

# FROM PLANTATION

# TO BALLROOM *by Jono Podmore*

Over 15 years ago, whilst working on an album of music based on the dance rhythms of the time, my old friend Uli Gerlach asked if I'd ever thought of investigating earlier dance music: the Foxtrot, Charleston etc. The idea stayed with me and, as it has been for so many of us, the lockdowns provided a chance to finally research this music and apply the findings to my own work.

My first discovery was that the essence of this music is a far cry from the superficial glitziness of *Strictly*, or the geriatric end-of-pier ballroom.

The truth is that these are all slave dances. They all derive from African American culture of the late 19th and early 20th century and carry with them the trauma of slavery and treasured remnants of African culture. I looked at seven dance pieces in detail and here's a little of what I uncovered.

## *The Charleston*

One of the iconic dances of Roaring Twenties, it gets its name from the city of Charleston, South Carolina; a major slave trading port founded in 1670 and named after Charles II. Around 50% of all the slaves in America arrived in Charleston. The African Americans of this region among all the southern states have managed to maintain the most of their African culture. This is particularly apparent on the Sea Islands, a chain of 100 or so islands that runs down the Atlantic coast from north of Charleston, through Georgia down to Florida. The plantation owners were much more "hands off" on the Islands. The ocean limited escapes, and as long as there was a reliable rice crop the owners were more inclined to leave the slaves to get on with it to a degree. Many of the agricultural practices employed on the islands were brought with the slaves from West Africa, so the food, customs, beliefs, some aspects of language, music and dance of the Geechee and Gullah peoples of the islands all have strong, identifiable African roots. Despite their relative autonomy, the people of the Sea Islands were crushingly poor so access to musical instruments was limited, the drums being replaced with a stick beaten on the floor. Their music is largely based around a persistent 3+3+2 rhythm; sometimes known as the Cuban triplet: half of the West African clave pattern. This rhythm forms the basis of James P Johnson's 1923 hit song *The Charleston*. Johnson was an enormously influential African American pianist; a founding father of what became Jazz, and co-wrote the song with white lyricist Cecil Mack and became one of the most popular songs of the period. Although the dance itself has its roots in the "challenge dances" that were part of slave culture, it "was

a synthetic creation, a newly-devised conglomerate tailored for widespread popular appeal..." eventually popularised in Europe and beyond by Josephine Baker.

## *The Black Bottom*

This is one of the most recognisable dance music rhythms of the 1920s, the title recently appearing in film *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (2020). Despite the obvious innuendo, the title of the dance has nothing to do with anyone's derriere. Black Bottom is an area of Detroit, Michigan. This district of the city gets its name from its dark alluvial soil and as the city expanded the poorest people lived there, particularly Eastern European Jews. During World War I the Great Migration began: around 6 million black people from the rural south, began to move north, a process that continued in to the 70s. They were lured by mass employment and the sophistication of urban life, and were desperate to escape the lynchings and increase in racism in the segregated South; there were up to 3,500 lynchings in the Southern states between 1882 and 1968. When they reached Detroit, poverty drove them to Black Bottom. The community thrived and soon boasted an African American economy, infrastructure and culture. The nightclubs were magnets for the great names of Jazz, and the neighbourhood was the birthplace of Elijah Muhammad, Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson among others.

White composer Ray Henderson wrote the hit song that launched the Black Bottom dance craze in 1926; partly in celebration of this burgeoning African American cultural hub, partly as voyeur. The song drives home the syncopated rhythm of the dance, derived from a West African bell patterns, with the lines:

Black Bottom, a new twister,  
it's sure got 'em and oh sister,  
They clap their hands and do a raggedy trot.

An example of a common pattern: black culture popularised by whites with a colonised depiction of black people as a "raggedy" other.

Little remains of Black Bottom in Detroit today, but its enormous cultural impact remains, not least in the self-confidence of the city's black music culture.

