

“You Can’t Dance to It”: Jazz Music and Its Choreographies of Listening

Christopher J. Wells

Abstract: Central to dominant jazz history narratives is a midcentury rupture where jazz transitions from popular dance music to art music. Fundamental to this trope is the idea that faster tempos and complex melodies made the music hostile to dancing bodies. However, this constructed moment of rupture masks a longer, messier process of negotiation among musicians, audiences, and institutions that restructured listening behavior within jazz spaces. Drawing from the field of dance studies, I offer the concept of “choreographies of listening” to interrogate jazz’s range of socially enforced movement “scores” for audience listening practices and their ideological significance. I illustrate this concept through two case studies: hybridized dance/concert performances in the late 1930s and “off-time” bebop social dancing in the 1940s and 1950s. These case studies demonstrate that both seated and dancing listening were rhetorically significant modes of engagement with jazz music and each expressed agency within an emergent Afromodernist sensibility.

CHRISTOPHER J. WELLS is Assistant Professor of Musicology at the Arizona State University School of Music. Their work appears in the *Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity* (2016) and the journals *Women & Music* and *Jazz & Culture*. They are currently writing a book about the history of jazz music’s ever-shifting relationship with popular dance.

Like many jazz scholars, I spend a lot of time doing critical historiography, contemplating the sedimental layers of ideology jazz’s histories have accumulated over time and how those striations affect our view of the past. But there is one moment in my life that sticks out when I truly felt the gravity of jazz historical narratives. When I say gravity, I mean precisely that: it pulled me off my feet and planted my ass in a chair. At the 2013 American Musicological Society annual meeting in Pittsburgh, a live band performed Ted Buehrer’s painstaking transcriptions of Mary Lou Williams’s compositions and arrangements. My friend Anna and I lindy hopped our way through Williams’s best charts from the 1920s and 1930s: “Walkin’ and Swingin’,” “Messa Stomp,” and “Mary’s Idea.”¹ About halfway through, the band took up “Scorpio” from Williams’s *Zodiac Suite*, and I felt that groovy bassline throughout my legs and hips as delightful pockets of rhythmic

© 2019 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences
doi:10.1162/DAED_a_01741

dissonance invited me (and I presume also Anna, though I haven't asked her) to keep dancing . . . but we didn't. The music still felt "danceable," but we'd crossed from 1938 to 1944, and I felt a shift inside myself as I questioned whether letting my hips respond to that bassline would still be appropriate as the band crossed the "bebop moment": that early 1940s boundary separating jazz-as-pop from jazz-as-art.

The bebop moment has become a crucial, arguably *the* crucial, event in nearly every large-scale narrative treatment of jazz's history. As cultural theorist Bernard Gendron explains,

The bebop revolution has since been enshrined in the jazz canon as a contest of epic proportions, occurring at the major fault line of jazz history. Bebop is given credit for having transformed jazz from a popular dance music, firmly ensconced in the Hit Parade, to a demanding, experimental art music consigned to small clubs and sophisticated audiences.²

Gendron's historiographic framing is quite astute, and it is important we continue to reexamine this still potent narrative construct. I would advocate moving away from the idea of a bifurcating "moment" in favor of conceptualizing the cultural transition of jazz at midcentury as a long and often messy process encompassing many individual and collective negotiations among musicians, audiences, and institutions.

A critical element of the potent trope Gendron highlights is that the bebop moment marked jazz music's severance from practices of social dancing. This is encapsulated in a scene from Ken Burns's iconic, if oft-criticized, documentary *Jazz*: "No Dancing, Please." The sign fills the screen before panning upward to a sax player blowing in a smoky club. In this early moment from the eighth volume of *Jazz*, narrator Keith David explains,

Great jazz soloists abandoned dreams of having big bands of their own, formed small groups instead and retreated to nightclubs, places too small for dancing. . . . The jam session had become the model, freewheeling, competitive, demanding, the kind jazz musicians had always played to entertain themselves after the squares had gone home. The Swing Era was over; jazz had moved on. And here and there across the country, in small clubs and on obscure record labels, the new and risk-filled music was finally beginning to be heard. It was called "Bebop."³

Christopher J. Wells

Henry Martin and Keith Waters offer a similar framing in their ubiquitous tome *Jazz: The First Hundred Years*: "The beboppers, however, disassociated jazz from the jitterbugging crowds of the 1930s in an attempt to win respect for their music as an art form. The radical change in tempo also certainly affected dancing."⁴ Among the "key points" they use to differentiate bebop from swing are the following: "Deemphasis on dancing: Tempos considerably faster or slower than in swing; Rhythmic pulse less obviously articulated than in swing."⁵ Further scholarly accounts bolster this point. Even as he notably, and somewhat controversially, situates bebop as a contiguous extension of the swing era, historian David Stowe still reinscribes this trope, offering "big bands betraying their audience by playing undanceable tempos or lacing their charts with the controversial modernisms of what was coming to be called bebop."⁶ Stowe's emphasis on betrayal highlights another significant element of this narrative: that musicians claimed greater autonomy as artists by distancing themselves from popular audiences and from the trappings of mass entertainment.

Musicians and dancers have also reaffirmed this narrative. In his autobiography, Dizzy Gillespie attributes his band's

“You Can’t Dance to It” struggles in the late 1940s to a disjuncture between what his band was playing and what social dancers wanted.

Dancers had to hear those four solid beats and could care less about the more esoteric aspects, the beautiful advanced harmonies and rhythms that we played and our virtuosity, as long as they could dance. They didn’t care whether we played a flatted fifth or a ruptured 129th.⁷

Foregrounding and problematizing audience members’ bodies, Gillespie highlights the chasm between his own expressive desires and those of listeners who principally wanted “to dance close and screw.”⁸ Frankie Manning, arguably the most influential Savoy Ballroom dancer of the swing era, gives an account of bebop from which one would certainly gather the music was not for dancing. Manning writes: “I went to Minton’s Playhouse to hear some jazz, and I said, ‘What the heck is going on?’ . . . I was used to music for dancing, but this new sound was only for listening.”⁹ Though Manning’s parsing of listening and dancing highlights the very dichotomization of listener corporealities I seek to disrupt in this essay, his experience represents his generation’s perspective regarding the challenges bebop’s innovations presented to bodies entrained to the rhythms and tempos of swing, challenges that indeed dissuaded them from dancing.

