

The Charleston in the 1920s: the Dance, the Composers, and the Recordings.

By Albert Haim

The Charleston dance became a world-wide craze in the Roaring Twenties. The dance and the song, composed by James P. Johnson (music) and Cecil Mack (lyrics), were introduced in 1923 in the Broadway musical *Runnin' Wild*, and became the quintessential¹ jazz age symbols: flappers dancing frantically to the Charleston rhythm and drinking prohibition booze. The success of the Charleston was not confined to the U.S.: Europeans and South Americans went wild over it. We will see below that some of the first recordings of *Charleston* were made in Buenos Aires and Berlin. Part of the huge success of the Charleston in Paris was due to Josephine Baker's doing the dance in 1926 at the Folies Bergère...

Of course, the tune that went on to become the "theme song" of the jazz age was *Charleston*. Among the performers on opening night on Broadway were Adelaide Hall and Elizabeth Welsh. The number was sung by Elizabeth Welsh with the male chorus line singing and dancing the Charleston. The reviewer of the show for the October 30, 1923 issue of the New York Times wrote, "Runnin' Wild excels in eccentric² dancing-some of the most exciting steps of the season (steps is not always the word, for knees are used more often than ankles) are now on view at the Colonial."

Charleston, the Dance.

There is evidence that some of the dance steps used in the Charleston number of the *Runnin' Wild* production were danced long before the show opened on Broadway. Golden and Grayton, a couple of white minstrel³ artists performing in blackface, claimed to have danced the Charleston in 1890 in their *Patting Rabbit Hash* dance number. According to Leroi Jones, the Charleston comes from an Anshati ancestor⁴ dance. Noble Sissle recalled learning the dance in Savannah in 1905. Rubberleg Williams stated that "The first contest I ever won was a Charleston contest. It was in Atlanta in 1920." [1] Several productions in theatres and nightclubs had dancers performing some of the steps of the Charleston; examples are *Liza* (1922-1923), *How Come* (1923) and the *Ziegfield Follies of 1923*. One of the numbers in the production of *Liza* was called *Charleston Dancy* [sic]. It was composed by Maceo Pinkard (music) and Nat Vincent (lyrics). *How Come* included two numbers, *Charleston Cut-Out* and *Charleston Finale*. Garvin Bushell [2] traces the roots of the Charleston to a Geechie dance done in the Georgia South Sea Islands. James P. Johnson himself noted, "These people were from South Carolina and Georgia where the cotillion was popular- and the "Charleston" was an offspring of that. It was a dance figure like the "Balmoral." A lot of my music is based on set, cotillion and other southern country dance steps and rhythms." [3] In a letter to the New York Times dated December 19, 1926 and published on December 26, 1926, composer William Marion Cook stated that the Charleston rhythm was introduced by Thomas Morris in his 1923 composition *Charleston Strut*.

Although there may have been some steps similar to those in the Charleston before it was introduced in the production of *Runnin' Wild*, it is clear that the extraordinary popularity of the dance came about as a consequence of the success of the song and the show. Harold Courlander wrote [4] "It is, of course, possible to perceive in the Charleston certain steps or motifs⁵ extracted out of Negro tradition, but overall it was a synthetic⁶ creation, a newly-devised conglomerate⁷ tailored for wide spread popular appeal." ...

¹ the most perfect or typical example

² something that is unusual, peculiar, or odd

³ typically a show consisting of black American melodies, jokes, and impersonations and usually wearing blackface

⁴ Ancient group

⁵ a recurring subject, theme, idea, etc...

⁶ Not organic, fake

41 Soon after the introduction of the Charleston in *Runnin' Wild*, the dance craze swept the country and the world.
42 People danced the Charleston in dance halls, at the beach, on college campuses, on the roof of a London taxi
43 (filmed by Pathé News), on boardwalks and at home. A headline in the sports section of the March 11, 1926
44 New York Times declared "(Coach) Bezdek Makes Football Squad Charleston. Penn State Adopts Dance as
45 Exercise." The Prince of Wales reportedly was a big fan of the Charleston. According to the Modesto News-
46 Herald of November 6, 1926, "The Prince of Wales has mastered the Charleston and dances it with the skill and
47 rhythm that only professional dancers can equal." ...

48
49 It is noteworthy that the Charleston was banned in various places around the world for
50 sociological/political/religious/health reasons. Of course, the Charleston and other American dances such as the
51 fox-trot were banned in Russia as symbols of American decadence⁸ and were tagged the "immoral manifestation
52 of bourgeois⁹ luxury." The archbishops of Rome and Vienna banned the Charleston for their parishioners citing
53 moral reasons. At a world convention of dance teachers in Paris in 1926, a universal boycott of the Charleston
54 was considered because "The negro dance is immoral and not fit for good society." A plan to "purify" the
55 Charleston was put into effect. [9] Several colleges in the U. S. banned the dance for being too "scandalous" or
56 for lacking "grace and beauty." According to the New York Times of December 10, 1926, "The Christian Churches
57 of South Africa have declared war on the Charleston on the ground that it is essentially a Kaffir¹⁰ dance and that
58 the performance of it by whites lowers their prestige¹¹ in the native eyes." On November 6, 1926 (report in the
59 New York Times edition of November 7, 1926), the Prague, Czechoslovakia police chief implemented an order
60 that prohibited the Charleston in all public places. The Minister of the Interior went farther: he forbade dancing of
61 the Charleston in private places where public officials or diplomats were present. Such bans were repeated
62 across Europe and England. One member of the District Council of Dayton (one of the most populous London
63 suburbs) declared that "the man who invented Charleston was a fit candidate for the lunacy asylum and that the
64 fools who attempted to dance it were balmy¹²." A Polish archbishop condemned the Charleston in March 1927
65 as an "unpardonable sin." The Charleston was banned in Mexico City in August 1926 because it was likely to
66 cause heart failure. Municipal authorities in Constantinople, Turkey banned the Charleston in November 1926
67 because it was a "menace to health."

68 The Charleston was also banned in several cities in the US and around the world ostensibly¹³ because of building
69 safety considerations. After a roof collapsed in the Pickwick Dance Club in Boston, MA on July 4, 1925 during a
70 Charleston dance and killed 44 people, dancing to the rhythm of the Charleston was viewed as too dangerous
71 and was banned in several cities. As reported in the New York Times of August 30, 1925, the Charleston dance
72 was banned in halls of Passaic, New Jersey by the Chief of Police with the backing of the Supervisor of the
73 Bureau of Buildings. The supervisor claimed that "old type halls were not strong enough to stand up under the
74 strain of the Charleston." "The Charleston is all right morally, so far as I know," added the chief." In contrast, the
75 Buffalo city inspector justified the ban on the basis of both safety and moral reasons: according to the
76 Schenectady Gazette of November 21, 1925 the chief declared, "The physical being of the young upstarts may
77 be shattered with their morals through the agency of the Charleston." A ban was also implemented in Concord,
78 NH because the dance halls could not withstand the "strain caused by the Charleston." An exception to the ban
79 on dancing the Charleston in Berlin was made for a restaurant built 365 feet above ground near the top of the
80 radio tower of a German radio corporation. This was reported in the New York Times of September 8, 1926 with
81 the headline "Charleston Tower to immortalize Charleston." ...

⁷ Combination of things that are not similar

⁸ luxurious self-indulgence; often used to describe a decline due to an erosion of moral, ethical, or sexual traditions

⁹ a member of the middle class

¹⁰ Word referring to black people in South Africa; Derogatory in nature

¹¹ having or showing success, rank, wealth, etc

¹² crazy; foolish

¹³ Apparently or purportedly, but perhaps not actually