'You can't see anything, can you?': Examining Tap Dance on Early Musical Theatre Recordings

Ben Macpherson

Introduction: 'That was me dancing. How did it look?'

Partway through a rendition of 'But Not Today' from the musical comedy *Lido Lady*[1] by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, the English musical comedian Jack Hulbert breaks into a tap dance. At the end of the routine, he says, 'That was me dancing. How did it look?'. After a brief pause, he wryly exclaims: 'Oh, of course, you can't see anything, can you? I keep forgetting!'. Accompanied by the Gaiety Theatre Orchestra under the baton of conductor Sydney Baynes and captured on a sound recording made in London by Columbia Records in 1927, Hulbert's tap routine is, in a literal sense, invisible. Yet, the seemingly throwaway response to his own question is revealing. While aesthetic appreciation for vocal and musical performance on record was an accepted part of popular culture and journalistic discourse by the end of the 1920s, the sonic inclusion of a notably visual medium, tap dance, seems peculiar, even incongruous, for the listener as much as the performer.[2] Focusing primarily on one recording from 1926, with reference to other examples from the period between 1900 and 1940, this article engages with such seeming incongruity. Through close archival listening made possible as part of a British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Small Research Grant (Award Ref: SG2122\210387), this article seeks to offer a new evaluation of tap dance on early recordings of musical theatre, examining it in three ways: as *an aesthetic time-capsule*; as *a*

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[1] 'But Not Today' from *Lido Lady*, Columbia 4228, 1927, Shellac disc, British Library.

[2] In the case of 'But Not Today', the spatial fields within which Hulbert's voice and tap movements are heard differ markedly; the studio may have had some rudimentary floor microphones, but this is uncertain in the production information or metadata for the recording.

dual-modality for listeners; and as *a disembodied archive*. To do so, a tripartite historical context will help establish some parameters for this discussion.

Experiments in early sound recording and the development of musical comedy – including the popularity of tap dancing – ran in parallel from the late nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth century. First, the invention of the phonograph by Thomas Edison in 1877 marked a revolutionary moment in the capture and reproduction of sound. Unlike previous mechanical music devices, like musical boxes for example, the phonograph both played back *and* recorded sound, inscribing it onto wax cylinders. A decade later in 1887, Emil Berliner's gramophone replaced wax cylinders with flat discs which were both more durable and scalable commercially. These new audio technologies affected a revolution in the cultural commodification of sound, transforming it from an ephemeral phenomenon to something that could be documented, repeated, and replicated. As a result, the commercialisation of recorded sound developed rapidly. By 1890, coin-operated phonographs, installed in public venues, provided the general public with access to recorded music. In one saloon bar in San Francisco in that same year, customers reportedly spent $1000 in one month as public demand increased.[3]

As a coterminous cultural development, musical theatre – in its early form of musical comedy – was growing rapidly as a popular entertainment in London and New York. Histories differ over the exact origins of the musical as a form, but they often locate its beginnings to New York in 1866, and the somewhat accidental success of *The Black Crook*, considered a kind of proto-musical in its combination of music, dance, and drama. Fast forward to 1884 and 1887 respectively, and two London productions, *Jack in the Box* and *My Sweetheart,*were termed 'musical comedy dramas'. This was a clear semantic indication of the

[3] Richard Burgess, *The History of Music Production* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

move away from the pastoral romanticism or gentle satire of operetta and comic opera to a more topical and urbane popular entertainment, which would draw liberally from a complex smorgasbord of cultural influences including both European opera and African-American minstrelsy, shaping the development of the form on either side of the Atlantic.[4]