Of course, as audiences stop dancing, they necessarily *start* doing something else, and equally critical to jazz’s ostensible transition is listeners’ new mode of performative engagement, as jazz audiences increasingly listened while performing the motionless, serious, and intellectually rigorous listening posture of the Western concert listener. Musicologist Scott DeVeaux argues that the rise of the jazz concert between 1935 and 1945 was crucial to repositioning jazz as a form

of serious art. As he explains, concert formats present a powerful cultural rhetoric within the United States, because of their associations with the “considerable social privilege” afforded European art music.¹⁰ Concerts, of course, also impose a specific choreography for audiences; DeVeaux writes, “The concert is a solemn ritual with music the object of reverent contemplation. Certain formalities are imposed upon the concert audience: people attend in formal dress, sit quietly, and attentively with little outward bodily movement, and restrict their response to applause at appropriate moments only.”¹¹ In a concert setting, musicians and seated audience members lay claim to cultural capital by performing the movements and nonmovements that mark the concert as an elite social space and the music performed as worthy of serious consideration. Both affirmations and contestations of the bebop moment as a singular point of rupture that marks jazz’s emergence as “art” necessarily position jazz listeners’ bodies as critical sites of deeply political performance both within and in opposition to social inscribed choreographies.

I contend that jazz studies as a field could benefit from more robust discussions of its audiences and of the social and aesthetic politics that shape how listening bodies contribute to the aesthetic discourses that mark jazz as lowbrow, highbrow, sinful, tasteful, primitive, modern, popular entertainment, and high art in various times and places. As both a practicing social jazz dancer and a scholar researching jazz music’s intersections with social and popular dance, I have had the privilege of engaging substantively with dance studies as a field. Dance scholars have developed a robust and deeply nuanced critical discussion of bodies and embodied expression that could certainly inform work in jazz studies, even when

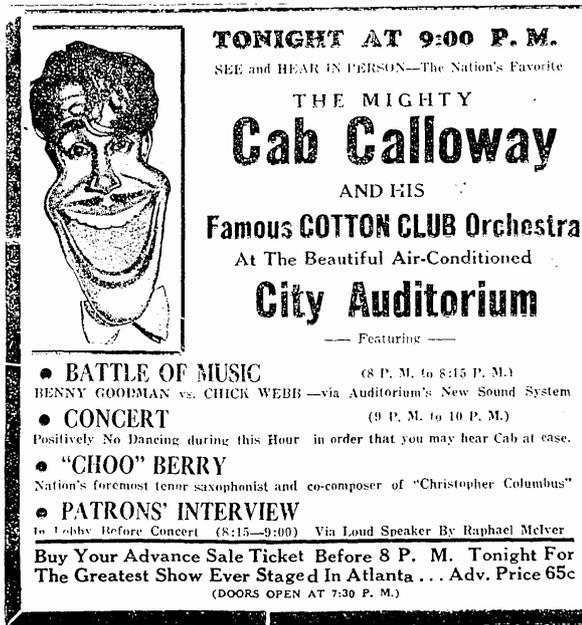
dance is not our explicit subject. In this essay, I offer the concept of *choreographies of listening* as a theoretical tool meant both to place jazz studies in closer dialogue with valuable work on embodiment and performance emerging from the field of dance studies and to offer us useful language through which to more critically interrogate the complex and deeply contextual social performances of listening in which jazz's audiences engage. Toward that end, I develop and apply the concept through two brief case studies, one from the early 1930s and one from the late 1940s and early 1950s, that highlight shifts and unorthodoxies in black listener corporeality and complicate dominant narratives regarding black audiences' corporeal modes of dancing and of listening during these periods.

Black jazz audiences during the interwar period were particularly mindful of the intersection between seated listening and the projection of rigor and dignity. A series of events targeting black audiences in Atlanta during the late 1930s specifically bifurcated the space for seated listening and dancing listening. Advertisements in the *Chicago Defender* and the *Atlanta Daily World* – Atlanta's primary African American newspaper – promoted dance parties that also featured a separate “concert hour” when no dancing was allowed. The first such concert was held at Sunset Park in July 1938 and featured the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra. The *Defender* reported that the Lunceford event separated dancing time from concert time: “During the concert hour before the ‘jam session,’ Lunceford entertained the crowd with what could be considered a floor show, but was styled as a concert hour – no dancing was allowed. At 9:30 o'clock, swing-time begun continuing until 1:30 o'clock.”¹² Two similar events were held at Atlanta's City

Auditorium, the first of which, also in 1938, featured Cab Calloway's band. Advertisements made clear that from 9 – 10 p.m. there would be “NO DANCING, in order that you may hear Cab at ease” with assurances that “at ten o'clock sharp, he will get ‘hotcha’ and ‘jam it’ until one-thirty o'clock the next in the morning.”¹³ The following year, City Auditorium hosted Count Basie's orchestra, offering a concert half-hour with “POSITIVELY NO DANCING” following a patron's interview in the lobby.¹⁴

