Compiled by Jersey Slim Hawkins, May 2007

A Cakewalk Chronology

Three Dances in Search of an Origin

The origins of cakewalking occupy no canonical historical space; they lie partly in ancient Congolese ritual dance, partly in early nineteenth century plantation social life along the Gulf coast, partly in the traditional flavors of European folksongs, and partly in the double consciousness inherent in the aesthetic and cultural inventions of African slaves and their descendents throughout the social history of the Americas to the present day. There is, nevertheless, enough historical evidence to distinguish among three distinct uses for the term, "cakewalk," in vogue from the early of the nineteenth century through the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Firstly, the noun can refer to a quite specific dance routine, probably derived from the Congolese form known in the New World as the *bamboula*, and serving as the basis for a veritable dance-craze, on both sides of the Atlantic, closing the nineteenth century and beginning the twentieth.

Secondly, the verb, "to cakewalk" (like the verb, "to jitterbug") refers not so much to a particular set of steps and movements but to a fully developed style of flamboyant dance, involving elaborate expressive exaggeration and demanding considerable expertise. Used in this sense, the term begins life in the deep, antebellum South, but matures on the sidewalks of New York during the Gay Nineties. The intervening decades produced a rich treasury of printed compositions, dubbed, "cakewalks"; syncopated to support the style.

Finally, there is a generic sense of the term, "cakewalk," which, like its cousin, "to take the cake," can refer widely to any elaborate dance form, or even quite simply to dancing at all.

Pre-History of the Cakewalk

Accounts collected from the writings of eighteenth century witnesses provide several clues concerning the African antecedents of the cakewalk. The French colonist, Moreau de St Mery, for instance, leaves this description of the *calenda* as danced in the French West Indies at the end of the eighteenth century:

> One male and one female dancer, or an equal number of dancers of each sex push to the middle of the circle and begin to dance, remaining in pairs. This repetitious dance consists of a very simple step where, as in the "Anglais" one alternatively extends each foot and withdraws it, tapping several times with the heel and toe. All one sees is the man spinning himself or swirling around his partner, who, herself, also spins and moves about, unless one is to count the raising and lowering of the arms of the dancers who hold their elbows close to their sides with the hands almost clenched. The woman holds both ends of a kerchief which she rocks from side to side. When one has not witnessed it himself, it is hard to believe how lively and animated it is as well as how the rigourous following of the meter gives it such grace. [Quoted in Lynne Fauley Emery's *Black Dance from 1619 To Today.* Second Revised Edition. Princeton, 1988, pp. 22-23.]

Many of the special movements of the cakewalk, including the bending back of the body and the dropping of the hands at the wrists, were characteristic of several African Kaffir dances, the principal movements of which were performed during rest periods in dances that would otherwise last several hours. They were inserted as improvisational "breaks," and allowed couples to separate at various points so that they could have freedom of movement. By breaking the pattern of ritual dance, or breaking the beat, many Congolese people expected to "break" into the world of their ancestors.

No little insight concerning the survival of these Kaffir gestures in African-American dance can be gleaned from a consideration of the early piano compositions of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, especially his fantaisie, *La Bamboula – Danse Nègre*, which greatly impressed Chopin when Gottschalk, the son of an English cotton broker and a high-born French Creole, met the famous composer while on a European tour sometime in the early 1850s. Gottschalk was probably the first composer to attempt committing genuine African rhythms and the wooden fanfares of African drums to European notation. His sources were among the Sunday revelers that populated Congo square in New Orleans in the 1840s. Henry Didimus (Henry Edward Durrell), Gottschalk's 1853 biographer, took pains to describe the *bamboula* as the young Louis would have seen and heard it in New Orleans. This is the earliest known written description of African dancing in Congo square:

> Let a stranger to New Orleans visit of an afternoon of one of its holydays, the public squares in the lower portion of the city, and he will find them filled with its African population, tricked out with every variety of a showy costume, joyous, wild, and in the full exercise of a real saturnalia. As he approaches the scene of an infinite mirth, his ear first catches a quick, low, continuous, dead sound, which dominates over the laughter, hallo, and roar of a thousand voices, while the listener marvels at what it can be doing there. This is the Bamboula, the dance Bamboula; a dance which takes possession of the Negro's whole life, transforms him with all the instincts, the sentiments, the feelings which nature gave to his race, to sleep for awhile, to be partially obliterated by the touch of civilization, but to remain forever its especial mark.
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> Upon entering the square the visitor finds the multitude packed in groups of close, narrow circles, of a central area only a few feet; and there in the center of each circle, sits the musician, astride a barrel, strong-headed, which he beats with two sticks, to a strange measure incessantly, like mad, for hours together, while the perspiration literally rolls in streams and wets the ground; and there, too, labor the dancers male and female, under inspiration or possession, which takes from their limbs all sense of weariness and gives them a rapidity and a durability of motion that will hardly be found elsewhere outside of mere machinery. The head rests upon the breast, or it is thrown back upon the shoulders, the eyes closed, or glaring, while the arms, amid cries and shouts, and sharp ejaculations, float upon the air, or keep time, with the hands patting upon the thighs, to a music which is seemingly eternal.
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> The feet scarce tread wider space than their own length; but rise and fall, turn in and out, touch first the heel and then the toe, rapidly and more rapidly, till they twinkle to the eye, which finds its sight too slow a follower of their movements. [Quoted in Rudi Blesh & Harriet Janis' book, *They All Played Ragtime.* Fourth Edition. New York: Oak, 1971, pp. 82-83.]

La Bamboula – Danse Nègre opens with drumbeats, and the principal motif that follows—later sung by the Creoles as "*Quand patate la cuite na ma mangé li*" ("When the tater's cooked, don't you eat it up")—is the *Place Congo* chant, complete with background chords on wooden trumpets.

Sometime around the time Durrell observed Congo square for the first time himself, the *bamboula* had already found its way up and down the Gulf coast, where it became incorporated into the Chalk Line Walk. Especially in Florida in the 1850s, the Chalk Line Walk was performed by designated "Walkers" who would walk a straight line and balance buckets of water on their heads. Over time the dance evolved into a exaggerated parody of the white, upper class ballroom figures, so that the dance became a form of code whereby slaves would imitate, for comic effect, the mannerisms of the "big house," where all sorts of dignified walking, low-bowing, cane-waving, and hat-doffing were incorporated into a high-kicking grand promenade.

The Idea of the Cakewalk, then, became that of a couple promenading in a dignified manner, high stepping and kicking, mimicking high society. Some of the better-off plantation owners would bake a cake on Sundays and invite the neighbors over and have a contest of the slaves; different prizes were given but commonly it was a cake, and whoever won would get it. Hence the expression, "that takes the cake." The practice of awarding cakes probably derives from the famine-times in Ireland, when the practice arose of

offering a cake to the best set dancer at Sunday get-togethers. The dancers would do a Penny Jig, which each dancer would pay the fiddler a penny after dancing, trying to win the cake. One Mrs. Lully, in her Book of Irish Customs, reports that "Although the fare of Sunday seldom rises beyond the accustomed potatoes and milk of the rest of the week, some few halfpence are always spared to purchase the pleasures which the Sunday cake bestows. This cake set upon a distaff is the signal of pleasure and becomes the reward of talent; it is sometimes carried off by the best dancer, sometimes by the archest wag of the company."

The competition dancers were also called "Walkers." These dance contests became enormously popular; at the National Cakewalk Jubilee in New York City, the champions received gold belts and diamond rings. There were two categories of contests: the "Grand Straight Cakewalk" (Regular) and the "Fancy Cakewalk" (Dressed Up); the doors would open at 7:00 p.m., with the contest held at 11:00p.m.; dancing would continue until 5:00 a.m. Cakewalk dance contests would eventually be held in every major city in North America. Tin-Pan Alley would, in turn, make a fortune off of the cakewalk dances and ragtime music that a veritable army composers and lyricists would produce at prodigious, industrial rates.

History of the Cakewalk

While the appearance of the cakewalk in mass culture is often associated with the routines that Charles Johns and Dora Dean brought to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, it was more likely the use of a cakewalk interlude in Harrigan and Hart's enormously successful 1877 minstrel revue that brought the dance into broad public view. The centerpiece of their show was a feature called "Walkin' for Dat Cake," published fulsomely in their playbills as an "Exquisite Picture of Negro life and Customs, professed by all to be the most masterly production ever placed upon the stage." Not wasting a New York minute, they published the song later that year with Pond & Co.

