

**The Great War and a new dance beat:
Opening the South African dance floor**

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Introduction

This article proposes to consider ballroom dance in South Africa leading up to and during the Great War of 1914. It will highlight how the resultant increase in the globalisation of urban South African society and the infiltration of the jazz beat into the ballroom dances, as in other Western countries, served as a catalyst to expand the South African social dancing scene. The article will also examine the exclusive nature of the pre-war ballroom dancing arena before focusing on the period after 1914, when ballroom dancing became radically more popular because of fund raising balls and dancing events which celebrated war victories. Dancing during this time was, however, far more than a funding of war time efforts or a mere antidote to war depression: at another level, dancing was the opening-up of the public dance sector as a result of the incorporation of new or untraditional dances that turned dance movements into dance crazes. This subsequently allowed those who were previously excluded from dance as an elitist pastime, to be included – creating what was referred to as a dance-mad society during the war years.

First steps: South African clubs and halls

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, ballroom or social dancing formed an occasional part of the social life of South African society. With some notable exceptions, it was centralised in the European and more privileged or more musically oriented classes. Moreover, it was a very private, leisurely affair characterised by strict decorum and was often aimed at enhancing social status.¹

Many contemporary accounts allude to spaces when it comes to dancing in society. Carl Jeppe, for example, describes the balls “under the stars”, and in her 1902 diary, Hildagonda Duckitt records how the people “who live in the country are

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1. A.M. Green, “Dancing in Borrowed Shoes: A History of Ballroom Dancing in South Africa (1600s–1940s)”, MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2008, pp 33–68.

generally very fond of dancing, for the mere exercise...".² Although ballroom dancing did feature in rural society, the very nature of social dance meant it required music, a number of female and male partners, special dress, disposable income and a set leisure time – and this made it far more popular in urban areas. Consequently, as young cities grew and became an integral part of the South African landscape, ballroom dancing became synonymous with the growing, mainly white, middle classes. By the turn of the century, the founding of exclusive clubs in and around cities like Pretoria and Johannesburg further assisted in laying down a viable platform for the development of ballroom dancing. Clubs like the Rand Club, New Club, Jewish Club, Abe Bailey's Union Club, The Cantonese Club, The Ladies '89 Pioneer Club, the Country Club in Johannesburg and the Pretoria Country Club, had a very exclusive membership base which required not only a membership fee but also a certain acceptable social status. Given that these clubs were based on the English club tradition it was inevitable that social dancing events would be part of club events.³

However, in the mushrooming new towns there was an ever-increasing working and lower middle class and as a result mixed class and traditional dancing became popular in public leisure spaces. Dances like these were almost always associated with liquor and behaviour that was deemed improper. This was especially prevalent in the cosmopolitan mining compounds.⁴

In his 1911 reminiscences Louis Cohen, for example, emphasises that people from a wide variety of classes and ethnic origin danced together and he points out how this tended to lead to "disobeying social rules" and the misuse of alcohol. He describes the dancing scenes as sometimes being "violent" where different racial groups danced in "a building which was used as a dancing saloon, and thither would hasten every night a multitude of chocolate belles accompanied by their beaux ...".⁵

In his study on the growth of the Johannesburg entertainment industry, David Coplan mentions the complexity of organised social structures and how the "urban black African middle class soon formed social, cultural and religious associations".⁶ He refers to a larger grouping of unskilled domestic, commercial and industrial workers who were evolving a culturally distinct model of urban social life. These people he claimed "met for recreation in the shebeens", where drinking

2. H.J. Duckitt, *Hilda's Diary of a Cape Housekeeper, being a Chronicle of Daily Events and Monthly work in a Cape Household, with Numerous Cooking Recipes and notes on Gardening and Poultry Keeping* (Chapman & Hall, London, 1902), pp 14–15.

3. B. Theron, "A Social History of Pretoria during the First Phase of the Anglo-Boer War: October 1899–June 1900", MA dissertation, University of South Africa, pp 144–145, 154, 157; J.B. Wentzel, *A View from the Ridge: Johannesburg Retrospect* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1975), pp 94–96; G.A. Leyds, *A History of Johannesburg: The Early Years*, (Nasionale Boekhandel, Cape Town, 1964), p 196; E. Itzkin, *Gandhi's Johannesburg: Birthplace of Satyagraha* (Witwatersrand University Press in association with MuseumAfrica, Johannesburg, 2000) pp 48–49; P. Joyce (ed.), *South Africa's Yesterdays*, (Reader's Digest Association, Cape Town, 1981), pp 110–111, 279.

4. R. Blennerhassett and L. Sleeman, *Adventures in Mashonaland*, (Books of Rhodesia, Bulawayo, 1969), p 8; C. van Onselen, *New Babylon. New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand 1886–1914* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2001).