To understand why these Atlanta concerts were exceptional, however, and why these audiences may have desired to enact the seated posture of serious listening, we must consider that these performances were organized as racially segregated events for black audiences only. The same *Daily World* article announcing Cab Calloway's 1938 appearance and its “streamlined” concert section also reveals that this would be City Auditorium's first “all colored double performance” and that “management is eager to see if Negro people really appreciate an evening all their own.”¹⁵ While it may have been their first jazz concert, the black Atlantans attending City Auditorium were not strangers to the role of attentive audience member for a serious concert performance. The venue regularly hosted not only jazz dances but also graduation ceremonies, community pageants, and operatic and concert recital performances by black singers, the kinds of events whose concordances with elite European culture musicologist Lawrence Schenbeck has convincingly situated within the African American social and intellectual project of racial uplift.¹⁶ In fact, earlier that month, the City Auditorium staged a pageant entitled “75 Years of Progress” that celebrated the development of the Negro race in America, and earlier in the year the auditorium hosted

"You Can't Figure 1
Dance to It" Cab Calloway Band Concert Advertisement, 1938



TONIGHT AT 9:00 P. M.
SEE and HEAR IN PERSON—The Nation's Favorite

**THE MIGHTY
Cab Calloway**
AND HIS
Famous **COTTON CLUB** Orchestra
At The Beautiful Air-Conditioned
City Auditorium

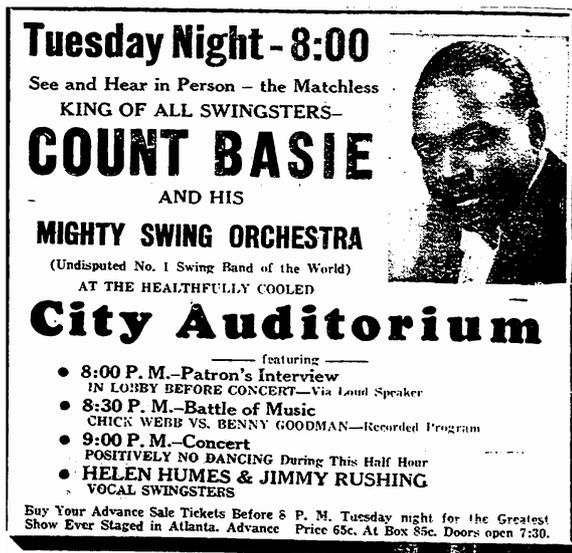
— Featuring —

- **BATTLE OF MUSIC** (8 P. M. to 8:15 P. M.)
BENNY GOODMAN vs. CHICK WEBB —via Auditorium's New Sound System
- **CONCERT** (9 P. M. to 10 P. M.)
Positively No Dancing during this Hour in order that you may hear Cab at ease.
- **"CHOO" BERRY**
Nation's foremost tenor saxophonist and co-composer of "Christopher Columbus"
- **PATRONS' INTERVIEW**
In Lobby Before Concert (8:15—9:00) Via Loud Speaker By Raphael McIver

Buy Your Advance Sale Ticket Before 8 P. M. Tonight For
The Greatest Show Ever Staged In Atlanta . . . Adv. Price 65c
(DOORS OPEN AT 7:30 P. M.)

Source: *Atlanta Daily World*, August 4, 1938 (accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers).

Figure 2
Count Basie Orchestra Concert Advertisement, 1939



Tuesday Night - 8:00
See and Hear in Person — the Matchless
KING OF ALL SWINGSTERS—
COUNT BASIE
AND HIS
MIGHTY SWING ORCHESTRA
(Undisputed No. 1 Swing Band of the World)
AT THE HEALTHFULLY COOLED
City Auditorium

— featuring —

- **8:00 P. M.—Patron's Interview**
IN LOBBY BEFORE CONCERT—Via Loud Speaker
- **8:30 P. M.—Battle of Music**
CHICK WEBB VS. BENNY GOODMAN—Recorded Program
- **9:00 P. M.—Concert**
POSITIVELY NO DANCING During This Half Hour
- **HELEN HUMES & JIMMY RUSHING**
VOCAL SWINGSTERS

Buy Your Advance Sale Tickets Before 8 P. M. Tuesday night for the Greatest
Show Ever Staged in Atlanta. Advance Price 65c. At Box 85c. Doors open 7:30.

Source: *Atlanta Daily World*, May 14, 1939 (accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers).

spiritual concerts from the Tuskegee University Choir under the direction of African American composer William Dawson.¹⁷ Atlanta's black audiences thus already understood the specific rules governing audiences' corporeal performance in this elite cultural space: by sitting down, listening intently, and responding appropriately with limited movement, black audiences could acquire embodied cultural capital by performing the physical rhetoric through which seated audiences communicate respect, dignity, intelligence, and sophistication.

I introduce these hybridized concert events, which explicitly instruct audiences about how to position their bodies for listening, to suggest choreography as a useful analytic lens through which to approach listening practices and engagement with music, and specifically with jazz. My use of the term *choreography* follows dance scholar Susan Foster, who employs the concept to consider broadly the structuring of possibilities for how bodies can move and behave within a given space. Whether planned intentionally by a single person or formed organically through gradual shifts in tacit social mores, choreography, she argues, is a "hypothetical setting forth of what the body is and what it can be based on the decisions made in rehearsal and in performance about its identity." Foster claims we can thus read choreographies as "the product of choices, inherited, invented, or selected, about what kinds of bodies and subjects are being constructed and what kinds of arguments about these bodies and subjects are being put forth."¹⁸ Foster's work draws from a robust interdisciplinary conversation in dance studies that regards the body, whether moving or stationary, as always performative and always political.¹⁹

To see how movement's interaction with choreographies specifically influ-

ences listening, it is useful to consider the conjuncturally specific listening praxis ethnomusicologist Judith Becker has termed "habitus of listening." Building upon sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's framework, Becker offers this term as a way to understand the default mode(s) of listening within a particular sphere of musical practice. As Becker explains:

Our habitus of listening is tacit, unexamined, seemingly completely "natural." We listen in a particular way without thinking about it, and without realizing that it even is a particular way of listening. Most of our styles of listening have been learned through unconscious imitation of those who surround us and those with whom we continually interact. A "habitus of listening" suggests not a necessity nor a rule, but an inclination, a disposition to listen with a particular kind of focus . . . and to interpret the meanings of the sounds and one's emotional responses to the musical event in somewhat (never totally) predictable ways.²⁰

Tacit, socially constructed choreography is often central to the process of "unconscious imitation" to which Becker refers. The habitus generated by a musical space's choreography guides how one enacts the process of listening, what sensory information is a relevant part of this listening process, and what constitutes appropriate interaction between the various participants. When applied to jazz listening spaces, choreography indexes the implicit and explicit assumptions people make about their role (dancer, musician, concertgoer, and so on), how they should thus orient their body to communicate what it means for them to listen to the music being played (or that they are playing), and what their listening bodies communicate about the soundscapes and attendant values within a given shared space.

