



## DANCES OF THE RAGTIME ERA

During the 19th century, most of America's dances were imported from Europe, as dance masters emulated the latest fashions of London and Paris. At the same time, the slaves from Africa were combining their native music and dance with European and Caribbean forms, resulting in the spirituals and "Ethiopian Melodies" that were popularized by minstrel shows and American composers like Foster, Christy and Gottschalk. This new uniquely American music developed into Ragtime, with its characteristic syncopation.

At the end of the century, many Americans were becoming bored with the old music and dances, which were essentially those of their grandparents. The Twentieth Century was seen as a time to make great changes, so most people were ready for innovations, probably with the expectation that the changes would come from society's cultural leaders. But instead, many Americans began to find it "modern" to dance to the new Ragtime music from the rural South. Even a few high society ballrooms accepted the blacks' Cake Walk as "the popular fad of popular society." In the early 1900s, Ragtime music began to gain a wider acceptance, especially among the lower classes, who matched the exuberance and unpretentiousness of the new music with a spontaneous menagerie of "animal dances" such as the Grizzly Bear, Turkey Trot, Bunny Hug and Camel Walk. By 1910, a popular phrase was, "Everybody's Doin' It," but in fact most of proper society could not yet accept the new music and dance because of its low-class association with blacks, bars and brothels.

At this time, the newlyweds Irene and Vernon Castle found themselves in the right place at the right time, exhibiting their versions of the new American dances in a Parisian dinner club. They became immensely popular in Paris, and their fame spread through Europe. When the Castles returned to Irene's New York home in 1912, their dancing set a new prototype for Americans to follow. The Castles were a young, elegant, attractive, wholesome, married couple who had become the rage of Parisian high society. In a word, they had class. If they could dance the new ragtime dances, then all of proper society could join the growing dance craze. The Castles were joined by other exemplars, such as Maurice Mouvet and Joan Sawyer, becoming catalysts in the ragtime dance mania of 1912 to 1915 . . . the largest dance craze the world had ever seen. After two centuries of Americans dancing in the European manner, Europe was now importing the latest American dances and music.

During the ragtime dance craze, the ballrooms were dominated by a single dance, the One-Step, where a couple merely walked one step to each beat of the music. Its immense popularity was due primarily to its simplicity. But those who were especially fond of the new dancing had a wide variety of more complex steps and styles to choose from. The Argentine Tango, which had been greatly modified in Paris, was renowned for its flirtations with sensuality, previously forbidden in public dancing. In contrast, the Hesitation Waltz was characterized by an elegant, almost balletic grace. The Maxixe was a swaying Brazilian polka that was adopted as a Tango. Vernon and Irene danced the One-Step in a unique style that became known as the Castle Walk. The Half-and-Half was an unusual hesitation waltz in 5/4 time, accompanied by even more obscure experiments in 7/4 time. Finally, the Fox-Trot became the latest fad in the last months before the Great War.

World War I brought an end to the ragtime era dance craze. The twenties saw a revival of social dancing with Classic Jazz music, the Charleston, Collegiate and Black Bottom. The Tango adopted a more "gaucho" style under the influence of Rudolph Valentino, and the kicking Fox-Trot started to become a smoother walking. Although the twenties saw a return of tremendous enthusiasm for dancing, it never quite reached the heights of originality, diversity and mass popularity seen in the ragtime era.