570}\) Savoy plan of entertainment, February 24, 1939. The possibility of multiple afternoon shows being rolled together into longer sets was a distinct possibility; it was, however, unlikely that this was the case with evening shows, as attendees would pay upon entrance, and it would have been in the pavilion management’s best interests to sell as many tickets as possible.
\(^{571}\) Gale Enterprises balance sheet, July 1, 1939. The documents indicate that twenty dancers were hired by Gale Enterprises for the show’s run. This also is a higher number than the estimate provided in 1938, which asks for $640 for the dancers.
African-derived American dances, beginning with a performance of a West African routine; a cakewalk; the Snake Hips dance; Manning’s choreography, the “Big Apple;” and a Lindy Hop routine, the “Mutiny.” The routines were performed to live music, with the soundtrack provided by Fess Williams’ combo during the afternoon shows, and Teddy Hill’s ensemble in the evening. According to amateur reels shot at the World’s Fair, Williams’ ensemble was performing outdoors for the afternoon shows, and likely contained seven to eight musicians. Hill’s aggregation, capable of utilizing the slightly larger indoor space, likely consisted of eight to twelve performers. The presence of two musical ensembles was a requirement enforced by the musicians’ union, which limited the number of hours any single ensemble could perform at an outdoor venue. The musicians were paid a weekly rate of $43.75 per person, for roughly three to four hours of playing per day. This was not an ideal schedule even under the best circumstances, to say nothing of having to perform outdoors in the heat and humidity of the summer. With the hectic nature of the evening shows and the high turnover rate of customers, work at the Savoy pavilion verged on exploitative in spite of the rising prominence of Whitey’s

572 Batchelor, *This Thing Called Swing*, 249. The Mutiny acquired its puzzling moniker after Thomas Lee, the routine’s choreographer, demonstrated his work to Manning who, wary of the emphasis on aerial maneuvers and air steps, and distrustful of the lack of partnered Lindy hop in the choreography, jokingly referred to Lee’s work as “a mutiny against Lindy hop.” The name apparently stuck.
574 Ibid.
575 Savoy plan of entertainment, February 24, 1939.
The final salaries of the personnel are listed below, and reflect weekly earnings. For the afternoon sessions, the costs were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 pc. Band</td>
<td>$350.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 dancers @ 25</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.C.</td>
<td>$50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Cashiers @ 20</td>
<td>$40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doorman and Barker</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ticket taker</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Ushers @ 18</td>
<td>$54.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen’l Utility Man</td>
<td>$65.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$909.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The evening sessions were slightly more expensive, requiring almost the same amount of personnel, but adding costs of utilities to the breakdown:

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576 Ibid.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Band</td>
<td>350.00</td>
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<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Ushers @ 18</td>
<td>54.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asst. Manager</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>70.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Porters @ 22</td>
<td>66.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning supplies</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elec. Bulbs</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office supplies</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountants</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repairs</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>45.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricians (spots)</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,610.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional weekly expenses also included 3 extra barkers at $60 ($20 per individual), publicity tallying a total of $100, and money set aside for incidental expenses to the sum of $140, for a total of $300 in miscellaneous weekly costs. The summary of some of these costs, however, reflects the unrealistic staffing demands and associated fees of the Savoy pavilion. The lengthy shifts at the pavilion would doubtless require more than a mere three porters and ushers, and, under more favorable circumstances, the salaries would be distributed in a manner more consistent with the pavilion’s demands. The breakdowns are very telling of the cost of talent: the musicians, protected by the union, would typically walk away with the highest earnings; meanwhile, the dancers, who likely

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worked for the majority of hours, were reimbursed only as highly as the clerical workers. In spite of the apparently low salaries for dancers, the manager and assistant manager earned $100 and $75 per week, respectively. 578 Nevertheless, Gale appears to have earned his keep as the pavilion’s impresario by paying careful attention to detail, demonstrating himself to be an efficient, if somewhat fastidious and fussy, manager. Gale’s concern for the well-being of his enterprise is demonstrated by a series of telegrams, in which he repeatedly makes requests for a team of electricians to fix a broken light bulb to assure the dancers at the pavilion were not “performing in the dark.” 579 Whether the same level of concern extended to the dancers on an individual, personal level is unclear, but one may infer from the dancers’ recollections that Gale was far more concerned with his venture’s profitability.