The historical narratives of sound recording and musical comedy intersect for the first time in 1900, in England, when Berliner recorded songs from the musical comedy phenomenon *Florodora,* a musical which, by turn, featured the rounded vowels of Evie Greene's operetta vocal performance, the Music Hall speak-song of W. Louis Bradfield, and a cakewalk-influenced sextet dance number.[5] By the summer of 1901, at least twenty *Florodora* recordings were available on both cylinder and disc, including a series of 78rpm gramophone records from Columbia, featuring highlights from the show and a full libretto of the production – an early progenitor of the Original Cast Recordings (OCRs) that have since become central to the reach and popularity of musical theatre as part of the mass cultural complex.[6] The significance of sound recording to musical theatre's history and heritage in this regard is astounding. Between 1949 and 1964, cast albums from various musicals spent more time at #1 on the *Billboard* Top 100 chart than Frank Sinatra, The Beatles, The Monkees, and The Rolling Stones combined.[7] In the twenty-first century, their influence remains evident, exemplified by recordings of productions such as *Hamilton: An American Musical*, of which

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[4] Ben Macpherson, *Singing Utopia: Voice in Musical Theatre* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 25.

[5] While this article focuses on tap dance in particular, the development of musical comedy includes a rich and varied history of borrowing, appropriation, and adaptation of a range of dance styles – in particular, adaptations of social dance such as the Charleston, foxtrot, and swing dancing, which Phoebe Rumsey has considered at length elsewhere in *Embodied Nostalgia: Early Twentieth Century Social Dance and the Choreographing of Broadway Musical Theatre*, Routledge Advances in Theatre and Performance Studies (Routledge, 2023).

[6] Tim Brooks, 'Early Recordings of Songs from Florodora: Tell Me, Pretty Maiden...Who Are You? - A Discographical Mystery', *Association for Recorded Sound Collections Journal* XXXI (2000): 51–64.

[7] See Laurence Maslon, *Broadway to Main Street: How Showtunes Enchanted America* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.

the Original Broadway Cast Recording was certified diamond for sales in 2023.[8]

Yet, despite their commercial and cultural impact, original cast recordings, musical theatre compilation albums ('Gems from…' or 'Highlights of…' a particular musical), and adjacent outputs, such single-performer albums (e.g. Broadway star Sutton Foster's *Take Me to the World* (2019) or Frank Sinatra's *My Kind of Broadway* (1965)), have been long overlooked in musical theatre history and scholarship. This is likely due to analytical emphases on prioritising discussion around live, visually spectacular performance – a bias which parallels trends in popular music studies, as seen in Lee Marshall's critique of recorded music's devaluation in culture at large.[9] Moreover, musical theatre scholarship is intensely interdisciplinary, encompassing musicology, narratology, performance studies, voice studies, cultural studies, political theory, sociology, race and gender studies, and more. In this case, musical theatre scholarship has been perpetually misaligned, adjacent to, or treated as a subset of established fields, such as musicology or performance studies, further marginalising musical theatre on record as an area of sustained focus in academic discourse. This observation becomes even more acute when we consider that, as a related area of musicology, sound studies, cultural studies or media archaeology, the study of early sound recordings may, in itself, also experience a similar kind of misalignment.

Recent scholarship has, however, begun to turn up the volume on the sonic heritage and cultural importance of musical theatre on record.[10] In one brief study focusing on the development of OCRs, for example, George Reddick offers something of a taxonomic

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[8] Logan Culwell-Block, 'Hamilton Broadway Album 1st Cast Recording to Be Certified Diamond by RIAA', Playbill.Com, 26 June 2023, https://playbill.com/article/hamilton-broadway-album-1st-cast-recording-to-be-certified-diamond-by-riaa.

[9] 'Do People Value Recorded Music?', *Cultural Sociology* 13, no. 2 (2019): 141–58.

[10] George Burrows et al., 'Original Cast Recordings Musical Theatre and/as Sonic Heritage: An AHRC Network Report', *Studies in Musical Theatre* 19, no. 1 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1386/smt; Douglas L. Reside, *Fixing the Musical: How Technologies Shaped the Broadway Repertory* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Laurence Maslon, *Broadway to Main Street: How Showtunes Enchanted America* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

framework for understanding their function and circulation in popular culture.[11] He suggests that OCRs might act as a substitute for a consumer's inability to attend a live performance, a sonic preview to enhance anticipation of an upcoming trip to the theatre, a prized aural archive of a performance one has witnessed (what media studies scholars may term a 'sound souvenir' after the term by R. Murray Schafer),[12] or a historical document of work now unavailable to experience in a live production.