“You Can’t
Dance to It”

In discussing jazz musicians in the 1920s, musicologist Jeffrey Magee situates jazz musicians’ enactment of racial uplift as a form of cultural mastery that demonstrated fluency in Western concert traditions.²¹ By corporeally enacting the role of Western concert listeners, black audiences at City Auditorium also embodied an ethic of racial uplift through cultural mastery, situating themselves as educated, cerebral, and serious listeners. Crucially, performing the nonmovement of a seated listener also signaled that African American audiences were capable of corporeal discipline, a critical counter-statement to longstanding minstrel tropes that portrayed black bodies as fundamentally wild and subhuman. Corporeal discipline was thus central on numerous levels to the physical enactment of racial uplift.²² Control of one’s body was tied to positive moral values through the early twentieth-century discourse surrounding physical culture. As a precursor to the American bodybuilding movement, the concept of physical culture offered that individuals were capable of improving their bodies through educated, disciplined labor and were capable, through this work, of improving their worth and moral character. This concept became an especially potent tool for African American communities because it offered a counter-narrative to white supremacist genetic determinism.²³ It is also important to note that a still, seated listening posture draws attention *away* from one’s body, presenting a space where serious sounds meet serious minds (with perhaps the minor concession that there are ears involved). For African Americans at this time, emphasizing their cerebral prowess and sensitive intellect was a powerful tactic for contesting oppressive stereotypes that marked black bodies as wild, unrestrained, and dangerous and that sensationalized black

talent as the result of a savage and naturally gifted body rather than a rigorously cultivated mind.

For black musicians and audiences, aspirational desire for the cultural capital afforded serious music and musicianship functioned at the point of intersection between two ideological formations in African American communities: the aforementioned racial uplift and, in the 1940s, an emergent discourse of Afro-modernism. Musicologist and pianist Guthrie Ramsey has situated Afro-modernism as an aesthetic and political consciousness through which Afrodiasporic people asserted artistic agency and autonomy by focusing on form and abstraction over function. For some musicians, this aesthetic sparked an ambivalence or even hostility toward dancing. From their perspective, listening without silence and without stillness communicated both a lack of respect and a lack of effort: that one was not *truly* listening. Operating from within this ideology, accounts of jazz’s transition to a form of art music tend to focus principally on the agency and actions of jazz musicians, suggesting that bebop players complicated jazz’s musical texture to such a degree that the sound itself rejected the dancing body and demanded pure, seated listening to be truly appreciated. As my second case study will show, however, some black youth moved against the new prescribed choreography of motionless listening, participating actively in bebop’s innovations in a manner every bit as rigorous as their seated counterparts.

Writing for the *Hartford Courant* in 1948, columnist M. Oakley Stafford offered the sort of frustrated antibebop rant commonplace among “moldy fig” critics in the 1940s. However, Stafford’s frustration in this case was not with the music itself but rather that in bebop’s “newest

phase,” a new form of social dance was emerging alongside it.

I'm Up To My Ears In The Bebop development. . . . Now the newest phase of it . . . A few weeks ago there was only the music . . . Sharp, discordant chords, absence of tune, and that sort of thing. No one danced to it. . . . Now the new development . . . They are dancing to it. They are doing what appears to be a combination of the modern dance with jitterbugging thrown in and even a step or two of ballroom stuff. . . . It is so definitely to current music what the modern dance was to dancing . . . Difficult to accept . . . Angular . . . Meaningful . . . And slow to get into your affection but once there, you love it. . . . Watch the up-and-coming set dance to it differently from the way they danced to jazz. . . . It is definitely not jazz . . . Worth watching . . . It grows on you.²⁴

While bebop's "undanceableness" is a central theme of its historiography, there is ample evidence that counter-choreographies existed among black youth who treated bebop as *their* popular music and developed new social dance forms that both reflected and added new layers to bebop's already complex tapestry of innovations.

Several major African American figures in jazz history have alluded to this phenomenon. As Amiri Baraka notably wrote in *Blues People*, "'You can't dance to it' was the constant harassment—which is, no matter the irrelevancy, a lie. My friends and I as youths used only to emphasize the pronoun more. 'You can't dance to it' and whispered 'or anything else for that matter.'"²⁵ When I interviewed Sylvan Charles, an eighty-one-year-old retired postal worker, Harlem resident, and self-identified "bebop dancer" about his experience with bebop as a teenager in the 1940s, I presented him with the common narrative that bebop music was not for dancing; his response:

"That's Ridiculous!" Charles first heard jazz music as a child growing up on the island of St. Croix. He and his friends got into bebop through listening to records in the early 1940s as young teenagers and started dancing to bebop records in church basements, at house parties, and, by 1945, at massive block parties all over New York City. These block party sites, according to Charles, included in a vacant lot adjacent to Minton's Playhouse where a record player perched on a flat-bed truck would play tunes such as Dizzy Gillespie's "Emanon" or Tad Dameron's "The Squirrel," both particularly popular among dancers.

Aligning with the counter-history Charles's reminiscences invite, Ramsey's discussion of Afromodernism explicitly eschews the strict bifurcation of high art and popular culture central to the white modernist paradigm implicit in most framings of the bebop moment. Ramsey highlights the black body's shifting relationship with popular culture and mass media as particularly critical to the post-war emergence of Afromodernist sensibilities.