5. L. Cohen, *Reminiscences of Kimberley* (Bennett, London, 1911), pp 202, 203.

6. D. Coplan, "The African Musician and the Development of the Johannesburg Entertainment Industry, 1900–1960", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5, 2, April 1979, p 136.

and dancing often went on for an entire weekend, although they tended to look to the more westernised African and coloured middle class as a socially superior group.⁷

Ballroom was not only danced by white middle class South Africans: there was a distinct, separate history of black and coloured participation. The historical record reveals that black dancers belonged, if not by law, then by passion and technique, on the dance floor. So-called "rainbow" dance events or balls were held on the outskirts of town while the white upper classes were having public and private balls; this remained part of South Africa's ballroom dance history throughout the early twentieth century.⁸ The balls held by black dancers were, however, danced in the shadows. They were an ever present imitation of the white balls but they were not always visible to the European eye. The limited number of travel journals that reported on black social pastimes reflected the astonishment of writers witnessing the high standard of ballroom dancing in black communities.⁹ However, reference to ballroom dancing by African people in early twentieth century documents appears to be made by chance or merely in passing. When mentioned in the white media in the early twentieth century, they were not usually discussed in as much detail as were the European or white balls and dance functions. Far more attention was given to the ethnic or tribal dances; various documents and media reports can be found describing or listing the place and time of mine and tribal dancing competitions.¹⁰ However, sources that do make mention of ballroom dancing in black and coloured communities emphasise the ability of the dancers to provide a perfect imitation of the dance steps seen at white ballroom functions, as well as the prominent role that this dancing played in their society.

Dancing under the British flag

The British takeover of the four colonies in 1902 resulted in public dancing, especially in urban areas, increasing substantially in popularity due to the social influence of the British authorities. From 1910 (Union of South Africa) up until 1926 (with the Balfour Declaration), the most prominent British representatives in the country were the high commissioners and governor-generals of South Africa.¹¹ Throughout their terms of office they played a very active social role and it was the governor-general in particular who had a great influence on the social scene.¹²

7. Coplan, "The African Musician", p 136.

8. W. Bird, *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822* (Struik, Cape Town, 1966), pp 165–166.

9. M. le Valliant, *Travels into the Interior Parts of Africa by Way of the Cape of Good Hope in the Years 1780, 81, 82, 83, 84 and 85* (Robinson, London, 1790), p 31; B. Irvine and B. Irvine, *The Dancing Years* (W.H. Allen, London, 1970).

10. National Archives of South Africa (hereafter NASA), South African Archives Depot (hereafter SAB), BN 25/4/1928, Native sub-commissioner Benoni – Director of Native Labour, 18 May 1928, where the mining commissioner of Benoni comments on the "tribal competition dances" and the weapons used during these dances. Mining houses promoted these competition dances amongst the black workers, because it was a cheap but effective leisure activity for the miners. Mine owners believed dancing would prevent violent outbursts that could possibly occur because of boredom in the confined space. Also see "Ons Fotografie Wedstrijd: Basoetoe-skoolmeidjies aan Dans", *Die Huisgenoot*, April 1920, p 39.

11. Personal interview, J. Lambert, UNISA, Pretoria, 20 April 2006.

12. J. Lambert, "The Earl of Athlone and South Africanism", *Kleio*, 34, p 129; Personal interview: J. Lambert, UNISA, Pretoria, 20 April 2006.

The prominent social position the governor-general and his wife held and their almost royal image meant that they played a considerable role in reinforcing ballroom dancing in South Africa. The governor-generals were at the top of society's social ladder and their attendance at social functions validated these social activities (e.g. clubs, garden parties and other leisure activities associated with the British middle class). These functions, along with the new style of ballroom dances which were held shortly before and at the time of the outbreak of the First World War, would probably otherwise not have been easily accepted in either "conservative" Afrikaner or in traditional black culture. In a sense, the governor-general's association with the ballroom component of much of the social scene made ballroom dancing more prominent, desirable and acceptable within society at large.

It was particularly under governor-generals such as Herbert John Gladstone (1914–1920),¹³ that ballroom dancing became an increasingly familiar pastime. It appears that the white middle class regarded ballroom dancing as a respectable social activity which had connotations of regal behaviour. The governor-generals personified what this respectability entailed. A letter from the governmental secretary in Maseru concerning Gladstone's visit to the city, for example, indicates how keen the Europeans in the country were to meet him and his wife at social functions such as a garden parties.¹⁴ Furthermore, governor-generals had access to the infrastructure required to host and attend various dance parties throughout the year.

During this time a distinction was made between a garden party and ball, both of which were popular social dance functions. Balls and garden parties were generally organised for a Saturday (less often on Mondays or Fridays). Although private Sunday dances did take place, they were frowned upon, because Sundays were religiously upheld as the Sabbath.¹⁵ While a garden party was usually organised for an afternoon, from about 2pm to 5.30pm, balls were reserved for the late evenings, commonly starting at about 8pm and going on until the early hours.¹⁶

Sparked by the growth in the working class and the resultant need for an acceptable leisure activity in the urban areas and, one might argue, being inadvertently legitimised by the British governor-generals, the demand for public dance spaces increased. Halls and other public venues were used to hold regular, often weekly, events. Fixed dances started to feature with regularity in the newspapers, as is evident in the *Rand Daily Mail*, advertising "Dancing every

13. Gladstone was the first governor-general in South Africa. See for example *Our First Half-Century 1910–1960, Golden Jubilee of the Union of South Africa* (Da Gama Publications, Johannesburg, 1960), p 12.

14. NASA, SAB, Pretoria: Governor General Files (hereafter GG) 1412 45/13: Government secretary's office, Maseru – Garraway, 15 April 1911.

15. According to Act 28 of 1896, part 8, Public dances on a Sunday were illegal. For a more detailed discussion on the reasons and applications of this law see section above. See for example an article that appeared in a popular Afrikaans magazine that warns against the moral dangers that dancing held for the church in P.J. Pienaar, "Dans, Gemengde Baaier, Kaart-speel en Wyn-drink", *Die Huisgenoot*, April 1920, p 378.