On this basis, musical theatre scholar Zachary Dorsey notes that '[o]riginal cast albums [and, by extension, adjacent recordings of musical theatre songs] make a show's music and lyrics convenient' for discussion and analysis. In the context of this article, he also writes that, in its ephemerality, musical theatre 'dance is not as easily available for close study'.[13] For example, on record, extended dance breaks for choreography, which utilised dance styles with no deliberate physical sound (such as swing dance or ballet), would simply become instrumental interludes or, more often than not, may be truncated or excised from the recording altogether.[14] However, this is not the case for tap dance: the rhythmic, percussive, and therefore intentionally *audible* form that has, for the last century, been a recurring style on the musical stage. For reasons which become clear as this article progresses, the 'marginalised history' of tap dance is 'fragmented and less well collected' than other dance

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[11] 'The Evolution of the Original Cast Album', in *The Oxford Handbook to the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp et al. (Oxford University Press, 2011). Roger Heaton (2009) 'Reminder: A recording is not a performance', in Nicholas Cook, Eric Clarke, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and John Rink (Eds.) The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music (pp. 217 - 220), Cambridge University Press. Page 217.

[12] Karin Bijsterveld and Jose van Dijck, eds., *Sound Souvenirs: Audio Technologies, Memories and Cultural Practices* (Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

[13] Zachary Dorsey et al., 'Dance and Choreography', in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 339–40.

[14] 'Dancing in the Archive: Bodily Encounters, Memory, and More-than-Representational Participatory Historical Geographies', *Area* 20 (2024): 4, https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12982. The practice of editing or cutting dance breaks from cast recordings was largely established by the producer Goddard Lieberson, often credited with developing the 'studio cast recording' at Columbia Records in the mid-twentieth century. Among the musicals he produced for record are *South Pacific* (1949); *Kiss Me, Kate* (1949); *West Side Story* (1957); and *My Fair Lady* (1959), which was funded entirely by Columbia Records. For more information, see Maslon, *Broadway to Main Street: How Showtunes Enchanted America*, in particular, chapter 6 and chapter 8.

styles.[15] Yet, the inclusion of tap dance as a recurring feature of early musical theatre recordings – and in particular, on individual songs recorded outside of their original context – provides a basis for considering aspects of its history, and offers a means by which this specific form of dance on stage may be more readily available for the kind of close study that Dorsey suggest is lacking.[16]

Tap Dance on Record

As a performance practice, tap is a hybrid form developed from Celtic jigs, the clog dances of Europe, and ritual folk dances of Central and Western Africa. It was forged in an era of slaves taken to America who had to dance on a small square auction block to prove they were physically capable before they were sold. While musical theatre recordings already occupy a contested and marginalised place in the history of the form, tap therefore occupies a more politically contested space in the historical narrative of popular performance. Various histories of tap dance interrogate, acknowledge, or reveal this complexity, considering its subsequent journey into the 'white dominated spaces' of Broadway, the West End, and Hollywood.[17]

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[15] Thompson, 'Dancing in the Archive: Bodily Encounters, Memory, and More-than-Representational Participatory Historical Geographies', 3.

[16] With respect to scholarship on audio engineering, there likewise exists hardly any research on best practice in the practices for capturing tap, much less any serious historical commentary regarding tap shoe design, tap materials, floor types, microphone choice and position, or documentation regarding the particularities of capturing tap dance when it was at its peak during the switch from acoustic to electrical recording in the mid-1920s. For further discussion, see Kaetlynn Marie Eckles, 'Recording Tap Dance as a Form of Musical Percussion: Microphone Types, Placements and Techniques' (MSc Thesis, University of Colorado, 2022), iii, https://www.proquest.com/openview/7eb611bcae418742f94a0ea623eed180/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar.