After Harrington and Hart, the cakewalk circulated throughout the show world, a mainstay of minstrelsy. It became a national obsession after Bert Williams and George Walker incorporated the dance (and its imitations) into a comedy routine they played for forty weeks at Koster & Bial's on the Fourteenth Street Rialto in New York City. Assisted by two girls, Williams and Walker were posed in full cakewalk regalia and reproduced in colors to be distributed as advertisements for Phillip-Morris cigarette brands. Shortly thereafter, the execution of cakewalk steps was taken up by high society.

In 1900, John Phillip Sousa brought the cakewalk to the Paris Exhibition, where it again became a national obsession. Behind the cakewalk, piano rags, and eventually orchestral rags crossed the cultural lines of race and class to become a social craze, an aesthetic transformation in taste, and the classical music of a new brand of bohemian.

Along with their cousins, the rags, cakewalks fell out of fashion in the 1920s, once blues and jazz inherited all of their essential genes.

The Oxford Street Opera Troupe – Circa 1850

Chronology of the Cakewalk

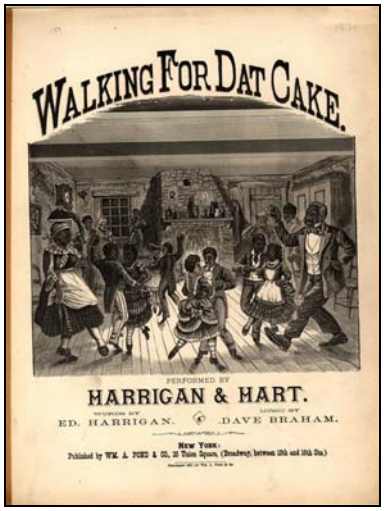
1847	*La Bamboula – Danse Nègre*—composed by Louis Moreau Gottschalk from African themes heard in Congo Square.
1848	First edition of the Christy Minstrels' songbook series, *The Ethiopian Glee Club* (attributed to "Gumbo Chaff," pseudonym for Bostonian publisher, Elias Howe).
1850	Appearance of the Chalkline Walk on Florida plantations. As described by Tennessean Shephard Edmonds, a musician son of freed slaves (and later the first black private detective in the United States), the cakewalk was originally a plantation dance, just a happy movement they did to the banjo music because they couldn't stand still. It was generally on Sundays, when there was little work, that the slaves both young and old would dress up in hand-me-down finery to do a high-kicking, prancing walk-around. They did a take-off on the high manners of the white folks in the "big house," but their masters, who gathered around to watch the fun, missed the point. It's supposed to be that the custom of a prize started with the master giving a cake to the couple that did the proudest movement.
1853	Biography of Louis Moreau Gottschalk published.
1868	Scott Joplin born in Texarkana, Texas
1877	Harrigan & Hart feature a cakewalk extravaganza, *Walkin' for Dat Cake*.
1885	Jelly Roll Morton born in New Orleans, Louisiana.
1886	New Orleans novelist George Cable describes the *counjaille* as a modified *bamboula*: "The *bamboula* still roars, and rattles, twangs, contorts and tumbles"—and then "the music changes. The rhythm stretches out heathenish and ragged."
1889	The *Creole Show* features a Cakewalk.
1892	- Sissieretta Jones dubbed "Black Patti" after a wildly successful engagement staged at Madison Square Garden, 26-28 April. - First Cakewalk Contest in New York City.
1893	Chicago World's Fair features a Ragtime Players Congress at which Charles Johns and Dora Dean are featured as world-class calkewalkers.
1895	Ben Harney's *You've Been a Good Old Wagon* published.
1896	The Cakewalk Craze Begins: - Bert Williams publishes *Dora Dean*, a cakewalk in tribute to her incomparable performances. The Chorus asks: *Oh have you ever seen / My Dora Dean?* *She's the hottest thing you ever seen;* *I'm gwine to make this gal my Dora Queen,* *Next Sunday morn I'm gwine to marry Dora Dean.* - May Irwin's "coon shouting" *Bully Song* published. - Ben Harney publishes first New York City ragtime hit, *Mister Johnson (Turn Me Loose)*, structured between a spiritual and a blues (4-bar call, 4-bar repeat, 4-bar response).  An impromptu coon dance in the public square of Boston.

