

On With the Dance: Nation, Culture, and Popular Dancing in Britain,
1918-1945

by

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To my parents, Douglas and Glennis Abra

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List of Abbreviations

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation

M-O A: Mass Observation Archive

IWM: Imperial War Museum

TNA: The National Archives

PRO: Public Record Office

AIR: Records created or inherited by the Air Ministry, the Royal Air Force, and related bodies

CO: Records created or inherited by the Colonial Office

HO: Records created or inherited by the Home Office

LAB: Records of departments responsible for labour and employment matters and related bodies

MEPO: Records of the Metropolitan Police Office

PMC: Public Morality Council

NVA: National Vigilance Association

BNC: British National Committee

NAS: National Archives of Scotland

Abstract

This dissertation examines the evolution, experience, and public understanding of popular dancing in Britain between 1918 and 1945. It argues that this period saw the development of a national dance culture, a phrase which should be understood in specific ways. Due to factors such as the transformation of popular dance forms and the opening of hundreds of affordable public dance spaces, dancing became increasingly accessible to and participated in by the whole of the nation. Dance culture also had a strong influence on the cultivation of ideas about what it meant to be British, through the development of the so-called “English style” of ballroom dancing, as well as the thematic content of popular novelty dances such as the Lambeth Walk. Moreover, in response to the growing influence of the United States on British dancing, cultural producers such as the ballroom dance profession and dance hall industry disseminated defensive definitions of Britishness constructed against a highly racialized American other, while British dancers physically enacted their own meanings and ideas about the nation through the performance of popular dances.

In this way, the discussion shows that the development of popular dance culture must be understood within a transnational system of cultural circulation, influenced by continental Europe, Latin America, Britain’s colonies, but especially the United States. This study therefore adds to a developing historiography that suggests that British

domestic culture and national imagining were forged and influenced by sites and factors including, but not limited to, the Empire. It is also a major contention that contemporary concerns about Americanization existed in tension with many Britons' fascination with American dance forms, and that the national dance culture was often an unfinished project. This provided a space for the consideration of issues of national concern, including notions of respectability and sexual morality, as well as for reifying or challenging hierarchies of gender, class, and race. Finally, the dissertation argues that the content, as well as the host of cultural meanings associated with popular dancing, were forged through an ongoing negotiation between the ballroom dance profession, the dance hall industry, and the dancing public.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Ballroom dancing is not an activity which is cut off from the world, but a living thing influenced by events and sensitive to what is going on all around. A change of fashion, war, an upsurge of interest in a particular foreign country, pop music, increased opportunities for travel, social upheavals, the popularity of film or television music – all these have had repercussions on the dancing scene.¹

Victor Silvester

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, Victor Silvester, author of the comments above, was one of Britain's foremost professional ballroom dancers and dance bandleaders. As such, he was well-positioned to observe the forces and events that affected the evolution and performance of dancing, and the ways in which this cultural form became implicated in the wider social fabric of the nation. Indeed, Silvester's words were to some degree echoed decades later by a twenty-first century dance studies scholar, who recently noted, "[the] forms of modern social dance ... are symbolic or *expressive* of a host of social and cultural values (regarding individual or group identity, sexuality, or class interests, for instance) *particular to* their time, place, and historical contexts."² It has therefore been a long-held belief of scholars and dancers alike that dance is, and historically has been, reflective of a host of complicated social and cultural issues.

However, this dissertation begins with a question: how would the historical picture look

¹ Victor Silvester, *Modern Ballroom Dancing*, (London: Stanley Paul, 1977, 1990), 17. These comments appear in a revised edition of Silvester's seminal guide to modern ballroom dancing, which was originally published in 1927.

² Julie Malnig, introduction to *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 5.

if we turned Silvester's comments around? Rather than considering how dancing was influenced by war, fashion, social transformation, and other cultural forms like film and popular music, I want to consider how dancing influenced these processes, and many others. It is a primary premise of this study that popular dance is not simply reflective, but constituent, of social change, and national imagining.

This dissertation charts the evolution, experience, and public understanding of popular dancing in Britain between 1918 and 1945. I argue that this period saw the development of a *national dance culture*, a phrase which should be understood in three ways. First, I demonstrate that during the period under review, popular dancing became increasingly national in scope and accessibility. The end of the First World War saw the rapid ascendancy of a new popular dance form known as modern ballroom dancing, which, due to its simplicity and originality, quickly became the primary dancing style throughout the country. At the same time, the opening of hundreds of affordable public dancing spaces, notably the *palais-de-danse*, provided new, increasingly standardized, opportunities for dancing as a leisure practice to Britons of all regions and classes. Moreover, the rise of the public dance hall was part of the wider commercialization and mass-marketing of leisure that occurred in Britain during the 1920s and 1930s, and this discussion will show that popular dancing's connections to other commercial cultural forms of the period, particularly music, radio, film, and print, did much to disseminate dance culture throughout the nation; the result was that even those who never visited a dance hall or engaged in the actual performance of dancing, consumed popular dance culture in varying ways. In its first meaning, therefore, the phrase "national dance

culture” connotes a developing mass culture, in which the experience of dancing became increasingly accessible and homogenous.³

Second, popular dance culture was national in the respect that it provided a space for the forging, expression, and embodiment of ideas about national identity. The following chapters will show that during the period under review, cultural producers of dancing such as the ballroom dance profession and the dance hall industry were much invested in creating or legitimizing something inherently “British” in popular dancing, and this in turn suggested specific ideas about what it meant to *be* British. Through the development of the so-called “English style” of ballroom dancing, and the creation and marketing of popular novelty dances like the Lambeth Walk, the profession and industry advanced ideas about the nation that shifted over time from espousals of modernity, to nostalgic celebrations of Britain’s natural beauty and folk tradition, to evocations of democracy and national unity. I suggest that these efforts to “anglicize” popular dancing must be understood in terms of Britain’s position within a transnational system of popular cultural exchange, in which strong foreign, particularly and increasingly American, influences were brought to bear on British dance culture. I further show that despite the best efforts of the dance profession and dance hall industry to create an authentically national dance culture, the dancing public continued to embrace American dances, music,

³ Part of the reason that I am employing national dance culture rather than “mass dance culture” is because of the amount of scholarship, notably by Michael Kammen, that suggests we cannot really talk about a “mass” culture until after the Second World War. Even then, as James Cook recently noted, “mass” culture is never fixed, but constantly continues to expand in terms of its ubiquity. This point is further validated by my own argument, since as will be discussed below, I am also contending that the national dance culture was left to some degree unfinished, and was not wholly universalizing. See Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century*, (New York: Knopf, 1999); James Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. James Cook, Lawrence Glickman and Michael O’Malley, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 291-317.

and dancing films, and was able, through its consumption or performance of popular dance culture, to either reify or challenge the ideas about the nation being espoused by the producers of dancing.

This tension between the dance profession, dance hall industry, and dancing public as to the content and meaning of the national dance culture points to the third way in which I want the phrase to be understood, which is as to some extent an unfinished ideal of the contemporary producers of dancing, and as a mutable cultural field of shifting experiences and meanings. Despite the best efforts of some within the dance profession and dance hall industry, there remained disparities among Britons in terms of access to quality instruction or facilities for dancing. Those within the dancing public also made choices in their consumption of dance culture, determined by factors such as their age, geographic region, personal preferences, and of course level of interest in dancing, which significantly individualized their experience. These choices shaped the content of the national dance culture in ways beyond those envisioned by the profession and the industry, exemplified through the dancing public's continued disinterest in dances the profession revered, such as the tango, and in its continued attraction to cultural imports from the United States, which resulted in a national dance culture was at times more American than British.

The unresolved and changeable nature of the national dance culture also allowed it to become a site for the negotiation of cultural and social issues of national concern, such as the changing role of women in society, and ideas about national morality and respectability. I interrogate a number of these issues by considering the discourses that

surrounded the new “modern” dances, women who danced, professional dance partners, and public dancing spaces, showing that the professionalization, standardization, and commercialization of popular dancing were all strongly associated with attempts to reduce criticism of the new dance forms that emerged during this period, and to garner greater respectability for the social practice of “going to the palais.” At the same time, these cultural processes provided a space for the reinforcement, but also occasionally for the reimagining, of categories of gender, class, sexuality, and particularly race. I argue that the efforts to anglicize dances predominately of African American origin; public interest in black dance forms; and the social and material reality of interracial dancing during the Second World War, highlighted the increasing fluidity of British ideas about racial difference as the period progressed. I further argue that British conceptualizations of race must therefore be understood not only in an imperial, but also in a transatlantic and international system of cultural exchange.

Therefore, to reiterate, in describing a national dance culture, I am defining and employing the “national” in several different ways. The national refers to the physical breadth of the nation, and the nationwide and market-driven system of cultural and commercial exchange that emerged or expanded during the period under review, owing to factors such as economic and technological developments. At the same time, the national was also an ideological and discursive construction, a vision of what it meant to be British that was imagined and expressed through dance culture. I will be using both of these understandings of the national in the dissertation, independently and in conjunction with one another at different points in the discussion. In addition, while the national is

clearly a central organizing principle for this project, I am also seeking to destabilize and de-center the nation as a category by suggesting that the national must be understood in terms of the transnational and the global. The dance culture that emerged in Britain after the First World War was entirely dependent on transnational cultural exchange – not only were most dances imported from elsewhere, native-grown dance forms, from the English style to the Lambeth Walk, were created in reaction to foreign influence. I thus aim to show that the history of twentieth century popular culture was rarely entirely a national history; rather cultural forms originating in different countries were inextricably connected, moved across boundaries, and were profoundly influenced by these movements.

Defining “Popular” Dancing and its Producers and Consumers

A number of historical actors from the period under review, and some modern scholars, have referred to the dance forms, as well as the leisure practice of dancing, that are the focus of this dissertation as “social” rather than “popular.” Indeed, Julie Malnig’s recent definition of social dancing as a cultural form that “reflects and absorbs daily life as well as shapes, informs, and influences social patterns and behaviors,”⁴ well describes my own understanding of the functioning of dance within British culture and society. However, while I am therefore integrating scholarly definitions of social dancing into my analysis, I have chosen to use “popular dancing” as the primary frame of reference. In mobilizing the “popular,” I am seeking to draw upon and contribute to theoretical understandings of the functioning of popular culture.

⁴ Julie Malnig, introduction to *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake*, 6.

Considerable scholarly debate has been waged among historians and cultural theorists as to an appropriate definition of the “popular,” and my own use of the term in the chapters that follow should be understood in a specific way. First, I draw upon the work of scholars like Lawrence Levine in affirming that most of the dances under discussion, as well as the practice of going out dancing as a leisure activity, were popular, in that they were well favoured and enjoyed “popularity” with the British public. As Levine writes, “popular culture is culture that is *popular*; culture that is widely accessible and widely accessed; widely disseminated, and widely viewed or heard or read.”⁵ Dancing was unquestionably popular in this way, not only in terms of the degree of public favor that the dance forms under review received, but in terms of its sheer social ubiquity.

Second, I use the popular in order to invoke the processes of cultural production and consumption, of cultural appropriation, domination, and resistance, that exist along what Stuart Hall has termed “the dialectic of cultural struggle.”⁶ Hall suggests that while the struggle between the dominant culture, created within the context of commercial capitalism, and its consumers is always unequal, popular culture provides some space for consumers to suppress and resist the domination of the producer. A number of other scholars have since examined these processes with respect to specific cultural forms, showing that in their consumption of popular culture, historical actors have often been

⁵ Lawrence Levine, “Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and its Audiences,” *American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (December 1992): 1373.

⁶ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular’,” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). Considerably more work on the functioning of popular culture by Hall and other scholars emerged from within the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. For more on these developments, see Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.)

able to construct their own meanings, and even find common ground for political action.⁷ Moreover, as James Cook recently pointed out, growing numbers of scholars are also seeking to recover Theodor Adorno's phrase of a "culture industry" in order to encompass not only these processes of cultural production and consumption, but also the transnational circulation of cultural products.⁸ The transnational movement of dance culture is intrinsic to my own understanding of how British dancing was forged and disseminated, and is inherent to my discussion of "popular dancing" and the "national dance culture" in the chapters that follow. In referring to popular dancing, therefore, I am referring to a social and cultural practice that enjoyed popularity with a large number of Britons, and which was produced through a culture industry that functioned both within and beyond Britain's national borders.

In more specific terms, it is a primary contention of this dissertation that Britain's national dance culture was forged through an ongoing negotiation between the cultural producers and consumers of popular dancing, three groups that I am terming the ballroom dance profession, the dance hall industry, and the dancing public. At the same time, these negotiations, and the motivations and meanings constructed for all three groups, were affected by the transnational circulation of popular dance culture, particularly the

⁷See for example Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*, (New York: Verso, 1987); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Politics in Chicago, 1919-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Andrew Horrall, *Popular Culture in London, c. 1890-1918: The Transformation of Entertainment*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 2001; James Nott, *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸ See James Cook, "The Return of the Culture Industry." Adorno, along with Max Horkheimer, first posited the idea of a "culture industry" in 1944's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception."

growing influence of Americanization. While for the most part the profession and the industry were the primary producers of dancing, while the dancing public was the consumer, these positions were never fixed. Rather, the profession and the industry occasionally had competing or overlapping interests that disrupted or shifted their respective roles as dominant cultural producers, and most significantly, the dancing public often became producers of dancing in their own right. The most obvious way in which this occurred was that through the physical act of dancing itself, popular dancing was produced. Whatever efforts the profession or industry made to shape the content or performance of a person's dancing, the instant they stepped foot on the dance floor, much of the power of cultural production became embodied in them.

In referring to the ballroom dance profession, I am referring to the dancing teachers, exhibition and competition dancers, and writers for the dance press and other dance-related print culture, among who increasingly formalized professional ties were created starting after 1920. Most of these men and women often participated in more than one of the professional activities named above at the same time, and a growing number also became engaged in the commercialization of popular dancing as it progressed. However, it was the dance hall industry that was largely responsible for turning popular dancing into big business. The 1920s and 1930s saw the rise of a large number of public dance halls all over the country, which gradually consolidated into large chains of halls, the most powerful and renowned of which was the "circuit" controlled by the Mecca organization. In defining the dance hall industry, however, I include not only these large conglomerates, but also the independent dancing establishments that continued to exist,

and the often small-scale dance promoters who ran dances in rented spaces. The industry was therefore comprised of the whole and wide-ranging array of opportunities for dancing outside of the home, as well as many attendant enterprises ranging from print culture, to dance instruction, to dance band management.

The dancing public also contained a diverse group of contemporary Britons, engaged in popular dancing to widely varied degrees. In a primary respect, the dancing public was the dancers who frequented dancing classes and public dancing spaces, and engaged in the performance of popular dancing. However, there was a multitude of other ways beyond the physical practice of dance in which Britons consumed dance culture. Some people frequented public dancing spaces as patrons, but never took a turn on the floor. There were also large numbers of Britons who rarely or never went to the palais, but who were exposed to dance music or the performance of dancing via other cultural forms such as the radio or cinema. Moreover, even those Britons who espoused no personal interest in popular dancing at all were often exposed to dance culture through its representation in advertising, fiction, or newspaper articles. A major element of the national dance culture was its sheer ubiquity within British society, providing numerous ways in which it could be consumed by Britons in different spaces, and through different media. I am therefore suggesting that the dancing public should be understood not as a monolithic entity, but in fact as a collection of multiple dancing public(s).⁹

⁹ Since Jürgen Habermas published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962, in which he posited the existence of a “public sphere” in the eighteenth century, operating between the state and the private realm and providing a space for rational debate by citizens, scholars have debated the meaning of the “public.” This has resulted in the articulation of numerous definitions of the public, or of different public(s), in which it can connote the “people,” the physical spaces of social and political interaction, and the circulation of ideas through cultural texts. In discussing a dancing public, I am drawing on all of these

Historiographical Overview

This dissertation represents the first historical study to deal exclusively with the subject of popular dancing in Britain.¹⁰ It seeks to fill a still lingering hole within a burgeoning field of scholarship in British history on leisure and popular culture. Much of this work has focused on the expansion of commercial entertainment in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, looking at cultural forms such as the theatre, pleasure gardens, singing saloons, and particularly music hall.¹¹ For the twentieth century, historians have devoted the most attention to film,¹² radio,¹³ and football,¹⁴ and many have suggested

understandings, though I primarily want the term understood with respect to the specific function of dance culture that will be described throughout the dissertation. In this way the various publics are defined in terms of where, why, and most importantly how, its constituents consumed popular dancing, whether it was in the physical performance of a dance, or through the multitude of other cultural forms connected to dancing, ranging from radio to print. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, tr. by Thomas Burger, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991, 2001); Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

¹⁰ One of the most comprehensive studies of the development of modern ballroom dancing in Britain was provided by Philip J.S. Richardson in 1946. As editor of the *Dancing Times*, Richardson was at the forefront of many of the events described in this dissertation, and his work remains a valuable primary and secondary source. See Philip J.S. Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1946). In addition, in the 1960s, two studies of British social dancing during the period under review were conducted by a sociologist and a professional dancer/writer respectively. See Frances Rust, *Dance in Society*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); A.H. Franks, *Social Dance: A Short History*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963).

¹¹ Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885*, (London: Routledge, 1978); Peter Bailey, ed., *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988); Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*; Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth Century London*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Andrew Horrall, *Popular Culture in London, c. 1890-1918*; Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall & Modernity: The Late Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

¹² See Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-1939*, (London: Routledge, 1984); Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film*, (London: BFI Publishing, 1994); Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Best of British: Cinema and Society from 1930 to the Present*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999); John Hill, *Cinema in the 1980s: Issues and Themes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre, and the 'New Look'*, (London: Routledge, 2000); Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001). There is also a considerable volume of scholarship specifically concerned with cinema during the Second World War. See Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986); Philip M. Taylor, ed., *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World*

that the interwar years saw an important expansion in commercial leisure opportunities for all classes. Rising wages and shorter working hours permitted the pursuit of amusement for greater numbers of Britons, while the development of new technologies and commercial industries facilitated the expansion of entertainments such as recorded music, print media, radio, and the cinema.¹⁵ It is within this context that the development of a national dance culture must also be understood.

However, with the goal of diminishing a whiggish view of inexorable progress in popular cultural evolution, some scholarship has also attempted to reconceptualize leisure as an historical practice and theoretical framework. Andrew Davies has sought to broaden the definition of leisure in the twentieth century in order to incorporate more non-commercial, informal street-based and out-of-door pursuits, while Davies, Claire Langhamer, and Selina Todd have employed gender analysis in order to take the focus of leisure history off of men, particularly of the working-classes, and what they did with the time they were not at work.¹⁶ Langhamer in particular shows that by considering

War, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988); Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime Cinema*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); James Chapman, *Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

¹⁵ Asa Briggs, *A History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Siân Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939-45*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ James Walvin, *The People's Game: A Social History of British Football*, (London: Allen Lane, 1975); Jeffrey Richards, "Football and the Crisis of British Identity," in *Relocating Britishness*, ed. Stephen Caunce, Ewa Mazierska, Susan Sydney-Smith, John K. Walton, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Neil Carter, *The Football Manager: A History*, (London: Routledge, 2006); James F. Lee, *The Lady Footballers: Struggling to Play in Victorian Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁵ See also Stephen G. Jones, *Workers at Play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Martin Pugh, "We Danced All Night:" *A Social History of Britain Between the Wars*, (London: Bodley Head, 2008).

¹⁶ Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender, and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992); Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England, 1920-60*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918-1950*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

women's individual daily experiences and personal definitions of both "work" and "leisure," we can see that both in fact had very fluid meanings during the period between 1920 and 1960. In addition, David Fowler has argued that it was the interwar, rather than the postwar period, that first saw the emergence of a strong youth culture in Britain.¹⁷ Both he and Langhamer demonstrate that during the interval in the life-cycle between leaving school and marriage Britons suffered the least from unemployment and had the most disposable income, and that leisure and entertainment was therefore a primary concern for this social group.

This scholarship has opened the door for my specific study of dancing in a number of important ways. First of all, popular dance was a leisure practice that was most associated with women, and which also fostered and provided a channel through which to express concerns *about* women. Second, dancing formed an integral part of interwar and wartime youth culture, though I am also seeking to complicate the idea that dancing was predominately associated with younger Britons. While *going* dancing was mostly, though not exclusively, associated with youth, the wider popular dance culture was ageless in its appeal and consumption. And yet, the following chapters will also show that as the ones who most often frequented the dance halls and engaged in the physical practice of dancing, young Britons were perhaps dance culture's most "active" consumers, with considerably more influence on how the cultural form evolved than older Britons, whose experience of dancing may have come largely via the radio, cinema, or print culture. It is also significant that the period between 1918 and 1945 saw the existence of at least two

¹⁷ David Fowler, *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyle of Young Wage-earners in Interwar Britain*, (London: Woburn Press, 1995).

discrete generations of “young” Britons, who perceived and influenced popular dancing in distinctive ways. Finally, a more fluid understanding of leisure allows me to think about popular dance culture in ways well beyond simply the social practice of “going out dancing.” I also examine dancing as a profession, as a marketing tool, as a cultural form that could be consumed through a multitude of different media by women and men, and as an embodied expression of national identity, to name only a few.

Much of the literature referred to above does discuss popular dancing to some extent, acknowledging its importance within British leisure and popular culture of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and thus further laying the groundwork for this dissertation. Langhamer, Davies, and Fowler all provide informative analyses of dance hall culture, but these are conducted as part of their wider respective examinations of women’s leisure, working-class leisure, and youth culture, and Langhamer and Davies focus for the most part on the city of Manchester, whereas I take a more holistic national view. Ross McKibbin has also provided a helpful overview of dance culture as part of his much larger work on the democratization of culture in Britain between 1918 and 1951.¹⁸ But the most comprehensive study of popular dancing to date has been conducted by James Nott, whose book on interwar popular music contains two excellent chapters on the rise of the dance hall industry and the experience of going out dancing.¹⁹ However, my approach is distinguished from Nott’s in several respects. First of all, Nott examines dancing largely as an off-shoot of the popular music industry. While I acknowledge and in fact argue for dancing’s important connections to music and a number of other

¹⁸ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ James Nott, *Music for the People*. Another study which briefly considers dancing within the wider frame of music is Dan Laughy, *Music and Youth Culture*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

contemporary cultural forms, I also see it as a distinctive cultural form in its own right, composed of its own specific adherents, print culture, celebrities, and professionals. Secondly, it is with respect to these professional dancers that this study is also set apart from Nott's and the other existing historical literature on popular dancing. I place great emphasis not only on the rise of the commercial dance hall industry, but also the professionalization of ballroom dancing, to the development and content of popular dancing during the period under review.

While historians have not considered the dance profession to any great extent, there has been scholarship in dance studies on professional dancing that provides important context to this study. Juliet McMains provides a brief discussion of the development of the English style and the professionalization of ballroom dancing in Britain as part of her larger study of the ballroom dance industry in the United States.²⁰ Theresa Buckland has also written on British ballroom dancing, and dancing masters such as Edward Scott, in the Victorian and Edwardian periods,²¹ while Beth Genné's work on the attempt to establish and achieve respect for a "British" ballet during the interwar years runs parallel to the same efforts within ballroom dancing that I am concerned with.²² Further scholarship in dance studies and dance history has also shown how the physical performance of dancing can embody meaning, and help to express

²⁰ Juliet McMains, *Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

²¹ Theresa Buckland, "Edward Scott: The Last of the English Dancing Masters," *Dance Research* 21, no. 2 (2003): 3-35. See also Theresa Buckland, "Crompton's Campaign: The Professionalisation of Dance Pedagogy in Late Victorian England," *Dance Research* 25, no. 1 (2007): 1-34

²² Beth Genné, "Openly English: Phyllis Bedells and the Birth of British Ballet," *Dance Chronicle* 18, no. 3 (1995): 437-451.

cultural identity.²³ This has provided an essential theoretical framework for my own argument about the ways in which Britishness was embodied through popular dance. In addition, other dance scholarship, notably the anthologies edited by Julie Malnig, Helen Thomas, and Jane Desmond, concerned with the functioning and physical performance of social and popular dance, has provided further theoretical insight and historical context to this discussion.²⁴

Finally, another major issue of concern in this project, as well as to some of the growing body of historical work on British popular culture, concerns the relationship between popular culture and the construction of national identity. How the British nation was imagined, or which social groups were granted citizenship in terms of their inclusion or exclusion from the national community, in a given historical moment, have been questions of concern for scholars of British history for some time. To cite only a few examples, historians have sought to understand what it meant to be British in the years following the Act of Union, in the age of high imperialism, or during the global wars of

²³ Ann Daly, *Done Into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1995); Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997); Jane C. Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographing History," in *The Routledge Studies Reader*, ed. Alexandra Carter, (London: Routledge, 1998), 180-191; B.J. Wray, "Choreographing Queer: Nationalism, Citizenship, and Lesbian Dance Clubs," in *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings about Dance and Culture*, ed. Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynn, (Banff: The Banff Press, 1999), 22-44; Beth Genné, "'Freedom Incarnate': Jerome Robbins, Gene Kelly, and the Dancing Sailor as an Icon of American Values in World War II," *Dance Chronicle* 24, no. 1 (2001): 83-103; Jane Desmond, ed. *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On & Off the Stage*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); Danielle Robinson, "Race in Motion: Reconstructing the Practice, Profession, and Politics of Social Dancing, New York City, 1900-1930," (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 2004).

²⁴ Helen Thomas, ed. *Dance in the City*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion*; Malnig, ed. *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake*. See also Carter, ed. *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*; Alexandra Carter, ed. *Rethinking Dance History: A Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2004).

the twentieth century.²⁵ The issue of how national identity was expressed or forged through popular culture, however, is a slightly more recent question, and one of increasing historiographical interest. Scholars such as Siân Nicholas on the BBC,²⁶ Jeffrey Richards on football,²⁷ Peter Bailey and Barry Faulks on music hall,²⁸ and Jeffrey Richards, James Chapman, and Andrew Higson on film,²⁹ have shown how popular culture helped to shape ideas about citizenship, as well as to express, often idealized, images of the nation and national community.

This study seeks to add to, but also to complicate, scholarly understanding of the relationship between popular culture and national identity, in ways that are related to the specificities of popular dancing as a cultural form. Much of the existing historical literature focused on these questions has suggested that popular culture has often reflected, or as Jeffrey Richards has suggested, mirrored, national identity.³⁰ In the case

²⁵ See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging of the Nation, 1707-1837*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar World*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Frank Mort, Becky Conekin, Chris Waters, eds., *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964*, (New York: NYU Press, 1999); Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Nicoletta Gullace, *Blood of Our Sons: men, women, and the renegotiation of British citizenship during the Great War*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain, 1939-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁶ Siân Nicholas, "From John Bull to John Citizen: Images of National Identity and Citizenship on the Wartime BBC," in *The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960*, eds. Richard Weight and Abigail Beach, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 36-58.

²⁷ Richards, "Football and the Crisis of British Identity."

²⁸ Faulks, *Music Hall & Modernity*, 2004; Peter Bailey, "Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion: Americanization, National Identity, and Sexual Politics in Inter-war British Music Hall," *Cultural and Social History* 4, no. 4 (2007): 495-509.

²⁹ Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); James Chapman, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005). See also Kenton Bamford, *Distorted Images: British National Identity and Film in the 1920s*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999).

³⁰ Richards, "Football and the Crisis of British Identity," 96.

of cultural forms such as film, for example, this mirroring regularly reproduced a vision of the nation consonant with dominant ideologies, consumed by cinema audiences who had little direct agency in determining the messages conveyed onscreen. What I believe distinguishes popular dancing from many other popular cultural forms, therefore, is that the production of ideas about national identity through dance was heavily influenced, and indeed embodied, by the dancers themselves. In the development of the English style, and in determining the content of novelty dances such as the Lambeth Walk, meaning was often constructed through the very act of dancing itself, in an ongoing negotiation between producers and consumers.

In considering the relationship between popular dancing and national identity, I also extend this analysis beyond the geographic borders of the United Kingdom, and contribute to a developing historiography that considers what have been termed “international” or “global” influences on British domestic culture and national imagining. Historians have now well established that the British empire, and more specifically the reciprocal relationship between colony and metropole, had a strong impact on metropolitan society and national identity.³¹ However, a growing body of work has begun consideration of the influence of geographic sites and cultures beyond the Empire on these same material and discursive constructions, and seeks to situate British history in a more global context. As Andrew Thompson recently noted, “the empire [was] not the

³¹ See Burton, *Burdens of History*; Colley, *Britons*; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, (New York: Routledge, 1995); Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867*, (Oxford: Polity, 2002); Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, *At Home With the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

only frame of reference for national imagining.”³² Following on this work, I will demonstrate that not only Britain’s empire, but also continental Europe, Latin America, and particularly the United States, had a tremendous impact on what was danced in Britain; the professionalization of ballroom dancing; controversies over dancing; the décor and architecture of public dance halls; and what transpired in dancing spaces. Indeed, the increasing strength of Britain’s transatlantic relationship and popular cultural exchange was the chief factor that prompted the national dance culture to become a site in which ideas about Britishness were created and contested.³³ I will therefore show that it was not only the Empire, but also concerns about Americanization, as well as the continued public fascination with America and American cultural imports, which underpinned contemporary understandings of racial difference, and national identity.

Sources

This dissertation is based on a wide-ranging and varied primary source base, a fact which has not only helped me to reconstruct the functioning of popular dance culture, but also serves to illuminate the increasing ubiquity of dancing within British society during the period under review. Images, references, and discussion of popular

³² Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-nineteenth Century*, (Harlow, U.K.: Pearson Education Ltd., 2005), 200. See also Robert Aguirre, *Mexico and Central America in Victorian Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Jonathan Eacott, "Owning Empire: The Matter of India in the English-speaking World, 1730-1830," (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008).

³³ In this I am also drawing on the considerable scholarship connected to transatlantic cultural exchange, and particularly the work connected to the movement of black cultural forms within the African diaspora. See Stuart Hall, "What is 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 21-37; Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Cross Roads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Politics of Place*, (London: Verso, 1994); Anne-Marie Angelo, "The Black Panthers in London, 1967-1972: A Diasporic Struggle Navigates the Black Atlantic," *Radical History Review* 103 (Winter 2009): 17-35.

dancing appeared in a diverse range of print culture, both general and dance-themed, as well as institutional and government documents, police reports, social surveys, films, advertising, radio programmes, diaries, letters, and memoirs, all of which have been used to varying degrees in researching and writing this dissertation.

I have examined the printed representation of dance in everything from novels to women's magazines to the popular press, both local and national.³⁴ This has allowed me to explore how dancing was portrayed in fiction and advertising, as well as to follow public debates and discussions surrounding new dances, people (particularly women) who danced, and dancing spaces. There was also an extensive dancing-related print culture during the period under review, which is drawn upon heavily in the chapters that follow. What I am terming the "dance press" was largely composed of newspapers and periodicals produced by the ballroom dance profession, such as the *Dancing Times*; the popular music industry, such as *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*; and the dance hall industry, such as the Mecca chain's *Dance News*. All of these cultural producers also created a voluminous number of dance-themed books and pamphlets, pertaining to topics such as the history of dancing, dance hall promotion, and dance instruction.

Another major primary source base for the dissertation has been the Mass Observation Archive, and particularly its topic collection "Music, Dancing, and Jazz." Established in the late 1930s, Mass Observation was a left-leaning social research

³⁴ In using the popular press, particularly national dailies like the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, and *Daily News*, the circulation of which expanded significantly during the period under review, I take seriously Adrian Bingham's recent assertion that "if these newspapers cannot offer an unproblematic guide to the attitudes of individuals, they remain of immense historical value for the contribution they made to public and political discourse of the period." See Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 12.

organization concerned with documenting everyday life in Britain. Early on in its existence, the organization undertook a book project on jazz and dancing. While the book itself was never completed, I have been able to draw upon the plethora of dance hall observer reports, newspaper clippings, dance hall promotional materials, and correspondence with key figures in the dance profession and dance hall industry, which Mass Observation assembled in pursuit of the project.

Other important sources have included Metropolitan Police reports, particularly those pertaining to police raids on night-clubs believed to be contravening licensing laws related to the sale of alcohol and the regulation of dancing, and which provide a vivid picture inside these establishments. I have also utilized both written and aural sources produced by the BBC, in order to learn more about dancing's presence on the radio during the period under review, and consulted a number of diaries and memoirs held by the Imperial War Museum, which have helped to document individual Britons' experience of dancing during the war years. Finally, I have listened to dance music and watched dancing films of the era, in order to further assess the multiple media through which contemporary Britons experienced and attained knowledge of popular dance culture.

Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter One provides an overview of the evolution of popular dancing during the period under review, highlighting the development and standardization of the English style of ballroom dancing, and the professionalization of the ballroom dancing community. I discuss how these processes were inextricably connected, in that a catalyst

to the dance profession's development was the series of conferences convened in the 1920s by prominent members of the dance community who were seeking to standardize the steps of new ballroom dances that became prominent after the First World War. Out of these events emerged the "standard four" dances of the English style, the foxtrot, the one-step (which would later be replaced by the quickstep), the modern waltz, and the tango, which the profession then passed on to the dancing public via dancing schools, exhibition dancing, and dance competitions. However, I suggest that popular dance culture was not determined entirely by this direct top-down process of profession to public. Not only did a large segment of the dancing public eschew instruction, and remain largely oblivious to professional activities, the two groups were not always simpatico in terms of their dancing preferences. Pointing to dances such as the tango, which the profession admired but the public deemed too difficult, and the Charleston, which the public embraced and some in the profession scorned, I argue that the content of the national dance culture was constituted through an ongoing negotiation between these producers and consumers of popular dancing.

Chapter Two provides additional context to some of the professional motivations and dancers' preferences described in Chapter One by considering the social perception and public understanding of popular dancing. I suggest that the dance profession was strongly influenced by criticisms of dancing, originating both within and beyond the British Isles, in making its decision to standardize popular dances. At the same time, I demonstrate that the societal attacks on modern ballroom dancing were never as voracious as many professionals seemed to fear, and that the profession's actions must

therefore be understood in terms of wider social and cultural changes that influenced the public view of popular dancing. These included ideas about modernity and concerns about an excessive pleasure-seeking culture in the postwar era, issues that were also both profoundly gendered. I argue that dancing's associations with flappers, or "modern women," caused many to view the leisure practice with suspicion and anxiety in the early 1920s, but also that these concerns dissipated over time. As the interwar period progressed, dancing became increasingly feminized, employed as an important feature of advertising, education, and fiction directed towards women, and providing new opportunities for feminine independence. The result was that by the outbreak of the Second World War, when women's behavior and pleasure-seeking once again became an issue of major social scrutiny, dancing had largely disappeared from the debate.

Having established the influential role played by the dance profession to the evolution of the national dance culture, Chapter Three then focuses on the development of the other major cultural producer of popular dancing, the dance hall industry. Starting with the opening of the Hammersmith Palais in London in 1919, the years that followed saw the rise of large commercial enterprises surrounding popular dancing, most notably the Mecca organization, Britain's largest chain of dance halls. I show that this development provided for an increasing uniformity of experience for Britons visiting dance halls throughout the nation, and yet I also suggest that in visiting these dancing spaces, the public entered into cultural negotiations with the dance hall industry just as they did with the dance profession. Not only did a great disparity remain in terms of the access to, and quality of, public dancing spaces for Britons of different regions and

classes, the dancing public made important choices as to where, how, and why they consumed dancing, which served to individualize their experience and kept “going to the palais” from becoming a wholly universal process. Chapter Three also situates the rise of the dance hall industry within the context of the wider commercialization of leisure during this period, and considers the ways in which popular music, the radio, film, and print culture served to further disseminate dance culture throughout the nation, thus creating the varied dancing public(s).

Like Chapter Two, Chapter Four seeks to situate the development of one of the two producers of dancing, in this case the dance hall industry, within a wider cultural context, by considering the social perception of public dancing spaces. I argue that certain dancing spaces, notably night-clubs and working class dance halls, attained a negative reputation based on their perceived connections to sexual immorality and criminal behavior, and that these dubious characteristics became personified in the figure of the professional dance partner. I also demonstrate that a major aspect of the commercialization of the dance hall industry was therefore to ameliorate the social perception of dancing spaces and dance partners, and to transform the dance hall into a respectable, even family-friendly, leisure venue. While this goal was in many respects successful, and the respectability the dance hall did significantly increase, it was at the cost of implementing policies that reinforced traditional ideas about gender, class, and sexuality. Moreover, the process of “cleaning up” the dance halls was never wholly complete, in that there remained establishments that never sought or accrued

respectability, in which the transgression of social mores and hierarchies remained possible.

Finally, the last two chapters of the dissertation consider the connections between popular dancing and the construction of national identity, focusing on the interwar and war years respectively. Chapter Five demonstrates that the 1920s and 1930s saw strong attempts on the part of both the dance profession and the dance hall industry to create a national, intrinsically “British” dance culture, and that these processes reified a vision of Britishness that was both racialized and anti-American. The first section looks at the dance profession’s attempt to “anglicize” foreign dances into the English style of ballroom dancing with a view to complying with the so-called British temperament, defined in terms of refinement and civility, while the second section examines the Mecca dance hall chain’s creation of a series of novelty dances, starting with the successful Lambeth Walk, which were explicitly marketed for their British creation and origin. I argue that while the ideas about national identity put forth by the producers of dancing were potent and often accepted by the dancing public, I also suggest that the creation of a national dance culture did not diminish Britons’ fascination with American imports, and that dancers had the ability to embody different meanings and national imaginaries in their physical performance of these dances.

Chapter Six then demonstrates how these same cultural negotiations over the vision of the nation between the producers and consumers of dancing persisted into the war years, though the meanings shifted to some degree. I argue that popular dancing provided a potent means for particularly the dance hall industry and the public to express

and embody many of the ideals associated with the “people’s war,” namely cheerful endurance, grace under fire, and national unity. I then examine the profession, industry, and public’s reception of one of the most important dances of the war years, the jitterbug, as well as the racial conflicts that arose in public dancing spaces, largely between white American servicemen and black GIs and colonial war workers and military personnel, in order to highlight popular dancing’s role in fostering and reflecting the fluidity in ideas about race. I argue that the persistently racialized discourses surrounding African American dances, as well as fears about miscegenation, existed in a largely unresolvable tension with Britain’s belief in its own benevolent racial policies, and a continued public interest in the black music and dancing forms that were emerging from the transatlantic culture industry in an ever-increasing volume.

Lastly, I want to note that the title of the dissertation is inspired by the standard proclamation issued from an M.C. or bandleader in order to commence the dancing in Britain’s dance halls during the period under review. Millions of British dancers, as well as those listening in to dance music programs on the radio, or watching the performance of a dance band in a musical film, would have heard these words regularly, and it seems appropriate to echo them in launching into the discussion that follows: “Now on with the dance...”

Chapter 2

Dancing in the English Style: Professionalization, Public Preference, and the Evolution of Popular Dancing

In 1921, famed dancing teacher Monsieur Pierre wrote an article for the *Dancing Times* that began with a question: “Who makes new dances?”¹ He also quickly summed up an answer to his own query by categorically stating, “not the teachers.”² Writing in a moment of significant transformation to British popular dancing styles, Pierre went on to describe how new dance steps were making their way into Britain’s public ballrooms each day, but suggested that this was a phenomenon entirely directed by the dancers themselves, rather than the teachers of dancing. While to some extent Pierre appeared to lament the manner in which “teachers, powerless to exercise any control, have had no alternative but to follow the lead of the very people they had once hoped to govern,”³ his concerns were not universal among professional dancers. Indeed, many contemporary teachers believed that dancers *should* be in control of popular dancing, and that the profession should follow after public will. And yet whatever ideals these teachers professed over adhering to public preferences, there is little question that as popular dance continued to transform over the next months and years, the increasingly professionalized ballroom dance community played a critical role in shaping its

¹ Monsieur Pierre, “Who Makes New Dances?” *Dancing Times*, December 1921, 299.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

evolution. The content of Britain's national dance culture was strongly influenced by both dancers and their teachers.

Starting at the moment of the so-called "dance craze" that gripped the British nation following the conclusion of the First World War, this first chapter will chart the evolution of popular dancing styles in Britain throughout the period under review. The early 1920s saw the ascendancy of modern ballroom dancing, a new popular dance form that would dominate the ballrooms frequented by all classes, in all parts of the British Isles, until well after the Second World War. Moreover, during the interwar years, these new ballroom dances, including the foxtrot, one-step, tango, modern waltz, and eventually the quickstep, were taken up by a developing British dance profession and standardized into what became known as the "English style" of ballroom dancing. I will argue that this process of professionalization was central to the evolution of the English style, in that growing connections between dancing teachers, the rise of exhibition and competition dancing, and other professional developments, shaped not only the content of the new ballroom dances, but also their performance by the dancing public.

However, this chapter will also show that while the dance profession played a critical part in the development of the English style, its ambitions and ideals for popular dancing did not always ally with the dancing public's. The profession advocated strongly for dances such as the tango and the blues, and yet they were never popular successes on the same level as the foxtrot or quickstep. At the same time, some dance professionals objected vehemently to dances like the Charleston, but were then confronted with the reality of immense public enthusiasm for the American import and had to adapt accordingly. Moreover, I argue that a dance such as the Charleston strongly illustrates the

complexity of the cultural processes that determined the content of the national dance culture, for these negotiations were not only between the profession and public, but occurred within each group as well.

Modern Ballroom Dancing's Early Days

In the months after the end of the First World War, many contemporaries observed that the euphoric British nation had entered into a frenzy of celebration and pleasure-seeking, chiefly emblemized in victory balls and a general craze for dancing. In January 1919 the *Daily Mail* referred to dancing as “the mania of the moment,” further noting that “society men and girls dance, business men and girls dance, working girls and men dance, every sort and kind of girl and boy dance; all have been caught up in the enveloping wave of dancing which is sweeping over the country.”⁴ A few days afterward, the same newspaper commented, “Everyone dances in London now. We dance to the gramophone, the piano, the ‘Jazz’ band ... We dance in our houses if they are of sufficient size ... we dance at ‘controlled dances’ and uncontrolled dances in all sorts of little halls and studios.”⁵ Many other contemporary press items also supported the existence of a dance craze. One report suggested that businessmen were leaving their offices in the middle of the day for a half hour turn around the floor at a tea dance, or that women would stop in for a quick dance while out shopping.⁶ Another article revealed that special dancing classes were being held in Marylebone to instruct disabled war veterans how to dance with artificial limbs,⁷ while a letter to the editor to one national daily expressed annoyance that authorities appeared to be prioritizing the building of dance halls over

⁴ “The Mania of the Moment,” *Daily Mail*, January 8, 1919, 7.

⁵ “How We Dance,” *Daily Mail*, January 15, 1919, 4.

⁶ “Tea-dancing,” *Daily Mail*, January 27, 1919, 4.

⁷ “One-legged dancers,” *Daily Express*, December 22, 1919, 6.

regular trash pick-up.⁸ The *Daily Express* summed up the situation as follows: “Dancing mad! London is stricken with the craze, and so also are the great towns throughout the country. The adult population of London at the present time can be roughly divided into three classes – those who are dancing, those who are learning, and those who want to do both.”⁹

Nor was the coverage of a dance craze limited to London-based or national newspapers. The dance press,¹⁰ for which dancing was the primary focus, naturally took notice of the upswing, with the *Dancing Times* noting, “The population of the dancing public was probably never greater than it is at the present moment. Hundreds of dancers in the Metropolis are so fond of it that they are not content unless they can go to a dance two or three times a week.”¹¹ Local newspapers also remarked upon the dancing boom, something reflected in an *Eastern Mercury* article announcing weekly dances at the Masonic Hall in Leyton: “We venture to think that never in history has dancing been indulged in to the extent it is this season, doubtless the re-action after the dreary days of the past five years, has something to do with this.”¹² Like the latter article, much of the initial press coverage of the dance craze suggested that it was merely a by-product of the end of the war. In another piece, the *Daily Mail* observed, “People are dancing as they

⁸ S.A.M., Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, January 31, 1920, 4.

⁹ “London’s Orgy of Dancing,” *Daily Express*, October 30, 1919, 7.

¹⁰ As I stated in the introduction, the “dance press” is the phrase I am using to encompass all of the contemporary newspapers and periodicals that dealt specifically with dancing as an art and leisure form. An abundance of dance-themed publications came and went during the 1920s and 1930s; of these *The Dancing Times* was arguably the foremost, and the only one to continue publication for the whole of the period under review. Much of the output of the dance press had direct links to either the ballroom dancing profession or dance hall industry, and it will be discussed at much greater length in Chapter Three.

¹¹ Sitter Out, *Dancing Times*, November 1919, 78-79.

¹² “Select Dances,” *Eastern Mercury*, October 21, 1919, 4.

have never danced before, in a happy rebound from the austerities of the war.”¹³ Cecil Sharp, a founder of the early twentieth century British folklore revival, similarly speculated in a 1920 speech that “the popularity of dancing to-day is due to the post-war tendency to exercise some form of expression.”¹⁴

Yet while there can be little question that in the aftermath of such a brutal conflict Britons were looking for a little fun, to ascribe the dance craze simply to postwar euphoria obfuscates the complexity and significance of the developments that occurred within British popular dance culture during this period. Rather, the postwar dancing boom was simultaneously a symptom and a catalyst of a much wider scale transformation of dancing as a leisure form. There were a number of different facets to this transformation – the decreasing expense of an evening’s dancing, largely associated with the opening of large public dance halls; significant changes to the popular music industry and other increasingly commercialized cultural forms that were inextricably connected to dancing; and the broader transformation of British social and cultural life during the interwar period that provided context to the changes in popular dancing. All of these issues will be discussed at greater length below or in subsequent chapters, but the first major dimension of the dramatic changes to popular dancing that must be addressed is the transformation of the dances themselves.

In the first months and years after the war, the groundwork was laid for what would eventually become known as the English style of ballroom dancing. It was during this period that the ballroom dance community, an increasingly professionalized enterprise, began to standardize the steps of the foxtrot, one-step, modern waltz, and

¹³ As quoted in Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1940, 1994), 18.

¹⁴ “Tea Table Talk,” *Daily Express*, January 5, 1920, 3.

tango, and these were the dances that would dominate British dance floors for decades to come.¹⁵ This process of standardization began in earnest around 1920, and will be discussed in more depth below; however, the roots of modern ballroom dancing extended back a decade earlier. Virginia Woolf famously suggested that “on or about December 1910 human character changed,”¹⁶ and it was in fact on or about that same year that the character of popular dancing began to change in significant ways as well.

In his 1946 work *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, Philip Richardson identified several significant developments in ballroom dancing that directed the shift into the “modern” era, the first of which was the evolution of the waltz. Having arrived in Britain in the early nineteenth century, the waltz remained the “unchallenged queen of ballroom” a century later, evolving only in minor ways after the mid-1800s.¹⁷ Then, during the early years of the twentieth century, a new variation on the waltz known as the Boston arrived in Britain from America. The new dance was eagerly embraced by scores of younger dancers, and it bore little resemblance to the waltz their parents had danced other than it was performed to waltz music. By the early 1910s, variations of the Boston reigned supreme, though its heyday proved to be short-lived. The dance had all but faded out by the First World War, though elements of the Boston could still be seen in a later waltz variation known as the Hesitation.¹⁸ The dance was primarily significant for being the first dance to cultivate relaxed and natural movements, which presaged the

¹⁵ The one-step was eventually phased out as one of the standard four dances in favor of the quickstep, a development that will be discussed below.

¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), 4.

¹⁷ Philip J.S. Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1946), 18. The waltz was not the sole dance to appear on public dance programmes prior to 1910. Also in favor were dances such as the two-step, the lancers, the quadrille, the galop, or sequence dances such as the valeta or military two-step, but none of these threatened the waltz’s supremacy.

¹⁸ Victor Silvester, *Modern Ballroom Dancing*, (London: Stanley Paul, 1977, 1990), 22. Ironically enough, the Hesitation was something of an amalgam of the Boston and the dance that replaced it in public favor – the tango.

philosophy behind the development of the English style of ballroom dancing after the war.

In addition to practical concerns such as the unrealistic amount of space that the dance required in crowded ballrooms, what trumped and transformed the Boston were two more developments in British popular dancing during the lead-up to the First World War. The first of these was the introduction of the tango, another dance that first appeared in Britain around the turn of the century but did not catch on in public ballrooms in any serious way until after 1910.¹⁹ Though occasionally billed as the “Argentine” tango and in possession of some real roots in Latin America, the tango that enthralled Britons during the last two dancing seasons prior to the First World War really originated in Paris. Eagerly embraced by Society, the dance took hold at London’s premiere dancing schools, and hotels and restaurants began hosting “tango teas,” afternoon dances where the public could participate in the dance. Despite its success, the tango originally spurred a bit of an outcry in the popular press over what Richardson termed its “imagined indelicacies.”²⁰ However, in an echo of the public’s acceptance of the waltz after it was included in the programme of a dance hosted by the Prince Regent in 1816, the tango attained greater social respectability once Queen Mary had witnessed an exhibition of the dance at a ball and pronounced it “charming.”²¹ Moreover, as will be discussed at greater length elsewhere, new dances almost invariably met with some opposition upon their initial introduction, but any public outcry was usually limited in scope and of short duration.

¹⁹ The earliest presence of the tango in Britain was as an exhibition dance on the London stage, which would soon prove to be a common way in which a new dance was initially introduced to the public.

²⁰ Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 25-26.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Around the same time as the tango crossed the English Channel, an even more significant influence on popular dancing was reaching the British Isles from the opposite direction. This was ragtime, which exploded onto the music and dancing scene in the United States in the early twentieth century and soon spread around the world. Like the majority of African American music and dance forms, ragtime represented a creolization of various African and European traditions; the music was notable for its use of syncopated rhythms, while accompanying “rag” dances emerged out of working-class dance halls throughout the United States.²² Ragtime’s British debut is usually associated with the arrival of Irving Berlin’s song “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” in 1912, which introduced the nation to both the new musical form, and the dances designed to accompany its syncopated melodies. Among the most popular were the so-called “animal dances,” such as the Bunny Hug, Grizzly Bear, and the Turkey Trot.²³ However, the most enduringly successful of the new ragtime dances was the one-step, about which Vernon Castle commented, “The Waltz is beautiful, the Tango is graceful, the Brazilian Maxixe is unique ... But when a good orchestra plays a ‘rag’ one has simply *got* to move. The

²² According to Nadine George-Graves, the African and African American influences on ragtime included elements such as improvisation, call-and-response, juba, the ring shout, and struts, while European influences included emphasis on the dancing couple rather than the individual, Scotch-Irish jigs, and German reels. Nadine George-Graves, “Primitivity and Ragtime Dance,” in *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 63. For more on ragtime see Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Ann Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Ian Driver, *A Century of Dance: A Hundred Years of Musical Movement, from Waltz to Hip Hop*, (London: Hamlyn, 2000); Danielle Robinson, “Race in Motion: Reconstructing the Practice, Profession, and Politics of Social Dancing, New York City, 1900-1930,” (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 2004); Julie Malnig, “Women, Dance, and New York Nightlife,” in *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 72-90.

²³ According to Ian Driver, it was the Turkey Trot which became more commonly known in Britain as “the Rag.” Driver, *A Century of Dance*, 30. For more on animal dances, see also George-Graves, “Primitivity and Ragtime Dance.”

One Step is the dance for rag-time music.’”²⁴ The virtually simultaneous ascendancy of the tango and the one-step also demonstrates the extent to which external influences on British dancing came from multiple locales in the early part of the period under review, though as the interwar period progressed the influence of America gradually began to outstrip the Continent and everywhere else. In addition, while the ragtime dances enjoyed credible enough success, their real significance resides more in what they presaged, namely the arrival of the foxtrot.

Contemporary sources and historical writing provide a number of different histories for the foxtrot, and varying dates for when the dance first arrived in Britain. Possibly simply another animal dance, the origins of the foxtrot have also frequently been associated with American vaudeville performer Harry Fox. However, it was the intervention of one famous dancing couple that caused the dance to take the world by storm. Vernon and Irene Castle were a married dance team who found international fame in Paris for their more sophisticated and graceful renderings of the new dance styles, particularly the tango and foxtrot. They developed the “Castle Walk,” a simple sequence of dance steps that could be applied to most of the popular dances of the day, and published a 1914 bestselling book, *Modern Dancing*, that outlined their toned down style of ballroom dancing. The grace and simplicity advocated by the Castles also had a strong influence on how the English style of ballroom dancing would eventually evolve, and went a long way towards diminishing public criticism of the new dancing styles around

²⁴ As quoted in A.H. Franks, *Social Dance: A Short History*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 176.

the world, through, as Ann Wagner has noted, their display of “skill, elegance, and propriety.”²⁵

Given the preponderance of foreign influences on British dancing styles, as well as the international celebrity of the Castles, it seems likely that the foxtrot became known in Britain before the First World War. Authorities such as Richardson suggested that the dance began to enjoy popularity in the country starting around 1914-1915, and was danced widely and enthusiastically throughout the war years. However, there was little consensus as to the actual steps of the dance, and everyone performed it a little bit differently. In addition, while between the Boston, the tango, the foxtrot and the other ragtime dances, it is clear that the first stirrings of a revolution in popular dancing styles was in the wind in the years leading up to the war, this trend was effectively halted for the duration. The nation’s preoccupation with the devastating conflict and wartime restrictions on leisure activities meant that while Britons continued to dance in earnest, the cultural form’s evolution really stalled until the last year of the war. At that point, however, a number of important developments critical to the evolution of modern ballroom dancing occurred, and occurred quickly. The period 1918-1920 was a chaotic and crucially important interval for the development of British popular dance culture.

One of the first major events that triggered the new era in British popular dancing was the arrival of American troops to Britain after the United States had entered the war. The presence of vast numbers of experienced dancers was critical to spreading knowledge and enthusiasm of not only the foxtrot, but also of another new cultural

²⁵ Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 255. For more on the Castles, see Robinson, “Race in Motion.”; Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), Chp. 5. It should also be noted that there was a distinct racial element to this effort to “tone down” the new dances in both Britain and the US, an issue that will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

phenomenon – jazz music. Newly arrived in Britain sometime towards the end of 1917, there was initially some confusion about what jazz actually was. While hundreds of bands, frequently composed of African American musicians, performed at theatres, restaurants, hotels, and dancing clubs around the country, a number of Britons believed that the “jazz” was the name of a new dance rather than of a musical style. A new American dance variation, comprised of three smooth steps performed to four beats of music, became known as the “jazz roll” and had a strong influence on the postwar development of the foxtrot.²⁶ Meanwhile, with the Armistice, the nation entered into the euphoric whirlwind of victory balls and tea dances that launched the dance craze described above, and a year later the opening of the Hammersmith Palais marked the beginning of the public dance hall era.

There were those who believed that the enthusiasm for jazz and the new dancing style was an ephemeral phenomenon, and that the dance craze was likely to fade away like so many previous social trends. In October 1919 the *Daily Express* printed an article entitled “Jazzed out,” in which the writer suggested that everyone was bored with the Jazz, and longing for a return to the days of the Mazurka and Minuet. He went on to describe the scene at a recent dance: “After midnight the juveniles performed prodigies of pedal exertion, but they looked just a little bored. That beginning of boredom means the end of jazz.”²⁷ A month later, a letter to the editor of the same newspaper also speculated:

The present craze for playing out of the home is one of the many phases which have grown on us since the war ... The soldier and the sailor are all out for enjoyment. So is the munitions girl and the land girl, and the woman who banged on a typewriter and made tea in the war houses of Whitehall.

But all this is just a passing phase. In another year ... Tired out with enjoyment, they will seek the quieter home life and the dance parties and theatre

²⁶ Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 38.

²⁷ Gerald Denston, “Jazzed Out,” *Daily Express*, October 28, 1919, 6.

suppers will give place to simpler evenings at cards and the like by the seclusion of their own firesides.

The slogan, for the next few years at any rate, will be, I surmise: “After the ball was over.”²⁸

Yet while there was clearly a contemporary notion that the enthusiasm for the new ballroom dances was just a passing fancy, and part of a general pleasure-seeking culture in postwar Britain, there were equally those who put forth strident arguments for dancing’s permanence and significance within the national culture. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these claims were being made from within the dance profession, where a number of professionals argued that although the dancing “mania” would inevitably dissipate with the passage of time, modern ballroom dancing was proving durable and developing into a national institution. In 1922 the *Dancing Times* declared,

The fact is that ballroom dancing to-day is no longer a craze in the same sense that roller skating and ping-pong were crazes for a brief period some years ago. There is nothing ephemeral about the interest which the public takes in dancing to-day. It has become an integral part of our social life, and a dance follows dinner as naturally as does the black coffee.²⁹

Two years later, professional dancer Franklyn Graham made a similar comment in *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*: “The craze for dancing no longer exists. Instead, dancing has become an established form of amusement and recreation. Dancing is an institution – as much an accepted item of life’s curriculum as the Sunday joint or the breakfast eggs and bacon.”³⁰ Another writer also made a comparison between dancing and daily activities in the same periodical: “The popularity of dancing amongst all classes has a quality of solidity that places it well beyond the circumscribed limits suggested by the word ‘craze.’ The boom in dancing is infinitely more than a passing phase; it has

²⁸ M.L. Trunket, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, November 27, 1919, 6.

²⁹ The Sitter Out, “In the Ballroom,” *Dancing Times*, October 1922, 21.

³⁰ Franklyn Graham, “Things Every Dancer Should Know,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, September 20, 1924, 173.

come to stay, and dancing is almost as much a part of our lives as getting up or going to bed!”³¹ From the beginning then, the dance profession was invested in establishing modern ballroom dancing as an ingrained, “everyday,” part of the national culture, and, as I will now show, professional dancers also had specific ideas about how this should be accomplished.

In the end, the dance profession proved to have more insight than dancing’s naysayers, and all of the factors described above – the new dances, the growth of jazz, the opening of public dance halls, and the general postwar pursuit of pleasure – resulted in something of a perfect storm that very quickly transformed popular dancing into one of Britain’s most widespread and established leisure activities. Yet in its early stages, this transformation was accomplished in such a chaotic way as to raise concerns among a number of leading figures in the dancing world. Chief among them was Philip Richardson, the editor of the *Dancing Times*, and arguably the foremost figure in the ballroom dancing profession for the entirety of the period under review. One of the greatest causes of concern for Richardson was the manner in which the public performed, or was being taught to perform, the new dances. As he later recalled, the quick tempo of jazz music, combined with the constant emergence of wild new dances, placed “the smooth foxtrot which had been slowly developing in grave peril. There was much freak dancing to be seen and freak variations.”³²

At the same time, the growing popularity of modern ballroom dancing incited a need for more teachers to educate the public in the new styles, and dancing schools cropped up in the hundreds. The *Dancing Times* remarked on this phenomenon with

³¹ Mona Vivian, “Has the Dance ‘Craze’ Come to Stay?” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, January 10, 1925, 229.

³² Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 39.

respect to the city of Leeds, somewhat facetiously noting, “[dancing] classes are springing up in nearly every street, and municipal authorities will seriously have to consider the advisability of opening up new streets to enable teachers to have one each.”³³ Essentially any enthusiastic ballroom dancer could set themselves up as a teacher, and there was little to no consistency as to how the dances were being taught. Richardson and other dance professionals sought to regulate this state of affairs, providing a proper system of accreditation for teachers, and even more importantly, standardizing the steps of the dances that they were teaching.

In addition to simply restoring some order to chaotic ballrooms, Richardson had two primary motives in seeking to standardize ballroom dancing. The first was economic, and went essentially unstated. While Richardson and other professionals publicly decried freak variations largely for being aesthetically displeasing, they also represented originality and improvisation on the part of dancers; this was viewed warily by the burgeoning dance profession, for, as Juliet McMains has noted, “if dancing became a free-form frenzy with no standards or techniques, dance teachers would soon be out of jobs.”³⁴ As I have already mentioned, the dance profession strongly advocated that the evolution of popular dancing should remain in the hands of the dancing public rather than the teachers; however, this ideal was often at odds with, and had to be negotiated in terms of, the profession’s economic needs and status as a commercial enterprise.

The other major impetus for standardization of steps went more acknowledged by the dance profession, and this was to deflect public criticism away from modern ballroom dancing. Richardson perceived condemnations of the new dances to be highly prevalent,

³³ Provincial Notes, *Dancing Times*, November 1919, 135.

³⁴ Juliet McMains, *Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 80.

particularly outside the British Isles. In 1914 the Vatican flatly denounced the Turkey Trot and the tango, and around the same time, the Dancing Teachers Association of America instituted a policy whereby it refused to provide instruction in any syncopated dance.³⁵ In their dance manual *Modern Dancing*, Vernon and Irene Castle were forced to address these criticisms head on, stating in the forward that one of the primary goals of the volume was to show that,

Dancing, properly executed, is neither vulgar nor immodest, but, on the contrary, the personification of refinement, grace, and modesty.

Our aim is to uplift dancing, purify it, and place it before the public in its proper light. When this has been done, we feel convinced that no objection can possibly be urged against it on the grounds of impropriety.”³⁶

Similar condemnations of modern ballroom dancing as vulgar, immoral, and a threat to social purity also circulated in Britain before the First World War intervened.³⁷ These criticisms of the modern dances had waned by the end of the war, and were arguably never as vociferous in Britain as they were in America or continental Europe, but the threat of public condemnation continued to loom large for those in the dancing profession. During 1919 and 1920, for example, the *Dancing Times* followed with interest (and perturbation) the attempts by some church authorities in France to stamp out modern ballroom dancing.³⁸ Despite the fact that no similar campaign existed in Britain, Richardson and others sprang into action.

During the early months of 1920, Britain’s leading dance teachers began to discuss holding a meeting to assess the state of ballroom dancing in the country. The

³⁵ Driver, *A Century of Dance*, 33. For more on controversies over ragtime and jazz dances in the United States, see also Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*; Malnig, *Women, Dance and New York Nightlife*; Robinson, “Race in Motion.”

³⁶ Vernon and Irene Castle, forward to *Modern Dancing*, (New York: Harper & Bros., 1914).

³⁷ Theresa Buckland, “Edward Scott: The Last of the English Dancing Masters,” *Dance Research* 21, no. 2 (2003): 3-35.

³⁸ This controversy will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Two.

Dancing Times pointed to the attacks on the foxtrot in France as evidence of the importance of such a conference: “Now, you and I know that these dances are perfectly clean, but unless we make a little counter-attack the very large number of people who do not dance will begin to pay attention to the other side.”³⁹ Accordingly, the first “Informal Conference of Teachers of Ballroom Dancing” was convened at the Grafton Galleries in London on May 12, 1920. Organized under the auspices of the *Dancing Times*, any teacher who requested an invitation was allowed to participate in the meeting (about two hundred were present), and the press was also in attendance. Philip Richardson was voted Chair of the proceedings, with other prominent teachers such as Madame Vandyck, Major Cecil Taylor, and Edward Scott, proffering suggestions on what should be the accepted steps of the foxtrot, one-step, and modern waltz; a demonstration of all three dances was also provided by dancing teacher Monsieur Maurice and his partner Leonora Hughes.

Summing up the meeting after the fact, Richardson wrote in the *Dancing Times* that “the business of the recent conference may be put under two headings. Firstly to eliminate what is bad. Secondly, to put what is good on a firm basis.”⁴⁰ A number of resolutions were passed in order to accomplish these rather ambiguous goals. In the quest to eliminate what was “bad,” all the teachers present avowed to “do their very best to stamp out freak steps.”⁴¹ These specifically included excessive lifts and dips, which the teachers believed were attractive enough as part of exhibition dances, but which were usually poorly performed by ordinary dancers; the resulting movements were perceived to be grotesque and ugly, and the cause of much of the ridicule and criticism directed

³⁹ The Sitter Out, *Dancing Times*, May 1920, 606.

⁴⁰ The Sitter Out, *Dancing Times*, June 1920, 687.

⁴¹ Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 44.

towards modern dancing. Freak steps also referred to those movements which produced havoc in crowded ballrooms, such as an over-pronounced pause in the Hesitation waltz, or side and backward steps in the foxtrot. But while the conference of teachers was quite sure as to what constituted bad dancing, there was less consensus on what was acceptable or good. Therefore, the decision was also taken to form a smaller committee whose responsibility it would be to determine what should be the recognized steps of the major modern ballroom dances, and which would report back to the larger group later that year.⁴²

Throughout the ensuing period between 1920 and 1922, two more informal conferences convened at the Grafton Galleries, and the smaller committee of teachers issued a report. In this way the steps of the foxtrot, one-step, tango, and modern waltz were slowly standardized, and these four dances formed a rudimentary version of the English style of ballroom dancing. In addition to the more formal meetings, the *Dancing Times* also began organizing special dances at which teachers could practice and confer about the steps of specific ballroom dances, such as the “Tango Ball” in May 1922, or the “Blues Ball” held in the fall of 1923. A number of these conferences and balls attended by Britain’s leading dancing teachers continued to convene over the course of the next few years, culminating in what Richardson termed the “Great Conference” at the Princes Galleries on April 14, 1929.

⁴² Chaired by Philip Richardson, the members of the select committee were: Mr. Charles d’Albert, Madame Edith Baird, Mr. H. Bloodworth, Mrs. Louis d’Egville, M. Georges Fontana, Miss Belle Harding, Mr. W.F. Hurdall, M. Maurice, Mr. Alec Mackenzie, Mr. D.G. MacLennan, Miss Murial Simmons, Mr. Edward Scott, Miss Jeannie Smurthwaite, Major Cecil Taylor, and Madame Vandyck. Most of these figures were principals of their own dancing schools and among the most prominent members of the ballroom dancing community at the time.

Significantly, it was at this event that teachers formally mandated that in standardizing modern ballroom dancing their focus should be on the public, rather than on professionals such as themselves, and that the basic steps of the four standard dances must therefore be kept as simple as possible.⁴³ The other major development of the conference was the creation of what eventually became known as the Official Board of Ballroom Dancing, the committee that would consider all major issues within the profession for years to come. This committee released a report shortly after the conference which outlined the simplified and standardized steps of the quickstep, foxtrot, modern waltz, tango, and blues. While slight changes and new variations would continue to develop in the ensuing years, the English style of ballroom dancing was effectively established from that point on.

The effects of the informal conferences of dancing teachers held throughout the 1920s were thus two-fold. First, the conferences were crucial to initiating the professionalization of modern ballroom dancing. During the interwar period formal ties were created between teachers, exhibition dancers, and competition dancers, and a large bureaucracy of professional associations developed around ballroom dancing, which regulated both instructional accreditation and dance competitions. Second, the work of the conferences went a long way towards determining what would be the major dances practiced in British ballrooms, and more to the point, what these dances would look like. The content of the English style, at least in an idealized form imagined by the dance profession, was in large part established through these meetings. I will now consider each of these developments individually, and in more depth.

⁴³ Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 75-76.

The Professionalization of Modern Ballroom Dancing

At the most basic level, the men and women who formed the ballroom dance profession were primarily dancing teachers. The connections between them were both formal and informal, with some teachers of dancing taking an active interest in the conferences of the 1920s and the professional associations that emerged from them, and others being simply happy to earn their living in a dancing school. However, beyond teaching, there were many other occupations and activities connected with professional ballroom dancing, including dance competitions, exhibition dancing, employment as a dance partner in a public ballroom, or the writing of dance instruction manuals or articles for the dance press. In addition, as the interwar period progressed, the connections between members of the profession that began at the first “informal” conference in May 1920 evolved into an increasingly complex bureaucracy. As the following discussion will show, the professionalization of ballroom dancing was a significant cultural occurrence in its own right, but also had a strong impact on the ongoing development of popular dancing as a cultural form and leisure activity.

Many of the activities associated with professional dancing were inextricably connected, and frequently members of the profession wore numerous professional hats, simultaneously, or at different points in their career. Philip Richardson, sitting atop the profession as the editor of the *Dancing Times*, was also a writer, teacher, and frequent judge of dance competitions. Another example resides in the career of Victor Silvester, who was at various times a dance partner, competitive dancer, teacher, writer, bandleader, and radio and television personality. According to his autobiography,

Silvester began his dancing career in the heady days of the postwar dance craze.⁴⁴ Following a period of distinguished wartime service while still only a teenager, he enthusiastically embraced the new modern dance styles and found he had a talent for them. Silvester obtained employment as a professional dance partner at the Empress Rooms in London, under one of the period's most formidable dancing teachers and entrepreneurs, Belle Harding. His work at the Empress Rooms was only supposed to be for a summer before he continued his military career by enrolling at Sandhurst; however, after only a few weeks at the military academy he ran away and returned to his dancing career. Over the next few years he taught dancing, eventually opening his own studio along with his wife, and won the World Championship of Ballroom Dancing in 1922 and 1923, alongside partner Phyllis Clarke.