16. NASA, SAB, Pretoria: GG 2251, 11/3: Col. Theo T. Truter – Captain Annesley, 25 September 1923; NASA, SAB, Pretoria: GG 2251, 11/2: C. Annesley – A. Cameron & Co, 8 March 1922.

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Saturday Night at the Masonic Dance Hall".¹⁷ Dancing was also becoming a popular pastime for the younger, better educated generation. Universities and colleges, especially in Bloemfontein and Pretoria, held dances on a regular basis. At the University of the Free State:

... one of the first great conflicts in the SRC had already come about in 1911. The reason? Dancing. It was custom to hold one official dance a year, under the auspices of the SRC. Most students wanted at least four official dances a year.¹⁸

This British influence and resultant popularity of dance was very clear.

Changing step: From the "old time" waltz to the foxtrot

As in Europe and the USA, Afrikaners of European descent and South African black people alike, were influenced by European colonists, and ballroom dancing became a familiar pastime. English-speakers were accustomed to the minuets and quadrilles, mazurkas, polkas, cotillions and waltzes of the previous centuries.¹⁹ Travel writers of the pre-twentieth century even mentioned how "slaves, working class whites, free blacks, Mozambiquers, Madagascans and descendants of indigenous people, took up the dances as part of their underclass subculture".²⁰ Although practised as part of a leisure activity, these dances comprised a set of prescribed steps and were often very difficult to learn. For example, a dance like the minuet, which was popular in South Africa well into the nineteenth century, was distinguished by its exact choreography and small steps and it was danced in groups. It was originally practised in court and also used to "display one's good breeding to the full [because of the] precise footwork and patterns, its regal bows, its taking and leaving of hats, gloves, fan and train".²¹

From the early nineteenth century onwards, more individualistic styled dances (as opposed to group dances) became prominent and a dance programme consisted of a variety of dances which were less choreographed and seemingly easier to learn. These dance forms were characterised especially by being danced around the room while turning, the most popular being the waltz and polka. They were in sharp contrast to the typical dances of the previous century which reflected a cordial, restrained relationship between the sexes, very much constrained by the society of the time. Furthermore, "[a]lthough the round dances of the nineteenth century did allow for a greater closeness between couples ... couples still performed in counter clockwise position around the floor in patterned steps, attuned to the movements of their fellow dancers".²² Typically, a dance function would be pre-arranged according to a set programme which prescribed not only which dance would be danced, but also dictated if and when more intimate dances could be performed. In the middle of the nineteenth century it was still common for

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17. "Scotia Dance Club", *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 January 1910, p 3.
 18. University of the Free State, *From Grey to Gold. The First 100 Years of the University of the Free State*, (University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 2006), p 66.
 19. Green, "Dancing in Borrowed Shoes", pp 60–62; V. Layne, "Square Roots at the Cape", *Rootz Africa*, 5, 4, November 2003, p 18.
 20. Layne, "Square Roots at the Cape", p 18.
 21. R. Astier, "Francois Marcel and the Art of Teaching in the Eighteenth Century", *The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, 2, 2, Summer 1984, p 18.
 22. J. Malnig, "Women, Dance and New York Nightlife", in J. Malnig (ed.), *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader* (University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2009), p 75.

balls in South Africa to be opened with a polonaise²³ or a grand march which was characterised by people walking or dancing behind one another, weaving through the ballroom.²⁴ The waltz and polka became standard items on a dance programme and were alternated with dances like the mazurka,²⁵ cotillion,²⁶ lancers and Scottish reels.²⁷ The evening was usually ended with a ceremonial minuet and or a quadrille.²⁸ The dance floor was clearly very regulated.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, syncopated rhythm became integral to the Western ballroom. The “shifting of each beat in a measured pattern”²⁹ of this musical innovation had an incredible impact on ballroom dancing because it introduced supplementary pauses and beats into the dance music which allowed for extra hops, jumps and dips in the choreography. This off-beat or in-between beat was a defining feature of the American-born Ragtime, which flourished between the late 1890s and the end of the First World War. “The rag dances evolved from both black and white working-class dance halls and clubs in urban areas ... where they were then picked up by professional performers as stage dances”.³⁰ The syncopated rhythm was also incorporated into the existing dance steps and re-choreographed, creating new dances like the Cake Walk, Two-Step, the Boston and the One-Step.³¹

These dances were distinctly different from those popular in the middle of the century because they “allowed couples to improvise steps and become virtually oblivious to the movements of their fellow dancers”.³² Initially these dances were condemned and even banned from the ballroom floor because of the close contact and freedom that they allowed the dancers. The 1910s would see these dances, now more finely structured by society dance couples like Vernon and Irene Castle, escalate in popularity especially in the USA where they were first introduced. It was dancing that any one, “even a child”, could do.³³ Moreover, they could be danced anywhere to the sound of a small band, a single piano or even

