ONE

Star Rising at Twilight

A CHILDHOOD IN VAUDEVILLE

I was raised on the tag end of vaudeville.

—SAMMY DAVIS JR.

Show business teaches you.

—ELVERA SANCHEZ

"I'M GOING TO SAY a line now that's going to probably cause a great deal of laughter and probably some consternation," Davis said in 1985 on *Late Night with David Letterman*. As a child star, "I appeared in blackface." He paused comically, gesturing toward his dark skin. "That means burnt cork."[1] Indeed, black performers as well as white blacked up in the era of stage minstrelsy. But in Davis's case, as he told it, the cork was doing double duty. Owing to 1930s child labor laws, his father and "uncle" Will Mastin used the burnt cork (and a fake cigar) to disguise the boy's age, passing him off as "a forty-four year old midget" for the sake of their vaudeville stage act. The ruse was made plausible by precedent—three-foot-tall "Princess Pee Wee" had traveled the vaudeville circuit with the Whitman Sisters throughout the 1920s—and in the ambit of most child welfare authorities, Davis probably did not come off as dancing "like a child," even to those familiar with Fayard and Harold Nicholas, the electric duo then lighting up the Cotton Club.

But behind the comic effect of this retrospective story as told in the 1980s lies a more significant truth about the Davis biography. In losing his childhood to the vaudeville circuit, Sammy Davis Jr. was reared *into* the sensibilities—both social and professional—of an era far preceding his own. The generational dynamics of his career would become increasingly important over time. He was mentored and stewarded into the limelight by Eddie Cantor, who was more than thirty years his senior; by the 1970s he was taking on the persona of Bill Robinson ("Mr. Bojangles"), almost fifty years older. Born in 1878, Robinson was Will Mastin's strict contemporary, and only ten

FIG. 2. Sammy Davis, Jr., c. 1929. Photo: Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

years older than Sammy Davis Sr. This is roughly the vintage that stamped Davis as a fully formed vaudeville performer with no childhood—the vintage of that "forty-four year-old midget." When Davis carried parts of his vaudeville past into the second half of the twentieth century, including its social outlooks, its hoofing styles, its comedic routines, its variety and stage patter, he was embodying a style that even predated his own 1930s childhood and reached all the way back to the days of Bert Williams.

It is of great significance that it was the tap dance, of all possible forms, that carried Davis into the mid-twentieth century. Like many other African American dance forms, tap was an expression of freedom and self-possession in a setting where both were denied—a joyous use of the body itself as an instrument of liberation under circumstances of oppression, fugitivity, and Jim Crow humiliation. "The Negro, strictly speaking, never had a jazz age," wrote Alain Locke in *The Negro and His Music* (1936), "he was born that way. . . ."[2] The "Africa" in jazz-associated cultural forms of music and dance, according to an unnamed critic cited by Locke, was in the fusion of movement and sound, the musical practices that transformed the body itself into an instrument. It began "in the restless feet" and "rippled through his limbs and communicated itself to every instrument upon which he could lay his hands."[3] At the same time, tap was steeped in performance traditions that had emerged from the minstrel stage, making it as hated and suspect as the cakewalk among generations of African Americans who came up too late for that moment when tap still defined the cutting edge of creative expression, of "the modern."

A number of forces account for the decline of tap in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The rise of cinema drastically cut the number of urban dance venues in the 1930s; changes in the tax code on entertainment establishments cut away at what was left in the 1940s. The rise of youth culture, rock and roll, and bebop—a jazz that was "insistent on being music for listening" rather than dancing—altered the nature of the dancing public, each in its own way, in the 1950s. Television was also a notoriously bad medium for the quick, flash styles that had developed, as neither its sound, its picture, nor the cumbersome wielding of its early studio cameras were well suited to capture the crispness and speed of tap. Whether tap died or, as Sandman Sims argued, "only went underground,"[4] it had traveled the entire arc from being the very epitome of "the modern" when *Shuffle Along* hit Broadway in 1921 to being the very epitome of "old timey" by the 1960s. And these temporal appellations carried powerful racialized meanings in the context of long-tailed minstrel traditions and emergent Civil Rights consciousness. Tap was becoming one

of the markers of generational conflict in the African American community, just as Davis's career began its meteoric rise.