By the late 1920s Silvester was regarded as one of Britain's foremost authorities on modern ballroom dancing, serving on the Official Board and publishing the first edition of his seminal *Modern Ballroom Dancing* in 1927. He later moved his teaching out of the dancing studio and onto the airwaves with the BBC Dancing Club, which began on the radio and later progressed to television. At the same time he worked as a bandleader, forming his own orchestra and becoming one of the pioneers of strict tempo dance music. Silvester's career thus testifies to the manifold ways that people could be implicated in the dance profession. His professional experiences also demonstrate the ever-changing nature of dancing instruction during the period under review; Silvester moved from small one-studio academies early in his career, to a chain of dancing schools that bore his name, to providing instruction to millions via radio and television.

⁴⁴ See Victor Silvester, *Dancing is My Life*, (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1958).

Of course, not all dancing teachers operated on such a grand scale. As was described above, particularly during the dance craze of the early 1920s, hundreds of people around the country with a sizeable enough floor in their parlor were setting themselves up as dancing instructors. Britain also had a long history of dancing academies, many of which pre-dated the war. Some were independent, while others formed larger chains, often named for and headed by a prominent dance teacher. One such teacher was Belle Harding, Victor Silvester's first employer, and about whom the *Dancing Times* wrote in 1919:

Miss Harding, by the way, is a most wonderful woman, who teaches dancing in every town of importance in the United Kingdom, besides some in France, Holland, and Switzerland. She flies about from town to town in her high-powered motor-car, and pays surprise visits to the hundred and fifty centres where her assistants are teaching. By a few dances and her contagious enthusiasm, each class is kept in touch with the best and latest features of the art.⁴⁵

In addition to illustrating the scale on which some dancing schools operated, this passage is also revealing about the important connections, both commercial and artistic, that the dance profession maintained with continental Europe. Moreover, the growth of dancing school chains like Harding's or Silvester's was part of the much wider-scale commercialization of leisure that occurred during the interwar years, and had a significant impact on popularizing dancing in Britain. In addition to the general accessibility of instruction represented by the explosion in the number of dancing schools, classes were also inexpensive enough to be affordable to Britons of most social backgrounds.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "Tea Table Talk," *Daily Express*, October 15, 1919, 3.

⁴⁶ Advertisements in the dance press reveal that a single dance lesson was likely to cost somewhere in the neighborhood of 3/6 for most of the period under review. Prices rose depending on the nature of instruction – group lessons were naturally less expensive than private sessions.

Dancing schools also provided spaces for public dancing; when their ballrooms were not being used for lessons, many of the schools hosted open “practice” dances for a small fee. Particularly in the period when large public dance halls were few and far between, these academy ballrooms provided one of the major venues for inexpensive commercial dancing in Britain. The development of dance hall industry throughout the 1920s therefore had a significant effect on the dance academies, particularly to their bottom line. Dance halls provided a larger, more luxurious space in which to dance, and the presence of professional dance partners at many establishments also supplied a cheaper means of obtaining instruction. These so-called six-penny partners could be hired for one dance, and they frequently helped clients to improve their dancing, a practice the *Dancing Times* discouraged in 1926 due to the effect it was having on the dancing academies’ enrollments.⁴⁷ In addition, many of the large palais-de-danse began operating dancing schools of their own, including such famous institutions as Adele England’s Locarno school, attached to the Streatham Locarno dance hall, and birthplace of the ballroom version of the Lambeth Walk.

At the larger dance halls, such as those controlled by the Mecca organization, the job description of the professional dance partners also frequently included providing exhibition dances during the course of an evening’s dancing. Exhibition dancing formed a significant portion of the work conducted by many professional dancers, and the simplest definition of the practice was that it was any dancing performed before an audience. In the interwar period, ballroom dancing, like ballet, was a popular performance art in music halls, theatres, and even department stores, yet more relevant to

⁴⁷ “The Palais de Danse and the Profession: A Suggestion,” *Dancing Times*, February 1926, 558. For more discussion of professional dance partners, see Chapter Four.

this discussion was the exhibition dancing that took place in public ballrooms. According to the *Dancing Times*, this was a practice that really took off in Britain with the introduction of the tango just prior to the First World War. As the nation went tango-mad, many purveyors of dancing engaged an experienced couple to provide a demonstration to others eager to learn the dance.⁴⁸

The idea that exhibition dancing should be instructional persisted throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and this became a primary means for the profession to introduce a new dance to the public, or to guide their performance of an existing dance. However, there was also a school of thought that believed that these performances should be geared towards providing entertainment rather than instruction, through the exhibition of dances not commonly known to the public, or the performance of the standard four in a manner that showcased a higher degree of difficulty. As exhibition dancers Marjorie and Georges Fontana told the *Dancing Times*, “the audience at most modern dances can do the ballroom dances now in vogue quite well themselves, and ... they would prefer to see an exhibition couple do something that they cannot do ... We make a point therefore of giving dances of a far more elaborate nature.”⁴⁹ Accordingly, exhibition dancing became a common feature of cabarets, a standard part of the programme at most public dance halls, when a break would be taken in the dancing for some sort of entertainment. Particularly talented exhibition couples often achieved a considerable degree of celebrity, and dance hall managers knew that the chance to see a famous couple perform would attract more people to their halls. They were therefore willing to invest considerable sums of money in procuring popular acts; during a week-long engagement at the Glasgow

⁴⁸ Marjorie and Georges Fontana, “Ballroom and Exhibition Dancing,” *Dancing Times*, December 1920, 176.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Norwood Ballroom, for example, famed dance team Santos Casani and Jose Lennard were purportedly paid a hundred pounds per day to perform exhibition dances.⁵⁰

Exhibition teams like Casani and Lennard were also fixtures on the dance competition circuit, another aspect of professional dancing that grew by leaps and bounds during the interwar period. The first competitions were rather informal affairs, usually arranged under the auspices of a dancing club or newspaper. However, in 1921 the *Daily Sketch* announced a national foxtrot and waltz competition, which introduced a new level in competition dancing to Britain. Local heats were held throughout the country, with a grand final at the Queen's Hall in London in February 1922. Eventually complex definitions of professional, amateur, and novice would arise in connection with competition dancing, and prominent British dancers would also increasingly participate in international contests. However, the annual Blackpool Dance Festival was far and away the nation's premiere competition event. Debuting around 1920, during the 1930-31 dance season Blackpool also became the location for the British Professional and British Amateur Dance Championships. Often referred to as ballroom dancing's version of the Wimbledon tennis tournament, Blackpool was highly respected within the international dance community as well, and by the late 1930s the championship was attracting spectators in the tens of thousands. It should also be noted that the growth of professional competition dancing did not prevent the continuance of less formal affairs. Into the Second World War and beyond public dance halls frequently hosted one-night only dance competitions, usually with a focus on one particular dance.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Casciani, *Oh, How we Danced! The History of Ballroom Dancing in Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1994), 49.

The rise of dance competitions was important not only to the development of the dance profession, but to the evolution of modern ballroom dancing as popular leisure form. For while participation in competition dancing was limited to a relatively small number of people, its influence was extended by its increasing popularity as a spectator sport. As with exhibition dancing, the general public stood to learn a great deal from witnessing a dance competition, or by following the extensive coverage the major events received in both the dance and popular press. They were able to see how the best dancers performed the dances of the day, and received advance notice as to what was, or would soon become, the latest dancing trend. For example, the *Daily Sketch* championship in 1922 restored the unpopular waltz to favor; the fall of 1926 saw a ceaseless flurry of Charleston competitions; and the 1927 *Star* Championship's replacement of the one-step with the quick-time foxtrot signaled another important evolution in the English style. One dancing enthusiast confirmed the part played by competitions in educating and entertaining the public in a letter to the editor of *Modern Dance*: "As a keen amateur dancer, whenever I can get the opportunity I never miss seeing our leading professionals, and have attended the finals in Blackpool for the last four years, and seen most of them dancing at the Astoria, Hammersmith, and other London dance places."⁵¹ Local heats and regional finals of dance competitions also helped considerably in elevating the standard of British dancing outside the capital. In 1927, Philip Richardson stated in the *Dancing Times* that "[dance competitions] have been undoubtedly one of the principal causes of the excellence of English dancing, which has reached so high a standard that the 'English style' is the ambition of all continental dancers."⁵²

⁵¹ Richard S. Grey, Letter to the Editor, *Modern Dance*, October 1936, 13-14.

⁵² "Our Novices' Competition," *Dancing Times*, February 1927, 586.

The rise in dance instruction, competition, and exhibition dancing required some degree of regulation, and the interwar period also saw the growth of large numbers of associations and societies dedicated to ballroom dancing, which further contributed to the process of professionalization. Professional dancing associations had actually been developing since the early years of the twentieth century. The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) had been created in 1904, while the National Association of Teachers of Dancing appeared in 1907. For most of the period under review the ISTD was headed by Cecil H. Taylor, who was commonly referred to as “Major,” and was the most prominent of the various professional societies that accredited teachers and governed the affairs of all styles of dancing in Britain.⁵³ The Society contained branches in ballet, stage, and operatic dancing, and the rising importance of ballroom dancing was marked with the creation of a “Ballroom Branch” in 1924. Largely forged as a result of the connections made through the informal conferences, the founding members of the Ballroom Branch were Victor Silvester, Josephine Bradley, Murial Simmons, Eve Tynegate-Smith, and Lisle Humphreys, and Richardson credited this group with really solidifying the technique of the English style.⁵⁴ The bureaucratization of ballroom dancing was continued with the creation of the Official Board of Ballroom Dancing, and by the late 1930s such a significant number of amateur and professional bodies had emerged that occasional conflicts arose among them. For example, in 1938, the National Society of Amateur Dancers got into a dispute with the Official Board over certain

⁵³ Cecil H. Taylor was a dancing teacher from Leeds whose family had been working in the dance profession for over 150 years. In addition to his function as president of the ISTD, he became one of the nation’s foremost authorities on old-time dancing. See Franks, *Social Dance*, 171.

⁵⁴ Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 59.

aspects of the management of dance championships and eventually resigned from the umbrella organization.

Finally, another critical way in which the professional dancers made connections with one another and with the public was through print culture. The dance press was a chief vehicle through which discussion about new and changing dances occurred, with prominent members of the profession writing articles or making contributions through letters to the editor. While a number of newspapers and periodicals devoted to dancing came and went throughout the period under review, the *Dancing Times* was far and away the most significant and influential. Originally introduced in 1894, the periodical then went defunct for a year before being re-launched in 1910, yet another testament to the transition that occurred in popular dancing after that year. It was from the pages of the *Dancing Times* that Philip Richardson guided the ballroom dancing profession, and organized events such as the informal conferences. This periodical and others provided an organ of communication for dance professionals around the country, helping to maintain consistency in instruction, and conformity in style and technique. Teachers who were perhaps less prominent within the professional community, or unable to attend the many conferences and meetings that were usually based in London, were able to maintain contact with leaders of the profession through print, and generally keep up-to-date with what was happening in the ballroom dancing world.

The development of the ballroom dance profession was significant in its own right, and many of the organizations and events that were inaugurated in the interwar period continue into the present day. However, unlike the present day, the profession of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s was focused on a cultural form which was also the foremost

popular dance form of the time. The real importance of the professionalization of dancing to this discussion is therefore the way in which this process influenced the dancing public in terms of how and what they danced. The dance profession largely developed through its members' shared concern with the evolution of the English style, and it made many of the critical decisions as to what dances would be included in this canon, and how they would be performed. These determinations were then disseminated to the public, through dancing classes, exhibition and competition dancing, and print culture.

Of course, it is difficult to know quite how much influence the dance profession actually exerted on the average member of the dancing public. There were certainly everyday dancers who took the practice very seriously, investing in lessons and further developing their skills by consuming dance print culture. The dozens of editions printed of a work such as Victor Silvester's *Modern Ballroom Dancing*, as well as the large market for other dance manuals, attests to the public's interest in professional dictates. The *Dancing Times* also had a significant readership among interested members of the dancing public, one of whom heralded the newspaper for "[passing] on to a grateful public all that the best brains in the profession have to offer ... [The] press has done a great deal to raise the standard of dancing amongst the public, who have neither the time, money, nor inclination to visit teachers, but welcome an authoritative paper where the latest phase in dancing is expressed in simple language."⁵⁵

Yet it must be noted that there were many dancers who never received formal instruction and merely emulated others on the dance floor, enjoying the ballroom more as a space of socialization. As one observer noted in the periodical *Modern Dance*, "only a small percentage of dancers are really serious over technique," going on to refer to

⁵⁵ Letter to the Editor, *Dancing Times*, January 1928, 544.

everyone else as “weekend dancers.”⁵⁶ In 1929, *Oxford Magazine* similarly noted, “Ballroom dancing appeals to thousands upon thousands ... its followers form two great camps, those who learn to dance, and that quite appreciable number who dance without learning.”⁵⁷ There is also further evidence that exhibition dancing and cabarets in general were viewed by some to be more of an annoying interruption to the evening’s dancing than a source of entertainment or instruction. Even some professional dancers expressed doubts that exhibitions did very much to help develop the casual dancer’s abilities. Major Cecil Taylor made this point in an interview with *Mass Observation*, before observing that while competitions were more useful in this respect, “The mass don’t want competitions.”⁵⁸

There was thus not insignificant public ambivalence to what the dance profession was doing or saying, and particularly in terms of what was being danced in the nation’s ballrooms, dancers were able to control considerable aspects of their own experience. There were multiple ways in which the members of the public could make their feelings about a dance known. Letters to the editor of dance and popular newspapers was one common expression of approval or distaste. Actions taken in dancing spaces also reflected preferences; people often performed whatever dance they wanted regardless of the music being played – waltzing to a tango, or jitterbugging to a foxtrot. More than anything else, the simple act of walking off the dance floor when a dance they disliked was being played also well articulated a dancer’s feelings.

⁵⁶ Harry Kahn, “Swing,” *Modern Dance*, February 1938, 13.

⁵⁷ S.G.R., “Rhythmic Dancing,” *Oxford Magazine*, February 28, 1929, 453. As quoted in James Nott, *Music For the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 162.

⁵⁸ M-O A: TC 38/6/G, The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, June 19, 1939, 3.

Moreover, beyond attempts to guide dancing style through instruction and example, the profession had little effective control of the public's performance of a dance. As Julie Malnig has noted with respect to the standardization of modern ballroom dancing in the United States, "one could not always account for what bodies were doing *in the moment* of dance."⁵⁹ Once a dancer entered the ballroom they became a producer of dance culture in their own right, influencing the national style through their individual performance of a dance. The dancing public therefore had a major influence on the creation of the national dance culture through its determination of what dances would be *popular*. In various ways dancers conveyed these preferences to the dance professionals, who theoretically responded to them. As the next section will show, the profession played a critical role in directing the evolution of popular dancing, but there was occasionally a disjuncture between what the professionals mandated and what the public wanted.

The Standard Four and Beyond: What Britain danced in the 1920s-1940s

In early 1920, while Britain was still embroiled in the dance craze, Bernard Carrington, and exhibition dancer at the London Hippodrome, speculated on the reasons behind the phenomenon in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Express*. Carrington placed much of his emphasis on the emergence of the new ballroom dancers, writing, "The reason why the present dances, fox-trot, one-step, and waltz, are so popular is because they are ...very simple to learn."⁶⁰ Carrington was not alone in his assessment. A central element of contemporary discourses surrounding the new modern ballroom dances, particularly the foxtrot, was that they were very simple and therefore easy to master.

⁵⁹ Malnig, "Women, Dance, and New York Nightlife," 82.

⁶⁰ Bernard G. Carrington, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, February 3, 1920, 4.

Writing a month after the Armistice in 1918, Philip Richardson reassured readers of the *Daily Mail* that anyone could participate in the new dances: “A number of people who have not danced for years feel they would like to commence again, but they are deterred because they cannot do the ‘complicated modern dances.’ Let me assure them the modern dances are not complicated, and if they can do the old valse well they need never dread adventuring in the modern ballroom.”⁶¹ Another London dance teacher similarly commented in the *Daily Mail* that “all modern dances are simple, though, and delightfully easy to learn ... I can guarantee to teach anybody in two lessons.”⁶² Unlike the pre-1910 styles of ballroom dancing, which were based on the five turned-out positions of the feet as in ballet, the foxtrot and other modern ballroom dances were based on natural movements, and a popular mantra asserted, “If you can walk, you can dance.”

Another prevalent idea associated with the new dances was that they placed popular dancing back in the control of the public, rather than in the control of the dancing teachers. Richardson was a particularly strong proponent of this position, expostulating frequently in the pages of the *Dancing Times* that at long last the public had broken free of the dictatorial direction of the Victorian dancing master, in one case hyperbolically comparing this development to recent events in European politics and warfare: “The modern ballroom dancer has revolted against the despotism of the Victorian dancing master in the same way that ... in the great world of which the dancing world is but a microcosm, the free nations have revolted against the military autocracy of the Teutonic

⁶¹ Philip Richardson, “Everybody Dancing Now,” *Daily Mail*, December 14, 1918, 4.

⁶² “The Spirit of the Dance,” *Daily Mail*, January 23, 1919, 7.

peoples.”⁶³ This notion that the public was now in control of popular dancing was also echoed by Victor Silvester in one edition of *Modern Ballroom Dancing*: “The coming of the First World War, when old institutions went by the board ... there was introduced by the dancers themselves – not the teachers, mark you – a free and easy go-as-you please style based more or less on the natural movements used in walking.”⁶⁴ For professional dancers, the idea that popular dancing was both simple and free from the constraints of the dancing teacher was therefore an important one. Yet ironically, the standardization of the English style, largely promulgated by Richardson, Silvester, and their close colleagues in the dance profession, would create a whole new kind of dancing rigidity that by the late 1930s the public would be seeking to escape.

As I have noted, the four dances that formed the early version of the English style were the foxtrot, one-step, modern waltz, and tango. Of the four, the foxtrot was far and away the most popular with the public, holding fast as the nation’s preeminent popular dance throughout the 1920s. In 1924, the manager of the Hammersmith Palais told a writer for *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, ““We find that the fox trot is the most popular dance, then the waltz and the one-step, and finally the Blues and the tango.””⁶⁵ Despite the fact that during the early part of the decade, countless new dances were introduced or re-introduced to the public, and though some would enjoy brief stints of popularity, nothing could supplant the foxtrot. It was the most frequently played on dance programmes, and the dance that the majority of the public felt the most comfortable with, even to the point of dancing foxtrot steps when waltz or tango music was played.

⁶³ The Sitter Out, *Dancing Times*, May 1920, 606. See also Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 32.

⁶⁴ Victor Silvester, *Modern Ballroom Dancing*, (London: Stanley Paul, 1977, 1990), 15.

⁶⁵ Draycot Dell, “Dance Halls of To-Day,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, March 29, 1924, 194.

Speculating on the future of ballroom dancing in the country, one dance press article from 1925 featured the headline: “After the Fox Trot – the Fox Trot.”⁶⁶

As this reference suggests, the supremacy of the foxtrot, and the inability of the dance profession or dance hall industry to find a new dance that would really catch on in the same way, was a subject of incessant discussion in the dance and popular press. At the start of each new dancing season, observers of dancing speculated about whether the foxtrot would be dethroned in the coming months, usually concluding correctly that it would not. Some critics lamented this reality, expressing boredom with the foxtrot and the concern that ballroom dancing would stagnate without the introduction of something new. In 1922 the *Dancing Times* reported that “[the foxtrot] has almost become stereotyped, and dancers feel that they want something a little different in this present winter from the foxtrot of a year ago.”⁶⁷ Dancing teacher Santos Casani also bemoaned the supremacy of the foxtrot, attributing it to the influence of the bands playing at dances: “Because nine out of ten dances that are played are fox trots ... consequently dancers have every opportunity of becoming proficient. If only dance-hall bands would play different dances in turn, and so give dancers an opportunity of practising other steps, the fox trot would soon topple from its pedestal and fall into line with the other dances.”⁶⁸ By 1926 the *Dancing Times* acknowledged that the foxtrot had been in a “rut” for some time.⁶⁹

Of course, it should be noted that those dance professionals who advocated for a new dance had motives beyond the evolution of the art. The absence of new dances

⁶⁶ Isobel Elsom, “After the Fox Trot – The Fox Trot,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, July 19, 1925, 246.

⁶⁷ The Sitter Out, “In the Ballroom,” *Dancing Times*, October 1922, 23.

⁶⁸ Santos Casani, “The Dances of To-morrow,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, May 31, 1924, 112.

⁶⁹ “Are Ballroom Dancers too Conservative?” *Dancing Times*, September 1926, 530.

meant that there was nothing new to teach students, who, upon perfecting the foxtrot might cease taking lessons. Accordingly, in 1921 the *Dancing Times* noted that there was nothing on the horizon for the new dancing season that would supplant the foxtrot, and remarked that “a number of teachers will complain that this absence of a new dance is very bad for business.”⁷⁰ Moreover, there were equally those observers of dancing who were unconcerned about the supremacy of the foxtrot. Actress and dancer Isobel Elsom wrote an article for *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* in 1925 in which she stated that she could well understand the enduring popularity of the foxtrot because “It is an easy, healthy and natural dance, combining a pleasing rhythm with an ease of accomplishment which is greater than that found in any other dance.”⁷¹ A year later, another commentator in the same periodical mused, “Why people should say we need fresh dances when we have the fox trot, I do not know.”⁷²

In terms of the public popularity of the other standard dances of the English style, the one-step placed a fairly distant second to the foxtrot; however, the dance gradually faded from prominence as the quickstep evolved, a development that will be discussed further below. With respect to the waltz, the dance was no longer in particular favor in the period immediately after the war, but after featuring prominently in the 1921 dance competition organized by the *Daily Sketch*, it enjoyed a strong revival.⁷³ Having passed through its Boston and Hesitation incarnations, the dance settled into a form known simply as the modern waltz. Like all modern ballroom dances, the new waltz was performed on the balls of the feet in a simple, progressive movement, rather than in the

⁷⁰ The Sitter Out, *Dancing Times*, January 1921, 306.

⁷¹ Isobel Elsom, “After the Fox Trot – the Fox Trot,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, July 18, 1925, 246.

⁷² June, “Dancing in 1926,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, January 9, 1926, 232.

⁷³ Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 51.

tip-toed, rotary motions of the old-time version of the dance.⁷⁴ The modern waltz continued to feature on most public dance programmes throughout the interwar and World War Two periods, though not with nearly the frequency of the foxtrot, or later the quickstep.

As to the public reception of the tango, the fourth standard dance of the English style, more considerable attention must be paid. The version of the dance that emerged in Britain after the war was quite distinct from its initial form, after a change in tango music transformed the steps into smoother, more sensual movements, and yet, perhaps contradictorily, into a “less rebellious, more standardized version of the original.”⁷⁵ Enormously popular in Paris, the new tango never reclaimed the success its rudimentary version had enjoyed in Britain during the 1912-1913 craze. In 1920, exhibition dancer Robert Sielle wrote a letter to the *Dancing Times* lamenting this reality: “Although we now have a tango remarkable for its beauty, simplicity, and general suitability to the requirements of ballroom dancing, we are still faced with the difficulty of overcoming the public timidity which invariably heralds the opening bars of tango music. No one seems to care to be the first to get up and dance.”⁷⁶

Throughout the interwar years there were many attempts by the dance profession to promote the tango, by introducing new variations of the dance or putting it on display through exhibitions and competitions. At the beginning of each new dancing season the dance press frequently speculated that this was the year that the tango would undergo a resurgence. But while the dance did enjoy brief moments of greater popularity, it

⁷⁴ Santos Casani, *Casani's Self-Tutor of Ballroom Dancing*, (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1927), 31.

⁷⁵ Driver, *A Century of Dance*, 70.

⁷⁶ Robert Sielle, Letter to the Editor, *Dancing Times*, November 1920, 95.

remained the least performed dance of the English style throughout the period under review. In 1926 a writer for *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* noted that upon her recent visit to a dance hall, “when a tango tune was played a few couples with a conscious air of bravery left the crowded floor-side to attempt the tango – lonely souls in a vast Sahara!”⁷⁷ Some years later, Mass Observation assessed the public enthusiasm for each standard dance on several different evenings at the Streatham Locarno dance hall. On one occasion the observer noted that while the foxtrot, quickstep and waltz attracted eighty to ninety couples to the floor, the tango brought less than thirty.⁷⁸ Another evening, a hundred couples participated in a foxtrot, but less than half that number elected to attempt the tango that followed it. All of the reports compiled by Mass Observation suggested that the tango generally had a tendency to clear the dance floor.⁷⁹

In 1922, the *Dancing Times* placed the blame for the tango’s lack of success on the dance bands, suggesting that musicians were simply less willing to play tango music.⁸⁰ Further statistics compiled by Mass Observation do attest to the fact that a tango was played far less frequently than the other standard dances; of a total thirty-six dances played at the Locarno one evening in 1939, there were thirteen quicksteps, eight foxtrots, six waltzes, and only four tangos.⁸¹ However, it is more likely that the bands played fewer tangos because of their tendency to clear the floor, and not any general unwillingness on the part of the musicians. What seems to have been at the root of public resistance to the tango was rather the belief that it was far more difficult than the other standard three. The comment by one woman in a dance hall, recorded by a writer for

⁷⁷ June, “Dancing in 1926,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, January 9, 1926, 232.

⁷⁸ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Streatham Locarno, December 4, 1939.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ “The Tango and Other Ballroom News,” *Dancing Times*, May 1922, 679.

⁸¹ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Streatham Locarno, 18/4/1939.

Popular Music and Dancing Weekly, is suggestive: ““Tango music is sweet and I like listening to it, but the dance looks as if only an expert should attempt it.””⁸² Public reticence meant that the tango did in fact remain largely a purview of the experts. Indeed, one observer speculated that the profession’s excessive attention to, and adaptations of the dance were actually at the root of its lack of public success: “The tango died almost before it was born, the result, I am convinced, of so many teachers trying to improve it by introducing their own steps.”⁸³ The tango therefore remained a staple of competition dancing and a topic of considerable interest to professional dancers, but not a prominent element of popular dancing.

Many of the other so-called “Spanish” or “Latin” dances that were introduced to the British public in the 1920s and 1930s suffered from a similar problem. Dances like the paso doble and rumba were popular as exhibition dances or as cinematic entertainment, but were rarely performed in public ballrooms. There was the occasional exception – *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* reported that the Latin-themed “Carioca,” introduced by the first Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers’ film *Flying Down to Rio*, was all the rage in Glasgow in 1934,⁸⁴ and in general, the Latin dances appear to have been more popular in Scotland than in England or Wales.⁸⁵ But while these dances might occasionally enjoy a boom as a novelty or regional favorite, for the most part the public preferred to stick with safe and easy options like the foxtrot, and later the quickstep. There was also a prevalent notion that Latin dances somehow ran contrary to

⁸² June, “Dancing in 1926,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, January 9, 1926, 232.

⁸³ Around the Dance Halls, *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, March 15, 1924, 148.

⁸⁴ Horace Richards, “Come Dancing Around Britain – No. 1: Glasgow Greets the Carioca,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, November 24, 1934, 12.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Casciani has noted that 1,000 dancers took instruction in the rumba at one Glasgow dancing school during a week in 1932. See Casciani, *Oh, How We Danced!*, 68.

the British temperament, an idea that will be explored in more detail in Chapter Five. Still, it should be noted that despite its less than stellar public response, the tango remained one of standard four English style dances throughout the period under review. The dance thus provides an important illustration of the disjuncture that often existed between the dance profession and dancing public. Though the profession was built around entertaining and educating the public in ballroom dancing, it retained its own focuses and mandates, and what interested professional dancers did not necessarily interest the everyday dancer.

This fact was further reinforced by the blues, another new dance that emerged in the early 1920s. Upon its arrival in Britain from America in 1923, some dance professionals thought that the blues might be the alternative to the foxtrot that many among them had been waiting for. Revealingly, Philip Richardson proclaimed in the *Dancing Times* in August of that year: “A new dance at last. We shall all be dancing ‘Blues’ this autumn.”⁸⁶ Like the foxtrot, the blues was performed in four/four time, but at a slower tempo – thirty-five bars per minute to the foxtrot’s forty-eight. Given that the dance was introduced right around a time that foxtrot tempos began to speed up in public ballrooms, which, as I will discuss below, culminated in the development of the quickstep, it is perhaps not surprising that the blues never really took off with the dancing public. The dance press continued to talk about the blues for a number of years, both in print and at various conferences, but the public never embraced the dance. As Richardson himself later summarized, “The dance intrigued professionals, but never really took off with the public.”⁸⁷ The blues thus stands with the tango as a dance that the dance

⁸⁶ Philip Richardson, “A New Dance At Last,” *Dancing Times*, August 1923, 1061.

⁸⁷ Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 57.

profession saw great potential in, but to which the public remained blasé. The interests and agendas of the profession and public were simply not always aligned, a fact that was also made manifest in the divergent professional and public receptions of the Charleston.

Although the public enthusiasm for the foxtrot would endure until well after the Second World War, the Charleston was one of the first dances to present a serious challenge to its supremacy. Though it was only for a relatively brief period, the dance was perceived by many to be the cause of a renewed dancing craze, and it lived long in the cultural memory of British dancing enthusiasts. Like many, if not all of the American dances that attained international popularity in the interwar period, the Charleston emerged from African American culture, and like ragtime, its exact origins are somewhat hazy. Barbara Cohen-Stratyner recently suggested that the dance had its roots in stage performances within African American musical revues of the early twentieth century, and describes how numerous contemporaries sought to take credit for its creation.⁸⁸ However, the first incarnation of a dance actually called the “Charleston” is generally associated with the 1923 Broadway musical *Runnin’ Wild*, after which time it transitioned to public ballrooms in the United States.

The Charleston was introduced to Britain through another musical revue, *Midnight Follies*, during the spring of 1925, but it did not have an immediate impact.⁸⁹ Later that year, however, an exhibition pair, Robert Sielle and Annette Mills, witnessed the ballroom version of the Charleston in New York, and decided to see if it would catch on in Britain. In July, in conjunction with the *Dancing Times*, they hosted a “Charleston

⁸⁸ Barbara Cohen-Stratyner, “Social Dance in Broadway Musical Comedy,” in *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 228. See also Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*, (New York: Macmillan, 1968); Driver, *A Century of Dance*, 59.

⁸⁹ Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 63.

tea” at a Soho dancing club, in order to educate other dance teachers about the new American phenomenon. As one teacher present at the event later recalled, “Questions, comment, argument, discussion went on for hours. Oh yes, the Charleston had hit London with a resounding thud.”⁹⁰

The majority of teachers did begin offering lessons in the Charleston, but when the season began that fall many dancers chose to attempt it without instruction, basing their performance on what they witnessed in stage shows, cabarets, or on the dance floor. Two professional dancers described what followed in the *Dancing Times*: “Hundreds of wild youths endeavoured to copy [the exhibition dancers’] kicking and stamping steps and to adapt them to the ballroom, with disastrous results. It was positively unsafe to go within two yards of any couple performing these ridiculous antics.”⁹¹ It was therefore the public’s performance of the Charleston, rather than the dance itself, that inspired the wrath of many dance professionals; having made every effort to stamp “freak steps” from modern ballroom dancing, they were infuriated by their resurgence in the Charleston. There were concerns about the roughness of the dance within the dance hall industry as well, and some dancing establishments banned the Charleston outright, while others displayed the letters “P.C.Q.,” for “Please Charleston Quietly.”⁹² Additional condemnations were found beyond the walls of the dance hall or the dancing school, particularly in the popular press, where the perceived violence and coarseness of the Charleston was frequently decried. Some newspapers even featured quotes from medical doctors suggesting that the dance could cause permanent damage to dancers’ ankles or

⁹⁰ Josephine Bradley, “My ‘Cavalcade’ of Dancing,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, October 27, 1934, 3.

⁹¹ Phyllis Haylor and Alec H. Miller, “Taming the Charleston,” *Dancing Times*, October 1926, 9.

⁹² Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 64.

shocks to the body that would result in paralysis,⁹³ and much of the coverage was also highly racialized, due to the dance's African American origins.⁹⁴

Yet it should be noted that reporting on the Charleston was also extremely contradictory. Articles in newspapers like the *Daily Mail* criticizing the Charleston as vulgar, monstrous, or savage, would be accompanied, often in the same issue, with other articles that discussed the influence of the dance on fashion, or reported novelties such as when a dance team performed the dance in a travelling airplane, or noted that the Prince of Wales was a keen enthusiast of the new dance.⁹⁵ Most importantly, condemnations of the dance also did virtually nothing to diminish its popularity with the dancing public, as Victor Silvester recalled in his autobiography:

Wherever you went people seemed to be practising the Charleston – in bus queues, in Tube stations waiting for a train, at street corners, in shops; even policemen on point duty were seen doing the steps – because in practically every ballroom in London every second dance was the Charleston, although ministers fulminated against it from their pulpits, schools banned it, and various cultural societies staged protest marches.⁹⁶

The *Dancing Times* also remarked upon the inability of the Charleston-haters to discourage dancing enthusiasts, noting that “In spite of the tirades which have appeared in the general Press against the Charleston, it is very evident, from the number of lessons which teachers are giving of this dance, that a very large section of the dancing public want it.”⁹⁷ Silvester similarly recalled the degree to which the Charleston craze filled up dancing classes, noting that he and his wife worked thirteen hour days as teachers at a

⁹³ Casciani, *Oh, How We Danced!*, 52.

⁹⁴ The racial discourses surrounding the Charleston and other dances of African American origin will be addressed in Chapter Five.

⁹⁵ See *Daily Mail*, November/December 1926.

⁹⁶ Victor Silvester, *Dancing is My Life*, 88.

⁹⁷ “Round the Classes,” *Dancing Times*, June 1926, 285.

profit of a hundred pounds per week, a number they could have doubled with a larger dance studio.⁹⁸

The response to the Charleston within the dance profession was similarly divided, at least initially. As was noted above, many professionals decried the dance's reintroduction of "freak steps" into the public ballroom, but there were also those who speculated that the Charleston was the new dance that the profession and public had been waiting for, something to at long last challenge the supremacy of the foxtrot. Other more ambivalent professionals seemed to believe the dance was nothing more than a novelty, or a passing fancy. In early 1926 a writer for *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* dismissed the new dance altogether in a discussion of what would be the major trends in the ballroom that season: "So far I have intentionally omitted the Charleston because no one seems to have taken it seriously."⁹⁹

However, by May 1926 the *Dancing Times* had summed up the Charleston situation in terms of two unassailable facts: "First, a very large section of the dancing public wish to dance the Charleston. Secondly, the majority of those who do Charleston are not only a nuisance but even a source of danger to other dancers."¹⁰⁰ Later that year, the periodical elaborated on this point even further:

The rhythm and beat of [Charleston] music has obtained too firm a hold upon the popular imagination for any official "bannings" or attacks by disgruntled correspondents in the daily Press to stop it.

It has got to come and those halls which attempt to "bar" the Charleston would be doing good dancing a far greater service if, instead of telling their patrons they must not do it, they would help them to dance it in a quiet and simple manner.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Victor Silvester, *Dancing is My Life*, 88-89.

⁹⁹ June, "Dancing in 1926," *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, January 9, 1926, 232.

¹⁰⁰ The Sitter Out, "Some Thoughts on the Present Situation," *Dancing Times*, May 1926, 255.

¹⁰¹ The Sitter Out, "Ballroom Notes," *Dancing Times*, October 1926, 35.

These comments well reflect the position that the dance profession eventually adopted with respect to the Charleston, as teachers concluded that the solution was to embrace this new dance, particularly since it was so popular with the public, but once again to make every effort to stamp out its rougher, freak steps. A milder form of the dance was quickly devised, in which the violent side-kicks were eliminated, and the so-called “flat progressive Charleston” was disseminated to the public through dancing classes, performances by exhibition dancers, and coverage in the dance press. Throughout the fall of 1926 the new Charleston gradually replaced the more boisterous version, and the fervor for the dance reached its zenith that December with the “Charleston Ball” at the Royal Albert Hall, which was attended by a number of dance professionals and celebrities, and featured general dancing, a competition, and a cabaret.

With the Charleston Ball the dance had achieved general social acceptance, and after that, perhaps because of that, it began to fade away. Rather than entering the English style pantheon in its own right, the long-term significance of the dance would prove to be the influence it had on the development of the quickstep. However, the Charleston craze is illustrative of a number of issues present in the development of popular dancing in Britain, most notably the reciprocal relationship that existed between the dance profession and dancing public when it came to the introduction and evolution of a new dance. While there were those members of the profession who despised the Charleston for its general appearance and the rough element it introduced to the ballroom, professionals could not, and would not, reject the dance out of hand. Indeed, the *Dancing Times* dismissed calls by the popular press for the abolition of the dance as “ridiculous”

and “harmful.”¹⁰² The profession recognized that the Charleston had to be embraced for two primary reasons. First, the public enthusiasm for the dance brought many new students to dance classes, which was clearly to the economic advantage of a profession dominated by teachers of dancing. Second, there was a persistent belief among the profession, which was eventually codified at the Great Conference in 1929, that the public should largely determine the direction that popular dancing in Britain would take.

Yet significantly, this fundamental goal did not inhibit dance professionals from taking dances that proved popular with the public and transforming them into something that they viewed to be more in line with the graceful elegance of the English style, as they did with the creation of the flat progressive Charleston. This occurred time and again, with the postwar jazz dances, with the Charleston, and, a number of years later, with the jitterbug. It is also worth noting that the cultural power the dancing public exerted in advocating for the Charleston or any other dance was somewhat diminished by the fact that the profession recognized, and almost bestowed it upon, dancers. As prominent teacher Josephine Bradley recalled,

[The Charleston] illustrated a viewpoint that I have always had that in reality the public lead the teachers in dancing taste and fashions.

You cannot foist a new dance arbitrarily upon the general public. Looking back over my twelve years as a West End dancer and teacher, this has been proved over and over again. New dances have been put forth as the latest fashion – and what has happened to them? They have quietly faded away in a few weeks.¹⁰³

While the profession sought to acknowledge and even promote the agency of the dancing public, in the very act of doing so it retained some degree of control over the consumption of popular dance culture. In addition, the channels through which the

¹⁰² The Sitter Out, “Some Thoughts on the Present Situation,” *Dancing Times*, May 1926, 255.

¹⁰³ Josephine Bradley, “My ‘Cavalcade’ of Dancing,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, October 27, 1934, 3.

dancing public was exposed to new dances were strongly mediated by the profession (the Charleston had, after all, been introduced to Britain by two professionals), or the dance hall industry, which also limited the level of choice that was really present in the cultural consumption of dancing. Professionals also continued to exert a strong influence on how a dance would evolve once the public had embraced it, as was made evident in the creation and dissemination of the flat progressive Charleston.

Moreover, the Charleston craze demonstrated that the negotiations between the dance profession and the dancing public cannot be imagined in a wholly binary or opposing sense. As the above discussion has shown, the profession, but also the public, possessed strong internal divisions on the Charleston issue. Indeed, this was a case where the divergent outlooks of the different dancing public(s) became acutely apparent. While many dancers embraced the Charleston, other Britons who did not dance often but rather consumed dance culture through other media, merely reading or writing about the dance, saw fit to condemn it voraciously. Enthusiasm and condemnation of the Charleston thus existed within both the dance profession and dancing public, demonstrating how the two groups could intersect, diverge, and overlap through the processes of cultural production and consumption. Finally, the Charleston craze showcased the lack of impact that social condemnations of new dances really had on their popularity with the public. This will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter, but in general, criticisms of dances did little to dissuade the dancing public from performing them.

In terms of the progression of British dance culture, the Charleston was quickly followed by the arrival in Britain of the Black Bottom, another American dance that could be performed on its own, or as a variation of the foxtrot. The Black Bottom was

discussed and analyzed in the pages of the dance press for several months, but was only a brief popular success, having even less permanent impact as its predecessor.¹⁰⁴ However, another major dance innovation that coincided with and succeeded the Charleston would prove to have much more longevity. Indeed, the dance in question would present a lasting challenge to the supremacy of the foxtrot in terms of public popularity, but perhaps simply because it was effectively an alternative form of the latter. This was the quickstep.

The advent of the quickstep provides an example of the important role that dance bands and dance music played in the evolution of popular dancing in interwar Britain. As was discussed above, the rise of jazz and the transformation of popular music was an important factor in the development of modern ballroom dancing.¹⁰⁵ This was also something that contemporaries remarked upon at the time, such as when singer and dancer Ethel Levey observed in 1924, “jazz music is ... responsible for the present boom in dancing ... It was jazz music that gave birth to the fox trot, and the fox trot, as every dancer will tell you, is the dance that has made dancing generally such a stupendously popular pastime.”¹⁰⁶ But the need for dances to accompany new musical forms was not the sole manner in which music shaped dancing. As the above-mentioned comments of Philip Richardson on the tango, and Santos Casani on the foxtrot well illustrate, the bands that played music *for* dancing also exerted considerable influence on what was danced, and how dancers moved on the floor. It was this type of musical intervention that led to the rise of the quickstep.

¹⁰⁴ The transient nature of dances like the Black Bottom is illustrated by the fact that the dance merited inclusion in a dance instruction book written by Santos Casani in 1927, but not in a subsequent volume written in 1936. See Santos Casani, *Casani's Self-Tutor of Ballroom Dancing*, 1927; Santos Casani, *Casani's Home Teacher: Ballroom Dancing Made Easy*, (London: Heath Cranton Ltd., 1936).

¹⁰⁵ Further discussion of the connections between popular music and popular dancing will be provided in Chapter Three. See also James Nott, *Music For the People*, 2002.

¹⁰⁶ Ethel Levey, “Has Our Music Improved?” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, November 8, 1924, 47.

In the mid-1920s, the dance profession and dancing public began noticing, and in many cases condemning, the fact that the dance bands were playing foxtrot music at a much faster tempo than before. As the *Daily Express* noted, “Foxtrots are quicker. In almost every big ballroom where a star dance band makes the music you notice this now. Three years ago the foxtrot speed was about 46 bars a minute. Now it is nearer 54 and sometimes as high as 58.”¹⁰⁷ A number of possible explanations for the faster tempos were given in both the dance and popular press. A common belief was that the large number of American bands working in Britain was the root cause, since foxtrot music was typically played faster in the United States. Another theory was that composers were now writing foxtrot songs in a faster-paced rhythm, and that the bands were simply following the music. There was also a suggestion that the bands were not shaping developments in quick-time dancing at all, but rather that it was the other way around; ballrooms were generally so crowded that dancers were forced to take shorter steps while performing the foxtrot, and the bands were simply attempting to keep pace with the people on the floor. The *Daily Express*’s dancing correspondent, Patrick Chalmers, further speculated that dancers were embracing, and perhaps fomenting, the change in tempo because they were desperate for a little variety in their foxtrotting.¹⁰⁸

The dance profession began to engage with the quick-time foxtrot issue in late 1924. In October of that year Richardson and the *Dancing Times* convened a Dancer’s Circle Dinner at the Hotel Cecil in London, during which it was determined that the slower and faster versions of the foxtrot should be regarded as two distinct dances. It was also likely at this meeting that the name “quickstep” first emerged, suggested by Florence

¹⁰⁷ Patrick Chalmers, “Quicker Foxtrots,” *Daily Express*, February 15, 1926, 8.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Purcell as a possible appellation for the faster dance.¹⁰⁹ The name did not come into general usage for several years, however; instead, the dance was referred to more clumsily as the “quick-time foxtrot,” or for a brief period as the “quick-time foxtrot and Charleston.” The new dance received further official sanction in 1927, when the “quick-time foxtrot and Charleston” replaced the one-step as a competition event at the annual *Star* Dance Championship. Then, in 1929, the quickstep was included as one the standard four dances of the English style in discussions at the Great Conference, and in the ensuing report by the Official Board of Ballroom Dancing. This professional recognition symbolized the quickstep’s acceptance into the British ballroom dancing canon, but perhaps even more significant was the public’s zeal for the dance. By the late 1930s the quickstep had outstripped the foxtrot as the nation’s most popular dance.

Following the brief Charleston craze and the more gradual development of the quickstep, British ballroom dancing entered a quieter period of evolution. Popular dancing now faced competition from the advent of the sound era at the cinema, and the onset of the Great Depression tempered the wild spirit of the dance-mad 1920s. Dancing remained one of the most widespread leisure activities in Britain, but the mania had somewhat dissipated. At the same time, the Great Conference had established the standard four dances and their basic steps, and these would remain the primary dances of the 1930s. This is not to say that nothing new appeared during the decade, however. In the mid to late 1930s, truckin’, a wild, largely individual dance that was a precursor to the jitterbug, made its first appearances in British ballrooms. The Cuban rumba also arrived in Britain starting in the mid-1930s, though, as was noted above, it was more of a success

¹⁰⁹ “The Quick-Step,” *Dancing Times*, November 1924, 143. The *Dancing Times* further reported in October 1927 that the ISTD had voted to officially make the name of the new dance the quickstep. See also Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 58.

as an exhibition dance than as a popular ballroom phenomenon. The same could be said of the many new dances introduced through the medium of Hollywood film. With the start of the sound era, dance musicals became one of the most popular cinematic forms on both sides of the Atlantic, chiefly emblemized in the nine films starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. However, the dances immortalized onscreen, such as the Carioca or the Caranga, usually required a technical skill far beyond the average British dancer, and like the rumba, none of the cinematic dances challenged the supremacy of the foxtrot and quickstep in popular dancing.¹¹⁰ The result was a slight restlessness within the dancing public, and fears among the profession that the always-looming threat of stagnation in ballroom dancing might finally have come to pass.

Ironically, the lack of innovation in ballroom dancing was directly connected to the processes of standardization implemented by the dance profession. As I showed above, standardization was initially embarked upon as a means of neutralizing potential public criticisms of modern ballroom dancing, and also in order to make the steps as simple, and thus accessible, as possible. However, as the interwar period progressed, the steps of the standard four dances became increasingly codified and rigid. It should again be noted that many social dancers never aspired to the ideal of standardized perfection set down by the professionals who developed the English style; they preferred instead to “while away the hours shuffling around the dance floor, dancing an approximation of the waltz, foxtrot, or tango.”¹¹¹ Therefore, particularly for those who shunned instruction, the English style began to be perceived as overly complex, and the ability to dance “correctly” as a largely unattainable goal.

¹¹⁰ More will be said about film dances, and the relationship between dance culture and film culture, in Chapter Three.

¹¹¹ Driver, *A Century of Dance*, 148.

The situation was further complicated by the continued growth and bureaucratization of the dance profession. The diverse professional associations and societies occasionally took different views of which new dances should be accepted into the English style, and what their standard steps should be. This was a problem that was given particular illumination by the Cuban rumba, which was taken up and standardized in dozens of different ways by various professional groups. As renowned dancing teacher Alex Moore described the outcome, “Not for many years has the dancing profession had such a marvellous opportunity of introducing a new dance, and, fortunately, not for many years have they made such a hash of it as they have with the Rumba rhythm.”¹¹² The chaotic professional reception of the rumba inevitably contributed to its lack of lasting impact on popular dancing in Britain.

The dearth of a dance that would prove to have any longevity following the ascendancy of the quickstep, combined with the perception that the English style was overly complicated and difficult, created a growing need within British dance culture for something entirely new. It was into this void that in the late 1930s and early 1940s two new dance crazes – the novelty dance and the jitterbug – entered in. Novelty dances, sometimes called “party dances,” were very simple group dances that followed a set sequence of steps or actions. Hundreds of these dances appeared in British ballrooms in the last years of the 1930s and into the Second World War, but none rivaled the popularity of one – the Lambeth Walk. Much more will be said about this and other novelty dances in Chapter Five; however it should be noted here that what set these novelties apart from the English style was not just their simplicity, but the fact that they

¹¹² Alex Moore, “Ballroom Dancing Made Easy. Carioca or Cuban-Rumba?” *Modern Dance*, November 1936, 5.

were largely an innovation of the dance hall industry, *not* the dance profession, suggesting a gradual transfer of influence among the cultural producers of dancing. Like the Charleston, the jitterbug was yet another dance that originated in African American culture and was developed in New York's Harlem, and first arrived in Britain in early 1939. However, it took the outbreak of the Second World War, and particularly the entry of the United States into the conflict and the attendant arrival of hundreds of thousands of American GIs, to generally popularize the dance. The jitterbug will be discussed at much greater length in Chapter Six.

The near-simultaneous emergence of novelty dances and the jitterbug, so divergent in style and in origin, also speaks to the continuing and complex forces that governed the introduction of new dances to Britain. By the time the jitterbug appeared on the scene, it was the latest in a long line of American dances to have crossed the pond. American, particularly African American, music and dance styles had been developing an increasing influence in Britain since the minstrel performances of the mid to late nineteenth century. The theatrically-based minstrelsy evolved into the first popular dance with African American roots to enjoy success in North America and Europe, the Cakewalk, which in turn transitioned into ragtime. Moreover, these processes accelerated considerably after the First World War, and ragtime was soon followed by the foxtrot, the Charleston, the Black Bottom, truckin', and the jitterbug, to name only a few. There can therefore be little question as to the preeminent and ever-increasing influence of the United States on British popular dancing, and popular culture in general.

However, merely pointing to the increasing Americanization of British dancing does not provide an accurate view of what was in fact a rather complicated picture. Until

the turn of the twentieth century, continental Europe had been the source of most new dances that were introduced to Britain, such as the waltz and the polka, and later the tango. Despite the wild success of the American jazz dances, the Continent continued to exert a not insignificant influence for much of the 1920s, particularly on the dance profession. The dance press followed developments, particularly in Parisian dancing, with a close eye, and prominent dance teachers frequently travelled back and forth to the Continent seeking inspiration. The lingering French influence is perhaps most observable in the number of British dancing teachers who adopted French-sounding names, or in the fact that when the first large public dance halls opened in Britain, they were dubbed “palais-de-danse.” Moreover, a number of dances that originated elsewhere than America or Europe, notably Latin America, were also introduced to Britain during the interwar years. Though never spectacular ballroom successes, dances like the Argentine tango, the Brazilian maxixe, the Cuban rumba, and the Brazilian samba were all well-known to the British public, especially as exhibition dances.¹¹³ Throughout the period under review, therefore, British popular dancing continued to be influenced by multiple foreign sites and cultures.

With so many clear international influences, the way in which dance culture circulated throughout the world must also be considered. As has been shown above, many new dances – from the tango, to the Charleston, to the Lambeth Walk – began life as exhibition or theatrical dances that were later adapted for the public ballroom, either at their point of origin or in Britain itself. Improvements in communication technologies and the development of transnational culture industries also disseminated dance culture

¹¹³ It should be noted that the rumba and samba enjoyed greater popular success in Britain in the 1950s than they did upon their initial introduction to the country.

around the globe, and members of the British dance profession travelled a great deal, seeking out new dances to import to Britain. In general, the movement of people – theatrical performers, tourists, and, in an age of global war, whole armies – also contributed in major ways to the circulation of dance culture. Moreover, the so-called “Latin” dances also provide further insight into just how complex the processes of cultural circulation actually were during this period, since few if any of them arrived in Britain on a direct line from Latin America, but were more often filtered through Paris or New York. As one dance press writer noted regarding the rumba, “It came from Cuba via Paris.”¹¹⁴ Adding even more layers to the picture is the fact that like in the United States, many of the dances emerging out of Latin America during this period had roots in the African diasporic communities that were the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade.

Eventually America did begin to outstrip Europe and the rest of the world in terms of its influence on British dancing, but Americanization was always a messy, incomplete process. For while most new dances originated in America, they were frequently altered by the dance profession upon reaching Britain before taking their place within the English style. There were also still attempts, particularly by professional dancers and the dance hall industry, to find inspiration for new dances within Britain itself, and it was from such an attempt that the monumentally successful Lambeth Walk first emerged. It is also here that another significant disjuncture existed between the dance profession and the dancing public. The public was much more likely to accept American dances on their own terms, as part of the growing contemporary fascination in Britain with all things American. It is notable that the vast majority of the dances that were popular successes

¹¹⁴ Leonore Manning, “Will the Screen Give Us A New Ballroom Dance Craze?” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, July 13, 1935, 20.

during the period under review originated in America, while non-American dances, from the tango to the rumba, remained the purview of professional dancers. And yet, public knowledge of American music and dances was to large extent mediated through cultural producers like the profession (as well as the dance hall and popular music industries), which meant that the British people's choices on these issues were never fully autonomous. At the same time, the profession espoused a deeply-held desire to adhere to public preference in determining the course that popular dancing would take, and did turn increasingly to America rather than Europe in seeking out new dance innovations. It was thus on a constantly shifting cultural field that the profession and public negotiated the content and performance of the national dance culture.

Conclusion

In 1942, the writer of a book that documented the contemporary craze for the jitterbug, compared the phenomenon to the national fervor for the Charleston almost two decades before. Attesting to what or who had initiated the British craze for the two dances, the writer noted, "the dancing world does not always follow the dictates of those who formulate the rules. If the public want something, then the rules go by the board. So the teachers generally give in."¹¹⁵ This statement well captured the processes and negotiations that were at the center of the evolution of British popular dancing between 1918 and 1945. As this chapter has shown, it was largely during the 1920s that "those who formulate the rules" first emerged, through the professionalization of a dancing community comprised of teachers, competition and exhibition dancers, writers and journalists. And the "rules" that these professionals formulated involved the

¹¹⁵ James Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, (London: Danceland Publications, 1942), 11.

standardization of the steps of four dances in such a way as came to be known as the English style of ballroom dancing. These two processes had a profound effect on determining what was danced in the nation's ballrooms, and how it was danced.

Yet what the above statement also points out is that the influence of the dance profession only went so far. There were any number of dancers who blindly or deliberately stayed beyond the profession's reach, eschewing instruction, ignoring exhibitions, and showing little to no interest in dance publications. There were also a number of dances that emerged throughout the period under review that the dancing public either accepted or rejected regardless of the feelings or best efforts of professional dancers. In this way, the tango and the blues remained the province of professionals, and the Charleston caught on with tenacity despite the ambivalence of the same. Of course, however real it was, this public power should not be over-stated. The casual dancers who never took a dance lesson and simply emulated others in the ballroom were very likely emulating someone who *had* at some stage or another received instruction from a member of the dance profession. Moreover, the creation or transmission of new dances to Britain was invariably mediated by the profession, or as will be shown in other chapters, the dance hall industry. Even the Charleston, the best example of a dance whose adoption into the national dance culture was directed by the public, was originally introduced to Britain by two professional dancers. Finally, it must be noted that the influence wielded by both the dance profession and the dancing public operated within a social and cultural context that also helped to determine the course of development of popular dancing. The subject of the next chapter will therefore be to consider how dancing was perceived within British society, by dancers and non-dancers alike.

Chapter 3

Modern Dances and Modern Women: Gender and the Social Perception of Popular Dancing

Following the end of the First World War, an attempt was made by some Britons to revive folk dancing. At the head of this effort was Cecil Sharp, director of the English Folk Dances Society, and an enthusiast and preserver of British folklore in general. But interestingly, Sharp's efforts on behalf of folk dancing were actively discouraged in a number of quarters. In a 1919 speech to the Arts League of Service, Margaret Morris argued that folk dancing could never be successfully revived since "the spirit of the times has changed."¹ A year later, the *Dancing Times* similarly declared that folk dancing belonged to a bygone age:

The truth is that these moderns have outgrown, or perhaps unfortunately lost, the spirit of these dances ... On the other hand, the enjoyment of the spontaneous performance of a modern dance by a modern person is easy to obtain ... The old dances expressed the spirit of the age during which they were performed, but that age is long dead. The new dances express the spirit of the day, and they are therefore suited to and popular with the people of the day."²

This statement made clear the *Dancing Times*' position that folk dancing had been categorically and necessarily replaced by modern ballroom dancing, and that the latter better embodied the postwar moment. Indeed, one of the most common arguments against the folk dancing revival was that jazz dancing *was* the folk dancing of the modern age. As the *Daily Express* wrote in 1920, "Many experts consider that the jazz is the folk-

¹ "Tea Table Talk," *Daily Express*, November 14, 1919, 3.

² G.E. Fussell, "Modern Folk and Their Dances," *Dancing Times*, March 1920, 442.

dancing of to-day, and that the folk-dancing in which Mr. Sharp, as director of the English Folk Dances Society, is so interested, is the folk-dancing of yesterday and has no place in swift modern life.”³

As this debate over folk dancing revealed, a dominant idea that circulated around modern ballroom dancing was that this cultural form represented something entirely new in the realm of British popular dance, and was very much a product of the age that had produced it. Even before the catastrophe of the First World War, the dances were frequently labeled as “new” or “modern,” but in the aftermath of the conflict, Britain’s new dances were represented as emblematic, or even as perpetuating, of much of the social and cultural change that the nation was witnessing. Modern ballroom dancing was associated with the modern age, with youth, with a society changed forever, and it was for all of these reasons that it was both embraced and condemned. As both a developing cultural form and widespread leisure activity, dancing was talked about, a great deal, and in a number of different contexts. This chapter will therefore consider the social perception of popular dancing, discussing its perceived modernity, considering the views of its critics and adherents, and exploring the manner in which dancing was influenced by, and helped to constitute, gender lines.

The first section of the chapter will examine the ways in which the new modern dances were viewed to be reflective of the modern age, both in content and practice, and the degree to which this was controversial. I will argue that while the dances were not without their critics, the social condemnation of popular dancing was actually less prevalent than the attempts to quash criticism by the dance profession appeared to suggest. Not only did the dance profession and dancing public launch an active defense

³ “Tea Table Talk,” *Daily Express*, January 5, 1920, 3.

of ballroom dancing in a number of cases, they spent considerable time touting its innumerable advantages, such as its benefits to health and beauty. I am therefore arguing that this defensive campaign must be understood within a wider social context, wherein dancing was associated with other issues of considerable public concern, particularly the changing position of women in society. The second part of the chapter then looks at this specific issue more closely, comparing two periods of heightened anxiety about young British women, the rise of the “flapper” in the period after the First World War and the social preoccupation with the “good-time girl” during the Second, and the presence of popular dancing within these discourses. I argue that the different uses of dancing in the two cases is suggestive about the large strides that this cultural form made towards widespread social acceptance during the period under review, and the degree to which dancing had become an established, and indeed promoted, aspect of British women’s lives. Both sections will demonstrate that while the social perception of popular dancing was always contested, this cultural form increasingly became a widely accepted part of the national culture.

Grotesque or Good For You? Debates about Popular Dancing

Concepts like “modernity” and the “modern” have been notoriously slippery and difficult for scholars to characterize, but historians are increasingly arguing that a productive approach is to consider how these terms were defined by historical actors themselves.⁴ In the context of British history, Martin Dauntton and Bernhard Reiger have noted that “Between 1870 and 1940, Britons repeatedly resorted to the semantics of

⁴ See Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, Chris Waters, eds. *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964*, (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1999); Martin Dauntton and Bernhard Reiger, eds. *Meanings of Modernity: Britain From the Late-Victorians Era to World War II*, (Oxford: Berg, 2001); Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004).

modernity to make sense of changes in their society.”⁵ This was no less true of discussions of popular dancing in the 1920s, within which a language of modernity was central; indeed, this fact is made abundantly clear by the very appellation *modern* ballroom dancing. The new dances that gained predominance in the aftermath of the First World War were viewed to be expressions of the changing conventions of the age that had produced them, and were largely understood by contemporaries in terms of the social and cultural changes, particularly with respect to gender, that this new era had wrought.

In 1922, Philip Richardson remarked in the *Dancing Times*, “I am not going to suggest that the modern foxtrot is more beautiful than the old minuet, but it is more in harmony with the times, just as the modern Rolls-Royce is more suitable to-day than the more beautiful coach and four of one hundred years ago.”⁶ These comments reflected one of the primary ways in which the new ballroom dances were seen to be modern; they represented a rupture with dancing styles of the past, replacing not only folk dancing, but also older popular dances like the lancers, the quadrille, the polka, or the Victorian-style waltz. For many Britons, these dances belonged to a bygone era, while the foxtrot, tango, and modern waltz were performed in a style that was in sync with the contemporary moment.

Moreover, because the movements of the new dances were simple and free, they were said to be symbolic and expressive of the breakdown of convention that was associated with the end of the war, and particularly with the increased independence enjoyed by women. All of these ideas were expressed in a 1924 article in *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*: “All that I can see in the change of dances during the centuries is

⁵ Martin Daunton and Bernhard Reiger, introduction to *Meanings of Modernity: Britain From the Late-Victorians Era to World War II*, ed. Martin Daunton and Bernhard Reiger, (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 15.

⁶ The Sitter Out, “In the Ballroom,” *Dancing Times*, January 1922, 338.

that they signalled the change in conventions, and if the modern dances show nothing else, they certainly depict a greater freedom of movement; their faster movement reveals the influence of sport; the lack of conventional restraint points to the fact that woman is taking her right place in the world.”⁷ This freedom was also said to be evident in the fact that the dances evolved outside the strict autocracy of the dancing teacher, an idea discussed in the previous chapter, and further reflected in another comment by the

Dancing Times:

The art of dancing ... is affected by the trend of modern thought every bit as much as the sister arts of painting and the drama. The trend of modern thought, as shown in the great world war which has just closed, is a revolt against despotic autocracy ... In the ballroom the up-to-date dances are the antithesis of the mechanical rule-bound movements insisted upon by the dancing masters of the late Victorian period.⁸

In popular dance culture, therefore, modernity came to be defined as a freedom from convention and regulation, an escape from tradition that could be embodied through the smooth and simple performance of a foxtrot or one-step.

The perceived modernity of modern ballroom dancing was equally confirmed by the fact that popular dances of the pre-1910 period began to be known as “old-time dances.” These dances, including the above-named lancers, quadrille, and old-time waltz, still had their adherents throughout the period under review, but mainly as novelties or as the focus of special theme nights at public dance halls. One London ballroom, the Peckham Pavilion, specialized in old-time dancing, and a Mass Observation report that described a visit there well illustrates the contemporary notion that this style had become something of a throwback: “Definitely a survival from the past. The average age of the dancers, the decoration of the hall, the heavy frivolity, all support the view that these are

⁷ Ella Retford, “From Minuet to Fox Trot,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, June 21, 1924, 164.

⁸ Philip J.S. Richardson, “Everybody Dancing Now,” *Daily Mail*, December 14, 1918, 4.

people who cannot adjust themselves to modern modes of entertainment.”⁹

Questionnaires circulated by Mass Observation further confirmed that what most of the patrons of the Peckham Pavilion enjoyed about the establishment was this return to the past. Frequently older than the average palais dancer, they liked that the Pavilion enforced many of the old customs and etiquette associated with Victorian dancing, such as men escorting ladies to and from the floor.¹⁰

Proponents of old-time dancing, and particularly of old-time ballroom codes of behavior, remained distinctly in the minority, however. The abandonment of traditional ballroom protocols was in fact frequently named as one of the things dancers liked most about the new style of dancing. Notably during the dance craze of the early 1920s, the belief was commonly expressed that dances were less formal than they had been before the war, with more of a feeling of gaiety and fewer restrictions on behavior. A writer in the *Daily Express* observed, “Not only is the public taste in dancing in process of evolution, but also the manners and customs relating to the art are changing. It is refreshing to note the atmosphere of freedom and goodwill which permeates our ball-rooms.”¹¹ Gone were the prewar conventions (at least at middle and upper class dances) of formal invitations, dance cards, and chaperones.¹² This increasing liberty from protocol was also frequently gendered, and associated with the changing status of women, as another comment in the *Daily Mail* revealed:

There is a free-and-easy air about dances, the result no doubt of the emancipation of the young girl which has been brought about by war conditions.

⁹ M-O A: TC 38/1/E, Peckham Pavilion, May 27, 1939.

¹⁰ M-O A: TC 38/1/G, Peckham Pavilion: Questionnaires, 1939.

¹¹ Geoffrey D’Egville, “Present Taste for Dancing,” *Daily Express*, November 21, 1919, 3.

¹² As the interwar period progressed, some of these elements were re-established in new ways, notably the use of chaperones as part of some dance halls’ attempt to regulate sexual activity in the ballroom, which will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

The girl who has been working as a V.A.D. or in a Government office, travelling to and fro unattended, does not take kindly to the chaperon-controlled dance.”¹³

As to the new dances being performed at these more free-and-easy affairs, they were not without their critics. However, any condemnation of modern ballroom dancing was hotly contested by the dance profession and dancing public alike, and once again proponents of older styles often found themselves marginalized. This fact was clearly illustrated by the reaction to a 1926 article printed in the *Daily Mail* by a writer calling himself “An Old Stager.” Titling his piece “Dances I Dislike,” the writer recounted his experience at a recent dance in the Midlands, and lamented the stark transformation of what was being performed in the ballroom since his own dancing days in the 1880s. Old Stager wrote, “For a man who used to be fond of dancing to sit and look on at the ungraceful contortions of the fox-trot is about as amusing as a devotee of Bridge being compelled to watch people playing beggar-my-neighbour or snap.”¹⁴ He decried the vulgarity of particularly the new dances imported from America, and described retiring out of earshot of the jazz-filled ballroom in order “to drift back to the perfect dancing and lovely music of forty years ago ... dream-like waltzes, the dignified Lancers, the jolly, rollicking polkas.”¹⁵ Concluding on a light note, Old Stager revealed that he had been declared “a dear old crank” by his hostess when he suggested that they strive to restore some of that same “harmony and beauty” to the 1920s ballroom.¹⁶

Significantly, the belief that Old Stager was an old crank did not prove to be one confined to his Midlands hostess. A few days after his article appeared, the newspaper

¹³ “How We Dance,” *Daily Mail*, January 15, 1919, 4.

¹⁴ An Old Stager, “Dances I Dislike,” *Daily Mail*, March 9, 1926, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

received a letter to the editor from someone signing themselves “Another Old Stager,” which condemned Old Stager’s call for a return to old-time dancing, and reiterated the notion that the new dances were far more in sync with the times. The writer declared,

It is impertinent for an Old Stager ... to attempt to dictate to young people what dances they should dance and how they should dance them. “Where is the dancing of the eighties?” he asks. Gone forever like the 8d. income tax. Young people want to enjoy themselves in their own way, which, naturally, in 1926, is different than that of 1886; and they don’t want old stagers of “well over sixty” telling them how to do it. If there is anything decadent about present-day dancing it is only in the minds of old stagers looking on.¹⁷

Another letter from a forty-year old female writer also defended the modern dances, suggesting that not only that they were more relevant to the current time period, but that they were an improvement on the old-time dances Old Stager recalled so fondly:

As a child I well remember “Old Stager’s” “jolly” polka, with its grotesque hops producing dishevelled heads and heated faces, and the “dignified” lancers, where rows of men and women linked arms and dashed wildly from end to end of the room or, in a circle, rushed round and round while many women were swung completely off their feet. Compared with the smooth, cool, easy rhythm of the modern young dancers, these bygone performers seem as children gamboling noisily beside their quietly progressing elders.¹⁸

Old Stager’s position was thus contravened by his own friends and a number of strangers, and the immediate and strong reaction to his call for a return to old-time dancing was typical of the passionate response elicited by complaints about the new dancing styles.

Of course, also inherent to both Old Stager’s position and the responses to it, was the idea that modern ballroom dancing was most associated with a specific generation. This was another significant way in which dance culture was perceived as modern, in that dancing, at least as a social activity, was viewed to be dominated by younger Britons. It is certainly true that young men and women were often among those most eager to embrace

¹⁷ Another Old Stager “Over Sixty,” Letter to the Editor, *Daily Mail*, March 11, 1926, 8.

¹⁸ Letter to the Editor, *Daily Mail*, March 13, 1926.

new dances, particularly the lively American dance imports. As Barbara Cohen-Stratyner has noted about the Charleston, “More than any other dance, it defined the performer as young and willing to take chances on modern life.”¹⁹ The divisions within the dancing public over the dance, described in the previous chapter, were thus strongly generational in nature, and a similar phenomenon was later observable with respect to the jitterbug, an idea that will be discussed further in Chapter Six. It is therefore important to note that much of the controversy that surrounded new dances throughout the period under review were often based in the generation gap, fairly typical and oft-repeated disputes between parents and children over what the latter were dancing. Yet, at the same time, it does not provide an accurate picture of what was in fact a complex picture to ascribe all censoring of dancing to generational divisions.