If one of the legacies of nineteenth-century minstrelsy involved the public degradation of the black body in the American entertainment sphere, then one hundred years after minstrelsy's emergence, African Americans used this same signifier to upset a racist social order and to affirm in the public entertainment and the private spheres their culture and humanity. Although it has some precedent, the new attitude was so prevalent that it represents a huge departure from earlier modes of "racial uplift," especially the "politics of respectability" championed by the black professional and upper-class citizens, who sought to discipline black bodies into bourgeois submission.²⁶

In Ramsey's analysis, Afromodernism involved a resistant shift in embodied

Christopher J. Wells

“You Can’t
Dance to It”

practice—I would argue, an alternative choreography of listening—manifested as a corporeal shift away from the disciplined, corporeal engagement that marked the era of racial uplift. Indeed, Ramsey acknowledges the significance of social dancing in black popular culture but focuses the bulk of his analysis on the lyrical and sonic signifiers presented in popular recordings. As such, in exploring black audiences’ kinetic engagement with bebop music through emergent forms of popular dance, I seek to bolster and expand his emphasis on black corporeal autonomy as critical to Afromodernist liberation.

When asked about bebop’s “undanceable” nature, dancer and folklorist Mura Dehn replied, “It was very, very danceable—it was magnificent. It was not done by white people. It was mostly done by black people, and it was done in spurts.”²⁷ Dehn, a Russian modern dancer, engaged in a decades-long study of African American folk and popular dance from the 1940s through the 1980s. Her work plays a vital role in documenting a crucial yet largely unacknowledged cultural space in which bebop dance thrived as part of a nascent postwar black youth culture. Dehn’s account of bop dancing focuses on the early 1950s, when a new generation of young people, more cynical and politically radical than those ten years older, regarded bebop as *their* popular music. The dance element of the new culture, according to Dehn, lagged behind the music by about half a decade. During World War II, according to Dehn:

Musicians were ahead of dancers in their search of new forms. . . . In a furious assault of saxophone virtuosity the musician seems to disregard the dancer. He sweeps him off the floor, breaks his legs with irrational rhythms, stabs him with long whaling spasms, paralyzes with introvert monotony.²⁸

These younger bebop dancers represented a sharp generational shift in which the music activated young peoples’ bodies even as older dancers, like Frankie Manning and his contemporaries, resisted the change. In her drafts for an unfinished manuscript, Dehn relays a vivid description of the attitudes of black youth from a Mr. Bishop, an instructor of black physical culture at PS 28, a Brooklyn public school.

The post-war kids are brighter, more mature, aware of problems economic, social, political. Conditioned to present time unrest, insecurity. They don’t think in terms of the future. . . . They don’t want to be dominated. They are spontaneous, dynamic. I actually feel they are a better human material, conscious of their environment—good and bad. They don’t go for Jazz. They are Bop fiends. If they are interested in dance, everything else becomes secondary.²⁹

Bishop’s account parallels cultural historian Eric Lott’s description of the shifts in social consciousness among young Northern black people in the mid-1940s. Lott presents “bop style” as a defiant identity performed through a matrix of statements not just in music, but also fashion, language, and demeanor. Though dance is conspicuously absent from Lott’s account of bop culture in New York, his description of “an aesthetic of speed and displacement” and a “closed hermeneutic that had the undeniable effect of alienating the riff-raff and expressing a sense of felt isolation, all the while affirming a collective purpose” neatly fit Dehn’s positioning of the culture surrounding bebop dance.³⁰ Further, that the young black “cools” of the 1940s and 1950s found ways to move to this music is well in-line with Ramsey’s positioning of Afromodernism as a governing paradigm for black life and black aesthetics at midcentury.

What ultimately emerged from the younger dancers' experimentation was a new style that adapted and expanded earlier vernacular forms, most notably the lindy hop and the applejack. Applejacking became the most prominent style of bebop solo dance, done almost exclusively by men, often in formal and informal cutting contests.³¹ While individual dance steps known as the "applejack" date back to the 1920s or before, applejacking reemerged as a solo dance craze in the late 1940s. The applejack is a step with many similarities to the Charleston in which inward-pointed feet step over each other as the knees continuously cross. By the 1950s, this basic step had yielded a wide array of variations including corkscrews, fans, tic-tocs, and other steps oriented around shifts in toe-heel balance.³² Individual styles of applejacking emerged with varying degrees of complexity among different scenes. Dehn's handwritten movement descriptions of applejackers at the Audubon Ballroom identify a range of slides and dips as well as abrupt stops in the middle of steps, leading her to identify the Audubon dancers' style as "the most modern dancing I ever saw."³³ At the Savoy Ballroom, Dehn noted, "it is danced in a broad and sweeping way, with dips and slides, with diving and skating, mostly to Boogie-Woogie music. But its off-balance pendulum fits into the torn riffs of Bop."³⁴

Applejack dancers negotiated bebop's "torn riffs" and its fast tempos through a shift toward half-time, or "off-time," dancing. As Dehn described the phenomenon,

Time is cut in two. Instead of fast bouncing steps there is a resilient slow stepping with multiple jitters on each foot. It travels through the erect body to a wobbling head. It is still the basic Lindy formula, but a new rhythm has emerged. A half-time off-beat

Lindy. The preoccupation is to break up the beat. The position of the body becomes nonchalant, deliberately negligent.³⁵

Through off-time dancing, bebop dancers worked around one of the core features of bop's ostensible undanceability – that it was simply too fast – by effectively cutting the tempo in half at will through their own realization of pulse. This sort of metric and hypermetric play allowed dancers not only to keep up with bebop musicians, but to move in and out of time with them, analogous to the integration of "inside" and "outside" playing in a bop solo. In our interview, Charles also emphasized his strong preference for the groovy feeling of dancing off-time, and told me he had only recently been told by jazz musicians that he was dancing "half-time." The off-time tempo created space for complex nuances in dancers' engagement with musical rhythm as, in Dehn's words, "in New York, they also dance between the beats, forming a rhythmic counterpoint with the music."³⁶ This type of danced engagement aligns in interesting ways with Stowe's description of bebop musicians' technical reflection of broader sociopolitical shifts.