Even if the Negro "was born that way," Locke warned of "the ever-present danger of commercialization" to African American arts of music and dance. As a purely "Negro dialect of emotion, [jazz culture] could not have become the dominant recreational vogue of our time . . . the most prolonged fad on record," if it had not also become "diluted and tinctured." Emerging from the "primitive rhythms of the Congo" and revolting "against the hardships and shackles" of an enslaved life in diaspora, jazz music and dance spoke forcefully to a more general (white) "revolt against Puritan restraint," becoming "the Western World's life-saving flight from boredom and oversophistication."[5] As a young performer, then, Davis sat at the intersection of many different worlds. He was a child of the Great Migration, though he was schooled in a set of sensibilities and performance practices that we might more readily associate with the nineteenth century. He mastered forms of song and dance that were syncretic to begin with—products of the Atlantic slave trade, with its colliding and fusing cultural exchanges from Africa to the Caribbean to North America—but fraught, too, with histories of appropriation, mimicry, and parody, Cedric Robinson's "relentless juggernaut of Black inferiorization."[6] And his early years, from child performer in the 1920s to rising star in the 1950s, coincided precisely with the curve of tap dance in America from "modern" to "passé." "Show business teaches you," as Davis's mother, Elvera Sanchez, would put it; and the lessons Davis took "on the tag end of vaudeville" were at once his ticket and his burden through the middle decades of the twentieth century.[7]

RUFUS JONES FOR PRESIDENT

Born in Harlem in 1925, Davis was raised in lean economic conditions but also amid the protean cultural flowering of the Great Migration. His father, Sammy Davis Sr., was a song and dance man from Wilmington, North Carolina, a veteran of traveling shows like *Shake Your Feet* and *Struttin' Hannah from Savannah*. His mother was a Cuban chorus dancer from New York, though in his own account Davis later switched out Cuba for Puerto Rico, amid Cold War currents of anti-Castroism. The two first met while working a show called *Holiday in Dixieland;* Davis was "the group's fastest man on taps" and Sanchez, "the comeliest chorus girl." The troupe leader was

Will Mastin, a long-familiar vaudeville name from Huntsville, Alabama, who had "danc[ed] his way on soft shoes from country minstrel platforms to the big city stages," as the *New York Post* later put it.[8] Before *Holiday in Dixieland,* Mastin had worked with a "Texas Tommy" act called California Poppies ("Texas Tommy" was the name of a popular dance, taken from the slang for a prostitute).[9] Elvera Sanchez left the Mastin group to have her second child, Ramona. This was ultimately a break-up story, and bitterness emerged on both sides over the years. The Davises resented what they saw as Sanchez's Cuban-inflected colorism—a certain air of superiority based on her lighter complexion—and for her part, Sanchez later resented the exclusions she experienced as one of the "east coast people," when the geography of her son's life became bifurcated between east and west. In any event, Mastin and the Davises, Sr. and Jr., took to the road. Davis made his debut at the age of two at the Standard Theater in Philadelphia. "'Five girls and seven men were in the act then,' Sammy Sr. recalled. 'One was a comedian called Rastus Airship. Will was his straight man. Little Sammy would watch them every time they went on. One night he did Rastus' dance—right on the stage. He was a regular on the act from then on.'" A chorus girl named Salina (no one remembers her last name) was the person who first had success in teaching Sammy the time step.[10]

Davis's repertoire, his versatility, the scope of his talent, and his performance persona were all indelibly shaped by the long history of African and African American cultural forms, and the ways these had travelled and evolved across space and time in both unadulterated form and minstrelized parody. It has been said that Davis "sang 'white' and danced 'black.'"[11] We will return to the "singing white" later on; but this "dancing black" embodied certain Africanisms, self-emancipatory practices in diaspora, and negotiations with white power and white cultural institutions that amounted to a *politics,* whether or not one ever had a particular wish to be "political." It was in this sense that Bill "Bojangles" Robinson could consider himself a "race man"—"I do all in my power to aid my race. I strive upon every turn to tear down any barriers that have existed between our two races"—while to some his on-screen dancing alongside Shirley Temple was the epitome of racialized bowing and scraping.[12] Black audiences were already heckling Robinson in the 1940s with "We don't want to hear that old Uncle Tom stuff."[13] Davis would come under similar suspicions in the Civil Rights years.