Additionally, the Savoy pavilion management’s goals and methods did not always coincide with the Fair’s more traditional approach to running the event, and Buchanan and Gale frequently clashed with the World’s Fair commission over issues of programming and concessions. The later weeks of the pavilion’s operation were marred by a considerable amount of unkind words, bad press, and arguments between the Fair managers and Gale, with the majority of these relating to issues of public taste and decency. In late June, roughly 6 weeks before the Savoy pavilion was to be closed, a minor scandal broke out over the content of the Savoy pavilion’s floor show:

    Warned earlier in the day to disinfect its show, the Savoy Ballroom took the oomph out of its opening African dance

578 “Project name: Savoy Ballroom,” 1937.
at the last minute. [...] The sepian performers toned down their routine by eliminating the scenes in which they crawled on the floor.\textsuperscript{580}

Additionally, unable to cover the high costs of concessions at the fair, Gale elected to operate the Savoy pavilion without a city-issued concessions license. The ensuing violation resulted in a court summons for Gale and Buchanan:

\textit{Moe Gale of the Savoy Ballroom [...] was ordered to appear Monday morning in Flushing Court. [Gale] was accused of operating without a license, [and was] tagged less than twenty-four hours after Sheriff Fitzgerald of Queens warned that he would crack down on fair concessionaires lacking city licenses.}\textsuperscript{581}

The shutdown of the Savoy pavilion ultimately resulted from three causes, the first of which was the fair’s loss of credibility in Gale’s venture due to lackluster financial performance. As the World’s Fair was already hemorrhaging funds as a result of the impending global military crisis, the Savoy Ballroom pavilion was simply not performing to a satisfactory standard.\textsuperscript{582} Second, the court case against Gale and Buchanan did little to maintain their standing as reputable businessmen in the eyes of the Fair’s management, resulting in what was likely a premature parting of ways. During the separation, the Fair authorities made no effort to retain Gale’s services.\textsuperscript{583} Lastly, the significant injuries and general discontent among dancers likely tipped the scales in favor of shuttering the venue.

\textsuperscript{581} “2 Summons Served,” \textit{New York Post}, June 9, 1939, 7. The New York World’s Fair documents pertaining to the Savoy Ballroom pavilion support this, but indicate that the measure may have been punitive, as the World’s Fair commission attempted to stem the flow of concessions to the pavilion in an attempt to curtail the pavilion’s activity.
\textsuperscript{582} Applebaum, \textit{The New York World’s Fair 1939/1940}, 613-41.
\textsuperscript{583} Miller and Jensen, \textit{Swingin’ at the Savoy}, 137-8.
in late July of 1939, as the dancers felt overextended, tired, and unwilling to commit to a low-paying venue in favor of other, more prominent fair attractions.\textsuperscript{584}

\textbf{Savoy Pavilion: The Aftermath}

When Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers traveling abroad to Australia and New Zealand returned to the United States at the end of summer in 1939, Frankie Manning was approached by Herbert White to join the performing troupe at the World’s Fair Savoy pavilion. After a brief tour of the facilities, the exhausted Manning shook his head: “I can’t make this, this is too much.” With both sets of dancers exhausted and underwhelmed by the state of the attraction, the management decided to initiate the shutdown process. Additionally, the World’s Fair’s run of the show, \textit{Hot Mikado}, a Broadway runaway hit, was simultaneously experiencing some degree of success. Occupying the larger, better appointed, and more architecturally sophisticated World’s Fair Music Hall, just a short walk from the Savoy Pavilion, the \textit{Hot Mikado} featured the additional draw of star power with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in a featured role. Ironically, both productions were staffed by Herbert White, which resulted in a migration of Savoy pavilion dancers from their workspace to the Music Hall in search of better hours, pay, and treatment. Naturally, Gale took umbrage to this fact:

Investigation reveals that dancers who are employed in the \textit{Hot Mikado} show are our former employees who appeared in the Savoy show, and who now still gain admittance to the Fair grounds [sic.] […] on the Savoy account.\textsuperscript{585}

