

# TAP KIDS STUDY GUIDE

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF TAP DANCE

Tap was created from combining elements of **African drumming** and dancing with the techniques of **European clog** and **step dancing**. The unique rhythms of jazz music distinguish American tap dance from all other kinds of dancing based on percussive footwork.

Between the 1600's and early 1800's, tap slowly evolved from European step dances like the **jig** and clog and a variety of secular and religious African step dances that were loosely labeled "**juba**" dances and "ring shouts." Danced primarily by enslaved Africans, this blend of jig and juba was transferred to the minstrel stage, and there it was polished into something identifiable as "American tap dance."

After the Civil War, vibrant new steps were added to the tap vocabulary including syncopated '**stop time,**' '**soft shoe,**' '**waltz clog,**' and '**time step.**' Dancers relaxed their postures and arms and shoulders were often used for whimsical gestures.

With vaudeville, great individual talents like Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and John Bubbles helped to refine rhythm tap dance, and later Hollywood popularized tap dance worldwide with films featuring Fred Astaire, the Nicholas Brothers, and Eleanore Powell, among others.

During the 1950's, the style dance changed and tap lost its popularity, although tap dancers continued to dance for their own pleasure.

In the 60's, several public tap dance events ignited the great revival of tap dance. Suddenly, tap was considered an art form rather than just entertainment. During the 1970's, tap returned to Broadway, film, and the concert stage throughout the USA, Europe, and Japan. The public's interest in watching tap dance has produced several Broadway hits, including "Black and Blue," and "Jelly's Last Jam," "Bring in Da Noise" "Tap Dogs and films such as "The Cotton Club," "Steppin Out," and "Tap."

## A RHYTHMIC COLLISION OF CULTURES

The early slave trade in America resulted in a rhythmic collision of cultures. Slaveholders already fearful of revolt began to panic when

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it was discovered that Africans could communicate with each other - over long distances and in code - through the use of drums. All over the South, slave-holders forbid the use of drums and other native instruments in African religious ceremonies. African-Americans held on to their traditional rhythms by transferring them to their feet. The tapping out of complex rhythmic passages was developed, and a subtle, intricate and vital physical code of expression was born. In 1845, the potato famine in Ireland caused thousands of Irish families to flee their county. They landed in New York City, their port of entry, and settled in the notorious Five Points neighborhood. They shared their decrepit living spaces with black families, and shared their favorite pastimes; singing, dancing, and music. Tap Dance and Clogging share deep roots. The most difficult of the clogs are the Jigs and Hornpipes. In some of these the feet can tap the floor more than seventy times in fifteen seconds. In clog dancing, no thought is given to the upper body. Almost rigid -- the shoulders and the arms are kept motionless. By the mid-nineteenth century, African-American footwork, body and arm movements had combined with Irish and British clogging steps. They incorporated a syncopated beat to create a style called "buck and wing." which became Modern Tap Dance. Modern tap dancing continued to evolve though the years 1900 to 1930. William Henry Lane was a young black man who studied with an Irishman, William Lowe, a master of the jig. Lane became known for his style, skill, and brilliance at performing. In 1844, he and another dancer, Irish-American John Diamond were each paid the enormous sum of \$500 to compete against each other in three challenge matches. The first match was declared a draw, and after the second and third competition, Master Juba, as Lane was then known, was declared King of All Dancers.

## **NATIONAL TAP DANCE DAY**

May 25th was proclaimed as National Tap Dance day by a vote of Congress in 1989, and is celebrated by enthusiasts across the USA. Recent Presidential Awards have been given to tap legend Honi Coles and the Nicholas Brothers for their lifelong contributions to the arts. Perhaps Gregory Hines said it best: "Tap is here, Now!"

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## DANCERS AS MUSICIANS

A tap dancer uses his shoes as a percussive instrument. There are five areas on the sole of the shoe that form the “notes”. A dancer needs to use control and flexibility of the knee, ankle, and foot to make clear, clean sounds.

Ragtime and jazz music is intertwined with the development of tap dance. Jazz was created by merging African and European musical traditions. African music provided the rhythmic element while European music provided the melody and harmony. The chief rhythmic element heard in Jazz is syncopation. Syncopation is a strong accent on a weak beat, and a rest (no sound) on a strong beat.

## THE TAP COUNTING SYSTEM:

Quarter notes (strong beats) 1 2 3 4

Eighth note couplet 1 & 2 & 3 & 4

Eighth note triplet count 1 &a 2 &a 3 &a 4 &a

Sixteenth or quadruple count 1e&a2e&a3e&a4e&a

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## A SHORT LIST OF FAMOUS TAP DANCERS

Don't let the list end here, there are so many more!

### Bill "Bojangles" Robinson

Bill Robinson was brought up by his grandmother after the death of his parents when he was still a baby. He was christened Luther, a name he did not like, so he suggested to his younger brother Bill that they should exchange names. When Bill objected, Luther applied his fists, and the exchange was made! (The new 'Luther' later adopted the name Percy and became a well-known drummer.) At the age of six he began dancing for a living, appearing as a "hooper," or song-and-dance man. Robinson eschewed the frenetic manner of the jitterbug; his dancing always remained cool and reserved, rarely using his upper body and depending on his busy, inventive feet and his expressive face.