Common criticisms leveled against modern ballroom dances were that they were comprised of movements that were silly, grotesque, or even immoral. But like Old Stager, those who voiced or attempted to act on these convictions, were often greeted with strong resistance from dancing enthusiasts. In 1919 the *Daily Express* published an article by a man who was one who viewed the new dance forms to be ugly and ridiculous:

In these days of the dance boom, craze, madness, or whatever you like to call it, I am that *rara avis*, the young man who does not jazz ... Personally I object to being forced against my will to cut absurd and fantastic capers in a ball-room, to slide and slither, and slide again, like a drunken sailor; to perform an involuntary treadmill exercise for three hours on end; to twinkle my toes and dip my knees and make myself look thoroughly ridiculous – in fact, to jazz.²⁰

¹⁹ Barbara Cohen-Stratyner, “Social Dance in Broadway Musical Comedy,” in *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 222.

²⁰ E.C.M., “Nightmares of the Ball-room,” *Daily Express*, November 22, 1919, 4.

What was significant in these comments was that even while decrying the content of the new dances, the writer acknowledged that he was in the minority in holding this position. Moreover, he continued by declaring that his dislike of jazz dancing had made him “a pariah outcast from society; voted generally a bore and a thoroughly dull fellow.”²¹ Letters to the editor of the *Daily Express* in the following days confirmed this supposition, basically advising the man to cease whining and join in the fun.

An even more active public outcry followed a direct effort to act on the notion that modern ballroom dancing was immoral and constituted a threat to social purity. In January 1920, the urban district council of Leyton attempted to ban the jazz and one-step dances held at the municipal hall and town baths on the grounds that they were “morally bad.”²² The *Daily Express* reported that dance enthusiasts in Leyton were extremely angry about the ban, and that the promoter who oversaw the dances at the baths tried to get out of his contract as a result of the prohibition. When this request was refused, the promoter reportedly sent two hundred free tickets to citizens who then attended one of the dances and energetically performed the banned dances, some of them in hobnail boots in order to assure maximum destruction of the venue.²³ Meanwhile, an editorial in the *Express* decried the move by Leyton’s council, commenting that “If the dissecting glass of suspicion be once applied, immorality – a fine, comprehensive, and vague sort of word – may be found in all sorts of attractive and, as we think, harmless pleasures ... This sort of inquest leads to lunacy. Leyton will not achieve a higher virtue by losing its jazz.”²⁴ The Leyton incident provides an important example of the power

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Banned Dances at the Baths,” *Daily Express*, January 2, 1920, 1.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “Chadband at the Dance,” *Daily Express*, January 2, 1920, 4

that the dancing public held in determining the course of development of British dance culture, using their own dancing bodies and the space of the ballroom itself to resist the dictates of commercial producers of dancing like the Leyton urban council. These events also demonstrated that while modern ballroom dances did have their critics, the naysayers were typically far outnumbered by the dances' supporters. The public was generally against the castigation of the new dances, and overt criticisms such as those expressed by the Leyton urban council were few and far between, despite the often expressed fears among dance professionals.

Indeed, there is an intriguing disjuncture between the degree to which modern ballroom dancing was condemned and the vociferous defense of the new dances that was launched by the dance profession. For example, professionals and the dance press repeatedly insisted that historically many new dancing styles were very poorly received upon their first introduction. As Philip Richardson wrote in 1922,

Will those who take delight in belittling our modern dances remember that they are the creations of the age? and will those who cry for the return of the dances of our grandparents and great-grandparents remember that they are crying for an anachronism? and will they also remember that one hundred years ago, when the valse was first introduced, folks held up their hands in horror, and begged for a return to the minuet and the country dance, just as in all probability one hundred years hence there will be those who belittle the dance then in vogue, and beg for a return of the stately foxtrot of their ancestors?²⁵

Similar statements abounded in the writings of professional dancers throughout the 1920s, many of which drew particular attention to the poor public reception of the waltz in the early nineteenth century. As another writer noted, "it is not without interest to realise that once a ban was put upon the waltz."²⁶

²⁵ The Sitter Out, "In the Ballroom," *Dancing Times*, October 1922, 23.

²⁶ Ella Ratford, "From Minuet to Fox Trot," *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, June 21, 1924.

Meanwhile, in addition to these more explicit professional defenses of dancing, or the strong response to criticisms of the new dances put forth by some members of the public and popular press, there was much contemporary discussion about the innumerable advantages and benefits of dancing. One such benefit was with respect to exercise and physical health, which, as Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has shown, was a subject of considerable social concern during the interwar period.²⁷ With specific reference to dancing, the *Daily Mail* observed in 1920, “Dancing is to be something more than the joyous amusement of gay and giddy youth. It is being taken up quite solemnly as a form of indoor exercise by the serious. Our books on sports and pastimes will be out of date until a new chapter gives dancing its honoured place.”²⁸ Famed dancing teacher Santos Casani similarly observed in his 1936 book, “I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way to keep fit, and that is, to keep dancing.”²⁹ Casani continued, “If ‘dancing for health’ was advertised as loudly as patent medicines, and folks danced instead of taking drugs and pills, we would have a healthy race.”³⁰ Dancing was even named as a cure for very specific conditions, as was the case in one *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* article from 1926:

Dancing is a cure for stammering, according to a Guy’s Hospital official who spoke on this subject recently. He gave as an example the case of a twenty-year-old girl whose stammering was due to lack of rhythm and who was completely cured by dancing. This is interesting because it bears out my view that dancing is a healthy exercise.³¹

²⁷ See Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “The Culture of the Abdomen: Obesity and Reducing in Britain, circa 1900-1939,” *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2, (April 2005): 239-273; Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Building a British Superman: Physical Culture in Interwar Britain,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 4 (2006): 595-610.

²⁸ “Serious Dancing,” *Daily Mail*, Feb. 10, 1920, 6.

²⁹ Santos Casani, *Casani’s Home Teacher: Ballroom Dancing Made Easy*, (London: Heath Cranton Ltd., 1936), 36.

³⁰ Casani, *Casani’s Home Teacher*, 38-39.

³¹ “Around the Dance and Music Hall,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, February 13, 1926, back cover.

In popular newspapers, the dance press, dance manuals, and physical recreation guides, dancing was suggested as a cure or preventative for conditions ranging from depression, to indigestion, flat feet, and poor blood; dancing and dance music were even put forward as a means of restoring the health of war veterans.³² In any number of contexts then, Britons were assured that they could “dance [their] way to health.”³³

Related to this issue of physical health, dancing was also promoted for providing a means of retaining a youthful look and demeanor, and for developing grace and physical beauty. As one writer noted, “Doctors say dancing is one of the finest exercises in the world, as it does not over-develop your muscles, but just keeps you young.”³⁴ A *Dancing Times* article from 1919 also touted dancing as “the secret of youth,”³⁵ while one London dance hall advised its patrons to “Dance and Keep Young!”³⁶ Not only was dancing an ideal means through which to maintain one’s youth, other commentators suggested that it could also be advantageous to the development of those who still were young. As the *Edinburgh Evening News* proclaimed in 1933, “Shy and awkward children have been transformed into models of natural ease and grace by learning to dance.”³⁷ Santos Casani also devoted a section of his *Home Teacher* to the discussion of the way in which “Dancing cultivates physical grace.”³⁸ He further argued that developing these attributes was critical to physical attractiveness as well, stating, “Beauty specialists can do much to make a woman attractive, but unless there is poetry in her movements she

³² E.J. Wass, “Music that Heals: How the Latest Fox Trots Are Winning War Heroes Back to Health,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, May 8, 1926, 56.

³³ A Doctor, “Dance Your Way to Health,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, August 16, 1924, 78.

³⁴ Molly Carmichael, “Watch Your Step,” *Daily Mirror*, November 9, 1935, 23.

³⁵ See for example, “Provincial News, Leeds,” *Dancing Times*, November 1919, 135.

³⁶ M-O A: TC 38/1/F, Peckham Pavilion: Literature, 1939.

³⁷ “Dance this Winter: and be Happy and Healthy,” *Edinburgh Evening News*, December 28, 1933.

³⁸ Casani, *Casani’s Home Teacher*, 38-39.

fails to be wholly alluring.”³⁹ A writer for *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* echoed Casani’s position, commenting that “Dancing and beauty go hand in hand,” and that it provided the ideal exercise for “maintaining slender hips, slim ankles, and graceful arms and wrists.”⁴⁰

Dance professionals and enthusiasts further suggested that dancing had a number of more abstract powers as well, providing a means of assessing a person’s personality, temperament, or character. As Santos Casani noted, “dancing helps to express personality... In a real sense dancing may be called the personality of motion.”⁴¹ Casani’s sentiment was frequently echoed in the dance and popular press, such as in one 1925 article in *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* which postulated, “The snappy lilt of a fox trot or the irregular beat of a Charleston seems to rouse our instincts, and in the dancing we give expression to whatever is foremost in our character. Temperament always comes to the surface in the ballroom.”⁴² On another occasion, the same periodical advised women that they could learn something about a man’s character by the way that he danced. Celebrity writer Nelly Wigley wrote, “dancing is the sincerest and most ancient form of self-expression, and a dancer’s worst faults, as well as his best qualities, come to the surface as soon as his foot touches the floor.”⁴³ According to Wigley, the way in which a man behaved in the ballroom could reveal a range of traits, including timidity, aggression, and vanity. Similarly, on the opposite side of the gender line, the *Daily Express* advised male readers that “A woman reveals her temperament by the way

³⁹ Ibid., 41-42.

⁴⁰ Margaret Black, “Graceful Health,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, December 6, 1924, 138.

⁴¹ Casani, *Casani’s Home Teacher*, 34.

⁴² Maggie Dickenson, “Should Husbands and Wives be Dancing Partners?” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, November 28, 1925, 110.

⁴³ Nelly Wigley, “Dancing and Character,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, February 14, 1925, 73.

she responds to her dancing partner.”⁴⁴ The article went on to suggest that a man could be assured that a woman who surrendered herself to her partner and did not attempt to lead in the dance would likely make an admirable and compliant wife.

Contemporaries thus touted the benefits of popular dancing as being manifold. In addition to cultivating good health, grace and poise, physical beauty, and providing a helpful means of evaluating the character of a future spouse, dancing was promoted for its ability to cultivate “social success,”⁴⁵ and for any number of seemingly random virtues, from limiting social unrest and preventing labor strikes,⁴⁶ to improving one’s tennis game.⁴⁷ Casani perhaps best summed up the many advantages of dancing as a sport and art in his *Home Teacher*, writing “Dancing is the highroad to happiness. It is more than mere pleasure; it is a subtle combination of art and exercise which blends the mind and body into perfect harmony.”⁴⁸

While a great deal of the discussion of dancing’s benefits was no doubt simply due to the very real enthusiasm of the cultural form’s proponents, there is also a sense that, at least on the part of the dance profession, the praise was to some extent a defensive mechanism. This is further borne out by the fact that much of the professional praise of dancing came during the same years that the various ballroom conferences were being convened. As I discussed in Chapter One, a primary reason that the ballroom dance profession embarked on its quest to standardize the steps of the new dances, a process which culminated in the development of the English style, was to curb public criticism of

⁴⁴ “Types of Dancers. Character Revealed in the Ballroom,” *Daily Express*, October 9, 1919, 3.

⁴⁵ Vesta, “The Social Value of Dancing,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, October 18, 1924, 249.

⁴⁶ “More Dancing – Fewer Strikes,” *Dancing Times*, October 1919, 10-13.

⁴⁷ “Dancing – An Aid to Tennis,” *Dancing Times*, March 1922, 541.

⁴⁸ Casani, *Casani’s Home Teacher*, 47.

modern ballroom dancing. Once again, this appears to have been something of an over-reaction to the level of criticism actually being leveled against the dances, which effectively amounted to some wary parents, the odd parish preacher, old-time dancing proponent, or dance venue proprietor. Given the dearth of real criticism of the new ballroom dances from more than a small minority of the populace after 1918, the profession's motives appear somewhat puzzling. It did seem that occasionally the dance profession protested too much.

There are a number of factors that I believe help to account for the concerns and actions of the dance profession and dancing enthusiasts among the public. First, at least during the early part of the period under review, the dance community was clearly reacting more to criticisms of modern ballroom dances that occurred outside, rather than within, the British Isles. In early 1920, both the popular and dance press closely followed the attacks on modern ballroom dancing initiated by Catholic Church authorities in France. The foxtrot, one-step, and tango were formally condemned by Cardinal Amette, Archbishop of Paris, and Bordeaux's Cardinal Andrieux, for their indecency, frivolity, and "unseemly gyrations."⁴⁹ At their behest, in March of that year the Marquise de Monstier produced a report that supported the Church's position that modern ballroom dances were "ugly and indecent."⁵⁰ At the same time, there were attempts in Paris to establish a dance censorship board, which would evaluate new dances in a manner similar to the way in which films passed through censors.⁵¹ In advocating for the first informal conference about ballroom dancing, Philip Richardson explicitly referenced what was

⁴⁹ Daily Express Correspondent, "Seven Sinful Dances," *Daily Express*, December 18, 1919, 1.

⁵⁰ Daily Express Correspondent, "Dances to Prelates. Marquise in a Campaign Against the Fox-Trot," *Daily Express*, March 8, 1920, 1.

⁵¹ "Tango Without the Tang," *Daily Express*, January 26, 1920, 5.

happening in France as a reason the meeting was vitally necessary.⁵² While no parallel campaign existed in Britain, events in France clearly had the fledgling British profession on alert. As Richardson proclaimed in November 1920, “They have not seriously attacked dancing in England yet ... Believe me, it is a very serious danger if allowed to develop.”⁵³

There is also some evidence that professional efforts to curb criticisms against modern ballroom dances may actually have had an effect, and help to explain why the new styles were not condemned as vociferously in Britain as they were elsewhere. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, ragtime dances and the tango were quite controversial when they first arrived in Britain. However, the outbreak of the First World War likely halted the evolution of a vocal opposition as much as it did the evolution of the dances themselves. The prompt organization of the British dance profession in the months and years after the war was therefore important to nipping renewed controversy in the bud. And while the existence of a professional dance community did not halt the strong condemnation of the Charleston that erupted in the mid-1920s, the swift actions of professionals in toning down the dance ensured that the controversy was quickly resolved.⁵⁴ Therefore, while dance professionals were perhaps overly concerned about criticisms of new ballroom dances, their efforts were important to ensuring that what controversy *did* exist was always of short duration.

Second, the defense of modern ballroom dancing launched by certain professionals was in part about controversies and debates about the dances within the

⁵² The Sitter Out, *Dancing Times*, May 1920, 606. See Chapter One for further discussion of the ballroom conferences.

⁵³ The Sitter Out, *Dancing Times*, November 1920, 84.

⁵⁴ For more on criticisms of the Charleston, see Chapters One and Five.

profession itself. One cause of internal dissent was based in generational disparities among professionals that resulted in the condemnation of the new style by select members of the dance community. Dancing masters who were holdovers from the Victorian and Edwardian eras frequently decried the new styles, but Richardson and other proponents of modern ballroom dancing argued that these old masters simply did not like the loss of control the new dances represented. As Richardson commented in 1922, “I think if we were to ask what is the real objection that these old teachers have to modern ballroom dancing we should find that it is because fifty years ago the teachers ruled the ballroom, whereas to-day the dancers themselves rule it. They are the most autocratic people on earth, these Victorian dancing masters.”⁵⁵

At the same time, among those professionals who embraced the modern style, there were financial motives for cultivating a notion that the new dances were controversial. Some within the profession blamed the public outcry against the modern dances on them being poorly performed, a stance that was likely to help fill dancing classes. There were even teachers who went so far as to use supposed public criticisms of dancing as a form of advertising. One *Dancing Times* notice for the Méthode Sielle School of Dancing featured a heading that screamed “Vulgarity in the Ballroom!” before going on to state:

Bad performers, enjoying themselves innocently enough, are the unwitting cause of the above outcry.

Ballroom dancing is brought into disrepute by people of unimpeachable character who would be most insulted if told of their responsibility. Their well-meaning but untutored movements are nine-tenths of the cause of the present absurd outcry in the Daily Press, in which one sees dancing described as negroid, indecent and vulgar. It is because many dancers do not know how to hold themselves that their dancing calls forth this strong condemnation.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ The Sitter Out, “In the Ballroom,” *Dancing Times*, January 1922, 337-338.

⁵⁶ “Vulgarity in the Ballroom!” *Dancing Times*, January 1921.

Without the need to work on perfecting or teaching the dances, many professionals would have been without a *raison-d'etre*, and it was therefore to their advantage to acknowledge, or even perpetuate, controversies around modern ballroom dancing.

Finally, the frequent attempts by the dance profession to defend, or highlight the virtues of dancing, must be understood within a wider social and cultural context, and with respect to contemporary ideas about the cultural form that extended well beyond the content of the dances themselves. First, and as I will discuss at length in Chapter Four, when the number of public dancing venues began to increase dramatically in the 1920s, certain spaces, notably night-clubs and working-class dance halls, became associated with sexual immorality and deviant or even criminal behavior, a fact that tainted the social perception of popular dancing as a leisure practice. Second, as much as dancing's proponents celebrated the cultural form's modernity, both in terms of content and practice, as a virtue, dancing suffered from the same condemnations that many "modern" institutions did. A chief illustration and mechanism of much of the social and cultural change that followed the end of the First World War, dancing became entangled in the debates that surrounded these social transformations. As the discussion above has already suggested, this was particularly true with respect to the changing place of women in society. Women were very often dancing's greatest enthusiasts, and, as the next section will show, contemporary discourses surrounding women who danced revealed the highly contested nature of public views on the cultural form.

From "flapper" to "good-time girl:" the changing image of women who danced

A number of historians have shown that the First World War altered the gender balance in Britain in critical ways that resonated well into the postwar world. The war's

destructive impact on traditional understandings of masculinity and on individual men, existed alongside a tremendous concern with women which was manifested on multiple fronts.⁵⁷ On the one hand, women's important contribution to the war effort as workers and sacrificing wives and mothers was acknowledged and rewarded by enfranchisement in 1918. On the other hand, the increased employment opportunities and greater personal independence that the war created for women was a subject of considerable social and political concern. There was also much discussion in the early 1920s related to the millions of "surplus" women who were unlikely to marry given the numbers of men killed in the war, and falling birth-rates, the spread of contraceptives, and changes to laws governing divorce and women's employment additionally reflected an alteration to the conventional gender order. Dominant within all of these debates was the figure of the "modern woman," also referred to as the flapper or dancing girl, and characterized by her short hair and more boyish fashions, lack of sexual inhibition, and propensity for drinking, smoking, driving cars and general pursuit of pleasure. The interwar years were thus a period of significant gender anxiety, and what I want to point to is how crucial dancing was to these discourses.

It is the contention of this section that popular dancing evolved upon a contested cultural field of changing gender relations, and that this was fundamental to how the cultural form was understood within society. In the context of the dance-mad 1920s, a love of dancing became one of the defining features of the modern woman, which in turn

⁵⁷ See Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs*, (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1988); Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-War Britain*, (London: Routledge, 1990); Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: the Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Nicolleta Gullace, *"The Blood of our Sons: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War"*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002); Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918-1950*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

colored the social perception of dancing in ways that provided context to the debates and professional actions described above. At the same time, I will show that the woman who danced was always a contested figure, simultaneously castigated for excessive pleasure-seeking and defended as deserving of amusement, testifying to British society's ambivalence about both modern women *and* dancing. Moreover, as the interwar period progressed, the changing role of women in society and the establishment of dancing as a national cultural form remained significantly intertwined; popular dancing and the space of the dance hall provided new forms of independence and professional opportunities to women, while at the same time dancing became a standard aspect of feminine education, and was put to work as an advertising tool in products directed towards women. This feminization of dancing was both reflective and perpetuating of its growing societal ubiquity and evolution into a national cultural form, but while this gradually helped to diminish concerns about dancing, the same could not be said about women. With the outbreak of the Second World War, feminine behavior again became a subject of negative public scrutiny, yet significantly, dancing was now largely absent from the debates. This absence provides strong evidence of the degree to which dancing had become an accepted or even socially endorsed aspect of women's lives.

Billie Melman has argued that while disapproving public commentary about the modern woman had been a social reality in Britain since the 1890s, the postwar flapper was something different again, emerging at an historical moment characterized by the confluence of shifting gender relations and structural changes to the nature of British popular culture; Melman points to film, mass-circulation daily newspapers, and the best-selling novel as having been critical to spreading the image of the flapper throughout the

popular imaginary.⁵⁸ But like film and print culture, popular dancing was developing into a mass cultural form during this period, and was also integral to debates about modern womanhood. Popular dancing provided both a primary means of identification for the modern woman, as well as a conduit through which her behavior could be vilified or defended. As Julie Malnig has noted, “Invariably, [protests against social dance] always come back to fears of (and for) the feminine: that the dancing would wreak havoc on the morals and sexual development of women and girls, threaten their roles as the keepers of domestic sanctity of home and hearth, or tempt their susceptible sexual natures.”⁵⁹

One of the principle sites where women and dancing were closely culturally interwoven was in the popular press. Several scholars have shown how gender anxieties, and specifically concerns about modern womanhood, were given particular airing in the popular press during the 1920s.⁶⁰ Much of this work has argued that the national daily newspapers essentially reaffirmed traditional understandings of femininity and domesticity, while providing strong criticisms of modern women, but as Adrian Bingham has recently noted, the representation and articulation of gender identities in the popular press was not actually quite so straightforward.⁶¹ Indeed, a close study of press accounts of women who danced suggests that contemporary views on both dancing and the modern woman were significantly contested, a fact that was strongly illuminated by a national debate that broke out on the pages of the *Daily Express* in February 1920.

⁵⁸ Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination*, 7.

⁵⁹ Julie Malnig, “Women, Dance, and New York Nightlife,” in *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 73.

⁶⁰ See Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination*; Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-war Britain*; Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England*.

⁶¹ Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press*, 5-7.

The issue was sparked by an editorial entitled “The Dream Girl – And the Awakening,” written by George E. Pearson, a veteran of the First World War.⁶² Describing the wartime experience, Pearson wrote, “Out in France, or under the tropical sun, how often the temporary soldier saw in his cigarette smoke the face of a dear, affectionate, typical home-loving English girl ... He would sigh and long for the day when again he could return to the ‘feminine’ girl at home, and satisfy his heart’s yearning.”⁶³ Pearson claimed that this dream of finding such an ideal British woman to make his wife after the war was part of what helped him survive life in the trenches, yet he went on to describe feelings of shock and dismay upon his actual return to Britain, and the discovery that the dreamgirl of his wartime fantasies no longer existed. Pearson suggested that while men had been sobered by their wartime experience, made more serious and learned the value of hard work, women had generally been changed for the worst.

It soon became apparent that Pearson was not the only one to advocate this position. His article created quite a stir, and over the next few weeks a national discussion over the current state of British womanhood emerged on the letters page of the *Daily Express*. Dozens of men and women weighed in on the debate, and gradually two competing visions of British femininity were articulated and deconstructed. The so-called “dreamgirl,” the woman that Pearson suggested battle-weary men had been fantasizing about throughout four long years of war, was described as virtuous, modest, subdued, and fond of home and family. Her antithesis was the feminine figure alternately referred to as the “modern woman,” “jazz-mad,” the “butterfly,” or simply the “dancing girl.” These

⁶² George E. Pearson, “The Dream Girl – And the Awakening,” *Daily Express*, February 16, 1920, 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

women were purported to be loud, flirtatious, and lacking in good sense; they dressed provocatively, smoked and drank alcohol, and were above all obsessed with dancing.

Many of the initial letters received by the *Daily Express* were written by men who whole-heartedly agreed with Pearson, and who described their own disillusionment with the women they encountered upon returning to Britain after the war. “Disappointed” wrote that while serving in Egypt he had also dreamed of “the dear girls of home and the purity, brightness, and sweetness of the beautiful English home life,” but had found upon his return that “Instead of the girls of our fond imaginings we find them a madly-given-over-to-dancing, theatre-going type. Not content with these as a mere diversion they have become in the present day an intoxicating passion.”⁶⁴ Another large volume of mail came from women claiming to be the lost “dreamgirl,” and who lamented the advantages that their dance-mad sisters seemed to enjoy over them in attracting the opposite sex. As “Elizabeth” wrote, “it is not the quiet stay-at-home girl who gets the best time, however pretty she may be. It is the one who attends the dancing classes, smokes, and is out for a thorough go-ahead life, and the men seem to prefer her.”⁶⁵ The number of letters like Elizabeth’s quickly inspired a whole new round of mail from men seeking to reassure them, and condemning the dancing girl in even more categorical terms. One man wrote, “The majority of men much prefer a girl of modest disposition – that is, one who does not smoke, flirt, or jazz.”⁶⁶ Another man similarly commented that “no serious thinking man would ever ... look for his ‘dream girl’ in a jazz-hall or night club.”⁶⁷ The position of

⁶⁴ Disappointed, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, February 19, 1920, 4.

⁶⁵ Elisabeth, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, February 18, 1920, 4.

⁶⁶ Northcote, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, February 23, 1920, 6.

⁶⁷ John Edwards, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, February 26, 1920.

many male correspondents is perhaps best summed up in a short statement by “Lonely,” who commented, “The best women ... do not frequent the dance.”⁶⁸

Yet despite the clear antipathy being directed towards dancing girls on the part of some veterans and frustrated dreamgirls, not all of the mail received by the *Daily Express* endorsed this castigation of women who danced. Indeed, I believe that much of the significance of this debate resides in its illustration of how contested public ideas about both women and dancing really were. A letter written by “A Girl of Nineteen” asked what was so wrong about young women having a little fun prior to marriage, when they would inevitably settle down and become serious.⁶⁹ Other defenders of dancing women turned their wrath on the so-called dreamgirls, with one writer commenting that these women could not find a husband because they were desperate and narrow-minded, as demonstrated by their viewing “harmless pastimes and pretty clothes as not quite ‘comme il faut.’”⁷⁰ Less contentiously, other women sought to suggest that an enthusiasm for dancing did not necessarily imply frivolity or immorality. Two widows wrote that, “not all girls who frequent the dance hall go because they are of a frivolous turn of mind, but because they, too, are lonely and seek companionship.”⁷¹ Another woman also suggested that a desire to dance was not a sign of bad character, but rather that dancing simply provided a necessary outlet for women who were otherwise very serious and hard-working:

Why do your correspondents persistently classify us into two groups – the dancing girl and the quiet, stay-at-home? Is there no combination of the two? ... Many a girl, after she leaves business, has to assist at home to relieve an overworked mother... and yet we still find time to enjoy our youth, to go to

⁶⁸ Lonely, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, February 25, 1920, 4.

⁶⁹ A Girl of Nineteen, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, February 21, 1920, 4.

⁷⁰ Speedy Puss, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, February 24, 1920, 6.

⁷¹ Two Lonely Widows, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, March 1, 1920, 6.

dances and to fling dull care away. Are we to be counted heartless because of this? Your correspondent will find, if he goes deeper, the many of the so-called butterflies are dreamers and thinkers as deep as himself.⁷²

This notion that there was a middle ground between the dreamgirl and the butterfly was advanced by several writers, and it should also be noted that not all of the defenders of dancing girls were other female dancing enthusiasts. About a week after Pearson's original article appeared, the *Daily Express* printed another opinion piece on the question of British femininity by writer A. Beverley Baxter. Baxter was also a veteran who acknowledged Pearson's dreamgirl as a common fantasy of the war, but went on to argue that this was an emotional reaction to the frontlines, and that "this classifying of the elusive feminine into types is absurd."⁷³

This national dialogue continued in the pages of the *Daily Express* for over a month, showcasing how deeply dancing was implicated in the postwar discussions of young women. Women who danced were largely represented as morally ambiguous, ill-equipped for women's conventional role as wife and mother, and dancing also became the chief symbol their excessive pursuit of a good time. Invariably appearing in any laundry list of modern feminine preoccupations alongside drinking, smoking, and gambling, dancing became directly associated with bad behavior. Public concerns about women thus became constitutive of public concerns about dancing, and vice versa. However, the dreamgirl and butterfly debate also clearly demonstrates that even in this initial phase of the dancing boom, the woman who danced was a contested figure, in turn vilified for excessive pleasure-seeking and defended as deserving of amusement after

⁷² Another Dream Girl, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Express*, February 24, 1920, 4.

⁷³ A. Beverley Baxter, "The Charm of the Feminine," *Daily Express*, February 21, 1920, 4.

four long years of war. Throughout the 1920s these same tropes appeared time and again on multiple social and political fronts, as a brief selection of examples will show.

In the same month as the *Daily Express*'s dreamgirl and butterfly controversy, two other debates illustrated the ambiguous social position of the dance-mad woman. First, the *Daily Mail* reported that it had been receiving a great deal of mail from members of the YWCA over divisions arising within the organization on the subject of women's dancing, theatre-going, smoking and card-playing. While the YWCA leadership apparently had concerns about the social activities of women living on their premises, the letters published largely defended dancing girls. One woman wrote, "I feel that the working girl living in the YWCA has enough to put up with ... without being deprived of any innocent enjoyment simply because some straight-laced folks say nay."⁷⁴ A couple of days later a married woman who had lived at the YWCA while her husband was at war also decried the "'kill-joy' elements" that wished to prevent dancing on club grounds, and limit women's ability to attend outside dances or the theatre. She argued that dancing could be an entirely innocent pursuit and to ban it would be "catering solely for unduly solemn and serious young women."⁷⁵

Yet that very same week, another fervor erupted surrounding a lecture by Dr. Murray Leslie at the Institute for Hygiene about the millions of "surplus" women created by the war. Within his comments Leslie suggested that the disproportion between the sexes was leading to an "extraordinary diversity of type" when it came to British women, and that more prevalent than ever was "the frivolous, scantily-clad, jazzing flapper ... to whom a dance, a new hat, or a man with a car were of more importance than the fate of

⁷⁴ "Y.W.C.A. Dancers," *Daily Mail*, February 5, 1920, 5.

⁷⁵ Padre's Wife, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Mail*, February 7, 1920, 6.

nations.”⁷⁶ He also commented that women’s obsession with dancing meant that the men who were on offer as dance partners were in huge demand and inundated with invitations to dances. In this case, the resulting letters to the editor of the *Daily Mail* (at least the ones that were published) entirely endorsed Leslie’s criticisms of dancing girls. In response to Leslie’s comments about the high demand for male dance partners, “A Young Dancing Man” wrote, “As one of these unfortunates, I suggest that the worst thing any young man can do is to learn to dance. One he does so he becomes a slave to dancing, he spends all his money on it, and he never has a moment of his own from dancing.”⁷⁷ Another writer, commenting on the large numbers of women unable to find husbands, stated, “The frivolous, scantily clad, jazzing flappers, irresponsible and undisciplined’ . . . are themselves a reason why so many men shrink from matrimony.”⁷⁸

The association between dancing and frivolous, immoral behavior by women also extended beyond discussions about the flapper. In a 1919 divorce proceeding between a Mr. and Mrs. Everitt, which received extensive press coverage, Mrs. Everitt was accused of adultery with a neighborhood doctor. As the case progressed Mrs. Everitt was painted as a repeat adulteress, bad mother, and frequenter of night-clubs. Her husband’s lawyer also pointed to Mrs. Everitt’s propensity for throwing weekend and evening parties that featured dancing to gramophone music, and the doctor’s frequent presence at these events as further proof of her bad character and adultery. A wild picture of dancing, drinking, and debauchery was painted before the courts.⁷⁹ Significantly, in the judge’s summation he cautioned the jury not to assume that simply because Mrs. Everitt enjoyed jazz music

⁷⁶ “The 1920s Girl,” *The Times*, February 5, 1920, 9.

⁷⁷ A Young Dancing Man, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Mail*, February 6, 1920, 6.

⁷⁸ Put off, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Mail*, February 6, 1920, 6.

⁷⁹ See *The Times*, October 22 – November 1, 1919.

and dancing she must be guilty of immorality. The very fact that the judge felt he had to make such a statement at all is very revealing about contemporary notions that associated dancing with moral laxity and bad behavior.⁸⁰

Criticisms of dancing women also filtered over into politics. While the 1918 Representation of the People Act granted the vote to British women for the first time, it did so only for women over thirty, and Judith Walkowitz has argued that public concerns about the flapper directly contributed to this continued disenfranchisement of young women.⁸¹ Attempts to extend the franchise went on throughout the 1920s, creating yet another site where dancing was drawn upon to demarcate the difference between the good and bad elements of British womanhood. In 1927, while presiding over the annual conference of the Women's Unionist Organization, Lady Evelden stated that "the great majority of women between 21 and 25 were not flappers who thought of nothing but dancing."⁸² While her comments were ostensibly designed to defend the reputation of young women and prove them deserving of the full rights of citizenship, it was once again dancing that was used to identify those women who perhaps did merit exclusion from the national community.

Nor were these concerns about modern women limited to Britain, and indeed, debates about the changing place of women in society should be understood in a wider international context. As Mary Louise Roberts has shown for France, many of the same threads were contained in discourses surrounding the modern woman in other countries, particularly the alienation experienced by returning servicemen, who found the women

⁸⁰ "The Everitt Divorce Case," *The Times*, October 31, 1919, 4.

⁸¹ Judith R. Walkowitz, "The 'Vision of Salome': Cosmopolitanism and Erotic Dancing in Central London, 1908-1918," *American Historical Review* 108, No. 2, (April 2003): 25.

⁸² "Women Unionists and Franchise," *The Times*, May 27, 1927, 13.

back home significantly altered, and the criticisms of these women's excessive pursuit of amusement.⁸³ In multiple social, political, and international contexts, therefore, the woman who danced was a subject of scrutiny, and this scrutiny was often, though not invariably, negative.

As the interwar period progressed, the specter of the dance-mad woman gradually faded from public view in Britain, a development that some scholars have attributed to diminishing concerns about the modern woman after the so-called "flapper vote" of 1928 enfranchised women on equal terms as men.⁸⁴ However, I want to suggest that these developments are reflective not only of women's changing political status, but also of changing social perceptions of dancing. Throughout this period popular dancing became an increasingly ubiquitous and socially acceptable part of the national culture, and this process was also significantly gendered. As the debates about dancing girls well demonstrate, from the time of the postwar dance craze, dancing appealed to and was connected with women much more than with men. Societal disapproval of the dancing girl did not prevent many women from embracing ballroom dancing as a pastime or profession, or prevent society from endorsing, or indeed selling, dancing to women. So while the anxieties about dance-mad women were undoubtedly real, they dissipated as dancing increasingly became a socially acceptable part of women's daily lives.

For many women, dancing played an important and complex social role, comparable, as Ross McKibbin has argued, to what "sport was to boys."⁸⁵ The women most interested in dancing tended to be young and single, since generally, though not

⁸³ See Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁸⁴ Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination*, 2-3.

⁸⁵ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England, 1918-1951*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 394-5.

always, women ceased attending as many dances once they were married.⁸⁶ Dancing was also of equal enjoyment to women of different social backgrounds, but how their interest manifested itself was often class contingent. Working-class women frequented public dance halls with far greater frequency than middle-class women, whose interest in dancing, particularly in the early part of the interwar period, tended to be expressed through enrollment in dancing schools or attendance at dances sponsored by churches, tennis clubs, or youth groups. However, as Claire Langhamer has noted, for most women “Dancing was ... a complex leisure experience which transcended the dance venue itself.”⁸⁷

Wherever they went dancing, many young women followed dance trends religiously, experimenting with new figures at home and adopting the latest steps. They read dance periodicals and instruction books, knew the members of popular dance bands and their songs, and listened for new dance lessons given on the radio. For these reasons, women generally tended to be superior dancers to men, taking the activity more seriously and devoting more time to practice. Some women also occasionally preferred to dance with each other at the dance hall, even when male partners were not at a premium; alternately taking the man’s part, women could obtain higher quality dance practice with each other than with a fumbling male partner more interested in romance. Indeed, in 1925, *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* featured an article entitled “Farewell Ballroom Romance!” wherein Barbara Miles, a world champion ballroom dancer, noted that many women were primarily interested in the mental and physical exhilaration provided by dancing rather than the possibility for romance, and that their interest in men in the

⁸⁶Claire Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England, 1920-1960*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 70.

⁸⁷ Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England*, 66.

dance hall concerned their quality as a partner more than anything else. Miles further remarked that “the motto of the modern dancing girl is ‘dancing for dancing’s sake.’”⁸⁸

Nor was it only the physical performance of dancing that women took seriously than men, but the whole dance hall experience. Modern ballroom dancing styles had a profound effect on women’s fashion, and the lighter fabrics, shorter skirts and looser fit of clothing associated with the flapper were in large part designed to facilitate performance of modern dance steps.⁸⁹ Much time and effort could be taken up with dressing for an evening’s dancing, and working-class women in particular were very adept in this respect, using their own skills as seamstresses to create stylish wardrobes at minimal expense. A twenty-three year old typist from Liverpool reported to Mass Observation, “Preparing for a dance is half the fun to my mind. Getting one’s frock ready. Wondering whether you shall have your hair done.”⁹⁰ Of his impressions of the working-class women who frequented dance halls in Bolton, one observer for Mass Observation noted, “It always ‘hits me between the eyes’ when I go to the Palais the girls – how smart they look – how well they use colour.”⁹¹ And when he expressed this admiration to a local hall manager, the latter responded, “Yes, you wouldn’t think they worked in a Mill or a shop.”⁹² As sociologist Pearl Jephcott observed in 1942, “When the girl goes dancing it means she can wear a smart frock and good stockings and try to look

⁸⁸ Barbara Miles, “Farewell Ball-room Romance!” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, February 14, 1925, ii.

⁸⁹ Juliet McMains, *Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 68.

⁹⁰ As quoted in Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England*, 65.

⁹¹ M-O A: Worktown 48/C, General Impressions, July 13, 1939.

⁹² M-O A: Worktown, 48/C, Palais-de-danse, July 13, 1939.

really glamorous before her equals.”⁹³ Dancing provided women with a means of self-expression, through fashion, and naturally through the dances themselves.

The dance hall could also be a site of considerable independence for women, one of the few places they could venture on their own or with friends. As one female writer noted in *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* in 1926, “The ... spirit of feminine independence rules in the ball-room. We no longer, for instance, wait to be taken to a dance, but pay for our own ticket at the door, our own refreshments – if none are otherwise forthcoming; and, similarly, if partners are slow in coming forward, we go to the ‘pen’ and pick our own professional dancing men at so much a dance!”⁹⁴ There was a belief that women could govern their own dancing experience, not only by locating partners on their own if no man asked them to dance, but by covering the expense of an evening’s dancing, another result of increased women’s employment and rising wages during the interwar years.⁹⁵ As another writer noted,

Modernity has made us very sensible, and in these days it is quite allowable for a man to take a lady to a dance and allow her to pay for her own ticket.

There are many girls to-day who dance and who, being business girls, are much too independent to wish a man to pay for their pleasures.⁹⁶

Outside of parental control, or the confines of having been “treated” to the dance by a man, women were able to dance, gossip, flirt, and find relative degrees of sexual freedom.⁹⁷

⁹³ A.P. Jephcott, *Girls Growing Up*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), 123.

⁹⁴ Nora Delany, “Jazz Manners in the Ball-room,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, February 27, 1926, 112.

⁹⁵ Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918-1950*, 220; Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England*, 126-7.

⁹⁶ Teddie Gerard, “May I Have the Pleasure?” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, April 5, 1924, 203.

⁹⁷ More will be said about romantic and sexual encounters in the dance hall in Chapter Four.

It should be noted, however, that this image of the independent dancing woman may have had more power as a symbol than as a social reality. In Jephcott's study of girls' leisure activities in the early 1940s, she observed that some went dancing as often as five nights a week, at an expense far exceeding the approximately four shillings they had to spend on such pursuits.⁹⁸ "Treating" by men was therefore still likely a definite reality for many women, a fact also borne out by Jephcott's research, in which one young man noted, "Girls go and hang about the entrance [of the dance hall] and hope that some bloke will pay for them."⁹⁹ But despite the material realities of how women ventured out dancing, it remains significant that dance culture provided a space for ideas about feminine independence to play out. This was equally true in terms of women's employment opportunities.

From the very inception of modern ballroom dancing, women were also a dominant presence on the professional side of this new dance form. The vast majority of dance instructors receiving accreditation were women, and many headed their own dancing schools. Two key members of the group charged with standardizing the figures of modern ballroom dancing were dance instructors Jeannie Smurthwaite and Murial Simmons, and these women and a number of others also served on the Official Board of Ballroom Dancing. The dance hall industry also provided numerous employment opportunities to women, as professional dance partners, waitresses, usherettes, coat check girls, and occasionally even management; notable in this respect were Mrs. Essex, manager of the Wimbledon Palais de Danse in the 1920s, and Betty Lyons, manager of the Hammersmith Palais in the 1930s. There were also some women involved in the

⁹⁸ Jephcott, *Girls Growing Up*, 115.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

dance music industry, particularly as crooners, though this remained largely a male purview until the Second World War. At that time, however, the number of musicians taken up with military service provided new opportunities to their female colleagues. Of particular note was Ivy Benson's all-female band, which played at various dance venues and also secured a regular spot on the BBC dance band rotation.

That women were the chief consumers of popular dance culture was also increasingly recognized by society at large, and as a cultural form dancing was feminized in a number of ways. Advertising for products directed towards women, such as cosmetics, skin care products, female fashions, and cleaning products, frequently employed images or descriptions of dances to promote their wares. A 1926 advertisement for Camp coffee played on women's traditional role as hostess, advising, "When guests come into *your* dance or party on a cold winter night – warm them up with good coffee."¹⁰⁰ Another ad, from 1935, promoted Odo-ro-no antiperspirant by showcasing an apparently odorous woman being observed by two men at a dance, one of whom commented, "Pretty, yes – but *I'm* not dancing with her!"¹⁰¹ Occasionally the use of dancing in marketing campaigns was even more overt. For several weeks in 1925, women's magazine *Home Notes* featured an advertisement for Twink clothing dye, which informed readers that if they mailed in the attached coupon along with a Twink carton front they would receive a free written dance lesson by dancing champion Maxwell Stewart. In addition to advertising, women's magazines featured many articles related to dancing trends, and the ballroom was a frequent setting for the short stories contained within these publications. Daily newspapers also included information about new dances

¹⁰⁰ *Daily Mail*, December 23, 1926, 12.

¹⁰¹ *Daily Mirror*, November 26, 1935.

or the latest dance frock on their women's pages, and the dance press devoted special attention to women. For several years in the 1920s, for example, the *Dancing Times* featured a monthly column entitled "Phillida goes dancing," which focused on issues of supposed feminine concern like fashion and romance, while relating Phillida's daily tours of the London dance scene.

Ballroom dancing also became an increasingly standard element of female education. It was understood within middle-class families that dancing was a social necessity for their daughters, who were thus typically enrolled in dancing schools as adolescents. Dancing was also made a part of female physical education at schools or youth organizations in a way it was not for boys. In two handbooks on physical recreation released by the Board of Education in 1937, only a few pages were dedicated to dancing in the book directed towards young boys, while in the version for girls, dancing received an entire chapter and several additional mentions.¹⁰² The girls' book noted, "it is thought that something in the way of a definite scheme of dancing will be welcome in a handbook dealing with recreative physical training for working girls and women, with whom dancing will probably be one of the more popular indoor activities."¹⁰³

The brief mention that dancing received in the physical recreation guide geared towards boys further reinforces the ways in which dancing was typically gendered female, and that there was a concomitant belief that there was something slightly unmanly about dancing. While a number of the major figures in the professional dancing world were men, they were vastly outnumbered by women within the profession as a whole, and this was also to some degree a development of the period under review. For

¹⁰² *Recreation and Physical Fitness for Youths and Men*, (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1937, 1942); *Recreation and Physical Fitness for Girls and Women*. (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1937).

¹⁰³ *Recreation and Physical Fitness for Girls and Women*, 1937, 10.

example, in an interview with Mass Observation, dancing teacher Major Cecil Taylor expressed dismay that after three hundred years of Taylor men working as dancing masters, his own son had refused to follow along, choosing instead to join the army because dancing “wasn’t a man’s job.”¹⁰⁴ Within the dancing public, there were certainly men who enjoyed dancing for its own sake, yet a Mass Observation survey found that the primary motivation in going out dancing for most male respondents was the opportunity that it afforded to meet women.¹⁰⁵ This gendering of dancing meant that men and women consumed the leisure form equally, but often differently.

The many contexts in which popular dancing was gendered female both reflected and propagated the ways in which it gradually became not only an accepted, but an endorsed aspect of British women’s lives. Moreover, the degree to which dancing became implicated in the fashions, advertising, reading material, and education directed towards women also amplified the influence that popular dance culture had on the nation as a whole; dancing was increasingly ubiquitous, as both a social practice and cultural touchstone, and this promoted its transformation into a national cultural form. But while concerns about women’s dancing diminished as the interwar period progressed, the same cannot be said about women; indeed, public concerns about the behavior and sexual morality of young, particularly working-class women, existed long before and long after the early 1920s.¹⁰⁶ Rather, what did transform during the interwar years was the specific content of discourses about pleasure-seeking women, and, significant to this discussion,

¹⁰⁴ M-O A: TC 38/6/G, The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, June 19, 1939, 6.

¹⁰⁵ As cited in Nott, *Music for the People*, 185.

¹⁰⁶ See Judy Giles, “‘Playing Hard to Get’: Working-Class Women, Sexuality, and Respectability in Britain, 1918-1940,” *Women’s History Review* 1, (Spring 1992): 239-255; Sonya O. Rose, “Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation in World War II Britain,” *American Historical Review* 103, no. 4, (October 1998): 1147-1176.

dancing gradually faded from prominence in these debates. This became particularly apparent upon the outbreak of the Second World War, when young women's behavior again became a subject of intense social scrutiny.

As a number of historians have shown, the war years saw a renewed public concern with the sexual morality of particularly working-class women, prompted by the arrival of the American Army in 1942 and the enthusiasm for the "Yanks" expressed by many British women.¹⁰⁷ David Reynolds has noted that "next to the caricature of the 'oversexed' GI, the image of the 'ever-ready' British female is probably the most durable myth of the American occupation," and women who were perceived to be in active pursuit of GIs faced considerable social condemnation.¹⁰⁸ As Sonya Rose has shown, public discourse circulated around the so-called "good-time girls," who were perceived to be prioritizing their own amusement above the needs of the war effort and general social good; indeed, these women were criticized as much for their quest for a good time during a period of national emergency, as they were for their perceived moral laxity.¹⁰⁹

But significantly, despite the fact that like the flapper the good-time girl was condemned for excessive pleasure-seeking, dancing is notable by its absence in descriptions of her behavior. This is particularly striking given that one of the greatest social impacts of the American "occupation" was the introduction of a new dance, the jitterbug, and that, as Ross McKibbin has noted, dance halls were a principle site for

¹⁰⁷ Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain, 1939-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942-1945*, (New York: Random House, 1995); Juliet Gardiner, *'Over Here.' The GIs in Wartime Britain* (London: Collins & Brown, 1992); Graham A. Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., Ltd., 1987).

¹⁰⁸ Reynolds, *Rich Relations*, 262.

¹⁰⁹ Rose, *Which People's War?*.

“yank-hunting.”¹¹⁰ In addition, dancing *ability* was also a considerable part of the appeal of GIs, who were considered to be vastly superior to British men in performing particularly the jitterbug, and the American presence inspired something like a renewed dance craze. Yet rather than focusing on young women’s zeal for dancing, public criticism focused on their presence and behavior in the streets and parks, and outside military encampments. Though much attention was once again being paid to the issue of excessive pleasure-seeking by women, dancing was simply not singled out to the same extent it had been in the 1920s. It is a subtle, but I believe crucial distinction, which is indicative of the considerable strides that popular dancing had made towards national acceptance.

In an interview with the Imperial War Museum, Pamela Winfield, one of thousands of British women to marry an American GI, described the scene that followed her first attendance at a dance where there were Americans present: “I went to school the next day with an American Air Force button on my gymslip. And my friends were horrified because nice girls did not go out with Yanks.”¹¹¹ In this story it was clearly Winfield’s involvement with an American, rather than her attendance at a dance, which shocked her friends. In fact, rather than being condemned as a site of wartime excess and sexual immorality with GIs, dances were viewed to be an ideal means of solidifying relations between the Allies. The British government saw dances as a way of welcoming American forces and making them feel more at home, and U.S. military bases and American Red Cross clubs reciprocated by becoming popular hosts of dancing in return. In this context, dancing was a perfectly appropriate way for women to pass the time. As

¹¹⁰ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 396.

¹¹¹ IWM, Sound Archive: 9947, transcript of interview with Pamela Winfield, 1987, 8.

one woman recalled, “the Yanks were all over. You danced with them but you knew what kind of reputation you would get if you went out with Americans.”¹¹² Her comments reflect the fact that wartime women saw dancing as a socially acceptable route to meeting GIs, but knew that to extend the relationship beyond the dance floor was to risk social condemnation. Norman Longmate has suggested that “the prevailing atmosphere at wartime dances was one of innocent enjoyment and good fun.”¹¹³ While this is perhaps an overly simplified assessment, it does appear to be the one shared by most contemporary Britons, something which is reflected in the comments of another wartime woman, who recalled that “The GIs would send yellow cabs to the factory to pick us up when we finished work ... We’d have a dance and a laugh and then they’d send us back again, there was nothing more to it.”¹¹⁴ Thus while it is certain that sexual relationships between British women and American GIs often did begin at dances, the dominant view of dancing in wartime was that it provided harmless fun and helped to improve relations with Britain’s allies.

In fact, when dancing did enter into contemporary discourses about moral laxity and pleasure-seeking women, it was more often drawn upon in women’s defense. Like the so-called good-time girls, another target of public scrutiny during the war years was the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), the women’s branch of the British Army. Composed largely of working-class women, and falling victim to lingering concerns about women’s military service in general, the ATS were subjected to a “whispering campaign” that accused them of immoral behavior. Attempts to defend these women, and argue for their strong character and innocent pursuit of amusement, often invoked

¹¹² As quoted in Philomena Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 135.

¹¹³ Norman Longmate, *How We Lived Then*, (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1971), 421.

¹¹⁴ As quoted in Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, 132.

dancing. In a 1941 *Daily Telegraph* article, the newspaper's correspondent in York noted, "Many of these girls come to this town for a time. They work hard and they like an evening's dancing now and then ... It would be hard to find much wrong with a life like theirs."¹¹⁵ That same year, Lord Trenchard stated in a speech to the House of Lords, "There are too many people ... who think because they see places like big hotels crowded with young girls dancing in mufti that they are not doing their bit. I gather that most of them, if not all, are working hard and are only enjoying an hour or two of relaxation in the evening."¹¹⁶ While Lord Trenchard's comments reveal that there were those who still condemned women who danced, the defenders were now more abundant than the critics. The general feeling was that dancing provided hard-working Britons of both sexes with well-deserved entertainment, rather than perpetuating immorality.

This idea was perhaps brought most strongly to light in July 1943, at a Methodist Church conference in Birmingham. Throughout the war religious leaders were among the most vocal critics of pleasure-seeking women and moral laxity in general. In 1943 the Archbishop of Canterbury gave a well-publicized address at a meeting of the Church of England Men's Society, in which he decried the "really alarming collapse of honesty and sex morality."¹¹⁷ Similar concerns were raised at different points by figures at every level of church hierarchy, from bishops to parish preachers, representing all Christian denominations, but in no case was dancing a significant feature of the diatribes on issues ranging from out-of-control youth, sexual activity, and alcoholism. At the Birmingham conference many of these issues were again under discussion, but significantly, the

¹¹⁵ Stewart Sale, "A.T.S. Morals Defended," *Daily Telegraph*, December 23, 1941, 5.

¹¹⁶ "Let Women Run the A.T.S.," *Daily Telegraph*, November 26, 1941, 3.

¹¹⁷ "Moral Laxity: Primate's Appeal to Men," *Leicester Evening Mail*, July 10, 1943, 5.

assembly also sanctioned dancing as a morally safe form of amusement by voting to permit dancing on church premises.

The conference's endorsement of dancing was not without its detractors. Most notably, Lord Rochester cautioned his colleagues that "Dancing has been known to lead to impurity of thought, desire, and practice. The most difficult fight that we men have is the fight for purity of thought, character and life, and there are few forms of pleasure in modern society which make that battle more difficult than dancing."¹¹⁸ However, the remarks of eighty-nine year old Dr. Scott Lidgett in defense of dancing were those most widely reported in the press:

It seems to be assumed in some quarters ... that directly you say that dancing may be an incidental and subordinate feature of an evening meeting, our young people will at once break out into Saturnalia ... This is a travesty. There has been no excess as far as I know. Trust [young people] under the adequate oversight and control of ministers and trustees to have some liberty, and you may be sure that that liberty will not be abused.¹¹⁹

According to newspaper reports, Lidgett's comments were met with loud applause, and when the issue came to a vote, the conference voted to permit church dancing by a large majority. Letters to the editor in the days that followed indicate that the Church's decision was also greeted with enthusiasm by the public. One man wrote to the *Leicester Evening Mail* that Lidgett had shown "wisdom" in his remarks, further commenting, "Surely there is no case to be made out for condemning ordinary dances, a form of relaxation and entertainment that has given pleasure throughout the ages? People must have recreation, change from the humdrum existence ... This killjoy attitude simply won't do in 1943."¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ "Dr. Scott Lidgett Defends Church Dances," *Leicester Evening Mail*, July 14, 1943, 4.

¹¹⁹ "Dancing and Cards," *Liverpool Daily Post*, July 15, 1943, 2.

¹²⁰ Anti-gloom, Letter to the Editor, *Leicester Evening Mail*, July 15, 1943, 3.

Thus like the ATS debates, the events at the Methodist Conference demonstrated that while the social perception of dancing remained to some degree contested, the vast majority of Britons increasingly saw dances as an innocent form of amusement. As this section has shown, a close look at the discourses that surrounded young women, dancing's chief purveyors, at the beginning and end of the period under review, demonstrates that somewhere along the way dancing had become respectable. This development is partly explained by the fact that the interwar period saw an increasing acceptance of women's leisure activities in general, particularly for the working-classes who were perceived as deserving of a little fun given how hard they worked and how much support they provided to their families.¹²¹ However, the changing view of women who danced also speaks to the increasingly widespread acceptance of popular dancing as a leisure activity, and its ongoing integration into the national culture.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter is that from the very beginning of the period under review, the social perception of dancing, and of the people who danced, was often contested. Dancing was ugly and grotesque, but also graceful and healthy. Women who danced were immoral and frivolous, but also hard-working and deserving of amusement. The new dancing style was risqué and a threat to social purity, but also inherently modern and in sync with the times. All of the above were expressed viewpoints about popular dancing in different moments and spaces, with different degrees of strength and power, and yet it is also clear that over time popular dancing did become a more acceptable and established part of the national culture. The very different

¹²¹ Todd, *Women, Work, and Family in England*, 215-217.

uses of dancing in discourses surrounding pleasure-seeking women in the early 1920s and the early 1940s speak volumes about the degree to which the nation's views on the cultural form changed between 1918 and 1945. Popular dancing increasingly became an accepted or "everyday" aspect of the national culture, though in ways that were perhaps skewed more towards women rather than men.

Moreover, the public and professional views on popular dancing discussed in this chapter are revealing about more than simply how the cultural form was perceived within British society, but also about the influences that helped to formulate these perceptions, and the types of action taken in order to promote or combat them. For example, the strong impact that the controversies over jazz dances in France had on the dance profession, and the subsequent evolution of the English style that was spurred on by professional fears, demonstrates that the way in which popular dancing evolved in Britain was frequently influenced by people, places, and events far beyond national boundaries. The incident in Leyton, wherein the public and press reacted strongly to an attempt by the urban council to ban certain modern dances, both in writing and through acts of physical resistance, showcases the degree of influence that the dancing public possessed in determining what would be danced in the nation's ballrooms. The controversy surrounding the dreamgirl and butterfly also showcased the passionate reaction that could be elicited from both critics and enthusiasts of popular dancing, all of which shaped the social perception and evolution of the cultural form, but also highlighted the degree to which the public understanding of dancing must be understood in a much wider context, in this case of changing gender relations. The debates around dancing, both professional and public

alike, therefore served as yet another form of cultural negotiation that reflected and influenced the development of popular dance culture in Britain.

Chapter Four

Going to the Palais: Inside the Dance Hall Industry and the Commercial Cultures of Britain

In a 1939 interview with Mass Observation, Major Cecil Taylor, famed dancing teacher and longtime president of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, remarked, “I don’t see what we could do without the palais now...They are a [part] of our life and are essential to our being.”¹ He pointed to the affordability, high quality dance floors, excellent bands, general cleanliness and efficient staff as all of the reasons why the “palais-de-danse” had become such an intrinsic and valued part of the national culture. Yet remarkably, the leisure spaces that Taylor described had effectively not existed only twenty years before. Starting at the beginning of the period under review, commercial leisure opportunities for Britons of all classes and regions expanded at a pronounced rate, and this chapter will show that popular dancing was implicated in this process in two main respects. The first instance concerned the development that Cecil Taylor pointed to in his comments above, namely the emergence and widespread expansion of the public dance hall, or palais-de-danse. The second way in which dancing was engaged in the expansion of commercial leisure was through its connections to other cultural forms that were implicated in the same process, producing cultural entanglements which

¹ M-O A: TC 38/6/G, The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, June 19, 1939, 7.

significantly expanded popular dance culture's influence and ubiquity within British society.

The first section of this chapter will discuss the experience of going out dancing in Britain, looking at both the rise of the public dance hall and considering the other opportunities for dancing outside of the home afforded to Britons during this period. I will chart the expansion of the dance hall industry, arguing that one by-product of this development was the cultivation of an increasingly uniform dancing experience for Britons, regardless of where they lived in the country. The standardization of public dancing was in fact a specific goal of developing dance hall chains such as the one controlled by the Mecca organization, and Britons did gradually come to know what to expect from an evening at the "palais." At the same time, I will show that uniformity of experience was never an entirely fulfilled project, since despite the best efforts of companies like Mecca, there remained distinct differences between the opportunities available for public dancing among Britons of different regions and social classes. Moreover, the often divergent desires and concerns formulated by those within the dancing public in visiting the palais or another dancing space, also played into individualizing their dancing experience.

This notion that Britons consumed popular dance culture in multiple and varying ways will be further developed in the second section of the chapter, which looks at the connections between popular dancing and other cultural and commercial forms of the period. I will argue that dancing's strong presence within popular music, radio, film, and print culture provided a multitude of ways for Britons to attain knowledge and experience

of popular dance culture. I will also discuss dancing's reciprocal influence on the other cultural forms and commercial industries under consideration, and suggest that it is in viewing dancing's interconnections with particularly music and film, that the increasing influence of the United States on British popular dance culture becomes acutely visible. Thus, while other cultural forms were critical to disseminating popular dancing throughout the nation, the content of the dance culture being disseminated was not always specifically "national."

Britain's Public Dancing Spaces

The years following the end of the First World War saw dramatic changes to the face of popular dancing in Britain, which were not simply connected to the development of the new dancing styles described in Chapter One, but also with respect to the public spaces in which dancing was conducted. In October 1919, the Hammersmith Palais de Danse opened in west London, inaugurating a new era in popular dancing as hundreds of dance halls began opening around the country. While dancing outside of the home had a long and established history in Britain, what distinguished the new venues was the fact that they were created entirely for the purpose of dancing. They were spacious, with high quality dance floors, and talented bands; they were also inexpensive enough to be accessible to Britons of all classes. As the *Dancing Times* commented in 1926, the plethora of public dance halls springing up around the country fulfilled "a long felt want."²

² "The Palais de Danse and the Profession: A Suggestion," *Dancing Times*, February 1926, 558.

This section will show that the expansion of the dance hall industry created not only additional places for Britons to dance, but also produced an increasingly uniform experience of “going to the palais” throughout the nation. This was particularly evident once dance halls chains began to emerge; patrons came to know what to expect from a Mecca dance hall, for example. However, the discussion below will also demonstrate that a universal national dancing experience was never really achieved. While the dance hall industry promoted uniformity of experience in various ways, the management of individual or chain dance halls also sought to distinguish their venues through decorative features and special events, and these efforts conveyed multiple meanings to dancing Britons. At the same time, there remained wide-ranging alternatives to the palais in terms of dancing establishments, further distinguishing the public’s experience. But most significantly, individual dancers had a strong influence on their personal experience of going out dancing; Britons ventured out to dance for different reasons, chose where to dance based on different criteria, and enjoyed different aspects of the overall dancing experience.

The options for public, commercial dancing in Britain prior to 1919 were disparate and strongly reflective of social hierarchies, with the middle and upper classes having access to the most specific and wide-ranging opportunities for dancing outside of the home. Dances were an inherent part of both country and city life for those Britons who composed the upper social echelon known as “Society,” and were also a prominent feature of an evening out at the various hotels, restaurants, and night-clubs frequented by these more affluent members of the population. The Edwardian period also saw the

development of both subscription dances and dance clubs, which further expanded the public dancing options for middle and upper class enthusiasts. Subscription dances were often held in conjunction with social organizations, largely organized by the dancers themselves, with attendees paying a fee that went to cover expenses including the venue, music, and refreshments. Somewhat similarly, dance clubs were composed of groups of people who paid a membership fee that went to hosting dinner-dances. Unlike subscription dances, however, which were held throughout the country, dance clubs were more a phenomenon of urban centers, particularly associated with the West End of London. Initially dance clubs had no fixed premises, but in the last years before the First World War, when the tango and ragtime began to suggest the transition into the modern popular dancing era, some clubs began to establish permanent venues, with the most famous clubs being Murray's, Ciro's, the Embassy, and the Grafton Galleries.

The West End dance clubs charged anywhere from ten to fifteen shillings for their dinner-dances, putting them well out of reach for most of the lower middle and working classes. These Britons were able to take part in the dancing that was sometimes a part of the entertainment at public houses and other lower class leisure venues, or the dances that were occasionally held at assembly or municipal halls. They could also usually afford the so-called practice dances held by most dancing schools when they were not in use for instruction. In addition, starting around the turn of the century, there were several relatively inexpensive and purpose-built public dance halls in seaside towns such as Brighton, Margate, and Douglas, designed to cater to holiday-makers. Most notable of the holiday dancing centers was Blackpool, which contained both the Empress Ballroom in

the Winter Gardens and the Tower Ballroom, and which established the town early as the ballroom dancing center that it would become with the development of competition dancing. It should be noted, however, that trips to the seaside were still largely the purview of the middle and upper classes until after the war.³

The working classes were thus at a distinct disadvantage in seeking out purpose-built dancing spaces, and in the months after the First World War, as Britain entered its dancing craze, some contemporaries began to call for the creation of more public spaces that would be specifically designed for dancing, and economical enough for the average Briton. In January 1919, the *Daily Mail* suggested that creating public dance halls would provide young men and women, particularly those residing in towns far from home due to military service or war work, with the opportunity to mix and mingle “under the best and healthiest circumstances.”⁴ The article also pointed to the plethora of public dance halls in the United States as a model for what Britain should put into place, an early testament to the American influence that would permeate the commercialization of popular dancing, and other related cultural forms, as the interwar period progressed. Inexpensive public dancing spaces were also common on the Continent by this time, and many Britons believed that it was time their country caught up with the trend.

The call made by the *Daily Mail* and others began to be answered when the Hammersmith Palais opened its doors on October 28, 1919. The event received considerable attention in both the dance and popular press, with the *Daily Express* remarking upon the grand opening of the Palais, that “Popular dancing reached its

³ James Nott, *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 149.

⁴ “Public Dancing Halls,” *Daily Mail*, January 20, 1919, 4.

climax.” The newspaper went on to pronounce that “This new super-palace of jazz and other dances of the day is declared to be without its equal as a dancing hall anywhere in Europe. Everything about it is in the superlative degree.”⁵ A few weeks after its opening, a columnist for the *Dancing Times* still declared the Palais to be “the talk of the town.”⁶ Nor was the enthusiasm of the press without cause, for the amenities provided by the Hammersmith Palais did exceed anything the nation had previously experienced in public dancing. Covering a space of 27,000 square feet, the Palais boasted an immense dance floor capable of accommodating a thousand dancers, and a general capacity of a thousand more. The hall also featured a café and restaurant, a sumptuous and ornate décor, and, for the first nine months of its existence, the musical stylings of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band from America.⁷

As the first and among the most luxurious of the palais-de-danse to open in the British Isles, the Hammersmith Palais always retained a fame and mystique above and beyond the average dance hall. As *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* noted in 1924, the hall was “almost as much London’s home of dancing as the Law Courts [were] London’s home of legal activity.”⁸ The Palais was the only public dance hall to feature a royal box, and throughout the period under review it saw a number of famous patrons take a turn on the dance floor, including members of the royal family such as the Duke of York, and celebrities like Mary Pickford. The hall’s amenities and renown also meant that it drew

⁵ “Super-Palace of Dancing,” *Daily Express*, October 29, 1919, 7.

⁶ “Some Extracts from the Diary of Mr. Terpsichore-Pepys, 1919,” *Dancing Times*, January 1920, 291.

⁷ Nott, *Music for the People*, 153.

⁸ Draycot M. Dell, “Dance Halls of To-Day,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, March 29, 1924, 194.

dancers from well beyond West London, but rather from all over the capital and beyond,⁹ and further setting it apart was its unique reputation as a cross-class ballroom and “social leveler.” In 1987, when the hall was undergoing renovations, a former dance bandleader described this class mixing in the *London Daily News*, “The Palais was always a real meeting-place, a melting-pot. When they were dancing, you couldn’t tell the daughter of a duchess from an ordinary working class girl.”¹⁰ While class lines were generally tightly maintained in popular dancing spaces and the reality of the social make-up of the Hammersmith Palais was more complex than this remembrance would imply, it stands as a testament to the enduring myth and renown that surrounded the nation’s first dance hall.

Yet the Hammersmith Palais’s greatest legacy was arguably the new era in popular dancing that its opening augured. The success of the Palais led to the creation of more and more purpose-built dancing establishments throughout Britain, with one estimate suggesting that 11,000 dance halls and night-clubs opened around the country between 1919 and 1926.¹¹ In the latter year, the *Dancing Times* remarked,

That the “Palais de Danse” has come to stay is very evident...in a short time there will be few towns of any size which do not boast their big dance hall. That these dance halls are welcomed by the general public is proved by the large crowds which throng them nightly; they are generally bright, cheery places with spacious dance floors, very fair bands and moderate charges.¹²

Naturally there was considerable variance between dancing venues with respect to size and amenities, but as the previous comments imply, a basic public dance hall model began to emerge.

⁹ Nott, *Music for the People*, 153-154.

¹⁰ Robert Sandall, “Light Fantastic,” *London Daily News*, June 2, 1987, 23. Clipping provided by Hammersmith Borough Archives.

¹¹ J. McMillan, *The Way it Was, 1913-1934*, (Kimber, 1979), 76. As cited in Nott, *Music for the People*, 151.

¹² “The Palais de Danse and the Profession: A Suggestion,” *Dancing Times*, February 1926, 558.

Most dance halls featured a large “sprung” dance floor of maple or oak, which accommodated anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand dancers. The dance floor was typically surrounded by clothed tables and chairs from which patrons could enjoy refreshments and observe the dancing, and in some halls further viewing spaces were provided via balconies, or promenades, that overlooked the ballroom. A band performed from a stage or raised dais, or occasionally a revolving bandstand, and the larger, more affluent halls often engaged two bands simultaneously, which would alternate playing so that there was never a break in the music. Dance halls also frequently possessed attached dining and drinking spaces, in the form of cafés, restaurants, snack or refreshment stands, lounges and bars. The remaining space was filled out by cloak rooms, separate rest areas for men and women, and frequently grand entrance areas, staffed by uniformed ushers and usherettes.¹³ The other staff on hand generally included a Master of Ceremonies who led the dancing, various managerial personnel, cloak and rest room attendants, serving staff, and professional partners who could be hired for six pence a dance, and occupied an area of the ballroom often dubbed the “pen.” The halls were also frequently designed and decorated in a manner meant to signify luxury and comfort, and dancers helped to reproduce the glamour of the palais by investing considerable energy and expense in dressing up for an evening’s dancing.¹⁴

¹³ For more on dance hall design, see also Nott, *Music for the People*, 168-177.