Davis's little seven-year-old performing self has been preserved for posterity in *Rufus Jones for President* (1933), a two-reeler featuring Ethel Waters.[14]

Rufus Jones was one of a cycle of African American shorts produced by Vitaphone in the 1930s, uneven vehicles designed primarily to capture black sound in a visual medium: *The Symphony in Black* with Billie Holiday, *Black Network* with Nina Mae McKinney and the Nicholas Brothers, *Bubbling Over* with Ethel Waters, *Pie, Pie Blackbird* with Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, *Syncopation Sermon* with Hall Johnson, *King for a Day* with Bill Robinson and Dusty Fletcher, *The All-Colored Vaudeville Show* with Adelaide Hall, *Hi De Ho* with Cab Calloway, and *Dixieland Jamboree* with Eunice Wilson.[15] Typical of the genre, *Rufus Jones* was dreamt up by a white creative and production team (written by Dorian Otvos and Cyrus Wood, directed by Roy Mack, and scored by Irving Berlin's right hand, Cliff Hess), but executed by an all-black cast that in addition to Waters included Hamtree Harrington, Dusty Fletcher, Edgar Connor, The Will Vodery Girls, and Russell Wooding's Jubilee Singers. *Rufus Jones* is a cringeworthy piece of racial libel from today's perspective, to be sure, but as in so much minstrelsy, it is also a contested terrain on which African American performers have left their own stamp of resistance.

The film begins on a porch, where Ethel Waters is hanging laundry. Little Sammy appears, having been hurt in a scuffle with his friend Sinbad. "That Sinbad Johnson sure is going to be sorry when he finds out what a great man you is," Waters soothes, as the boy sits in her lap. "Yous gwine to be president. . . . They has kings your age, I don't see why they can't have presidents. . . . The book says anyone born here can be president." She then sings him "All God's Children Got Wings." This loving scene gives way to Rufus's dream, as the child drifts off to sleep with the assurance *yous gwine to be president* evidently echoing in his mind. A jubilant crowd arrives at the porch in an Election Day parade, ready to draft Rufus for President. A brass band plays and numerous placards are bobbing aloft: "Vote first and last for Rufus Jones," "DOWN WITH THE REDS, PUT IN THE BLACKS." "We want Rufus for the president," announces the parade marshal. A member of the procession hoists Rufus onto his shoulders, and the parade continues to the strains of "Dixie," Daniel Emmett's 1860 ode to the plantation South. The procession arrives at a polling place, marked by a giant sign reading "Vote Here for Rufus Jones: Two Pork Chops Every Time You Vote."

When Rufus Jones's victory is announced, the scene shifts to an elaborate, and elaborately minstrelized, parody of black governance, a crazy quilt of cultural references that seems to combine the Reconstruction legislature scenes from *Birth of a Nation* with the pomp of African American election-

FIG. 3. Davis with Ethel Waters and Dusty Fletcher in *Rufus Jones for President,* 1933.

day celebrations in nineteenth-century New England. "I am happy to announce that Rufus Jones has been elected the pres-i-*dent,*" intones the marshal. "Come here, Prez, you gotta say something to your constitu-*ahn*-say." At this point young Sammy Davis sings "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You" (which had been a hit for Louis Armstrong in 1931 and for Betty Boop in 1932). The grown-ups surround the boy as he sings, patting juba, keeping time with their bodies; Hamtree Harrington bobs in a gentle, flat-footed Charleston in the background. Davis finishes with a nifty little high-kicking time step—a tap dance of enough dexterity and flash that we glimpse the plausibility of Will Mastin's "forty-four year old midget" ruse—before shouting "Yeah!" with an Armstrong-like flourish and biting with gusto into a piece of fried chicken.

Fade to the swearing-in. Devotees of the Broadway hit *Shuffle Along* might have recalled a similar scene involving the election of a police chief:

> PECK [SHOUTING TO THE CROWD]: Is I fit?
> CROWD: Yes you IS. You bet you're fit![16]

Now decked out in an academic cap and gown, Hamtree Harrington swears in the child President, who has donned a tuxedo and top hat.

HARRINGTON: Now first of all, swear to me / from now on pork chops will be free.

DAVIS: I do, I do!

. . .

HARRINGTON: Now make a law without no loops / there'll be no locks on the chicken coops. / And swear to me that you will choose / as the national anthem "The Memphis Blues." . . .

DAVIS: I do, I do!