## *The Shimmy*

This dance was popularised in 1916 with Spencer Williams' piece *Shim Ma Sha Wabble*. It became a big hit with the flappers of the 1920s, despite being banned in some

ancehalls as the focus on the upper body was considered obscene. Williams was an African American and the dance spread via black night clubs, but the origins of the dance itself reveal another thread: the role of Native Americans. The dance derives from the "Shima Shiwa" a Native American dance that rattles the heavily beaded traditional clothing. The interplay between African slaves and Natives was enormous; many African Americans can trace Native blood in their family tree. The Natives were supportive of escaped slaves, no doubt with a mixture of compassion and a spirit of the enemy's enemy being a friend. When slavery was at its height, the natives were losing their land, their livelihoods and eventually their lives stripped away from them by the whites. The method of treaty, illegal settlement, skirmish, war, new treaty with improved conditions for the prevailing power is exactly the same inexorable process we see today in the West Bank and Gaza. The Shimmy retained its popularity throughout the 20th century, reappearing in pop hits in the 1960s and then in 1995 with Ol' Dirty Bastard's hit Shimmy Shimmy Ya. Despite claiming, "Ooh, baby, I like it raw", the music reveals scholarly references to Williams' original piece and is largely in the same key.

### Buzzard Lope

This song and accompanying dance was never popularised on Broadway or in nightclubs despite being recorded by Bessie Smith, yet it holds many keys to understanding the trauma of slavery. At first glance the lyrics seem innocuous enough:

Don't care where you throw me.  
In that ole field.  
Cause my Jesus owns me.  
In that ole field.

African folklore relies heavily on animal metaphor, the most well known examples recorded in ancient Greece as Aesop's fables, and as seen in the name of other dances: Foxtrot, Turkey Trot, Bunny Hug etc. But the Buzzard here is no metaphor.

In Cornelia Bailey's excellent book *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man*, which records her life on the Sea Islands, she tells of her father and his friends gathering to have a drink, sing and dance. As the emotions would build this would lead to the Charleston and eventually the intricate and strenuous Buzzard Lope. The therapeutic aspect of the dance is revealed in its origins:

"...when the people who were enslaved... were working in the fields, in the sun, in the summertime, and that heat got to someone. It got to him bad... and he fell over, dead in the field. The master wouldn't let the workers stop. He wasn't going to let two or three people stop to bury their family member until it was dark and they couldn't work any longer. But a whole day in August was a lifetime, and the buzzards came, and they circled around, and the head buzzard came in and checked out the prey and the other buzzards joined him, and they started their natural thing of cleaning up the earth."

Meanwhile, I am very white, almost transparent from lack of Melanin. So what am I doing digging around in someone else's story and deriving my own work from it? I asked my friend, artist Joyce Treasure what she felt about my work. As a graduate of the Black Studies course at Birmingham City University, the first such course in Europe, she asked some probing questions about my intentions and made some painful comparisons but eventually she gave me her support. These stories need to be told. Black people can be as unaware of much of this vital history as anyone else; their story has been utterly colonised, censored and retold to them by whites over the generations, often removing all traces of black agency and context.



Art work by Joyce Treasure

Despite my skin, I realised that this is in part my story too. I'm from Liverpool, but a quick glance at my family tree reveals that none of my great-grandparents were born in the city. They came from Scotland, Ireland, Lancashire and Wales. They uprooted themselves from long local traditions dating back generations to come to Liverpool for one reason: to enjoy the spoils of transatlantic trade built on the barbarity of slavery. Their children, my grandparents, would have sung and danced the Charleston, the Black Bottom, Bunny Hug,

perhaps even Shimmied,

sharing the culture of the slaves whose suffering produced the wealth around them. I no longer feel like an exploitative voyeur mining another culture for my own benefit, I feel a responsibility to de-colonise our collective history and identify how slavery continues to touch us all, economically, socially and culturally.

*The first results of this work, my album Slave Dances (Seven Portraits) with artwork by Joyce Treasure will be released autumn 2021 on sound-space.net*



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