The sharp contradiction of the ensemble in bebop, together with the emphasis on individual virtuosity and dissonant (to swing-attuned ears) sonorities, suggests the heroic alienation of the postwar individual cut loose from Depression-era modes of commitment, or the racial militancy taking root among African-Americans in the late 1940s.³⁷

On a cultural level, bebop dancers are clearly part of Stowe's paradigm, yet they also fit within it on a technical level. In both its emphasis on individualism and its use of dissonance – understood as metric rather than harmonic – applejacking

“You Can’t Dance to It” fits neatly into a bebop aesthetic that exemplifies the “cultural mood of alienation” the music expressed.³⁸

While highly intricate and technically complex, applejacking was firmly entrenched in black popular culture. Black newspaper coverage of the emerging phenomenon suggests that the dance became popular via stage revues featuring the song “Applejack,” itself popularized by Lionel Hampton in 1948 and Lucky Millender in 1949. Dolores Calvin of the *Chicago Defender* reports seeing the dance for the first time both on stage and in the audience during a 1948 performance by Hampton in Newark, New Jersey.

The kids were jumping to “applejack” rhythm in the aisles. . . . The ones in their seats who couldn’t get to the aisles were yelling “applejack” followed by wild, uncontrollable hysterics. . . . We just sat glued to our chair, afraid to comment for fear of a hundred or more nearby juniors crashing our skull. . . . But nevertheless amazed and shocked at the goings on. [. . .] Then Hamp began Hamp’s Boogie. . . . That too, had “applejack” steps in it which he did quite willingly. . . . The singers, Wini Brown and Roland Burton were also on the “applejack kick.”³⁹

The applejack was one of several bebop-era dances associated in the 1940s principally with R&B music and specifically with a popular “jump blues” hit. An article in *Our World* that otherwise does not discuss dance extensively featured a half-page spread of a dancer engaged in the solo “applejack” and partnered “bebop.” As the author explained, “dig the new dances the cats are cooking. That should squash the deadpans who say bebop isn’t danceable.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Dehn frequently cites the applejack, along with the hucklebuck, as major postwar dance trends among the bebop “cools.” Though she emphasizes the applejack more, its

appearance alongside the hucklebuck is instructive regarding the porous transfer between bebop and other black styles of popular music. The popular song paired with the dance was an R&B recasting of Charlie Parker’s composition “Now’s the Time” and became a significant hit for Paul Wilson and his Hucklebuckers in 1949 (and later, of course, for Chubby Checker).

Often walking a playful line himself between “serious” art and popular entertainment, Dizzy Gillespie noted the heterogeneity in bebop audiences’ listening practices. Gillespie affirmed that bebop was, in fact, a “danceable” music in a 1949 essay he penned for the *Los Angeles Sentinel* defending his style of music through what he termed “counter-bopaganda”:

Another argument against bop is that people can’t dance to it. Well, I’ve seen people dancing to our band and to our RCA Victor recordings such as “Swedish Suite” all over the country. As a matter of fact they think the Afro Cuban rhythm affects [sic] are especially interesting to a dancer. But very often people don’t want to dance, they just want to come up to the bandstand and listen to the music. They pay their money and they take their choice. Is that bad?⁴¹

With the caution that this column, attributed to Gillespie, may well have been written by his publicist as was common practice at the time, this passage troubles two pervasive narrative tropes of bebop historiography.⁴² First, Gillespie seems to invite danced engagement with his music rather than expressing any resentment toward the ostensibly frivolous activity. He offers danceability as one of the music’s merits. Second, and highly related, he enthusiastically frames a bebop performance as a commercial transaction in which paying audiences purchase the right to interact with the music however they choose. This is not the attitude of a

heroic modernist nobly rejecting engagement with the commercial marketplace nor of one promoting antagonism toward popular audiences as a path to aesthetic liberation and ascendance to the realm of high art. Here, Gillespie demonstrates that, like generations of jazz musicians before him, he was himself far more comfortable with and invested in the role of “popular entertainer” than were those critics who positioned him as a “serious artist.” Indeed, as DeVaux has argued, even this pervasive image of bebop-musician-as-maverick-artist was itself a performative strategy crafted by skillful musician/entertainers such as Gillespie to satisfy the taste of white hipsters who craved the vibe of an authentic, anticommercial jam session experience and were willing to pay for it.⁴³

Given Gillespie’s above claim, however, what are we to make of his retrospective disdain for those who wanted to “dance close and screw” and to whom a flatted fifth was ostensibly illegible? Gillespie’s frustration here is that dancing audiences failed to appreciate those aspects of bebop music he himself most prized: in this case, its extended harmonic language and layers of asymmetric rhythmic complexity. However, his lamenting criticism could also suggest that, while he was a brilliant musician, he may have lacked the kinesthetic “chops” to properly appreciate the subtle complexities of bebop dancers’ movement. In fact, bop dancers’ penchant for “off-time” dancing yielded a fluid range of intricate, multilayered relationships with “those four solid beats” in the music. It may be that the metric subtleties of virtuoso social bebop dancers’ treatment of pulse were as illegible to Gillespie as his flatted fifths were to them. What this possible disconnect suggests more broadly is that jazz history’s strong focus on musicians’ perspectives, through oral history and autobiography

as central source texts, likely skews our framing and understanding of audience members’ modes of listening and the range of movements available to jazz listeners in specific cultural and historical conjunctures. What I am explicitly asking for here is a paradigm shift in how we regard rigorous listening and musical fluency. It is possible to appreciate music in ways that may be illegible to musicians themselves, and the ontological fissures between bebop dancers and musicians should push us to imagine a robustly heterogeneous concept of “music appreciation” that moves beyond mere fidelity or lack thereof to the precise epistemologies through which musicians conceptualize and value their own work. Such a paradigm shift offers a counterweight to any clean, ideological narrative of jazz’s sonic evolution into a form of expression that can only be properly appreciated, and only properly respected, when audiences listen from a posture that performatively erases their own bodies as participating agents in the event.