\textsuperscript{584} Gale Enterprises balance sheet, 1939.\textsuperscript{585} Gale to George P. Smith, 1939.
When the World’s Fair finally closed on October 31, 1939, the Savoy Pavilion had been shuttered for nearly three full months. The Fair’s reopening on May 11, 1940, did not see the return of the Savoy pavilion; the already low attendance figures resulted in significant financial losses for the World’s Fair, and attendance figures were additionally deflated by the outbreak of European hostilities on September 1, 1939. This forced the World’s Fair commission to shut down a number of foreign exhibits from participating countries, notably including Nazi Germany. The Fair went bankrupt in early 1941, but in spite of the relatively sudden and unexpected closure, it precipitated a number of meaningful changes in the perception of African-American popular culture. The exposure of swing music and jazz dance to the world provided by the Savoy pavilion represented a clearer, if somewhat biased, snapshot of Harlem’s culture. The Savoy Ballroom’s involvement in the World’s Fair was, perhaps, one of the first global, organized efforts towards the export of Lindy Hop and African-American dance to various parts of the world, particularly continental Europe. Secondly, the Savoy’s presence at the Fair established the primacy of Herbert White as a respected talent manager, and presented Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers as a significant cultural force both domestically and abroad. As Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers participated in major cultural events in New York, Moe Gale’s business and agency similarly benefitted from the media exposure, and became a considerably more prominent resource for agencies seeking talent. White’s dancers still masqueraded as social dancers at the Savoy Ballroom to entertain visiting dignitaries, tourists, and important visitors, thus considerably enriching the growth and development
of social and performance dancing at the Savoy Ballroom.\textsuperscript{586} The New York World’s Fair, however, assisted in generating the publicity for the Savoy, as, according to Norma Miller, its dancers were among the first to appear on locally broadcast television programs originating at the World’s Fair.\textsuperscript{587} Unfortunately, the ever-accelerating cultural momentum of the Savoy Ballroom seen from 1938 to 1939 was cut short by the outbreak of the Second World War. The military draft depleted the ranks of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, as many of the male dancers, including Manning, were drafted and shipped out for training or for active duty overseas.\textsuperscript{588} The likelihood of continued success and eventual worldwide fame would have been almost guaranteed, had the troupe been allowed to continue on their previously scheduled 1941 Las Vegas and West Coast tours, as well as their various European engagements.

\textsuperscript{586} Hubbard and Monaghan, “Social Dancing at the Savoy,” 129.
\textsuperscript{587} Miller, \textit{Swingin’ at the Savoy}, 139.
\textsuperscript{588} Manning and Millman, \textit{Frankie Manning}, 192.
CONCLUSION: BEYOND SAVOY, 1958-2014

“It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.”

Duke Ellington

Overview: The Zeitgeist of Swing

Because of the vibrant ebullience of swing consistently seen in recorded media, it is often easy to forget that while swing was a major cultural aspect of American urban life, its validation as a cultural activity has been long in coming. The 1970s mostly ignored swing in favor of more contemporary West Coast-originated equivalents such as shag and disco, while the 1980s and 1990s struggled with a resurgence of swing in the spite of its commercial co-opting. During the 1990s, swing music and Lindy Hop were frequently shown as senselessly exuberant activities, and were often conflated with consumption of alcohol, criminal activity, and blatant commercialism, as was the case with the GAP khaki advertisement and the music videos of such artists as Brian Setzer, Cherry Poppin’ Daddies, Alfredo Rey, and Royal Crown Revue. Swing culture was similarly misappropriated by Hollywood, repurposed for such films as Swingers (1996), The Mask (1993), and, perhaps less offensively, the poignant but historically fanciful Swing Kids (1993). Although such ventures popularized 1930s jazz and Lindy Hop