¹⁴ For further discussion of particularly women’s palais fashions, see Chapter Two. Both men and women generally wore evening dress to the dance hall, and on certain evenings, usually on the weekends, many halls required this. Nor was this necessarily a class-based policy, since the advent of mass produced clothing in the interwar period made the possession of one nice “going out” outfit a possibility for most members of society. See also Nott, *Music for the People*, 171-172.

Indeed, the majority of dance halls were ornate and ostentatious in their décor, with proprietors using elaborate decorative features as a means of distinguishing their hall from the competition.¹⁵ As one writer for *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* mused in 1925, “Almost every month sees the opening of a new dancing hall – some gorgeous new temple erected to the shrine of Terpsichore and rivaling in splendor and glittering magnificence the palaces of the East.” She went on to marvel at the modern dancing palace’s “beautifully paneled walls, marble columns, perfect glass-like floor, coloured lighting effects, jazz orchestras and so on...”¹⁶ The sumptuousness of many establishments was also commented on by another writer conducting a survey of the nation’s dancing spaces for the same periodical: “Since I first began writing about some of the popular dance-halls in London and the provinces, I have found that, unless one has a wide range of descriptive words at one’s command, it is impossible to do full justice to the splendour of the modern ballroom.”¹⁷ But while this decorative “splendour” was a common feature of the palais-de-danse, how this was achieved, and what the décor may have conveyed to patrons, varied considerably.

Many dance halls sought to highlight their status as thoroughly modern leisure spaces through the use of elaborate and dramatic lighting displays, as well as striking decorative pieces. The Plaza dance hall in Glasgow, for example, featured a sunken floor illuminated by coloured footlights, at the center of which was a fountain decorated in

¹⁵ Nott, *Music for the People*, 170.

¹⁶ Mona Vivian, “Has the Dance ‘Craze’ Come to Stay?” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, January 10, 1925, 229.

¹⁷ Draycot M. Dell, “Dance Halls of To-day. No. 3 – Finsbury Park Palais de Danse,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, March 22, 1924, 177.

flowers and containing real goldfish.¹⁸ Fountains were a common feature at a number of other dance halls as well, and the one at the Palais de Danse in Nottingham was given vivid description by a contemporary writer: “The water rises to a height of twenty feet, and is illuminated by a rainbow lighting system, so that it constantly changes colour.”¹⁹ Another notable adornment of the Nottingham Palais was the large illuminated globe that graced its entrance, and many other halls also possessed dramatic exterior lighting, such as the famed Barrowlands in Glasgow. These venues’ use of water and bright lights, as well as loud colours, chrome, and geometric shapes, promoted a self-consciously modernist aesthetic,²⁰ which some contemporaries perceived to be particularly in step with the new modern dance styles. As one writer remarked about the Regent dance hall in Brighton: “Dazzling colour schemes carried out in fantasies so bizarre as to suggest the incarnation of jazzdom give the Regent a most modern note.”²¹

However, even as they provided spaces for modern dancing, other dance halls eschewed modernity, at least as a decorative style, in favour of more classical or exotic themes. One London hall was described upon its opening in 1920 as positively “Neroesque” by the *Daily Express*. The newspaper further noted that with the establishment’s marble columns and Roman-style courtyard, “The classical idea has been carefully adhered to, and the chaste, cool design of a palace of ancient Rome lifts the place high above the status of the ordinary dancing hall.”²² The use of elaborate columns,

¹⁸ Nott, *Music for the People*, 170.

¹⁹ “Nottingham’s Dancing Problem is...Too Many Girls!” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, December 8, 1934, 20.

²⁰ Nott, *Music for the People*, 171.

²¹ Draycot M. Dell, “Dance Halls of To-Day,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, March 15, 1924, 148.

²² “Modern Roman Palace,” *Daily Express*, March 1, 1920, 7.

carpeting, and painted murals was common in public dance halls, in some cases to highlight a classical motif such as the one previously described, but these decorative features were also used to convey foreign, frequently “eastern” themes. Many halls, including the Hammersmith Palais, featured Japanese lanterns and incorporated what was purported to be Asian-inspired architectural elements into their décor. As the *Dancing Times* described the Hammersmith Palais, “That which has been a vast barn has been transformed by the wand of a magician into an Aladdin’s fairy palace, which sparkled with a thousand lights reflecting all the colours of the Orient.”²³ Meanwhile, the Wimbledon Palais was in possession of a “Japanese tea room,” as well as an “Egyptian alcove,”²⁴ while Nottingham’s New Victoria hall was adorned in wall paintings of “waving palms and oases.”²⁵ One hall in Birmingham was decorated as a mosque, with prayer mats hanging from the walls, and contained two lounges respectively dubbed the “Alcazar” and the “Baghdad.”²⁶ Other dancing spaces that were not specifically decorated with foreign motifs often had special theme nights in which these elements were promoted; particularly at upper class functions in the 1920s, “Oriental” nights were common, when patrons were required to wear “Eastern costume.”²⁷ As James Nott has noted, the very names commonly bestowed upon dance halls, including “Rialto,” “Lido,”

²³ “Some Extracts from the Diary of Mr. Terpsichore-Pepys, 1919,” *Dancing Times*, January 1920, 291.

²⁴ Draycot M. Dell, “Dance Hall’s of To-day. No. 1 – Wimbledon Palais de Danse,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, March 8, 1924, 124.

²⁵ “Nottingham’s Dancing Problem is...Too Many Girls!” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, December 8, 1934, 20.

²⁶ Nott, *Music for the People*, 171.

²⁷ “Tea Table Talk,” *Daily Express*, February 24, 1920, 3.

“Ritz,” and “Plaza,” also conveyed “sophistication and foreignness,”²⁸ as did the widespread use of the French “palais-de-danse.”

It is worth briefly considering what cultural meanings dance hall décor may have conveyed to the dancers taking a turn in the ballroom, and at first glance the exotic decorative features of many dancing spaces might appear to be linked to Britain’s status as a colonial power. Many historians have established how this position caused imperial influences to have a significant imprint on the metropole, with architecture and interior design being only one area among many in which the Empire came home.²⁹ Indeed, there were important ways in which popular dancing fused directly with imperial culture, such as when a dance hall became one of the attractions at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley the 1924. The hall was built directly within the exhibition grounds, in the shadow of the domed Indian Pavilion, and the event also produced a new dance tune, the “Wembley, Wibbly, Wobbly Dance,” which was performed as a one-step. The lyrics to the song commanded Britons to come to Wembley, to choose to see the exhibition and learn the new Wembley dance rather than to seek out recreation elsewhere in Britain, or in France or the United States.³⁰ The imperial theme was further adhered to through the hosting of special “Dominion Balls,” on the respective Dominion Days of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and in general the ballroom proved to be enough of a success that another dance hall was featured at the 1938 imperial exhibition in Glasgow.

²⁸ Nott, *Music for the People*, 171.

²⁹ For more on imperial influences on architecture and interior design, see Jonathan Shneer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, eds., *At Home With the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

³⁰ “The Wembley, Wibbly, Wobbly Dance,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, June 14, 1924, 150.

Despite the imperial-themed décor, songs, and special events, for the most part these exhibition dance halls simply provided another space for the performance of the same foxtrots and one-steps being danced in other contemporary dancing spaces. These events therefore used popular dancing's status as a favoured leisure activity in order to provide yet another way for Britons to consume imperial culture. At the same time, the exhibitions' inclusion of dancing spaces highlighted popular dancing as a cultural practice of specific imperial and national concern. In this way, contemporary espousals that dancing was becoming a national institution, or an established part of everyday life in Britain, were given further credence. The "imperial" dance halls, both at the exhibitions and beyond also well demonstrate that far from being a mere leisure practice removed from the nation's interests and ambitions, popular dancing was implicated in much wider historical and social processes.

However, rather than highlighting specific colonial spaces through its design motifs, the Wembley hall was decorated in a mish-mash of the same "eastern" and "oriental" themes present in many of the dancing spaces described above. According to one contemporary report, the exterior was "gaily decorated in Oriental fashion," and the interior was adorned in red, panel-painted walls, "orange gauzy hangings," as well as a balcony that contained palm trees beneath which refreshments were served.³¹ This is suggestive about the degree to which dance hall décor needs to be understood in a more expansive sense than merely as another manifestation of imperial culture on the metropole.

³¹ Margaret Black, "On With the Dance – At Wembley," *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, July 5, 1924, 208.

In a recent study of Selfridge's department store in the early 1910s, Mica Nava has argued for the existence of what she terms "commercial orientalism," which is distinguishable from the orientalism attendant to the processes of colonial domination and to scientific and anthropological discourses identified by Edward Said.³² Rather, commercial orientalism relied on representing, and most importantly selling, cultural difference as something attractive and desirable; as illustration Nava points to the exoticizing or orientalist tendencies produced and consumed in the decorative features of cinemas and department stores, in the new fashions associated with the tango, as well as in the theatrical performances of Maud Allen or the Ballet Russe, and the films of Rudolph Valentino. Other than with respect to Valentino, Nava confines her analysis to the period prior to the First World War; however, I would argue that dance hall décor suggests that this commercial orientalism extended into the interwar period, wherein the exotic allure of the east was again used as a means of drawing people into dancing spaces.

Yet even orientalism does not quite encompass the breadth of foreign influences represented in the décor or cultural practices present in dance hall culture, which, as I have shown above, were equally inspired by a modernist aesthetic and continental Europe. Moreover, the influence of America was also increasingly visible in special theme nights in dance spaces. Amid the "Oriental" nights at some upper class dances in the 1920s, there was also the occasional "Plantation" dance, in which some patrons even sported blackface, and many dance halls began hosting "Harlem" or "American" theme

³² See Mica Nava "The Allure of Difference: Selfridges, the Russian Ballet and the Tango," in *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture, and the Normalisation of Difference*, (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 19-40. See also Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

nights in the 1930s. Therefore, in frequently racialized terms, cultural difference was represented in dancing spaces in ways that attested not only to the imperial, but to the international influences present in metropolitan Britain, and to the nation's position within a transnational system of cultural circulation.

According to Nava's paradigm, the allure of the foreign was largely employed for commercial purposes within consumer spaces and popular entertainment, and this was no less true of dancing establishments; most dance hall proprietors were primarily concerned with décor as a way of bringing people into their halls. But while the varied decorative styles of different dance halls likely played some role in determining their clientele, there were also any number of other factors that influenced a person's decision to frequent one hall over another. Some of these were practical in nature – someone venturing out for an evening's dancing would likely find it most convenient to visit the palais in their own neighborhood, in order to avoid incurring the time and expense involved in travelling farther afield. Certain halls were also known for being "better" on certain nights, in which case patrons might make their choice about which hall to visit based simply on the day of the week. At the same time, dancing enthusiasts were also influenced by other considerations, such as what their favourite dance was to perform. Often through the actions and choices of the dancers themselves, halls became more associated with one specific dance, as one observer noted: "in my peregrinations over London... I had discovered that it is peculiar how, whereas at some halls fox trots are all the rage, at others, not many miles distant, the one step or the blues held sway."³³ The same could be

³³ The Man Who Didn't Dance, "The World's Greatest Dance-Hall," *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, February 2, 1924, 32.

said about the style of music played in one hall over another, and patrons could select a ballroom based on the band's tendency to play "hot" jazz or strict tempo dance music and their own musical preferences; since many bands had permanent gigs at specific dance halls, choices were also influenced by the quality or fame of the musicians.

Moreover, for many Britons the dance hall was equally, if not more important as a social space than as a place for music and dancing, and knowledge of other patrons also influenced dancers' choice of venue. People were more likely to visit a hall at which they had friends and acquaintances, a fact which contributed to, but also provided relief from, the widely proliferated contemporary notion that dance halls were often "cliquey." Certain halls also catered to different demographic, ethnic, or racial groups. The Royal dance hall in north London was known as the "Jewish" hall, while the Paramount dance hall on Tottenham Court Road typically attracted larger numbers of black people than any other. Moreover, a *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* article on dancing in Birmingham suggested that the generational divide also had an impact on dance hall clientele. In the Midlands city, Tony's Ballroom purportedly attracted people of all ages, though the writer noted that the "grey haired" patrons were typically more interested in listening to the music rather than dancing, while another of Birmingham's halls, the West End Dance hall, was dominated by the young. These distinctions were often influenced by decisions of the management, as was the case with the West End hall, whose manager specifically told *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, "We do not cater here for anyone

but young people.”³⁴ This article is also suggestive about the degree to which public dancing spaces were predominately, but not exclusively, patronized by younger Britons.

Despite the inevitable distinctions between decorative features, favoured dances, musical stylings, and the dancers themselves, however, there were common elements to the experience of most public dance halls. There was generally both an afternoon and evening session provided, of approximately three to four hours, or forty to fifty dances, in length. With reduced rates for the afternoon session and slightly higher prices on the weekend, admission to the larger halls cost anywhere from a shilling to five shillings, though the standard price for the whole of the period under review was two shillings, six pence. The band would play from a programme of dance songs that accompanied the range of dances associated with the English style of ballroom dancing, namely the foxtrot, modern waltz, tango, one-step or quickstep, and whatever other dances might currently be in favour. The type of dance being performed was signified by different colour lights descending upon the floor, such as blue for a foxtrot, red for a waltz, and full light for a quickstep, with an encore if the dance was proven a success by the level of applause.³⁵ Despite the varied preferences associated with different halls, foxtrots and quicksteps generally received substantially greater numbers of plays than waltzes, and especially tangos. Another customary feature of the dance programme was the cabaret, during which time a break would be taken in the dancing for some form of entertainment or activity. Exhibition dances were common during the cabaret, as were acrobats, jugglers, singers, magicians, and other variety acts. Many dance halls also featured

³⁴ Horace Richards, “Come Dancing Around Britain, No. 5 – Bright Bands at ‘Brum’!” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, December 29, 1934, 16.

³⁵ Nott, *Music for the People*, 172-173.

special themes or events as additional diversion, such as treasure hunts, costume contests, and of course dance competitions, with some halls being more successful in these endeavors than others. In 1924, *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* noted that the manager of the Wimbledon palais possessed “a genius for special nights. She has had ‘coiffure’ competitions, fancy dress balls, surprise nights, prettiest dress competitions – indeed, every type of competition that can add to the general interest.”³⁶

How patrons consumed both the dances and other entertainments provided by the dance hall was wide-ranging, and suggestive about the divergent concerns of all those contained within the “dancing public.” For example, significant numbers were ambivalent about the cabaret and other diversions that took time away from dancing, particularly if they were quite serious about the activity. As the *Dancing Times* noted in 1924, “Young and enthusiastic dancers begrudge the time given over to Cabaret – sometimes they even resent the short five minutes devoted to an exhibition couple.”³⁷ However, other patrons clearly frequented the dance hall in order to be entertained in ways beyond dancing, a fact which is borne out in the reduced entry free some halls provided for those who simply wanted to observe from the balcony rather than enter the ballroom proper. These non-dancers often enjoyed the cabaret, as well as the opportunity to observe the general dancing and listen to the music of the band. Indeed, particularly at dance halls that featured musicians of considerable renown, jazz enthusiasts who cared little for dancing might be drawn to the palais entirely to enjoy the music. In his autobiography, Eric Hobsbawm describes the experience of visiting a London dance hall

³⁶ Draycot M. Dell, “Dance Hall’s of To-day. No. 1 – Wimbledon Palais de Danse,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, March 8, 1924, 124.

³⁷ “A Word About Cabaret,” *Dancing Times*, August 1924, 1060.

in order to hear Duke Ellington play; he and his companion “nurs[ed] single beers in the gallery as we despised the slowly heaving mass of South London dancers below, who were concentrating on their partners and not on the wonderful noises.”³⁸ Finally, there were naturally those who visited the palais with minimal interest in any of the entertainments provided, but were simply looking to socialize with friends and pursue romantic interests.

Whatever their reasons for passing through the doors, however, Britons gradually came to know what to expect from an evening’s dancing at the palais. As greater numbers of dance halls opened throughout the 1920s, the experience became to some extent as standardized as the steps of the foxtrot, notwithstanding the competing decorative features and the creative strategies of various dance hall managers. This uniformity of experience was further cultivated by the increasing consolidation of popular dancing as a business, and the emergence of dance hall chains. In the late 1920s, a number of companies that were primarily concerned with cinemas witnessed the popularity of dancing and saw the advantage in diversifying; large conglomerates such as General Theatres Ltd., Gaumont British, and Odeon therefore began buying up independent or small chains of dance halls.³⁹ In some cases, these companies merged their combined interests, producing large-scale entertainment complexes featuring a cinema, dance hall, and places to eat on one site, in a number of urban areas. The Blackpool Palace for example, contained not only a dance hall, but a cinema and a variety theatre. However, the greatest of the dance hall chains had no connection to the cinema at all, focusing

³⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 81.

³⁹ Nott, *Music for the People*, 157.

entirely on dance halls and dancing-related concerns. This was the Mecca circuit of dance halls, the company most responsible for turning popular dancing into a mass cultural form by the outbreak of the Second World War.

The Mecca organization largely developed under the leadership of one man, C.L. Heimann, whose influence on British dancing eventually grew to be so significant that in 1938 Mass Observation referred to him as one of the “cultural directors of the nation.”⁴⁰ Born in Denmark, Heimann arrived in Britain in 1912 while still a teenager, having decided, as he told his biographer, “that feeding and entertaining people would be my business in life.”⁴¹ In the mid-1920s, he took a job with a firm called Ye Mecca Cafés, which provided catering services to a number of dancing venues including the Royal Opera House and the Café de Paris. Seeing the growing opportunities connected with commercial dancing, Heimann convinced Mecca to purchase another of its catering clients, Sherry’s dance hall in Brighton (then owned by the circus company Bertram Mills), and to name him as the manager of the new enterprise. He quickly made a number of changes at Sherry’s which eventually became standard in many dance halls, including opening up the balcony to non-dancing viewers, and the creation of new staff like usherettes.⁴² Indeed, a decade later, while interviewing Heimann for Mass Observation, Tom Harrison recorded the impression that the Mecca manager was “on the look out for ideas every minute.”⁴³ Perhaps not surprisingly then, the Brighton hall proved to be an immense success, and Mecca soon expanded its interests in dancing; by 1933, the

⁴⁰ Tom Harrison and Charles Madge, *Britain by Mass-Observation*, (London: Harmondsworth, 1939), 141.

⁴¹ As quoted in Roma Fairley, *Come Dancing Miss World*, (London: Newman Neame, 1966), 4.

⁴² Fairley, *Come Dancing Miss World*, 20-22.

⁴³ M-O A: TC 38/3/A, C.L. Heimann, December 8, 1938, 1.

company had taken control of the Ritz in Manchester, the Locarno in Streatham, and the Lido in Croydon.⁴⁴

The following year, Heimann was named the head of Mecca Dancing, a subsidiary of Mecca Cafés, but the latter soon decided to halt its foray into dancing when the Lido proved to be Heimann's first real failure. Undeterred, Heimann persuaded Mecca to let him continue pursuing (and financing) the dance hall expansion on his own, but still under the company name. In 1935, he partnered with a Scottish amusements entrepreneur, Alan Fairley, and starting with the Locarno dance hall in Glasgow, the two began buying up halls around the country at a rapid pace. By 1938, in addition to its existent halls, Mecca controlled dance halls in Edinburgh, Leeds, Sheffield, Nottingham, Bradford, Birmingham, as well as London's Tottenham, Paramount, and Wimbledon dance halls.⁴⁵ During the war years, the company also took over the management of the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, which was transformed into a dance hall for the duration. According to his interview with Mass Observation, Heimann prided himself on taking halls that were "white elephants" and turning them into a "healthy pink."⁴⁶

At the same time, Mecca had also expanded into almost all other aspects of the dancing business, including catering, construction projects such as the laying of dance floors and building of bandstands, managing and supplying dance bands and cabaret acts, accounting and publicity services, and employing professional dancers.⁴⁷ With respect to the latter, the company retained professional dancers, often of considerable renown, as

⁴⁴ For more on Heimann and the development of Mecca, see Nott, *Music for the People*, 155-157.

⁴⁵ Nott, *Music for the People*, 156.

⁴⁶ M-O A: TC 38/3/A, C.L. Heimann, December 8, 1938, 2.

⁴⁷ Nott, *Music for the People*, 157.

dance partners to fill the halls' professional pens, as exhibition acts, and as teachers for its dancing schools, the most notable of which was Adele England's school, connected to the Streatham Locarno. Mecca also developed a significant publishing arm, under the auspices of its Danceland Publications, which printed a newspaper, *Dance News*, as well as a number of small pamphlets and books about dancing. All of these publications were used to promote Mecca halls and any special events and competitions that might be occurring within them, as well as the original dances that the company began to create and market towards the end of the decade.⁴⁸

The creation of dance hall chains like Mecca was one of the critical factors in the continuing expansion of dancing into a mass-market enterprise, and to the evolution of a national dance culture. Mecca deliberately targeted a working-class clientele by keeping its halls affordable, but at the same time, and as will be discussed at more length in Chapter Four, also sought to appeal to middle and upper class patrons through the institution of policies designed to elevate the dance hall's respectability. Moreover, while seeking to draw in a truly cross-class and nationwide clientele, companies like Mecca sought to make an evening's dancing increasingly uniform regardless of where one was in the country. "Dancing the Mecca Way" became the company's slogan, putting forth the notion that the Mecca dancing experience was a standard one that patrons increasingly understood and could rely upon. The company also implemented promotional campaigns and special events designed to promote feelings of community and simultaneity within the national dancing experience; the most notable example were

⁴⁸ The Lambeth Walk, as well as Mecca's other novelty dances and "refined jitterbug," will be discussed at length in Chapters Five and Six.

the nationwide launches of Mecca's original novelty dances throughout 1939, when each new dance was introduced at every Mecca hall throughout the country on the very same evening.⁴⁹ Finally, the commercial expansion of dance halls also simply brought more and more people out dancing, increasing the universality of this aspect of cultural consumption; one estimate has it that by 1938 approximately two million Britons went dancing each week, or a hundred million annually.⁵⁰

Yet despite companies like Mecca's quest for a national dancing experience, there were clearly disparities in terms of access to high quality dancing facilities for Britons of all regions, and all classes. The large commercial dance hall chains were really confined to urban centers like Glasgow, Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham, Liverpool, Cardiff, Edinburgh, and of course London, as well as popular holiday destinations like Brighton and Blackpool. In terms of class, in a reversal of the usual mechanisms of social hierarchies, it was actually the upper classes that were at a disadvantage in terms of access to quality dancing facilities. It was not until the mid to late 1930s that public dance halls like Mecca's began successfully drawing in a more cross-class clientele, and the palais, with its superior facilities for dancing, was largely patronized by the working and lower middle classes. So while the expansion of the dance hall industry was critical to the creation of a national dance culture, it was never a wholly completed project; there remained numerous other types of spaces and opportunities for dancing outside of the home.

⁴⁹ For more on these events, see Chapter Five.

⁵⁰ Nott, *Music for the People*, 158.

If they were denied access to the grander palais by either geographic location or social protocol, Britons were not devoid of public dancing options. Though small town Britons did not have access to the multiple dancing options presented to city-dwellers, most medium-sized towns and cities did maintain at least one dance hall. Dancing was also held in a number of public spaces beyond the dance hall in both urban and rural areas alike, including municipal and institutional halls, public baths, churches, hotels, restaurants, and occasionally outdoors. Dances of this variety were more likely to be patronized by a locale clientele, those based in the actual neighborhood, village, or surrounding area. Indeed, most small villages staged a weekly dance, usually on Saturday night, which drew heavily from local populations with far fewer leisure opportunities than urban Britons. Village dances therefore fulfilled both the needs of dancing enthusiasts, but also served an important community function, bringing together local dancers and non-dancers alike in a social setting.

The nature of the facilities provided for dancing in spaces beyond the palais was naturally extremely varied. Often there was no live band, but rather music provided by a piano or gramophone. The dance floor was also likely to be far inferior to the palais' wood-sprung splendor; for example, upon visiting a dance at the Forester's Hall in Canterbury, an observer for Mass Observation noticed that the floor on which attendees danced was still marked out as a badminton court.⁵¹ One British servicemen's wartime diary also reveals that at a village dance in Church Stretton, the hall was illuminated only by oil lamps.⁵² Dances of this type were also often very crowded, and very hot. Yet

⁵¹ M-O A: TC 38/1/J, Other Halls, Forester's Hall, November 26, 1938.

⁵² IWM, Documents: 97/29/2, J.S. Grey, Diary/Scrapbook, September 24, 1941.

whatever their limitations, dances held beyond the purpose-built palais also became increasingly commercialized as the interwar period progressed, leading to the rise of the dance promoter. These figures were usually independent businessmen who rented out spaces in which to provide dances, used the entry fees to cover costs, and then pocketed the difference. Interviews conducted by Mass Observation in the late 1930s revealed that many dance promoters, particularly in cities, were working-class men who held other jobs during the day, and ran dances in the evenings as a way of making a little extra money.⁵³ Their dances largely catered to a clientele from the same social class, and with entry fees of sometimes as little as three or six pence, they were an even more reasonably priced evening's dancing than the palais.

At the other end of the urban social spectrum were the hotels, restaurants, and night clubs which formed the primary dancing opportunities for those in the upper classes. While dancing was a main feature of these establishments, it was not the primary focus that it was in the palais. Restaurants and hotels tended to provide meals as well as dancing. Night-clubs, or the so-called "bottle parties," featured some sort of cabaret entertainment.⁵⁴ Moreover, as was noted above, these spaces were generally far inferior to the palais in terms of the facilities that they could provide for dancing. As dancing teacher Cecil Taylor told Mass Observation, "In restaurants and hotel dances one seldom looks or expects to find good dancing. The floors are too small and are always crowded. They all look alike because they are brought down to what we call 'crush' that is when

⁵³ See M-O A: TC 38/2/A, Dance Promotion and Promoters.

⁵⁴ Much more will be said about night-clubs in the next chapter. See also Martin Pugh, *"We Danced All Night:" A Social History of Britain Between the Wars*, (London: The Bodley Head, 2008), 216-220.

the dancers have to crush their steps into a small space.”⁵⁵ Similarly, a writer for the *Daily Mirror* noted in 1935 that particularly the West End hotels and restaurants were poorly equipped for “real dancing,” further remarking that “Hammersmith and Cricklewood could teach Mayfair a thing or two.”⁵⁶

These comments reflect a prevalent thread that existed within discourses surrounding popular dancing spaces, and popular dancing in general, which concerned where, and *how*, the different classes danced. From the start of the postwar dance craze, a common feature of the commentary that surrounded the phenomenon was that it transcended social hierarchies, and all classes were equally enamored of the new style of dancing. For example, one *Daily Express* headline from October 1919 proclaimed, “London’s orgy of dancing – all classes affected by the craze.”⁵⁷ A month later, a writer reporting on dancing in Leeds stated in the *Dancing Times*, “Here everybody, without distinction of class or age, is dancing.”⁵⁸ As time passed and popular dancing evolved from a craze into an established part of everyday life and leisure, ideas about its cross-class appeal persisted. In 1936, dancing teacher Santos Casani mused, “Has there ever been any pastime in our history so popular among every class and community as dancing is to-day? ... Society girl and mill girl – each shares to the full all the pleasures that dancing can give.”⁵⁹ There were even those who suggested that this shared love of dance was promoting class and national unity, an idea that was put forth in another *Daily*

⁵⁵ M-O A: TC 38/6/G, The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, June 19, 1939, 3.

⁵⁶ Molly Carmichael, “Watch Your Step,” *Daily Mirror*, November 9, 1935, 23.

⁵⁷ “London’s Orgy of Dancing,” *Daily Express*, October 30, 1919, 7.

⁵⁸ “Provincial Notes – Leeds,” *Dancing Times*, November 1919, 135.

⁵⁹ Santos Casani, *Casani’s Home Teacher: Ballroom Dancing Made Easy*, (London: Heath Cranton Ltd., 1936).

Express piece: “never before has dancing played the part it now plays as a social equaliser; never has its influence penetrated to the heart of a people as it has done to the heart of the British public to-day.”⁶⁰

However, while Britons of all classes may have taken up modern ballroom dance styles, there was no suggestion that they were performing them together, and as has been shown, few popular dancing spaces attracted a cross-class clientele, at least not in the early part of the period under review. Moreover, because the working and lower middle classes frequented the *palais-de-danse*, which had such superior dancing facilities, this was the social group within the dancing public who demonstrated a better standard of dancing, and had the strongest influence on the evolution of the national dance culture. While the upper and middle class dancing clubs had been the center of British popular dancing in the period before the First World War, the advent of the public dance hall era transferred the greatest degree of influence to *palais patrons*, despite their lower status within the social hierarchy.

Most contemporaries, particularly within the dance profession, were highly derisive of both the facilities and the standard of the dancing in upper class venues, and praised the dancers who frequented the *palais*. As dancing teacher Josephine Bradley noted in *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, “it is good to see how the big public dance places have grown all over the country, for that is where you will always see the best ball-room dancing, not in the smart places of the West End of London.”⁶¹ Another professional had equal praise for the dancers she witnessed at a small village dance, at

⁶⁰ Geoffrey D’Egville, “Present Taste for Dancing,” *Daily Express*, November 21, 1919, 3.

⁶¹ Josephine Bradley, “My ‘Cavalcade’ of Dancing,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, October 27, 1934, 3.

least by comparison to what one saw at upper class dances, “The keenness and enthusiasm of the dancers, apart from the standard of their dancing, which was very high – was pleasantly refreshing after the languorous, what-a-beastly-bore attitude of dancers who sway and swirl, toddle and crawl in the somewhat artificial atmosphere of some of London’s most exclusive ballrooms.”⁶²

However, not all dance professionals found dancing in rural areas so praiseworthy, and there were those who felt that the regional differences in access to dancing facilities had as much of an impact on the quality dancing as class distinctions did. London-based ballroom professionals, particularly towards the beginning of the period under review, were often quite critical of the standard of dancing outside of large urban areas, or indeed, anywhere outside of the capital. As one competitive dancer wrote in the *Dancing Times* in 1921, “Despite the fact that in all the better circles in the Provinces the modern dance has been in vogue for some considerable time, the standard of dancing prevailing there is still exceedingly poor.”⁶³ This opinion was apparently still prevalent several years later, as one writer for *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* observed: “It is often argued that, because Londoners have so many excellent facilities for dancing, the quality of their dancing is superior to that in provincial towns, where dancing halls are fewer in number and much less spacious and luxurious.”⁶⁴ However, the profession was also very invested in reducing this perceived divide between town and country. Indeed, the writer of the *Dancing Times* piece mentioned above further noted that he was

⁶² Mona Vivian, “Has the Dance ‘Craze’ Come to Stay?” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, January 10, 1925, 229.

⁶³ Morry M. Blake, “Get the London Style,” *Dancing Times*, February 1922, 424.

⁶⁴ Zetta Mor, “Can London Produce the Best Dancers?” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, March 28, 1925, 182.

“exceedingly anxious ... to lay seeds which will blossom forth into a healthy desire among Provincial dancers to emulate the high standard of proficiency now shown by many of their London friends.”⁶⁵

The profession’s concern with improving the dancing abilities of all Britons grew out of many of the same factors that had played into its decision to standardize the steps of the English style, as well as its efforts to highlight dancing’s virtues and defend it from criticism.⁶⁶ Not only did many members of the profession believe that poor public performances of modern ballroom dances was what left the new style open to the attacks of critics, but helping to improve the public’s dancing was the majority of professionals’ primary *raison d’etre* and leading source of income. Moreover, the attempt to bridge the dancing gap between town and country is also indicative of another fundamental goal of many of those invested in developing and teaching the English style, which was to create a dancing style that was truly national in scope, and reflective of the national character.⁶⁷ Leading professionals believed that the way in which to achieve this goal was to improve provincial dancing, and bring it up to par with the way dances were performed in London, a process which they believed depended on both dance competitions and the continued expansion of the dance hall industry. By 1927, Philip Richardson suggested that real headway had been made, writing in the *Dancing Times*, “The improvement in dancing in the provinces is steadily maintained. At some places, notably the ‘Palais de Danse’ at Southport, the standard is well up to the average London standard ... The

⁶⁵ Morry M. Blake, “Get the London Style,” *Dancing Times*, February 1922, 424.

⁶⁶ For more on these efforts by the dance profession, see Chapters One and Two.

⁶⁷ This idea will be discussed at much greater length in Chapter Five.

provincial 'Palais' are doing wonderfully good work, and in many towns attract all the best people of the neighbourhood."⁶⁸

However, it must be noted that there were those, both within and outside the dance profession, who disputed that London was so far ahead of the rest of the nation in popular dancing. Part of the counter-argument related to a notion that any town and country distinction was perhaps more relevant with respect to the profession itself, rather than to the dancing public, particularly as time wore on. A number of contemporaries suggested that dance professionals outside of the capital could not hope to compete with those based in London, but that the dancing performed by everyday dancers was certainly on par, if not superior. As one writer noted in 1925, "I would say that for individual exhibition dancing London takes the lead, but if I were asked to find Britain's best amateur dancer I would first search the provinces and try London as a last resource."⁶⁹ Similarly, when asked about where the best dancing was to be found by Mass Observation, a dance hall manager in Bolton stated, "For the general public I should say Liverpool and Manchester. Of course there are no experts outside London comparable with London experts ... Our good amateurs will look like novices against those in London as time goes on."⁷⁰

Some observers of dancing beyond the capital not only disputed that Londoners were superior dancers, but also the idea that London was or should be the place that established dancing trends and developments for the rest of the nation. In an interview

⁶⁸ The Sitter Out, "Ballroom Notes," *Dancing Times*, April 1927, 21.

⁶⁹ Zetta Mor, "Can London Produce the Best Dancers?" *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, March 28, 1925, 182.

⁷⁰ M-O A: Worktown 48/C, Astoria Palais de Danse, December 18, 1939.

with *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, the manager of the Palace dance hall in Douglas, on the Isle of Man, declared, “We here in the North do not *follow* London; we frequently set the fashion ourselves: for new dances are far more often tried first at the Blackpool and Douglas great dancing halls; then they, if successful there, are taken up by teachers and dancing enthusiasts in London.”⁷¹ Similarly, the *Liverpool Echo* wrote in 1926:

Twice this week I have seen, in print, slighting references to “the provincial style.” It is time Londoners learnt better than this. There may have been a provincial style in the derogatory sense a few years ago, but since then there has been no difference in favour of London ... it is in big provincial centres like Manchester and Liverpool that the fate of dancers is decided, and its fads and whims decently eliminated.⁷²

Even if they did not claim to be setting the trends, many dancers outside the capital made efforts to stay current and keep up with what dance the rest of the nation was dancing, and to what music. As the manager of a Bolton dance hall told Mass Observation, “The people are very up-to-date. They expect to hear all the tunes that are being played on the wireless.”⁷³

These comments are reflective of the extent to which many Britons, no matter where they lived in the country, laid claim to inclusion in the dancing nation, and sought to have an influence on the development of the national dance culture. The expansion of the dance hall industry was a critical factor in both prompting and helping dancing enthusiasts throughout the nation to achieve that influence in several ways. The plethora of dance halls provided greater numbers of spaces for practice, as well as a site wherein

⁷¹ George A. Wade, “Running a Super Dance Hall,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, August 8, 1925, iii.

⁷² “Dancing Time on Merseyside,” *Liverpool Echo*, March 24, 1926, 10.

⁷³ M-O A: Worktown, 48/D, Manager, Aspin Hall, January 8, 1940.

Britons could be exposed to the latest trends in music and dancing, particularly as companies like Mecca sought to standardize the experience of dancing and produced nationwide dance-related events. And yet, as the discussion above has demonstrated, there clearly remained significant distinctions in terms of where, why, and *how* Britons consumed popular dancing. Indeed, as the next section will demonstrate, there was a multitude of ways in which Britons could consume dance culture, well beyond the walls of the palais or other popular dancing spaces.

Other Cultural Forms and Different Dancing Publics

In 1925, writing in *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, bandleader Ramon Newton discussed the influence of the radio on dance culture in Britain, noting that, “To-day, with the aid of this wonderful invention, a song that would probably never have been heard at either John o’Groats or Land’s End, is known there as quickly as it is known and appreciated by those who dance to the Savoy Havana Band ... Whilst those thousands of others listen in, they are visualizing the scene of happiness that the dancers create.”⁷⁴ This ability of Britons at the far reaches of the country to participate in the same dancing moment, and to share awareness of the most current dance trends whether or not they were enthusiastic dancers themselves, is illustrative of the important role that other cultural forms such as the radio played in disseminating popular dance culture throughout the nation. Newton’s comments also point to the prevalent contemporary belief that

⁷⁴ Ramon Newton, “Hundreds of Miles of Music,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, February 21, 1925, 92.

popular dancing was becoming a shared national experience, and how the cultural form helped to forge the nation as an imagined dancing community.⁷⁵

The period under review saw the commercialization and widespread expansion of not only popular dancing, but of a number of other cultural and leisure forms, which, due to their pervasiveness and reduced cost became accessible to the majority of Britons, regardless of their economic background or geographic region. Moreover, the cultural production and consumption, as well as the commercial industries, associated with many popular cultural forms and leisure activities were inextricably connected, to each other, and to popular dancing. Focusing on dancing's cultural and commercial links to popular music, radio, film, and print culture, I will argue in this section that these cultural entanglements did much to help disseminate popular dance culture throughout the nation, even to those who rarely or never went out to a dance. I will also consider the influence that popular dancing had on these other cultural forms in return, and show how some contemporary observers, particularly in the dance press, perceived and promoted the notion that the intersections of multiple forms of commercial consumption was helping to make popular dancing a nationwide communal experience. Finally, this section will show that through the other cultural forms connected to popular dancing, the growing influence of the United States on British dance culture becomes even more discernible. The public

⁷⁵ Benedict Anderson's conceptualization of the nation as an "imagined community" has been adopted by scholars in a variety of disciplines, studying a diversity of times and places. In his original work, he posited that the nation "is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6. Significantly, Anderson halted his analysis at the moment my work takes up, when print began to be supplanted by the explosion in other mass media forms. However, I believe that these new cultural forms suggest a natural extension of his paradigm, and the consideration of dancing in the section that follows shows how a media form like radio provided new ways for Britons throughout the country to imagine one another.

interest in American dances was connected to and ran parallel with a growing British fascination with American dance songs and Hollywood films, both of which streamed across the Atlantic at an escalating volume; at the same time, the commercial industries that developed around music, radio, and film were increasingly transatlantic enterprises. The result was that the popular dance culture being consumed by the British dancing public was often a hybrid of American and home-grown styles.

The cultural form and commercial industry to which popular dancing was most directly connected, and from the earliest period, was undoubtedly popular music.⁷⁶ A significant portion of the output contained under the heading of popular music in this period was dance music, and the success of this musical style did much to expand the knowledge and practice of popular dancing. As I discussed in Chapter One, the rise of syncopated music, in the form of ragtime and then jazz, was one of the fundamental impetuses to the creation of modern ballroom dancing styles. Moreover, music and musicians could also have a strong influence the evolution or public favour of a dance; some in the dance profession argued in the early 1920s that it was the decision of the bands to play fewer tangos and more foxtrots that determined the relative popularity of the two dances, while the speed at which the dance bands played foxtrot music was also the major stimulus to the development of the quickstep. However, it is too facile to state that dance music directed the evolution of popular dancing. Even the quickstep debate presented more of a chicken and egg issue; while some observers believed that dancers

⁷⁶ James Nott has defined “popular music” as that music which enjoyed favor and popularity, particularly dance music and variety songs, and which was subject to the increasing commercialization of leisure that occurred during this period. For more on popular music, and the development of the popular music industry, see Nott, *Music for the People*.

were responding to the quick pacing of the band in dancing the foxtrot at a faster tempo, others thought that the bands were speeding up their playing merely to keep up with dancers taking shorter steps due to the dance floor crush. The relationship between popular music and popular dancing, as well as their attendant commercial industries, was far thus more reciprocal and mutually sustaining.

As James Nott has shown, during the 1920s and 1930s dance music became increasingly commercialized and accessible to greater numbers of Britons of all classes and regions, due to the mass-marketing of the gramophone, the rapid growth of music publishing and record production, and the expansion of the dance band industry.⁷⁷ These developments were also strongly implicated in the expansion and commercialization of popular dancing. Gramophone records and sheet music (typically performed by means of a piano), as well as the growing number of dance bands, resulted in numerous and less expensive methods of providing music for dancing, particularly for the types of dances hosted by village councils or dance promoters that were described in the previous section.

Yet while the expansion of the popular music industry facilitated the expansion of popular dancing as a leisure activity and a commercial enterprise, the reverse was also true; the popular music industry would likely not have developed so quickly or on such a wide scale had there been no dancing boom to necessitate such an immense musical output. There also would have been none of the growing opportunities for dance bands that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s without an enthusiastic dancing public to play for. Moreover, the nation's enthusiasm for dancing was used to market the products of the popular music industry, as well as to create new ones. During the 1920s, a series of

⁷⁷Nott, *Music for the People*, Chps 1-5.

advertisements for Sonora gramophones promoted the product as the solution to “The rapid increase in the popularity of informal dances at home.”⁷⁸ In the late 1930s, the dance hall industry, specifically the Mecca circuit, provided a boon to the music publishers who were tasked with distributing the sheet music for the circuit’s successful series of novelty dances, one of which, the Chestnut Tree, was the second bestselling song at the time of its release.⁷⁹

Most significantly, in the mid-1930s dance music faced its own evolution in Britain directly due to the influence of the popular dancing. This occurred when some in the dance profession, as well as certain members of the dancing public, found that musicians frequently played dance music at too fast and erratic a tempo to comply with the standard steps of the English style of ballroom dancing. “Hot” jazz and swing were particularly critiqued in this respect, with the feeling being that dance bands were more invested in musical innovation than in the needs of dancers. Famed teacher and competition dancer Victor Silvester was at the forefront of devising a solution to this problem, which was to modify and regulate the tempo of dance music to be more suitable for accompanying the standard four dances. The result was what became known as “strict tempo” dance music, and Silvester put together an orchestra with himself as conductor, and which became synonymous with this new musical style.

Strict tempo was touted as the ideal style of music *for* dancing, something which came to be perceived as distinct from “dance music.” Both styles continued to exist simultaneously, however, with each having its distinct proponents. Jazz fans and musical

⁷⁸ See for example, “Dancing,” *Dancing Times*, January 1921, 330,

⁷⁹ Nott, *Music for the People*, 165.

aficionados tended to be very critical and dismissive of strict tempo, since they felt it limited originality and creativity. However, professional dancers and dancing enthusiasts saw the value in the smoother, standardized rhythms of strict tempo, because it did indeed make the standard dances easier to perform. This position which was well articulated by Cecil Taylor in comments to Mass Observation:

“The bands are one of our difficulties. Too often they play to please themselves and not the public... Different bands have their own ideas. Some make you want to dance. Some make you feel you want to have a drink. Victor Silvester’s orchestra will always make you feel you want to move. With it you have perfect time, perfect rhythm, and beautiful melody.”⁸⁰

The two musical camps often squared off in the pages of the dance press, with music and dancing’s respective proponents making impassioned arguments for or against strict tempo, and yet it should be noted that the differences in tempo were really only of particular concern to those who took either dancing or music really seriously. Moreover, whatever the criticisms of jazz devotees, strict tempo did provide a strong market for the popular music industry. By the time of Victor Silvester’s death in 1978, his orchestra’s strict tempo dance records had sold more than 75 million copies, a fact which more than anything else attests to its popularity with the British dancing public.⁸¹

Strict tempo was a home-grown, specifically British evolution in popular dance music, designed to accompany the standardized movements of the English style of ballroom dancing. It was spurred on and marketed through the circuits of the British popular music industry, whose gramophone companies, music publishers, and record producers had established cultural and commercial weight by the mid-1930s, not only in

⁸⁰ M-O A: TC 38/6/G, The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, June 19, 1939, 3-4.

⁸¹ Ian Driver, *A Century of Dance: A Hundred Years of Musical Movement, from Waltz to Hip Hop*, (London: Hamlyn, 2000), 144.

Britain, but in some cases internationally. It is important to note, however, that British music faced substantial competition for public favour from foreign, chiefly American, dance songs during the period under review, and that the cultural and commercial production of music for dancing was an increasingly transatlantic enterprise. Substantial links existed between British and American gramophone companies and music publishers,⁸² and despite the success of British-made music like strict tempo, a growing number of the songs being heard, and danced to, came from America. *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* well described the situation in 1925:

The figures of a statistician would afford conclusive proof as to the preponderance of American song and dance numbers now in favour over British compositions, but figures are unnecessary when the facts are so obvious. Think, for instance, of half a dozen popular dance melodies of the moment, and ask yourself how many are British and how many American. True, they may be handled by British music publishers, but they are American compositions none the less, and emanate from the brains of American music writers.⁸³

In these comments the transatlantic circulation of dance music, wherein American songs were imported and distributed by the British popular music industry, was clearly articulated, as was the intense popularity of American songs with British dancers. As several scholars of popular music have suggested, the famed British dance bands therefore generally adopted American styles, but much in the same way that the dance profession anglicized foreign dances, something I will discuss at length in the next

⁸² Nott, *Music for the People*, 13-32.

⁸³ Jimmy Campbell and Reg Connelly, "Is The American Song Supreme?" *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, February 7, 1925, iii.

chapter, musicians like Jack Hylton generally performed a domesticated and identifiably British version of jazz.⁸⁴

In addition to gramophone records and sheet music, another important way in which dance music was disseminated to the nation in ways beyond the live performance of musicians, was via the radio. The expansion of the “wireless” into the homes of Britons was accomplished at a frantic pace in the interwar years, with one estimate suggesting that there were 35,000 radio licenses in 1922, then two million by 1926, and nine million by 1939.⁸⁵ Dance music was a staple part of the programming at the BBC and at competing commercial radio stations on the Continent, and the radio therefore became another important cultural form for circulating popular dance culture to listening Britons. The plethora of dance songs heard over the radio helped to increase public interest in the dances that could be performed to them, and also allowed listeners to stay current as to the most popular ballroom dance music, even if they rarely went dancing themselves. As *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* noted in 1926, “[Dance music] is a very popular part of the broadcasting programmes, because even those people who do not dance – a very small number nowadays – enjoy listening to the rhythmic, time-perfect syncopation to which few can resist tapping out the beats with their feet.”⁸⁶ The influence of the radio in spreading music and dance culture to the nation was perhaps best illustrated in the case of the Lambeth Walk, the greatest song and dance phenomenon of

⁸⁴ See Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Nott, *Music for the People*; Peter Bailey, “Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion: Americanization, National Identity, and Sexual Politics in Inter-war British Music Hall,” *Cultural and Social History* 4, no. 4 (2007): 495-509.

⁸⁵ Nott, *Music for the People*, 59. Cited from Asa Briggs, *A History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, rev. edn. 5 vols., (London: Oxford University Press, 1995), i. 17, ii. 6.

⁸⁶ Michael King, “Playing to the World,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, September 4, 1926, 118.

the late 1930s. In a survey conducted by Mass Observation, almost half of those queried indicated that they had first heard about the Lambeth Walk over the radio, not in the dance hall.⁸⁷

However, it was not merely dance music that could be brought to Britons via the radio, but the whole experience of an evening's dancing. Much of the dance music broadcasted over the BBC was not transmitted from a studio, but from a public ballroom in which one of Britain's many famous dance bands played for actual dancers. In the 1920s, dance bands were typically based in a London hotel ballroom, such as Henry Hall and the Gleneagles Hotel Ballroom or Jack Payne at the Hotel Cecil; there were also two bands resident at the Savoy hotel, the Savoy Orpheans and the Savoy Havana bands.⁸⁸ With the continued development of the dance hall industry, even more musicians began broadcasting from palais-de-danse, such as Joe Loss's band, which performed from the Astoria dance hall on Charing Cross Road.

The popularity of these broadcasts was well demonstrated in 1926, when the BBC made plans to halt the transmission of the various Savoy bands, but backed down in the face of huge public outcry. As the *Daily Mail* reported, the hotel and BBC re-opened negotiations entirely "owing to the wishes of a large number of listeners that the bands should continue to broadcast."⁸⁹ More than merely offering entertainment, these broadcasts provided listeners at home with knowledge of dancing spaces that they might never visit personally; they could hear the applause of the dancers, and imagine them moving about the floor, joining in from their own sitting room if they so chose. Indeed,

⁸⁷ Madge and Harrisson, *Britain*, 163.

⁸⁸ Nott, *Music for the People*, 61.

⁸⁹ "Savoy Bands to Keep on Broadcasting," *Daily Mail*, February 19, 1926, 7.

the *Dancing Times* attested to the widespread reach of the ballroom broadcasts in 1926, noting, “these orchestras, when broadcasting, are playing to thousands upon thousands of the British public, and not only the few hundred revellers at ultra fashionable hotels and clubs in the heart of the West End of London.”⁹⁰ This comment also reflects the common contemporary espousal that the broadcasts of dance orchestras provided a shared experience for listeners and dancers throughout the nation. As a writer for *Popular Music Weekly* remarked, “sometimes when the music of the Savoy bands is coming ‘over the air’ one pauses to think of the millions of feet that are moving in time with their saxophones and banjos.”⁹¹ Therefore, in addition to spreading awareness of popular dancing trends and the goings-on in dancing spaces, in the minds of many the ballroom broadcasts provided a simultaneous and communal experience of popular dance culture for millions of Britons.

The radio’s national reach was also acknowledged by the dance profession, which used it to edify and educate the dancing public about what was happening in ballroom dancing, and to help dancers improve their technique. In the 1930s, Philip Richardson began providing broadcast commentary from the Blackpool dance festival, allowing Britons all over the country to share in ballroom dancing’s most important competitive event, and to learn about the new figures professionals were introducing into their routines. Prominent dancing teachers such as Santos Casani also presented instruction over the radio, a practice which culminated in the 1941 launch of Victor Silvester’s BBC Dancing Club, a show in which the famed teacher and bandleader provided a ten minute

⁹⁰ Ballroom Notes, *Dancing Times*, February 1926, 575.

⁹¹ Michael King, “Playing to the World,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, September 4, 1926, 118.

dancing lesson followed by twenty minutes of dance music performed by his strict tempo ballroom orchestra. A notice about the BBC Dancing Club in the *Radio Times* suggested that the program was specifically designed for mass appeal and accessibility: “The lessons will be arranged so that those who followed the previous series can increase their skill and those who have never danced before can make a beginning.”⁹²

The BBC Dancing Club was extremely successful, eventually transitioning to television in the late 1940s. Through this and other dance music shows, many Britons were able to experiment with ballroom dancing figures right in their own sitting room. As one woman recalled in her memoir, “I have memories of trying to teach my brother to dance by guiding him around the living room floor to the strains of Victor Sylvester’s [sic] orchestra issuing from the old wireless set and to the detriment of my toes, but we managed a passable waltz.”⁹³ Even if they chose merely to listen to the lesson and the music rather than to actively engage in dancing, these programmes furthered millions of Britons’ knowledge about what were, and how to perform, the popular dances of the day. In addition, through the BBC Dancing Club and the success of his dance orchestra, Victor Silvester became a household name in Britain, a testament to the ever-increasing power of the popular music industry and radio in disseminating knowledge of popular dance culture, in this case of a man who had begun his career at the start of the period under review as a six penny dance partner.

Indeed, the increasing exposure given to dancers and musicians via record and sheet music sales, the radio, and, as will be shown below, film and print culture, created

⁹² M-O A: TC 74/4/B, Undated clipping from *Radio Times*.

⁹³ IWM, Documents: 88/3/1, Geraldine Page, “Growing Pains: A Teenager’s War,” unpublished memoir, 51.

quite a number of popular dance celebrities, of which Silvester is only one example. Exhibition dancers, bandleaders, and the actors and actresses featured in dancing films, were among the most renowned dancing stars. While some of them, such as Silvester, bandleaders like Jack Payne or Jack Hylton, or film stars like Jessie Matthews, were British-born and quintessentially “national” celebrities, growing numbers of American dancers and musicians also achieved great celebrity in Britain as the interwar period progressed, particularly through the media of print culture, transatlantic radio, and Hollywood film. Such was their predominant fame that in many cases knowledge of American stars was drawn upon in order to promote or provide context to the careers of lesser known British figures; the popular or dance press frequently provided profiles of British performers, describing a native-born crooner as the “British Bing Crosby” or a dancer as the “British Ginger Rogers.”

But while American dance celebrities enjoyed increasing levels of popularity and influence in Britain, some of the most significant stars of the day were in fact what might be termed “Atlantic celebrities,” those whose fame and influence was forged not as the result of the straightforward Americanization of Europe, but rather via the very conduits of transatlantic cultural exchange. The earliest example of this phenomenon were famed dancers Irene and Vernon Castle, who achieved world-wide celebrity in the years before the First World War, forging a career as teachers and exhibition dancers on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly in Paris and New York. The circulation of their figure known as the Castle Walk, their book *Modern Dancing*, and the influence that the pair had on fashion on both sides of the Atlantic, is a testament to the ways in which dance culture

was forged through ongoing cultural negotiations between the United States, Latin America, and Europe, even in the earliest part of the period under review. The Castles were even emblematic of the Atlantic by their respective nationalities, in that Irene was American while Vernon was British.

The most significant Atlantic celebrity of the age, however, was undoubtedly Fred Astaire, whose career stands as an illustration not only of the importance of cultural exchange between Britain and the United States to the forging of British popular dance culture, but also to the emerging influence of film on popular dancing. Born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1899, Fred Astaire achieved child stardom alongside his older sister Adele as a popular vaudeville act. However, starting in the 1920s, the pair's career and international celebrity skyrocketed as much from their performances on the London stage as from those conducted on Broadway, as the twosome move back and forth across the Atlantic with revues like *Stop Flirting* (1923) and *Funny Face* (1928).⁹⁴ When his sister married and retired in the early 1930s, Astaire turned to Hollywood in search of the next stage in his career. Cast alongside Ginger Rogers as the supporting players in RKO's 1933 production *Flying down to Rio*, the pair's performance of a dance called the "Carioca" became the stand-out scene of the film. Now a bona fide film star in addition to a dance celebrity, Astaire would eventually make nine more films with Rogers, most of which were tremendously successful on both sides of the Atlantic.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ For more on Astaire's career, see his autobiography. Fred Astaire, *Steps in Time: An Autobiography*, (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1959, 2000).

⁹⁵ It is worth noting that the transatlantic nature of Astaire's career and celebrity was manifested through many of his films' content. In *Flying Down to Rio*, as well as a number of other Astaire and Rogers films, the characters frequently move from place to place, Paris to London to New York to Miami to Rio. In *Shall We Dance*, another Astaire and Rogers film from 1937, a portion of the action actually takes place on board

Nor were Astaire and Rogers vehicles the only cinematic productions to feature dancing during this period, which, with the advent of the sound era has been viewed as the golden age of musical films. As with popular music, American film productions predominated in British cinemas, though the British film industry also sought to emulate Hollywood's outpouring of films featuring songs and dancing. Of course, as Stephen Guy has suggested "as so often in British cinema history film-makers were also indebted to Hollywood, whose ideas and practices they all too easily followed."⁹⁶ Guy shows that approximately one sixth of the output of British filmmakers in the 1930s were musical films, most of which followed on music hall and theatrical traditions by filming popular musical comedies, or by providing "backstage" stories, in which a nebulous plot provided context to a series of variety acts.⁹⁷ Most of the stars of these films were actors and actresses who had transitioned from the stage to cinema, including George Formby, Gracie Fields, and Jessie Matthews, and famous dance bands, such as those led by Harry Roy, Henry Hall, and Jack Hylton, also began making appearances in some British dancing films. Thus, the cinema, as Britain's most popular and wide-reaching leisure activity, was a critical means through which popular dance culture was disseminated to the nation. Dancing films exposed Britons to dance celebrities and new dance songs, and perhaps most significantly, to new dances.

ship between Paris and New York. Moreover, some of the dances featured in the films, such as the Carioca, were portrayed as being authentic Latin American dance forms, but were more often creations of Hollywood choreographers.

⁹⁶ Stephen Guy, "Calling All Stars: Musical Films in a Musical Decade," in *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929-1939*, ed. Jeffrey Richards, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 100.

⁹⁷ Guy, "Calling All Stars: Musical Films in a Musical Decade," 99-114.

As I suggested in Chapter One, by the mid-1930s, some observers of popular dancing in Britain feared that it was starting to stagnate. After the Charleston craze and the evolution of the quickstep in the late 1920s, there was no new dance that caught on with enough tenacity to really shake things up in the ballroom until the rise of the Lambeth Walk in 1938. In addressing this reality, some contemporaries saw the plethora of dancing films that emerged in the 1930s as the logical place in which to search for a new popular dance. As *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* mused in 1935, “Will the screen give us a new ballroom dance craze?”⁹⁸ The article went on to point out, “New dances continue to stream forth from the film studios. After the ‘Carioca’ and the ‘Continental,’ we are now promised the ‘Piccolino,’ which, we are assured, will sweep the country.”⁹⁹ The dances referred to in the previous article were all the creations of Hollywood, but British dancing films also put forth a few offerings. One such dance was the “Caranga,” created for the 1935 film *Brewster’s Millions*. Upon the release of the film, *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* featured an article describing the elaborate efforts undertaken to get the dance on film, which concluded with step-by-step instructions to readers on how to perform the Caranga themselves.¹⁰⁰ There was a clear belief that the great number of new dances created for both British and American musical films could and would transition to the public ballroom, and film was also seen to be an ideal way in which to further popularize existing dances. Accordingly, Hollywood’s Paramount studios produced a film called *Rumba* in 1935, while the British film industry

⁹⁸ Leonore Manning, “Will the Screen Give Us A New Ballroom Dance Craze?” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, July 13, 1935, 20.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ “Here’s the Caranga!” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, January 5, 1935, 7.

capitalized on the success of the Lambeth Walk by creating a film of the same name in 1940.¹⁰¹

Yet despite the number of potential offerings being put forward by American and British films, there were those in the dance community who doubted that the cinema would really prove to be a viable source of new popular dances. In a 1939 interview with Mass Observation, Victor Silvester suggested that film dances were not suitable or practical for the public ballroom.¹⁰² Silvester's belief, which he was not alone in proffering, was that film dances occupied too much space on crowded dance floors, and also required too high a degree of difficulty for the average dancer. To remedy these issues, some efforts were made by enterprising members of the dance profession and dance hall industry to adapt certain screen dances for the ballroom. The manager of the Plaza dance hall in Glasgow, for example, introduced a simplified, more generally accessible version of the Carioca, which went on to enjoy substantial popularity in the city.¹⁰³ It continued to feature occasionally on dance programmes throughout the country for several years, though with nothing close to the frequency of the quickstep, foxtrot, waltz, or even tango. For example, Mass Observation recorded that on an evening at the Streatham Locarno in 1939, the band played more than a dozen quicksteps and only one

¹⁰¹ *The Lambeth Walk* was in fact the film version of the stage musical *Me and My Girl*, a re-titling which is a testament to the popularity of the dance. Both the musical and the dance will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Five. For more on the film version, see Guy, "Calling All Stars: Musical Films in a Musical Decade," 108-114.

¹⁰² M-O A: TC 38/5/G, Victor Silvester, May 30, 1939, 3.

¹⁰³ Horace Richards, "Come Dancing Around Britain – No. 1: Glasgow Greet the Carioca," *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, November 24, 1934, 12.

Carioca, and while the former generally drew over a hundred couples to the floor, the latter brought only thirty.¹⁰⁴

The sporadic success of a dance like the Carioca aside, there was no dance that originated on film that had a significant or lasting impact on British popular dance culture in the period under review. A potential reason for this was that, as one contemporary observer remarked, many of the era's film dances had a "definitely Latin stamp about them,"¹⁰⁵ and as has been noted elsewhere, the so-called "Latin" dances were never widespread popular successes in Britain; rather, Britons tended to enjoy them more as exhibition dances, or, as cinematic entertainment. But while the dances seen on the film screen may have lacked popular appeal, or were perceived as inappropriate for the ballroom, there is evidence that dance films did stimulate interest in popular dancing. *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* suggested in 1935 that film dances were inspiring the public to dance in a more "intricate fashion," as well as increasing the tempo at which people danced.¹⁰⁶ Renowned dancing teacher Adele England also pointed to the influence of Hollywood in attempting to account for the increasing public interest in "truckin'" style steps in the late 1930s, telling *Mass Observation*: "They see the films, see Fred Astaire and so on doing these steps so they think they will have a go."¹⁰⁷

Therefore, while most Britons were well aware that they would likely never "hoof it" like Fred Astaire, watching these films helped to spur interest in dance instruction or a visit to the palais. At the very least, film, like the radio, furthered public knowledge of

¹⁰⁴ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Locarno, November 8, 1939.

¹⁰⁵ Leonore Manning, "Will the Screen Give Us A New Ballroom Dance Craze?" *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, July 13, 1935, 20.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ M-O A: TC 38/5/G, *Dancing Teachers*, June 5, 1939, 4.

popular dance culture, helping it to become a more integrated aspect of both leisure and society. Moreover, while film did much to expand interest in dancing, dancing also provided various means of exposing Britons to film culture. For example, in 1924 the Olympia dance hall in London hosted a “film carnival,” to which dancers were asked to attend dressed as their favourite character from a film.¹⁰⁸ On another occasion, the Ritz ballroom in Manchester held a competition based around “The Merry Widow Waltz,” a dance that had been created in conjunction with the release of the film by the same name.¹⁰⁹ Film culture and dance culture were thus entangled in ways that disseminated knowledge of and access to both cultural forms to greater numbers of Britons. This was a fact upon which some contemporaries also remarked, suggesting as they did about radio that film helped to make popular dance culture more accessible throughout the nation. As one writer noted with respect to the number of famous bandleaders appearing in dancing films, “For radio fans the idea of band-leaders in films is a good one, for only a few thousand people can hope to see such stars as Harry Roy, Henry Hall and Jack Hylton even when they go on tour, but with a film every little village gets a chance of seeing the men who entertain them on the air.”¹¹⁰

As the above discussion will have suggested, in addition to the influence that they commanded in their own terms, a common thread linking popular music, radio, and film to popular dancing, as well as to each other, was print culture. The dance press in particular paid close attention to trends and developments in music, radio, and film, as

¹⁰⁸ “London Dance Notes,” *Dancing Times*, January 1924, 425.

¹⁰⁹ Phil Moss, *True Romances at Manchester’s Dances*, (Neil Richardson, 1998).

¹¹⁰ Howard Lawson, “Band-leaders Are Becoming Film Stars,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, July 20, 1935, ii.

they specifically related to dancing. For example, *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* associated music and dance in its very title, and in addition to the many articles it featured about dancing, one of its primary purposes was to publish sheet music of dance songs. The popular press also forged connections between the various dance-related cultural forms, commenting on new songs and dances that emerged through film, or vice versa. For example, in 1935, the *Daily Mirror* commented, “‘Cheek to Cheek’ – is the popular dance hit of the moment, the number which Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire ... have made famous in their latest film triumph ‘Top Hat,’”¹¹¹ linking music, film, and popular dancing together in one informative piece for readers.

In addition to forging and illuminating the links between the commercial and cultural forms described above, print culture did much to promote and disseminate knowledge of popular dancing in its own right. The dance press was naturally a chief vehicle for keeping readers within the dancing public apprised about new dances and evolutions in existing ones, as well as what was happening in the public ballroom. Periodicals like the *Dancing Times*, *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, *Modern Dance*, and *Dance News*, featured frequent “how-to” articles on specific dances or tips for better dancing in general. They also proffered advice on issues ranging from ballroom decorum, to dance fashion and appropriate clothing, to the innumerable benefits of dancing. In addition, the dance press followed the careers of dancers, musicians, and other dance celebrities, writing profiles and histories, and frequently featured series of articles over a number of weeks or months by renowned figures in dancing or dance music.

¹¹¹ “Cheek-to-Cheek,” *Daily Mirror*, November 22, 1935, 21.

The various newspapers and periodicals that composed the dance press had different producers and were generally directed towards specific readerships, though were also available more widely. The *Dancing Times* was the chief professional organ, concerned with dancing as an art form, and providing a near equal focus on both ballet and ballroom. Dozens of pages were provided for advertising dancing schools, and most of the articles were written by professional dancers, largely pertaining to the issues and events they were directly concerned with, such as the evolution of modern ballroom dancing, the ballroom conferences, and dance competitions. However, the periodical also reflected its editor's belief that professionals and the dances they helped to shape should largely be at the service of the public, and thus the *Dancing Times* also prominently featured "how-to" information about specific dances, as well as discussion of public dancing spaces throughout the nation. Similarly, *Modern Dance*, later the *Modern Dance and Dancer*, another professional journal that emerged in the 1930s, had a comparable mandate to the *Dancing Times*, though was also slightly more concerned with the minutiae of professional ballroom dancing, such as by providing synopses of what happened in meetings of the various professional associations.

Other newspapers and magazines that formed the dance press were less influenced by the dance profession, and were rather the products of the commercial industries that developed around leisure during this period. *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, which was published from 1924 to 1926, and then again from 1934 to 1935, was a journal of the popular music industry. Through connections with the music publishers, the paper published sheet music of the latest dance songs, and in its 1930s incarnation,

was even edited by a prominent dance bandleader, Jack Payne. However, the paper was also very concerned with developments and events in popular dancing, featuring a column entitled “Around the Dance Halls” in every issue, and undertaking a survey of the nation’s dance halls during both periods of its existence. Meanwhile, in the late 1930s, the dance hall industry also began making contributions to the dance press. As I noted in the previous section, Mecca’s Danceland Publications featured a newspaper which at various times was titled *Dance News* or *Danceland*. Perhaps not surprisingly, *Dance News* was most concerned with events occurring in Mecca halls, and with promoting Mecca’s original dances; however, the paper also contained coverage of more general news from around the profession and industry.

Yet while the dance press enjoyed a significant readership, it did not have the wide reach possessed by the popular press, and the latter was also an extremely important vehicle for disseminating popular dance culture. As Adrian Bingham has noted, it was during interwar years that “national daily newspapers became part of everyday life, read by a majority of the population.”¹¹² Circulation of papers like the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, and *Daily News* doubled in the years between 1918 and 1939, and by the outbreak of the Second World War, two-thirds of the population saw a daily newspaper.¹¹³ These national dailies, as well local newspapers, dedicated considerable attention to popular dancing. They were thus extremely influential in proliferating knowledge, occasionally misinformed knowledge, about new trends in dance culture, and also provided a space for showcasing and producing controversies around dancing.

¹¹² Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

During the dance craze of the early 1920s, the popular press featured daily articles about new dances, the opening of dance halls, the history of jazz, dance competitions, and events in the ballroom. Many of these same topics continued to appear throughout the period under review, and a number of newspapers and periodicals, both national and local, began to feature daily or weekly columns dedicated to issues and events surrounding popular dancing; for example, the *Liverpool Echo* featured such a column entitled “Dancing Time on Merseyside,” while the *Daily Express* assigned one writer, Patrick Chalmers, to keep track of all developments associated with popular dancing. Furthermore, dancing’s influence within the popular press extended well beyond these articles and columns of specific concern. Dancing was also used as an image or reference in advertising for all sorts of products. As I suggested in Chapter Two, these were more commonly products geared towards women, but dancing also appeared in advertisements for such disparate items as chewing gum, cigarettes, beer, and blood restorers. Dancing was also a topic of discussion on fashion pages, advertising sections provided notices about places to dance locally, and some magazines which were generally concerned with a wide-range of issues occasionally devoted special issues to the subject, as the *Ladies Field* did in the midst of the dance craze in 1920. Thus significantly, it was through the contemporary popular press that dancing’s wide-ranging permeation of British society became particularly apparent.

Of course, not all of the coverage of dancing in the popular press was positive or celebratory, and it was also in the press that many of the public debates surrounding popular dancing played out. It was in the pages of some of the national dailies that writers

were provided with a place in which to castigate specific dances, such as the “jazz” or the Charleston. Other issues of dancing-related concern were also revealed through this medium, such as the controversy over the so-called dancing girl, described in the previous chapter, or concerns about professional dance partners, which will be outlined in Chapter Four.