Indeed, as a practice, bebop dance exposes the separation of the terms “dancing” and “listening” as a false dichotomy. Even as DeVaux critiques the prestige culture of the concert and concert hall, he reifies the value judgments of its particular choreography of listening when he claims that even in the Savoy Ballroom, the increasing virtuosity of jazz music led to moments where “dancing would occasionally be supplanted by listening” and claims that concerts required listening with undivided attention. Through multilayered metric play, bebop dancers made active choices about where and how to experience the musical pulse and phrasing, both how to ride it and how to deviate from it when they so chose. This musical experimentation with rhythmic dissonance and polymeter either immediately followed or was coterminous with

“You Can’t
Dance to It”

the height of off-time bop dancing. Such parallels place bop dancers not among some broad-brushed construct of “the masses,” those supposedly undereducated jazz consumers seeking some cheap form of casual listening pleasure ostensibly out of step with genuine musical innovation. Rather, the social history and temporal dynamism of bop dancing invite us to see African American youth as virtuosic listeners who not only responded to bop musicians’ innovations but also contributed their own layers to its invigorating soundscape as active participants in what musicologist Brigid Cohen, borrowing a term from cultural theorist Homi Bhabha, has called postwar New York City’s “vernacular cosmopolitan negotiation,” through which avant-garde musical innovation flowed across genres within the ethnically diverse social spaces that fueled multiple emergent modernisms.⁴⁴

To conclude, I would like to turn back to perspectives from dance studies and specifically performance theorist André Lepoecki’s notion of “choreopolitics.” Lepoecki offers choreopolitics as a specifically resistant mode of engagement with those structures enforcing choreographic constraints, which he terms “choreopolicing” or the authoritarian containment of movement that yields “a policed dance of quotidian consensus.”⁴⁵ While it is tempting to position the danced listening of applejackers as choreopolitical in a way the concertized, “choreopoliced” seated listening more often associated with bebop is not, it is a temptation I wish to resist. I posit, rather, that black nonmovement functions as a choreopolitical resistance to the overdetermined fetishization of black bodies. The performance of nonmovement, in erasing the body, resists the white gaze as well as the white leftist desire to mobilize the black

body as a site of liberation, not for black people from oppression but for white people from whiteness.⁴⁶

Indeed, both still and moving listening practices represent African American jazz listeners’ claims to corporeal agency in resistance to the various determinisms inscribed upon their bodies. Articulating the corporeal agency of listening bodies necessarily invites a more robust engagement with Ingrid Monson’s work on “perceptual agency” than space affords me here, but certainly the relationship Monson seeks to explore between the auditory and the political could productively involve both the internal experience and externally perceivable expressions of diverse listening bodies.⁴⁷ What is important to remember is that embodied, danced ways of knowing are and have long been central to jazz, as they are and have been to many forms of African American music. As cultural theorist Fred Moten beautifully writes in his work on the black radical tradition, “It was always the whole body that emitted sound: instrument and fingers, bend. Your ass is in what you sing. Dedicated to the movement of hips, dedicated by that movement, the harmolodically rhythmic body.”⁴⁸ At the same time, ethnomusicologist Matt Sakakeeny’s evocative account of a silent march against violence in New Orleans demonstrates that a pointed refusal to make joyful noise can resonate with poignance as can a dignified listener engaged in active, defiant nonmovement.⁴⁹ Just as sound and silence can be both profound and banal, resistant and compliant, so too can motion and stillness. As Foster explains, individual performances can respond to choreographies on a spectrum ranging from conformity to subversion to total disregard. These performative responses to choreographic prescriptions both impact and are impacted by the particularity of

their circumstances as, in Foster's words, "both choreography and performance change over time; both select from and move into action certain semantic systems, and as such, they derive their meaning from a specific historical and cultural moment."⁵⁰ Recognizing jazz music's multiple conjuncturally specific choreographies of listening, as well as those audience performances that work within and against these choreographies, offers me a chance to highlight the word "matter" in this issue's theme of "Why Jazz

Still Matters," by which I mean the literal material bodies of jazz's audiences and how those audiences' modes of listening both inform and resist the narrative conceits of jazz history. It might also invite contemporary listeners to reflect on the ways we do, and specifically don't, listen to jazz and offer us more space to play within and against our own socially embedded choreographies as we consider how we listen, how else we might choose to listen, and why.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Anna Reguero DeFelice of SUNY Stony Brook, a fantastic dancer whom I met in New York City's swing dancing scene long before either of us became a musicologist. The performance in question was Indiana University of Pennsylvania Jazz Ensemble, "Mary Lou Williams: Selected Works for Big Band," American Musicological Society Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, November 7, 2013. This anecdote first appeared in my 2016 post for the American Musicological Society's blog Musicology Now, and I thank the current editors for their blessing to reproduce it here. Christopher, J. Wells, "Choreographies of Listening: Some Thoughts from Doing Jazz History While Having a Body," Musicology Now, January 6, 2016, <http://musicologynow.ams-net.org/2016/01/choreographies-of-listening-some.html>.
- ² Bernard Gendron, "Moldy Figs and Modernists" in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 33.
- ³ "Risk," *Jazz*, dir. Ken Burns, DVD (Burbank, Calif.: Warner Home Video, 2001).
- ⁴ Henry Martin and Keith Waters, *Jazz: The First Hundred Years*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schirmer, 2005), 174.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.
- ⁶ David Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 182.
- ⁷ Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, *To Be or Not To Bop* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979), 356.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 359.
- ⁹ Frankie Manning and Cynthia R. Millman, *Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 203.
- ¹⁰ Scott DeVeaux, "The Emergence of the Jazz Concert, 1935–1945," *American Music* 7 (1) (1989): 6.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² "Harlem Band Swings Down in Atlanta," *Chicago Defender*, July 2, 1938.
- ¹³ Advertisement, *Atlanta Daily World*, August 4, 1938. Caps in the original.
- ¹⁴ Advertisement, *Atlanta Daily World*, May 14, 1939; and "'Cab' in All-Colored Show Week from Today," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 28, 1938.
- ¹⁵ "Cab Calloway's Coming this Thursday Awaited," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 31, 1938.