[17] Benae Beamon, 'Tap and the Broadway Musical: Subversion and Subjectivity through Historical Consciousness', in *Dance in Musical Theatre: A History of the Body in Movement*, ed. Phoebe Rumsey and Dustyn Martincich (Bloomsbury Methuen, 2023); Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Mark Knowles, *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap Dancing* (McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers, 2002); Brian Seibert, *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2015); Thompson, 'Dancing in the Archive: Bodily Encounters, Memory, and More-than-Representational Participatory Historical Geographies'.

The popularity of this dance form was forged in an era of developing jazz dance on the musical stage. Broadway producer George M. Cohan adopted tap with an almost evangelical fervour in his musical comedies and follies in the early part of the twentieth century. The 1920s saw successful African American musicals such as *Shuffle Along* (1921) extend the range of tap dance styles available, including 'eccentric dancing [and] flash tap' and other forms of vernacular social dance, which were further transposed into a 'white dominated' space.[18]

Often, this transposition was facilitated by African American artists who worked uncredited as consultants and assistant choreographers to white dance arrangers on Broadway. One such artist was Clarence 'Buddy' Bradley, a tap dancer and teacher who is credited as 'the invisible man' of both US and UK musical theatre tap and African American vernacular dance.[19] Bradley's many achievements included work as a dance consultant on the original production of *Show Boat* in New York (1927);[20] the training of many white dancers in varieties of tap and vernacular dance in London and New York (among them, Fred and Adele Astaire and Jessie Matthews); a range of engagements with other choreographers who would go on to influence musical theatre and film, including Busby Berkeley and Agnes de Mille;[21] and an almost four-decade-long tenure in London, during which time he brought American dance styles onto the British musical stage. As Brenda Dixon Gottschild has noted, the work of Bradley and others took 'rhythmically complex black tap forms' and packaged

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[18] Ray Miller, 'Tappin' Jazz Lines', in *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, ed. Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver (University Press of Florida, 2014), 144.

[19] Constance Valis Hill, 'Buddy Bradley: The 'Invisible' Man of Broadway Brings Jazz Tap to London', *Proceedings of the Society of Dance History Scholars*, 14 February 1992, 77–84.

[20] In December 1926, *Variety* reported that Bradley was teaching Elizabeth Hines, who had been cast in *Show Boat* as Magnolia, 'some [Black] dance routines' (p.45)

[21] Sarah Whitfield and Sean Mayes, *An Inconvenient Black History of British Musical Theatre 1900-1950* (Methuen, 2021), 164–71.

them into a theatrical language 'that could be performed by whites', including by Fred Astaire on stage, screen, and in this context,on record.[22]

An Aesthetic 'Time-Capsule'

On April 20 1926, two men created what Laurence Maslon has called 'a time-capsule of the 1920s […] captured on a recording' in Columbia's London studio.[23] With music by George Gershwin and lyrics by Ira Gershwin, 'The Half-of-It Dearie Blues' was written for the brothers' first extensive Broadway outing in 1924, the musical comedy *Lady, Be Good!* Starring siblings Fred and Adele Astaire, the musical transferred to London in 1926 to much acclaim. A year into his time performing in *Lady, Be Good!* on Broadway, Astaire had reportedly tired of the dance break in 'The Half-of-it-Dearie Blues', and so began to tap, adding more breaks and slides as he crossed the Atlantic with the production.

The recording in question commits this song, and its improvisatory tap break from Astaire, to record. It forms part of what has come to be known as the Astaire London sessions, informal recordings made by Fred Astaire, accompanied by George Gershwin, while in London. Some formal recordings from the musical were also recorded and released during this period, but in London only (the Astaire's were not featured on any musical recording in New York until 1931).[24]

The recording, then, is something specific. It is not part of an Original Cast Recording (or equivalent predecessor), but it is an era-specific example of a musical comedy

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[22] Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 102–3.

