



TAP TAKES

Toe tappers and shoe shufflers have graced stage and screen with intricate rhythms and sensational showpieces for many decades. There is no doubt that tap dance has remained a popular form of entertainment to this day. The question is why? What is it about tap that captivates audiences of all ages and ethnicities?

To figure out the answer to this question, you first need to know where traditional tap dance came from. Mark Knowles, a choreographer and dancer from Los Angeles, has published perhaps the most comprehensive history of tap dancing to date in his book *Tap Roots*. Although there are many individual

of tapping popularised by the likes of Gene Kelly and Eleanor Powell. With the African dances becoming more formal and the European elements more rhythmic and loose, the 'twin heritages of European footwork and African style and rhythm blended', writes Knowles, and formed what we know as tap dancing.

Tap has come a long way in the last century. Its constant evolution is perhaps the main reason for its enduring popularity. 'It's much more acrobatic [now],' says Rhonda Sayer, principal of Rhonvic-Brolga Studios in suburban Sydney and seasoned all-round performer. 'It's becoming neater again. We

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dances and theatrical elements that have shaped the development of tap dance, it is possible to narrow down the list to several important contributors.

Of the Irish influence, the step dances (done with hard-soled shoes) were the most prominent contributors. These involved fast footwork and elaborate leg movements. Elements of English clog dancing also influenced – the wooden shoes that accentuated the sounds created by the feet were the forerunners of the modern tap shoe and even came to incorporate horseshoe-shaped irons that sparked against the pavement when the dancers tapped their feet. Both of these dance styles utilised few movement of the upper body, in contrast to the elements adopted from African secular and religious dances.

African traditional dances incorporated dragging, gliding and shuffling of the feet, which eventually became staple steps in modern tap. The body movements and African musical features also brought us jazz and swing, which was instrumental in the development of the traditional 'Broadway' style

did neat tapping, but it wasn't fast tapping and not a lot of beats. Then it went to very swiny tapping in the knee joints and it travelled more. But now it's coming back to neat, a lot of winging, a lot of double knocks, turns and travelling steps.' From Broadway to Industrial to Street, tapping has continued to 'wow' audiences and keep them coming back for more.

From Broadway to Streetwise

So, what is traditional Broadway tapping? Sometimes also called American tap, the Broadway style developed during the era of jazz in the early 1900s. It is a showy style that involves a lot of swinging, angular arms, feathers, sequins and pristine smiles. Vaudeville also featured skilled tap dancers in shows before television became a more accessible form of entertainment and dancers began moving to film from the 1930s. Some of the most famous tap dancers of all time – such as Ann Miller, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Eleanor Powell, Ginger Rogers, Bill

TO THE STREET

The legendary Gregory Hines said: 'tap is here, now!' And he was right. Romina Cavagnola looks at the evolution of tap dance and the elements that make it timeless.

'Bojangles' Robinson and the Nicholas Brothers – were at the height of their careers in the 1940s and 50s.

Tap was overshadowed by the onset of rock and roll, but recovered in the 1960s when a number of tap shows were performed on Broadway. The 70s and 80s saw a return of tap to film, with movies such as *The Cotton Club*, *Steppin' Out* and *TAP* (starring Gregory Hines and Sammy Davis Jr.) showcasing the buoyant steps and circular patterns of American tap.

In 1989, *TAP* showed a change in the traditional style of tap dance. Gregory Hines brought a funk feel to the dancing, which set tap on a new course of adaptation. The Nicholas Brothers also brought something different to tap throughout their long careers. Their style was very acrobatic and their signature 'no hand splits' and leapfrogs over each other down flights of stairs remain some of the most amazing dance feats ever performed.

The big tap revolution occurred in January 1995. Australian tap dancer and choreographer Dein Perry, in an astounding premiere performance, brought to the world *Tap Dogs*. Incorporating the innovative staging concepts of industrial rigs, the dancers tapped on corrugated iron, against metal scaffolds, and even were suspended from the ceiling. They brandished chainsaws, which brought the stage to life with sparks, much like the taps affixed to the shoes of the Irish step and English clog dances centuries before. They tapped on water and up and

down platforms; they bounced basketballs in time with their footwork; they changed the world of tap so profoundly that dancers and teachers across the globe began experimenting in earnest with industrial tap.