towards broader consumption, the result was significantly homogenized for a receptive audience eager to ingest any variety of colorful, energetic, period-flavored music, no matter how historically uninformed its presentation may have been. As movie-goers fell in love with brightly colored zoot suits, broad brimmed hats, and two-toned shoes that characterized the mass media’s portrayal of swing during the 1990s, considerable headway was being made by such societies as the New York Swing Dance Society, the Harlem Swing Dance Society, and others, to reconstruct accurately the historic foundations of swing music and the Lindy Hop in America.\(^590\) In addition to numerous scholarly publications, a variety of ongoing unaffiliated online publications and weblogs such as Jerry Almonte’s *Wandering and Pondering*, Robert White’s *Swungover*, and Peter Loggins’ *The Jassdancer* contribute to a vast field of Lindy Hop revival history, examining the dance and its original practitioners from a historically informed standpoint.\(^591\) The majority of these publications view the Savoy Ballroom as a nexus of musical and cultural facts from which research is conducted into the Savoy’s contemporary significance. Contemporary scholars are making significant strides towards the examination, reevaluation, and placement of the Savoy Ballroom’s legacy in a broad historical, musical, and cultural setting, evaluating its impact on a contemporary perspective of Harlem, jazz, and swing dance.


The plethora of independent research along with the existing scholarly trends in studies into African-American music history comprises a compelling image of the Savoy Ballroom as a provider of a number of important cultural services. Musically, the Savoy Ballroom contributed significantly to the formation and development of a contemporary musical taste. The compromise between managerial oversight on Gale and Buchanan’s parts, combined with the vocal support of particular musical trends on the audience’s part, served as a defining feature of the Savoy Ballroom’s approach to band and musician booking. An ensemble’s ability to capture and hold a crowd’s attention through imaginative arrangements, musical acrobatics, or, in some cases, tightly coordinated and skillful playing came to define the Ballroom’s test for quality, allowing the management to assess whether a particular band was worth rehiring. \(^{592}\) While the Savoy Ballroom was not the first venue to feature regular contests between rival bands, it pioneered a particular brand of rivalry, forcing the competitors to not exclusively compete against each other, but to repurpose the audience’s affection as a source of spontaneous musical inspiration. The commitment of dancers, both of professional and amateur skill levels, could contribute to the triumph or defeat of a particular band, thus serving to form an intrinsic bond between the musicians playing on stage and the dancers upon the floor. \(^{593}\) Similarly, the Savoy management’s desire to bring diverse aggregations from various geographic locales strongly contributed to an evolution of a particular brand of Savoy jazz. Chick Webb’s early encounters with the bands of Bennie Moten were crucial to the

\(^{592}\) Spring, “Dance, Venue, and Lindy Hop,” 185.
\(^{593}\) Miller and Jensen, *Swingin’ At The Savoy*, 102-6.
development of a nascent evolution of early swing, as the presence of multiple musical styles allowed for greater integration of tastes into new styles of musical performance. The distinctly different style of Moten’s approach to the shaping of a melodic line, the arrangement of a big band, and, perhaps most importantly, the treatment of rhythm in a standard swing song defined the repertoire and musicality of Chick Webb’s years with Ella Fitzgerald, establishing Webb’s music as the soundtrack of the Savoy Ballroom. The Battles of the Bands at the Savoy represented more than simple cutting contests between two competitors, rather embodying a free-flowing exchange of ideas and the distribution and reimplementation of localized musical styles.

Certainly, music at the Savoy Ballroom’s was one of the venue’s strongest, most enduring qualities; it was, however, the dancing, particularly the various forms of swing dance, that the Savoy became famous for, and is still remembered for today. The emergence and development of various jazz dance styles at and around the Savoy may be traced to a high degree of cultural overlap resulting from the Savoy’s lift on racially biased admission. As the Savoy Ballroom was open to a wide spectrum of attendees, many of which were tourists, a variety of possible social statuses, ethnicities, races, localities, and skill levels occupied the Savoy’s dance floor from night to night, with particular demographics only seldom dominating the space. The resulting melting pot allowed for several emergent dance forms, among them Lindy Hop, to solidly embed themselves in the zeitgeist. Ultimately, every attendee at the Savoy would dictate his or her own level of commitment, whether as a casual observer, an amateur ballroom dancer,

594 Pritchett, interview, 2013.
or someone willing to commit to learning the challenging and physically demanding Lindy Hop as a professional practitioner. As such, dances at the Savoy Ballroom were not limited strictly to Lindy Hop, and included multiple other swing-based, fad, and traditional Euro-American dances such as the Peabody, the Black Bottom, the Tango, and the Waltz. The amassing of these dances’ idiosyncrasies in one venue allowed for some considerable cross-pollination among various dance forms, with the improvisatory Lindy Hop being most affected by the presence of other dances. The ultimate popularity of Lindy Hop can be primarily attributed to its concurrent evolution with the music that accompanied it, as well as to the large corpus of contribution of committed professional dancers. Ultimately, the various jazz dances practiced at the Savoy represent a merging of African-American cultures, expressing the conflation of tradition and innovation.

