Black Dance Is Like All That Jazz

By William Moore

My boyhood friend and neighbor Thelonius Monk spent a great deal of his time brooding in the apartment below me because he could not find any work.

This was at a time when he and other musicians like Bud Powell, Dizzy Gillespie and such were being kidded to death about being "bebop" musicians in the '50s.

Sunglasses, loud clothing and instrumented, the cartoon figure would be walking in an endless desert. The caption below the cartoon would read: "Man, dig this crazy bench."

Thelonius has persevered as jazz in time came into its own. The music that he made is now his. That is, he is the known creator of the style and has been able to financially exist in this capitalist state.

This is a reflection of music to a great extent having come to terms with the black creator in this country. We now know that jazz is ours, or jazz is black music, or soul and what America sings is ours (even if the Beattles sing it), or that we are America's music because we have created a special song to sing here about the new conditions we live in. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony or Rigoletto is not an expression of what America is all about.

The musical breakthrough, although there is still a way to go, is a magnificent thing in terms of time. Quincy Jones composing music for a Hollywood film instead of Dimitri Tompkin is a "Fall and Decline of the Roman Empire" phenomenon requiring as large a volume to chronicle. Clean-up work in music is still being done by such fine organizations as the Collective Black Artists in New York City and the Afro-American Music Opportunities Association in the Mid-West.

Black Dance is now at a beginning point much as jazz was in the '40s. In fact, we in this field do not even have the friendly white critics (Nat Hentoff, Marshall Stearns, Andre Hodeir) who spent much of their time defining jazz to death.

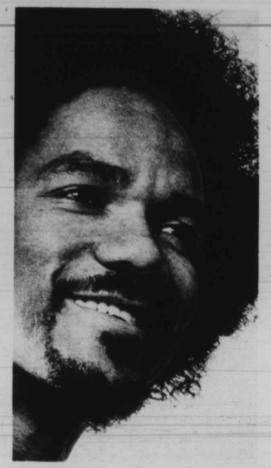
White dance critics have been particularly destructive to the new creative wave of Black Dance artists. Many because they have not understood (or even been aware of) the reality from which the black choreographer creates, and some because they have become negative or defensive about the harsh message the black choreographers convey.

Josephine Baker, Buddy Bradley and Talley Beatty had to leave this country to develop their genius. And, of course, America, especially black America, is all the poorer for it.

Buddy Bradley left in 1933 after restaging musicals on Broadway without any marquee credits because he was black. He tired of building the reputation of choreographers like Busby Berkeley so he left for London after years of teaching routines to the likes of Fred and Adele Astaire, Ruby Keeler, Eddie Foy, Mae West, Eleanor Powell and Paul Draper. Dance historians know Bradley's name only, along with the white stars who owe their careers and fortunes to his genius.

Talley Beatty, the first choreographic genius of the black concert stage, has to spend much of his time even now abroad to compensate for the lack of recognition and financial insecurity America has given him since the '40s.

Pearl Primus broods at home on our shores and really only comes into her own when she travels to Africa and is treated like the real Queen of Black Dance that she is.



Rod Rodgers is one of the leading black choreographers in the generation following Alvin Ailey. The Detroiter now makes his home and base of operations in New York City where he performs and teaches.

But, despite these American injustices, Black Dance is coming into it own. There are more Black Dance companies than ever being formed all over the country.

Alvin Ailey, Eleo Pomare, George Faison and Rod Rodgers are leading the way showing our people what an artist can do once a door is opened. For two years straight, a black musical has won Broadway's coveted TONY award, "Raisin" and "The Wiz."

There is still, however, a long way to go before Black Dance people can attain the victories that jazz artists now hold. Crucial at this point is communications. Black Dance artists need communications with one another and communications with the vast public, especially the black public. One would never think that the dance was the second most important art amongst the black (or African) arts. Yet, it is.

The big turning point for Black Dance in the future will be a communications one in which the artists are known for their contributions to our living culture and when, as in jazz, they can take full credit (including financial) for their creative works.

Members of the Chuck Davis Dance Company perform a Boot Dance. This group of young New York dancers is one of the leading active groups in the metropolitan area. They perform works, emanating from the Black Experience in the New World as well as Africa.

The Black Dance Workshop of Buffalo, New York is a group under the direction of Katherine Dunham trained dancer-choreographer Carole Welsh. Ms. Welsh's group travels throughout the state with her group's special brand of subdued but nationalistic Black Dance.

Twenty years ago, few black men would have advised their sons to join the Navy.

Twenty years ago, Blacks made up less than five percent of the Navy. Almost all were in the lower ranks—black chiefs were rarities, black officers virtually nonexistent.

Things have changed a lot since that generation. Today there are black petty officers in every specialty from advanced electronics to nuclear propulsion, black captains commanding ships and shore installations, black admirals making policy decisions at high executive levels. It's a different Navy, and a better one.

If your son is through high school—or will be soon—ask him to check with us. If he qualifies, we can train him in one of over 60 career fields. He'll have travel, free medical and dental care, thirty days of vacation with pay. And, with the Navy Campus For Achievement, a chance to work for college or vocational credits—right in the Navy.

Your Navy recruiter has all the details. Call toll free, **800-841-8000.** (In Georgia, 800-342-5855.) The world has changed a lot in a generation. So has the Navy.

NAVY