Given this controversial coverage, it is perhaps not surprising that the dance press possessed a decidedly ambivalent relationship with the popular press. On the one hand, the professional and commercial entities that produced dance-related print culture were aware of the important role that the mainstream press could play in promoting and expanding the influence of popular dancing. Some newspapers, such as the *Daily Sketch* or *The Star*, were also important sponsors of prominent dance competitions, a fact which caused *Modern Dance* to give the latter paper credit for being “synonymous with dancers and dance history.”¹¹⁴ On the other hand, those “in the know” about dancing were very critical of the ignorance displayed by those writing about dance culture in the popular press, and the misinformation that they feared this was spreading about dancing. Philip Richardson railed against this problem from the pages of the *Dancing Times* throughout the 1920s, concerned about the negative influence of the popular press as he and other professionals sought to uplift the reputation of modern ballroom dancing. Even after the new modern dances were well-established, the dance press remained nonplussed and irritated by some of the popular press coverage of dancing. This fact was well revealed by the comments of one writer in *Modern Dance*, who noted in 1935 that a recent article about dancing that he had read in the *Daily Mirror* was “the first article I have ever read

¹¹⁴ “The ‘Star’ Ballroom Championships,” *Modern Dance*, May 1939, 23.

in the lay press that didn't make a nasty mess of the subject."¹¹⁵ The editor of the same journal also complained some time later that the popular press did not pay enough attention to what was really happening in the ballroom, but was rather too easily distracted by fly-by-night novelties and freak dances which he suggested "gain more publicity than all the rest put together."¹¹⁶

One of the ways in which the profession and dance hall industry sought to combat popular misrepresentations about dancing was through other forms of writing, and newspapers and magazines did not form the sole output of dance-related print culture. As I noted in Chapter One, there was also an extensive print culture of books and manuals dedicated to instruction in ballroom dancing. The most famous and popular of these were Victor Silvester and Alex Moore's respective works, both entitled *Modern Ballroom Dancing*, and both going into dozens of printings and editions; Richardson estimated that over a million copies of Silvester's work had been sold by 1945, and it has continued to be reprinted into the present day.¹¹⁷ However, many other contemporary dancing teachers and competition dancers also produced their own instructional works, including well-known figures such as Edward Scott, Cecil Taylor, and Santos Casani, and Phyllis Haylor. The readership of all of these books was significant enough to warrant comments by the editor of *Modern Dance*, in which he noted that a number of dance teachers were concerned that instruction manuals were cutting into their business.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ "Them and There," *Modern Dance*, December 1935, 26.

¹¹⁶ A.H. Franks, "Dancers are too smug!" *Modern Dance*, November 1937, 1.

¹¹⁷ Philip J.S. Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1946), 70.

¹¹⁸ A.H. Franks, "Fact and Fallacy," *Modern Dance*, October 1937, 1.

The manuals generally included a few introductory pages outlining the credentials and some biographical information on the author, often including testimonials as to the author's expertise from the press and other professionals. Early chapters contained general comments on hold, balance, and positions, and those following were usually dedicated to specific dances. Some manuals also featured additional content pertaining to issues such as the history of ballroom dancing, suggestions on how to host a dance, advice on succeeding in dance competitions and getting accredited as a teacher, or discussion of the advantages of dancing to health or social life. The manuals were generally designed to be widely accessible, of use to both beginner and more advanced dancers, though with slightly more emphasis on the former. As Santos Casani noted in the early pages of one of his instructions manuals, "I shall proceed as if the reader knows nothing at all about the subject. I want to make the 'Self-Tutor' justify its description, and take my invisible pupil from the kindergarten stage, step by step, to that perfection which can only come with well-grounded knowledge."¹¹⁹

Like the dance profession, the dance hall industry also produced a significant print culture beyond its magazines and newspapers. Dance halls frequently printed souvenir pamphlets to advertise and inform the public about the amenities of their halls. One such pamphlet about the Empress Ballroom in Wigan noted, "The object of this Souvenir is to give our patrons, and also those who do not yet know the joys of the Empress Ballroom and Palais de Danse, a brief description of the amenities of this

¹¹⁹ Santos Casani, *Casani's Self-Tutor of Ballroom Dancing*, (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1927), 6.

favourite rendezvous.”¹²⁰ Mecca’s publishing arm also produced instruction manuals of its own, usually authored by the dance hall circuit’s foremost teacher, Adele England, and for the most part devoted to educating dancers about the company’s own original dances, such as its novelty dances or its refined adaptation of the jitterbug. These short volumes typically cost the equivalent of an evening’s dancing (two shillings, six pence), and were well within the financial means of the majority of Britons.

The dance hall industry’s entry into the practice of producing dance instruction manuals is a telling example of the ways in which the dancing business increasingly encroached on territory that had to some extent been the purview of the dance profession. As the interwar period progressed, the profession faced increasing competition from the many commercial industries that began to encompass and influence popular dancing, and slowly began to be displaced as one of the primary cultural producers of dance culture. Indeed, those members of the profession who maintained the strongest levels of influence were those who came to embrace the new media that were disseminating dance culture; accordingly, dancing teachers like Adele England and Victor Silvester forged ties with the Mecca organization and the BBC respectively, and more and more teachers sought to engage students through print culture.

Thus, whether it was through print culture, music, radio, or film, there were a number of different ways in which Britons could experience popular dance culture during the period under review, and the dancing public was not one monolithic entity, but rather was forged of varied and overlapping public(s). One public was composed of those

¹²⁰ J. & W. Atherton, *Empress Ballroom and Palais de Danse, Wigan*, (Liverpool: Ports and Cities Publishing Co., Ltd., 1926), 1.

people who frequented public dancing spaces, and experienced and performed dancing directly; even this group was not homogenous, for as the previous section demonstrated, people ventured out dancing with a multitude of purposes. Another dancing public was made up of the people who listened to dance music on the radio, perhaps getting up to quickstep around the sitting room, but perhaps not. There were also those who merely read about or saw on film the latest occurrences and innovations in popular dance culture, without attempting to perform them or even learn more about them. Through these other cultural forms and media, dancing was more and more ubiquitous within British society, and so while not every Briton went out dancing on a regular basis, the vast majority were touched and influenced by dance culture to some extent. In the context of the commercialization and mass-marketing of leisure, dancing became an increasingly national cultural form.

Conclusion

The widespread expansion and mass-marketing of leisure that occurred during the period under review created a multitude of ways in which Britons could consume popular dance culture. The development of the dance hall industry, and the rise of dance hall chains, created an abundance of affordable opportunities for dancing throughout the nation, as did the growing number of dances in other public spaces, which in some cases were also increasingly commercial ventures. Dances outside the grand palais-de-danse were also facilitated by developments in the popular music industry, including the expanded production of gramophone records and sheet music, which represented only one of the innumerable ways in which popular dancing was connected to other cultural

forms and commercial industries during this period. These connections also created many of the alternative ways in which dancing could be consumed; even if a person rarely or never went out dancing themselves, they more than likely experienced popular dancing over the radio, at the cinema, or through print culture. Moreover, another effect of these developments was that the dance hall industry, and the other commercial industries associated with dancing, gradually became the dominant cultural producers of popular dance culture. Their weight began to outstrip even that of the dance profession, with growing numbers of teachers finding that the best way to maintain a presence or influence within the national dance culture was through these other commercial cultural forms.

But while the dance hall industry, as well as the commercial entities that existed around popular music, radio, film, and print, attained a strong influence on the production of the nation's dance culture, the dancing public also entered into cultural negotiations in these contexts as much as they did with the dance profession. Individual Britons had different interests and agendas in venturing out for an evening's dancing, all of which helped to shape their experience. They were also faced with multiple choices as to how they would consume popular dancing, whether it was through the physical performance of a dance, in listening to a dance orchestra broadcasting from the Savoy Hotel, or in watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers engage in a rousing Carioca at the cinema.

Finally, it should be noted that in making these choices and deliberations, Britons were exposed to an ever-increasing volume of American culture. This was a reality that was forged by the increasingly transatlantic ties of the commercial industries surrounding

popular dancing and leisure in general, but also another result of the influence possessed by the dancing public in determining what would be popular, and the strong contemporary fascination with all things American.¹²¹ The popular dance culture that therefore emerged on the palais floor, over the radio, at the cinema, and in the press, was at various times British, American, or a hybrid culture of the two. As Peter Bailey has noted with respect to the simultaneous presence of British and American acts on the music hall stage in the late 1930s, cultural products from both nations could be “accommodated within the same institutional regime of popular pleasure.”¹²² While American songs were extremely popular, dancers also embraced the fundamentally British stylings of Victor Silvester’s strict tempo orchestra; at the same time, dance celebrities like Fred Astaire were forged by the very processes of transatlantic cultural exchange. But whatever the nature of the national dance culture, there is no question that it was increasingly ubiquitous – ringing out from the gramophone, transmitted over the radio, playing at the cinema, written about in the newspaper, and of course being embodied on the nation’s dance floors – and that it was experienced by a diverse and multi-valent dancing public.

¹²¹ This idea will be explored at greater length in Chapter Five.

¹²² Bailey, “Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion,” 495.

Chapter Five

The Dance Evil? Popular Dancing Spaces and the Quest for Respectability

In 1925, playwright J. Jefferson Farjeon wrote a piece for the *Dancing Times* entitled “The Dance Evil.”¹ Despite its suggestive title, Farjeon’s article was not an attack on popular dancing, but rather a lamentation over the way in which this cultural form was portrayed on the stage. Farjeon suggested that modern playwrights constantly vilified dancing in their work, though they themselves might not even be aware of it: “the attacks are subtle. The war is below the surface. Though we have yet to see the play entitled ‘Down with the Dance!’ the war goes on, just the same.”² Farjeon went on to argue that it was in the portrayal of characters who danced, or the settings in which dancing occurred on stage, which subtly maligned the cultural form. Pointing specifically to Noel Coward’s latest play, *The Vortex*, Farjeon wrote that all the characters who danced were “Vain people, silly people, dangerous flirts, and at least one drug-taker.”³ He stated that while there was no direct condemnation of dancing in the play, “in the author’s attempt to portray a certain kind of atmosphere and a certain kind of company, dancing is brought in.”⁴ What Farjeon had identified was the nature of certain cultural assumptions that circulated around popular dancing, which associated the cultural form with bad people in bad places.

¹ J. Jefferson Farjeon, “The Dance Evil,” *Dancing Times*, January 1925, 439.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

This chapter will argue that the public understanding of popular dancing was strongly influenced by real and imagined ideas about the spaces in which it took place, and of the people who frequented these spaces, both patron and professional. I will demonstrate that the reputation of dance halls was governed by several factors – the connection between dancing and sexual activity; the level of criminality and rough behavior present in a dancing space; and, connected to the first two issues, the social class of an establishment's chief patrons. The second part of the chapter will then focus on professional dance partners, a fixture in most public dancing spaces, and the (occasionally legitimate) association between this form of employment and prostitution. In this way, these men and women became the personification of the sexual immorality and criminal activity that some people believed characterized all public dancing spaces.

However, what the chapter will also reveal is that between the two world wars the social perception of dancing spaces underwent a gradual transformation. I will outline the active, and largely successful, campaign by producers and consumers of dancing alike to challenge the negative assumptions about popular dancing spaces and professional dance partners. This was of particular concern to the dance hall industry, which implemented policies to monitor behavior in dancing spaces, and reformed work conditions for professional dance partners, as part of its wider expansion and commercialization during the interwar years. While the criticisms never entirely disappeared, both dance halls and dance partners did gradually achieve greater respectability as a result of these efforts, which helped dancing to evolve from being the social and professional preoccupation of suspect people in suspect spaces, to being a respectable and nationally-embraced leisure

form. Yet, significantly, these strides were accomplished at the cost of reinforcing conventional ideas about gender, class, and sexuality.

Dance halls, night-clubs, and the quest for respectability

In his autobiography, Claude Langdon, a one-time manager of the Hammersmith Palais, recalled of the early interwar years that “some of the dance-halls which sprang up in our great provincial cities, as well as in London, did little to make dancing appear respectable as a pastime.”⁵ As popular dancing began to flourish in the period after the First World War, hundreds of spaces were built or transformed for that purpose, with dancing occurring in not only dance halls, but also restaurants, hotels, public houses, municipal and institutional halls, and even churches. It was only certain dancing spaces that inspired negative comment, however, and perhaps not surprisingly, it was often those public dance halls frequented by the working classes. As Robert Roberts recalled in his memoir of working-class life in Salford, near Manchester, the neighborhood “dancing rooms” had the reputation of being “taboo” and “low.”⁶ Many middle-class girls were banned by their families from attending dance halls, even if they were permitted to attend classes in the attached dancing schools; while learning to dance was a social necessity for girls, the hall itself was perceived as morally ambiguous by many middle-class fathers.⁷ Responding to a survey by Mass Observation, one young woman said, “I have never been in a dance hall ... I think of them has haunts of the less desirable sections of the lower

⁵ Claude Langdon, *Earls Court*, (London: Stanley Paul, 1953), 51.

⁶ Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 16, 52, 216.

⁷ Catherine Horwood, *Keeping Up Appearances: Fashion and Class Between the Wars*, (Stroud: Sutton, 2005), 99.

classes.”⁸ A London housewife similarly reported that she had also never been in a public dance hall, observing, “I think they are all right for the lonely person who is keen on dancing or the working-class girl or fellow who has no other opportunities of meeting the opposite sex.”⁹

However, the class dimensions of the dance hall were even more complex than a straightforward division between the working and middle and upper classes. As Andrew Davies has shown, there was a social hierarchy that distinguished one working-class hall from another, and marked certain halls as “lower;” there were also a significant number of working-class girls who were banned from the dance hall by their parents in much the same way as middle-class girls.¹⁰ As one woman interviewed by Davies recalled, “I was never allowed to go dancing. My father used to say they were no good, [people] who went dancing.”¹¹ Some girls, undoubtedly from all classes, therefore took to sneaking out to the dance hall against their parents’ wishes. Another woman recalled about such a visit to a Manchester hall, “My father would have killed me if he’d known. It was a right dive.”¹² Certain dance halls attained a negative reputation based on their working-class patronage, which influenced how they were perceived by Britons of *all* classes, and speaks to contemporary understandings of respectability. Individuals and families of the very social class a dance hall was understood to cater to might also reject patronizing it in the quest to remain respectable.

⁸ As quoted in Claire Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England, 1920-60*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 68-69.

⁹ As quoted in Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England*, 69.

¹⁰ Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender, and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), 89-94

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹² *Ibid.*, 90.

Adding further layers of complexity to this picture is the fact that it was not solely working-class dance halls that were subject to public condemnation. Night-clubs, sometimes referred to as “dancing clubs,” attracted patrons from all classes of society, and were also sites of interracial socialization. Typically after-hours enterprises, these establishments commonly breached licensing laws related to the sale of alcohol and the regulation of music and dancing; they were subject to frequent raids by the police and criminal prosecution, all of which received widespread press attention. Therefore, though night-clubs were largely a phenomenon of urban centers, Britons who never set foot in such an establishment were very aware of what went on in them. The goings-on in night-clubs provided an extreme example of what tainted public perceptions of all dancing spaces – overt sexual activity and criminal behavior.

The possibility of romantic encounters was naturally a large part of the appeal of popular dancing as a leisure form. Sharing a dance or mingling in the tea room provided men and women with ample opportunity for forging romantic connections.¹³ As Ross McKibbin has noted, dance spaces were also one of the “one of the few occasions where convention permitted [women] to take the sexual initiative,” provided through such vehicles as “Ladies’ Choice” dances.¹⁴ Many romances were thus initiated at the dance hall. As one man described to Mass Observation, “I went with a friend of mine [to the Edinburgh Palais] one night to pass the evening; I met a girl who was very fond of dancing, and so the only way I could keep up the friendship was to learn dancing...I go to the Edinburgh Palais every afternoon and evening I am off. Now I am married to the girl

¹³ For more on the connections between dance halls and courtship, see Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England*, Chapters 3 and 4; Davies, *Leisure, Gender, and Poverty*, 91-92.

¹⁴ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 395.

I met in this dance hall.”¹⁵ Not only did the dance hall provide a place for the forging of romances, it was also a relatively acceptable destination for couples, particularly among the working classes, to go together during their courtship, and many romantic connections that began at a dance culminated in marriage.

Of course, dance halls were also an important site for the initiation of more casual flirtations and sexual encounters. The degree to which sexual activity occurred *at* a dance depended to a great extent on the nature of the establishment. Night-clubs were a space wherein overt sexual behavior tended to be readily condoned, often right on the dance floor. A 1922 police report by an officer working undercover in a London night-club related, “I then danced with a lady friend and while doing so saw a man, while dancing with a young girl, seize her by the hips and lift her into the air. In her struggle in mid-air the girl exposed her legs and knees much to the amusement of those who saw it.”¹⁶ Two years later another undercover officer witnessed, “A woman, very drunk, started dancing about the floor, pulling her dress up above her knees, showing her underwear.”¹⁷ As will be discussed at greater length below, prostitution was also highly prevalent in these establishments, and the space was therefore colored by unconcealed sexual offers, as another officer described:

During the dance she said “Wont [sic] you come and spend the night with me? I rather fancy you.” After this first dance she said to me “Come and sit down dear” and led me to the settee. At once she began to pull up her skirt with her left hand, at the same time saying to me “Lend me ten shillings will you dear? Business is very bad.” She continued to pull up the skirt until she exposed a red and black

¹⁵ M-O A: TC 38/6/F, Danceland Questionnaire, 1939.

¹⁶ TNA: PRO, MEPO 2/4481: Mrs. Kate Evelyn Meyrick or Merrick: allegations of irregularities at The Cecil, The 43 and The Bunch of Keys Clubs, 1924-1934, Folder 1, 1922.

¹⁷ TNA, PRO, MEPO 2/4481: Mrs. Kate Evelyn Meyrick or Merrick: allegations of irregularities at The Cecil, The 43 and The Bunch of Keys Clubs. 1924-1934, Folder 3, 1924.

garter about 4 inches above her left knee. She at once said “Is that alright, dear?”¹⁸

Though perhaps the most extreme in their permissiveness, night-clubs were also not the only dance spaces in which sexual activity occurred. Some independent dance halls and private dances also tended to be more informal and tolerant of sexual behavior. At the Spinners Hall in Bolton, which held dancing twice weekly, Mass Observation noted, “[Necking] much in prominence as evening wore on and especially after second interval.”¹⁹ At the Labour Club in the same town, an observer witnessed couples kissing and petting in dark corners,²⁰ and at the small dance hall attached to a pub in Worcester, Mass Observation described the following scene:

The girl in brown trousers, who had been selling tickets, became very friendly with a soldier – there were about six dancing, with some permanently or semi-permanently at the bar. Every time [I] saw her she had progressed a bit. At first she was only talking to him, then she lay against him and gazed into his eyes, then she had her arm round his neck, and finally lay in his arms on the balcony sofa, and kissed hard. In between times she danced.”²¹

Even in the absence of overt sexual activity at dance halls, sexual attraction was made evident through flirtation and the dancing itself. Upon his first visit to the Streatham Locarno, one observer for Mass Observation noted, “The aspect of the place was definitely lascivious and well designed for a place for sexual enjoyment. The sexual nature of dancing was obvious all the time. Why should the dancers dance in couples otherwise?”²² Another observer said about the same hall, “coming from middle class

¹⁸ TNA: PRO, MEPO 2/4481: Folder 1, 1922.

¹⁹ M-O A: Worktown 48/D, Spinners Hall, December 30, 1939, 6.

²⁰ M-O A: Worktown 48/C, Observations of Saturday Night, April 3, 1937, 5.

²¹ M-O A: TC 38/2/B, Additional Material, Observer’s Report, July 20, 1940.

²² M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Locarno, April 27, 1939.

society, I was surprised at the amount of open intimacy, the numbers of arms round shoulders and the number of people holding hands quite openly.”²³

For the most part, however, sexual behavior in the dance hall was circumspect. As another visitor to the Locarno remarked, “There doesn’t seem to be much sex about – dancing’s the thing – not sex dancing specially [sic].”²⁴ Instead, sexual encounters arising in the dance hall generally took place outside the establishment. Typically if a man and woman had shared several dances over the course of the evening and were attracted to one another, the man would ask to “see her home.” Since most young women still lived with their parents, any sexual activity tended to occur along the route home. Women had significant power in these interactions, basically directing whether or not they would occur. At the end of an evening’s dancing at a hall in Deansgate, for example, Mass Observation noted, “A few youths hung about outside the exit downstairs trying to ‘Click’ with a girl – they were not very successful.”²⁵ As I discussed in Chapter Two, young women’s increased income in the interwar period meant that many of them were willing to pay their own way into the dance hall rather than allowing men to cover costs with an expectation of sexual favors in return, though “treating” did still occur.²⁶

Women therefore tended to direct how far things would progress when they accepted an escort home, perhaps progressing from kissing on an initial encounter to more intense sexual activity should a man and woman establish a regular date for the walk home. Using data compiled from Mass Observation’s “Worktown” study of Bolton in northern England, Tom Harrisson suggested in *New Writing* in 1938 that there was a

²³ M-O A, TC 38/1/A, Locarno, April 18, 1939.

²⁴ M-O A, TC 38/1/A, Locarno, November 17, 1938.

²⁵ M-O A: Worktown 48/C, Description and impressions of the Savoy Dance Hall, Deansgate, 2.

²⁶ See also Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918-1950*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 220; Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England*, 126-7.

definite strategy to the women's actions: "When you've been going regular with a girl for some time, you start 'courtin'; then you may get further than [kissing]. There's little promiscuity or first-night take-all in Worktown ... For the Worktown girl takes the long view. She isn't out to make it easy. She wants a man to want her enough to marry her."²⁷ Naturally it is difficult to know the full extent and nature of sexual interactions originating in the dance hall, or particularly to ascribe motives to the historical actors involved; however, it seems safe to say that sexual encounters were a regular part of the experience of going to the palais for both men and women. Public knowledge of this fact was directly connected to the social perception of these venues.

Indeed, sexual competition was often a major catalyst in prompting the second form of behavior that diminished the public reputation of dance halls – violence and criminal activity. In 1920, the *Daily Mail* reported the story of a young woman stabbed in the shoulder by her former fiancé after she arrived at a dance with another man.²⁸ On another occasion the *Mail* related a case wherein a man struck a woman in a hotel ballroom in Eastbourne after she refused to dance with him.²⁹ In 1945, Mac's dance hall in Piccadilly was the site of a murder, when two American GIs killed the fiancé of a woman one of the men had previously been involved with.³⁰ Though this case was extreme, violent occurrences were not uncommon in dancing spaces, and not only violence originating from romantic entanglements. Alcohol was a leading cause of rough behavior in dance spaces, leading some patrons to engage in what dance promoters described as "hooliganism," largely characterized by physical fights and damage to

²⁷ Tom Harrisson, "Whistle While You Work," *New Writing* 1 (Autumn 1938): 56.

²⁸ "Girl Stabbed at Dance," *Daily Mail*, January 14, 1920, 5.

²⁹ *Daily Mail*, April 10, 1926, 7.

³⁰ TNA: PRO MEPO 3/2308: Gordon Johnson murdered by Private Thomas Edward Croft United States Army at Mac's Dance Hall, Great Windmill Street, W.1 on 4 September, 1945.

property.³¹ Andrew Davies has also documented considerable gang violence in and around Manchester's dance halls.³² Indeed, certain nights of the week were widely recognized as fighting nights in the city, and the Devonshire Street Ballroom was dubbed the "blood bath" on Saturday evenings.³³

However, it was night-clubs that were most responsible for inculcating the reputation of lawlessness that surrounded dancing spaces. Licensing violations, prostitution, and general criminal activity were commonplace and widely reported in the press. Kate Meyrick, operator of a series of different dancing clubs at 43 Gerrard Street in Soho, and convicted multiple times of breaching licensing laws, became a veritable folk hero in endless press coverage of her various indiscretions and arrests. A 1919 *Daily Express* article recounted a prosecutor's description of one of Meyrick's clubs: "It is called a dancing club, but it would be no exaggeration to call it a dancing hell – an absolute sink of iniquity. It is a noxious fungus growth on our social life."³⁴ In 1929 the *Sunday Sentinel* published an autobiographical series by Meyrick, outlining her experiences in London club life. No doubt deliberately salacious, it revealed an environment replete with drugs, alcohol, violence and criminal activity; Meyrick also wrote a book, entitled *Secrets of the 43*, for additional public consumption. As the examples above suggest, the popular press played an important part in creating and disseminating the vision of public dancing spaces characterized by sexual immorality and criminal behavior. For example, in December 1926 the *Daily Mail* reported on the arrest of two men connected with a dance hall in Marylebone on charges of keeping a

³¹ M-O A: TC 38/2/A, SLDA General Meeting, Dance Promotion and Promoters.

³² Davies, *Leisure, Gender, and Poverty*, 92-94.

³³ Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England*, 68.

³⁴ "Night Life in London Club," *Daily Express*, December 23, 1919, 5.

disorderly house; in describing what had transpired in the place, the newspaper suggested that “Acts of the grossest nature were witnessed.”³⁵

Responding to these types of reports, there were active attempts on multiple social fronts to “clean up” and improve the reputation of these dancing establishments. Public records indicate that abstract notions of character began to play a role in granting licenses for music and dancing to dance proprietors and promoters; according to the requirements of the 1926 Home Counties (Music & Dancing) Licensing Act, county councils were to confer with local police as to the “conduct and character of the applicant” prior to issuing a license.³⁶ Night-clubs in particular were also of considerable interest to social welfare organizations like the Public Morality Council and National Vigilance Association. They constituted a primary focus of the patrol work conducted by these groups, which also included patrolling for illegal gaming, excessive drinking, and street solicitation; the organizations also frequently lobbied for increased police and legislative redress to curb the activities in these establishments. In 1930, the Metropolitan Police received a letter about 43 Gerrard Street from the London Public Morality Council that questioned, “how it was possible for these proceedings to have continued in the same building [sic] for so many years.”³⁷ Despite regular undercover operations, the police were somewhat limited in what they could do to combat night-club criminality until 1943, when the police were granted additional powers to raid a venue without a warrant.³⁸ Finally, the dance press also attempted to curb deviant behavior in dancing spaces and improve the reputation of

³⁵ “Police & Dance Hall,” *Daily Mail*, December 2, 1926, 6.

³⁶ TNA: PRO HO 45/20506: Entertainments: The Home Counties (Music and Dancing) Act, 1926: legal powers of County Councils to issue licences, delegate authority and institute proceedings. 1932-1943.

³⁷ TNA: PRO MEPO 2/4481: Mrs. Kate Evelyn Meyrick or Merrick: allegations of irregularities at The Cecil, The 43 and The Bunch of Keys Clubs, 1924-1934, Folder 6, 1928-1930.

³⁸ A Mass Observation interviewee at the Frivolity night-club also raised the notion that the London County Council deliberately shied away from cracking down on licensing violations because of the amount of money the resulting fines accrued. See M-O A: TC 38/4/H, Frivolity, May 11, 1939.

at least certain establishments. In 1924 the *Dancing Times* featured a series of articles entitled “Dance Clubs and the Law,” wherein licensing laws were outlined for the benefit of proprietors and customers. That same year the periodical provided a written guide of dancing establishments in London, advising readers as to which were disreputable and should be avoided, and which were above approach and worthy of the business of respectable people.³⁹

But it was the dance hall industry itself that put in the strongest effort and made the greatest strides towards raising the respectability of dancing spaces. The exception was the after-hours night-clubs, particularly those in the Soho area of London, which conducted business as usual well into the war years. However, the management of many other dance halls worked hard to turn them into respectable, family-oriented leisure venues. Of this effort, Claude Langdon wrote, “Not one in a million of the couples who dance today at the many palais throughout the country know that I had to fight to give them a wholesome, clean and cosy place where they could enjoy a dance.”⁴⁰ C.L. Heimann and Alan Fairley’s biographer similarly extolled Mecca’s efforts in this regard, writing,

Public dance halls had always been raw, rough, and dirty...
[Heimann and Fairley] had to wipe out the old impression of dance halls; then they had to *prove* they could make them places for healthy recreation, where it was safe for ordinary boys and girls to meet and enjoy themselves.”⁴¹

There was thus a conscious effort on the part of the major dance hall proprietors to improve the reputation of their business and to expand their clientele.

³⁹ “London Dance Notes,” *Dancing Times*, April 1924, 737-741.

⁴⁰ Langdon, *Earls Court*, 179.

⁴¹ Roma Fairley, forward to *Come Dancing Miss World*, (London: Newman Neame, 1966), vii.

Accordingly, at large chain dance halls such as those controlled by Mecca, a number of policies were put in place to regulate the behavior of dancers. Alcohol was prohibited on the premises and those who were visibly intoxicated were barred from entering. At some halls, photographic records were kept of known trouble-makers, and those caught damaging property or engaged in physical violence were banned in the future.⁴² There were also attempts to encourage patrons to bring their children to Mecca halls, particularly for the afternoon sessions, and to promote the idea that dancing was a family-friendly activity. For example, when Mecca introduced a series of novelty dances in the late 1930s, they were marketed towards children as much as adults; dance halls also became a common location for children's Christmas and fancy-dress parties. As Heimann and Fairley later told their biographer, "Our whole policy is to bring families into all our pursuits."⁴³

Nor was it only the large chain dance halls that engaged in the effort to maintain good order at dances. In 1939, a group of private dance promoters formed the South London Dance Association (SLDA), with a mandate to conduct a joint effort to keep the "rough element" out of dances. According to an interview with Mass Observation, the membership of the SLDA had been experiencing increasing problems of men forcing their way into dances at a greatly reduced rate, often for nothing, and causing trouble. As a way of combating this problem, the names and descriptions of trouble-makers were taken and distributed around to other promoters in the group.⁴⁴ The SLDA was composed of working-class men who ran dance clubs as a side business, and the bulk of their patrons were of the same social level. Their efforts thus reflect an attempt on the part of

⁴² Langdon, *Earls Court*, 180.

⁴³ Fairley, *Come Dancing Miss World*, vii.

⁴⁴ M-O A: TC 38/2/A, Lenny Haynes, Dance Promotion and Promoters, 1.

working-class dance promoters to combat the classist attitudes which marked their dances and clientele as less respectable.

Accompanying the effort to give dance halls a more wholesome public image were deliberate attempts to monitor sexuality. Some dance halls began to employ chaperones to patrol the ballroom and curtail overt sexual activity, a part that could also be played by the M.C. Regarding a large dance hall in Douglas, *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* noted, “[the M.C.] watches over the whole in such a way as at once to detect the slightest lapse from what ought to be, and, if this occurs, immediately puts it down.”⁴⁵ As one dance hall manager in Bolton told Mass Observation, “There isn’t any room for the funny business in the Modern Dance Hall as the people watch too keenly for that.”⁴⁶ At the Aspin Hall in the same town, a policy was put forward that women who left the hall at some point in the evening were not allowed to re-enter; this was to prevent couples from sneaking out for a brief sexual encounter and then returning to the dance. As the manager of the hall told Mass Observation, the restrictions “keep the tone pretty decent.”⁴⁷ In this case, the onus for maintaining respectable relations with the opposite sex was clearly placed on women, but in certain contexts men’s sexual freedom was equally curbed. At public dance halls, conduct was generally regulated in strongly heteronormative terms. Men dancing with other men was typically prohibited, and management frequently made attempts to bar patrons who were known to be homosexual. Interestingly, women dancing with women was not banned in the large palais, and was indeed commonplace when male partners were scarce, or for the purposes of practice.

⁴⁵ George A. Wade, “Running a Super Dance Hall,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, August 8, 1925, iii.

⁴⁶ As quoted in James Nott, *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 187.

⁴⁷ M-O A, Worktown 48/D, Manager, Aspin Hall, January 8, 1940, 16.

While it seems more than likely that there were lesbian couples in dancing spaces, the social acceptability of women dancing together shielded these women from the same discrimination.

It should also be noted that monitoring policies were often more fluid in practice. As I described above, sexual activity was a definite reality in and around some dancing spaces. Moreover, upon observing an openly gay couple at a dance, Mass Observation discussed their presence with the event's promoter, who "said there were several [same-sex couples who] tried to get in, but he kept them out, only allowing this one and his boy friend because they were quite harmless."⁴⁸ Dancing spaces thus provided some space for the contestation and transgression of social mores, and the degree to which this occurred was largely dependent on the nature of the venue. Independent dances and dance halls were often the most flexible in terms of their supervisory policies, whereas Mecca, sitting atop the dance hall industry, was far and away the most stringent; the bigger the business, therefore, the tighter the restrictions on behavior. A major element of the commercialization of popular dancing was the attempt to make dancing spaces respectable, and in that quest the dance hall industry instituted policies that reified conventional understandings of gender roles and sexual morality.

By the Second World War the dance hall industry had been quite successful in elevating the respectability of the public ballroom. As Mari Williams argues in her study of Welsh female munitions workers during the Second World War, "Having been considered out of bounds to all women of 'respectable' character in the years before the war, the dance-hall suddenly became one of the main social centres attended by the

⁴⁸ M-O A: TC 38/1/I, Rye Lane, August 21, 1939.

young women of wartime south Wales.”⁴⁹ This was equally true around the country. For the dance hall industry, the major proof of success in the quest for respectability came in the form of increasing numbers of middle and upper class patrons, and it should be reiterated that class had always been at the root of the aspersions directed towards dancing spaces. Since the primary consumers of British dance hall culture were working and lower middle class women, the argument for the “lowness” of dance halls was frequently based in the social position of their chief clientele. As I showed in Chapter Three, popular dancing was a cultural form shared by all classes, but dancing spaces were still largely reflective of social divisions. There were exceptions to this rule; night-clubs were renowned for being spaces where the aristocracy and working-class met and mingled, and Kate Meyrick’s two daughters even married members of the peerage. However, these cross-class encounters usually operated in highly gendered terms, with upper class men frequenting these establishments to mingle with working-class women and prostitutes. Gender, class and the cultural assumptions about dancing spaces were therefore all constitutive of one another; the reputation of dance spaces was influenced by the social position of the women who frequented them, while working-class women who danced were simultaneously tainted by the sexually-charged assumptions that plagued dancing. These intertwining factors also influenced the perception of professional dance partners, which I turn to now.

⁴⁹ Mari Williams, *A Forgotten Army: Female Munitions Workers of South Wales, 1939-1945*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 173.

The six penny dance partner: prostitute or professional?

In Agatha Christie's 1942 novel *The Body in the Library*, the murder victim is a young woman employed in a seaside hotel as a paid dance partner. In the course of her duties the woman had become close to a wealthy and elderly client who wished to adopt her, and there is some suggestion by other characters in the novel that she may have brought on her own death by reaching "above herself" socially.⁵⁰ This fictional condemnation is revealing of a lingering stigma that surrounded the men and women who in their professional lives were known by a variety of titles, including dance "host/hostess," "partner," "teacher," and "professional."

In the years after the First World War dance partners who could be hired for a small fee became a fixture at most hotels, restaurants, night-clubs, and dance halls.⁵¹ Much like the dancing girl or flapper, the dance partner was a product of the postwar dance boom and was also a figure of considerable public suspicion and scrutiny. For some, the notion of paying for a dance was viewed to be too close an approximation to paying for sex, and dance partners were frequently stigmatized as prostitutes and gigolos. The etymology of the term "gigolo" is in itself revealing of the assumptions that surrounded this type of work; while modern readers would likely readily define the word as referring to a male prostitute, this was not always the case. The primary definition provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a gigolo as "A professional male dancing partner or escort."⁵² It is a testament to the nature of society's views of paid

⁵⁰ Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library*, (New York: Signet, 1941, 2000), 106.

⁵¹ For clarity I will hereafter refer to these figures as "dance partners," except where a primary source specifically references a partner by a different title.

⁵² It should be noted that the etymology of "gigolo" is slightly more complicated than this, however. The OED defines gigolo as the masculine correlative of "gigole," from the french, and defined as a "tall thin woman, woman of the streets or public dance-halls." The links to prostitution were therefore present at the

dance partners that the term has linguistically evolved in the manner that it has, and relatively quickly. In 1939, Mecca employee Leslie Webster rejected the label entirely, emphatically declaring to Mass Observation “I am a professional dance partner, not a gigolo.”⁵³ It is thus apparent that the connotations and commentary surrounding paid dance partners did much to cement an association between dancing spaces and concerns about sexual morality.

The public view of the dance partner was in large part based in the fluid definition of the term, and the varied nature of these men and women’s employment. In the early 1920s, some dance partners operated rather unofficially; talented dancers became regular attendees at dance establishments and sold dances independently. They might have a loose affiliation with the management, but typically earned only what they could procure from their clients in tips, refreshments, and the occasional gift. These circumstances were altered for many dance partners in the early 1930s, when the increasing commercialization of the dance hall industry and the opening of more and more large palais-de-danse made a level standardization a necessity. For reasons that will be discussed at greater length below, reforms were introduced to standardize hours, pay, and conditions. Dance partners at the major dance halls, particularly those on the Mecca circuit, were now usually accredited teachers and competitive dancers. At many establishments they occupied a particular area near the dance floor, often known as the “pen,” where they could be approached by patrons who purchased tickets, usually at a rate of six pence per dance. These dance partners were paid a standard salary by the venue that employed them and retained about half of what they brought in from clients.

word’s origin, and yet references to gigolos in primary sources I have consulted often employ it both with and without the undertones of prostitution.

⁵³ M-O A: TC 38/3/G, Dance Professionals, March 12, 1939.

They might also make tips on top of their basic rate of pay, and under these conditions working as a dance partner could provide a decent living.⁵⁴

But at other dancing establishments, such as independent dance halls and night-clubs, the reforms that determined conditions at the large palais had little real impact. Into the Second World War there were many dance partners who continued to work only for tips and drinks, possibly with the management taking a percentage. From these earnings they would also have to provide themselves with the clothing, shoes, and transportation needed to fulfill the requirements of their position. Frequently holding down another job as well, few of these men and women were trained teachers or professional dancers. Indeed, in an interview with Lillian, a dance partner at a Soho night club called the “Blue Lagoon,” Mass Observation discovered that dancing ability was not even a prerequisite for the women being put forward as dance partners at the club.⁵⁵ Their role was largely to provide company to the patrons, and convince them to purchase more food and drink. In addition, unlike at the large palais, where the “pen” was usually occupied by a roughly even number of the two sexes, night-club hostesses were predominately women, and there is considerable evidence that in these circumstances the term “dance partner” frequently was simply a euphemism for prostitution.

In her interview with Mass Observation, Lillian indicated that many of her fellow dance hostesses did exchange sexual favors for money, or at least held out the possibility

⁵⁴ Some dance partners employed by the large palais, considering themselves to be professionals, viewed tips as an insult. In Victor Silvester’s autobiography, he recalls that in his early days as a dance partner at the Empress Rooms in London just after the First World War, he and a colleague were offered half a crown each by a young woman who had spent considerable time dancing with each of them one evening. Silvester’s colleague promptly returned the money, furiously demanding, “What do you take me for – a waiter?” See Victor Silvester, *Dancing is My Life*, (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1958) 41.

⁵⁵ M-O A: TC 38/4/H, The Blue Lagoon, April 14, 1939, 1-8.

of sex as a way of securing better tips from their male clients.⁵⁶ Records compiled by undercover police officers in the lead-up to raids on night-clubs provide additional insights into the sexual trafficking Lillian described. In Metropolitan Police reports the terms “dance hostess” or “dance partner” were often used interchangeably with “prostitute.” Describing the scene at the El Morrocco bottle party, one officer noted, “Dance hostess[es] of the prostitute type are employed to entertain guests and coax them to buy drinks.”⁵⁷ A number of other reports written by police agents also revealed that they were propositioned by dance hostesses while working undercover. Recounting the details of a 1931 raid on a club at 43 Gerrard Street, an officer wrote, “The dancing instructresses have solicited me and on the night of the raid, the woman known as ‘Rosie’ said to me: - ‘If you want a lady, I can arrange that with a friend, but I don’t do that.’”⁵⁸

There was thus an active sex trade functioning within some dance establishments, and while it is clear that not all dance partners were engaged in prostitution, it is equally apparent that in these circumstances a woman’s livelihood was in large part dependent on her ability to attract men and not the quality of her dancing. Police reports reflect rampant competition between dance partners to secure decent earnings, or at the very least to find someone to purchase their drinks and breakfast. One report described the following scene at 43 Gerrard Street:

On 3 occasions, I saw quarrels between the dancing instructresses over men showing more favour to one than the other. On each occasion the women were on the point of fighting. One woman said to the other: - “You have your bloody breakfast money, what about me?” to which the other dancing instructress replied:

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ TNA: PRO MEPO 2/4501: El Morocco Bottle Party, W.1: liquor irregularities, unlicensed music and dancing, complaints of rowdism and indecent literature, 1938-1940.

⁵⁸ TNA: PRO MEPO 2/4481, Folder 7, 1931.

- "I can't help my face can I, and the men liking me more than you, have a look in the mirror, you're a pretty looking cow."⁵⁹

With no base salary, dance partners looked to patrons not only for tips, but also for drinks, meals, and even gambling money. One officer reported, "Dancing instructresses with whom I have been compelled to associate, have continually pestered me for shillings with which to play on the machines. On many occasions to avoid suspicion I have been obliged to give them money."⁶⁰

Even in the larger dance halls, where dance partners were not completely financially reliant on what they could procure from patrons, the relationship between professionals and their clients was often not solely about dance instruction. Despite concerted efforts by management to hire professional dancers and keep paid partnering as respectable as possible, the line between dance and romantic partnering was often blurred. Many dance partners established a regular clientele, and gifts of varying degrees were common. Clients often attempted to move the relationship beyond the confines of the dance hall, something some partners were more willing to go along with than others. Charles Dilworth, the manager of Mecca's Royal dance hall in north London, told Mass Observation that the majority of the dance partners working for him were "most moral," and kept their relationships with clients purely professional, because not to do so was likely to cost them the client in the end.⁶¹ However, Dorothy, a dance partner at the Royal, also told the social research organization that she had to keep the fact that she was married a secret in order to maintain her clientele. She reported that some male customers

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ M-O A: TC 38/3/F, Mecca Managers, Interview with Dilworth, March 18, 1939, 2.

were sexually aggressive with her, and that many of her regular clients made offers to walk her home or buy her dinner.⁶²

Male dancer partners also forged relationships with patrons off the dance floor; they frequently escorted female clients to restaurants or other dance venues following their shift at the dance hall, and a number even travelled with their regulars. But as Harry, another Royal dance partner informed Mass Observation, navigating the relationship with a client could be complex:

This job has its amusing side and its sordid side. We have opportunities of meeting intelligent people and the reverse – stupid women, while the girls meet over-amorous men. This business is very intimate, unlike all others ... We get a lot of married women. They have more time and love dancing. Sometimes it goes farther and they take a passion for their particular teacher. Then come the complications. One must be shrewd.⁶³

While the general state of affairs between dance partners and their regular clients was naturally extremely varied, there is little question that the relationships did occasionally become sexual. In Victor Silvester's autobiography he details several romantic relationships with female clients, and one dance partner bragged openly to Mass Observation about the number of sexual conquests he had made.⁶⁴

The undertones of lawlessness and sexual immorality connected to working as a dance partner, both real and imagined, were intrinsic to public understandings of the profession. When Victor Silvester informed his parents that he was leaving the army to accept a position as a dance partner at the Empress Rooms, his father was purported to have said "he never thought he'd live to see the day one of his sons turned gigolo."⁶⁵ In the eyes of many people dancing simply did not represent respectable work. The popular

⁶² M-O A: TC 38/3/G, Professionals at the Royal, May 25, 1939.

⁶³ M-O A: TC 38/3/G, Professionals at the Royal, May 2, 1939.

⁶⁴ M-O A: TC 38/3/G, Cyril, June 25, 1939.

⁶⁵ Silvester, *Dancing is My Life*, 40.

press was a chief vehicle through which a negative view of the dance partner was disseminated. In an article describing the opening of the Streatham Locarno dance hall in 1929, one newspaper observed that a guarantee the venue would be run along the “correct lines” was the management’s decision “not to resort to the objectionable system of providing ‘six penny’ dance partners.”⁶⁶ The press also cultivated links between dance partners and immoral behavior. In February 1920 the *Daily Express* featured an article expressing concern about the so-called “Lounge Lizards of London.” The piece contended that the “sleek, well-dressed dancing man, with his saponaceous, unctuous, suave manner,”⁶⁷ was an ever-present feature at London’s dance establishments, usually to be found preying on wealthy older women who could supply them with gifts and financial support. The newspaper further suggested that it was commonplace for the so-called “dancing dandies” to seduce and then blackmail these women, who were frequently married. Criminality of this sort was another common feature of press attention towards dance partners. There is evidence that particularly among the impoverished, night-club variety of dance partner, criminal behavior was an occasional reality; Blue Lagoon hostess Lillian revealed that she knew of multiple incidents wherein a colleague went home with a client only to rob him.⁶⁸ Newspapers reveled in this type of story, such as when *The Times* reported on a case wherein a male dance partner at the Portman Rooms escorted a regular client to the Hammersmith Palais, only to steal her diamond ring.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Untitled news clipping found in Locarno Dance Hall file, London Metropolitan Archives: GLC/AR/BR/07/4153.

⁶⁷ “‘Lounge Lizards’ of London,” *Daily Express*, February 2, 1920 4.

⁶⁸ M-O A: TC 38/4/H, The Blue Lagoon, April 14, 1939, 1-8.

⁶⁹ “Dancing Partner’s Rings Stolen,” *The Times*, March 3, 1920, 14.

Dance partners also received negative exposure in press coverage of the police raids on dancing clubs described above. A 1919 *Daily Express* article recounted Kate Meyrick and a partner's summons to court for "permitting the premises to be used as a resort of women of ill-repute."⁷⁰ In addition, in Meyrick's *Sunday Sentinel* series, she essentially acknowledged the sexual activities of the dance partners working for her, but accepted no complicity in their behavior: "When my dancing girls introduced their men friends to me as their brothers, I believed them, and I always warned them not to allow any men but these brothers to escort them home...I am afraid dancing girls in those days were not as innocent as a thought them."⁷¹ The *Sentinel* series also featured the tragic story of a dance partner who was murdered by her husband while working at the 43 Club, and highlighted the general desperation of many women looking for employment in the profession. In one installment Meyrick wrote, "Often a young woman has come to me, almost penniless and full of shame for the wreck she has made her life since coming to London, and has pleaded for a chance to be a dancing partner in my clubs."⁷²

Press attention was further drawn to the plight of dance partners in 1931, when sixteen year old Marie Sibley, employed as a dance hostess at a London restaurant, sued her neighbor after she was bitten by his dog. A judgment was returned in her favor on the dog issue, but in delivering his verdict the presiding judge took the opportunity to decry the conditions under which Sibley was forced to work. Mr. Justice McCardie pointed to Sibley's youth and working hours, and the fact that she had to provide the clothing and transport required for her job, as all being cause for significant concern. His greatest

⁷⁰ "Night Life in London Club," *Daily Express*, December 23, 1919, 5.

⁷¹ Kate Meyrick, "My Ten Years Behind the Scenes in London's Night-Life," *Sunday Sentinel*, February 13, 1929, 13.

⁷² Kate Meyrick, "Butterfly Girls Who Asked Too Much Out of Life," *Sunday Sentinel*, March 17, 1929, 12.

condemnation, however, was reserved for the fact that Sibley worked only for tips rather than a paid salary. McCardie argued that this state of affairs provided “a direct incitement to young girls to go beyond the bounds of propriety and sexual restraint. It is quite plain that the more pleasing a girl was to a man the greater the fee that he was likely to give her.”⁷³ While there was no evidence presented that Sibley herself was engaged in prostitution, McCardie’s comments once again linked professional dance partners with prostitution in direct public view.

Two years later this connection was once again made explicit through another legal proceeding that drew even more public attention. Three men connected with the Kosmo Dance Club in Edinburgh were brought to trial in Edinburgh Sheriff Court for contravening the Immoral Traffic Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act. Asher Barnard, proprietor of the Kosmo Club, Edwin Jones, manager, and James Black, floor manager, were all charged with aiding and abetting prostitution, and living wholly or in part off the earnings of prostitution, through a system of “booking out” the club’s dance partners. The case was a source of intense public interest. The *Glasgow Herald* reported that on the first day of the trial “a queue of men and women waited to gain admission to the courtroom.”⁷⁴ While the presiding judge, Sheriff Brown, opted to close the courtroom, the press was allowed to remain, and the details of the trial received extensive coverage in a large number of local and national newspapers. Later, when the jury returned their verdict, crowds of people assembled outside the courthouse, and a large police presence was also on display.

⁷³ “15-Year-Old Dance Girl’s Peril: Judge’s Condemnation,” *Daily Express*, November 20, 1931, 3.

⁷⁴ “Dance Club Charge,” *Glasgow Herald*, November 30, 1933. News clipping from NAS: HH16/1: Criminal Case File, The Kosmo Club Immorality Trial, 1933-1934.

Over the course of the nine day trial, the inner-workings of the booking out system, the source of the criminal indictment against the Kosmo Club's management, was detailed through testimony provided by the accused, other club employees, taxi-drivers, clients, and undercover police officers. A client could request a dance partner in person or over the phone at a cost of thirty shillings, ten of which went to the woman while the remainder was split by management, and then leave the club with her. While most of the dance partners and clients testified that they would then simply move on to another dance hall or party, a small number did admit that they were engaged in what was described throughout the trial as "immoral purposes." The jury clearly believed these witnesses rather than the majority and the accused, finding all three men guilty as charged; Barnard was sentenced to eighteen months in prison, while Jones and Black received three month sentences.

Throughout the trial, the Kosmo Club's dance partners were represented in varied and occasionally contradictory ways. The prosecution attempted to portray the women as victims, under the control of the three accused men, while the defense's position shifted frequently. In cross-examining one of the dance partners, Barnard's attorney, Mr. Blades, accused the witness of lying, suggesting she lacked "honour" and "virtue," and at one point asking, "Is it possible to descend any lower?"⁷⁵ In his closing remarks, Blades also attempted to shift culpability for any illicit activity off the accused and onto the dance partners; he suggested that the ones who chose to engage in prostitution were not working under the direction of the club management but were merely smart businesswomen making the most of opportunities presented to them by the booking out system. However,

⁷⁵ "Night Life," *Edinburgh Evening News*, November 30, 1933, 7.

he also made the argument that the dance partners *had* been victimized, not by his client, but by the trial itself:

“One of the cruellest of some very cruel things done in this case was the indiscriminate branding of these Kosmo dance partners as prostitutes ... These girls might be of lowly origin, but they were not entitled to be stigmatised and branded as the worst of womankind without positive proof. My heart was many times aflame ... at the treatment meted out to these defenceless girls.”⁷⁶

As the trial concluded, the presiding judge echoed McCardie’s words in the Sibley case two years before by lamenting the working conditions of paid dance partners, and suggesting that legislative reform might be required.

To some extent the Kosmo Club case represented the pinnacle of longstanding efforts to reform the working conditions of dance partners, from groups and individuals both within and outside the dance hall industry. In the report issued by the Official Board of Ballroom Dancing following the Great Conference in 1929, dance hall managers were encouraged not to allow dance partners to provide lessons unless they were qualified teachers.⁷⁷ While this was in part about the competition that untutored (and cheap) dance partners presented to established dancing teachers, this move by the profession helped to inculcate the idea that dance partners should be trained professionals. Meanwhile, throughout the 1920s the Metropolitan Police received a number of letters from concerned citizens regarding what was taking place in after-hours dancing clubs, some specifically referencing the behavior and plight of dance partners. Regarding one of Kate Meyrick’s establishments, a correspondent wrote, “there is reason to suppose that some of the rooms on the premises are used for worse purposes than drinking. A ‘Mrs. Stephenson’ who appears to be a kind of superintendent also acts as a procuress and

⁷⁶ “Guilty,” *Edinburgh Evening News*, December 7, 1933, 7.

⁷⁷ Philip J.S. Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1946), 80.

agent for the unfortunate girls employed as dancing partners, and will at any time obtain a girl to go home with a visitor on being paid a fee.”⁷⁸

Dance partners also drew the attention of numerous social welfare organizations. The minutes of meetings of the National Vigilance Association (NVA) reveal that the organization was concerned about working conditions of dance partners at the Portman Rooms as early as 1920.⁷⁹ The NVA raised the issue once again in response to Justice McCardie’s comments in the Sibley case in 1931, as did the British National Committee, and both organizations had discussions based around the call for legislative reforms that followed the Kosmo Club case. For reasons that are not readily apparent from the records, the decision was made that national legislation was not a necessity; rather local jurisdictions were to be encouraged to emulate the system in place in Glasgow, where a clause in the dance hall license issued by the city stipulated that paid dance partners must not be hired for any purpose outside the hall itself.⁸⁰

However, the press attention and political pressure seems to have inspired the dance hall industry to engage in a greater degree of self-regulation, and following the Kosmo Club case there were attempts to alter the taint that surrounded professional dance partners through reforms to working conditions and hiring practices. These efforts were also connected to more general efforts to raise the respectability of dancing spaces, described above. Increasing numbers of dance halls implemented a wage system, and steady pay meant that dance partners did not have to pattern their behavior in order to maximize tips out of sheer financial desperation. Dance halls seeking greater

⁷⁸ TNA: PRO MEPO 2/4481, Folder 5, 1927.

⁷⁹ Women’s Library: FL195, 4NVA/1/1/07, Executive Committee Minutes, National Vigilance Association, Vol. 7, October 29 1918 – November 28, 1922.

⁸⁰ “Dance Halls: Proposals to License Instructresses,” *Edinburgh Evening News*, December 9, 1933, 7.

respectability also sought out dance champions and instructors to fill their professional pens, highlighting dancing ability over personal charms in hiring their staff. Mecca in particular was also extremely strict about the behavior and professionalism that was exhibited by partners when they were off the dance floor; upon observing dance partners in the professional pen at the Astoria dance hall engaged in pursuits like knitting or reading the newspaper, a writer for Mass Observation noted that they would never get away with doing so at a Mecca hall.⁸¹

In the larger chains there was also increasing concern with issues of character, which effectively amounted to class, evident in hiring practices. As the *Weekly Telegraph* noted in 1939, in order to obtain a job as a partner at Mecca's Streatham Locarno dance hall, "Applicants must be good dancers, speak in a cultured voice, have had a good education, and be able to provide faultless references."⁸² The concern with diction and education and more abstract issues like character would seem to imply that dance halls were essentially looking for dance partners from higher up the social ladder, and is indicative of the wider class implications of public assumptions about the profession. Because many dance partners were from the lower classes, the scrutiny of these men and women was part of a longstanding discursive association between the lower classes and sexual immorality and prostitution.⁸³ Thus the elevation of the class position of those working as dance partners also elevated the respectability of the profession as a whole.

⁸¹ M-O A: TC 38/5/D, Astoria, December 5, 1939, 3.

⁸² "Six Penny Partners," *Weekly Telegraph*, February 25, 1939, 20.

⁸³ See Judy Giles, "'Playing Hard to Get': Working-Class Women, Sexuality, and Respectability in Britain, 1918-1940," *Women's History Review* 1, (Spring 1992): 247; Sonya O. Rose, "Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation in World War II Britain". *American Historical Review* 103, no. 4, (October 1998): 1165; Paula Bartley and Barbara Gwinnett, "Prostitution," in *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2001), 223.

The contested public vision of dance partners is further revealed by the fact that despite its propensity for sensational reports about night-club raids and thievery by dance partners, the press was another site where the reputation of dance partners was gradually rehabilitated. In April 1926 the *Daily Mail* featured a column in which the plethora of partners-for-hire at Britain's dancing establishments was discussed. Dancing correspondent Patrick Chalmers noted that in the early 1920s a higher end hotel or restaurant employing dance partners was viewed to have "lost caste," but that "gradually a custom regarded as raffish ... became accepted as normal."⁸⁴ Chalmers did caution, however, that it was a far better practice to pay the partners a wage, rather than forcing them to work only for gratuities. The dance press also presented a more sympathetic picture of professional dance partners. In a 1926 issue of *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, columnist "Foxtrot" attempted to reinforce the challenges of the job and the deftness with which they were met:

I spent an interesting time the other evening watching the professional partners at work. From what I saw, it is not enough to be a good dancer. You have got to possess plenty of patience and dance around as though you are enjoying yourself instead of working! I watched a certain lady partner dancing with various males, and it was truly wonderful to see the way in which she adapted her style to fit with her partner.⁸⁵

In this account, the writer highlighted the talents possessed by many professional partners, both in terms of dancing and interpersonal skills.

In the mid-1920s *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly* also featured a serialized story entitled "The Confessions of a Dancing Partner" which was a first-hand, and likely fictional, account of life in the professional pen.⁸⁶ Rosie, the heroine of the tale is a

⁸⁴ Patrick Chalmers, "Dancing Partners," *Daily Mail*, April 23, 1926, 8.

⁸⁵ Foxtrot, "Around the Dance Halls," *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, October 23, 1926, iii.

⁸⁶ See *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, February 9, 1924 – March 8, 1924.

working-class girl from London who takes up a second job as a dance partner in order to support her sick mother. While the tone of the piece is largely sympathetic to its lead character, the portrayal of the job is less straightforward. Rosie is conflicted over working as a dance partner; on one level she is dazzled by the bright lights of the dance hall and the “romance” of the work, but she also senses the derision of other people over what she does, particularly when the employer at her day job dismisses her for also working in the dance hall. However, eventually Rosie becomes reconciled to, and indeed a defender of work as a dance partner: “Where once I had felt vaguely worried at being a dancing partner, where I had imagined that in some way I was lowering my dignity, I now realised that here was a position that was just as creditable as any other.”⁸⁷ The story concludes with Rosie marrying one of her clients, and the two of them opening their own chain of dance halls.

A similarly favorable fictional rendering of professional dance partners also appeared in *Modern Dance* in 1936. In this story, the heroine, Isobel, takes up work as a dance partner and exhibition dancer in order to support her family after her upper class husband finds himself out of work. Initially, Isobel’s husband, Hugh, is strongly opposed to her employment, and imagines that she is having an affair with her dancing partner. However, eventually Hugh comes to appreciate and respect his wife’s work as a professional, full of admiration for “The splendid and plucky way in which she had set out to do her bit towards raising them above water once more.”⁸⁸

By the late 1930s, there were press offerings that seemed entirely designed to raise the respectability of dance partners. In the *Weekly Telegraph* piece referenced

⁸⁷ “The Confessions of a Dancing Partner,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, March 1, 1924, 114.

⁸⁸ A.H. Franks, “Good Shoes,” *Modern Dance*, August 1936, 24.

above, reforms to work conditions and more stringent hiring practices were outlined, and working as a dance partner was described as a “whole-time job as well recognised as that of a bank clerk.”⁸⁹ The comparison of a profession frequently equated with prostitution to working as a bank clerk is telling of the strides towards respectability that dance partners had made by the outbreak of the Second World War – or at least of the strident efforts made by the dance hall industry to generate respectability for its professionals. The contradictory press coverage of the profession is also illustrative of the extent to which the dance partner was always a contested figure, one about whom certain assumptions were made, and yet who was also accepted as a standard feature of one of society’s most popular leisure forms. For those employed as dance partners, the realities of their professional lives were similarly contradictory. Though there were dance partners who used the title as a shield while engaged in less socially acceptable pursuits, there were naturally many other dance partners who simply did the job they were hired to do – helping patrons to improve their dancing skills and providing a partner to wallflowers. In addition, though suspicions about the job never entirely faded and a lingering social stigma surrounded the profession, work as a dance partner afforded, particularly women, relative degrees of freedom of movement, financial independence, and sexual agency.⁹⁰ Dance partners thus personified the same contested duality between social condemnation and social acceptance that was often characteristic of popular dancing in general.

⁸⁹ “Six Penny Partners,” *Weekly Telegraph*, February 25, 1939, 17.

⁹⁰ I realize that this is a slightly problematic statement in terms of the women forced into prostitution out of financial necessity; I am referring to the dance partners paid a wage but who chose to enter into sexual relationships with clients. Dance partnering was also yet another profession in which men were typically paid more than women, on average £4 to the men’s £6.

Conclusion

In her study of Victorian London's Cremorne Gardens, Lynda Nead has described the pleasure gardens as "a schizophrenic social space, associated equally with peaceful family outings and explicit prostitution and public disturbance."⁹¹ As this analysis suggests, leisure spaces had long been viewed in contested ways, often simultaneously sites of innocent amusement and depravity. In this same way, it is important to note that some of the cultural tensions surrounding dancing spaces and professional dance partners described in this chapter were never entirely resolved. Class divisions continued to determine the clientele of different dancing spaces to a considerable degree, so that upper class Britons were still likely to view venues frequented by the working classes as low and morally questionable. Certain dancing establishments, particularly night-clubs, never made any serious attempt to achieve respectability and remained associated with sexual and criminal activity in public perception. And there always remained a minority of people making the argument that dancing was dangerous to social purity.

Yet between 1919 and 1945 popular dancing spaces did make considerable strides towards widespread social acceptance, largely as a result of direct efforts by commercial producers of dancing to resolve the schizophrenic duality articulated by Nead. More importantly, the stigma surrounding dancing spaces and dance professionals never had a detrimental impact on the popularity of dancing as a leisure form. Britons from all walks of life continued to dance throughout the debates described above. To return to J. Jefferson Farjeon's article "The Dance Evil," which opened this discussion, the writer pointed out that the playwrights he was accusing of denigrating dancing were very likely

⁹¹ Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 109.

to protest against his statements with comments like: “We don’t condemn dancing! We dance ourselves!” or “What are you talking about? Dash it! We *all* dance!”⁹² Yet as Farjeon argued, in their work these same dance enthusiasts drew upon, and indeed perpetuated, some of the cultural assumptions about people who danced and the spaces they danced in. There was thus a longstanding and unresolved tension between the social perception of dancing and its ongoing popularity as a form of entertainment.

The wider significance of the campaign to make popular dancing spaces respectable becomes more apparent when these efforts are viewed alongside the simultaneous development of dancing into a national cultural form. As the English style evolved and the dance hall industry grew increasingly commercialized, popular dancing became a site in which issues of national concern could be weighed and contested. The process of cleaning up the dance halls was therefore also about delineating what was considered to be appropriate behavior within the national community and defining national morality. As I have shown above, cultivating respectability for dancing spaces and dance partners reified conventional understandings of gender, class, and sexuality for the nation at large, and yet this process was always incomplete. Despite the efforts to monitor and reinforce traditional understandings of gender roles and sexual morality, some dancing spaces also provided room for these conventions to be successfully transgressed, and dance culture occasionally became a site where the social borders of their nation could be defined, tested, and transformed.

⁹² Farjeon, “The Dance Evil,” 439.

Chapter 6

From English Style to Lambeth Walk: Popular Dancing and National Identity in Interwar Britain

England has undoubtedly taken the lead in the development of modern ballroom dancing. Other countries may have supplied the raw material and the dancers or New York, being nearer the source of that material, may have been the first to experiment with it, but it was the teachers of England who first analyzed the crude steps, reduced order out of chaos and evolved that modern technique which has made the English style paramount over three-fifths of the globe.¹

In 1922 dance professional Alec Mackenzie wrote an article for the *Dancing Times* in which he compared dancing in Paris and London. He described a recent trip to the Continent where he had witnessed the impact that a group of American visitors had on the dancing in a Parisian ballroom, by introducing a new foxtrot variation from their own country which was eagerly taken up by their French hosts. Reflecting on these events, Mackenzie noted, “in London this could not have happened. Here the dancing is an absolutely national development, extremely characteristic of the national temperament, and very suited to it.”² He went on to suggest that whereas dancing in France reflected a melting-pot of foreign styles, British dancing was steady and resistant to outside influences. Mackenzie’s comments might appear incongruous given that the vast majority of the dances being performed in British ballrooms during the interwar period originated outside the British Isles, yet his assertions reflect the active effort on the

¹ Philip J.S. Richardson, preface to *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1946).

² Alec Mackenzie, “Dancing in Paris and London,” *Dancing Times*, June 1922, 777-779.

part of the contemporary ballroom dance profession and dance hall industry to cultivate something specifically British in modern ballroom dancing. Through the process of “anglicizing” foreign, particularly American, dancing styles, as well as the inclusion of what was supposed to be authentically British content in other dances, popular dance culture became an important space for the consideration, expression and embodiment of what it meant to *be* British.

Scholars of British history are increasingly considering the role that popular culture has played historically in constructing national identity,³ and this chapter will examine the ideas about the nation that were articulated and disseminated through British popular dancing during the interwar period. The first part of the discussion will focus on the language of nation associated with the dance profession’s efforts to standardize the steps of the English style of ballroom dancing, while the second section will examine the history of five, “typically English” novelty dances produced by the Mecca chain of dance halls – the Lambeth Walk, the Chestnut Tree, the Park Parade, the Handsome Territorial, and Knees Up, Mother Brown. I will show that dancing addressed the issue of national identity on several different fronts. First, frequently espousing the belief that in all countries dancing was an expression of national character, the dance profession transformed foreign dances into the English style with a view to complying with the

³ See Alun Howkins, “Greensleeves and the idea of national music,” in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, Vol. III, ed. Raphael Samuel, (New York: Routledge, 1989); Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad’s Army*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Siân Nicholas, “From John Bull to John Citizen: Images of National Identity and Citizenship on the Wartime BBC,” in *The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960*, eds. Richard Weight and Abigail Beach, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 36-58; Kenton Bamford, *Distorted Images: British National Identity and Film in the 1920s*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999); Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall & Modernity: The Late Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004). James Chapman, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).

British temperament, defined in terms of refinement, moderation, and civility. Second, the promotional campaign that surrounded the Mecca novelty dances was entirely based on the dances' national origins, as well as their national content, through which Britishness was imagined in terms of the nation's history, heritage, and landscape. The vision of the nation articulated through the English style and the Mecca dances was therefore not always analogous; however, the efforts of the dance profession and dance hall industry to create new national dance forms did generally correspond over what was *not* British. Through popular dance culture Britishness was explicitly defined against foreign others, chiefly America, and in profoundly racialized terms.

But while the ballroom dance profession and dance hall industry were very invested in creating a popular dance culture that reflected the British nation, I will show that the dancing public, often captivated by the increasing flow of cultural imports from the United States and the myth of America, was considerably less concerned with this process. There were several notable exceptions, such as the popular fervor for the Lambeth Walk, but in general the dancing public evaluated dances for their quality rather than their origins; indeed, a new dance's "Britishness" was not enough to ensure that it would be a popular success. Moreover, I will also demonstrate that through their physical performance of popular dances, Britons helped to reify the vision of the nation espoused by the producers of dancing, but also occasionally expressed and embodied alternative national imaginaries.

The English Style and the National "Temperament"

In May 1920, a group of Britain's leading teachers of dancing assembled at the Grafton Galleries in London, and initiated a process that would culminate in the

standardization of the steps of the English style of ballroom dancing. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the decision to standardize ballroom dance steps was born of a number of issues, including a perceived need for consistency in what was being taught in dancing schools and the desire to insulate modern ballroom dancing from the attacks of critics. However, there was another element to the dance profession's efforts with respect to the English style, which was also initially revealed at the first ballroom conference when a dispute arose among some of those in attendance. A group of teachers attacked certain suggestions on standardization proffered by famed teacher and exhibition dancer Monsieur Maurice on the grounds that he was not British. As Philip Richardson later recalled, these teachers questioned "what right had an American to attempt to teach English people how to dance."⁴ Maurice's suggestions were later carried unanimously when other speakers pointed out that most of the dances under discussion were American in origin, and that as "the greatest American dancer" Maurice was best positioned to offer an opinion on them.⁵ However, the incident foreshadowed the extent to which the standardization of the English style would be about considerably more than establishing a set form of steps and figures.

Of the dances that formed the original standard four of the English style – the foxtrot, the one-step, the tango, and the modern waltz – none actually originated in Britain. Yet I will demonstrate in this section that during the process of standardization the dance profession made a deliberate attempt to transform the dances into something identifiably British. Consistently arguing that dancing was an expression of national character, professionals sought to create a British dance form that was distinctive from

⁴ Richardson, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, 43-44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

that of foreign – and racial – others. This anglicization of foreign dances was one of the most significant elements in the creation of a national dance culture in Britain between the wars, and it created a space for the articulation and expression of ideas about national identity.