The Savoy Ballroom also served as a focal point of cultural dissemination. By the late 1930s, the Savoy Ballroom functioned as more than a dance and social venue, but also as a base for several troupes of professional Lindy Hoppers, selected and managed by Savoy artistic director, Herbert White, and promoted by Savoy part-owner, Moe Gale. The venue’s visibility played a significant role in their promotion: because of its prominent and high-class nature, the Savoy Ballroom served as a hub for visitors to Harlem, and thus provided a major point of cultural exchange for visitors. While no conclusive evidence points to how, exactly, the Savoy Ballroom affected the surrounding community, its presence in the neighborhood was an important cultural fixture, and was widely lauded by Harlem press publications for its cultural contributions. The Savoy

595 White, interview, 2013.
Ballroom provided more than a venue in which locals and tourists could gather for an evening’s dance: it elevated the social status of the locale by hosting a variety of cultural events, fund-raisers, social functions, and providing a gathering location for those seeking purely social contact. As a nexus of its community, the Savoy Ballroom provided Harlem’s denizens with a sense of cultural identity by representing a community centerpiece they could comfortably call their own.\textsuperscript{596} A strong community was built around the Savoy Ballroom during the late 1920s and well into the mid-1930s, as it served as a vessel for propagating African-American culture by the late 1930s and early 1940s by means of direct contact with the outside world, and the outsourcing of its professional dance troupe, Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, for various films, performances, travelling tours, and Broadway showcases.\textsuperscript{597}

**Bringing It All Together: Avenues for Future Discourse**

With much of the original Savoy Ballroom documents either destroyed, in private collections, or at various unknown locations, it is difficult to piece together an all-encompassing and fully accurate representation of the venue as it once existed. No records of its day-to-day operations can be found, and the information that is available tends to be unreliable for several reasons. First, it is communicated largely by biased reporters in writing; much of what has been committed to print, whether in books, promotions, or in press, invariably has a racially or culturally biased slant characteristic

\textsuperscript{596} Pritchett, interview, 2013.
\textsuperscript{597} Ibid.
of the period in which it was published. Second, it is also transmitted via spoken word via primary sources; those individuals who have so generously contributed their time to speaking of their first-hand experiences at Savoy Ballroom, however, also are separated from their experiences by one half of a century. Therefore, the majority of existing evidence is either biased or incomplete; the records that do exist, as has been shown by Terry Monaghan, are usually in need of verification, as even the official publications released by the Savoy Ballroom tend to be inaccurate in an effort to inflate the Ballroom’s grandeur and popularity.\textsuperscript{598} The various myths circulating about the creation of the Lindy Hop running parallel to Lindbergh’s flight, similarly originating at the Savoy, were also likely propagated in the effort to make the venue more appealing, at least initially.\textsuperscript{599} Various news- and opinion-based publications, such as the \textit{New York Age} and the \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, tend to be skewed in favor of the claim that the Savoy Ballroom was one of the greatest, most remarkable, and most attended venues in New York, while such publications as the \textit{New York Times}, the \textit{Saturday Evening Post}, and the \textit{New York Daily News}, owned and read predominantly by whites, seldom mention the Savoy Ballroom at all.\textsuperscript{600} More often than not, the overall impression in the press tended to skew towards the opinion that the Savoy Ballroom was culturally relevant only to the individuals who frequented it.