[23] *Broadway to Main Street: How Showtunes Enchanted America*, 21.

[24] This fragmented, seemingly ad hoc, approach to documenting performances was not unusual. As Maslon notes of recordings from this period, 'in the first three decades of the twentieth century; anyone seeking coherence or consistency would be bitterly disappointed'. See *Broadway to Main Street: How Showtunes Enchanted America*, 22.

performance on record. Informal as it was, this recording is the first to feature a solo Astaire tap dance and is the earliest known recording of musical theatre tap dance available for 'close study' (to borrow from Dorsey). It is for these reasons that,while not recorded for the express purpose of documenting the musical from which it is taken, it is worthy of further investigation here. First, in what way is it a 'time capsule' of the 1920s? Much has to do with the possibilities and limitations of its recording technology and the spontaneity which characterises the tap performance from Astaire.

Historically Contingent Recording Technologies

While recordings are musical, commercial, and acoustic in their analytical potential, the advent of the sound recording 'has been shaped above all by technology', and in 1926, Columbia were a year into their use of electrical recording systems, having converted to using Western Electric.[25] Reflecting on this development, recording historian Richard James Burgess notes that while the previous use of acoustic horns suited John Philip Sousa marches by a marching band or the rounded tones of Enrico Caruso, they were not adept at capturing the thin, conversational urbanity of early crooning. So too, the cutting head of mechanical recording devices would be overloaded by bass drums or full drum sets and ruin the wax or vinyl.[26]

Burgess further notes that '[e]lectrical recordings could now capture sibilance and subtle sounds as well as a wider frequency spectrum', ideal for the resonance, high frequencies and lower thuds created in the buck, wing, slide and polyrhythmic percussion of

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[25] Simon Frith, 'Going Critical: Writing about Recordings', in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 271.
[26] *The History of Music Production*, 31.

tap.[27] The timbre of Astaire's tap dance in this recording, and the specific clarity of the off-beats, is therefore facilitated by the development of the new technology. If tap dancing is 'what the eye hears',[28] then the intersection of recording techniques and performance aesthetics of the musical comedy form, in this first recording of Astaire tap dancing, may be an artefact of 'what the ear sees'.

The introduction of electrical recording systems meant that musicians could play together while spaced out in a room rather than crowded around a single acoustic horn.[29] Several microphones could be used simultaneously to achieve a more balanced sound in real-time in ways which did not simply rely on the performers artificially adjusting their volume, tone, or timbre. Notwithstanding this, Simon Trezise reminds us that there are still times when 'unfamiliar spatial arrangements […] can interfere with [and] disrupt musicians' accustomed performing arrangement', and in any analysis of a prior recording that has been digitally transferred or archived, 'some aspects of timbre are the production of undocumented decisions by the transfer engineer'.[30] With these complexities acknowledged (if not entirely reconciled), what spatial arrangements might the ear 'see' in this recording? Before more modern techniques with their 'easy correction of errors' in pursuit of what Roger Heaton calls 'the 'perfect' construct', this performance offers a tap that is heard in the same space as the voice and piano: lower mid-left of the room, in front of the piano and to the lower left side of the voice placement. This one-off, one-take sonic document captures imperfection and improvisation, a moment of 'live' performance, even if the recording itself is always-already

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[27] *The History of Music Production*, 31.

[28] To borrow from Seibert, *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*.

[29] For an example of this in early musical comedy recordings, the Columbia release of *Florodora* in 1900 is a particular example. Further discussion of this example can be read in Macpherson 'The Sweet Smell of Success: 'Florodora' as Victorian Megamusical', in *Blockbusters of Victorian Theater, 1850-1910: Critical Essays*, ed. Paul Fryer (McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers, 2023); *Singing Utopia: Voice in Musical Theatre*.

[30] 'The Recorded Document: Interpretation and Discography', in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 194–95.

remediated.