Next we see the Senate chamber, a veritable gallery of stereotypes: a sign on the cloakroom reads, "Check Your Razors"; senators in top hats and tails are kneeling on the floor of the entryway shooting craps. Announced with pomp and circumstance, the child president enters, still in tuxedo and top hat, escorted by Waters and a young man in a ceremonial military uniform (epaulets, feather plume, sash, medals). The senators all sing "Hallelujah." Waters rises to make a speech:

> Now, Senate, listen here. I don't want my child comin' home with no headaches from runnin' this government, so I nominated myself to the office of the President-ESS. [Applause.] And I'm also rarin' to take up with y'all some matters of the most inconspicuous importance.

Such matters include establishing a Commissioner of Poultry "to see that all the padlocks is first removed from the coops," and a Watermelon Investigator "to plant the watermelon vines near the fence instead of in the middle of the patch." An objection from the floor ("Are we going to sit around here with all our *supremeority* and let her tell us what to do?") insults the President-ess, who then sings "Am I Blue?" followed by "Underneath the Harlem Moon," a vaudeville minstrel number by Jewish immigrant lyricist Mack Gordon (b. Morris Gitler): "There's no fields of cotton, picking cotton is taboo/We don't live in cabins like our old folks used to do. . . ." The number's minstrel lineage becomes clear in the final verse, an ode to the happy-go-lucky (but no longer plantation) Negroes, who "just live for dancing" and are "never blue and forlorn"; it's no sin "to laugh and grin / That's why we *shvartzas* were born."[17]

Soon another objection is raised from the floor: "When we elects a President, we elects him to *do* something. This President just sits in the chair and don't do nothin.'" "I'll do something!" Davis replies, and flashes a quick minute-and-a-half dance number, moving from a flat-footed time step and "BS chorus"—standard steps from vernacular jazz dance—to more complex

combinations and "up on the toes" moves that cite contemporaries like the Nicholas Brothers, a modified "falling off the log" move and a prideful, strutting little "walk around," all delivered in the "class act" style of a top hat and tails presentation. "There you is," Waters says with a mother's pride; "*You ain't never had a president what could do that.*" It is worth mentioning here that the number is bound to be slightly misread from the twenty-first century perspective. While the seven-year-old Davis was a talented dancer who had fully mastered the mugging cuteness that had won him a spot with Will Mastin's troupe, it is also true that child performers of this genre and skill were fairly common on the black vaudeville circuit. There were performance conventions in place, that is, and there was also a kind of bouncy immaturity to Davis's performance that would have almost certainly led 1930s audiences to react more coolly than today's YouTube audiences do.

Harrington next announces a group of "ambassadors and diplomats and such like," and the Will Vodery Girls perform a lavish rendition of "Putting It On." The pop and smoke of a photographer's flash wakes the sleeping Waters, now once again on her porch with the young boy, and she realizes, "My pork chops is burning." She returns to "All God's Children Got Wings," and the film ends with the gentle ode to segregation, "Just you stay on your own side of the fence / and no harm will come to you."

Rufus Jones captures many important elements of the entertainment world in which Davis came up. His remark that he "was raised on the tag end of vaudeville" places him on a historical timeline, to be sure, but it places him in a very particular social setting as well. The "on" invokes the *how* of his rearing in addition to the *when* or *where,* as in "I was raised on cornbread and religion." As relayed in *Rufus Jones,* this was a segregated world where any production anticipating a white or a mixed audience was firmly under white control, and therefore where black talent often faced tough choices between embodying insufferable racial caricatures and unemployment. It was a world with a lot of watermelon and fried chicken, and a lot of jokes about chicken thievery and razor violence—much like the world of the "coon song," as described by Alain Locke, still rife with relics of "the worst minstrel days."[18]

But it was also a world in which black actors learned to play *through* the thick racial stereotypes, making the images their own by going over the top and thus subtly subverting the racialized commentary they had been enlisted to ventriloquize, as in minstrelsy, doing a parody of a parody. The last line of "Underneath the Harlem Moon" is typically rendered as "that's why darkies were born," for example, but Waters's use of the Yiddish *shvartsas* resolves the

authorship more clearly, and so highlights the racial ventriloquism that was central to the white Vitaphone production. When she later says, "There you is, *you ain't never had a president what could do that,*" the line comes across something like a hostage's compliance with explicit instruction. Riffing on precisely such moments, Phil Silvers would later do a scorching stand-up routine that depicted white lyricist Jerome Kern tutoring Paul Robeson in "proper" Negro dialect for his "Old Man River" performance in *Show Boat*.[19] In any case, *Rufus Jones* remains one of the most complete portraits extant both of the young Sammy Davis Jr. and of the entertainment world that reared him.