\textsuperscript{598} Hubbard and Monaghan, “Social Dancing at the Savoy Ballroom,” 131.
\textsuperscript{599} Ibid., 131-2.
\textsuperscript{600} Turcott, “Harvest Ball Sellout,” 1937. When the Savoy Ballroom was mentioned in these publications, it was generally with an air of flippancy; the Savoy dancers tended to be portrayed as vaudevillian caricatures of their actual selves.
Therefore, in the absence of much concrete, unbiased research, additional studies could include a series of follow-up research projects, among them a concerted collection and study of any first-hand accounts by former Savoy patrons and dancers, to be cross-evaluated for usable information. While individual accounts by such dancers as Norma Miller, Frankie Manning, Sonny Allen, and Barbara Billups are extraordinarily useful in providing a personal glimpse of the Savoy, they do not reveal a more objective reality of the Ballroom as a venue and cultural edifice. A broader, more generalized examination of the oral history of the Savoy Ballroom would provide a valuable cross-section of its growth and contribution to the community over a period of 30 years. Additionally, an examination of the Savoy Ballroom through the lens of evolving cultural trends in the wake of its closing could provide a valuable series of insights into the Savoy Ballroom’s growing and diminishing impact on the contemporary perception of swing culture and the Savoy’s role in its modern interpretation. Lastly, concerted efforts to collect, codify, and analyze a material history of the Savoy Ballroom through various memorabilia and objects by reconstructing their significance within the greater narrative of the Savoy Ballroom’s evolution. Each of these avenues is equally worthwhile and deserving of proper examination, particularly in conjunction with the others, to reconstruct a more complete account of the Savoy Ballroom’s role in its original context as well as contemporary culture.
AFTERWORD

Situated in the heart of northwest Washington, D. C., only a short walk from the swanky neighborhood of Adams Morgan, the Josephine Butler Parks Center is a stately Victorian-style manor occupying a lot across from the picturesque Meridian Hill Park. Built in 1927 as a vice-presidential mansion, and eventually sold to the American Legion, the Parks Center housed the Hungarian Embassy from 1951 to 1977. Given its multi-cultural, storied past, it is somehow fitting that for the past seven years the Josephine Butler Parks Center has been home to the Jam Cellar, the closest contemporary equivalent of New York’s Savoy Ballroom. As I walk up the stairs to the front door, I am little overwhelmed. I haven’t visited this venue since August, 2007. I came to the Jam Cellar for a brief talk with Robert E. White, III, the internationally recognized Lindy Hop and Balboa dancer and instructor, as well as longtime artistic director of this venue. Walking through the front door, I realize how closely the Jam Cellar resembles the Savoy Ballroom both in look and spirit: a double grand stairwell underneath a hung, cut chandelier ascends from the first story to a flight and the second floor above. The elegant, rococo décor of the alabaster trimming highlights the walls’ subtle, pale yellow tone, as the lobby gives way to a sizable L-shaped ballroom, an opposing smaller room with an attached coatroom, and a large balcony overlooking 15th Street and Meridian Hill Park. Despite the heat and moisture hanging in the air, so characteristic of the waning Indian

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summers in the District, over a hundred individuals are dancing inside as the sounds of hot jazz fill the air. Serendipitously, the song happens to be Lucky Millinder’s “Savoy.”

Bobby and I sit down at a large antique table in one of the back rooms of the Parks Center. My first question, invariably, is about the Jam Cellar. The venue, which has been featured in the Washington Post as well as on the back page of National Geographic, has had a life cycle that is nothing short of exciting. Formed in early 2000s by a group of young, highly committed, and energetic Washington area swing dancers, the Jam Cellar switched its location from the tight confines of a basement in Fairfax, Virginia to the spacious quarters of the Parks Center on February 7, 2006. With the new venue came a new crowd of regular patrons, and the influx of new faces has brought about a new mission: no longer reserved solely for the elite, professional dancers, the Jam Cellar now fosters a newly found sense of camaraderie and community among those who frequent the space. The monthly class offerings bring in plenty of newcomers, while the engaging social atmosphere of the ensuing Tuesday evening dance motivates them to stay.

