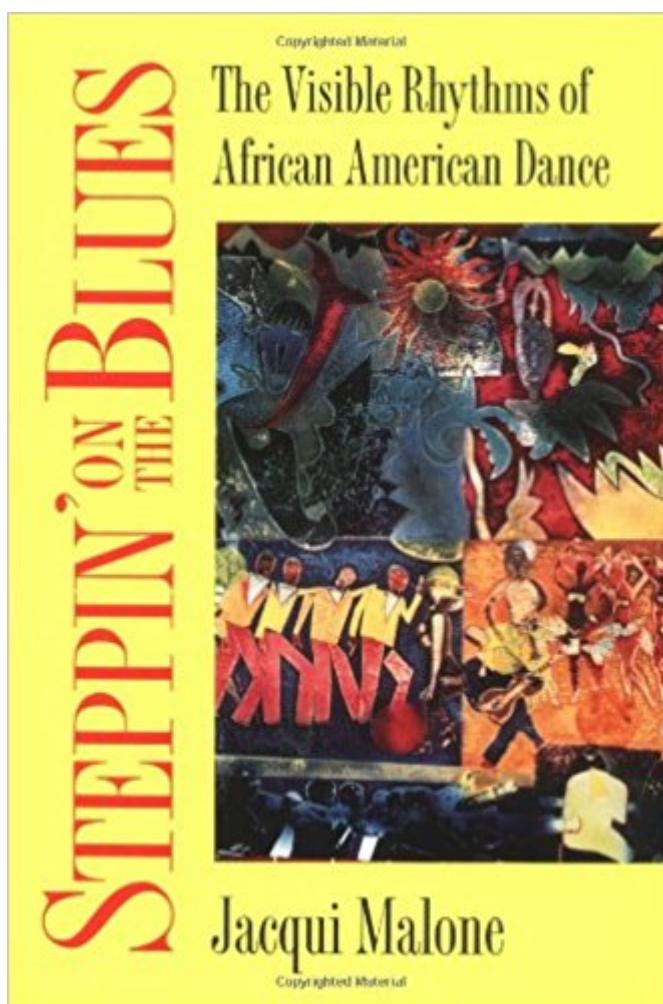


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# Steppin' On The Blues: The Visible Rhythms Of African American Dance (Folklore And Society)



## **Synopsis**

This award-winning cultural history of black dance explores the meaning of dance in African-American life and the connections among music, song, and dance in African-American culture.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Opportunities for self-expression were limited during the days of slavery, but at a dance, anyone with the right moves could become the king or queen of the floor. Dance styles from Western and central Africa became the basis for a vernacular dance style that made the rhythms of the music visible. In stark contrast to the erect spines and stiff legs of European dance, the spontaneous, bent-kneed, and angulated bodies stressed a life-affirming joy that remains vital today. From the public Negro dance contests of slave times, to the wildly popular minstrel shows, to the Harlem cabaret scene of the 1920s, to the stylized moves of Motown vocal groups, Malone records this history with an energy befitting her subject. She takes us to the present, where the heritage survives in the choreography of African American marching bands and the recent explosion of African American fraternity and sorority step shows. Recommended for public and academic libraries. ?Dan Bogey, Clearfield Cty. P.L. Federation, Curwensville, Pa. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book explores not only the meaning of dance in African American life but also the ways in which music, song, and dance are interrelated in African American culture. Beyond that it has been, finally, one of the most important means of cultural survival.

While focusing on blues and African American dance (along with culture and music) this book provides and excellent example of how dance in general can evolve. The book is incredibly well cited and incredibly well researched and argued. This gives you a great deal of faith in the content and at the end of it, you will have phenomenally better understanding of the interplay of dance with culture and music. I read it because of my interest in dance (blues especially) and how we define what traditional dance is. However, anyone interested in dance should read this. After reading this book, you will appreciate the paradox of trying to identify what 'traditional' really means when it comes to dance. You will see how dance can steadily evolve in response to history, politics, economics, music, technology, social change and so on. At the end you will realise what the word 'traditional' means in dance and also know that you can't always say if something is traditional or not. Even though the book focuses on African culture, it does so in such a detailed manner, that you can then appreciate how dance in other cultures could evolve differently and why. This provides anyone interested in dance an incredibly good insight into the nature of dance and why we do indeed dance and how we can always dance better. It is academic style writing, and that might be hard for some, but take you time and read the whole book; I did and it was worth it.