“You Can’t Dance to It”

- ¹⁶ Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878–1943* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2012).
- ¹⁷ Gamewell Valentine, “Pageant of Race Progress Viewed at City Auditorium,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 12, 1938; and Gamewell Valentine, “Tuskegee Choir Presentation Looms Treat,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 26, 1938.
- ¹⁸ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 4. Foster’s work includes a robust review of the trajectory of the term choreography within dance studies, and thus I will not reproduce it here.
- ¹⁹ Though my discussion here centers on Foster, my thinking is also deeply informed by Kate Elswit’s concept of “archives of watching” as a means to do close readings of dance spectatorship by blurring the dichotomization of on-stage and off-stage bodies in concert dance spaces, as well as Andrew Hewitt’s notion of “social choreography” as “a way of thinking about the relationship of aesthetics to politics.” Kate Elswit, *Watching Weimar Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), xvii–xxiii; and Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 11.
- ²⁰ Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 71.
- ²¹ Jeffrey Magee, *Fletcher Henderson: The Uncrowned King of Swing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27–38. I riff on Magee’s argument in discussing black jazz listeners’ demonstration of aural mastery as a means of racial uplift in Christopher J. Wells, “‘The Ace of His Race’: Paul Whiteman’s Early Critical Reception in the Black Press,” *Jazz and Culture* 1 (2018): 84.
- ²² David Krasner has shown that prominent black dancers—specifically Ada Overton Walker—sought to rebrand black embodiment as fundamentally dignified and an expression of control in discipline through cakewalk performances and instruction in the 1910s. David Krasner, “The Real Thing,” in *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890–1930*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 109–118.
- ²³ Mark Whalan, “Taking Myself in Hand: Jean Toomer and Physical Culture,” *Modernism/Modernity* 10 (4) (2003): 597–607.
- ²⁴ M. Oakley Stafford, “Informing You,” *Hartford Courant*, March 18, 1948.
- ²⁵ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 211–212.
- ²⁶ Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 51.
- ²⁷ Mura Dehn interviewed by Maria Kandilakis, typescript, in Mura Dehn Papers on Afro-American Social Dance (hereafter “Mura Dehn Collection”) (New York: Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts), box 20, folder 216, 1.
- ²⁸ Mura Dehn, “The Bebop Era,” drafts for an unfinished manuscript on jazz dance, Mura Dehn Collection, box 1, folder 6.
- ²⁹ “Mr. Bishop” quoted by Mura Dehn in *ibid.* I discuss physical culture as a potent, malleable concept in black corporeality in my work on dance as spatial practice in Harlem ballrooms. Christopher J. Wells, “‘And I Make My Own’: Class Performance, Black Urban Identity, and Depression-Era Harlem’s Physical Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*, ed. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellars Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21–22.
- ³⁰ Eric Lott, “Double V, Double Time: Bebop’s Politics of Style” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 461.

- ³¹ In her writings, Dehn alternately identifies it as a trend of the 1940s or early 1950s. She also notes “girls also did Applejack—but seldom.” Handwritten notes for *The Spirit Moves*, Mura Dehn Collection, box 21, folder 60.
- ³² This sort of heel-toe motion is a fascinating running thread in African American popular dance including movements ranging from the “tic toc” and Charleston in the early twentieth century through the moonwalk and contemporary “floating” slides in various forms of hip hop dance.
- ³³ Dehn, “The Bebop Era,” 4.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ³⁵ Mura Dehn, “Bop Time,” unpublished draft manuscript, typescript, Mura Dehn Collection, box 4, folder 80, 1.
- ³⁶ Dehn, “The Bebop Era,” 2.
- ³⁷ Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 11.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ³⁹ Dolores Calvin, “‘Applejack’ Replaces ‘Jersey Bounce’ with Dancers in the State of Jersey,” *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1948. Unbracketed ellipses in the original; bracketed ellipses added by the author.
- ⁴⁰ Dave Hepburn, “Bebop: Music or Madness?” *Our World* 4 (1) (1949): 34–35.
- ⁴¹ Dizzy [John Burks] Gillespie, “Daddy of Bebop Says New Music is Here to Stay; Gives Reasons,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 28, 1949.
- ⁴² In an interview with Ronald Welburn, Billy Rowe, formerly an entertainment columnist with the *Pittsburgh Courier*, claimed that guest columns by famous musicians were often penned by those musicians’ press agents, but that “they would try to stick to how the person would react to this sort of thing and get his opinion and write the story.” See Ronald Garfield Welburn, “American Jazz Criticism, 1914–1940” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1983), 234–235.
- ⁴³ Scott DeVaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- ⁴⁴ Brigid Cohen, “Diasporic Dialogues in Mid-Century New York City: Stefan Wolpe, George Russell, Hannah Arendt, and the Historiography of Displacement,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 6 (2) (2012): 149.
- ⁴⁵ André Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 57 (4) (2013): 20.
- ⁴⁶ For more on white “slumming” and the political left, see Wells, “And I Make My Own.” For its historiographic resonances, see Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48 (3) (1995): 396–422; and John Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
- ⁴⁷ Ingrid Monson, “Hearing, Seeing, and Perceptual Agency,” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (S2) (2008): S38.
- ⁴⁸ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 39–40.
- ⁴⁹ Matthew Sakakeeny, *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), 169–173.
- ⁵⁰ Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 24.