TAP

Black performance styles in blues, jazz, comedy, and tap were of necessity developed in conversation with such white-over-black imperatives, whether in accommodation or resistance. For comedians, this meant a minstrelized style of self-abnegating humor. For female dancers it meant oversexualization. For male dancers, it often meant an enforced clownishness that undercut the virtuosity and athleticism of the dance and of the dancers themselves. When not *over*-sexualized (Gus in *Birth of a Nation*), that is, the black male body in American entertainment tended to be *de*-sexualized (Hamtree Harrington in *Rufus Jones*). The Rufus Jones character himself emerged from among the legions of children known as "pickaninnies" or "picks" on the vaudeville circuits, though on the stage they typically accompanied a white star. Will Mastin himself had been a "pick," for example, and in film this tradition ran all the way back to one of Thomas Edison's first shorts, *The Pickanniny Dance* (1894).[20] In this regard a film like Vitaphone's *Rufus Jones* not only emerged from the minstrel stage, but shared a family tree with the acreage of racist advertising and postcard images and the "coon song" sheet music iconography that descended from Reconstruction-era slanders about Negro self-governance, which in turn descended from the caricatured "Bobalition of slavery" broadsides of the 1830s.[21]

There are four distinct contexts of differing historical scale—horizons of interpretation—in which to locate the performance styles that Davis was beginning to hone in *Rufus Jones* and the circumstances he inherited. The first is the deep historical past that stretches back centuries to Africa, cultural "retentions" transported through the Middle Passage. Tap dancing was

among the styles that evolved from a long history of social dance in Africa, and from syncretic cultural exchanges in port cities throughout the Americas, where African jigs and European forms like the hornpipe and Irish step dancing converged in a "double helix" of traditions.[22] The repertoire of the enslaved included what later publics knew as the pigeon wing, buck dance, buzzard lope, ring dances, quadrilles, cotillions, reels, and water dances, among others. The African step dance called "Giouba" (typically rendered as "Juba," and later, "Pattin' Juba"), according to dance historian Marian Hannah Winter, "somewhat resembled a jig with elaborate variations, and occurs wherever the Negro settled, whether in the West Indies or South Carolina."[23] The Juba step has been described as a "sort of eccentric shuffle," fusing "steps and figures of the court of Versailles . . . with the hip movements of the Congo." Pattin' Juba consisted of "foot tapping, hand clapping, and thigh slapping, all in precise rhythm."[24] Early-twentieth-century anthropologists made all sorts of highly problematic pronouncements about African peoples, but in their zeal to create typologies and catalogues of African cultural "survivals," these scholars did render a wealth of observation on the continuities in dance elements across the diaspora. They saw "the Ibibio of Nigeria performing a shimmy to end all shimmies, the Sherbro of Sierra Leone executing an unreasonably fine facsimile of the Snake Hips, and a group of Hausa girls near Kano moving in a fashion closely resembling the Lindy, or Jitterbug." "Dahomean shoulder movements" were "antecedents of the Quiver, Shake, Shimmy, and similar dances." A Winti dance in Surinam featured "fingers tugging at the clothing, as though scratching to relieve an itching sensation," a gesture later known in North America as the Itch and made famous on the vaudeville stage by the popular duo Butterbeans and Susie, to the tune of "The Heebie Jeebies."[25]

The hallmarks of African dance wherever found included improvisation; call and response; the counter-clockwise circle dance; a taking of turns (soloist and ensemble—the "break"); the shuffle; a flexing or bending of the knees and waist that is quite distinct from anything in the European tradition; a centrifugal force, radiating outward from the hips ("Congo hip movements"); and a propulsive rhythm. It is typical in this tradition, wrote Alain Locke, "to embroider whatever basic rhythm is set—changing, doubling, skipping beats in a fashion bewildering to those less expert in rhythmic patterns and designs."[26] All of these elements tended to fuse movement with sound in such a way that the dancers themselves became musicians, and vice versa.[27] The polyrhythmic character of African musics also produced a common style of dance in which "the feet followed one drum, the hips another," in what one

musicologist calls a "metronomic sense" of the regular pulse beneath highly complex and competing beats. In Africa and across the diaspora, it should be noted, all of this was to be accomplished by the dancer "with an air of ease and silent disdain," in Robert Ferris Thompson's words, that was to become in America the very hallmark of "cool."[28] The increasing commercialization of dance, beginning with the onset of Ragtime and Tin Pan Alley, enshrined these African "survivals," even while concealing them behind the modern American nomenclature of "Quivers," "Shakes," and "Shimmies."