As I ask whether or not the Savoy Ballroom’s legacy is carried on by such historic venues as the Jam Cellar, Bobby enthusiastically agrees with the premise of my first question:

> When I took over running the Jam Cellar […] I realized that there was no sense of community. […] As I explored other, similar venues and organizations, I realized that what was missing from the Jam Cellar was a stronger sense of unity between dancers. […] In that respect, I believe the Jam Cellar is performing a function similar to the Savoy Ballroom, because, like the Savoy, it acts as not just a place
for students to come and dance, but as a space for social interaction.\textsuperscript{603}

To the Jam Cellar’s owners and patrons, building a community around the dancing is an activity that is every bit as vital as the actual Lindy Hop taught there. The sense of direction, provided by the communal efforts on the part of the organizers, instructors, students, and musicians at the Jam Cellar, and many similar venues across the United States and the world, is what appears to propel swing culture forward. Jam Cellar newcomers and longtime regulars seem to lose themselves with complete abandon in the atmosphere, completely ignoring the atavistic nature of the whole enterprise: a group of modern adults dancing to music from nearly a century ago, performing steps from a niche subset of a dance form originating in Harlem. When I ask Bobby about this, he weighs in again:

To me, Lindy Hop represents the pinnacle of expressive freedom. I really think that […] people love it because it allows for so much creativity with so few fundamentals. When you break away from your partner during a swing-out, you can experiment to your heart’s content, but also […] have the option to listen to your leader, and follow his movement. In my opinion, it is the ability of the dancer to recreate the music, and for the musician to recreate the dance that makes Lindy Hop so appealing right now.\textsuperscript{604}

Indeed, the idea of Lindy Hop as a cultural vessel perpetuating the ideas of freedom, improvisation, partnership, and invention is favorably reflected in the Jam Cellar regulars’ active participation.\textsuperscript{605} The ear-catching music of Chick Webb, Lucky Millinder, Fats Waller, and Duke Ellington still holds sway over the dancers, and Lindy

\textsuperscript{603} Robert E. White III, interview by author, Washington, D. C., September 25, 2013.
\textsuperscript{604} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{605} Hazzard-Gordon, “Dancing to Rebalance the Universe,” 36-39.
Hop continues growing with the music as Lindy Hoppers of all skill levels reinterpret the music on the social floor and in performance. The simulacrum of music and dance perpetuates an aesthetic of cyclical development, with plenty of space for Lindy Hop’s future growth.

On my way out of the Jam Cellar, I shake hands with Bobby, thanking him for his time. Always a genial host, he replies that he is only too happy to share his perspective on his passion, and I couldn’t agree more. Like the tour I was given of the Jam Cellar, my research is but one perspective on the topic of the constantly evolving culture of swing. Although the Savoy Ballroom, one of the main purveyors of swing and swing culture, had been closed since for over half of a century, its legacy endures in word, thought, and deed. Professional and amateur historians diligently chronicle aspects of Savoy-based popular culture and musicianship while many enthusiastic professional and amateur Lindy Hoppers carry the tradition forward by tirelessly engaging with the venue’s history and tradition, eager to not allow the Savoy Ballroom’s history disappear into obscurity. Efforts are made to preserve the Savoy’s history through such organizations as the Swing Dance Hall of Fame, and through the participatory efforts of individuals engaging with the development, growth, and performance of jazz, swing, Lindy Hop, and various other cultural aspects of the Savoy Ballroom. These efforts are predominantly aimed at a better understanding of the foundations that fuelled a unifying passion for tens of thousands of individuals worldwide, effectively recreating the Savoy Ballroom’s goals on a broader, worldwide scale. Such efforts can only mean well for the continued cultural presence of
the Savoy Ballroom, because, in the words of Sonny Allen, to know where you’re going, you have to know where you came from.\textsuperscript{606}

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Musicology Program

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Thesis: Savoy: Reassessing the Role of the “World’s Finest

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Thesis: Nationalist, Neoclassical, or Both: The Examination of
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Piano Performance Program

PRIVATE STUDIES

Jazz Piano

Gordon Webster New York, NY 2011-2014
Lewis R. Porter Rutgers University, NJ 2010-2014
Michael Maher Shenandoah University, VA 2006-2009

Classical Piano

Thomas Mastroianni Catholic University of America, DC 1998-2006
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TEACHING EXPERIENCE (COLLEGE)

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Emmanuel College • Boston, MA 2012-2014
Duties: Teaching undergraduate and graduate courses, vocal instruction and coaching, student academic advising.

Courses: 
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- PERF1304 Music of the World
- PERF1321 History of Vocal Music
- PERF1352 The Sound Project

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Musicology, Jazz Studies  
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Humanities Department  
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Duties: Teaching undergraduate and graduate courses, supervision of independent and directed studies.