I truly enjoyed this book. I enjoyed it so much that I spent hours looking at Youtube videos of the people, groups, and dances that were mentioned in the book. What this book did for me was forced me to seek out other information and learn more. Ms. Malone dealt with various aspects of African American vernacular dance i.e., big bands and jazz dancing, steppin' traditions, Black marching bands, etc. Excerpt I liked: "Let the Punishment Fit the Crime": The Vocal Choreography of Cholly Atkins, Chapter Seven "He is the wellspring from which we flow. And the groups that want to be viable go back to Cholly. What he uses is more of a scientific approach than a fad approach. Cholly understand the way that the human body moves, he understand the grace of dance." Melvin Franklin an original Temptations "From the twenties through most of the forties, American tap dance in the jazz/rhythm tradition experienced its heyday. Suddenly in the late forties, the bottom dropped out for many rhythm tap dancers who had established successful careers in vaudeville, in musicals, and with big bands. By the sixties, even the great champion and chronicler of American vernacular dance, Marshall Sterns, wondered if classic jazz dance was vanishing forever. Although we know

now that black vernacular dance evolves in cyclical pattern, no one could have predicted in the sixties that dance movements from the twenties, thirties, and forties would live on through the nineties and beyond in many of the performance traditions that span African American culture. The lively existence of such black dancing vocal groups as those in the Motown Town Revue helped preserve and recycle much of the vocabulary of classic jazz dance, including some tap. The man largely responsible for this particular cultural transference was Cholly Atkins, a jazz dance artist who worked as a choreographer for Motown Records from 1965 to 1971. The Atkins contribution to American culture has been extraordinarily significant. He not only made polished performers out of rock-and-roll singers who started with a hit single and raw ambition. He taught them to perform their music by doing dances that worked their magic not by retelling a song's storyline in predictable pantomime but by punctuating it with rhythmical dance steps, turns, and gestures drawn from the rich bedrock of black vernacular dance. "In so doing, he virtually created a new form of expression: Vocal choreography. Thoroughly versed in twentieth-century African American dance forms, from social dances like the lindy hop to street-corner (and then stage) sensations like rhythm tap, Atkins gave his singing groups a depth and appeal that was sometimes lacking in their tunes and lyrics. Without knowing, popular groups of the sixties, seventies, and eighties were performing updated versions of dances of the forties, thirties, and twenties - classic black vernacular dances - and projecting them to a larger audience than ever before. Through the good offices of Cholly Atkins, even movements from tap, markedly out of favor in the sixties, were being taught to sixties rock-and-roll stars, who introduced them to the new generation to the United States and around the globe. That the style or body language of rhythm tap is so accessible to young African Americans today has to be due in part to these "underground" efforts of vocal choreographer Atkins. The book covers so much more. The chapter on Cholly was simply my favorite. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in African American history and culture.

Jacqui Malone's *Steppin on the Blues* needs to be reprinted so it is available to scholars, musicians, dancers, and the public who need to hear what Malone says. It is a necessary book for understanding African American life and culture in general, and African American music and dance in particular. Her explanations of how the musics and the dances fit into real social life of Africans and African Americans as well as her examinations of dance in modern social life of African Americans are excellent. While her book is well documented, her style is accessible to all readers. I've been looking at books on Black dance as part of a larger study of Black music and culture. *Steppin on the Blues* is essential. While Malone does not offer as full and as documented a

history as Emery's Black Dance: 1619 to the Present, she provides a good explanation of how dance fits into the culture and life of African societies in Africa and in the Diaspora, particularly in the United States. She explains this in the context of more modern discussions about African and African American identity than any other source. Her references and sources provide a good introduction to question of general African American culture and identity. Malone leaves aside Black vernacular and folk dance and music when she reaches the development of Black show dancing in the 19th Century and Black art dance in the early 20th century. However, at the close of her book she studies the role of dance in several contemporary forms of Black cultural and social life, stepping at Black colleges, dance in Black social and fraternal orders, and dance in the Florida A. & M. marching band. Each of those three chapters is worth the price of the book. They provide clear studies about how the continuation of African-originated social and cultural forms responds to the real needs of African Americans in 20th and 21st Century life. My favorite was her chapter on college stepping which focused on the history of stepping at Howard University. Despite the title, Malone says almost nothing about one subject that I was most interested in: blues dancing. While the popular current notion of the blues, especially from without the Blues People, sees the blues as a solo singer's work for concert or cabaret performance, blues especially in its origins was a dance music and new forms of dancing, blues couple dancing emerged as the blues overcame other forms of folk and popular musics in the first decades of the 20th Century. Still, this is too important a book to be only available at collector's prices. **REPRINT THIS BOOK!**

My daughter's tap teacher suggested this book. She loves reading about the "art of tap" and its origination. We love, love love this book and will suggest it to others.

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