The second horizon of interpretation concerns the evolution of African dance within the brutal context of Atlantic slavery. The percussive dancing that passed from plantation to stage—from Master Juba to Bert Williams and Bill Robinson to the Will Mastin Trio—not only retained the polyrhythms and adapted specific steps from earlier African social or religious dances like the Ring Shout, but were directly influenced by fugitive dance moves that had been developed within (and because of) the constraints and surveillance of slavery. When African drumming was outlawed, as Brenda Dixon Gottschild writes, for example, "The feet—as well as hands clapped together or patted on various body parts and 'found' instruments such as spoons, buckets, or brooms—had to carry out the function of drums."[29] Likewise, Protestant strictures against dance in parts of North America prompted slaves to improvise ingenious forms of their own religious dancing that avoided ever crossing the feet in a way that would *look* like dancing to the Euro-American eye. They would

> shift [their] weight from heels to toes, to insides and outer edges of the feet, moving the feet in various directions, turning toes and knees in and out, sliding, gliding, shuffling, stomping the feet—without ever crossing them or lifting them from the ground. On top of this they articulated the torso and limbs in counter rhythms and different directions, adding syncopations and improvised movements throughout the body. Thus they were not breaking white Protestant rules. . . .

What this elaborate improvisation within the constraints of religious taboo would look like, writes Gottschild, is "an early form of pre-tap dance called buck dancing."[30]

The third horizon of interpretation has to do, not with specific gestures or moves, but with the *spirit* and the social relations of the dance. The Ring Shout or Juba crossed from the vernacular social world into the realm of commercialized entertainment already embedded in a set of friendly com-

petitive practices—the hoofers' competition, the cutting or carving session—that mirrored other African-descended forms of competitive interaction such as the dozens, woofing, sounding, and signifying. Such forms richly combined individual expressive possibility with rituals of collectivity. One aspect of this inheritance was its masculinism. This is not "maleness," per se, as there were indeed brilliant women soloists like Katie Carter ("the Queen of the buck and wing dancers"), Alice Whitman, and Jeni LeGon, and also genius soubrettes among the chorines, like Florence Mills and Josephine Baker. *Masculinism,* rather, is a competitive bravado rooted in distinctly gendered sociality, privilege, and exclusivity, as in Harlem's famous "Hoofer's Club." "The older guys came with blood in their eyes," said Honi Coles, "always looking to cut you up. But that's how tap is."[31]

On the black side of the color line the masculinist aspect of this inheritance was imbricated with a broader, communal, race-based understanding of the dynamic relationship connecting the soloist to the ensemble—a cultural sense of individual expression amid mutual caretaking, a deep feeling of responsibility among members of the ensemble that critics have called *jazz ethics.*[32] Sammy Davis Jr. and his circle of old time hoofers paid homage to precisely this ethos in *Tap* (1989). The jam session (musicians) or the cutting session (dancers) is "the jazzman's true academy," as Ralph Ellison wrote. "It is here that he learns tradition, group techniques and style. . . . [He] must then 'find himself,' must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul."[33] This is what Ellison had in mind when, in response to the proposition that African Americans "lacked cultural institutions to protect our cultural gains," he famously replied, "No. We *do* have institutions, we have the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, *and we have jazz.*"[34] At once metaphor and philosophy, Ellison's formulation posits a direct relationship between jazz and democracy in the dire dependence of both upon absolute freedom of self-expression and absolute commitment to the wellbeing of the ensemble. It was in this "jazzman's academy" sense that—in spite of the negative connotations bequeathed from minstrelsy—tap dancing could be a joyous expression of self-emancipation, "an act of black beauty and power," "a means of survival," as historians of dance have put it.[35] The improvisational interlude—the *break*—whether in dance or in sound, is the foundation of African American performance practices whose rhythm, angularity, asymmetry, and dynamism are deeply expressive of identity, both on individual terms and as a member of a collectivity and a link in the chain of tradition. Art itself, wrote Ellison, "the blues, the spirituals, the jazz, the dance—was what we had in place of

freedom."[36] The dancing body became an instrument of liberation. "Setting a high value on the community-strengthening powers of rhythmic synchronization came with the slaves' African heritage," writes dance historian Brian Seibert, while "associating dance with freedom became part of their American one."[37] This principle of self-possession and self-emancipation has been on regular display in performance settings from the Time Step to the Shimmy to the Lindy Hop to the Moon Walk—to that monument to masculinism itself, the NFL end zone dance.