It should be acknowledged at the outset, however, that in naming the national dance form the “English style,” the dancing community effectively excluded large parts of the British Isles, and this focus on England, rather than Britain, should be understood in a specific way. First, the predominance of England in discourses about the whole of Britain was certainly nothing new. Given that many of the leading figures in the ballroom dance profession were English, references to the Englishness of the national dance form were more likely based on carelessness rather than an attempt to suppress their fellow Britons in Scotland and Wales. This is further confirmed by the fact that in much of the primary material on which this chapter is based, “English” and “British” are used interchangeably. Moreover, there were important figures in the contemporary dancing community, such as teacher and bandleader Victor Silvester, who frequently did espouse the notion that the native ballroom dancing style should be called the “British style” rather than the “English style.” This was not necessarily nationalistic rhetoric, but rather a reflection of one of the primary goals of the standardization of dance steps. The dance profession’s aim was that there would theoretically be no distinction between how Britons danced the foxtrot from London to Edinburgh to Cardiff. While regional variation was still inevitable, Britons were dancing the same dances in all parts of the British Isles, and in ballroom dancing culture, the English style *was* meant to be the style for the whole of the nation.

This quest for national uniformity in ballroom dancing extended beyond geography as well. As I showed in Chapter One, the dance profession frequently argued that chief among the virtues of the new ballroom dances was their simplicity, and thus accessibility; modern ballroom dancing was consistently promoted as a dance form that anyone could participate in, regardless of their age, gender, or class. In addition, since another major objective associated with standardization was to deflect public criticism against the new dancing styles, the creation of the English style was about making modern ballroom dancing both accessible, and *acceptable*, to the whole of the national body. All of these issues reflected the dance profession's desire to create a truly national dance form.

Yet nothing demonstrated this agenda more clearly than what proved to be the primary issue in the development of the English style, which was to distinguish British dancing from the way in which the same dances were performed in other countries, particularly America. The successful standardization of ballroom steps was in itself something that differentiated British and American dancing, since dancing teachers in the United States were never able to attain the same level of national uniformity among teachers and the dancers they instructed.⁶ However, most critical to the process of standardization and anglicization was the belief that American and other foreign dancing styles were somehow at odds with the British "temperament." The standardization of the English style was therefore very concerned with making the dances more fluid and

⁶ As scholars like Danielle Robinson and Juliet McMains have shown, American dance teachers, like their British counterparts, were concerned with toning down and refining the steps of ballroom dances in the 1910s and 1920s, but were less successful at achieving the nationwide standardization of steps for reasons, McMains suggests, mostly due to geography. See Juliet McMains, *Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 71-86; Danielle Robinson, "Race in Motion: Reconstructing the Practice, Profession, and Politics of Social Dancing, New York City, 1900-1930," (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 2004).

graceful, without the kicks, dips, lifts, “freak steps” and general “stunting” that dance professionals believed characterized American and Continental dancing. Rather, as foreign dances were transformed into the English style, terms used to describe the new style included reserved, refined, moderate, staid, and civilized, all of which were perceived to better embody what it meant to be British, and distinguish Britain from other nations.

As the English style evolved throughout the 1920s, dance professionals consistently argued that wherever the dances being performed in the nation’s ballrooms originated, ballroom dancing in Britain represented something entirely transformed and distinctive. In 1923 Philip Richardson noted in the *Dancing Times* that “the ingredients of the foxtrot came from America, but the foxtrot as danced to-day in London is essentially an English dance, with considerable difference from its prototype in New York.”⁷ Major Cecil Taylor, president of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, echoed this notion that American dances were significantly made over upon reaching Britain, stating in an interview with *Mass Observation* that, “modern ballroom dancing is due to American influence without question but on every occasion it has arrived in England it has been pulled to pieces by the experts and has had cuttings and trimmings – cuttings taken off and trimmings added to – which have made it worthy of acceptance.”⁸ In fact, not only did British dance professionals assert that American ballroom dances had been successfully recreated as British, they also frequently voiced the belief that these new British dance forms were superior to the originals. In 1924 a writer for the *Dancing Times* commented that, “the foxtrot, as danced in London to-day, is an English dance, in spite of

⁷ Ballroom News, *Dancing Times*, October 1923, 17-19.

⁸ M-O A: TC 38/6/G, Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, June 19, 1939, 7.

its American beginning, and we much prefer to dance it in our own way.”⁹ Richardson similarly noted, “one must have some criterion by which one can judge the attempts of dancers in any particular dance ... In the foxtrot and one-step one first looked to America, whence they came; now one looks to the best exponents in London.”¹⁰

The distinctiveness and high quality of British ballroom dancing was therefore a point of considerable professional pride. As early as 1921 an official for the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing declared to the *Daily Mail*, “the Englishman has become the best dancer in the world. His dancing is very much steadier and infinitely more graceful than that of the American, the Frenchman, or the German.”¹¹ This sense of superiority was only heightened once the English style was exported abroad. In 1939, Major Cecil Taylor bragged to Mass Observation that “everyone wants to dance the London style no matter where they live. Without question London leads the world in social dancing.”¹² In addition, the English style increasingly set the international standard in ballroom dancing, being taken up by many other nations, with the notable exception of the United States.¹³ A major part of the reason for this was the overwhelming success of British teams at international dance championships. As Victor Silvester told Mass Observation, “all the continental countries copy English styles, mainly because English couples win all the competitions.”¹⁴ Competition success also further cultivated the belief in the superiority of British dancing at home. In 1936, *Modern Dance* decreed about the annual ballroom dance championship at Blackpool, “the All-British Championship has

⁹ Dancer, “To the Dance Bands of London,” *Dancing Times*, March 1924, 615.

¹⁰ Ballroom Gossip, *Dancing Times*, March 1922, 521.

¹¹ “Best Men Dancers,” *Daily Mail*, August 9, 1921, 3.

¹² M-O A: TC 38/6/G, Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, June 19, 1939, 7.

¹³ Eventually even the Americans succumbed, and starting in the 1960s the English style was adopted by many competitive ballroom dancers in the United States. See McMains, *Glamour Addiction*, 86-92.

¹⁴ M-O A: TC 38/5/G, Victor Silvester, May 30, 1939, 3.

become the world's championship, as is the case of the tennis at Wimbledon, which is really only an 'All-England' title, but again justly regarded as the 'blue riband' of the tennis contests throughout the globe."¹⁵

Yet despite the fact that the British dance community firmly put forth the notion that foreign dances were transformed and made distinctive through the process of anglicization, there were those who saw the need for a dance that was British in *creation* rather than merely in evolution. As exhibition dancers Marjorie and Georges Fontana mused in the *Dancing Times* in 1920, "England is rapidly taking her place as the foremost dancing nation of the world. Does it not seem a pity that we have to go abroad for all our new dances? Are we not clever enough in this country to evolve something ourselves?"¹⁶

In the mid-1920s there were two notable attempts to answer this call for a ballroom dance that was completely British-made, the first of which was the "five-step." Developed by composer Harry Davson and dancer George Cunningham, the five-step was a ballroom dance set in five-four rhythm, distinguishing it from the foxtrot's four-four or the waltz's three-four. The dance received a substantial amount of publicity in the dance and popular press, and was endorsed by celebrities such as bandleader Jack Hylton; the promotional campaign also particularly highlighted the British origins of the dance. But despite the best efforts of the dance profession, the five-step failed to catch on with the public in any meaningful way. The bottom line was that the Britishness of the five-step could not compensate for its weaknesses as a dance. It was overly complicated, and the distinctive rhythm meant that there was a shortage of songs to which it could actually be danced. The intense promotional campaign may also have worked against the dance in

¹⁵ Editorial, *Modern Dance*, June 1936, 1.

¹⁶ Marjorie and Georges Fontana, "Ballroom and Exhibition Dancing," *Dancing Times*, December 1920, 176.

the end; Philip Richardson speculated that part of the problem with the five-step was that in their eagerness to embrace a new (and British) dance, teachers and the press gave it such a flurry of attention that its limitations were very quickly exposed.¹⁷

Yet the failure of the five-step did not preclude another attempt to create a home-grown ballroom dance two years later. The “trebla” received an even larger scale publicity campaign than the five-step, which was even more explicit about trumpeting its British creation. The trebla’s creators, Albert Barnett and Nora Chilo, staged daily demonstrations of the dance in their studio, and it received considerable coverage in the dance press. The *Dancing Times* featured full-page advertisements for the trebla for over a year, one of which contained the image of a lion, bookended by the phrase “British & Best.” The text further advised readers, “Don’t be dominated entirely by American Invasions!!! Learn the TREBLA the All-British Non-Sequence Dance.”¹⁸ A similar sentiment was also observable in another advertisement, which included testimonials for the dance from the popular press. Wrote the *Referee*, “It is an entirely British dance, not a hybrid product of American origin, like most of our dances.”¹⁹ The *West London News* similarly commented, “It is hoped that [the Charleston] will soon be superseded by ‘The Trebla,’ which is a simple and graceful dance and is entirely British.”²⁰ The promotional campaign for the trebla therefore revealed not only the dance profession’s eagerness to create an authentically British dance, but also its discomfort with the increasing encroachment of American culture, an idea that will be discussed further below. And yet

¹⁷ The Sitter Out, *Dancing Times*, September 1924, 1129.

¹⁸ “Can you dance the Trebla?” *Dancing Times*, September 1927, 632.

¹⁹ “Trebla Season,” *Dancing Times*, December 1926, 350.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

despite the profession and press's best efforts, the trebla made as little impact as its predecessor.

The lesson of the five-step and the trebla was that a dance's Britishness was not enough to guarantee it would be success with the public. The dances also represented only two examples of the hundreds of new dances that were introduced during the interwar period in an attempt to locate "standard five," a fifth dance that could be added to the English style canon and alleviate public weariness over endless foxtrot variations. As early as 1923 some dance professionals were concerned that the absence of a new dance and the rigid standardization of steps were causing British dancing to become stagnant and boring. As one correspondent for the *Dancing Times* stated in an article suggestively entitled "The dullness of English dancing,"

There is a monotony about the bands which is reflected in the dancers, and the real joy of dancing is conspicuous by its absence. Steps have become rather too conventional with the best dancers owing to the influence of competitions which have led to standardization, which, however, is all to the good as long as individuality is not killed.²¹

These comments foreshadowed a concern that would grow as the interwar period progressed. As I suggested in Chapter One, the standardization of dance steps meant that there were specific ways in which to dance incorrectly, which left less room for creativity and cultivated fears of stagnancy. While there were those who described British ballroom dancing as refined and graceful, there were equally those professionals who referred to it as phlegmatic and boring.

At least within the ballroom dance profession, however, these naysayers remained in the minority. Most professionals were dedicated to the ongoing process of standardization and anglicization, and it should be noted that ballroom dancers were not

²¹ K.M.B., "The Dullness of English Dancing," *Dancing Times*, October 1923, 16.

alone in this effort. Beth Genné has shown that the same time period saw attempts to create an authentically English ballet, another cause in which, as editor of the *Dancing Times*, Philip Richardson was deeply embroiled. Ballet in Britain had traditionally suffered under the predominance and influence of French and Russian companies, and during the interwar period efforts were made to establish and cultivate respect for a home-grown style.²² As I established in previous chapters, ballroom dancing was also heavily influenced by sites around the globe, from continental Europe to Latin America, and yet was predominately affected by the increasing stream of American dance culture that crossed the Atlantic. In the case of both ballet and ballroom dancing therefore, the national dancing style was articulated against a foreign other.

Indeed, at the root of the anglicization process was the contemporary belief that dancing style was intrinsically connected to national character or identity. Describing the scene in a Parisian ballroom for his above-mentioned comparison of dancing in Paris and London, Alec Mackenzie wrote, “I noticed that the crowd included representatives of at least half a dozen nations, all of whom were dancing in styles representative of their racial characteristics.”²³ Another professional dancer, in an article describing the American dancing style, similarly commented that, “dancing is an expression of life which is influenced by the national character. Therefore little differences will always

²² Genné shows that during the interwar period ballet dancers such as Phyllis Bedells were among the first to go “public” with their Britishness rather than assume French or Russian stage names, which were traditionally more respected in professional ballet circles. This was also the moment that saw the creation of what has since been considered to be the ballet canon, including such works as *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty*, largely through the interventions of British ballet dancers such as Ninette de Valois. See Beth Genné, “Creating a Canon: Creating the ‘Classics’ in Twentieth Century British Ballet,” *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 18 (Winter 2000): 132-162; Beth Genné, “Openly English: Phyllis Bedells and the Birth of British Ballet,” *Dance Chronicle* 18, no. 3 (1995): 437-451.

²³ Alec Mackenzie, “Dancing in Paris and London,” *Dancing Times*, June 1922, 777.

remain between the different continents.”²⁴ Professionals therefore believed that in their original form, foreign dance styles required dancers to perform in ways that ran contrary to their British nature and temperament. In the case of American dances, they were viewed to be too stunt-filled, boisterous, and unrefined for British tastes. For example, in 1939 the *Modern Dance and Dancer* included an article about the “College Swing,” a dance that was purported to be sweeping America after being introduced in a new Betty Grable film. The periodical speculated that the dance was unlikely to succeed in British ballrooms, however, since “[it] requires for its complete enjoyment the ability to abandon oneself entirely to its quick rhythm. In fact, one should let oneself go to an extent of which but few English folk are capable.”²⁵

Nor was it only American dances that the dance profession perceived to run contrary to Britishness. In 1924, prominent dancing teacher Santos Casani speculated as to why the tango, a major success in Parisian ballrooms immediately after the First World War, had not similarly caught on in Britain. Casani wrote, “it was said, rightly or wrongly, that English dancers had not the temperament for this most graceful Southern dance: in any case, the tango was not a success.”²⁶ In 1936, dancing teacher Alex Moore made a similar assessment of another so-called Latin dance, the Cuban rumba, which had just arrived in Britain. Moore argued that the rumba was not likely to be a significant successful in British ballrooms, because as “attractive as this dance is, it is entirely opposed to English temperament.”²⁷ Like the boisterous, stunt-filled American way of

²⁴ Thomas W. Bus, “My Impression’s of America’s Dancing,” *Modern Dance and Dancer*, January 1939, 15.

²⁵ “America’s Latest Craze,” *Modern Dance and Dancer*, August 1939, 16.

²⁶ Santos Casani, “The Dances of To-morrow,” *Popular Music and Dancing Weekly*, May 31, 1924, 112.

²⁷ Alex Moore, “Ballroom Dancing Made Easy,” *Modern Dance and Dancer*, November 1936, 5

dancing, the seductive rhythms of Latin American dances were also seen to be at odds with Britishness.

Through their belief that dancing reflected and embodied national characteristics, therefore, dance professionals articulated a vision of what it meant to be British. Of course, as the evidence described above should suggest, this notion of national identity was most often defined in terms of what was *not* British, rather than what was. A detailed comment on how British dancing compared to that of other nations, produced in the *Dancing Times* in 1922, is particularly illustrative:

There is none of the roughness or harshness of the American execution seen in a British ballroom, nor is there anything of the svelt movement of the Latin. The Britisher's execution lies somewhere between these two, and in its highest expression becomes a thing of grace and rhythm such as is the admiration of the dancing world. This is founded upon the Englishman's unflinching instinct for moderation.²⁸

In this passage, writer G.E. Fussell articulated what was revealed about British national character through ballroom dancing via a comparison with the perceived characteristics of other nations. Yet his more explicit references to the Englishman's "moderation" and the "grace" of British dancing are significant as well. References to the English style's grace and moderation were common in professional descriptions of British dancing, alongside evocations of smoothness, refinement, and civility. Through the process of standardization, these characteristics were identified as those that best defined British national identity as well.

There was an additional and critically important undercurrent to the anglicization process which must be addressed, however, and that was with regard to race. A number of scholars of American dance have now established that most dance forms native to the

²⁸ G.E. Fussell, "Racial Temperament and the Dance," *Dancing Times*, January 1922, 405.

United States, from the eighteenth century Virginia jig through to ragtime, the Charleston, and the jitterbug, were in fact blended amalgams of African American and European American traditions.²⁹ From African Americans came elements such as improvisation, call-and-response, and strutting, while European Americans added partner dancing, as well as aspects of Irish and Scottish jigs, and German reels. Yet despite these creolized geneses, as Danielle Robinson has argued with specific reference to ragtime, these dances were generally understood by the American public in terms of their African American origins.³⁰ In Britain, the actual provenance of American dances, received as they were second-hand, was even more hazy; as has been noted, there was often confusion about the background or even the name of a new dance upon its first arrival in Britain, as exemplified in the jazz roll, or later the belief that the “rock & roll” was a dance and not a musical style. In this muddled context it was an even simpler instinctive reflex for Britons to equate American with African American. There was therefore a general contemporary awareness that the vast majority of dances being performed in British ballrooms had originated in America, and an almost equal recognition that many of these dances also originated in black America.

Racial commentary about American dances in the dance and popular press ranged from short histories and general statements about their African American origins, to outright racial prejudice. In 1919, in an impassioned plea for a restoration of the waltz to common practice, dancing teacher Edward Scott wrote in the *Dancing Times*,

²⁹ See Robinson, “Race in Motion,”; Jurreta Jordan Heckscher, “Our National Poetry: The Afro-Chesapeake Inventions of American Dance,” in *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 19-35; Julie Malnig, “Women, Dance, and New York Nightlife,” in *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 72-90.

³⁰ See Robinson, “Race in Motion.”

Depend upon it, when the wheel of fashion takes another turn, as the nigger minstrels depart, with all their baggage of banjos, drums, motor-horns, tin-plates, and frying-pans, the ever youthful waltz will again be welcomed with open arms, and the discomfited jazzers, fox-trotters and one-steppers will, nolen volens, succumb to her irresistible sway.”³¹

Nor was Scott the only one to decry the spread of jazz dancing in racist terms. At the first standardization conference, dancing teacher Monsieur Maurice condemned jazz dances as “low-negro” and for fourth rate establishments.³² In 1921, in the *Dancing Times*’ monthly column “Phillida Goes Dancing,” Phillida wrote, “We know, of course, it originated from the niggers – modern dancing I mean – and that it requires neither brains nor ordinary intelligence.”³³

The racial origins of the new modern dances were an ever-present feature of the discourses surrounding them, and the same racist tropes appeared time and again as new American dances were introduced throughout the interwar period. When the blues appeared in Britain in 1923, the *Dancing Times* noted that it “originated with the Darkies in the Southern States of America.”³⁴ Racialized language and race-based prejudice emerged in even stronger terms with the introduction of the Charleston in 1925. As I discussed in Chapter One, upon its initial appearance in Britain, popular media coverage of the dance was generally very negative. Like many of the American dances that had preceded it, the Charleston was viewed to be too wild and boisterous for the refined British ballroom, something which was articulated in profoundly racialized terms. A *Daily Mail* correspondent declared the dance to be “a series of contortions without a vestige of charm or grace, reminiscent only of the Negro orgies from which it derives its

³¹ Edward Scott, “About Waltzing,” *Dancing Times*, March 1919, 201

³² The Sitter Out, *Dancing Times*, June 1920, 697.

³³ “Phillida Run Away – From Dancing,” *Dancing Times*, July 1921, 789.

³⁴ Ballroom Chat, *Dancing Times*, October 1923, 19.

creation.”³⁵ The *Mail* also quoted a Lady Walpole, who declared the Charleston was “vulgar,” further remarking that watching a couple perform the dance was like watching “two Christy Minstrels on the beach.”³⁶ Reacting to the controversy, the dance profession stepped in once again, adapting the American dance in a manner designed to circumvent public criticism. The result was the flat progressive Charleston, a toned-down version of the dance which was viewed to be more in step with the English style.³⁷

But significantly, in April 1927, as the fervor over the Charleston dissipated, the *Dancing Times* published an article which was revealing about what was really at the root of anglicization efforts. Entitled the “Negro Influence in Dancing,” the piece by writer F.A. Hadland charted the long-term influence of African American culture over music and dancing in Britain. Starting with the minstrel performances of the mid-nineteenth century, Hadland moved forward in time, acknowledging that frequently “the white man has ... learnt something from the negro.”³⁸ Then, arriving at the African American creation of the new ballroom dances of the jazz era, Hadland wrote,

Of course, [these dances] had to be refined and adapted to civilised life before [they] could be countenanced in European ballrooms. The sawing movements of the arms, shaking shoulders, and close embraces, the incessant tom-tom beating and clatter had to be modified. The Charleston has been so adapted, and in its reformed character seems to be a welcome addition to the ballroom repertoire.³⁹

Hadland’s article thus made explicit the racial undertone to the dance anglicization process. The frequent professional references to “freakish” steps, “stunting,” or “wildness” in descriptions of American dances were essentially a code for blackness, and

³⁵ “The Charleston Dance – A Protest,” *Daily Mail*, April 26, 1926, 7.

³⁶ “A Vulgar Dance,” *Daily Mail*, April 27, 1926, 7.

³⁷ The public and professional negotiations over the Charleston are discussed in more detail in Chapter One.

³⁸ F.A. Hadland, “Negro Influence in Dancing,” *Dancing Times*, April 1927, 73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

many of the specific movements stamped out of ballroom dancing in the development of the English style, notably the isolated movement of the torso, improvisation, and the separation of partners, were those most connected to African American dance forms.⁴⁰ In standardizing the steps of the English style, therefore, the ballroom dance profession was effectively seeking to *whiten* black dances.⁴¹

It is also significant that once a dance was standardized and made “British,” racialized language generally disappeared from discussions of the dance. This was true of the standard dances of the English style, and even of the Charleston, once it had been transformed into its flat progressive form. A fundamental, if rarely stated, part of the process of rendering a dance more British was therefore to create distance between new dance forms and their African American origins. Moreover, given the well-established connection between dancing and national character, in anglicizing foreign dances the profession made an implicit suggestion about the ideal racial make-up for the British nation; through the standardization process Britishness was categorically defined as white. Indeed, on occasion the notion that black dances ran contrary to Britishness was made more than implicit. Upon the introduction of truckin,’ a precursor to the jitterbug, in the mid-1930s, a correspondent for the *Modern Dance and Dancer* described an exhibition of the dance in Manchester, writing, “the [dancers] were coloured people; they performed the most un-English movements you could imagine – negroid in the extreme.”⁴²

⁴⁰ McMains, *Glamour Addiction*, 83.

⁴¹ Not surprisingly, this whitening process was not unique to Britain. Danielle Robinson has argued convincingly that the development of modern ballroom dancing in the United States, under Vernon and Irene Castle and others, constituted an effort to whiten ragtime dances, and transform them in such a way as to appeal more to middle and upper class sensibilities. See Robinson, “Race in Motion,” Chps 3 and 4. See also McMains, *Glamour Addiction*.

⁴² Mancunian, “Manchester Murmurs,” *Modern Dance and Dancer*, December 1935, 5.

Yet a dance like truckin' opens up the critical and complex question of how the dancing public viewed and received the dance profession's efforts to anglicize and whiten American dances. In one respect, it is apparent that in many cases the public did not play a major part in directing, nor indeed may not even have been aware, of the profession's efforts with respect to standardization and anglicization. The English style was the style of ballroom dancing that was taught in dancing schools, showcased in competition and exhibition dancing, and described in dance manuals and the dance press. Dance enthusiasts were trained by these means, and for those that eschewed formal instruction, they learned to dance simply by emulating everyone else. The dancing public therefore accepted the English style and all that it represented for the most part automatically.

Moreover, in developing the English style the dance profession did not operate in a vacuum, and the process of anglicization must be understood within its specific social and cultural context. The vision of national identity articulated through the English style, with its emphasis on gentility, moderation, reserve and civility, was not solely confined to popular dance culture. A number of scholars have previously identified this "civilised version of what it was to be British" as something which was prevalent throughout the modern period.⁴³ As Jeffrey Richards has argued, until well into the twentieth century ideas about the national character were those of restraint, civility, respectability, the latter being defined in terms of "self-improvement, education, restraint, thrift, and good manners."⁴⁴ This vision of the nation was particularly prevalent during the interwar years, when ideas about peacefulness and moderation emerged as a means of combating

⁴³ John K. Walton, introduction to *Relocating Britishness*, ed. Stephen Caunce, Ewa Mazierska, Susan Sydney-Smith, John K. Walton, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 8.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Richards, "Football and the Crisis of British Identity," in *Relocating Britishness*, ed. Stephen Caunce, Ewa Mazierska, Susan Sydney-Smith, John K. Walton, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 93.

the fears of brutalization that resulted from the war.⁴⁵ The standardization of the English style was thus accomplished in a way that complied with, and perpetuated, dominant contemporary ideas about national identity.

This notion is equally confirmed with respect to the whitening that accompanied the transformation of African American dances into something identifiably British, which was consonant with longstanding notions of national identity, forged through imperial encounters with racial others, and which categorically equated Britishness with whiteness.⁴⁶ It should be recalled that in toning down the American version into the flat progressive Charleston, the profession was responding to racist diatribes against the dance that originated as much with the general public as they did within the ballroom dance community. Indeed, as has been reiterated above and in previous chapters, the process of standardization and anglicization was initiated by the dance profession in an effort to make modern ballroom dancing more accessible and acceptable to the public; professionals frequently espoused their fundamental belief that the dancing public, rather than the dance profession or dance hall industry, should direct the way in which popular dancing evolved in Britain. Therefore, at least in the eyes of the dance profession, the public was deeply implicated in efforts to anglicize dances starting in the ragtime era, through the Charleston craze, and beyond.

⁴⁵ See Jon Lawrence, "Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain," *The Journal of Modern History* 75 (September 2003): 557-589.

⁴⁶ Historians have now well established the degree to which whiteness was intrinsic to national identity and citizenship well before and continuing beyond the period under review. See Laura Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, (New York: Routledge, 1995); Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867*, (Oxford: Polity, 2002); Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain, 1939-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Yet significantly, there is also evidence that the dancing public did not always embrace or adhere to the ways in which popular dances were transformed and produced by the dance profession, or the ideas about the nation imbued in these efforts. The unenthusiastic public response to the five-step and trebla is telling about the degree to which the average Briton was less invested in the idea of an authentically native dance form than the profession was. Despite the fact that by the mid-1920s people were already growing weary of foxtrot variations, and despite the fact that the five-step and trebla were specifically promoted for their British creation, the lack of public interest determined that neither dance would become “standard five.” The failure of these dances also anticipated the public reaction to another “British” marketing campaign a decade later, which related to a series of novelty dances produced by the Mecca organization; as will be shown below, with one notable exception, the supposed Britishness of these dances did not really factor into their public reception. In addition, there were also those people who expressed ambivalence about the civilized, refined, and moderate vision of the nation associated with the English style, even suggesting that Britons might benefit from a little Americanization. For example, in 1919, in the very earliest stages of the dance craze, the *Daily Mail* asked, “is it not to the credit of the Jazz band that it has caused the Englishman to lay aside some of his traditional reserve for once to let himself ‘go,’ and to show that he really is enjoying himself?”⁴⁷

It is with respect to this growing influence and permeation of American culture that the production and consumption of the English style needs to be understood. As the discussion above has made clear, the dance profession was very concerned with distinguishing British dancing from American dancing, which is suggestive about

⁴⁷ “Irresistible Jazz,” *Daily Mail*, January 29, 1919, 4

professional reservations over the increasing influence of the United States, not only in racial terms, but with respect to more general concerns about Americanization. From the very first conference of dancing teachers in 1920, some professionals were clearly already wary of American influence, as their criticisms of Monsieur Maurice demonstrated. The advertisements for the trebla were also particularly revealing about professional concerns about Americanization, and the testimonials about the dance from the popular press further suggest that professional dancers were not alone in this regard; rather, the actions and motivations of the dance profession should be understood in terms of more widespread contemporary qualms over the increasing predominance of American culture.

Indeed, the ballroom dance profession was only one among many contemporary popular cultural producers and commercial entertainment industries that implemented policies and practices designed to curb Americanization. As Peter Bailey has noted, in the 1920s the Variety Artists Federation became “fiercely protectionist and racist” in the face of an ever-increasing presence of American performers on the music hall stage; by the 1930s music hall, like the English style of ballroom dancing, was also being celebrated for its “exemplary Englishness.”⁴⁸ The British film industry also feared the predominant popularity of Hollywood movies, resulting in the implementation of the notorious quota system in which a certain percentage of films shown in Britain had to be British-made, and also leading many within its ranks to promote the need for a national cinema.⁴⁹ In 1935, concerns about the large presence of American bands operating in Britain caused

⁴⁸ Peter Bailey, “Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion: Americanization, National Identity, and Sexual Politics in Inter-war British Music Hall,” *Cultural and Social History* 4, no. 4 (2007): 497, 505.

⁴⁹ The quota system was enforced by the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, which did help to stimulate production within the British film industry, but also led to the creation of the so-called “quota quickies,” poor quality, low cost films designed to meet the requirements of the quota.

the Musicians Union to impose a ban on “aliens,” which was clearly directed primarily towards acts from the United States,⁵⁰ and as the next section will show, the other major cultural producer of popular dancing, the dance hall industry, was also strongly implicated in attempts to reassert British popular cultural autonomy. Finally, the legislation introduced in order to enforce the quota system and the ban on foreign musicians speaks to governmental and more widespread societal concerns about the encroachment of American culture.

These efforts were in response to, and existed in tension with, many Britons ongoing and ever-increasing fascination with the United States, and ardor for American cultural products ranging from jazz music to Hollywood films. As Eric Hobsbawm has suggested, having examined the allure of America from his vantage point as both a scholar and as one who recalls being enamored of jazz as young man in interwar Britain, American cultural imports were often of interest merely because they were American.⁵¹ Many people believed America to be inherently exciting, exotic, and modern; moreover, despite the inherent racism in discourses about American cultural imports, their perceived blackness was also part of what made them intriguing.⁵² As Peter Bailey has noted, “Fashionable society lionized black entertainers, the avant-garde awarded the ‘Negro’ cult status, and the British public were captivated by the good looks and intelligence of the black American artist Paul Robeson.”⁵³

⁵⁰ James Nott, *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 145-6.

⁵¹ See “Jazz Comes to Europe,” *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion, and Jazz*, (New York: Norton, 1998); Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*, (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

⁵² Mica Nava, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture, and the Normalisation of Difference*, (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 80. See also Bailey, “Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion,” 498.

⁵³ Bailey, “Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion,” 497.

Within this context, many Britons were eager to experiment with any new American dance that crossed their path. This had been the case with jazz dances, the Charleston, and also occurred with truckin', a decade later. Described above as thoroughly "un-English" by one contemporary dance professional, truckin' remained of considerable interest to a significant number of dancers. Mass Observation reports from the late 1930s reveal that the dance enjoyed substantial popularity and prevalence in the dance halls.⁵⁴ This was to some degree promoted and thus mediated by the dance hall industry, which provided exhibitions and special sessions for the dance, yet it is also clear that some enthusiasts trucked above and beyond these established parameters. Truckin' was engaged in during foxtrots and quicksteps, and as one observer noted, "One couple even managed to concoct truckin to waltz time"⁵⁵ It appears that much of the enthusiasm for the dance was based in its general American-ness; as Mass Observation noted with respect to the origins and public knowledge of the dance, "Rogers-Astaire are at the base of it."⁵⁶ However, race was also a visible aspect of the production and consumption of truckin.' Most of the exhibition dancers hired by the dance hall industry were black, and many of the truckin' couples described by Mass Observation were interracial, usually a black man and a white woman.

The choices made by some within the dancing public to adopt truckin,' and the physical performances of the dance that they engaged in on the nation's dance floors, retained significant cultural power for shaping the content national dance culture, and the vision of national identity that popular dancing expressed. Simon Frith has argued in a

⁵⁴ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Observations in Dance Halls, Locarno.; M-O A: TC 38/1/B, Observations in Dance Halls, Paramount.

⁵⁵ M-O A: TC 38/1/B, Paramount, March 20, 1939.

⁵⁶ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Locarno, November 17, 1938.

study of popular music that cultural forms are not merely reflections of cultural identity, but rather that cultural identity is forged through shared participation in the act of consuming popular culture.⁵⁷ It is in the practice, not the content, of popular culture that meaning is formed. Dancing is particularly relevant to this process of cultural identity formation, since, in dance, physical practice is central to consumption. Indeed, numerous historians and dance scholars have previously considered the relationship between dancing and the construction of cultural identity, showing that popular and theatrical dance provides a means for race, class, gender, or nation to be physically enacted.⁵⁸ As Jane Desmond has noted, “dance, as an embodied social practice and highly visual aesthetic form, powerfully melds considerations of materiality and representation together.”⁵⁹

In their performance of popular dances therefore, the dancing public was able to either reify or challenge the understanding of Britishness associated with the English style. In adhering to the instruction of professionals in ballroom dancing, or mimicking those who had taken lessons on the dance floor, dancers performed the vision of the nation established by the English style, in which Britishness was civilized, refined, and white. However, in choosing to adopt, and in performing a dance like truckin,’ the dancing public created and embodied alternative meanings and national imaginaries. Truckin’ was not as rigidly defined in its movements, and was livelier than the English

⁵⁷ Simon Frith, “Music and Identity,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, (London: Sage, 1996), 108-127; See also Stuart Hall, “The question of cultural identity,” in *Modernity and its Futures*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁵⁸ See Jane C. Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997); Beth Genné, “‘Freedom Incarnate:’ Jerome Robbins, Gene Kelly, and the Dancing Sailor as an Icon of American Values in World War II,” *Dance Chronicle* 24, no. 1, (2001): 83-103; Robinson, “Race in Motion.”

⁵⁹ Desmond, introduction to *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, 3.

style; it embodied a vision of national identity that was less associated with reserve and civility, and more connected with expressions of freedom. As I will show in the next chapter, this understanding of Britishness became increasingly prevalent as the country entered the Second World War. The image of the nation associated with a dance like truckin' was also more fluid with respect race, as the claims of white superiority that upheld Britain's colonial system and national self-understanding, existed in tension with many Britons witnessing of, and desire to experiment with African American dance forms. This racial instability would also become more pronounced during the war years, with the coincident ascendancy of the jitterbug and significant changes to the racial make-up of the nation.

I am thus arguing that the content of the national dance culture, and the vision of national identity embodied through popular dance, was fluid rather than fixed, and in a constant state of evolution on the nation's dance floors. While for the most part the English style and all of its attendant associations remained the dominant popular dance form and national imaginary, dancing provided some space for a reconsideration and performance of different meanings, in which Britishness was perhaps less refined and more racially complex. These meanings were then experienced and expressed by individual dancers, and observable to their fellow Britons in the ballroom. At the same time, this cultural power should not be over-stated; the dancing public's adoption of African American dance forms was always mediated by the profession or the dance hall industry, and there does not seem to be much evidence that dancers resisted professional moves such as the toning down and whitening of a dance such as the Charleston. And once again, it should be reiterated that actions taken by the dance profession need to be

understood in terms of dominant contemporary views on race and the nation, which most dancers also helped to reinforce. Yet significantly, it was not only the content of the national dance culture, but also the image of the nation that it expressed, that was forged through cultural negotiations between the dancing public and the dance profession, and, as the next section will further illuminate, the dance hall industry.

Doing the Lambeth Walk

One evening in March 1938, C.L. Heimann, the managing director of the Mecca organization, attended a performance of the popular stage musical *Me and My Girl* at the Palace Theatre in London. The show centered around the character of Bill Snibson, a cockney from Lambeth in south London, who inherits an earldom but finds it difficult to adapt to life among the social elite.⁶⁰ At one point in the show, Bill, as played by Lupino Lane, leads a grand dinner party in a dance number called the Lambeth Walk, complete with a swagger and shoulder roles which were purported to represent the “typical Cockney walk.”⁶¹ For months Heimann had been seeking out a new dance that could be performed by Britons of all ages, with or without dancing experience, and sitting in the audience watching Lupino Lane strut about the stage, he believed he had found just the dance.⁶² Quickly securing Lane’s permission to adapt the stage number for the dance hall, Heimann turned to Adele England, his leading dance instructor, to develop a ballroom version. What England went on to create was a very simple sequence dance,⁶³

⁶⁰ For more on the stage production of *Me and My Girl*, see Raphael Samuel and Alison Light, “Doing the Lambeth Walk,” in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, Vol. III, ed. Raphael Samuel, (New York: Routledge, 1989), 263-271.

⁶¹ Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, *Britain by Mass-Observation*, (London: Harmondsworth, 1939), 141.

⁶² Roma Fairley, *Come Dancing Miss World*, (London: Newman Neame, 1966), 60.

⁶³ Sequence dance was the name given to dances that required dancers to perform the same sequence of steps in repetition. They were nothing new in the 1930s, dating to at least as far back as Victorian dance

in which partners circled the floor singing the Lambeth Walk song and marching with the supposed cockney swagger; at requisite intervals in the song they would slap their knees and hoist their thumbs in the air, yelling “Oi!” Simple, silly, and infectious, the Lambeth Walk was destined to become the greatest dance phenomenon that Britain had seen in many years.

Mass Observation’s oft-cited pronouncement that “you could find them doing the Lambeth Walk in Mayfair ball-rooms, suburban dance-halls, cockney parties and village hops,”⁶⁴ goes only some distance towards articulating the profound impact of this dance. In many ways, the Lambeth Walk represented more than a simple dance craze. Unlike the fervors that surrounded the foxtrot or the Charleston in the 1920s, this time the British public was clamoring for a dance that was British in origin and not just in evolution. While there were a number of different reasons the Lambeth Walk was as successful as it was, a major element of the craze that surrounded the dance concerned its promotion and public reception as a quintessentially *national* dance. Unlike the dances that formed the English style, the Lambeth Walk was a dance developed by a British dance professional, and performed to a song written by a British composer; it was produced and promoted by a British company, and first introduced in British ballrooms. The dance was also viewed, largely erroneously, to be authentically British in its content as well, a traditional cockney cultural form with a long and established history.

The stunning success of the Lambeth Walk meant that it inspired many imitations, most notably by its own creator, C.L. Heimann, who sought to duplicate his first triumph

favourites such as the Lancers and the Quadrille. It should also be noted that during the period under review, sequence dances such as the Lambeth Walk went by a variety of names, such as novelty dance, group dance, party dance, communal dance, or social dance.

⁶⁴Madge and Harrisson, *Britain*, 139.

with a series of follow-up dances. During the final years of the 1930s Mecca introduced four more novelty dances, the Chestnut Tree, the Park Parade, the Handsome Territorial, and Knees Up, Mother Brown, all of which followed the Lambeth Walk's formula of simplicity and specifically British content. The themes present in these dances articulated an even more specific vision of the British nation than the English style of ballroom dancing, glorifying the nation's history and heritage, landscape and natural beauty, and making a more inward turn towards England rather than Britain. All of these are idioms which previous work on national identity has identified as being prevalent in the interwar period; however, given that they were created and promoted in the last months and years before the outbreak of the Second World War, the dances also anticipated the transition to new wartime understandings of the British nation.⁶⁵ Moreover, beneath their veneer of merriment the Mecca novelty dances, like the English style, clearly demarcated what was *not* British, in profoundly anti-American and racialized terms. Finally, close consideration of the Mecca dances provides strong insight into the negotiations entered into between the dance hall industry and dancing public over the content of the national dance culture, and the vision of national identity that it embodied. Significantly, with the exception of the Lambeth Walk, the public largely rejected the supposed Englishness or Britishness of the Mecca dances, and it was not their content but their merit as dances which seems to have determined whether or not they were successful.

⁶⁵ On interwar national identity, see Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars*, (London: Routledge, 1991); Alex Potts, "Constable Country Between the Wars," in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, Vol. III, ed. Raphael Samuel, (New York: Routledge, 1989), 160-186; Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Matthew Grimley, "The Religion of Englishness: Puritanism, Providentialism, and 'National Character,' 1918-1940, *Journal of British Studies* 46 (October 2007), 884-906; Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). On national identity during the Second World War see: Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991); Sonya Rose, *Which People's War?*.

Soon after Adele England had fulfilled C.L. Heimann's request for a ballroom version of Lupino Lane's Lambeth Walk, the two staged an exhibition of the dance at Mecca's Streatham Locarno dance hall. Mecca also launched an active publicity campaign, working with music publishers and the BBC to promote both the song and dance. It did not take long for the Lambeth Walk to catch on, and dance venues all over the country were soon complying with the public demand for the new dance. The Lambeth Walk also quickly spread beyond the British Isles, to the Continent, throughout the Empire, and to America. In October 1938, reflecting on the recent Munich Crisis, the *Times* remarked that had war not been averted, both Britain and Germany would have been marching off to the fight to the same popular dance tune. The newspaper quoted a poet, who had purportedly written at the height of the Crisis, "while dictators rage and statesmen talk, all Europe dances — to The Lambeth Walk."⁶⁶ Moreover, as additional evidence of its popularity, the dance inspired a flurry of copycats, such as the Blackpool Walk, the Southend Walk, and the Margate Walk. Over the next months and years, even while Mecca was releasing its own Lambeth Walk follow-ups, there appeared dozens of other new party dances, including the Booms-a-Daisy, the Exhibition Swing, the Gazook, the Trek, the Cherry Hop, the Palais Stroll, the Highland Swing, as well as regionally-specific favorites such as the Scottswood Shuffle, the Clapham Prom, and the

⁶⁶ Editorial, "Peace and the 'Lambeth Walk'," *The Times*, October 18, 1938.

Deptford Dip.⁶⁷ Regarding this vast array of copycat dances the *Daily Mail* observed that “the Lambeth Walk has a lot to answer for.”⁶⁸

Yet the enthusiasm displayed by the public in performing this dance goes only some distance towards understanding the Lambeth Walk phenomenon, which in many ways transcended the ballroom. It should also be noted that this novelty dance (and those that followed it) was not without its critics, particularly among dance professionals who argued that party dances were silly and ridiculous, and denigrated the integrity of ballroom dancing. However, whatever the feelings of its advocates and critics, the extent to which the Lambeth Walk pervaded British society was remarkable. The King and Queen were reported to have performed the dance at Balmoral, and many of Britain’s leading stars of stage and screen participated in a celebrity performance at the Coliseum. The dance became a staple number of 1938’s Christmas pantomimes, to the point that Lupino Lane’s production company had to threaten lawsuits for copyright infringement.⁶⁹ In May 1939, *Me and My Girl* became one of the first musicals ever to be broadcast over the new medium of television, and the following year Lane produced a film version, re-titling it *The Lambeth Walk*.⁷⁰

The song and dance were so ubiquitous that they developed a cultural currency that could be drawn upon in many different contexts. The Labour Party composed a

⁶⁷ The Deptford Dip was actually created by Parliamentary candidate for Deptford, Eric Cuddon, as a campaign ploy. Of Cuddon’s efforts the *Daily Mail* commented, “this, I imagine, is an entirely novel way of trying to woo the electorate. If it turns out to be successful, Captain Cunningham-Reid will no doubt regret that he didn’t invent the Marylebone Minuet, or the Baker-street Stroll.” See Charles Graves, “I See Life by Charles Graves,” *Daily Mail*, March 2, 1939, 8.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jonah Barrington, “Oi! No Doin’ the Lambeth Walk in the Pantos,” *Daily Express*, November 11, 1938, 3.

⁷⁰ For more on the film version of *Me and My Girl*, see Stephen Guy, “Calling All Stars: Musical Films in a Musical Decade,” in *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929-1939*, ed. Jeffrey Richards, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 108-114.

campaign song to the tune of the Lambeth Walk, and a number of other companies and organizations followed suit, producing such dances as “The Printers’ Walk,” created for a meeting of printers in Brighton.⁷¹ In October 1939, following the outbreak of the Second World War, a parody entitled “Hitler’s Lambeth Walk” began to circulate in penny pamphlet form, with the lyrics changed to mock Nazi leaders and describe an easy Allied victory.⁷² A filmmaker also later produced “Lambeth Walk – Nazi Style,” which inserted the song into reedited scenes from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. The actual Lambeth Walk, a short street in south London, became a site of particular public interest and symbolic resonance. In September 1939, the *Evening Standard* followed children from Lambeth Walk to Surrey as a means of examining the impact of the evacuation; later, when bombs began to rain down on London, Lambethians were photographed dancing in the rubble-strewn street as a symbol of Britain’s endurance.⁷³ Long after the Lambeth Walk had disappeared from dance floors and the airwaves of BBC it retained a lingering cultural resonance; to this day there is a pub in south London called the “Lambeth Walk.” Thus, the question that inevitably emerges from all this is what precisely it was about this dance that caused it to have such a tremendous, and long-lived, cultural and social impact.

As I have suggested already, by the late 1930s popular dancing in Britain had reached something of a stagnant point. Two decades had passed since the dancing boom which followed the end of the First World War, and the English style of ballroom

⁷¹ It should be noted that Mass Observation stated that this song was never actually used by the Labour Party, though a copy of the lyrics remain in the Mass Observation Archive. See M-O A: TC 38/2/D, Lambeth Walk cont’d, 1939; Clipping from *Sussex Daily News*, February 6, 1939, found in M-O A: TC 38/1, Additional Material, February 6, 1939.

⁷² M-O A: TC 38/6/A, Jazz Literature, April 12, 1939.

⁷³ “Dancing Amid the Ruins Down Lambeth Way,” *Daily Sketch*, September 19, 1940. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/2/G.

dancing, once considered to be innovative and provocative, had become mainstream and rigidly standardized. The dances had evolved to a point of such standardization and complexity that dancing lessons became virtually a necessity for anyone wishing to take to the floor, the opportunity for which was limited to those who had the time, inclination, and money for instruction. But even for those who were adequately trained in ballroom dancing, the standard four were growing somewhat tiresome; nothing truly new had appeared in British dancing since the Charleston in the mid-1920s, and for years observers of dancing had been speculating that something was needed to shake things up in the ballroom. Into this void entered the Lambeth Walk – simple, fun, and totally different. As one commentator noted, the Lambeth Walk freed the British dancing public from “every law of ‘rise and fall,’ ‘contrary movement,’ ‘sway,’ etc., and up rise these non-dancers, these wallflowers, these nobodies, and take the floor, the band puts on paper hats and lets itself go, and the party spirit is amongst us.”⁷⁴

Of course, throughout the years of dancing stagnation hundreds of new dances had come and gone without having nearly the impact of the Lambeth Walk. And while part of the dance’s appeal was certainly its simplicity and accessibility, it was also not the only, nor even the first, novelty dance; both the Palais Glide and the American-made Big Apple had been floating around the dance halls for some time before the arrival of the Lambeth Walk, but only enjoyed real success once the latter had spurred enthusiasm for these sorts of dances. Mecca’s promotional campaign, and the zeal with which the popular media embraced the Lambeth Walk phenomenon, also only partly explain why it was this, and not another party dance, that caught on with such tenacity. Therefore, I want to suggest that what set the Lambeth Walk apart from all the other new dances that

⁷⁴ Eric Y. Tilley, “Slow Foxtrot or Lambeth Walk,” *Modern Dance and Dancer*, May 1939, 18.

had failed to enjoy even a fraction of its success, was the promotion and public acceptance of the Lambeth Walk as something authentically British, and symbolic of the national spirit.

In the summer of 1938 C.L. Heimann told *The Star* newspaper, “there has never been anything quite like ‘The Lambeth Walk’ in English dancing. Practically everything popular here came from America. ‘The Lambeth Walk’ has changed all that. It has the happy spirit of the old English round dances.”⁷⁵ Heimann’s comment reflected the two main features of the public commentary that circulated around the Lambeth Walk – that it was British-made, in a time when so much British popular culture originated in the United States, and that it was authentically British in its content, perhaps even harkening back to older national dance forms. Regarding the first issue, contemporary discourses reflected a general belief that the success of the Lambeth Walk marked an important reassertion of British cultural autonomy. Adele England told *Mass Observation* that it was the greatest English dance success the world had ever seen.⁷⁶ In turn, *Mass Observation*’s Tom Harrison suggested in the *Picture Post* that British music and dancing were at last making a stand against the sea of American imports, referring to the Lambeth Walk as “the biggest blow to American influence.”⁷⁷ He argued that the dance’s success represented a real challenge to American cultural supremacy, not just at home but abroad, a notion that was also espoused by others, particularly once the Lambeth Walk was exported to the United States. In late 1938, Jack Payne, one of Britain’s leading bandleaders, commented in the *Evening News*, “ever since Irving Berlin tickled our feet

⁷⁵ “This Man Made the World Shout ‘Oi!’,” *The Star*, August 16, 1938. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/2/G.

⁷⁶ Adele England quoted in Madge and Harrison, *Britain*, 161.

⁷⁷ Tom Harrison, “The Birth of a Dance,” *Picture Post*, January 7, 1939, 46.

with his little masterpiece ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band,’ American composers...have been giving us foxtrots and quicksteps lauding the panoramic delights of every State within the Union ...it is pleasing to find at long last that the compliment can be wholeheartedly reciprocated.”⁷⁸ As I suggested in the previous section, there had been multiple attempts throughout the interwar period to quell the increasing Americanization of British popular dance culture, resulting in the anglicization of American ballroom dances and the creation of British dances like the five-step and trebla. Now at long last the British dance community had a bona fide hit to call its own.

Secondly, the Lambeth Walk was celebrated for more than being a dance made in Britain, but for being authentically British in its content as well. Despite the fact that the modern genesis of Mecca’s Lambeth Walk was not concealed, attempts were made by its creators to establish a longer tradition for the dance form. Lupino Lane confirmed the authenticity of the dance in an interview with *Mass Observation*, stating, “I got the idea from my personal experience and from having worked among cockneys. I’m a cockney born and bred myself. The Lambeth Walk is just an exaggerated idea of how the cockney struts.”⁷⁹ The composer of the song, Douglas Furber, similarly claimed to have drawn inspiration from working-class people in his Yorkshire childhood.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, multiple newspapers began reminding readers that there had been a music hall song called the Lambeth Walk back around the turn of the century, popularized by Marie Lloyd’s husband Alec Hurley. While there was no direct connection between Hurley and Lupino Lane’s versions of the Lambeth Walk, Mecca latched on to this longer history,

⁷⁸ Jack Payne, “About this Lambeth Frolic,” *Evening News*, December 15, 1938, 11. Clipping in M-O A: TC 38/2/E.

⁷⁹ Madge and Harrison, *Britain*, 159.

⁸⁰ See Samuel and Light, “Doing the Lambeth Walk,” 267.

mentioning Hurley in a short book the company released about all its novelty dances in 1942.⁸¹ The only prominent figure in the Lambeth Walk's production who did not attempt to reinforce the dance's authenticity was Adele England, who openly admitted to Mass Observation that she had not drawn inspiration from, nor even investigated cockney culture before developing the steps of the dance. Rather, she designed the Lambeth Walk based on her knowledge and experience of what proved popular in the dance halls.⁸²

England's comments suggest that Mecca's primary motive in creating the Lambeth Walk was not to celebrate or restore an authentic working-class cultural tradition, but rather to create a popular dance that would bring people into their dance halls. This is not surprising, since Mecca was first and foremost a business, and the market forces at work in the production of the Lambeth Walk cannot be ignored. As the history of the dance makes clear, Mecca, the dominant force in British commercial dance culture, had considerable power in shaping what would be danced not only in its own halls, but all over the nation. The British people embraced the manufactured vision of popular tradition represented in Mecca's Lambeth Walk, validating and confirming it in their own acceptance and performance of the dance. However, the Lambeth Walk phenomenon was more complex than a simple case of cultural manipulation and social control. Rather, in the production and consumption of the dance, Mecca and the public negotiated the content and performance of the Lambeth Walk in ways that made the dance, whatever its real origins, a recognized part of the national culture and a site for the construction and embodiment of national identity.

⁸¹ Adele England, *How to Dance C.L. Heimann's Novelty Dances* (London: Danceland Publications, 1942), 16.

⁸² Madge and Harrisson, *Britain*, 159.

Significantly, the Lambeth Walk's producers were not the only ones to perpetuate the notion that it represented an authentic British cultural tradition. The popular press was also a potent force in validating the dance's legitimacy. Seeking a history of the Lambeth Walk, the *Manchester Guardian* turned to Major Cecil Taylor, president of the Imperial Society for Teachers of Dancing, who duly reported that "costers on Hampstead Heath danced like this sixty years ago."⁸³ Editors at the *Modern Dance and Dancer* also wrote that they had conducted their own study of the dance's history and evolution, similarly confirming that "[it] originated at the fairgrounds of London, when the costers took their concertinas, combs and paper, and danced with their donahs."⁸⁴

Real-life Lambethians were also eager to lay claim to the dance. In interviews conducted by Mass Observation in the actual Lambeth Walk, many local people willingly confirmed that the song and dance had a long history, dating back perhaps as far as half a century, and that the latest incarnation was merely a revival. This belief is not surprising given the existence of the old Alec Hurley music hall song, though most Lambethians suggested that the earlier version of the dance that they knew often went by a different name. One woman recalled that she performed the Lambeth Walk, "oh years ago when we were little shirt buttons. Fifty years ago. We called it the jig."⁸⁵ Another man remembered that prior to Lupino Lane's version, "we had our own show. It hadn't any name. But we always used to say 'Oi!'"⁸⁶

The belief that the Lambeth Walk represented an authentic cockney, and thus British, cultural form was expressed by many participants and spectators of the dance

⁸³ "The Birth of a Dance," *Manchester Guardian*, 26 July 1938, 10. Clipping in M-O A: TC 38/2/G.

⁸⁴ "Oi!," *Modern Dance and Dancer*, July 1938, 11-12.

⁸⁵ Madge and Harrison, *Britain*, 144.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

outside Lambeth as well. In a list establishing the origins of Mecca's Lambeth Walk, Mass Observation's Madge and Harrison put in the number one position, "the cockneys of Lambeth and elsewhere whose walk [Lupino] Lane imitated."⁸⁷ Research conducted by the social research organization also showed that approximately a quarter of British people surveyed believed that the dance had originated with "Lambeth, costers or Cockneys."⁸⁸ One observer told Mass Observation, "I understand the Lambeth Walk is a coster dance, and I imagine it originated with the costers and girls promenading."⁸⁹ Thus, whatever its true origins, the British public seemed to identify something historically British in Mecca's Lambeth Walk, and reinforced the dance's authenticity as much as its creators did. As another observer of the dance remarked, "[the] thing that struck me was the way the dancers seemed to throw themselves into the part, as though they were play-acting, especially the men, who seemed to fancy they were costers, imitating their mannerisms."⁹⁰

This comment is suggestive about the extent to which, just as I described with respect to the English style and truckin' in the previous section, it was in the physical performance of the Lambeth Walk that much of its meaning was created. It was not merely rhetoric, whether it was produced by Mecca or the public, which connected the dance to British cultural tradition and national identity; rather, the Lambeth Walk also created a site where ideas about the nation could be embodied and performed. More specifically, through their physical performance of the dance, Britons transformed the

⁸⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 166.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 166.

⁹⁰ M-O A: TC 38/2/C, Material used for Lambeth Walk Chapter in Britain.

Lambeth Walk according to individual and regional preferences, and expressed changing understandings of national identity.

It must be noted that with its London theme, and its creators' frequent references to the remarkable local and international success of an "English" dance, the Lambeth Walk fell short of being a truly "national" cultural form. So though the British people acknowledged the cockney theme of the Lambeth Walk, they also sought to extend its geographic range through their performance of the dance, modifying and adapting it to be more national in scope. As I mentioned above, there were a number of regional variations of the Lambeth Walk, focused on places like Margate and Blackpool. In Scotland, dancers changed the customary "Oi!" at the end of the dance to an "Och Aye."⁹¹ At the same time, the British dancing public constantly altered the steps of the dance, reflecting local preferences and customs. As Adele England noted, "people will do it in their own way," while another woman remarked, "nobody seems to do it the same."⁹² Thus, in their physical performance of the dance, the public played a vital part in shaping its content and meaning well beyond the visions espoused by Lupino Lane or the Mecca organization, transforming the Lambeth Walk into a truly British dance form.

While Britons attempted to expand the scope of the Lambeth Walk beyond one short London road to the whole of the nation, they also tended to confirm the working-class themes of the dance. One woman noted that the dance was "common, particularly the 'Oi' bit at the end, and I think it is lovely to be common and let yourself go in these

⁹¹ Madge and Harrison, *Britain*, 163.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 161; 167.

days of refinement.”⁹³ Moreover, as Raphael Samuel and Alison Light have noted, the musical *Me and My Girl*, which first introduced Lupino Lane’s Lambeth Walk, was like a modern enthronement of the Lords of Misrule, a fun reversal of the traditional social hierarchy that allowed the working-class, as embodied in Bill Snibson, to ascend. Samuel and Light further argue that “the comedy as a whole offered a fantastic easing of class differences in which the claims of common humanity reigned supreme...The working class, however rough their ways, are basically harmless; the aristocracy, however stuck-up, benevolent; the English a race of lovable eccentrics.”⁹⁴ Stephen Guy has similarly argued with respect to the film version of the show that it was in the Lambeth Walk that “The meeting of the classes is symbolized.”⁹⁵ The dance retained this spirit in its transition to the public ballroom, and many Britons did believe that in their performance of the dance they were paying tribute to the working classes, and to class harmony in general. One dancer noted, “I always feel that it draws all classes of society together ... The whole thing gives out friendliness and makes me like the costers better.”⁹⁶

This evocation and celebration of class unity and of the “ordinary” Briton anticipated ideas about national identity that would become even more evident and important once the country entered the Second World War. As many scholars have shown, during the so-called “people’s war,” the nation’s self-understanding was inextricably tied to ideas about class breakdown, national unity, and the vital role played by the average person in winning the war, and as Gareth Stedman Jones has argued, the

⁹³ Ibid., 173. It is important to acknowledge that not everyone Mass Observation surveyed were enamored of the Lambeth Walk, and class prejudice was occasionally displayed in some people’s response to the dance. However, public enthusiasm generally outweighed public condemnation.

⁹⁴ Samuel and Light, “Doing the Lambeth Walk,” 267.

⁹⁵ Guy, “Calling All Stars,” 112.

⁹⁶ Madge and Harrison, *Britain*, 171.

latter ideal was personified in the cockney.⁹⁷ Like the geographic breadth of the nation, these became ideals that the British people were able to experience and embody in their performance of the Lambeth Walk. The dance allowed all Britons to participate, whether or not they could afford instruction in ballroom dancing. As Lupino Lane remarked, “rich and poor alike – there is no class distinction about dancing. Anyone can do the ‘Lambeth Walk’ and nearly everyone does.”⁹⁸ The communal performance of the dance also inspired feelings of camaraderie and community, allowing Britons of different classes to imagine that they were one happy dancing unit. While classes would rarely have mingled in their performance of the Lambeth Walk, the popularity and ubiquity of the dance further reinforced the idea that it was a shared national experience.

Moreover, this general accessibility, as well as the physical enactment of class harmony represented in the Lambeth Walk, also served to cultivate the idea that the dance reflected Britain’s long history of democracy. C.L. Heimann often expressed the belief that his novelty dances showcased the nation’s democratic spirit, and Lupino Lane also proffered this suggestion, stating in *Answers*, “ours is a truly great democratic nation, and such institutions as the ‘Lambeth Walk’ make it more so.”⁹⁹ In January 1939, the *Picture Post* featured an article entitled “The Birth of a Dance,” which was written by Mass Observation’s Tom Harrison, and charted the creation and dissemination of Mecca’s first follow-up to the Lambeth Walk, the Chestnut Tree. The article also featured

⁹⁷ See Gareth Stedman Jones, “The ‘Cockney’ and the Nation, 1780-1988,” in *Metropolis-London: Histories and Representations Since 1800*, ed. David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones, (London: Routledge, 1989), 272-324; See also Rose, *Which People’s War?*; Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*.

⁹⁸ Lupino Lane, “About This (You know) Walk,” *Answers*, December 10, 1938, 9. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/2/E.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

an interview with C.L. Heimann, who had this to say about the appeal and importance of the Mecca novelty dances:

“I claim, rightly or wrongly, that the Lambeth Walk and Chestnut Tree are typically English. The difference between the English people and those who follow Hitler and Mussolini as I see it, is between the arms of Hitler and Musso, and the arms of the King. Musso puts his hand over his head and everyone else does and that means the rule of iron. The King puts his hand above his head and everyone else does when they sing The Chestnut Tree, and that means democracy.”¹⁰⁰

Heimann suggested that it was their very ability to follow a leader in dance rather than in marching that separated the British from their future military enemies in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.¹⁰¹ When the Lambeth Walk was later banned in these countries, Heimann further declared to Mass Observation that the dances were simply “too peace making” for the likes of Hitler and Mussolini.¹⁰²

The British public also embraced this notion that the Lambeth Walk, and dancing in general, were symbolic of democracy and the national spirit. Mass Observation’s Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge justified their inclusion of an entire chapter about the dance in a book about the national reaction to the Munich Crisis by noting, “we may learn something about the future of democracy if we take a closer look at the Lambeth Walk.”¹⁰³ In September 1940, at the height of the Blitz, the *Daily Sketch* photographed a group of Londoners performing the Lambeth Walk amidst the ruins resulting from a recent German air-raid. A caption beneath the image read, “the gallant Cockneys of Lambeth Walk refuse to be downhearted. They still keep up their famous dance, and they

¹⁰⁰ Tom Harrisson, “The Birth of a Dance,” *Picture Post*, January 7, 1939, 48-49.

¹⁰¹ Peter Bailey has recently noted that a parallel discourse existed around music hall in the late 1930s, in which humor and the “pleasures of the people” became symbolic of democracy and national solidarity, and also stood in contrast to the militant and coercive uses of leisure by the Nazis. See Bailey, “Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion,” 506.

¹⁰² M-O A: TC 38/3/A, C.L. Heimann, March 12, 1938.

¹⁰³ Madge and Harrisson, *Britain*, 140.

can smile.”¹⁰⁴ This notion that the British public would “keep smiling through” wartime adversity was intrinsic to contemporary notions of a people’s war, and wartime understandings of national identity.¹⁰⁵ In the Lambeth Walk, many Britons found a potent means of expressing and embodying these ideals.

The Lambeth Walk thus came to retain a host of cultural meanings that extended well beyond C.L. Heimann’s goal of creating a simple party dance that would bring the masses into Mecca dance halls. Both the dance hall industry and the British dancing public helped to establish the Lambeth Walk as a longstanding national cultural tradition, and the dance provided a site for the creation and physical embodiment of a vision of a British national identity that evoked democracy, the common working man, and the wartime spirit. Though the Lambeth Walk was created as an arguably profit-driven stratagem of the Mecca organization, through the intervention of the British public it became an authentic part of the national culture. Yet the commercial motives that were central to Mecca’s original production of the Lambeth Walk must be recalled in the consideration of the company’s subsequent novelty dances, and particularly in the public reception of them.

Indeed, the craze for the Lambeth Walk had in no way abated when Mecca premiered its second novelty dance, the Chestnut Tree, in November 1938. With this dance, and the three that followed it, Mecca maintained the formula that had been so successful with the Lambeth Walk; all of the dances were designed to be relatively simple to learn, and were based around a supposedly English theme. In the case of the

¹⁰⁴ “Dancing Amid the Ruins Down Lambeth Way,” *Daily Sketch*, 19 September 1940. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/2/G.

¹⁰⁵ See Rose, *Which Peoples War?*; Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*. The part played by dancing in helping to express wartime national identity will be discussed at much greater length in Chapter Six.

Chestnut Tree, the dance was inspired by a newsreel image of King George VI joining in a camp sing-along of the old folk song “The Village Blacksmith” taken sometime in the summer of 1938. The widely-seen image of the King tapping his head in the tradition of the folk song purportedly provided inspiration to composer Jimmy Kennedy, charged with coming up with Mecca’s next novelty dance tune.¹⁰⁶ Kennedy recreated the “The Village Blacksmith” as “The Chestnut Tree,” and once again Adele England developed the dance. In the same simple style as the Lambeth Walk, dancers circled the floor mimicking the growth of a tree, and concluded by boisterously exclaiming “CHESTNUTS!”

Mecca’s promotional campaign for the Chestnut Tree was much more organized, and on a much grander scale than the one it had developed for the Lambeth Walk. Heimann and his public relations manager, Byron Davies, created the stratagem of giving the Chestnut Tree a national launch, based around the idea that the whole of the nation could learn and share in the newest dance at the exact same moment. On the evening of November 15, 1938, the Chestnut Tree was introduced simultaneously at every Mecca dance hall throughout the country. On-staff professional dancers demonstrated the dance first, and then invited patrons to join in, with the words to Jimmy Kennedy’s song prominently displayed on large banners around the halls so that people could sing along. Adele England herself introduced the dance at the Streatham Locarno, and later went on tour to further promote the dance around the nation. In addition, Mecca sent advance information about the Chestnut Tree (instructions on steps, images, music, lyrics banners, etc.) to both the press and non-Mecca dance halls free of charge, in the hope that these forums would further spread word of its newest novelty dance. The company also joined

¹⁰⁶ Tom Harrisson, “Birth of a Dance,” *Picture Post*, January 7, 1939, 45.

forces with Peter Maurice Music Company to promote and distribute the Chestnut Tree song. On the same day that the dance debuted in Mecca halls, sheet music and gramophone records also went up for sale, each containing written or recorded instruction on how to perform the dance, while Jack Payne's band launched the song on the BBC.

Only four months later, a similar and even more costly promotional campaign was launched for Mecca's third novelty dance, the Park Parade, which received its national debut on March 8, 1939.¹⁰⁷ The theme of the Park Parade was based around a couple taking a romantic stroll in the park on a summer's day; the dance's big finish, along the lines of "Oi" or "Chestnuts!" required dancers to shout "Yippee, ain't love grand!" The Park Parade was also considered to be more like a real dance than its predecessors, with a change from foxtrot (four-four) to waltz (three-four) time halfway through. The steps were once again designed by Adele England, to go along with a song composed by Arthur Young, Tommy Duggan, and Anthony Page. Like the Chestnut Tree, the Park Parade had a simultaneous premiere at all the Mecca halls throughout the country, and the dance was made the grand finale of a variety show at the London Hippodrome, debuting there on the same evening. It also received even more advertising than the Chestnut Tree, with posters on the sides of buses and in the London Underground, and as an additional promotional tool Mecca introduced a free gift element to the Park Parade launch. During the dance's demonstration at Mecca halls nationwide, real straw hats were distributed to patrons to sport during the dance – not paper "carnival novelties," Mecca

¹⁰⁷ According to an interview conducted with C.L. Heimann by Mass Observation, Mecca spent £500 promoting the Lambeth Walk, £1,000 on the Chestnut Tree, and £3,000 on the Park Parade. M-O A: TC 38/3/C, Park Parade Premiere, February 8, 1939.

was quick to note, but real hats that would cost four to six shillings in a shop – which were supposed to complement the outdoor theme.¹⁰⁸

Both the Chestnut Tree and the Park Parade enjoyed credible, if short-lived, success. Proponents of novelty dances in general deemed the Chestnut Tree fun and easy, while some more serious dancers tended to prefer the Park Parade's added complexity. Though neither dance attained anything like the status of the Lambeth Walk, they were generally well-received. Mecca was far less successful, however, with its fourth novelty dance, the Handsome Territorial. With a song composed by Jimmy Kennedy and Michael Carr, and dance movements by Adele England, the Handsome Territorial was described by many as more of a march than a dance. Comprised of the same type of simple movements as its predecessors, the climax required the dancers to shout "BOOM!" while performing a military salute. The dance was introduced during the summer of 1939, on the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War, and with its military theme, Mecca promoted the dance as being particularly topical, and "astoundingly appropriate to current events."¹⁰⁹

The Handsome Territorial debuted at the Locarno on June 13, 1939, but with far less fanfare than the Chestnut Tree and Park Parade. Adele England told Mass Observation's Alec Hughes that Mecca wanted to see if another dance could be successful without a large promotional campaign, as the Lambeth Walk had been.¹¹⁰ No doubt this reduction in publicity accounts to some extent for the Handsome Territorial's lack of impact, yet it must also be attributed to the inferiority of the dance itself. Hughes' report for Mass Observation suggested that even some of its creators and promoters

¹⁰⁸ M-O A: TC 38/3/D, Park Parade press bulletin.