What emerges here is not only audio fidelity in terms of recording, but also a kind of perceptual 'performative fidelity'; what Patrick Feaster defines as 'the extent to which the socially situated playback of an indexically recorded action is accepted as doing whatever the original would have done in the same context'.[31] Feaster links this to a kind of Foucauldian power, which may elsewhere be inferred in Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' or Marvin Minsky's notion of 'telepresence', while suggesting that 'performative fidelity' is more directly connected to an audience's (or listener's) perception that *this* was supposed to be *that,* and therefore, *this* functions as *that* would have originally in the moment.[32] In this case, the predominance of the lower-mid frequency extending into higher-mid and high frequencies of the tap section, with some lower frequency punctuation cutting through, gives an immediacy and depth to the dance, imbuing the recording with a performative force (or fidelity) beyond mere sonic reproduction. Such frequencies offer a presence and a visceral quality to the tap here, in marked contrast with the often high-mid and high-frequency engineering of tap breaks on more contemporary musical theatre recordings, reliant on processes of compression or the removal of the lower-mid frequency for easy transfer across a variety of formats. Further, the ability to capture this visceral and performative quality also highlights another characteristic of America in the 1920s: a seemingly restless energy borne of the new industrial age, post-First World War optimism and Broadway spectacle.

The Energy of an Era

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[31] "Rise and Obey the Command': Performative Fidelity and the Exercise of Phonographic Power', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 3 (2012): 358.

[32] "Rise and Obey the Command': Performative Fidelity and the Exercise of Phonographic Power', 359.

The visceral quality of the tap dance and the sense of spatial intimacy with piano, vocal, and dance being recorded in real-time, combine to create a sense of 'performative fidelity': that this recording not only captures tap dance, but that we are hearing the spontaneity of Astaire and Gershwin's unedited, raw and embodied performance.[33] Seventy years before Philip Auslander's landmark text on mediation and liveness, this recording acts as a kind of sonic document, capturing an essence of the live and ephemeral, even while the embodied presence of any recording is only illusory.[34] Beyond technology enabling a kind of visceral effect in the frequencies and timbre of the tap itself, the energy elicited from this illusory liveness and presence is encapsulated in two further aspects of the recording.

First, reflecting on the development of tap in the 1920s, Constance Valis Hill notes that during the jazz age, '[h]undreds of tap dance steps were invented', particularly by African-American performers, and yet 'went unnamed because they were improvised and elaborated on in informal jam sessions'.[35] Often, the momentum of these jam sessions, or 'tap challenges', was sustained by an oral (and embodied) call-and-response between performers who formed a community of participants in a kind of non-partnered social dance.[36] Such exchanges and interjections enhanced the feeling of spontaneity and playfulness – a trace or 'surrogation' of live ephemerality later captured on mediated (and repeatable) recordings.[37]

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[33] This is certainly the case with respect to Astaire's dancing while, as other scholars have noted, notwithstanding with the opportunities opened by the transition to electrical recording practices in 1926, the sense of novelty or immediacy in musical recordings by this time may have been less apparent to listeners, as consumers and performers alike became accustomed to the mediated characteristics of recorded sound. For discussions of this in relation to changes in recording and listening practices, see Neal Peres da Costa, *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing*, New York (Oxford University Press, 2012); Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, 'Recordings and Histories of Performance Style', in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[34] *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Routledge, 1999); Rick Altman, 'The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound', in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (Routledge, 1992).

[35] *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 79.

[36] Rumsey, *Embodied Nostalgia: Early Twentieth Century Social Dance and the Choreographing of Broadway Musical Theatre*, 77.

[37] See Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performances* (Columbia University Press, 1996).

Examples of this can be readily heard in early sound media. At the outset of this article, Jack Hulbert addressed the imagined listener, and on a recording of the song 'Let's Say Goodnight 'til the Morning' from the Jerome Kern musical comedy *Sunny*, recorded in the same year as Astaire and Gershwin's informal session for Columbia UK, Jack Buchanan and Elsie Randolph performed a similar exchange:[38]

BUCHANAN: I see you missed a beat there.