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23. The “polonaise” formed part of ceremonies, such as weddings, and was basically danced by couples forming a chain, the man taking the lady’s left hand and leading her around the room while slightly bending his knees at every third beat of the music. After walking around the room the men and ladies walk in opposite directions but follow each other with their eyes. When they re-join they repeat the first set of the “polonaise”. See H.E. Kennedy, “Polish Peasant Courtship and Wedding Customs and Folk-song”, *Folklore*, 36, 1, 31 March 1925, pp 48–68; P.J.S. Richardson, *The Social Dances of the Nineteenth Century in England* (London, Jenkins, 1960), pp 94–95.
 24. Western Social Dance: Nineteenth Century Social Dance, available at <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/dihtml/diabout.html>>; s.a. Accessed 10 May 2006.
 25. The mazurka, a Polish folk dance was, like the waltz, danced in triple time, but with a strong accent on the second beat. See Richardson, *The Social Dances of the Nineteenth Century*, p 96; and A. Swartz, “The Polish Folk Mazurka”, *Studia*, 1, 4, 1975, pp 249–255.
 26. Richardson, *The Social Dances of the Nineteenth Century in England*, p 100.
 27. J. Malnig, *Dancing till Dawn: A Century of Exhibition Ballroom Dance* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1992), pp 2–3.
 28. Richardson, *The Social Dances of the Nineteenth Century*, pp 9–10.
 29. Grove music online, “Syncopation”, available at <<http://0-www.grovemusic.com.innopac.up.ac.za:80/shared/viwes/article.html?section=music.27263>>; s.a. Accessed 18 August 2006.
 30. Malnig, “Women, Dance and New York Nightlife”, p 75.
 31. Grove music online, “Ragtime”, available at <<http://0-www.grovemusic.com.innopac.up.ac.za/data/articles/music/22825.xml?>>; s.a. Accessed 18 August 2006.
 32. Malnig, “Women, Dance and New York Nightlife”, p 75.
 33. C. Téten, *Dance through Time Presents Dancetime! 500 Years of Social Dance* (Video recording) (Dancetime Publications, Kentfield, 2000).

the newly imported gramophone.³⁴ These dances were consequently not only acceptable but also accessible to a larger section of society.

While little mention of these ragtime dances could be found in popular, white South African newspapers of the time, before the outbreak of the Great War there was a definite following of these ragtime dances in the black urban societies from as early as the late nineteenth century. David Coplan,³⁵ Christopher Ballantine³⁶ and Veit Erlmann,³⁷ for example, refer to African minstrel shows being seen by black as well as white audiences. These authors found that “printed sheets of ragtime songs – often indistinguishable from ‘coon’ songs, as minstrel songs were called in their final stage – other Tin Pan Alley songs [and] phonograph recordings” were available in urban areas. Even by 1904. “recordings and tonic sol-fa versions of Ragtime or ‘coon’ songs were not only being sold in trade stores, but songs of this kind were also being performed by black choral groups”.³⁸

Coplan also refers to early black dance bands like Modikwe's Band from Rustenburg who were hiring themselves out in 1912 “on weekends in Pretoria, playing for a variety of occasions” which often included dancing.³⁹ The popularity of dance bands which played ragtime music was also reported on in the *Imvo Zabantsundu*.⁴⁰ The newspaper reported that Chief Dalindybo “nursed the ambition to possess an instrumental band” and that he “imported from England an expensive set of musical instruments” to create a “Tembu Band”. After he fell ill a bandmaster from the British Army heard of his plight and selected and trained “suitable young Tembus”.⁴¹ At a Christmas function they played some hymns, Christmas carols and dance music and went on to give a public performance in Umtata.⁴² Dance bands like these continued to feature at evening functions and after a concert “instrumentalists” like these could be “hired for dancing afterwards”.⁴³

Dancing the war away

“When the [Great] War broke out”, reported Victor Silvester, a British dance instructor and founding member of the Ballroom Committee of the Imperial Society

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34. Green, “Dancing in Borrowed Shoes”, pp 141–142.
 35. D. Coplan, *In Township Tonight! Three Centuries of South African Black City Music and Theatre* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008).
 36. C. Ballantine, *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1993).
 37. V. Erlmann, *Nightsong: Performance, Power, and Practice in South Africa* (University of Chicago, Chicago, 1996).
 38. C. Ballantine, “Concert and Dance: The Foundations of Black Jazz in South Africa between the Twenties and the Early Forties”, *Popular Music*, 10, 2, May 1991, p 130.
 39. Coplan, “The African Musician”, p 137.
 40. L. and D. Switzer note that the newspaper was “founded in King William's Town in the Eastern Cape by John Tengo Jabavu, with white financial support – chiefly from Richard W. Rose-Innes, a lawyer, and James W. Weir, a local merchant and son of a Lovedale missionary. The Jabavu family controlled the newspaper until 1935”. See L. Switzer and D. Switzer, *The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho. A Descriptive Bibliographic Guide to African, Coloured and Indian Newspapers, Newsletters and Magazines, 1836–1976* (G.K. Hall & Co., Boston, 1979), p 40.
 41. *South African Native Opinion*, 24 February 1914, p 7.
 42. *South African Native Opinion*, 24 February 1914, p 7.
 43. Green, “Dancing in Borrowed Shoes”, pp 141–142; Coplan, *In Township Tonight*, p 97.

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of Teachers of Dancing, who had a strong following in the South African dancing scene,⁴⁴ “the Tango and the Boston, already on their last legs, were completely forgotten”. He claimed that the “Waltz very nearly died too, but in its ‘Hesitation’ form⁴⁵ was occasionally danced. The highly syncopated One-Step or Rag more than held its own”.⁴⁶ This reflected how more formal dances were gradually being eased out by dances with syncopated beats.