Ah, but those negative connotations. This brings us to the fourth horizon of interpretation, the evolution of tap dance forms in the North American entertainment context, and in particular the practices and the long shadow of the minstrel stage. Tap as "what we had in place of freedom" was immensely complicated and has been frequently misjudged because of its entanglement with minstrelsy, where, as Alain Locke put it, black performers had to make themselves over into "Pseudo-Negroes," producing "a decoction of their own slap-stick, caricature and asininity," "superficial types of uncles, aunties, and pickaninnies" echoing in the "minstrel and vaudeville stereotypes of Negro half-clowns. . . ."[38] As the jig became associated with Negro dancers, the very word "jig" became a racial epithet, as in "jigaboo," or "Jig Top," the segregated tent of the traveling circus. The percussive moves of the diaspora were first brought to the American stage by black entertainers like William Henry Lane (known as Master Juba), but from the mid-nineteenth century onward, many African-descended dance and music practices in North America became best known not under the proper authorship of African American performers, but only when circulated in ridicule by white performers in blackface.[39] Among white audiences, these burnt-cork forms often passed as originals rather than copies. The cakewalk—North America's first genuine "dance craze," around the turn of the twentieth century—nicely captured the racial house of mirrors that American entertainments had constructed. Here white dancers took to parodying their African American compatriots in an elaborate, ritualized quadrille that was in truth already a black parody of *them*.[40] "Us slaves watched white folks' parties," an elder remembered at the turn of the century, where guests "danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march, with the ladies and gentlemen going different ways and then meeting again, arm in arm, and marching down the center together. Then we'd do it, too, *but we used to mock 'em,* every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it, but they seemed to like it; I guess they thought we couldn't dance any better." Referring to herself as "an old strut gal," she also recalled that

slaves could win special privileges if their dancing pleased the master.[41] The highly stylized cakewalk (or walk around)—including the contest and the prize—became a standard finale in the minstrel show from the Civil War until the early decades of the twentieth century. Bert Williams and George Walker brought the cakewalk to Broadway around 1900. It was "through minstrelsy that the dances called jigs, juba, shuffles, and breakdowns became theater," writes Seibert. "It was through minstrelsy that they became tap."[42]

The minstrel mask was worn to quite different effect by black and white entertainers. As Thomas Riis has observed, "Afro-American tricksters, used to wearing the mask for white slave owners, could show the white minstrel audiences what they wanted to see. . . ."[43] George Walker, for instance, would articulate his participation in minstrelsy in a fairly sharp language of proprietary right: "We thought that as there seemed to be a great demand for black faces on the stage, we would do all we could to get what we felt belonged to us by the law of nature."[44] Though white and black performers wore the mask quite differently and to disparate effect, the songs, dances, and comedic routines associated with minstrelsy circulated widely in American culture from the early nineteenth century onward, first in the minstrel show proper, but later in revues, operettas, burlesques, road shows, tent shows, medicine shows, circuses, small carnivals called "gillies," and vaudeville.

In such a context of mutual mimicry amid steep and dangerous power differentials, racial parody became written into the forms themselves in such a way that, even when performed by African Americans (often in blackface), they took on an aura of racial disparagement—the Jump Jim Crow and Zip Coon caricatures in early minstrelsy, the "happy darky" of the sentimental plantation formula or "plant show," the flash and grin of the Hollywood dance number. White entertainers in the minstrel era fought to preserve their place of privilege by excluding black performers through the mechanics of Jim Crow itself: "Blackfaced white comedians used to make themselves look as ridiculous as they could when portraying a 'darky' character," said George Walker.

The "fatal result" was that black performers "imitated the white performers in make-up as 'darkies.' Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself." Several generations of black performers had to contend with "the conflict between self and stereotype that existed in the minstrel dancing body."[45] Even Williams and Walker, who chafed and rebelled against the minstrel stereotypes, billed themselves as "The Two Real Coons." Alain Locke would observe of Bill