Former Tap Dog Nathan Sheens – who was the dance director for one of the American productions of *Tap Dogs* – says that the great thing about *Tap Dogs* is that it 'opened a window for a lot of tap dancers and showed the world...that blokes can tap dance and when they tap dance with big boots on and on all different types of surfaces it's a very impressive style.'

When the hype of *Tap Dogs* started to die down, Perry went on to create *Steel City* (another industrial tap show), on which the movie *Bootmen* was based. Sheens also performed in this show, then went on to assist Perry in choreographing the *Tap Dogs* performance in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. Once again, the world was in raptures over the impressive style and intricate footwork of the Tap Dogs.

Sheens himself has left his own mark on the tapping world with his creation *BPM beatsperminute*. In a move away from the industrial style of *Tap Dogs* and towards the emerging street tap style, Sheens and co-creator Glyn Gray combined tap with percussion, vocals and funky bass lines to create a many-layered show that demonstrated the versatility of the dancers



Hollywood starlet, Ann Miller

Tap Dogs 'showed the world that blokes can tap dance'.

Tap Dance Day

In November 1989, the US Congress declared May 25 National Tap Dance Day. 'By golly, there ought to be a law to make everyone love tap dancing', said Representative John Conyers of Michigan.

The idea for this annual celebration was contrived by Carol Vaughn, Nicola Daval and Linda Christensen. These ladies loved tap and rallied teachers and dancers across the US to gain support. With the support of Conyers and Republican senator Al D'Amato from New York (who was an avid tap fan), Resolution 131 was passed by both houses of Congress and tap declared a national treasure.

May 25 was chosen because it was the birth date of Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson - the man credited with the fusion of various racial influences that led to modern tap. The three masterminds of Tap Dance Day chose this date because they 'felt it was important that the symbol for tap be African American because many people still did not know of blacks' contribution to tap. To tap insiders, Robinson was renowned for dancing on the ball of the foot, in split wooden soles, and in perfect time', writes Jane Goldberg for Dance Magazine.

In the US, the celebration is honoured with performances in many cities. Nowadays, Tap Dance Day is International, with nations such as Iceland, India, Japan and Australia.

Glamour Puss Studios in Melbourne, Australia, along with Funktap, were the first to celebrate Tap Dance Day in Australia. Glamour Puss Studios' Tap Dance Day celebrations include performing at City Square, in Federation Square, on the steps of Parliament and at Queensbridge Square at Southbank. In 2009, 'we decided one day was not enough and instituted Melbourne Tap Week', says Glamour Puss Studios on their website.

A comprehensive outline of the development of Tap Dance Day can be read in Jane Goldberg's article 'How Tap Got Its Day - May 25th National Tap Dance Day'.



Bill "Bojangles" Robinson

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The cast of BPM beatsperminute.

and of the art form itself. For Sheens, it was all about the question 'how can we help tap dance evolve one step further than it already has?' With BPM *beatsperminute*, Australia found the answer.

When asked what it is that keeps audiences in awe of tap, Sayer and Sheens both agree that the changing musical scene has helped tap along. 'It's probably more the music...that has changed,' Sayer says. 'It's gone more from the ballroom style,

Tap is truly timeless...

Hollywood music to pop bands... a lot of drumming and percussion, then electric bands....Everybody's changing to suit the music.'

That the US Congress proclaimed May 25 (the birthday of 'Bojangles') as National Tap Dance Day in 1989 is testament to the popularity of the art form. Sheens thinks that tap 'continues to evolve, even today and it should, it shouldn't stop, it's infinite.' This is probably the heart of the matter. That it constantly adapts and lends itself to transformation shows that tap is truly timeless.

Knowles, Mark (2002). *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap Dancing*, McFarland & Company, North Carolina