¹⁰⁹ M-O A: TC 38/3/E, Press Bulletin for Handsome Territorial, 1939.

¹¹⁰ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Handsome Territorial Premiere, June 13, 1939.

seemed dubious about the quality of the dance. England herself felt that Heimann's determination to release a new novelty every few months was diminishing the quality of what was being created, telling Mass Observation, "it is mad to bring out so many dances, though I am the last who should say it... These things just come to you. You might just think of a good idea, like Lambeth Walk, and make a success of it. But you can't do that when you have to turn them out on a certain date."¹¹¹ She later admitted to being nervous about touring the country with the Handsome Territorial, and apparently with good reason. At the dance's Locarno premiere, once the hall's professional dancers had completed the exhibition, no patrons joined in at all. When the dance was introduced at the Paramount several days later, the reception was little better. Patrons at both premieres described the dance as "daft," "crazy," "awful." Hughes overheard one woman remark to her friend about Adele England and her new dance, "I think I could write better than that myself."¹¹² Another woman stated, "of course I'm not going to dance a thing like that. They'd have to drag me on the floor first."¹¹³ Hughes himself concluded that the dance was "still born."¹¹⁴

Yet the Handsome Territorial's chilly reception did not stop Mecca from proceeding with the launch of its next dance. On December 12, 1939, Heimann and England premiered *Knees Up, Mother Brown* at the Paramount dance hall in London. Like the Lambeth Walk, the dance had its roots in an old music hall song, and promotional materials were once again provided free of charge to the press and non-Mecca halls. The press bulletin also reflected Britain's changed reality after September

¹¹¹ M-O A: TC 38/5/G, Interview with Adele England, *Dancing Teachers*, June 5, 1939.

¹¹² M-O A: TC 38/1/B, *The Handsome Territorial*. Paramount. June 14, 1939.

¹¹³ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, *Handsome Territorial*, June 13, 1939.

¹¹⁴ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, *The Handsome Territorial*. Paramount. June 13, 1939.

1939, stating that Mecca was “at your service to make dancing prosperous in war time.”¹¹⁵ Indeed, the outbreak of the war goes some way towards explaining why Knees Up, Mother Brown made little real impact; it was in competition with another, perhaps more timely novelty dance, the Black-out Stroll, produced by one of Mecca’s competitors that same fall. But there was also now less eagerness among some members of the dance industry and public to embrace Heimann’s latest novelty; they had clearly lost patience with the Mecca dances and their fly-by-night popularity. The manager of the Aspin Hall in Bolton, told Mass Observation, “I’ve not bothered with the last one – Knees Up, Mother Brown. [Mecca has] written to me about it...but I reckon it isn’t worth bothering about. Why take all the trouble to get the stuff to learn it and then put it across for it to die out in about a week? It’s not worth it.”¹¹⁶ While Knees Up, Mother Brown did have a few proponents, it had little lasting impact as a dance.

Therefore, despite the fact that with the Chestnut Tree, the Park Parade, the Handsome Territorial, and Knees Up Mother Brown, Mecca strived to exactly replicate the combination of factors that had created the success of the Lambeth Walk – simplicity and British content – each was less successful than the last. No doubt part of the reason for this was that some of the “novelty” in novelty dances had simply worn off. The public had been overwhelmed with five of these dances in less than two years, not to mention all of the other non-Mecca party dances that came and went in the same time period, and had grown weary of the repetition. Yet mere boredom on the part of the public does not provide a true picture of the public reception of the Mecca novelty dances, particularly

¹¹⁵ M-O A: TC 38/7/B, Knees Up Mother Brown flyer, December 1939.

¹¹⁶ M-O A: Worktown 48/D, Aspin Hall, January 8, 1940.

when one considers the success of the Black-out Stroll, and the fact that the outbreak of the war saw something of a resurgence of interest in novelty dances in general.

Rather, the reception of the Mecca dances presents a more complex picture about the public consumption of popular dance culture, and the part played by dancers in determining what cultural meanings would be associated with and performed through a dance. For in articulating their feelings about the four dances, the British dancing public and the dance profession called upon the first element of Mecca's rhetoric about its dances (simplicity and accessibility) but rarely the second (Britishness.) If a person liked novelty dances, they tended to like the new ones produced by Mecca; if they did not like novelty dances, they disliked Mecca's dances as much as any others. As with the five-step and trebla a decade earlier, the dances' supposed Britishness seemed to play little part in determining how individual Britons reacted to them. Despite Mecca's best efforts to sell their dances as national cultural forms, proponents and critics alike focused on the novelties' value merely as dances, not *British* dances.

As I have suggested already, all the Mecca novelty dances were designed with a specific goal of being universally appealing. With the Lambeth Walk the focus had been on the dance's ease and accessibility, a truly democratic dance that anyone could take part in. Mecca pushed this ideal of simplicity with its other four novelty dances as well, even to the point of suggesting that they were appropriate for children. Special morning sessions were held at some Mecca halls to teach children the new dances free of charge. Images of young children were also common in advertisements for the dances. The promotional materials for the Handsome Territorial noted that like its predecessors, "it is entirely free from any taint of 'sex' and therefore appropriate for Parties and for

Children.”¹¹⁷ However, Mecca’s formula for broad-based interest in its dances was even more complex than simply creating easy-to-perform dances. Mecca wanted its dances to appeal to *everyone* and subtle differences between the dances were targeted at separate consumers. Since dancing was often perceived to be a leisure pursuit dominated by the young, Adele England deliberately inserted elements of the Polka, an old-time dance, into the Chestnut Tree, thinking that this would make it more appealing to older dancers.¹¹⁸ With the Park Parade, Mecca attempted to appease the critics of novelty dances who argued that they were not really ballroom dances at all, by introducing more complexity, and a mid-dance switch from foxtrot to waltz time. With its various novelty dances Mecca tried to ensure that there was something for everyone, a notion that was also reflected in how the novelties were performed in the dance halls. Mecca halls often play the novelty dances together in a sequence known as the “Heimann Medley.” Patrons therefore knew that if they liked the Park Parade more than the Chestnut Tree, they did not have to wait long for their favorite dance to be played, and, Mecca likely hoped, would not leave the dance floor.

The distinctions between the various Mecca novelty dances did figure into their reception to a considerable degree. Some dancers preferred the Chestnut Tree or the Park Parade for the very reasons that Mecca had predicted. In a survey conducted jointly by Mass Observation and the dance periodical published by Mecca, *Danceland*, many respondents noted that they preferred the Park Parade to the Chestnut Tree because there was “more to it,” and it was more of a “real” dance.¹¹⁹ As one man wrote, “the Park Parade has more charm and style than the Chestnut Tree, it has variety and more

¹¹⁷ M-O A: TC 38/3/E, Press Bulletin for Handsome Territorial, 1939.

¹¹⁸ M-O A: TC 38/3/A, The Chestnut Tree, December 7, 1938.

¹¹⁹ M-O A: TC 38/6/F, Danceland Questionnaire, April 1939.

opportunity for real dancing as compared with the rather miming actions of the Chestnut Tree.”¹²⁰ Most patrons therefore had their personal favorite among the novelty dances; there was also some variation from hall to hall, town to town, in terms of whether it was the Chestnut Tree, the Park Parade, or even the Handsome Territorial that was most popular. How a dance would “go over” also often depended on the location or simply the night in question. Novelty dances tended to be very successful at private dances, since everyone generally knew one another and were less inhibited and concerned about looking foolish. Mass Observation also noted that all of the Mecca dances were enthusiastically performed at a New Year’s Even dance in Bolton; something about the festive atmosphere of the holiday was conducive to the communal merriment of novelty dances. The observer noted, “the effect produced [by the dances] was one of terrific excitement. The band was playing full blast, everyone was singing the words ... and the floor was vibrating [and] sinking a good 4-6 inches in the centre of the room.”¹²¹ But though there was considerable diversity in when, where, and why people enjoyed novelty dances, there were some common sentiments put forth by enthusiasts of the dances, often directly corresponding to Mecca’s intentions. Proponents suggested that novelty dances had restored fun to the ballroom; that they were simple and enabled even the most inexperienced dancers to participate; that they were a welcome change from twenty years of foxtrot variations. Many of those responding to the *Danceland* questionnaire also simply expressed that the dances were “happy.”¹²²

Among professional dancers, the response to the Mecca novelty dances was decidedly mixed. Some believed that the dances’ virtue was that they had restored public

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ M-O A: Worktown 48/D, Bolton Palais, January 1, 1940.

¹²² M-O A: TC 38/6/F, Danceland Questionnaire, April 1939.

interest in dancing, and expressed the hope that once people entered the dance halls to participate in novelty dances they would be inspired to take up ballroom dancing in a more serious manner. James Quinn, a professional dancer who along with his partner Florence Mills was Mecca's chief demonstrator of the novelty dances, told Mass Observation, "[these dances get] people to dance who otherwise would not. They learn simple dances like this and, finding they like them, it encourages them to learn the more complicated ballroom dances."¹²³ Dancing teacher Alex Moore similarly wrote in the *Dancing Times* that novelty dances "[have made] ballrooms much brighter, and [have] also had the effect of inducing thousands of non-dancers literally to 'walk' on the ballroom floor for the first time."¹²⁴ Major Cecil Taylor went so far as to state that "the Lambeth Walk came as a godsend. The ballroom had become so melancholy for want of something of a joyous nature that the Lambeth Walk brought back to the ballroom what had been lacking for 20 years."¹²⁵ However Taylor, and other prominent members of the dance profession such as Victor Silvester (who similarly acknowledged that party dances had restored fun and enthusiasm to dancing), also categorically asserted that the novelties were not "real" dances.

This was the mantra most often take up by professional critics of novelty dances, who also suggested that because of their similarity to old-time sequence dancing the dances were old-fashioned and halted any progressive development in modern ballroom dancing. Famous teacher of dancing Monsieur Pierre wrote in the *Modern Dance and*

¹²³ M-O A: TC 38/3/A, The Chestnut Tree, December 7, 1938, 5.

¹²⁴ Alex Moore, "Will the War Change the English Style?" *Dancing Times*, March 1940, 357. Clipping found in Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/4/A.

¹²⁵ M-O A: TC 38/6/G, Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, June 19, 1939, 2.

Dancer, “I am disappointed because I consider we should go *ahead* not *backwards*.”¹²⁶

Other professional critics were concerned about more than technique, however, suggesting that the silly novelty dances constituted a threat to the integrity of the British ballroom. Scottish dancing teacher and ballroom manager John Gillespie wrote a very critical letter to the *Modern Dance and Dancer* suggesting that dancers were being “tortured” by the rush of party dances, and that it was paramount that the dance profession “make an effort to stop this hectic rush of stupid novelties.”¹²⁷ Most dance professionals, whether they approved of novelty dances or not, dismissed them as passing craze that would not have the same enduring appeal as the four standard ballroom dances. In his 1944 book, *The Ballroom Dancer’s Handbook*, teacher and writer A.H. Franks explained that the guide would contain no discussion of party dances at all, since “most of them are too ephemeral for serious contemplation; they have no foundation in technique and are produced chiefly for the diversion of the unhappily vast army which remains ignorant of the joy to be won from mastery of the four standard dances.”¹²⁸ Even Adele England acknowledged that most of her dances were likely to fade out quickly.¹²⁹

It should be noted that some professionals’ distaste for novelty dances resided in the effect that these dances had on their bottom line. As one teacher lamented to Mass Observation, the craze for novelty dances, because they were so simple to learn, had caused a real slump in dancing school attendance.¹³⁰ However, the criticisms of novelty dances did not only come from professionals. Despite attempts by Heimann and some

¹²⁶ Monsieur Pierre, “Those Sequence Dances!” *Modern Dance and Dancer*, May 1938, 14.

¹²⁷ John R. Gillespie, Letter to the Editor, *The Modern Dance and Dancer*, January 1938.

¹²⁸ A.H. Franks, *The Ballroom Dancer’s Handbook*, 2nd ed. (London: Isaac Pitman and Sons, Ltd. 1944), vi.

¹²⁹ M-O A: TC 38/5/G, Interview with Adele England, Dancing Teachers, June 5, 1939.

¹³⁰ M-O A: TC 38/5/G, Interview with John Rowe, Dancing Teachers, February 16, 1939.

segments of the popular press to disseminate the idea that all the Mecca novelty dances equaled the success of the Lambeth Walk, there is no question that they were not universally beloved. As I suggested above, some people worried about looking ridiculous performing the silly dances. A dance hall manager in Bolton noted, “whilst the crowd are quite prepared to laugh at the staff doing them they do not take them up well themselves. They feel conspicuous doing them.”¹³¹ Another hall manager suggested that rather than being worried about looking silly, the patrons at his establishment simply took dancing too seriously to engage in novelties: “It wouldn’t go here ... I don’t think that sort of dance catches on. The public dancers are dancers here.”¹³² The feelings of many novelty dance critics are perhaps best summed up in one man’s response to the Chestnut Tree, recorded by Mass Observation: “Silliest damn thing I’ve ever seen.”¹³³

Public and professional reaction to the Mecca novelties was therefore much divided, but what is most striking about the diverse reactions to the dances is that, unlike the response to the Lambeth Walk, there was little to no discussion of their thematic content. This was despite Mecca’s strong attempt to promote the notion that like the Lambeth Walk, all of its novelty dances were, in Heimann’s words, “typically English.” While still in the planning stages for the Lambeth Walk follow-ups, Adele England told Mass Observation, “we want to keep them all English now.”¹³⁴ Once again the dances were designed by British musicians and dancers, and contained what was purported to be British content. The Chestnut Tree was based on an old folk song, celebrated rural village life, and through the image of the king that purportedly inspired the dance, had

¹³¹ M-O A: Worktown 48/D, Aspin Hall, January 8, 1940.

¹³² M-O A: Worktown 48/C, Astoria Palais de Danse, December 18, 1939.

¹³³ M-O A: TC 38/3/A, The Chestnut Tree, November 15, 1938.

¹³⁴ Madge and Harrison, *Britain*, 161.

connections to that most British of institutions – the monarchy. The Park Parade also celebrated Britain’s natural beauty, the urban park, and pushed nostalgia through the addition of the straw hat, which was supposed to harken back to an old fashion trend, the “Strawyard,” and to a past era in general. Byron Davies, Mecca’s head of publicity, said about the Park Parade, that “the spectacle of a ballroom filled with couples with the men all wearing straw hats, creates an atmosphere reminiscent of the good old days when the only Sunday amusement was to listen to the band in the park.”¹³⁵ The Handsome Territorial, though less about nostalgia than about the “topical” threat of a looming war, paid tribute to another traditional and conservative national institution, the army. Like the Lambeth Walk, the Handsome Territorial also glorified the average, everyday Briton by focusing on a low-ranked foot soldier rather than an officer, as the lyrics demonstrate:

He wasn’t a Gen’ral
He wasn’t a Colonel
He wasn’t a Major
He wasn’t a Captain
He wasn’t a Sergeant
He wasn’t a Corp’ral
Just a member of the rank and file
She took one look at him
And her pretty little head began to swim
She liked his Left! Left!
She had a good home and she left
Cos’ he was a Handsome Territorial¹³⁶

Finally, Knees Up, Mother Brown was based on an old music hall song, represented to be, as the Lambeth Walk was, an authentic cockney song and dance.

Historians have shown that nostalgic references to Britain’s past, and espousals of the nation’s natural beauty, were common in interwar popular culture, and inextricably

¹³⁵ Byron Davies, “Dance that Revives a Fashion,” *The Entertainment Organizer and Club Secretary* 10 (March 1939), 63. Found in M-O A: TC 38/3/D, Park Parade Literature.

¹³⁶ Sheet music of Handsome Territorial. Found in M-O A: TC 38/3/E.

connected national identity. The Mecca dances were also more concerned with glorifying England, rather than Britain, part of another common interwar tendency of an inward-focus on “Little England.”¹³⁷ At the same time, the Handsome Territorial’s celebration of the military, and the Lambeth Walk’s evocation of the everyday working man, both anticipated important aspects of wartime national identity, with its strong focus on the important role played by the average person in winning the war. Moreover, C.L. Heimann’s frequent espousal of the novelty dances’ “democratic spirit,” and particularly the point he made about the negative reception of the dances in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, hinted at the manner in which dancing would be employed during the war years as a means of distinguishing Britain from its enemies: democracies danced, while dictatorships did not. Thus, like the English style of ballroom dancing, the Mecca novelty dances became a site for the construction, expression, and embodiment of what it meant to be British.

Yet interestingly, while the British dancers embraced these elements in the Lambeth Walk, they remained resistant to the idea that the other Mecca novelty dances were “typically English.” Indeed, when they did acknowledge any national element to the dances, it was often in derisive terms. An American visitor to the Streatham Locarno, upon observing an exhibition of the Handsome Territorial, remarked to Mass-Observation, “it’s screwy. That’s what you call an English dance, isn’t it?”¹³⁸ A sixteen year old girl said about the Park Parade, “Oh it’s like the Lambeth Walk – daft. That’s the

¹³⁷ See Light, *Forever England*; Alex Potts, “Constable Country Between the Wars,”; Mandler, *The English National Character*, 2006; Alun Howkins, “Greensleeves and the idea of national music,” in Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, Vol. III, (New York: Routledge, 1989); Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad’s Army*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

¹³⁸ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Handsome Territorial Premiere, June 13, 1939.

trouble with this country. When they have a thing they keep imitating it, till you get fed up with it.”¹³⁹ In addition, some dancers actually perceived the novelty dances as a threat to the true British dancing represented by the English style. One letter to the editor of the *Modern Dance and Dancer* observed, “it is conceivable that in 1938, when the whole world is looking to the British style of dancing as the best in the world ... that we should lower the dignity of the ballroom by introducing such dances.”¹⁴⁰ Two other letter writers expressed similar concerns: “For years style and grace have been the main features of British dancing. Now, with [novelty dances] all has been forgotten.”¹⁴¹

Thus, despite the fact that most of the Mecca novelty dances, particularly the Chestnut Tree and Knees Up, Mother Brown, had at least as much claim to being genuine national cultural traditions as the Lambeth Walk, the British public proved reluctant to identify anything authentic in them. In attempting to account for this, it must be recalled that almost two years passed between the creation of the Lambeth Walk and the launch of Knees Up, Mother Brown. This was a crucial time period, in which Britain moved closer to war, and ideas about national identity transitioned accordingly. As notions of national unity became increasingly prevalent, celebrations of Little England such as those evoked by the Mecca novelty dances were bound to lose some of their appeal. While popular cultural celebrations of landscape, history, and heritage would remain prevalent throughout the war years as well, in this transitional moment, the new ideals of the wartime nation may well have been more potent.

In this context, it seems likely that if any of the Mecca novelty dances was to have been accepted as truly national, it would have been the Handsome Territorial. Not only

¹³⁹ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Locarno, April 29, 1939.

¹⁴⁰ Robert Gledhill, Letter to the Editor, *Modern Dance and Dancer*, December 1938, 21.

¹⁴¹ A. Calloway and C. Smith, Letter to the Editor, *Modern Dance and Dancer*, January 1938, 20.

was it “topical” in a time when war-themed novelty dances such as the Black-out Stroll enjoyed legitimate success, the dance, like the Lambeth Walk, celebrated the ordinary Briton, which was commensurate with wartime understandings of national identity. However, unlike the Lambeth Walk, it was not admired as a dance, and quality clearly played as much, if not more of a part than thematic content in determining whether a dance would be admitted into the national culture. Moreover, the failure of the Handsome Territorial suggests that there may well have been one more issue at work in the public’s failure to accept the Mecca novelty dances as something authentically British. Some people seemed to have seen through the commercialization of the nation represented in the dance, and to have viewed the content as exploitative. Alec Hughes speculated in his report for Mass Observation that the timing of the dance was designed to coincide with the institution of conscription in the summer of 1939, and he was not the only one to express this belief or that it might be inappropriate or insensitive. A Locarno band member told Mass Observation, “[the Handsome Territorial] is a fuckin’ marching tune. I think [Mecca is] trying to cash in on the conscription business. They may get away with it.”¹⁴²

These comments reveal that many Britons were likely aware of Mecca’s efforts to produce the nation as a commercial commodity. This awareness is connected to what Peter Bailey has identified as “knowingness” within the context of Victorian music halls,¹⁴³ or what James Cook, drawing on some of the later writings of Theodor Adorno,

¹⁴² M-O A: TC 38/4/A, Mecca Bands, May 27, 1939.

¹⁴³ Peter Bailey, “Music Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture,” in *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

has termed “‘split’ consumer consciousness”¹⁴⁴ in which consumers can perceive and critically evaluate cultural products disseminated by a culture industry. In this way, the interwar dancing public was conscious, probably even with the Lambeth Walk, of the commercial processes at work in Mecca’s production of its novelty dances, even while receiving and performing them. While the case of the Lambeth Walk clearly shows a willingness on the part of the public to accept the cultural meanings, notably about nation, that the dance hall industry produced, a closer look at the reception of all five Mecca novelty dances shows that the public equally had agency in determining what vision of the nation they would accept, transform, or simply reject. This brief history also further illustrates that much of this consumer power resided in the nature of dance as a cultural form. Once Britons stepped onto the dance floor, Mecca effectively lost control of how they would perform its dances, and what meaning would be constructed. In this sense, the consumers of commercial dancing became cultural producers in their own right.

Finally, it must be noted, and many contemporary Britons likely remarked this as well, that the authentic Britishness of the Mecca novelty dances, the Lambeth Walk included, was questionable to say the least. First of all, they were all the brainchild of C.L. Heimann, who was himself not even British, but a Dane. Second, the attempt to establish any pre-Mecca origins for these dances reveals that some of them may well have originated outside the British Isles, and even, like so much interwar popular culture in Britain, in America. Before they featured in the climax of a Mecca novelty dance, the words “Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree” formed the title of a poem by Longfellow. In

¹⁴⁴ James Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. James Cook, Lawrence Glickman and Michael O’Malley, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 307.

addition, Mass Observation speculated in 1939 (and some modern scholars have also supported the notion) that the Lambeth Walk was actually derived from the American cakewalk.¹⁴⁵

That the Lambeth Walk may in fact have originated in America, particularly in black America from where the cakewalk evolved, is the final irony in the history of the Mecca novelty dances. For not only was the notion that these dances were *not* American a major part of Mecca's creative strategy and promotional campaign for all their dances, there was distinct racial element to these statements as well. In articulating what he believed to be the appeal of the Chestnut Tree, composer Tommie Connor told Mass Observation, "English dances should be for the English – [people are] getting tired of what I call Harlemaesque."¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Mecca's press release for the Chestnut Tree echoed the language employed by the dance profession in their own efforts to anglicize African American dances: "the dance itself is severely ENGLISH. So many of the new and short-lived dances that have been introduced in recent years have been American, and based on negro rhythms not suited to the English temperament."¹⁴⁷ Therefore, the Mecca novelty dances followed the tradition set by the English style in firmly establishing Britishness in terms of whiteness, and against America.

But while British dance culture had always espoused a racialized vision of national identity, by the late 1930s Mecca's insistence that their dances were not American and not black perhaps proved to be more of a hindrance than a selling point. As was discussed in the previous section, many Britons were extremely enthusiastic about

¹⁴⁵ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 409.

¹⁴⁶ M-O A: TC 38/3/A, The Chestnut Tree, November 15, 1938.

¹⁴⁷ M-O A: TC 38/3/A, Press Bulletin: The Chestnut Tree.

American cultural imports in any form. Moreover, Mecca's establishment of its novelty dances as explicitly English and explicitly white occurred at the very moment that a new dance originating in black America was first making its way across the Atlantic. In the same year that Britain was introduced to the Chestnut Tree, the Park Parade, and the Handsome Territorial, it was also introduced to the jitterbug, which was to redefine British dance culture during the war years. So while the dancing public was eager to embrace the authenticity of the Lambeth Walk, it did not infer anything truly national about Mecca's follow-up dances. Part of the reason seems to have been a cognizance that Mecca was using these supposedly British dances as a self-interested means of bringing people into their halls. Another contributing factor may well have been that Mecca's anti-American, explicitly white vision of Britishness held little appeal for a dancing public happy to be swept away by swing music and the jitterbug.

Conclusion

Throughout the interwar years both the ballroom dance profession and the dance hall industry made attempts to create an identifiably British popular dance form, and in so doing provided implicit, and at times explicit, definitions of British national identity. As this chapter has shown, the dancing public responded to these efforts only in part. As the profession's five-step and trebla, and the industry's Lambeth Walk follow-ups well demonstrate, most dancers prioritized quality over "Britishness" in their evaluations of a new dance. Moreover, captivated by America and its cultural imports, many Britons were simply less concerned with the creation of a national dance culture than the cultural producers of dancing appeared to be. The result was that Britons adopted and performed the dances that they liked most, often those originating in black America, and in so doing

embodied an alternative vision of what the nation's dance culture, and the nation itself, would look like.

At the same time, I do not mean to suggest the existence of a rigid and binary system in which the dance profession and dance hall industry were strictly racist and anti-American, while the public grasped eagerly to any new cultural product from the United States. First of all, in attempting to forge a national dance culture, the producers of dancing were in fact adhering to dominant contemporary ideologies about race, nation, and Americanization. Second, it was most often the dance profession or dance hall industry that introduced new American dances to the public, by which these producers demonstrated their own interest in American cultural products and mediated the public's consumption of them. Finally, as the discussion of the jitterbug in the next chapter will once again reiterate, particularly the dance hall industry demonstrated considerable flexibility in terms of what dances it embraced and promoted, generally prioritizing commercial interests over nationalistic zeal.

Chapter 7

Performing the People's War: Nation, Race, and Popular Dancing in Wartime Britain

On an August evening in 1940, at the height of the Battle of Britain and mere days away from the start of the sustained German bombing campaign known as the Blitz, Eric Sevareid, an American foreign correspondent for CBS stationed in London, took to the airwaves. Sevareid was broadcasting from the Hammersmith Palais, London's first and most renowned public dance hall. He began,

“I'm standing in the middle of a great big dance floor. I guess it's the biggest in England, and it's got the biggest crowd I ever saw trying to dance in one place at one time ... There was an air raid alarm ... fifteen minutes ago. The orchestra leader simply announced they'd go on playing if the crowd wished to stay, and I don't think more than a half a dozen people have left. They simply put up a big cheer and went on with their song. We're a long way from Berkeley Square. We're a six penny bus ride from the heart of London ... This is not Mayfair. Nobody comes here to be seen or to see. They come to dance, for the pure pleasure of dancing...and these shopgirls, these workers, these grocers clerks, these people who make up the stuff of England, they dance wonderfully well.”¹

In this brief speech Sevareid vividly described the vibrant dance culture that continued to thrive in Britain during the Second World War, yet his comments reflected more than the wartime public's enthusiasm for dancing. In highlighting the good cheer of the Palais patrons, as well as their fortitude and bravery in the face of a potential air raid, and in making a celebratory reference to ordinary people as those who best embodied the British nation, Sevareid was drawing on threads of a widespread wartime discourse associated

¹ IWM, Sound Archive: 20240, French civilian comments on dancing at Hammersmith Palais, recorded August 24, 1940.

with the so-called “people’s war.” Severeid’s comments also provide strong illustration of the role that popular dancing played in reflecting and expressing this mythology, and in constructing wartime national identity.

This chapter will show that during the war years popular dancing remained a space for the consideration, expression, and performance of national identity, both in terms of the idealized picture of the nation associated with the people’s war, and in terms that emphasized the escalating fluidity of racial hierarchies. The first section will argue that producers and consumers of popular dancing used the cultural form in order to highlight and express prevalent ideas about national unity, grace under fire, and the people’s ability to “keep smiling through” the difficulties of wartime. Moreover, the notion that had emerged towards the end of the interwar years, that its continued desire and ability to dance was what separated Britain from its military enemies, took on an added weight within the context of the war, and dancing provided a potent and visible expression of freedom and democracy. The second section of the chapter will then focus on one dance that was particularly associated with these ideals, the jitterbug, considering not only contemporary ideas that saw the jitterbug as an embodiment of freedom, but also the important negotiations between the dance hall industry, dance profession, and dancing public that determined the jitterbug’s development in Britain, and which suggested the ways in which the dance marked a transformative moment in British dance culture.

I will also argue that the jitterbug reflected and fostered a fluidity in contemporary understandings of racial difference. The production and consumption of the dance in Britain represented and embodied the wider unresolved tension between notions of white

superiority associated with Britain's position as an imperial power; some Britons acknowledgement of and attempts to authentically emulate African American dance forms; knowledge about and eventually the physical presence of American-style racism; and the country's belief in its own benevolent racial policies. The final section of the chapter will then demonstrate how this same contestation over race played out in dance floor racial clashes. I will show that the attacks on African American GIs and black colonial servicemen and war workers who danced with white women further complicated all of the issues named above, in addition to stirring some Britons' fears of miscegenation, and posing new challenges to a dance hall industry striving to maintain both its commercial interests and its long-fought for respectability.

Dancing After the Siren

Very early on in the Second World War, the conflict became known as the people's war. The idea emerged that all Britons, regardless of age, gender, geographic region, and particularly class, were being united by the war effort, and that the social mixing produced by the evacuation and military service, as well as by shared hardships such as bombing and rationing, were contributing to a leveling of the traditional British class system. The belief in "equality of sacrifice" was widely proliferated, as was the notion that all Britons were (and should be) "doing their bit" for the war effort. At the same time, there was a heavy emphasis on the important contribution of ordinary people to eventual victory, and much focus on their ability to "keep smiling through" the difficult conditions created by the war. Historians have been interrogating the veracity and complexities of the people's war mythology almost since its inception, and most recent scholarship has demonstrated that were just as many expressions of social

antagonism during the war years as there was a language of social unity.² However, whatever the reality was, the idea of a people's war was retrenched and widespread, and as Sonya Rose has shown, intrinsic to the contemporary vision of national identity.³ This section will show that popular dancing was a site that contributed to reifying and expressing these notions of national unity, shared responsibility to the war effort, and Britain's ability to maintain strength and good cheer in the face of wartime adversity. In addition, I will argue that discourses about dancing continued to suggest that Britishness was something that could be embodied through dance, and that this became a potent means of celebrating Britain's democratic spirit, and distinguishing the nation from its enemies.

When the Second World War erupted on September 3, 1939, all places of public amusement in Britain, including dancing spaces, were immediately closed due to the fear of imminent aerial bombardment. For a number of years the Air Raid Precautions department of the Home Office had been debating the best policy to enforce regarding cinemas, theatres, and dance halls, with officials concerned not only about the potential casualties should a large entertainment venue take a direct bomb hit, but the effect on public morale that the deaths of mass numbers of theater-goers, movie-watchers, or dancers might have. However, officialdom was equally cognizant of the important role that entertainment could play in maintaining morale, particularly if the war was a long

² See Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945*, (London: Cape, 1994); Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991); Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain, 1939-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ See Rose, *Which People's War?*

one.⁴ Thus, by mid-September, when the expected air-raids had failed to materialize, public ballrooms and dance halls were permitted to re-open.

Almost immediately the idea began to proliferate that Britain was embroiled in a renewed dance craze, the likes of which had not been seen the end of the First World War, or perhaps ever in history. The *Evening Standard* remarked in November that “you have only to go to Quaglino’s, the Dorchester, Grosvenor House, the Café de Paris, or the May Fair to see that dancing is the most popular wartime amusement.”⁵ Citing the comments of famed bandleader Joe Loss, the *Bristol Evening World* went even further than the *Standard*, declaring in December that “Dancing is enjoying the biggest boom in its history – not forgetting the heady days of the Charleston.”⁶ As dance band drummer Anthony Crombie later recalled in an interview with the Imperial War Museum, “it was tremendous [in the dance halls.] Everybody was ... going for it hell for leather. No tomorrow... nobody knew whether they were going to see the next day so it was a now or never type philosophy.”⁷ Crombie’s comments indicate that for many Britons the renewed zeal for dancing was likely related to a desire to live in the moment in the face of the uncertain future of wartime, though there were also more practical reasons people chose dancing over other leisure pursuits that will be discussed further below.

Significantly, much of the coverage of the dance craze also hinted at more than mere public enthusiasm for dancing. There was a notion that Britons were well willing to confront the dangers of the war in order to engage in a dance or two, and that this was

⁴ TNA: PRO HO 45/18141: Places of Public Entertainment in Time of War, Report for the Home Office, 1938-1939.

⁵ “Corisande’s News for Women,” *Evening Standard*, November 22, 1939, 11.

⁶ “Dancing is Biggest Boom in History,” *Bristol Evening World*, December 2, 1939. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Miscellaneous.

⁷ IWM, Sound Archive: 11844, Transcript of interview with Anthony Crombie, recorded 1986, 2.

symbolic of their bravery, good spirits, and community-feeling. A Mancunian correspondent for the periodical *Modern Dance* noted in October 1939 that Manchester had been a gloomy place since war had broken out, but described the excitement with which people greeted the reopening of the city's dance halls:

Despite the black-out and the black look-out, I, in common with many others I should imagine, donned dancing shoes and made for the nearest hall, dived in, through darkened doorways, and stood blinking in the light and thought how heavenly it is to dance again – and this after only a fortnight without ... Before a few dances were over, I found quite happily that all the dancers were singing as well as dancing – in fact, it almost became community singing – and it really did help us all to feel more cheerful.⁸

These comments provided a vivid picture of Britons' willingness to brave the blackout and the uncertain future in order to participate not only in a little fun, but in the community-feeling forged in the dance hall. At the same time, this image of dancing spaces as a vital space of brightness and merriment was not just advanced by the media, but by the dance hall industry as well. As the manager of Bolton's Aspin Hall told Mass Observation in January 1940, "The blackout makes the need for a central place of brightness, and ... noise [which] are perhaps more essential than they were before the war... [In the hall] there is increased light to make up a brilliant contrast with the blackout, which is oppressing everywhere else in town."⁹

Among the most strident disseminators of the image of stalwart Britons choosing to dance rather than succumb to fears or distress about the war were American war correspondents. The comments of broadcaster Eric Sevareid that opened this chapter well demonstrate his efforts in this respect, and Sevareid's colleague Edward R. Murrow was

⁸ "Manchester Notes," *Modern Dance*, October 1939.

⁹ M-O A: Worktown 48/D, Manager, Aspin Hall, Bolton, January 8, 1940.

another voice that pointed to the dance craze as evidence of Britain's endurance. In one of his broadcasts to America, Murrow stated:

I have been doing a little research this week, looking into the general subject of London night life. Business is good; has in fact improved since war came. There are more dance bands playing in London's West End now than in the months before peace went underground. Many establishments where one could eat without musical distraction in the old days have now engaged small orchestras. Customers want to dance. [Ballrooms and night-clubs] are jammed nearly every night. People come early and stay late. I left one place at 3:30 the other morning. No one else showed any disposition to leave and so far as I know they may be there still, singing *The Beer Barrel Polka* and trying to dance on an overcrowded floor.¹⁰

Dancing provided Murrow and the news media in general with a means of showcasing the nation's good cheer and strong morale. The popular and dance press were full of stories that described packed dance floors and Britons' eagerness to dance despite wartime hardships and danger, something that would become even more critical as the situation on the battlefield changed and the so-called Phony War transitioned into a long series of British military set-backs, and the start of enemy bombing.

Historians like Angus Calder and Sonya Rose have shown that the idea of the British public's "grace under fire," particularly during the bombing campaign, was deliberately promoted by the media, government officials, and the people themselves.¹¹ Once again, dancing was used as important illustration of this phenomenon. At the height of the Blitz, the *Daily Mirror* featured a headline that read, "LET THE PEOPLE SING? YOU CAN'T STOP 'EM!" Beneath the headline was a photograph of Londoners dancing in the bomb-ravaged streets of the East End, jovial and defiant in the face of enemy

¹⁰ Edward R. Murrow, *This is London*, ed. Elmer Davis, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941), 41.

¹¹ See Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, 125; Rose, *Which People's War*, 3.

attempts to crush morale through terror bombing.¹² Dance venues also sustained a number of direct bomb hits, and the crowd reaction after once such attack on a London dance hall was described as follows in *The Times*: “When the bombs fell the lights in the dance hall went out, dancers were flung to the floor and debris cascaded down. A sailor shouted as the hall was plunged into darkness, ‘Keep steady, stand against the walls.’ The dancers obeyed and there was no panic.”¹³ Meanwhile, the town of Dover, suffering under not only bombing raids but enemy shelling across the English Channel from occupied France, was often celebrated for the resilience and persistence of its night-life. In a short book entitled *Britain under Shellfire*, journalist Frank Illingworth marveled that under such conditions as the town was facing, Dover still staged weekly dances at the town hall:

*Every Monday. The enemy is but 21 miles away, but dances will be held every Monday! On the average, Dover sees three dances per week, and seldom are they postponed through war causes. One occasion saw the orchestra vie with German gunners as to which could make the most noise: dancers remained swaying to the rhythm of war and a “hot” band! ... Such items show the “carry on” spirit of a town living under the shadow of German long-range artillery.*¹⁴

This image of Britons dancing through the war years, even “after the siren,” was in fact so strong that it became part of the permanent memory of the war. In 1945, only a few months after the conflict had drawn to a close, a writer for the periodical *Britannia and Eve* commented,

Future historians may say that Global War gave dancing and dance music a new lease of life. Radio programmes apart, the armies kept dancing alive and spread the cult. Wherever the fighting men of air, sea or land camped down, and

¹² As quoted in Jean R. Freedman, *Whistling in the Dark: Memory and Culture in Wartime London*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 127.

¹³ “Bomb casualties killed in dance hall,” *The Times*, March 17, 1941, 4.

¹⁴ Frank Illingworth, *Britain Under Shellfire*, (London: Hutchison & Company, 1942), 42.

girls were to be got, they organized a weekly dance. There was more dancing in the war than in normal peace time years.¹⁵

In 1949, Victor Silvester similarly remarked in his book *Dancing for the Millions*, “It is perhaps not insignificant that the great dancing boom in Britain began when this country was threatened with invasion and when bombs were dropping. It stood our people in good stead then, and it has done so ever since, for the boom has never abated.”¹⁶ Decades later, a 2003 retrospective about the Liverpool Blitz produced by the *Liverpool Echo* featured the following memory from one serviceman who was a regular visitor to the Grafton Galleries: “One Saturday night a bomb dropped in the alley between the Grafton and the Olympia. The ceiling was peppered with shrapnel coming through the roof. The dancing continued to the strains of Mrs. Wilf Hamer on the piano. She played until the all-clear sounded.”¹⁷ Also revealing is that fact that the above remembrance was featured in an article that ran under the headline “We Danced As They Bombed,” with dancing clearly standing in as the most illustrative example of the death-defying endurance of wartime social life.

That Britons continued to dance merrily even in the face of the worst the war could offer was therefore a potent idea during and long after the war, and yet the reality of the situation was significantly more complex. Interviews with various dance hall managers conducted by Mass Observation revealed that when leisure spaces first reopened in September 1939, the return of patrons was in many cases accomplished at a

¹⁵ C. Patrick Thompson, “And Now...to Dance,” *Britannia and Eve*, November 1945, 56.

¹⁶ Victor Silvester, *Dancing For the Millions*, (London: Odhams Press, 1949), 38.

¹⁷ “We Danced As They Bombed,” *Liverpool At War*, Special Publication of *Liverpool Echo*, 2003, 14. Clipping from Liverpool Record Office, Hf942.753LIV .

slow trickle rather than at a mad dash.¹⁸ A Mr. Burford, the assistant manager of the Astoria ballroom in Charing Cross road, attributed the gradual build to the fact that at first the dance hall was only permitted to open in the afternoons. However, once evening hours were extended to eleven o'clock, business at the Astoria did resemble something like the dance craze being described in the popular press. Indeed, Burford reported that the hall was doing better than it had been before the war, and that at the franchise's other venues, in Brighton, Liverpool, and Birmingham, as well as at his competitor's halls, business was "outstandingly good."¹⁹ Further evidence of a dancing boom is provided by the fact that around this same time the Association of Ballrooms petitioned the Home Office to remove the ban against dancing on Sundays in order to meet public demand for the pastime.²⁰ In addition, a number of spaces not previously used for dancing were turned over for the purpose in order to accommodate eager dancers. As the editor of the popular music periodical *Melody Maker* told Mass Observation, "In some cases, from information I receive in letters from all over the country, enterprising band leaders have taken over derelict halls and are running their own dances – places like church halls and the like which have been left empty due to the war."²¹ The most significant example of this expansion of public dancing spaces was the Mecca organization's takeover of the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, which was converted into a dance hall in

¹⁸ M-O A: TC 38/5/D, Astoria, December 5, 1939, 2. M-O A: Worktown 48/D, Dance and Dance Halls; M-O A: TC 38/6/A, Jazz Since the War Began.

¹⁹ M-O A: TC 38/5/D, Astoria, December 5, 1939, 2.

²⁰ TNA: PRO HO 45/24083: Entertainments: Sunday dancing: proposals to extend facilities, 1926 – 1950.

²¹ M-O A: TC 38/5/A, Editor, *Melody Maker*, October 27, 1939.

December 1939, and remained one of the country's premiere leisure venues for the duration.²²

It should be noted, however, that the Astoria's Mr. Burford attributed the increase in business to continued wartime restrictions, such as the blackout, rather than dancers' symbolic fortitude. Burford told *Mass Observation*, "The Blackout helps us inasmuch as the boys and girls who go dancing before the war used to go dancing some nights, to the pictures on others, and on other nights would parade around and look at the shops. But now every night they have to go inside somewhere."²³ Another dance hall manager in Bolton similarly reported that war conditions were sending more entertainment-seeking Britons to the dance halls, "owing to the fact that at the weekend people are not able to travel out of town."²⁴ He also noted that while public attendance was up above pre-war levels, the hall was still losing out on the reduced number of private dances. The wartime dance craze was therefore as much about the limited alternative entertainment options as it was about defying the enemy through dance. Moreover, what might be termed the first wave of the wartime dancing boom (the second would come with the arrival of the American Army in 1942) was more a phenomenon of the period known as the Phony War, during the fall and winter of 1939-1940, when war had been declared between Britain and Germany but very little was happening militarily. Anticipation over things to come likely did lead to a desire to live in the moment as drummer Anthony Crombie suggested, but dancing also simply provided Britons with something to do throughout this waiting game. For example, bandleader Joe Loss attributed the crowded dance halls

²² For more on the Royal Opera House as a dance hall, see Francesca Franchi, "Mecca Comes to Covent Garden," *About the House: The Magazine of the Friends of Covent Garden*, (Spring 1991), 12-20.

²³ M-O A: TC 38/5/D, Astoria, December 5, 1939, 1.

²⁴ M-O A: Worktown 48/C, Astoria Palais de Danse, December 18, 1939.

to the number of men in uniform who were killing time while awaiting their deployment.²⁵

This leads to the final significant wrinkle in the story of the defiant dancing nation. Numbers compiled by the Home Office reveal that attendance at leisure venues dropped considerably during periods of heightened crisis in the war, such as the launch of the German offensive in Western Europe in the spring of 1940, or the start of the Blitz later that year.²⁶ In May 1940 the press secretary of Grosvenor House wrote to Tom Harrisson at Mass Observation about a dancing-related survey the social research organization had planned to undertake at the hotel, but had decided to abandon: “I was half a mind to suggest putting it off myself as, with the latest War developments ... the mood of the people is not to go out nearly so much at night to make whoopee in the West End.”²⁷ Some contemporary press accounts also confirmed that not everyone was in the mood to dance. In the same issue of *Modern Dance* that described the zeal for dancing in Manchester, another correspondent wrote about the situation in Scotland:

At the moment of writing most of the Scottish halls have reopened, but under circumstances that could not be more unhappy. Many people have at present not the time nor the inclination for the gay atmosphere of the ballroom, and black-out regulations and the restricted travelling facilities have seriously curtailed the activity of the others.²⁸

Thus, not all Britons greeted the outbreak of war in a furor of dancing, and as this quotation also shows, the realities and restrictions of wartime could make actually going out dancing a significant challenge, whatever the desire of individual dancers. Yet there

²⁵ “Dancing is Biggest Boom in History,” *Bristol Evening World*, December 2, 1939. Clipping found in MO-A: TC 38/1/A, Miscellaneous.

²⁶ TNA: PRO HO 186/229: Entertainment, Restriction on public amusements. Public Entertainments; Decision Regarding Entertainments Emergency Period, May 10, 1940.

²⁷ M-O A: TC 38/8/D, Correspondence, Letter from H.E. Smith to Tom Harrisson, May 21, 1940.

²⁸ “Scottish Notes,” *Modern Dance*, October 1939.

is also evidence, from contemporary diaries and letters, as well as postwar memoirs, that Britons did devote considerable time and effort to continue dancing throughout the war years, and faced the attendant dangers with courage and humor.

For many people, the appeal of dancing in wartime was often based in the very reasons the press and dance hall industry cited, particularly the brightness and merriment provided by the dance hall. As one woman recalled regarding the Grafton Galleries in Liverpool, “Outside we had the black-out, so it was great to walk into a bright, warm, and pleasant atmosphere.”²⁹ Such was the allure of dancing spaces that many Britons were willing to go to considerable trouble and effort in order to spend an evening out at one. In an interview with Mass Observation, the manager of the Streatham Locarno mentioned a couple who used to drive in from Croydon to dance at the hall at least three nights a week; once the war began and fuel was rationed, he assumed he would no longer see them, but then the couple began appearing regularly on bicycles.³⁰ Similarly, in his wartime diary, Captain J.S. Gray described being part of group of soldiers and civilians who journeyed over twenty miles one evening just to reach a dance.³¹ Another diary, kept by Leeds factory worker Louise White, reveals how many women war workers regularly spent afternoons out dancing prior to commencing work on the night shift, a practice that no doubt made for a long and exhausting day.³² White’s diary also provides illustration of how often the most enthusiastic dancers might go out dancing, in that she frequently attended dances twice in one day, going to one dance hall for the afternoon programme, and another in the evening.

²⁹ “We Danced As They Bombed,” *Liverpool At War*, Special Publication of *Liverpool Echo*, 2003, 14. Clipping from Liverpool Record Office, Hf942.753LIV .

³⁰ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Chaperlin, November 1, 1939, 4.

³¹ IWM, Documents: 97/29/2, J.S. Gray, unpublished diary/scrapbook, April 20, 1940.

³² IWM, Documents: 86/54/1, L. White, unpublished diary, 1942-1945.

Moreover, personal accounts lend credence to the notion that dancing and leisure activities in general were critical to the maintenance of morale, in spite of the dangers. Regarding her experiences as a teenager during the war, Geraldine Page asserted, “Entertainment was discovered to be a great morale booster and people were willing to take a chance on the bombs.”³³ Of the bleak period that followed the defeat of the British Expeditionary Force in Western Europe and the evacuation of Dunkirk, a Dover woman similarly recalled, “there were many lighter moments. Cocktail parties and dances were held ... They did much to boost up our morale.”³⁴ Even when the war intruded directly into the experience of the dancing, many Britons retained good spirits and humor. In March 1941, two fifty kiloton bombs landed right in the middle of the dance floor of the Café de Paris near Piccadilly Circus, killing eighty people, including members of the band. One witness to the event recalled that her husband later commented on the evening, “At least we didn’t have to pay for our dinner.”³⁵ So while the image of the dancing nation may have been more significant as a symbol than as a social reality, it was a symbol that retained real power for many Britons. This may also be partly explained by the existence of another contemporary idea that suggested that in taking on the challenges associated with dancing in wartime Britons could actually *help* the war effort, and in ways beyond maintaining morale and presenting an image of defiance before the enemy.

From very early on the cultural producers of popular dancing, namely the dance hall industry and ballroom dance profession, enlisted in the war effort with gusto, and dancing spaces and the dance press were inundated with ideas and images that supported

³³ IWM, Documents: 88/3/1, Geraldine Page, “Growing Pains: A Teenager’s War,” unpublished memoir, 18-19.

³⁴ IWM, Documents: 89/10/1, V. Rayner, “Dover, 1939-1945,” unpublished memoir, 15.

³⁵ IWM, Sound Archive: 10345, Interview with Ruth Wittmann, recorded September 4, 1988.

the ideal of the wartime nation. Dance celebrities joined the military or took up war work to much fanfare, and prominent members of the ballroom dancing community launched the “Dancers’ Victory Fund” to support various wartime causes. Dance halls took up collections to support the building of Spitfires, covered their walls with pleas to women to take up war work, hosted war-themed dances such as “Gas Mask Balls,” and provided reduced rates to military service personnel. The management of ballrooms also demonstrated a strong awareness of dancing’s ability to boost morale, illustrated by such actions as when the Fountainbridge Palais in Edinburgh announced a “Let’s Be Cheerful Week” in 1940.³⁶ There were a number of venues that went to great lengths to ensure the safety and enjoyment of their dancers after the start of the German bombing campaign. The Savoy Hotel converted one of its ballrooms into an air raid shelter where it continued to provide dining and dancing, and later mattresses and pillows so that its patrons did not need to brave the dangerous streets at the end of the evening.³⁷ In a move that proved tragically ironic after the events described above, the Café de Paris, located below street level, was specifically advertised as one of the safest places in London to dance, and Mecca’s Paramount dance hall was similarly promoted as “London’s most comfortable air-raid shelter.”³⁸

Established connections between the dance hall industry and other commercial cultural forms like the radio were also put to good work during the war years. The BBC broadcasted a show live from the Hammersmith Palais called “Services Spotlight,” which featured celebrity entertainment for those in military service. So popular was the show

³⁶ Elizabeth Casciani, *Oh, How We Danced!: the History of Ballroom Dancing in Scotland*, (Edinburgh: The Mercat Press, 1994), 94.

³⁷ IWM, Documents: 95/14/1, Phyllis Warner, “Journal Under the Terror, 1939-1942,” unpublished diary.

³⁸ M-O A: TC 38/1/B, Paramount, October 21, 1939, 1.

and the Palais itself, that it became something of a target, even meriting mention in a broadcast by the infamous Lord Haw-Haw: ““And in our next raid over London, our victorious bombers of the Third Reich will have great pleasure in dropping heavy bombs on the concert for troops being given at the Hammersmith Palais.””³⁹ Concerned, the BBC and Palais officials did not halt the broadcasts, but ceased identifying the location of Services Spotlight, announcing only that the show was being aired from a dance hall in the south of England.⁴⁰ A similar threat was made against the Barrowlands dance hall in Glasgow, referenced obliquely by Haw-Haw by its famous illuminated sign, which was promptly removed until after the war.⁴¹

Special events at the dance halls were also pervaded with war themes, such as when a dance band competition at the Royal Tottenham in late 1939 required participants to play at least one wartime number, such as “Tipperary” or “Roses of Picardy.” Some amateur dance competitions also instituted policies whereby at least one member of competing teams had to be in uniform, and proceeds from these events were frequently donated to war causes. In smaller towns where there was no large palais-de-danse, the weekly village dance was also frequently used as a means of raising money in support of the war effort. At village and institutional halls all over the country, entrance fees to dances were donated to hospitals, the Red Cross, St. John’s Ambulance, the Home Guard, and funds to help the building of armaments, particularly planes.

Britons who attended a dance could therefore feel that they were “doing their bit” to help the war effort. Though it is difficult to know the degree to which this factored into patrons’ decision to take in an evening’s dancing, or their actual experience

³⁹ As quoted in Langdon, *Earl’s Court*, (London: Stanley Paul, 1953), 180-181.

⁴⁰ Langdon, *Earl’s Court*, 181.

⁴¹ Casciani, *Oh, How We Danced!*, 94.

at the dance hall, there is evidence that the public also consciously used popular dancing as a means of performing a number of the ideals associated with the people's war. For example, many Britons who would normally have sported evening dress to a dance abandoned this practice for the duration. In his survey of London nightlife, Edward R. Murrow remarked on the understated nature of the clothing, even in places "where a few months ago evening dress was as important as the ability to pay the check."⁴² Another writer similarly remarked that the "formality and the trimmings" had been removed from wartime ballrooms.⁴³ The result was that whatever the background of patrons on the dance floor, everyone looked to some extent the same, particularly given the plethora of uniforms also in the mix.

The conditions of wartime also prompted greater degrees of social mixing in the ballroom, of Britons of different ages, regions, and even classes. In reference to the traditionally elite Café de Paris, the *Evening Standard* noted near the beginning of the war that a "democratic change has come over London nightlife. The dancers ... bore the stamp of districts as far afield as Wimbledon."⁴⁴ An important factor in promoting greater mingling of Britons of different backgrounds was the geographic movement of large numbers of people associated with the evacuation, war work, or military service. These realities meant that many people were likely to visit dancing spaces well beyond their neighborhood dance hall, perhaps for the first time. The diary of J.S. Gray, mentioned above, provides a good illustration of this phenomenon. Gray, an avid dancer who traveled around Britain a great deal due to frequently changing military postings, attended dances in every sort of venue from small churches to large chain dance halls, in

⁴² Murrow, *This is London*, 41.

⁴³ C. Patrick Thompson, "And Now...to Dance," *Britannia and Eve*, November 1945, 8.

⁴⁴ As quoted in Philip Ziegler, *London at War, 1939-1945*, (London: Pimlico, 2002), 52.

locations ranging from Dover, Llandudno, Newcastle, and London. His diary also reflects that he made friends and acquaintances in all of these places largely by attending dances, typically finding a local woman who he would regularly partner with.⁴⁵

Within the military itself, wartime circumstances also permitted less formality and greater degrees of mixing across ranks than would have been permitted in peace-time. In 1944 a committee of the Air Council of the Royal Air Force approved a practice that was becoming increasingly prevalent at bases around the country – that of “all-ranks” dances. The committee cited the distance of bases from towns or cities; a more economical use of bands, time, and labor; scarcity of partners for multiple dances; and “that ‘all-ranks’ dances bridge[d] the gap between officers and airmen” as valid reasons for allowing such dances at the discretion of station commanders.⁴⁶ Official protocol was often disregarded at dances outside the control of military authorities as well. One woman serving in the Wrens, the women’s branch of the Royal Navy, recalled that, “As I was only a non-commissioned person...we were not meant to mix with officers, and often red tape was across the dance hall. But often we broke the rule.”⁴⁷ Similarly, Edward R. Murrow noted that dance floors were a strange *mélange* of ranks, even with respect to partnering; it was not uncommon to see “[a] sergeant of the Women’s Auxiliary Fire Service being pushed about the dance floor by a private.”⁴⁸ Of course, like so many temporary wartime measures, this mixing of servicemen and women of varying social backgrounds lasted only for the duration. By 1948 the Air Council had decided that, “the considerations

⁴⁵ IWM: 97/29/2, J.S. Gray.

⁴⁶ TNA: PRO AIR 2/8865: R.A.F. dances for all ranks – policy, 1944.

⁴⁷ IWM, Documents: 94/27/1, A. Parkhurst, unpublished memoir, 1941-1947, 2. Parkhurst, 3.

⁴⁸ Murrow, *This is London*, 41.

which gave rise to the war-time decisions to allow “all-ranks” dances are ... [no longer] desirable or necessary in peace-time.”⁴⁹

During the people’s war, therefore, the sharing of dance floor space provided a vivid performance of national unity in action, with Britons of different classes and regions engaged merrily in a dance. Yet in a microcosm of the wider reality behind the myth, this ballroom unity could also illuminate or even perpetuate lingering social divisions. Despite prevalent notions of shared sacrifice, Britons were not all confronted with the same dangers and deprivations, a distinction that frequently broke down along class lines. This became apparent to someone like drummer Anthony Crombie as he ventured beyond his own bomb-ravaged London neighborhood to play in ballrooms in the West End:

I lived in the East End and in ... the early days of the blitz particularly there was a lot of deprivation. [Food] was very short and people were really getting hit because of the close proximity of the docks. That area was receiving a lot of attention from the German bombers. I’d leave then in the evening, go to Piccadilly Circus on the tube ... I’d make my way to the nightclub that I was working ... and in those places everything was in full swing, there was plenty of money around, there was plenty of booze, lots of food, lots of beautifully turned out young ladies working in the role as hostesses, some of them from society families, judging by their speech and deportment. And the whole thing was on a very very high level. Morale was very high and a good time was being had by all, notwithstanding the fact that outside all hell was breaking loose.⁵⁰

Later on in the war, the presence of the American Army in Britain created new circumstances under which cross-class dancing occurred, in potentially controversial ways. American GIs had little understanding and little concern about the workings of the British class system, and would think nothing of boldly marching into higher end hotels

⁴⁹TNA: PRO AIR 2/8865.

⁵⁰ IWM, Sound Archive: 11844, Transcript of interview with Anthony Crombie, recorded 1986, 2. Crombie, 13.

like the Savoy, the Ritz, or the Dorchester – often with a working class girl on their arm.⁵¹ As Pamela Winfield remembered, “girls who’d never even seen the inside of one of those were now being taken to places like the Grosvenor House and The Dorchester.”⁵² There were undoubtedly upper class patrons of these establishments that were far from welcoming of these working-class women, a situation that perpetuated negative public feelings about women who consorted with GIs.⁵³

Related to the issue of social mixing and social unity in the ballroom was the continued wartime interest in novelty dances exhibited by the dance hall industry, and to some extent, by the dancing public. As I described in the previous chapter, the war erupted in the midst of the novelty dance craze that was initiated by the Lambeth Walk. While the public had grown somewhat weary of these types of dances by the fall of 1939, and definitely maintained preferences as to which ones it embraced, novelty dances proved an ideal means of expressing the camaraderie and community-feeling that was believed to have pervaded the dance hall. Bandleader Joe Loss even partly attributed the wartime dancing boom to the “stimulating effect of party dances.”⁵⁴ In the context of the war, the popularity of novelty dances was based in many of the same reasons that had existed before the war – they were fun, simple, provided some variation from ballroom dancing, and, as the *Liverpool Evening News* suggested in October 1939, helped to “enliven the atmosphere.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Joanna Mack and Steve Humphries, *The Making of Modern London: London at War*, (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1985), 161.

⁵² IWM, Sound Archive: 9947, transcript of interview with Pamela Winfield, 1987, 14.

⁵³ See Chapter Two. See also David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942-1945*, (New York: Random House, 1995); Juliet Gardiner, “Over Here:” *The GI in Wartime Britain*, (London: Collins & Brown 1992); Rose, *Which People’s War?*.

⁵⁴ “Dancing is Biggest Boom in History,” *Bristol Evening World*, December 2, 1939. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Miscellaneous.

⁵⁵ “Dancing Notes,” *Liverpool Evening News*, October 13, 1939. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/4/A.

Moreover, the dance hall and popular music industries instantly embraced Britain's changed reality in the creation of new, war-themed novelty dances. The first of these, the Black-out Stroll, was created in the fall of 1939 by Tommy Connor of the Chestnut Tree fame. Comprised of the same simple movements as most novelty dances, the twist with the Black-out Stroll was that halfway through the dance the lights in the ballroom would be shut off, and everyone would switch partners. For this reason, the *Daily Mirror* rather meanly declared that the dance was ideal for "wallflowers," women usually deemed too unattractive or untalented to secure partners under the lights.⁵⁶

Tommy Connor declared slightly different motives in his creation of the Black-out Stroll, however. In an interview with *Mass Observation*, he described wanting to produce a dance that would highlight and promote the merriment of the wartime ballroom, as well as to help forge acquaintances among dancing strangers:

"My main reason for getting the dance out was to get one which would allow a change of partner, and also to bring an atmosphere of jollity to the dance floors. There [has] been a 75% change of face in the ballroom since the war began. Evacuees are going into ballrooms they have never been in before. This [dance] gives them the party spirit... It gives everyone a reason to meet everyone else. I am dancing with you. At the end of 32 bars I am dancing with someone else. If only a few words pass between you there is a communal atmosphere and you can always renew the acquaintance next week."⁵⁷

The Black-out Stroll was thus specifically designed to foster unity among the Britons of disparate backgrounds brought together by the circumstances of the war, and yet the degree to which the dance was successful in this regard is debatable. Upon first observing a performance of the dance at the Astoria ballroom, *Mass Observation's* Alec Hughes reported that only about half the participants actually switched partners during the "black-

⁵⁶ "Wallflowers, Here's Your Dance," *Daily Mirror*, November 18, 1939, 10.

⁵⁷ M-O A: TC 38/5/D, Tommy Connor, December 5, 1939, 2.

out” as they were supposed to.⁵⁸ Wartime dancers therefore continued to assert considerable control over their dancing experience and consumption of dance culture, just as they had in peace-time. No doubt some people did use the opportunity provided by the Black-out Stroll to mix and mingle, and welcomed the reduced formality and greater social mixing of wartime dancing. However, there were equally those dancers who preferred to keep to themselves, or the friends they had arrived at the hall with.

It is also important to note that the onset of war did not diminish the commercial motives possessed by the dance hall and popular music industries in creating new dances. The chief producers of the Black-out Stroll, Tommy Connor, Joe Loss, and the Loss band’s chief venue, the Astoria dance hall, were just as concerned with using the dance to sell sheet music, gramophone records, and to bring people into the halls, as Mecca had been in producing its series of “British” novelty dances. Indeed, when the Black-out Stroll proved more successful than Mecca’s later efforts like *Knees Up, Mother Brown*, the dance hall circuit also began to exploit war themes in its own productions. In 1941, Mecca released *The Tuscana*, which was a novelty dance designed to mock the military setbacks of the Italian Army in Greece, featuring movements that embodied the dance’s catch-phrase “You Just Retreat.” Steps were taken forward and backward to accompany lines in the song, such as “One step forward/That’s the way to attack/Then three steps backwards/Cause it’s better going back.”⁵⁹

In addition, the relative safety of some dancing spaces over others, something that even became a part of advertising campaigns for places like the Paramount, was arguably not merely about protecting dancers, but also about ensuring that they continued to

⁵⁸ M-O A: TC 38/5/D, Astoria, December 5, 1939, 5.

⁵⁹ M-O A: TC 38/2/B, Publicity Materials for *The Tuscana*, 1941.

patronize the venue. Nor, it must be noted, was the dance hall industry above self-promotion about its wartime good works. In the fall of 1940, Mecca sent a letter to an unknown number of media outlets and business acquaintances, including Mass Observation, that read,

This is not, in any sense, a business communication, but you may be interested to know that despite many difficulties we have kept business going, continuing the employment of nearly a thousand people; helping financially any that have been “called up”; collecting large sums for various deserving causes. We also organized the “Don’t Talk League” which has been very successful, and we are handing over the whole money, without any deductions whatever, to the British Sailors’ Society. Moreover, - an achievement of which we are rather proud - we have opened no less than 12,000 War Savings Accounts for our patrons. We merely mention this to show that we have done our “Bit”, - don’t you think it rather good?⁶⁰

So while there is little doubt that the commercial producers of dancing did much to support the war effort in very real terms, they also used the war as a way to elevate, or at least maintain, their business. The game was the same as it had been during the interwar years, in terms of the dance hall industry producing the nation for public consumption as a means of bringing people into the halls. All that had changed was the vision of the nation that commercial dance culture was producing, in that this vision was now heavily influenced by the dominant contemporary mythology of a people’s war, in which dancing fostered and expressed national unity, and Britons could do their bit for the war effort by continuing to dance.

The dance hall industry was also a chief disseminator of ideas about the nation that established the very important ways in which Britain was perceived to be distinct from its military enemies. As was shown in Chapter Five, this was a process that had really begun in the late 1930s, as the international situation deteriorated and war appeared

⁶⁰ M-O A: TC 38/7/B, Letter from C.L. Heimann to Mass-Observation, October 1940.

increasingly imminent. In this context, dances like the Lambeth Walk and the Handsome Territorial began to celebrate the “ordinary” Briton through the working-class Lambethian and the rank-and-file serviceman. Cultural producers like C.L. Heimann and Lupino Lane further suggested that through their cross-class accessibility and fun, free, spirit, novelty dances were symbolic and expressive of Britain’s freedom and democracy. This, it was suggested, was what separated Britain from its military enemies – Britons danced, while Germans and Italians marched.

The dance hall industry, and Mecca in particular, latched onto these ideas with even greater tenacity after war had actually been declared. Particularly in the dance press, the notion that Britain’s continued, and even increased, zeal for dancing was what distinguished the nation from its enemies was widely proliferated. Most commonly, comparisons were made between the dancing boom in Britain and increasing restrictions on dancing in Nazi Germany and Occupied Europe; Mecca’s *Dance News* particularly honed in on every dance hall closure in Paris and Berlin it could find out about. The newspaper also published items such as a political cartoon that featured a disgruntled Hitler showing a British newspaper to Mussolini and exclaiming, “Ach, Musso! See this, they’re still dancing!”⁶¹ The image suggested that the power of British dancing, and the freedom that it embodied, was great enough even to annoy and distract the Nazi leader.

In 1944, Mecca produced a short booklet about British dancing entitled *Stepping Out*, which featured the covering phrase: “Where Freedom Reigns, There’s Dancing.”⁶² Much of the book was comprised of an article that made this point more fully, with writer James Mackenzie noting,

⁶¹ Reproduced in James Mackenzie, *Stepping Out*, (London: Danceland Publications, 1944).

⁶² Ibid.

Dancing and freedom are words that go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other ... You are free, within broad limits, to do as you please and go where you please – to the sixpenny “hop” round the corner, or to the comfortable magnificence of the West End hotel. No one questions your right. You exercise it in the normal course of things as a free citizen in a free country.⁶³

Mackenzie then prompted the reader to imagine venturing out dancing one evening and finding every dance establishment closed, remarking, “this is very largely the position in dictator and dictator-occupied countries, when force rules and freedom goes and with it dancing which so truly expresses a freedom of spirit and action that is distasteful to rulers and conquerors.”⁶⁴

Within the context of the war, therefore, dancing came to embody, physically as well as symbolically, anti-fascism, freedom, and democracy. Once again the dance hall industry's commercial motives in putting forth these ideas must not be discounted, and Mecca was no doubt hopeful that advising people that they were doing their part for democracy would continue to bring people in the halls. However, there is evidence that these ideas held real power for the dancing public as well. Just as Britons used dancing and the space of the dance hall to do their bit, and to express national unity and wartime spirit, they latched on to a new dance that would help them to illustrate and physically embody notions of freedom.

Jitterbugging Towards Victory

In 1940, C.L. Heimann and the Mecca organization announced their latest dance innovation, which was an adaptation of an American important, the jitterbug. In promotional materials for the new dance, the dance hall circuit proclaimed,

⁶³ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 6.

The interest and enthusiasm for Jitterbug Dancing is now well-established, having withstood the condemnation it at first received – it is characteristic of the present epoch; it is demanded by youth; it has progressed without any sponsoring. It has, in fact, asserted itself despite the efforts of many sections of the Dancing profession to eliminate it!⁶⁵

In this statement, much about the history of the jitterbug’s cultural trajectory in Britain is revealed. The dance had many detractors, within the public, dance profession, and dance hall industry, but endured largely through the efforts of its enthusiasts. It was generally favored by the young, and came to be seen as an ideal dance to best reflect and express the wartime moment. Moreover, the fact that the above statement came from Mecca, Britain’s largest chain of dance halls, whose cultural power has been well established in previous chapters, is revealing about the degree to which the jitterbug became significantly entangled in the culture industry that surrounded popular dancing. As this section will demonstrate, the jitterbug stands as one of the most emblematic dances of the period under review in terms of the cultural negotiations that went on between the dancing public, ballroom profession, and dance hall industry in determining the content and progression of popular dance culture. It also provides an important illustration of the influence that popular dancing could wield on culture and society well beyond the confines of the dance floor, becoming an important site for illuminating, and also complicating, British understandings of racial difference.

The jitterbug was a dance of African American origin that emerged in the United States in conjunction with the development of swing music, an evolution in jazz that occurred sometime in the early 1930s.⁶⁶ In fact, the term “jitterbug” originally connoted

⁶⁵ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Locarno, Press announcement for All-Britain Jitterbug Championship, 1940.