### Willie Covan (The Four Covans)

Willie started out at the age of six as a "pickaninny", a child between the ages of six and twelve who performed as a corps of backup dancers for a woman singer. He never took a dance class in his life, but rose to the pinnacle of all vaudeville entertainment-dancing at the Palace Theatre.

### Peg Leg Bates

Mr. Bates lost his leg at the age of twelve working in a cottonseed gin. In spite of never having formally studied dance, he went on to a distinguished career in tap dancing, performing in Paris, top Harlem nightclubs, and on Ed Sullivan's television show.

### Fayard and Harold Nicholas (The Nicholas Brothers)

The Nicholas' show stopping act was distinguished from other child acts of the day by their grace, agility, and sophistication. In addition to being the show-stopping act at the Cotton Club from 1932-1939, they appeared in more than fifty Hollywood movies.

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## Shirley Temple

Shirley Temple made her first movie appearance at the age of six. Her fame was colossal, and within a year she was the number one box office star. She tapped in many films, often with another veteran tapper, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson.

## Gene Kelly

Gene Kelly ranked as one of the finest and most creative dancers in musical motion pictures. Kelly developed a spontaneous, athletic dancing style. His imaginative choreography combined tap dancing with elements of ballet and acrobatics. He made his Broadway debut in 1938 in the chorus of *Leave It to Me* and gained his first recognition in the title role of the musical *Pal Joey* in 1940. He is best remembered for his dancing in the MGM classic “*Singing In The Rain*.”

## Fred Astaire

Astaire was the American movie dancer of the 1930s and 1940s. Famed for his mixture of elegance and nice-guy charm, he was a popular romantic lead despite his lack of typical movie star good looks. His dance routines are a staple of movie highlight reels. He was often paired with dancing actress Ginger Rogers; their movies together included *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), *Top Hat* (1935), and *Swing Time* (1936).

## Gregory Hines

Hines was aged six when he and brother Maurice Hines performed, as the Hines Kids, at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. Hines appeared in such movies as “*The Cotton Club*” (1984), “*White Nights*” (1985), “*Tap*” (1989) and “*A Rage in Harlem*” (1991). Hines made his Broadway debut with his brother in *The Girl in Pink Tights* in 1954. He earned Tony Award nominations for *Eubie!* (1992), *Comin' Uptown* (1980) and *Sophisticated Ladies* (1981), and won the Tony Award and Drama Desk Award for the revue *Jelly's Last Jam* (1992) and the Theatre World Award for *Eubie!*.

## Savion Glover

Savion is one of the youngest men to be nominated for a Tony Award for his performance in *Black and Blue*. He made his Broadway debut as the title character in *The Tap Dance Kid* at the age of 12. In 1996, Savion won the Tony award for his work in the Broadway smash-hit, *Bring In Da Noise, Bring In Da Funk*.

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## Suggested Reading

**Brotherhood in Rhythm: The Jazz Tap Dancing of the Nicholas Brothers**  
By Constance Valis Hill

**The Souls of Your Feet**  
By Acia Gray

**Tap! - The Greatest Tap dance Stars and their stories**  
by Rusty Frank

**Jazz Dance**  
by Jean & Marshall Stearns - An excellent source of historical information on tap dance and its heyday.

**The Tap Dance Dictionary**  
By Mark Knowles

**Savion! My Life in Tap.**  
(2000) NY:HarperCollins.

**Black Dance in America: a History Through its People.**  
Haskins, James (1990)

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## RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

The Magic of Honi Coles - PBS presentation produced by Susan Pollard

Tap Dance in America - PBS presentation hosted by the late great Gregory Hines.

Stormy Weather - Hollywood Classic featuring breathtaking dance numbers of the Nicholas Brothers

Masters of Tap features Chuck Green, Will Gaines, and a Honi Coles, 61 minutes of lore on bebop and rhythm tap, including a master class with Honi Coles, recorded in London in 1983. Rare footage of the masters. Publisher HOME VISION (TEL: 800-262-8600)

That's Entertainment Collection - Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra, Esther Williams and Fred Astaire are just a few of the 125 stars showcased. This collection includes lavish production numbers from over 100 MGM musicals, and behind-the-scenes footage and out-takes that never made it onto the big screen. That's More Entertainment! hosted by Michael Feinstein, features unreleased musical numbers. 8 hours 6 minutes on four videocassettes. (\* All MGM Compilations. Available commercially for rental or purchase [MULTD].)

About Tap: (28 min, color. 1985) Hosted by Gregory Hines, focusing on the artistry and style of some of America's leading male tap dancers. Direct Cinema Ltd. ,P.O. Box

## RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:

[www.tapkids.com](http://www.tapkids.com) Learn more about the stars of the show

[www.ita.org](http://www.ita.org)

[www.tapdance.org](http://www.tapdance.org)