Clearly there was a tendency to dance these dances even before the Great War. However, as is seen in South African dance programmes in the Union, nineteenth century dances were still very much in favour. A farewell dance held at the Caledon Town Hall in 1911, for example, still only listed a few waltzes, Lancers, and the German Polka.⁴⁷ Dances held in black townships were often, as mentioned, far closer to those of their American counterparts. The sudden changes brought about by the war entrenched the influence of the jazz beat in the Union’s larger metropolises and changed the nature of dance.

In the United Kingdom and South Africa, the First World War served as an impetus to strengthen the acceptance of new dances. In the UK there was a distinct upsurge in their popularity and a change to the nature of ballroom dancing. Hustwitt explains that:

The First World War was a time of widespread change in the social, economic and moral life of Britain and this had important effects upon dancing and the music that came with it. The growth of military spending meant increased wages for all, a trend which lasted until 1921, and spending on entertainment increased greatly.⁴⁸

While the outbreak of war did not necessarily mean riches for all, in Johannesburg at least, there was a “rapid development of small factories [that in turn resulted in] ... new jobs for skilled and unskilled workers”.⁴⁹ As noted by Albert Grundlingh, urbanisation increased by 83 percent during the war years.⁵⁰ Luli Callinicos explains that:

...the number of Africans not working in the mines grew from 61 111 to 92 597. The numbers of African women grew even more rapidly. The beginning of the migration

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44. Victor Silvester’s articles often featured in South African magazines on dancing. See Green, “Dancing in Borrowed Shoes”, p 27.
 45. This “hesitation” in the waltz step was accomplished by “holding” or pausing in the waltz step on the counts two, three. See C. Walker, *The Modern Dances, How to Dance them: Complete Instructions for Learning the Tango, or One Step, the Castle Walk, the Walking Boston, the Hesitation Waltz, the Dream Waltz and the Argentine Tango*, 3rd ed. (Saul Brothers, Chicago, 1914), pp 41–49.
 46. V. Silvester, *Modern Ballroom Dancing: History and Practise* (Barrie & Jenkins, London, 1974), p 31.
 47. See for example a 1911 dance programme for the Farewell Ball at the Caledon Town Hall in Joyce (ed.), *South Africa’s Yesterdays*, p 102.
 48. M. Hustwitt, “‘Caught in a Whirlpool of Aching Sound’: The Production of Dance Music in Britain in the 1920s”, *Popular Music*, 3, 1983, pp 8–10.
 49. L. Callinicos, *A People’s History of South Africa, Vol 2, Working Life 1886–1940, Factories, Townships and Popular Culture on the Rand* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987), p 82.
 50. A. Grundlingh, “The Impact of the First World War (1914–1918) on South Africa: A Neglected Catalyst for Change?”, Unpublished paper presented at the Historical Association of South Africa (HASA) Biennial Conference on “History Wars, Wars in History and Other Southern African Histories”, Durban, 26–28 June 2014.

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of black women to the towns is significant because their arrival began to change the pattern of black urban living.⁵¹

The migration of women to the towns was significant because it was these women who, in years to come, allowed for more informal dances to take place in shebeens. Dances in shebeens became an enterprise, because beer and often entrance fees were charged to attend these dance functions. In the 1920s and 1930s USA ragtime dances were transformed to become South Africa's own Marabi-style dance events.⁵² The nature of the wartime social dances also allowed women in general a bigger role on the dance floor, because the steps themselves, and even partners, could be changed at will.

During wartime in the UK:

Dance halls, gramophone records and sheet music sales boomed. Women replaced men in the workplace and were momentarily loosened from the ties of patriarchy; social and sexual morals relaxed considerably ... The gramophone (and later the wireless) allowed people to practise dancing at home, as well as throw small dance parties in parlours ... These [novelty] bands were at their most popular in the years 1916 to 1919. Along with these bands a number of exhibition dancers, such as Irene Castle, and variety artists, such as Elsie Janis [emerged].⁵³

Similarly, in South Africa the First World War not only made it possible for the working classes to attend their own dance functions – it also saw the popularity of dances and dance bands soaring. These were often created and funded by the defence force. Dancing became a distinct feature in South Africa's military corps. For example, in the minutes of J.V. Officers Commanding Corps, a very telling comment was made about a ball that was to be held at the Carlton Hotel:

... it was most desirable that it should be held, as it was a social function in which considerable interest was taken by the public and should be of considerable benefit to the offices of the force being as one of the very few opportunities awarded to officers of all Corps to meet socially. Further, the meeting conceded that if the necessity and importance of supporting a function of this kind were properly placed before the officers they would not fail to respond in a proper manner.⁵⁴

Dancing during wartime was limited to the white communities, but as Coplan indicates, the bands of the Salvation Army, Native Military Corps and the African Boy Scouts played at various social functions. He adds that these bands "often belonged to or performed on behalf of voluntary associations, and in cooperation with the 'pianomen' of the shebeens began to create an indigenous African jazz".⁵⁵ The gramophone, that became more and more accessible in South Africa as the years went by, also made ragtime tunes part of the rhythm of the South African city life. It was held that:

...a succession of black dance crazes struck Africa and affected its urban neo-folk music ... At first the impact of the imported black performing arts was felt on coastal towns like Monrovia, Freetown, Cape Coast Accra, Lagos and Cape Town where it