⁶⁶ How exactly “swing” music should be defined has been a source of considerable historical and scholarly debate, but the definition provided by David Stowe is simple and instructive: “a stage in the development of jazz characterized by written arrangements and performed by big bands – or small ensembles culled

the fans of the musical style rather than any particular dance, and the dances that presaged and laid the groundwork for the jitterbug dance were the Lindy Hop and the Shag. The Lindy Hop in particular emerged from the African American dance halls of New York's Harlem, particularly the Savoy, and was characterized by its improvisational and occasionally individual movements. Two dance scholars recently described the dance as follows: "Dominated by continuous rhythmic play in its defining swing-outs, the two partners rhythmically improvised while separating apart and drawing back together."⁶⁷ This "breakaway" was a defining feature of the jitterbug, and the dance was inextricably connected to swing, the music to which it was performed; indeed, there was a tendency among jitterbugs to intersperse their dancing with pauses simply to listen to the music.⁶⁸ Like the Charleston before it then, the jitterbug was an exuberant dance that encouraged creative invention, and occupied considerable space on the dance floor.

While perhaps irrevocably associated in popular memory with the American presence in wartime Britain, the jitterbug actually first crossed the pond even before the war had started. A potentially apocryphal story recounted in a contemporary history of the dance had it that the jitterbug's British life began in January 1939, when a "coloured couple," likely American, was engaged in jitterbugging in the corner of the dance floor at Mecca's Paramount dance hall in London.⁶⁹ Having attracted a fair amount of attention from other patrons, they were asked to give an impromptu exhibition of the dance on the

from those bands – during the 1930s and 1940s." See David Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 5. For more on the jitterbug in an American context, see also Lewis Erenberg, "Things to Come: Swing Bands, Bebop, and the Rise of a Postwar Jazz Scene," in *Recasting America*, ed. Larry May, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁶⁷ Karen Hubbard and Terry Monaghan, "Social Dancing at the Savoy," in *Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 133.

⁶⁸ Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 42.

⁶⁹ This story is recounted in James Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, (London: Danceland Publications, 1942), 28.

bandstand by the hall's manager, R.T. Davis. Although there may be some truth to this tale, it should also be noted that the jitterbug would not have seemed as dramatically novel as the story implies. The name "jitterbug" may have been new to Britain, but swing dancing had been growing in influence for several years in various dance forms that included truckin', or another dance known merely as the "swing."

Throughout 1939 the jitterbug became an increasing fixture at the large dance halls in urban centers, though remained to some degree specialized knowledge. Mass Observation reports indicate that the dance received special demonstrations at a number of London halls, but was practiced on the dance floor by only select members of the public.⁷⁰ On November 20th of that year, Britain's first jitterbug competition was staged at the Paramount, which had become known as the nation's primary "jitter hall." The competition largely consisted of a dance marathon, the endurance form of dance contest that was widespread in the United States throughout the Depression but had not become popular in Britain.⁷¹ However, competitors were also required to stay in rhythm with the music or be disqualified. This event, which received considerable attention in the popular and dance press, did much to further widespread knowledge of the jitterbug throughout the country.

Over the next months and years, the jitterbug expanded its influence on British popular dance culture through a number of means. Additional dance competitions emerged, transitioning away from the marathon-style and towards the more traditional formats that had been established throughout the interwar years, and in January 1940 the

⁷⁰ See M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Locarno; M-O A: TC 38/1/B, Paramount; M-O A: TC/38/1/C, Royal Tottenham.

⁷¹ For more on American dance marathons see Carol Martin, *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture in the 1920s and 1930s*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994).

first All-England Jitterbug Championship was held at the Paramount. Moreover, the American jitterbug craze caused the dance to become a prevalent feature in Hollywood movies, such as the Ginger Rogers vehicle *Bachelor Mother*, or the Marx Brothers' production *The Big Store*, all of which introduced the dance to scores of British cinema-goers.⁷² The dance hall industry, though quite ambivalent about the dance for a variety of reasons that I will discuss further below, also did much to aid the proliferation of the jitterbug throughout the ballrooms of Britain. Finally, the British jitterbug era entered a new, more pronounced phase with the entry of the United States into the war and the arrival of the American Army in Britain starting in early 1942. The thousands of American servicemen stationed around the country, often in rural areas that lacked the large palais-de-danse through which city-dwellers had previously encountered the jitterbug, now did much to bring the dance to the masses.

Upon its first appearance in the nation's ballrooms, initial attempts at the jitterbug by British dancers were fairly simplistic compared to how the dance was performed in the United States. As Benny, a jitterbug demonstrator who toured the country for Mecca told Mass Observation, "You don't see the real jitterbug dancing over here. In America they throw the girl over their back. They have her leg under their arm and give her a twist and then throw her over their back. They dance till they drop exhausted – that's proper jitterbug. They go on and on and on till they drop. They will last 25 minutes."⁷³ Outside of London, attempts at the dance were even more amateurish, at least to the eyes of Mass Observation's Alec Hughes, who wrote of the jitterbug dancing in Bolton, "Their jitter had none of the London ease, nor any of its intricacy and skill. They just jigged about,

⁷² Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 57-60. See also Hubbard and Monaghan, "Social Dancing at the Savoy," 141.

⁷³ M-O A: TC 38/4/H, Frivolity, June 4, 1939, 1-2.

having a good time ... None tried any really complicated steps.”⁷⁴ The presence of the Americans was therefore not only significant for spreading the influence of the jitterbug, but also for altering and ameliorating the way in which the dance was performed in Britain. Indeed, prior to the arrival of the American Army, one dancing teacher advised British dancers to take a look at some of the Hollywood films featuring the jitterbug in order to learn how to better perform it, since according to him, “the English version is very, very crude.”⁷⁵

Like so many dances that had come to Britain from America, opinions on the jitterbug originating with the dance profession, dance hall industry, and dancing public, were markedly divided. Some contemporaries were enthusiastic about a new and innovative dance, while others were suspicious or dismissive, such as bandleader Joe Loss who stated in 1939 that he saw no future for the jitterbug.⁷⁶ Much of the commentary on the dance presented a strong echo of the debates that had surrounded the Charleston almost two decades earlier. There was perplexity, amusement, and in some cases strong objections to the wild, untamed nature of the jitterbug. As one witness to the dance recalled, “it seemed a bit strange...it seemed like they were circus acrobats.”⁷⁷

The jitterbug’s wild steps, kicks, and breakaways were also often disruptive to patrons engaged in more traditional ballroom pursuits. Regarding one visit to a dance, J.S. Grey wrote in his wartime diary that the hall was “simply packed out with Yanks [and] Canadians, with jitter-buggers everywhere, so it was almost an impossibility to get

⁷⁴ M-O A: Worktown 48/C, Astoria Palais de Danse, December 18, 1939.

⁷⁵ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 76.

⁷⁶ “Dancing is Biggest Boom in History,” *Bristol Evening World*, December 2, 1939. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Miscellaneous.

⁷⁷ IWM, Sound Archive: 11830, Transcript of interview with William Amstell, recorded 1986, 16.

in any serious dancing.”⁷⁸ As jitterbug demonstrator Benny told Mass Observation, “They have had to ask the people at the Paramount if they would mind not doing the jitterbug to ordinary quicksteps. I do it. You see you kick peoples [sic] ankles and they don’t like it and complain.”⁷⁹ On another occasion, Mass Observation recorded that “Those dancing in the ordinary fashion seem to find it rather annoying as the evening wears on and the jitterbug fans become worked up.”⁸⁰ The report went on to reveal that, responding to the complaints of other patrons, the dance hall’s M.C. requested that dancers not engage in jitterbugging during the general dancing, but promised that there would be a special session later in the evening. The three or four eager jitterbugs who participated in this special session then apparently drew considerable interest from the other dancers as an exhibition, but the observer speculated that non-jitterbugs were equally keen not to have to continue share dance floor space with them afterwards.

As this story illustrates, part of the issue that the dance hall industry had with the jitterbug was the degree to which it spurred dissatisfaction among non-jitterbugging patrons. The dance also wreaked havoc on diligently maintained dance floors, leading to costly repairs for ballroom proprietors. In addition, the industry feared public criticism over the jitterbug’s imagined improprieties, since it was a dance that caused women to be lifted high in the air and flung about the dance floor, with their skirts often raised over their heads. A common criticism was therefore that the jitterbug was “not nice.”⁸¹

Clinging to the tenuous grip on respectability that they had developed for their

⁷⁸ IWM: 97/29/2, J.S. Gray, May 5, 1943.

⁷⁹ M-O A: TC 38/4/H, Frivolity, June 4, 1939, 2.

⁸⁰ M-O A: TC 38/2/B, Jitterbugs, August 10, 1940.

⁸¹ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 81.

establishments throughout the interwar years, many dance hall managers feared social purity advocates who might use the jitterbug to castigate them once more.

The dance hall industry therefore attempted to establish limits on the jitterbug, both in terms of when and *how* it was performed. A report for Mass Observation described the efforts of the manager of the Paramount in this respect:

He said that on the American nights they had jam sessions, but only short ones as the dancers went wild, eyes rolling, skirts flying and in general working themselves up into a frenzy. Mr. Davis explained that the management wanted them to enjoy themselves but when the dancing started turning into immoral display they called the jam session off and played waltzes etc.⁸²

Similarly, during a jitterbug marathon in Leeds, one dance step in which the female partner fastened her legs around the male partner's body and was spun around was banned from the competition for its seeming impropriety.⁸³ As was shown above, there were also special jitterbug sessions created during an evening's dancing, in order to better control the dance and keep jitterbugs from disrupting other dancers. On a visit to the Royal dance hall in north London, for example, a writer for Mass Observation recorded the presence of a sign that asked jitterbugs "to confine their activities to dances specially played for them at 4.30, 5.30, 8.30, 9.30, and 10.30."⁸⁴ In another echo of the Charleston craze, some halls went so far as to attempt to ban the jitterbug altogether, placing signs announcing the prohibition around the dance floor.

However, the dance hall industry also perceived certain advantages to embracing the jitterbug, and once again C.L. Heimann and Mecca were at the fore of these efforts. The actions taken by Mecca appear particularly ironic in view of the fact that racialized anti-Americanism was at the center of the company's promotional campaign for its

⁸² M-O A: TC 38/1/B, Mr. Davis on Swing, March 8, 1939.

⁸³ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 30.

⁸⁴ M-O A: TC 38/1/C, Royal, December 1, 1939.

“British” novelty dances.⁸⁵ Yet confronted with strong public enthusiasm for the latest African American import, Mecca did an abrupt about-face and jumped on the jitterbug bandwagon. Throughout 1939, even while extolling the home-grown virtues of the Lambeth Walk and its follow-ups, Mecca began making moves to make the most of the jitterbug phenomenon. The circuit hired dancers, often American, to stage exhibitions of the dance at Mecca halls around the country, and began to advertise the Paramount as a place patrons could “Come and see our famous jitterbugs.”⁸⁶ Mecca halls also became a primary site of many special jitterbug-themed events, such as marathons and competitions at the Paramount, Locarno, and Royal Opera House. Considerable attention was paid to the jitterbug in Mecca’s various periodicals, and in 1942 the company’s print arm also released a book dedicated to the new dance, entitled *Swing Fever Jitterbug*.

Most significantly, Mecca co-opted the dance itself, releasing “C.L. Heimann’s Refined Jitterbug” in 1940. A smoothed-out, toned-down version of the dance, the refined jitterbug represented the dance hall industry’s entry into practices that the dance profession had been engaged in since the early 1920s with the standardization of the English style, and the creation of the flat progressive Charleston. The changes served to alleviate many of the concerns about the impropriety or immorality of the jitterbug, but also, as will be discussed further below, to anglicize it. Promoted as a follow-up to Heimann’s British novelty dances, the refined jitterbug was also adapted by Adele England and publicized using many of the same marketing strategies. In addition to a special launch of the dance at 1940’s All-Britain Jitterbug Championship at the Locarno, Mecca coordinated with the Peter Maurice Music Company to release relevant sheet

⁸⁵ For more on the promotional campaign of the Mecca novelty dances, see Chapter Five.

⁸⁶ M-O A: TC 38/7/B, Pamphlet for Paramount Dance Hall, c. 1940.

music, for which the two companies chose the very popular Glenn Miller swing tune “In the Mood.” Credit was given where credit was due, and the cover of the sheet music featured a large image of Glenn Miller; however, in one corner a small image of C.L. Heimann was also featured, and consumers were advised that they were buying the music that went along with his “jitterbug novelty.” The pamphlet contained the music to “In the Mood,” as well as diagrams and instructions on how to perform the jitterbug.⁸⁷ Thus, only a few short months after promoting its quintessentially British novelty dances in highly anti-American terms, Mecca not only embraced the latest American import, but re-created and re-packaged the jitterbug as its very own.

That being said, Heimann was not the only one to advocate the creation of a “refined” jitterbug – the idea was also prevalent within the ballroom dance profession. In general terms, the profession greeted the jitterbug with the same degree of bemusement and ambivalence as it had greeted novelty dances only a short time earlier. In responses to a survey of dancing teachers conducted for the book *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, the dance was described as everything from a “nuisance dance” to “undignified” to “very fascinating.”⁸⁸ Of those queried, Major Cecil Taylor was the most disapproving, proclaiming, “Jitterbug is a horrible thing and most detrimental to dancing in general. I advise its total banishment.”⁸⁹ Even those who were less negative about the jitterbug expressed concerns, once again echoing many of the same sentiments that had circulated around novelty dances, particularly that the dance might undermine or diminish the English style. One historian has summed up the feelings of the dance profession on the

⁸⁷ A copy of the sheet music to “In the Mood” described above is found in M-O A: TC 38/7/A, Songs, 1940.

⁸⁸ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 68-78.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

jitterbug as “at best a threat to ballroom dancing and at worst a vulgar display, a disgusting and degrading sight.”⁹⁰

However, the situation was actually not quite so simple. There was also a feeling among some professionals that, like the Lambeth Walk and its many follow-ups, any new dance that inspired an interest in dancing among the general public was a thing to be welcomed. Regarding the swing, a rudimentary version of the jitterbug, a writer for *Modern Dance* noted, “The success of this new dance was inevitable. For years ballroom routine remained unchanged; the average dancer had become lethargic and consequently in the mood to accept a new form of dancing.”⁹¹ Like novelty dances then, the jitterbug entered into and revived a popular dancing scene that had grown somewhat stagnant, a development that many professionals saw as positive. As Monsieur Pierre told the writers of *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, “It is certainly a welcome change from the standard dances and is likely to increase in popularity ... it should benefit dancing.”⁹² Dance teacher Alex Moore, while describing what he witnessed at a jitterbug competition as “the most disgusting and degrading sight I have ever seen in a ballroom,”⁹³ went on to proclaim that the dance would not have a discernible impact on the future of dancing, and was a useful novelty for wartime dance floors. He was also one of the professionals to suggest, in similar terms to C.L. Heimann, that there was room within British dance culture for a “mild” jitterbug.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Franchi, “Mecca Comes to Covent Garden,” 19.

⁹¹ Harry Kahn, “Swing,” *Modern Dance*, February 1938, 13.

⁹² Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 69.

⁹³ Alex Moore, “Will the War Change the English Style: The Jitterbug Menace,” *Dancing Times*, March 1940. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/4/A.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Another advocate of a mild or refined jitterbug was Victor Silvester, who remarked in the survey for *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, “[The jitterbug] is a vital force providing it is modified. All lifts, throws and other exaggerated movements should be entirely eliminated. These movements are acrobatics, which is not dancing, and quite unsuitable for the ballroom. If ever this form of dancing is to develop, the standardisation of a few simple basic steps is essential.”⁹⁵ By 1944, Silvester had acted on these ideas, working in conjunction with C.L. Heimann in order to produce the “jive,” a modified, subdued form of the jitterbug that went even further than Heimann’s refined version. Already a renowned bandleader with his strict tempo orchestra, Silvester also formed a new Jive Band in order to record and sell music to accompany the new dance, and, along with Mecca’s Danceland Publications, released a book on the subject, entitled *This is Jive*.⁹⁶ Silvester stated that the new and re-named dance was specifically designed to appease enthusiasts and critics of the jitterbug alike, noting “The Jive is as clever as the Jitterbug was crude. Danced slowly it can be graceful. Danced quickly, it can be just as bright and snappy without being boisterous.”⁹⁷ However, it is less clear whether the majority of dancers made such distinctions, with many viewing the two dances as effectively interchangeable, particularly since there was also another American version known as the jive.

In terms of how the dancing public regarded the jitterbug, as I have already suggested, some negative feelings were inspired against the dance for the havoc it often created on the dance floor. As J.S. Grey recorded regarding his visit to a dance hall in Brighton, “Went to Sherrys [sic] again in afternoon. Swamped out today by U.S.A.

⁹⁵ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 76.

⁹⁶ Victor Silvester, *This is Jive*, (London: Danceland Publications, 1944.)

⁹⁷ Silvester, *This is Jive*, 21.

soldiers indulging in the infernal ‘jitterbug.’”⁹⁸ Like Grey, dancing enthusiasts who took their favored pastime very seriously also shared the concerns of professional dancers that the jitterbug constituted a threat to the “real” or “true” dancing of the English style. As one concerned dancer wrote in a letter to the editor of *Modern Dance*, “While I agree that at a dance all types have to be catered for, I am aggrieved by the fact that Swing is growing into a pernicious canker and spoiling dancing altogether. I have visited various places and find the tendency to make all Foxtrots and Quicksteps into Swing.”⁹⁹ The letter writer went on to state that unless the dance profession took action, they might be witnessing “the deterioration of modern ballroom dancing as we know it now.”¹⁰⁰

However, even some dancers who found the jitterbug disruptive in the ballroom, or feared its impact on modern ballroom dancing, also tended to find it intriguing as an exhibition or competition dance. Moreover, there were reasons beyond its quality as a dance that Britons – particularly women and particularly after the American Army had arrived in the country – found to embrace the jitterbug. A number of contemporary writers commented on the food, drink, and other perceived luxuries that were common fare at dances held at American military bases or Red Cross clubs, which made them a very popular evening out for Britons who had been suffering under three years of rationing. Geraldine Page recalled that she and her friends viewed the food provided at American dances with incredulity and excitement, noting that they “were prepared to be polite and even try to Jive or Jitterbug in order to partake in such a feast.”¹⁰¹ There were fringe benefits to socializing with GIs and giving their native dance a try – everything

⁹⁸ IWM: 97/29/2, J.S. Gray, January 25, 1944.

⁹⁹ M.S. Hale, Letter to the Editor, *Modern Dance*, March 1938, 23.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ IWM: 88/3/1, Page, “Growing Pains: A Teenager’s War,” 98.

from food and drink to cosmetics and nylons – and these culinary and material enticements were not the only attraction present at American dances. As I discussed in Chapter Two, and as many other scholars have previously established, the American GIs themselves were tremendously popular with young British women.¹⁰² The jitterbug was often an intrinsic part of the experience of socializing with GIs, and Page’s wartime memoir provides a vivid account of her first experience with the dance:

As a dance, I at first found the Jive unattractive. Those jiving used too much floor space and were a distinct hazard to others dancing on the floor. My initiation came at one of the American Forces dances, when a stocky and ebullient young G.I. approached me with the words “Can you jive?” When I truthfully answered “No”, he grabbed my hand and said “That’s okay, I’ll teach you. Before more could be said, I found myself hauled onto the dance floor, my protests unheard in the blare of the band. I was flung out, pulled back, twirled, twisted, and jigged, while my partner contorted his torso and legs in fantastic wriggles to the vibrant rhythm of the music. At the end of the dance I staggered, crumpled, red faced and giddy into the supporting arms of my giggling girlfriends. They could laugh. Their turn was to come! In time, although maybe not excellent exponents, we at least became adept enough to follow our partners steps in this infectious and energetic dance.¹⁰³

Other women were more enthusiastic than Page about the jitterbug, with one recalling, “We English girls took to it like ducks to water. No more slow, slow, quick, quick slow for us. This was living.”¹⁰⁴

As this comment suggests, there were many among the dancing public, both women and men alike, who admired the jitterbug not only as an exhibition dance or as a path to food and romance, but simply as a dance. It was fun and lively, and provided a respite from the rigid standard four. Even J.S. Grey, in general quite ambivalent to the “infernal” jitterbug, was forced to acknowledge in his diary that the dance produced a

¹⁰² See Reynolds, *Rich Relations*; Gardiner, “*Over Here: The GI in Wartime Britain*”; Rose, *Which People’s War?*.

¹⁰³ IWM: 88/3/1, Page, “Growing Pains: A Teenager’s War,” 98-99.

¹⁰⁴ As quoted in Gardiner, “*Over Here: The GI in Wartime Britain*,” 114.

good time: “Went to the Regent Dance Hall in the evening and as might have been imagined it was full to overflowing with the Canadians taking full charge and ‘jitterbugging’ all over the place!! As a dance it was hopeless but everyone was enjoying themselves and the bar was full!!” There is no question that the dance was not universally beloved, and that even at the height of its popularity, more Britons were likely still dancing the quickstep than the jitterbug; Major Cecil Taylor even speculated to Mass Observation that the dance had a greater presence in the press than it did on the dance floor.¹⁰⁵ However, the jitterbug maintained a devoted following, a fact that was borne out most strongly by the fact that the ballroom profession and the dance hall industry embraced it to the extent that they did, a move that both attributed to public enthusiasm for the dance.

Indeed, like the Charleston before it, the jitterbug was imagined as a dance craze that was largely initiated by the public. Victor Silvester suggested that the dance had developed “at random in its own turbulent way,” quite removed from the intervention of the profession or industry.¹⁰⁶ The power of the public’s enthusiasm and influence was also a main theme of the Mecca-produced *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, the opening pages of which observed: “Crazy? Maybe. Acrobatic contortions not fit for the ballroom? Perhaps. But the public liked it and asked for more.”¹⁰⁷ The booklet further highlighted the way in which jitterbugs were not dissuaded by attempts to curb the spread of their favorite dance: “Large notices ‘No Jitterbugging Allowed’ did not stop all the enthusiasts, many of whom got into a corner to whisk and twirl away.”¹⁰⁸ C.L. Heimann himself stated that

¹⁰⁵ M-O A: TC 38/6/G, The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, June 19, 1939, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Silvester, *This is Jive*, 18.

¹⁰⁷ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

“‘If people want a thing they will have it,’”¹⁰⁹ a belief that appears to have been at the root of Mecca’s pragmatic decision to embrace the dance. The jitterbug therefore stands as an important illustration of the influence wielded by the dancing public, and yet also of the ongoing negotiation between cultural producers and consumers of dancing in determining the evolution of dance culture in Britain. For while the jitterbug remained, it was also reined in by the dance hall industry and dance profession, transformed first into the refined jitterbug, and later into the jive.

The public zeal for the jitterbug must also be understood in terms of the increasing attraction of American dances and cultural imports that I described in Chapter Five. Quintessentially American in the eyes of many Britons, the impact of the jitterbug’s provenance was also amplified by the physical presence of so many Americans in the dance halls, and throughout the country in general. Moreover, as scholars like Eric Hobsbawm and Mica Nava have identified, part of what lay at the root of the British fascination with America was the belief that the country and its cultural forms were inherently modern.¹¹⁰ In the case of the jitterbug, the dance’s perceived modernity was borne out in two specific ways.

First of all, the jitterbug was decidedly associated with young Britons, since the dance was perceived to require too much energy and abandon for older dancers; *Swing Fever Jitterbug* even quoted a doctor who suggested that it might be dangerous for anyone over the age of thirty to attempt the dance.¹¹¹ Another dancing teacher also told the *Star* newspaper that it was only because of the young that the jitterbug was able to

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹¹⁰ See Eric Hobsbawm, “Jazz Comes to Europe,” in *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion, and Jazz*, (New York: Norton, 1998); Mica Nava, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture, and the Normalisation of Difference*, (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

¹¹¹ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 34-35.

attain any sort of foothold in Britain, since “It calls for far more energy, abandon, rhythm, and lack of self-consciousness than anyone beyond the teens possesses.”¹¹² This same article further highlighted the important generational factor at work in the dance’s public reception, remarking that while the war had initiated crazes for both the jitterbug and novelty dances, the latter seemed largely to be the purview of dancers in their 30s or older, while the former appealed to their teenage children.¹¹³ The newspaper then pointed to the irony of the fact that these middle-aged novelty dancers were the same generation who had embraced ragtime and the foxtrot, thus killing off sequence dancing which was essentially what novelty dances were.

What this article illuminated was the fact that those Britons who had been at the fore of the popular dance revolution in the early 1920s, when the developing English style was viewed to be intrinsically modern, were now being replaced by a new generation of young dancers with their own, particularly American, understanding of what constituted modern dancing. As the *Star* noted, these young dancers were taking to the jitterbug “like a duck takes to water.”¹¹⁴ There were contemporaries who were fairly dismissive of youthful preferences for the jitterbug, exemplified by one writer who stated in 1945, “The youngsters may amuse themselves with the leaping Harlem dances, but the ordinary citizen can still get by on a waltz and a foxtrot.”¹¹⁵ Yet other older Britons appeared more accepting and even curious about this latest evolution in popular dancing, as the comments of one “elderly lady” interviewed at a dance hall reveal:

¹¹² “Young Sheffield Goes ‘Crazy’ Dancing,” *The Star*, July 31, 1941. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/4/A.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ C. Patrick Thompson, “And Now...to Dance,” *Britannia and Eve*, November 1945, 56.

I've heard about jitterbug from my grand-daughter and came along this evening to see what it really looked like. It looks a bit modern to my idea, but I remember years ago how annoyed my parents were when I told them I had danced the Boston Two Step at a dance. No doubt if I were a young girl to-day I should be jitterbugging with the best of them.¹¹⁶

This woman's observations well articulated the way in which the young were to some extent always at the forefront of changes to popular dancing, whether it was the move from old-time dancing, to ragtime, to modern ballroom dancing, to the Charleston. The jitterbug marked another important transitory moment, when upbeat, individualized steps began to outstrip rigidly standardized ballroom dances as the nation's primary dancing style. As James Mackenzie noted in the conclusion to *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, after the war "It hardly seems likely that [the young] will be content with the old, accepted order of dancing."¹¹⁷

In addition to the generational nature of feelings for or against the jitterbug, the second way in which the dance was associated with modernity was through the notion that it was very much a product of the time period that had produced it. Just as the foxtrot and modern waltz were deemed to be ideal expressions of the period just after the First World War, the jitterbug was viewed to be an extremely appropriate dance for the wartime moment. As Mackenzie also commented in *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, the "jitterbug and swing music were only the present generation's way of shaking off the cares of war during their leisure hours."¹¹⁸ Alec Moore similarly stated, "Remember ... that there is a war on, and that ... many people turn to the ballroom for mental relaxation. For such people I feel that the Novelty Dance, and perhaps a mild form of the 'Jitterbug' dancing

¹¹⁶ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 83.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

is a welcome innovation.”¹¹⁹ For many Britons, the wild fun of the jitterbug was an ideal dance through which they could dispense with war-related fears and concerns.

Contemporary commentators also saw something intangible or difficult to articulate in this notion, such as when Mackenzie suggested that there was just “something in the air that helped [the jitterbugs] along.”¹²⁰ Along these same lines, dance band drummer Anthony Crombie suggested that the spirit on the dance floor was markedly different from what had come before the war, and that it was one better expressed through swing and the jitterbug:

Prior to the war ... in places like the Grosvenor House or Savoy Hotel ... the music was keyed down very low, rather sedate kind of offering, more wallpaper than music, and suddenly with the oncoming of the war people had all this frustration and pent up energy that needed to release and I think the American style music provided the opportunity to get rid of those energetic impulses via dancing. Dancing was the big thing. Dancing to these bands was the big thing.¹²¹

As Mackenzie concluded, the jitterbug provided “vigour and spontaneous good feeling,” as well as “an outburst of gladness in the face of the depressions and war scares.”¹²²

These comments on the jitterbug should also be understood within the context of discourses about dancing and the people’s war that were discussed in the first part of the chapter. In a moment when dancing was presented as an ideal vehicle through which to express the nation’s resolve and good spirit, a dance as lively and carefree as the jitterbug had a natural valence and impact. As I argued in the previous chapter with respect to truckin’ (a precursor to the jitterbug), the improvisational nature of the jitterbug released dancers from the rigid standardization of the English style, and all of the latter’s attendant

¹¹⁹ Alex Moore, “Will the War Change the English Style: The Jitterbug Menace,” *Dancing Times*, March 1940. Clipping found in M-O A: TC 38/4/A.

¹²⁰ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 10.

¹²¹ IWM, Sound Archive: 11844, Crombie interview, 5-6.

¹²² Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 83, 30.

associations about what it meant to be British. Rather, with its spirit, spontaneity and individualism, as well as its American origins, the jitterbug suggested alternative national imaginaries that were consonant with dominant wartime ideologies. As scholars of the history of swing and the jitterbug in the United States have suggested, this music and dance form was intrinsically associated with American national identity, seeming to embody and express “freedom, individualism, ethnic inclusiveness, democratic participation.”¹²³ These associations also had significant power in the British context, as a means of celebrating a military ally, and of expressing the belief that it was the nation’s ability to keep dancing through that separated Britain from its fascist enemies. For those who performed, witnessed, or read about the jitterbug, the dance embodied freedom and anti-fascism.

Lending further weight to these associations was the fact that swing music and the jitterbug were employed as a form of cultural resistance by non-conformist youth, the so-called “swing kids,” within Nazi Germany. As Les Back has shown, the Americans and British used propaganda to mock Nazi prohibitions against jazz as a way of highlighting the differences between democracy and fascism, and underlining the justness of the Allied cause. However, Back further argues that this was accomplished by side-lining black musicians in favor of white musicians like Glenn Miller, and attempting to marginalize and hide the African American origins of swing and the jitterbug. The Germans in turn then used the racism attendant in the Allies’ representations of swing as a way of exposing the significant flaws in its enemies’ democratic ideals, and in this way, “The meaning of jazz itself became an emblem of a wider struggle over the opposition

¹²³ Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 99. See also Erenberg, “Things to Come.”

between liberal democracy and fascism.”¹²⁴ Back concludes that their respective reactions to swing and the jitterbug, as well as to interracial dancing between black men and white women, revealed “uncomfortable similarities among Jim Crow, John Bull, and the racial phobias of Nazism,” and the fact that normative whiteness was at the heart of both the Allied and Nazi causes.¹²⁵

While I am not disputing this analysis, I want to suggest that it perhaps relies too heavily on an assumption that American and British racial outlooks were basically the same. For a true sense of the contemporary picture, British attitudes towards the racial origins of the jitterbug must be examined on their own terms, as do the respective reactions of the two countries to interracial dancing, which is the subject of the next section of the chapter. Like all dances of African American origin that had crossed the pond since 1918, discourses that surrounded the jitterbug in Britain were significantly racialized, and there were contemporary comments that castigated the dance in racist terms. Moreover, the same process of anglicization, and by extension whitening, of an African American dance form that had given rise to the English style, was at work again in C.L. Heimann and Mecca’s creation of the “refined” jitterbug. The language here was particularly significant, since, as has been shown in previous chapters, notions of British refinement, and the toning down of wild movements understood in profoundly racialized terms, were central to the anglicization process. It is significant too that in the press materials for its refined jitterbug, Mecca made no mention of the dance’s African American origins, a telling omission from a company that had also previously touted its

¹²⁴ Les Back, “Syncopated Synergy: Dance, Embodiment, and the Call of the Jitterbug,” in *Out of Whiteness: Culture, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Vron Ware and Less Back, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 169-195.

¹²⁵ Back, “Syncopated Synergy,” 170.

novelty dances so heavily for *not* being black. There was also no acknowledgement of the racial origins of the jitterbug in Victor Silvester's discussion of the jive. There was clearly still a strong belief that African American dances had to be transformed into something more identifiably British, and white, before being taken to the masses.

However, in some of the public and professional discussion about the jitterbug, the racial tone had changed in slight, but meaningful ways. There was a growing number of people in the popular music and dance hall industries, dance profession, and dancing public, who acknowledged the racial origins of the dance in a manner that sought not to suppress, but rather to highlight them. For the historical actors involved, some of this commentary was also designed to recognize and even celebrate the expertise of jitterbugs of African origin. As Mackenzie wrote in *Swing Fever Jitterbug*,

Critics have dismissed jitterbugging as “negro stuff” and there is no doubt that it is a modified version of steps that have been passed on for a great many years by natives whose predecessors performed them in far-off jungle days.

Such movements cannot be condemned out of hand, for man has danced since the earth began and gained his inspiration from nature all round him. True dancing, it has often been pointed out, is based on rhythm, and nowhere is true rhythm more naturally performed than by the negro. The white man may not have the same facility but he can learn much of the art of true dancing by watching the negro.¹²⁶

Other commentators also reinforced the origins of the jitterbug by highlighting the expertise of black dancers in performing the dance, particularly by comparison to white dancers. As jitterbug demonstrator Benny told Mass Observation, “You watch a coloured man dance and a white. There is an entire difference. The coloured man is born to dance like that.”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 12.

¹²⁷ M-O A: TC 38/4/H, Frivolity, June 4, 1939, 2-3.

This recognition of black expertise in the jitterbug was also affirmed by the increasing interest expressed by some white Britons to know how black dancers perceived their performances of the dance. *Swing Fever Jitterbug* asked an African American dancer about the British jitterbug, purportedly being told “‘It’s O.K., but they don’t let themselves go.’”¹²⁸ Mass Observation also interviewed two truckin’ demonstrators at the Streatham Locarno in order to get their opinion about British attempts at African American dances, one of whom noted, “‘there’s just something missing in the English.’”¹²⁹ This dancer’s partner elaborated further on the subject, telling the social research organization, “‘I guess it is born in us. The rhythm is there. It originated in the negro. It comes easy to us. There is a natural rhythm in our bodies. The English are much better at ballroom dancing than at this sort of dancing. They are inclined to be too stiff. They make it look too much like work.’”¹³⁰

While the notion of black “expertise” in the jitterbug perpetuated longstanding and problematic biological assumptions about racial difference, it also provided black dancers with a degree of cultural authority in the eyes of white Britons. Moreover, rather than moving to instantly stamp out the movements that were perceived to be “black” in the jitterbug, some Britons sought to preserve and copy them. In an interview with Mass Observation, two white women who performed exhibitions of the jitterbug at Mecca halls said that they had learned the dance from black dancers: “‘We practice with the coloured people. They are marvellous. They were never taught nothing. They just dance. They learned it from birth. We picked it up from them.’”¹³¹ It was also with a degree of

¹²⁸ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 44.

¹²⁹ M-O A: TC 38/1/C, Truckin’, Lagey and Heyward, June 1, 1939, 1.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹³¹ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Jitterbug Demonstration at the Locarno, July 1, 1939.

satisfaction that the women revealed that they had been deemed superior jitterbugs by the black dancers who had trained them, better even than black women: “We’ve been told [by] coloured people [that] we swing better than dark girls.”¹³²

Some Britons had therefore come to acknowledge that there was something legitimate, and worth preserving and emulating, in African American dance forms, and in accounting for this shift, there are two factors that I want to point to. The first was the continued perception of America as intrinsically modern and exotic, elements that were embodied in a dance like the jitterbug. A second and related factor was the physical presence in Britain of greater numbers of black men, especially after the start of the war and the arrival of both colonial servicemen and war workers, and African American GIs. Particularly the latter men amplified the attractions of the “authentic” jitterbug through their physical performance of the dance. As Mica Nava has suggested, black dances, and especially performances of them by black men, were also subject to the “allure of difference” that she identifies with respect to “commercial orientalism,” and which I discussed in Chapter Three.¹³³ It also appears that the tendency towards acknowledging the blackness of the dance increased as the war years progressed, in that *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, which did highlight the origins of the jitterbug, was produced by Mecca, which had previously sought to suppress this knowledge with its refined version.

Of course, the acceptance of racial difference through the jitterbug should not be overstated. Even within these shifting racial discourses, there was still a level at which the jitterbug provided white dancers with ways of making claims at superiority. The

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Mica Nava, “White Women and Black Men: The Negro as Signifier of Modernity in Wartime Britain,” in *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture, and the Normalisation of Difference*, (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

women jitterbugs mentioned above laid claim to the African American dance and made it their own by proclaiming that they had improved upon its performance in comparison to black dancers. In addition to the comments previously referenced, the two exhibition dancers also told Mass Observation, “We were at the Paramount and one evening they put us on the centre stand. We can do anything that any of the coloured people can do as far as swing is concerned.”¹³⁴ Much in the same way, in *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, the paragraph immediately following the one in which Mackenzie suggested Britons could learn something from African Americans about dancing, he noted, “it is interesting to recall that one of the first jitterbug marathons ever held in this country was won by a young English couple in spite of the fact that an experienced coloured couple were competing.”¹³⁵ In this statement was an implicit suggestion of white superiority, even in the performance of a black dance. White British jitterbug enthusiasts therefore reified racial difference and claims of white superiority, even while challenging them.

The production and consumption of the jitterbug therefore illuminated the fluidity of British understandings of racial difference by the Second World War, which were subject to the confluence of imperial racism and Americanization. A belief in white superiority, and the equation of whiteness with Britishness, was at the root of efforts to anglicize and whiten dances of African American origin throughout the interwar period, but when the same process was initiated again with the jitterbug, it remained significantly less finished than it had been with the foxtrot or Charleston. Greater numbers of Britons now sought to experiment with an African American dance in its original form, and to highlight black expertise in performing it – though not without also occasionally asserting

¹³⁴ M-O A: TC 38/1/A, Jitterbug Demonstration at the Locarno, July 1, 1939.

¹³⁵ Mackenzie, *Swing Fever Jitterbug*, 13.

British superiority in this as well. At the same time, the presence of unprecedented numbers of black men, which contributed to the shifting reception of the jitterbug, added even greater complexity to an already unstable British outlook on race, as the next section of the chapter will show.

Before considering this issue in more depth, however, I want to reiterate the major points of significance that I see concerning the history of the jitterbug. In many ways, this dance, the biggest craze to come out of the war years, represented continuity with the interwar period. It was an American dance transplanted to Britain, which was popularized through dancing's connections to other cultural forms and commercial industries, such as print, film, radio, and popular music. Moreover, the manner in which the dance spread and evolved stands as a testament to the ongoing negotiation between the dance profession, the dance hall industry, and the dancing public in determining the direction that dance culture in Britain would take. Through this negotiation, the dance was accepted due to public enthusiasm but also transformed by the profession and industry in ways that would help it to best express contemporary notions of national identity; in this way the dance came to symbolize and embody an image of the nation associated with both the people's war, and freedom and democracy.

However, the history of the jitterbug is simultaneously one of continuity *and* change over time. In small and subtle ways the evolution of the jitterbug phenomenon demonstrated that popular dancing in Britain was on the cusp of another major upheaval. First of all, it was a dance mainly for the young, those who were a generation removed from the Britons who had embraced the foxtrot, and who were now seeking to spark their own dancing revolution. Second, the nature of the jitterbug itself also spoke to an

important and imminent transformation in the content of popular dance culture. The dance's improvisational nature, and the individual rather than partnered steps that would follow the breakaway, provided a stark contrast to the standardized movements of modern ballroom dancing and heralded the type of dancing that would eventually accompany developing popular music forms like rock & roll, and new dances like the Twist. Third, while the ballroom dance profession still wielded significant authority throughout the jitterbug years, there were signs that its influence might be on the wane in favor of the more highly commercialized dance enterprises. It was Mecca, not the ballroom profession, which was at the forefront of developments with respect to the jitterbug, and professionals who now held the greatest sway were those such as Victor Silvester, star of radio and later television, rather than everyday teachers. Finally, the racial discourses that surrounded the jitterbug represented both continuity and change with how dances of African American origin had been greeted in the past, but must also be understood within the context of important changes to the racial make-up of the country itself.

“What are we going to do about this?”

On September 19, 1943, the newspaper *Sunday Pictorial* ran an editorial with a headline that asked “What are we going to do about this?”¹³⁶ The question posed by writer Geoffrey Carr concerned the abusive treatment frequently suffered by black colonial troops and war workers who had been entering Britain in increasing numbers in response to the needs of the war effort. At the centre of Carr's article was the story of Arthur Walrond, a West Indian journalist now serving as a Sergeant in the Royal Air

¹³⁶ Geoffrey Carr, “What are we going to do about this?” *Sunday Pictorial*, September 19, 1943, 6.

Force. While attending a dance at Bury St. Edmonds in Suffolk, Walrond had been physically attacked by an American soldier who objected to him asking a white woman in attendance to dance. Nor was this the first time that Walrond had been the victim of dance floor racism, having previously been assaulted by a British Army officer after dancing with a white woman in Lancashire. Following the Suffolk incident, Walrond had written a letter to the Colonial Office demanding protection from such indignities and asking, “Is it fair, is it just, to ask me to risk my life nightly over enemy territory when, behind me, I have left something as treacherous to humanity as any ‘ISM?’” The very same day that Walrond wrote his letter, he was killed while taking part in a bombing raid over Germany. Calling him “a devoted son of the Empire,” the *Sunday Pictorial* suggested that it was time for the British public to acknowledge the immense contribution being made by black colonial subjects in the war with Nazi Germany, and to protect them from the sort of violence and persecution suffered by Walrond and others like him.

The case of Arthur Walrond reveals much about the role that popular dancing played in illuminating and inciting racial conflict in Britain during the Second World War. Dancing had long been a vehicle through which Britons were exposed to imperial culture and racial difference, but with the large influx of black men into Britain during the war – both colonial subjects and African American GIs – racial difference became far more visible in popular dancing spaces, and this often provoked conflict. Many American racial problems were transplanted across the Atlantic with the U.S. Army, but wartime racial issues were not all imported. Popular dancing became a space where the changes to the racial make-up of the British national community were profoundly felt, and where ideas about race were expressed and contested. As this section will show, events

transpiring in dance venues forced the British public, press, and government to examine and question imperial policy, and to confront their own racial prejudices as well. These issues also existed in tension with the commercial concerns of the dance hall industry, and put to the test the extent to which popular dancing really had become an accepted and respectable leisure form.

By the 1940s Britain's status as an imperial power meant that the nation had long experience with racial difference. Black communities appeared around the country, particularly in port towns, in increasing numbers from the eighteenth century onwards. The First World War was a particularly important moment when the number of racial others in Britain increased dramatically, and historians like Laura Tabili have demonstrated that social and institutional racism were a reality in Britain well before 1939.¹³⁷ However, as Sonya Rose and Bill Schwarz have shown, the large growth of the black community during the war years was significant for rendering racial difference far more visible within Britain's borders, prompting a renegotiation of internal race relations.¹³⁸ While Tabili has recently argued that the social impact of "internal others" is not based on the increase of numbers alone,¹³⁹ I am arguing that popular dancing is a site where it becomes abundantly clear that the rise in the number of black men did have a pronounced effect, demonstrated by increased racial conflicts in dance venues and more frequent attempts by the dance industry to implement color bars. While dance hall racism occurred to some extent during the interwar period, it was not nearly as common, nor as

¹³⁷ Laura Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

¹³⁸ Rose, *Which People's War?*; Bill Schwarz, "Black Metropolis, White England," in *Modern Times: reflections on a century of English modernity*, ed. Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea, (London: Routledge, 1996), 176-207.

¹³⁹ Laura Tabili, "A Homogeneous Society? Britain's internal 'others', 1800-Present," in *At Home With the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

geographically widespread. In addition, wartime incidents of racial conflict in dance venues received more attention and prompted more discussion among the press, public, and government, reflecting and perpetuating their wider social impact.

The major catalyst for increased racial conflicts during the war, in dance spaces and elsewhere, was the presence of the American Army. U.S. troops began arriving in Britain in early 1942 and continued to do so in a steady stream until the invasion of Normandy in June 1944. The so-called American “invasion” not only raised the visibility of racial difference in Britain through the presence of African American GIs, but also transplanted the problematic race relations of Jim Crow America to the British Isles. The experience of Arthur Walrond, described above, was not unique. White Americans frequently voiced objections to black men dancing with white women, and often with violent results. Four Americans, two white and two black, were arrested in the town of Huyton, near Liverpool, in August 1942 as a result of a street fight outside a pub. The Home Office report describing the incident noted that “The cause of the trouble appears to have been due, to the U.S. white troops resenting Coloured troops associating with local females at local dance halls.”¹⁴⁰ Black colonial subjects were also frequently targeted by white Americans. Regarding the implementation of a color bar at the Grafton Galleries in Liverpool, the Home Office noted that West Indian war workers had been frequenting the hall since they began to arrive in Britain in 1941. However, with the arrival of the Americans, the dance hall had “degenerated on occasion into a racial fighting ground between coloured British subjects and white Americans.”¹⁴¹ Indeed, documents reveal that the British government was under the impression that some

¹⁴⁰ TNA: PRO, HO 45/25604: War: US Forces personnel stationed in the UK: possibility of friction between white and coloured troops, 1942-1944.

¹⁴¹ TNA: PRO, LAB 26/55: Colour Bar – Manchester and Others.

Southern white men visited dance halls with the express intention of using physical force to stop black men from dancing with white women.

A number of dance hall managers responded to the rising number of racial conflicts in their establishments by imposing partial and full color bars. The Grafton Galleries was only one of several Liverpool area dance halls that implemented policies denying entry to black servicemen and workers as a result of racial tensions. A slightly different tactic was put in place by the Mecca organization, specifically with respect to the Paramount. The circuit's "jitter hall" had consistently been the one that attracted the largest black clientele, something that had been true even before the war, but once again racial problems increased exponentially after 1942. Mecca did not institute a full color bar, but introduced a policy whereby black patrons could only enter the hall if they brought their own dance partner, since, management argued, most violent incidents seemed to occur after a black man asked a white woman to dance.

The racial policies put forth by the dance hall industry therefore overwhelmingly targeted black, rather than white, patrons. Indeed, one Liverpool dance hall manager placed the onus for the color bar firmly on the behavior of the black men, telling the *Warrington Examiner*, "At first I was proud of my 'United Nations' ballroom, but the United Nations personnel were anything but united. They quarreled, flashed knives, and made white girls fear to refuse to dance with them."¹⁴² However, most managers argued to the Home Office that decisions over how to resolve racial tensions in dance venues were financially, rather than racially motivated, since the number of white patrons was so much larger that to ban them would be bad for business.¹⁴³ Given the well-established

¹⁴²"Two Dance Halls Ban Coloured Men," *Warrington Examiner*, December 8, 1943.

¹⁴³ TNA: PRO: LAB 26/55: Colour Bar – Manchester and Others.

commercial concerns of the dance hall business, these reasons were very likely a primary concern in the establishment of color bars, though were particularly incongruous from an industry that had been advocating dancing as the emblem of freedom and democracy.

What was significant about dance floor racism during the war years was not simply that it was more prevalent, but also that it provoked a new level of reaction and discussion among the people, press, and government. The British prided themselves, and had based their imperial policy, on what they perceived to be their more liberal racial thinking, and the public and press reaction to racial violence in dance halls was generally very sympathetic to the black men, particularly to colonial workers and soldiers who were perceived to be “doing their bit” for the war effort with as much diligence and patriotism as white Britons. When told by an American not to dance with a Jamaican airman, A.R. Wilson recalled replying, “But why, [when] they voluntarily came over before you did to fight for us.”¹⁴⁴ Similar sentiments arose over a situation involving the Casino dance hall in 1943. After the manager of the Casino refused to eject a Jamaican war worker upon protest from a group of white Americans, the dance hall was placed out of bounds by US Army authorities. Shortly afterwards, British and Canadian military personnel were also directed to boycott the Casino. The case attracted considerable press attention, and one letter to the editor of the *Warrington Examiner* stated,

With the right of the American authorities to decide what is best for their own I am not prepared to argue; but when the British powers-that-be take a similar step, I think a great deal should be said ... [The Casino manager] is entitled to stand up for the rights of coloured people without having to be persecuted ... He will be assured the hearty support of every true Briton and anti-Fascist.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ IWM, Documents: 86/68/1, A.R. Wilson, unpublished memoir.

¹⁴⁵ Letters to the Editor, *Warrington Examiner*, December 11, 1943, 4.

For this writer, if not for some parts of the dance hall industry, the notion of color bars did constitute a threat to the vision of the British nation defined in terms of freedom and anti-fascism.

The Casino dance hall controversy also attracted the attention of the government, when the Member of Parliament for Warrington posed a question about the military ban in Parliament. The government did not concede that the ban was motivated by racial conflicts, but rather attributed it to overcrowding. While this was a less than convincing excuse, it is clear that the British government did not want to be in the business of supporting color bars – at least not officially. It should be noted that dance halls were only one type of public space in which there were attempts to impose color bars; after 1942, this became increasingly common in public houses and hotels as well. Something that is apparent in both official documents and public statements by government representatives, is that in dealing with these situations, the government was committed to ensuring that American-style segregation practices would not be imported to Britain. Concerning the increasing number of color bars, the Minister of Information, Brendan Bracken, wrote in the *Sunday Express* in September 1942 that “the British government is in favour of putting an end to this prejudice as quickly as possible.”¹⁴⁶

Moreover, the racist actions repeatedly occurring in dance venues had implications well beyond the people and places they directly affected. The resolute opposition to dance hall racism expressed by the British people and government must be understood within a specific context, most notably the slow weakening of Britain’s empire, and the ideals upon which it was fighting the war. Britain had built its Empire premised on ideas of benevolent rule and the proliferation of democracy; as Sonya Rose

¹⁴⁶ Brendan Bracken, “Colour Bar Must Go,” *Sunday Express*, September 20, 1942, 2.

has shown, the racial divisions brought on by incidents such the ones described above, threatened to undermine the whole imperial system and the fundamental basis of British national identity.¹⁴⁷ Arthur Walrond again stands as emblematic; believing himself to be a subject of the British Empire, he felt alienated from the mother country by the racism he encountered on British dance floors. In turn, many white Britons, both government officials and members of the public, who heard Walrond's story and others like it, reacted to dance hall racism as something categorically "un-British." This was not only because they believed in the image of their benevolent empire, but because for many Britons racist thinking was inextricably connected to fascism and the Nazi enemy, and again was viewed to represent something contrary to their vision of the British nation. Popular dancing therefore played a significant role in forcing many British subjects, whether they were born in the metropole or the colonies, to confront contradictions inherent in both imperial policy, and the very nature of the British national identity.

But while the British government was concerned with protecting the rights of black subjects, it was also very concerned with not alienating Britain's American ally. Despite abundant protests from Walrond and others like him, and reports by local welfare officers that in the face of color bars there were few leisure activities left to colonial soldiers and workers, the government appears to have been a lot of talk, and very little action. There is also abundant evidence that though the authorities wished to make welcome black colonial subjects and African American GIs, there was still considerable concern in government circles about the possibility of relationships between black men and white British women. As several historians have shown, anxiety about interracial sexual relations was widespread during the war years, expressed not only by the

¹⁴⁷ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 239

authorities, but also by the members of the public. Graham A. Smith, in his study of the experiences of African American GIs in wartime Britain, notes that from almost the moment the black GIs arrived on British soil “many commentators knew that their sexual relations with white women would be the most volatile factor in their temporary stay.”¹⁴⁸

As several scholars have shown, there is abundant evidence that African Americans and black colonial subjects were very popular with many white British women, both as dance partners and as objects of sexual and romantic desire.¹⁴⁹ For this reason, black men were not the only targets of race-based protests in the ballroom; the women who danced with them were also the subject of considerable scrutiny both on and off the dance floor. A.R. Wilson, a young British woman who later married an American GI, recalled being “chided” by another American for dancing with a Jamaican R.A.F. Corporal at a dance near Chippenham in 1943.¹⁵⁰ Another British woman stated that, “If you danced with coloured Americans, you were blacklisted by the white ones. They kept a list at the camp of these girls and passed it to the new troops coming in.”¹⁵¹ Women who partnered black men therefore also suffered abuse and condemnation, and not only from intolerant Americans.

There is evidence that some Britons were just as uncomfortable with the specter of interracial dancing as the visiting Americans. To return to the story of Arthur Walrond, it should be recalled that prior to the incident involving an American, Walrond had been confronted by a British officer over dancing with a white woman. Similarly, in her study of the British homefront, Juliet Gardiner describes a scene wherein two British women

¹⁴⁸ Smith, *From Jim Crow to John Bull*, 187.

¹⁴⁹ See Smith, *From Jim Crow to John Bull*; Rose, *Which People's War?*; Nava, “White Women and Black Men.”

¹⁵⁰ IWM: 86/68/1, A.R. Wilson.

¹⁵¹ As quoted in Gardiner, “*Over Here*,” 156.

asked a group of black GIs who were largely being ignored at a dance in Somerset, to join them during a “ladies choice” party dance. The father of the two women was later approached by another man at the dance, who demanded to know “what his daughters were doing dancing with coloured troops.”¹⁵² One last example provides further insight into the complex space dancing occupied in wartime race relations. In 1943, the case of Learie Constantine, a government welfare officer and local cricket star of Caribbean-birth, grabbed national attention when he and his wife were barred from staying at a London hotel due to a color bar. Again, the press and public expressed outrage over this action, demanding redress for the humiliation of a British subject. However, when a local church synod met to pass a resolution against racist policies of the sort encountered by Constantine, one minister encouraged caution, asking whether those present would “care to see their people dancing with these men.”¹⁵³

This comment is suggestive about the degree to which dancing continued to occupy a slightly different place in social perception than many other leisure activities. With a well-established connection between dancing and dancing spaces, and romance and sexual activity,¹⁵⁴ it can be of little surprise that interracial dancing may have sparked fears of miscegenation more than cross-race encounters in other leisure venues. Overall, however, the protests against interracial dancing came overwhelmingly from Americans rather than Britons. Indeed, as Les Back has suggested, Britons “more often the not took the side of black soldiers.”¹⁵⁵ He cites the writings of civil rights activist Walter White,

¹⁵² Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime*, (London: Headline Publishing, 2004), 486.

¹⁵³ “Synod and Insults to Coloured Folks,” *Western Mail & South Wales News*, September 16, 1943, 3.

¹⁵⁴ For more discussion of these connections see Chapter Four.

¹⁵⁵ Back, “Syncopated Synergies”, 185.

who recorded the experiences of some of his African American friends who were stationed in Britain, as emblematic:

One had told of the distinguished British family inviting a group of American soldiers to their home for dinner and dancing. Everything moved smoothly during the meal, but when one of the Negro soldiers danced with one of the English women, he had been assaulted by a Southern white soldier. A free-for-all followed in which the British took the side of the negroes.¹⁵⁶

Therefore, it was only for certain Britons that dancing spurred fears of interracial sexual encounters. The above example, and others such as that of the defense of Arthur Walrond, demonstrates that not everyone perceived a distinction between dancing and any other social space wherein interracial socialization might take place. I believe this also speaks to the way in which by the war years dancing had come to be perceived to a much greater extent as an “innocent” or “respectable” form of public amusement. Much like a love of dancing had ceased to be a useful tool of castigation against “pleasure-seeking women,” it was no longer directly connected to what was a very prevalent fear of miscegenation.

Moreover, the outcry that did exist against interracial dancing, and specifically the implementation of color bars, was often a regionally-specific phenomenon.¹⁵⁷ Dance hall managers in cities like Liverpool and Cardiff, with large pre-war black populations and much longer histories of racial tension, were much quicker to implement racist policies against black servicemen and GIs, than proprietors of dancing spaces in parts of the country with less experience of racial others. It is also apparent that though several dance hall proprietors did express racist positions in attempting to implement color bars, the

¹⁵⁶ As quoted in Back, “Syncopated Synergies,” 185.

¹⁵⁷ One recent study that highlights the importance of place to understanding British race relations is Jacqueline Nassy Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

majority were equally, if not primarily motivated by financial concerns in trying to sort out how to curb dance floor racism. The violence also reintroduced one of the chief elements that the dance hall industry had attempted to stamp out in its quest for greater respectability throughout the interwar period.

Therefore, like the production and consumption of the jitterbug, dance floor racism confirmed the fluidity and occasionally contradictory nature of contemporary understandings of racial difference, which were arguably less retrenched than they would be after the war.¹⁵⁸ The British response to racial violence in dancing spaces was often regionally, and even individually specific, and dancing occupied a highly contested space within wartime social and racial relations. There was a tension between the women who were interested in dancing with and dating black men, and those who feared a connection between interracial dancing and miscegenation. This was contextualized within the longstanding disjuncture between those who viewed dancing to be a threat to social purity and those who did not, and the wartime idea that dancing provided a means of welcoming colonial subjects and African American GIs. The question of dancing's respectability was also connected to the dance hall industry's ongoing commercial concerns, which further existed in tension with the belief both within and outside of the business that color bars were inherently un-British and betrayed the ideals upon which the war was being fought. This in turn was complicated by the British government's desire to maintain an unsegregated society and its need to appease its vitally important American ally.

¹⁵⁸ For more on postwar race relations, see Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar World*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Chris Waters, "'Dark Strangers in our Midst': Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963," *Journal of British Studies* 36, no. 2, (April 1997): 207-238; Anne-Marie Angelo, "The Black Panthers in London, 1967-1972: A Diasporic Struggle Navigates the Black Atlantic," *Radical History Review* 103 (Winter 2009): 17-35.

Finally, the prevalence of racial tensions in public dancing spaces also demonstrates the degree to which the Anglo-American relationship exerted an increasingly strong influence on British race relations, perhaps almost equal to that of the declining empire. Dance culture had played an important role in this respect for a long period prior to the Second World War, through the importation of African American music and dancing, a process that continued through the war years with the jitterbug. However, now the physical presence of white and black Americans initiated processes, such as the implementation of color bars, which would carry on into the postwar world.

Conclusion

During the Second World War, the production and consumption of popular dancing in Britain maintained a number of continuities with the interwar period, and yet was also transformed in ways that were in certain cases specific to the context of the war, and in other cases appeared more permanent. Dancing remained an important space for the creation and performance of ideas about national identity, but the image of the nation had shifted significantly with the outbreak of war. Now dancing was used to express national unity and the wartime spirit, as well as to embody freedom and democracy. At the same time, a new generation was assuming control of popular dancing, the children of those who had first embraced and established the English style. This new dancing public latched onto the jitterbug, which hinted at the styles of dancing that would dominate the postwar ballroom. It had not happened yet, nor would it for some time, but ballroom dancing was gradually being replaced as the nation's primary popular dance form.

This transition meant that particularly within the context of the jitterbug, it became increasingly evident that the dance hall industry was attaining greater social and

cultural influence than the ballroom dance profession. And yet for the moment, the three primary producers and consumers of popular dance culture remained the same as they had since 1918. The production and performance of the people's war through dance, as well as the evolution of the jitterbug, the era's most significant dance innovation, were each accomplished through the independent and inter-connected actions of dancers, the dance hall industry, and the dance profession. These negotiations also influenced how the nation viewed racial difference, in that some Britons attempted to preserve the African American traditions associated with new dance forms, while others were engaged in the now well-established processes of anglicization and whitening. Moreover, this tension extended into the dance hall beyond the origin and content of what was being danced, but in the varied and contradictory ways in which Britons reconciled the presence of racial others on the dance floor. Popular dancing therefore revealed the highly fluid nature of contemporary understandings of race *and* nation, influenced as they were by both the consumption of popular culture and the material reality of dance floor racism, and then expressed in terms that were often regionally or even individually specific.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

In a 2006 episode of the BBC science fiction television show *Torchwood*, a spin-off of one of the broadcaster's best known productions, *Doctor Who*, two characters are transported back in time to the year 1941. However, the show's hero, Captain Jack Harkness, and his colleague, Tosh, find themselves not on a battlefield, in an air-raid shelter, or even a cinema, despite the fact that the latter remained Britain's most popular leisure activity. Rather, the setting for dramatic action that occurs at the height of the Second World War is a Cardiff dance hall. Dancers foxtrot and jitterbug in a ballroom decorated in Union Jacks and propaganda posters, romantic rivalries and racial tensions play out on the dance floor, and at one point all of the patrons are forced to flee to the bomb shelter beneath the hall, where the musicians continue to play songs like the "White Cliffs of Dover" until the all-clear sounds. At that point the dance hall manager merrily proclaims, "Let the dancing continue!"

The fantastical time travel element aside, scenes such as those that play out in *Torchwood* are common in popular cultural imaginings of the war years. There are few war films that do not feature at least one scene at a dance. In movies, television shows, and novels, as well as documentaries, printed retrospectives, and public histories, dancing often features heavily as *the* symbol of wartime social life. As one character in the 1984 American homefront film, *Swing Shift*, muses, "Do you know who dances in a war?"

Everybody.” Nor are these associations entirely confined to the Second World War. In many different contexts, jazz and swing music, flappers, and other elements of dance culture predominate in popular memory of the 1920s and 1930s as well.

Moreover, in recent years the dances that defined this era have enjoyed something of a renaissance, not just as a fixture in popular memory, but as a cultural practice. Swing dancing experienced a resurgence on both sides of the Atlantic, and in Britain a number of venues, including the Royal Opera House and the Savoy Hotel, have revived the custom of hosting tea dances. Of these events, the Royal Opera House website invites patrons to “Come and Waltz, tango, cha-cha-cha and quickstep to the strains of the Royal Opera House Dance Band ...We continue to celebrate the days when the Royal Opera House was one of the most popular dance venues in London with our tea dances.”¹ At the same time, new generations of Britons have been introduced to ballroom dancing through such popular television shows as *Strictly Come Dancing*. In this program, celebrities team up with a professional dancer and compete in a weekly dance competition. The show is a quasi-revival of the long-running BBC show *Come Dancing*, and the title also contains an homage to the Australian film *Strictly Ballroom*. The success of *Strictly Come Dancing* has also caused the concept to be exported abroad, and the show has been most notably recreated in the United States as *Dancing With the Stars*.

As is likely apparent, many of these more recent developments can be linked directly to cultural forms and practices that emerged in the period under review in this dissertation. Tea dancing at the Savoy or Royal Opera House was a prevalent practice for most of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s; this was also when that Britain was first introduced to most of the dances being performed at these twenty-first century events, from the

¹ See <http://www.roh.org.uk/whatson/production.aspx?pid=8307>

quickstep to swing dancing. The television show *Come Dancing* originally debuted in 1949, a production not only of the BBC, but of C.L. Heimann and the Mecca organization, which had its birth and heyday during the interwar and war years. Moreover, the processes of transatlantic cultural circulation, that continue to enable a British show like *Strictly Come Dancing* to be exported to the United States, also expanded at a pronounced rate during this period. The manner in which the show was re-imagined for an American television audience, re-formatted and re-named *Dancing With the Stars*, further parallels the ways in which popular dance imports to Britain were transformed into something identifiably British by cultural producers during the interwar and war years.

In this dissertation I have tried to untangle the moment of origin, or of significant transformation and evolution, of many of these dancing forms, practices, and commercial industries, that continue to resonate into the present day in both material and imaginary terms. In the preceding chapters I have argued that the period 1918 to 1945 saw the creation of a national dance culture, which emerged through ongoing cultural negotiations between the ballroom dance profession, dance hall industry, and dancing public. Moreover, I have shown that the national dance culture was never a wholly complete project, and that its evolution (and unfinished nature) must be understood in terms of a more widespread commercialization and expansion of leisure and entertainment, as well as the transnational circulation of popular culture.

During this period popular dancing became increasingly accessible and prevalent throughout the nation, due to the confluence of a number of factors. The development of modern ballroom dancing, a new dance form espoused for its naturalness and simplicity,

spurred interest in dancing as a leisure form, and allowed greater numbers of Britons to master, or at least manage a passable version of the new steps. At the same time, the opening of hundreds of inexpensive public dance halls provided new spaces in which to dance for Britons of all classes and regions. Finally, popular dancing's increasing ubiquity, in the newspaper, on the radio, and at the cinema, to name only a few, disseminated knowledge and experience of dance culture even to those Britons who never went dancing.

I have also tried to show that what was danced, how these dances were performed, and an array of cultural meanings related to gender, class, race, sexuality, and nation, were established through the processes of cultural production and consumption associated with the developing dance culture industry. In this way, new dances came to Britain via the conduits of transnational cultural exchange, with the predominant source clearly being America, though there were also some home-grown dances that emerged during the period under review. These dances were then weighed and evaluated by the dance profession, the dance hall industry, and the dancing public, independently and in conjunction with one another, and were accepted, rejected, or transformed in ways that determined whether or not they would be included within the national dance culture. These interactions also governed how dancing would be conducted, not only in terms of the performance of the dances themselves, but with respect to the social spaces and circumstances within which it took place.

In more specific terms, in the 1920s the dance profession transformed and standardized the steps of the modern ballroom dance forms that were attaining international popularity, and created the English style of ballroom dancing. This new

style was then transmitted to the dancing public via dancing classes, exhibition and competition dancing, and print culture, and also eventually became an important cultural export for the nation, as it was adopted as the competition standard by many other countries. In the case of the dance hall industry, by the late 1930s this cultural producer was also creating and transforming a number of popular dances, from the Lambeth Walk to the refined jitterbug, but had its greatest impact in shaping the spaces in which dancing would be consumed, creating an increasingly standardized public dancing experience. As for the dancing public, this group (or groups) served simultaneously as producers and consumers of popular dancing, influencing both its content and its context. Incidents described throughout this discussion, such as when public objections halted plans to cease the broadcasting of the Savoy dance bands, or when dancers sported hob-nailed boots to a dance at the Leyton town baths in order to protest the urban council's ban on jazz dances, demonstrate the agency exerted by dancers in their consumption of dance culture. The public also shaped the national dance culture by determining which dances would be popular, and by affirming or altering the steps, as well as the cultural meanings, introduced to them by the profession or the industry in their physical performance of dances.

In summing up this discussion, however, I want to underscore the point that the cultural negotiations described throughout the dissertation should not be understood as a rigid and inflexible system of production and consumption, in which the dance hall industry and dance profession advanced specific mandates about what the nation should be dancing, and how these dances should be imagined, which were then either accepted or resisted by the dancing public. Nor were the producers of dancing categorically anti-

American while the dancing public was unqualifiedly enthusiastic about every dance or other cultural import crossing the Atlantic. Rather, the motivations and interests of all three cultural groups functioned on an ever-shifting cultural field, occasionally aligning, overlapping, and contradicting one another.

In producing popular dance culture, the dance profession and dance hall industry operated in ways that both intersected and diverged. For example, the dance profession saw the rise of the public dance hall as a vitally important development to the expansion and improvement of dancing throughout the nation; simultaneously, the practice common at many dance halls of employing professional dance partners was perceived by some teachers of dancing as a threat to their bottom line. There was also considerable overlap in terms of the “membership” of the profession and the industry, and particularly as the influence of the dance hall industry expanded (along with the increased commercialization of leisure in general), many of Britain’s more prominent teachers, notably Victor Silvester, maintained their influence by joining forces with the likes of Mecca or the BBC.

At the same time, in a case such as the one in Leyton mentioned above, dancers joined forces with a dance promoter in order to combat the dictates of the urban district council; in this incident, the interests of the dancing public and one commercial producer of dancing clearly aligned. Moreover, as much as the dancing public exerted considerable agency in determining the content, performance, and meaning of the national dance culture, it must be acknowledged that this was accomplished in ways that were often significantly mediated by the profession and the dance hall industry. The dances that the public chose to embrace were usually brought to Britain, transformed, or created by the

producers of dancing. The producers and consumers of dancing alike were also significantly influenced by forces external to dance culture, both in terms of dominant ideologies about gender, race, class and nation contained within British society, and in terms of cultural influences originating beyond national borders, ranging from a new dance sensation in New York to controversies over dancing in Paris.

In these ways, it is apparent that the study of popular dancing illuminates far more than what was performed in the nation's ballrooms during the interwar and war years. I have tried to show that dancing was implicated in a host of cultural and social issues, ranging from the changing status of women, to ideas about national morality and respectability, to fears about Americanization. With respect to the latter, I join the growing number of scholars who have started to suggest that Britain's understanding of racial difference and national identity did not evolve solely with respect to its position as a colonial power. Rather, ideas about race and nation were also forged through Britain's position within a transnational culture industry increasingly dominated by African American cultural products, of which dances were only a select example.

Moreover, with respect to two ongoing questions of concern for contemporary historical actors and historians alike, the mythologies surrounding Americanization and the idea of a "people's war" between 1939 and 1945, I believe that this study has shown that neither can be understood as "either/or" propositions. American cultural products clearly had a profound influence on Britain during the period under review, but not in a way that was irrevocable; it is also significant that American dances were produced, reproduced, and consumed in ways that were nationally specific once they arrived in Britain. In the same way, the people's war mythology was not a phenomenon that can be

either affirmed or entirely consigned to myth; rather, it was something that retained both symbolic and material power on the nation's dance floors. So much so in fact, that it continues to be drawn upon decades later in portrayals of both war and dancing in shows like the BBC's *Torchwood*, and many others.

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