Courses: 
- MUS102 Music: A Cultural Experience
- MUS201 Musical Dramas and Comedies
- MUS203 Popular Music
- MUS215 Jazz History
- MUS290 Honors Independent Study

Teaching Fellow  
Musicology  
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Musicology and Ethnomusicology Department  
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Duties: Taught undergraduate and graduate courses, coordinated with supervising instructor to conduct class, grading responsibilities, creating syllabus and assignments for courses.

Courses: 
- CFA MU102 Music Appreciation for Non-Musicians
- CFA MU104 Understanding Music
- CFA MU649 Advanced Research Techniques

Online Facilitator  
Musicology  
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Distance Education Department  
Boston University • Boston, MA

Duties: Facilitated online courses for students, coordinated with supervising instructor to conduct class and distribute course materials, attendance and grading responsibilities, course management responsibilities, understanding of BlackBoard, Moodle, and ECLearn software.

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- CFA MU745 Music in West Africa
- CFA MU755 Music in America
- CFA MU766 Jazz and Popular Music Arranging
TEACHING EXPERIENCE (MISC., K-12)

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PROFESSIONAL APPOINTMENTS

Conductor / Music Director
Hanover Theatre
Worcester, MA

Artistic / Music Director
Sweet Hot Jazz Ensemble • Boston, MA

Creative / Music Director
Ghosts of Weimar (jazz ensemble)
The Lilypad • Cambridge, MA

Organist / Conductor
Parish of the Messiah
Auburndale, MA

Pianist
NatashaFolk Ensemble
Brookline, MA

Music Director / Conductor
Unity in the City
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Johnny Blazes and the Pretty Boys
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Conductor / Music Director
Boston University, Drama Department
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Teaching Interests: Jazz between the World Wars, Jazz dance before World War II, French neoclassicism and impressionism, medieval notation and aesthetics, Indian classical music, American folk music, American musical theatre, music appreciation for non-music majors, music and culture.
**PUBLICATIONS**

**Books**


**Articles**

“Simple and Sweet: Reassessing the Role of Artie Shaw’s Gramercy Five in Modern Jazz Scholarship,” Boston University, 2011.

**Invited lectures**


*Music in America*, Boston University, organizer and chair, 2008.


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**PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY (RECENT)**

**Solo piano**

Concert, jazz piano. Taylor House, Boston, MA 2013

Concert, jazz and classical. Boston Symphony Hall, Boston, MA

Recital, jazz and classical. Boston University, Boston, MA

Staff Pianist. Algonquin Club, Boston, MA

Jazz piano recital. Boston University, Boston, MA 2012

Classical recital. Boston University, Boston, MA 2009


Concert, jazz and classical. Lyceum, Alexandria, VA

**Collaborative**

Performance series, *From The Top* radio program, Boston, MA 2014
Residency, Sweet Hot Jazz Band. Boston, MA 2013-2014
Performance series, Sweet Hot Trio. Boston, MA 2012
Residency, Ghosts of Weimar. Lily Pad, Cambridge, MA 2011
Performance series, Sweet Hot Trio. Boston University, Boston, MA 2009
Performance, Shahrum Kashani. Boston, MA 2007
Residency. Lyceum, Alexandria, VA
Performance. Loudoun Symphony Orchestra, Alexandria, VA 2005

**Musical Theatre**

Director / Producer / Music Director 2014
[title of show] – workshop production
Lasell College • Auburndale, MA

Assistant Music Director 2013
“A Christmas Carol” (Equity, SAG)
The Hanover Theatre • Worcester, MA

Music Director and Pianist 2009-2014
Various theatre productions
Performing Arts Center • Framingham, MA

Music Director and Pianist 2012
“Dickens' Women” (w/ Miriam Margolyes)
University of Massachusetts Lowell
Boston University • Boston and Lowell, MA

Music Director and Pianist 2012
“I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change” (Equity, SAG)
Spotlight Playhouse • Haverhill, MA

Music Director, Conductor, Pianist 2011
“A Little Night Music” (university)
Theatre Department, College of Fine Arts
Boston University • Boston, MA

Music Director and Pianist 2009
“She Loves Me!” (Equity, SAG)
Worcester County Light Opera Company • Worcester, MA