51. Callinicos, *A People's History of South Africa*, pp 82–83.

52. For a detailed discussion of the history of Marabi see Coplan, "The African Musician", pp 135–164.

53. Hustwitt, "Caught in a Whirlpool of Aching Sound", pp 8–10.

54. NASA, SAB, Minutes Officer Tvl Volunteers (hereafter TVO), 18, 563, 18 March 1911.

55. Coplan, "The African Musician", p 137.

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was appreciated by local people including the black elite, whose high-class dance orchestras and brass bands played waltzes, marches, ragtimes, fox-trots.⁵⁶

It is evident that dancing continued to feature among the younger generation as well as those active in other leisure pastimes. This made it possible, for the most part, for dancing to continue and even to expand during the war years. In September 1914 an active dance committee was, for example, appointed at the Transvaal University College (TUC). The student magazine reported: "A Dance Committee, to hold office for a year and have at its disposal £25, was chosen".⁵⁷ In addition,

a small dance was held on Saturday, 23rd May [1914], on the occasion of the visit of the Grey University Rugby and Tennis teams; another was held on Friday, 26th June; and it is contemplated holding a larger one, to be self-supporting as far as possible, at the beginning of next term.⁵⁸

The formation of this dance committee was significant because it not only formalised and ensured regular dancing events among the young academics but also allowed for the acceptance of the more popular ragtime beats into the social life of Pretoria.

Dancing functions were often held after sports matches or to support a specific sporting club and raise funds for the war effort. This was evident in Mafeking where the rugby club had an "energetic Dance Committee" and arrangements were in hand for "holding a dance at an early date".⁵⁹ The bowling club also used dancing to celebrate matches and raise funds. One dance was described as being "an eminently successful affair; over forty couples were present and the utmost good humour and sociability prevailed".⁶⁰ Cricket clubs were also involved in dancing.⁶¹ As was the case before the war, dances were held to raise funds for organisations such as the Catholic Church. It was reputed that:

the dance given last night in aid of the Catholic Church Building Fund, and as a means for celebrating the anniversary of the feast day of St Patrick, was voted by all present most enjoyable. Though not crowded, there were sufficient dancers to preclude any suggestion of the floor not being fully occupied. Altogether about 80 people were present.⁶²

As in Europe, dances were arranged in South African cities to support wartime efforts, celebrate victories, and relieve boredom, or as a form of escapism from the atrocities of war. On 9 March 1917, for example, a dance was organised by the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes (ROAB) to raise funds for the war effort. It was reported that "Dancing commenced at 8.15pm and terminated at 2.30am. Over a hundred people were present and many of the more popular [dances were seen], the floor-space was taxed to its utmost".⁶³

56. E.J. Collins, "Jazz Feedback to Africa", *American Music*, 5, 2, Summer 1987, p 176.

57. *The TUC Students' Magazine*, 1, 3, September 1914, p 7.

58. *The TUC Students' Magazine*, 1, 3, September 1914, p 7.

59. "MEMS", *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 30 March 1914, p 2; also see *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 19 March 1914, p 3.

60. *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 24 March 1914, p 3.

61. "Cricket", *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 20 March 1914, p 3.

62. "Cricket", *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 20 March 1914, p 3.

63. "ROAB Dance", *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 9 March 1917, p 3.

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Even within military ranks, dancing was one of the pastimes soldiers could turn to if they wished to relieve what Mason and Riedi described as the “boredom” of war. As they put it:

The [British] army was well aware that “morale had particularly to be nourished during the time out of the line”, when, with the enemy out of sight, boredom, drink and fatigue were apt to induce “mischievous thoughts” in the private soldier”.⁶⁴

In the context of South Africa, a club “swinging record” was set by a soldier from the military base at Roberts Heights, Pretoria.⁶⁵

Dances were also held in honour of “heroes’ home-coming[s]”. It was reported in the media that:

After four years of crowded life in France, Engl (sic) and America, Capt. and Flight Commander Andrew W. Beaucamp Protector V.C ... returned on Tuesday morning to his home town ... In the Town Hall which was crowded to its utmost capacity ... while a number of vocal and instrumental items and exhibitions of dancing were given by several ladies and gentlemen and two pupils.⁶⁶

The popularity of dance functions during this time swept across cities and by 1916 *Ilanga Lase Natal* noted that by 1916 there were “over forty Native Clubs”.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the First World War not only created an opportunity to dance but it also changed the very nature of the dances themselves. What is important to note is that many of the men participating had no experience in dancing – having only just completed school. Their older relatives also took up dancing again, even if only to be able to spend more time with the younger soldiers. According to Silvester, neither the young soldiers nor the older family members had time to learn the “intricacies of the Waltz or the Tango”, but as for the foxtrot, the “fascinating lilt of the tunes” and the “informal nature of the steps appealed to them so much that in a few months the Foxtrot swept all other dances except the Rag off the floor”. The foxtrot was a ... real “go-as-you-please” dance.⁶⁸

This “go-as-you-please” ragtime dancing appealed to urban South Africa residents where cities were not as well planned as those in the UK and dance events were often held in “makeshift” ballrooms.⁶⁹ Dances, music and dress seen

64. T. Mason and E. Riedi, *Sport and the Military: The British Armed Forces, 1880–1960* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010), p 82.

65. “Club Swinging”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 February 1910, p 8.

66. “Mafeking Heroes’ Home-coming”, *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 5 March 1920, p 3.