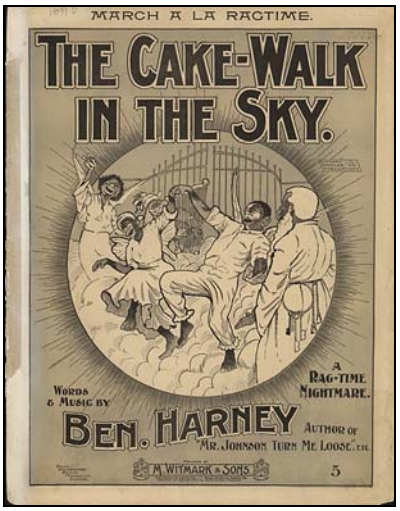
1897	 Ragtime Arrives: - *Missus Johnson's Rent Rag Ball* (D. A. Lewis) and *Rag-Ma-La Rag* (A. Shaw) published. In *Rent Rag Ball*, *Ol' Missus Johnson* *Had an awful time / For to keep her home / And take care of them pickaninnies sweet;* *And so last month when things was awful bad, / Missus Johnson said,* *"Now I must give a rag /For to raise my rent,* *Or out I'll have to go."* - Krell's *Mississippi Rag* (January) & Turpin's *Harlem Rag* (December) published. - The term, "ragtime," first appears in print (anon. Chicago reporter).
1898	The Craze Continues: - Marion's *Darktown is Out Tonight* published. Promo notes: "From the Great Success of '*Clorindy*' or '*The Origin of the Cakewalk*' by Dunbar & Marion." - Williams & Walker challenge William Vanderbilt to a cakewalk contest. Williams and Walker called at the Vanderbilt mansion on 16 January, and left the following letter: TO *Mr. William K. Vanderbilt* *Corner of Fifty-second Street and Fifth Avenue* *New York* DEAR SIR: In view of the fact that you have made a success as a cakewalker, having appeared in a semi-public exhibition and having posed as an expert in that capacity, we, the undersigned world-renowned cake-walkers, believing that the attention of the public has been distracted from us on account of the tremendous hit which you have made, hereby challenge you to compete with us in a cake-walking match, which will decide which of us shall deserve the title of champion cake-walker of the world. *Yours very truly* WILLIAMS AND WALKER - The *Chicago Inter-Ocean* of 2 January describes the dancing at a nonprofessional contest, in the words of character actor Joe Belgium, who acted as judge: "The band started a march with a tremendous crash. Mr. Dave White led off with Miss Patty Willow, a very stout colored woman in a ballet dancer's costume made from yellow calico, and behind them seventy-five more couples. From the judge's stand it was a whirling ring of kaleidoscopic colors accompanied by shuffling feet in time to the music. Long men mated with short women and had they been automatons moved by wires their movements would not have been more perfectly in time with the music. "The friends of the walkers stood around the outside and yelled encouragement to the candidates and as the music got into full swing and quickened its time a bit, they began to shuffle and to sway in rhythm. Every walker strained his or her muscles to put in extra steps and as the procession swung around the corners, each one had his or her own way of making the turn. Some of them did it with a nice precision. Others executed a few steps from a wing dance, then, as they were around, settling down into t he steady shuffle that would bring them to the next turn."
1899	- Joplin's *Original Rags* (March) & *Maple Leaf Rag* (Sept) published. First Edition of *Maple Leaf* features Williams & Walker on the cover. - Bernard's *Colored Aristocracy* published. - Rupert Hughes describes "clog dancing" as "ragging." 
1900	- The Paris Exhibition – Sousa introduces ragtime; cakewalks become a European craze. 
1904	- The St. Louis World's Fair features the first National Ragtime Contest (piano).
1917	- Scott Joplin dies.

Captured on Film – Immortalized in Print

Three stills taken from vintage footage

Bert Williams and George Walker





What Sousa Brought to Paris


LE CAKE-WALK
143/8
Dansé au Nouveau Cirque. LES SŒURS PÉRÈS.
S.I.P.