67. Coplan, “The African Musician”, p 136.

68. Silvester, *Modern Ballroom Dancing*, p 31.

69. A. Mabin and D. Smith have for example noted that very little was done in urban planning prior to and during the First World War and that it was a “conscious attempt to use state power to influence, direct and control the course of urban development”. During the war period “many pressures for a new approach to the cities and towns of South Africa began to re-emerge” and as “costs rose, housing shortages deepened and ‘slums’ grew, producing demands for something to be done.” See A.M. and D. Smit, “Reconstructing South Africa’s Cities? The Making of Urban Planning 1900–2000”, *Planning Perspectives*, 12, 1997, pp 194, 197.

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on the battlefields were also copied at social events in the Union. While the specific dances are not often mentioned in the daily and weekly papers of the time,⁷⁰ reference is made to them in newspapers like *The International*.⁷¹ In 1915, for example, a report refers to the amazement of “a young private in the trenches whose people are wellknown (sic)” when meeting “a very sociable lot of Germans” and after hearing the Germans play, a regular concert was started where “our chaps sang [and danced to] the latest ragtime choruses”.⁷² The newspaper further reminded its readers of the International Socialist League’s dance at “Professor West’s Academy”.⁷³ *Imvo Zabantsundu* also noted in 1916 how one of the “Allied songs ‘F.I.R.E.’ (France, Italy, Russia and England) by the Merrymakers, immensely delighted the audience” and how the ragtime song “Everybody Rag with Me” received an encore.⁷⁴ The “ragtime” dress of the Allied forces was also copied by ladies at a dress ball in 1917 and “very enjoyable dancing” was had by all concerned.⁷⁵

Although not all the commentators approved of the ragtime dances, they did have a great following in South Africa. One report written in Durban, for example, refers to the new ragtime trend rather disparagingly as follows:

The Turkey Trot dance has been introduced to Durban ... regarded purely as a dance, turkey trotting is not what one might call the perfection of graceful action. It requires firmness of grip, high kicking, and a good deal of nonsensical bobbing about. Anyway, it is much too strenuous to ever become popular in Durban. A languid waltz where your fair partner goes to sleep upon your shoulder and only wakes up at intervals to eat ices, and make sure her hair is on straight, is more in Durban’s line.⁷⁶

By 1918, regular dance evenings were advertised in the newspapers. The Entertainment Committee of the International Socialist League of Johannesburg advertised their dance night series with gents’ tickets selling at 2s.6d and ladies’ tickets at 1s. Dancing was due to commence at 8pm and refreshments would be provided.⁷⁷ The advertisement continued:

It should not be necessary to point out that the Entertainment Committee is entitled to, and deserves the support of comrades as well as the general public at these functions. If you don’t dance, seek and find your pleasure in bringing someone who does.⁷⁸

70. For a discussion on how newspapers and other sources represented dancing in South Africa, see Green, “Dancing in Borrowed Shoes”, pp 25–30.

71. L. and D. Switzer note that the newspaper was: “[f]ounded and published in Johannesburg by the International Socialist League (ISL) and from 1921, was the official organ of the Communist Party in South Africa. The newspaper appeared under the following titles: *The International* (September 1915 to September 1924); *The South African Worker* (original series July 1926 to April 1930 and the revived series June 1936 to March 1938); *Umsebenzi* (April 1930 to May 1936); and *Inkululeko* (July 1940 to June 1950)”. See Switzer and Switzer, *The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho*, p 77.

72. “The League’s Progress”, *The International*, 22 October 1915, p 3.

73. *The International*, 22 October 1915, p 3.

74. “A Bantu Benefactor: Warm Tributes to an Unselfish Labourer. Mr Bud M’Belle’s Retirement”, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 22 August 1916, p 5.

75. “Fancy Dress Ball at Slurry”, *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 11 August 1917, p 3.

76. *The Mafeking Mail & Protectorate Guardian*, 14 February 1914, p 2.

77. “League Notes. Dance”, *The International*, 28 June 1918, p 3.

78. “League Notes. Dance”, *The International*, 28 June 1918, p 3.

Perhaps the most telling changes in the South African dance scene brought on by the First World War were evident in the change in the dance programmes themselves. In April 1919 the dances at an “Easter Ball” in the town hall were listed as follows:

Waltz; Saunter; Waltz; Lancer; Fox trot; Waltz; American Two-Step; Waltz; Waltz (aeroplane); Pas de Quatre; Saunter; Flirtation Waltz; Waltz; American Two Step; Waltz; Lancers; Saunter; Waltz; One Step; Flirtation Waltz; Fox Trot ; American Two Step; Waltz.⁷⁹

While the Lancers and Pas de Quatre⁸⁰ still featured on the programme as they did in 1911, the presence of the American Two Step, the Saunter⁸¹ and the One Step,⁸² reflects the changes taking place on the South African dance floor. It is interesting to note that white South African ballroom dancers seemed to prefer more sedate versions of the new dances, while the exhibition dancers such as Vernon and Irene Castle, adapted their style from the wilder ragtime dances shortly before the outbreak of the war. The “entry of America into the war has led to several American novelties being introduced”, explained the press, “for instance, there is the Anglo-American One-step and a new Fox trot, both of which have been arranged ... to suit the English style of dancing”.⁸³

The new waltz, one-step, tango and especially the foxtrot were radically different from the minuets and quadrilles of the previous centuries. Not only was this new style of dancing danced to livelier music, it also required much closer contact and faster, more individually styled movements between partners. The incorporation of these dances into the working class dance hall allowed the strict social rules which were reflected in the restrictive and prescriptive nature of dances like the minuet, to make way for more freedom on the dance floor. No longer was it prescribed in detail how close or how far you had to hold your partner; when to dance; how to dance, or even with whom from your class to dance – dancing just had to be to the natural beat of ragtime music. It can be argued that without the exposure (because of their participation in the war) ordinary South Africans had to the dancing style of Europeans and Americans, these dances might not have gained the wide appeal they did in South Africa – nor would the ballroom have opened up to the extent that it did.

Silvester noted that during the last months of the war in the UK: “... our ballrooms ... were crowded with American soldiers so that the Foxtrot began a

79. “Mrs J. Bennett’s Easter Ball”, *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 17 April 1919, p 3.

80. Dance where four couples dance facing one another in a square. *Contredanses; description des figures, plan des figures, Paris*, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?musdibib:1:/temp/~ammem_QH78>, s.a. Accessed 13 June 2014.

81. Slow variation of the Foxtrot. Dance evolution in America, available at <http://www.basinstreet.com/articles/dance_ev.htm>, s.a. Accessed 13 June 2014.

82. See for example V. **Castle, *Modern Dancing* (World Syndicate Co., New York, 1914.), p 44. “Now to begin with the dance: the gentleman starts forward with his left foot, and the lady steps backward with her right, walking in time to the music. Bear in mind this one important point: When I say walk, that is all it is. Do not shuffle, do not bob up and down or trot. Simply walk as softly and smoothly as possible, taking a step to every count of the music”.

83. “Is this My Crawl? The Select Saunter”, *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 4 January 1918, p 3.

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fresh phase of its existence".⁸⁴ The media also reported that "everyone is anxious to learn the new steps" and that even a "grey-haired man can do the 'Two-step' the 'fox-trot', and the 'Jazz' without undue exertion, but the waltz would tire him in ten minutes".⁸⁵ The report went on to explain:

The old beau is cutting out the younger man and is thoroughly enjoying himself. All the dancing schools are full up, for everyone is anxious to know the new steps. The new dances and even the favourite waltz make up the ball programmes to-day. The old dances, such as the Lancers, are not placed in the West End programmes.⁸⁶

Conclusion

In 1921, two years after the end of the First World War a traveller who returned to Johannesburg remarked that he was amazed at the changes and progress of the city. It was now:

... a city of light, bustle and civilisation ... Progress and democracy, fashionable flappers and jazz bands were the leading features of the town; smart policeman regulated the traffic with Piccadilly precision; the pavements were thronged with pretty women – wearing expensive but out-of-date frocks – and the shop windows were filled with good things.⁸⁷

Nowhere were these radical changes that the city underwent more evident than on the dance floor. The structured ballroom dancing events with their orchestras and formal bands had largely been replaced by small bands or even a gramophone record. Formal, prescriptive dances made way for informal break-away dances that reflected a growing working class aiming to be more like the developing West. A dancing event could take place almost anywhere and required little or no government support or organised club structure – and furthermore no upper class approval. Dancing during the Great War years developed a double dimension, moving from a frivolous leisure pastime to a more integral functioning element of society. Within a single decade, the ballroom environment moved away from an almost exclusive, private, Euro-centric dance room to an inclusive public dance hall that drew a broad spectrum of South Africans both black and white to its public dance facilities.

Abstract

The Great War of 1914, and the increase in the South African urban society, served as a catalyst to expand the South African social dancing scene. While dancing before the War was still very exclusive, dancing during War time became radically more popular with fund raising balls, the celebration of victories and the infiltration of the jazz beat into ballroom dances. Dancing during this time was however far more than a mere "antidote to war depression", it was the opening up of the public dance sector with the incorporation of the untraditional, dances that turned the dance movements into "dance crazes". This subsequently allowed those that were previously excluded from this elitist past time, to be included into the dance crazes of the time.

84. Silvester, *Modern Ballroom Dancing*, pp 32–33.

85. *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 27 February 1919, p 2.

86. *The Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 27 February 1919, p 2.

87. F. Addington Symonds, *The Johannesburg story*, (Frederick Muller Ltd., London, 1953), p 188.

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Keywords: South African ballroom dancing, First World War, Governor-Generals, Ragtime dances, social dances, public dance halls, shebeen, gramophone, urbanization.

Opsomming

Die Eerste Wêreldoorlog, en die uitbreiding van stedelike Suid-Afrikaanse gemeenskappe, het gedien as katalisator vir die ontwikkeling van sosiale dans in Suid-Afrika. Voor die Oorlog was dans grootliks as eksklusief beskou, terwyl dit gedurende die Oorlog aansienlik meer gewild geraak het te danke aan fondsinsamelingsdinees, partytjies ter viering van oorwinnings en die insluiting van die jazz ritme in sosiale danse. Dans gedurende hierdie periode was tog veel meer as 'n blote "teëvoeter vir Oorlogsdepressie", dit was inderwaarheid 'n radikale uitbreiding van die publieke danssektor: nie-tradisionele danse wat dans bewegings in meesleurende tendense laat ontaard het. Gevolglik kon diegene wat voorheen uitgesluit was deur die eksklusiewe aard van dans as tydverdryf, meemaak in gewilde dans tendense.

Sleutelwoorde: Suid-Afrikaanse baldans, Eerste Wêreldoorlog, Goewerneur-Generaals, ragtime dans, sosiale dans, gemeenskaplike danssale, shebeen, grammofoon, verstedeliking.