RANDOLPH: What do you mean I missed a beat, Jack – you did!

BUCHANAN: Oh really, well, we'll let that go!

Such exchanges resonate with the earlier African American jam session model, where call-and-response bound performance to community, while also echoing other performance forms that influenced musical comedy, including vaudeville, minstrelsy, and Music Hall.

In each case, the content of these spoken passages is revealing. For Hulbert, it is a self-conscious acknowledgement of the limitations of sound recording; for Buchanan and Randolph, it is a playful comment on the imperfection of performance. For Astaire, however, the exchange also captures the energy of the jazz age through a delight in the kind of improvisation Astaire was already into performances of *Lady, Be Good!* During Astaire's tap break with Gershwin, he asks:

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[38] *'Let's Say Goodnight Till The Morning' from Sunny*, Columbia 9417, 15 October 1926, Shellac disc, British Library. This recording also features heel-driven taps, likely performed on wooden flooring or a tap board in the studio, with much ambient and ancillary noise (foot movements, shoe squeaks), lending a 'liveness' to the sound in a different way but a similar manner to the informality of Astaire's improvisation to Gershwin's song.

ASTAIRE: How's that, George?

To which the composer replies:

GERSHWIN: That's great, Freddy – do it again!

Astaire duly obliges, while in the last part of this recording, he can also be heard to add a shim sham (a classic tap sequence) along with drawing from a raft of other influences from African American dance, including buck dancing on the heel, and softer polyrhythms reminiscent of Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, who would not be heard on record for a further three years.

Astaire's improvisation is further heightened by his other vocal interjections. He occasionally lets out a whoop, shriek, or slight laugh of joy as he dances. Once more a feature of the 'tap challenges' mentioned above, as sound studies scholar Brandon LaBelle observes, such extra-linguistic vocal acts 'perform to expand the scale of the body', here acting as vectors of embodied presence in a disembodied performance.[39] While codified now, the visceral spontaneity and elaboration of this dance break therefore fizzes with 'restless', improvisatory energy, a decadent display of both attitude and the circulation or appropriation of dance styles characteristic of the era.[40]

Astaire himself acknowledged this tendency in his performance, often quoting James Cagney's remark, 'You've got a little of the hoodlum in you'. Astaire's dancing is thus

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[39] Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (Bloomsbury, 2014), 45.

[40] Isaac Goldberg, 'Childhood of a Composer', in *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (Oxford University Press, 2007), 31; Macpherson, *Singing Utopia: Voice in Musical Theatre*.

characterised by 'an impulse to disturb the peace',[41] offering 'a vision of the industrial body retooled for a rootless, mobile future'.[42] His dancing absorbed and reimagined the accelerated, machine-driven rhythms of modern life, transforming the metallic clatter of cities like New York into an artful display of speed, grace, power, and surprise. Industrial noise became sublimated into personal expression, demonstrating how modernity's mechanical force could be reshaped into fluid and dynamic performance. As musical comedy matured as an art form, Astaire's tap exemplified what Joel Dinerstein identified as 'tap's primary message':[43] industrial power under individual control. Until its restless energy ceded to the genteel aspiration of ballet as the dominant aesthetic of musical theatre in the mid-twentieth century under the influence of choreographer Agnes DeMille, tap grew to become more than a dance form – it was a sonic articulation, captured by technology, of the utopic impulse of the American Dream during that nation's ascent to global dominance, as musical percussion and physical movement combined to create a distinctively American (albeit predominantly white) expression of progress in sound and rhythm.

While most of his contemporaries tended to emphasise footwork through complementary body movements and arm gestures, Astaire's energetic and impulsive tap dancing exhibited an 'impulse to flow in all directions'; '[h]is appeal to the eye wasn't separate from his appeal to the ear'.[44] His desire for innovation and improvisation embodied the contradictions and dynamism of modernity, captured on this sonic time capsule. The contradictory impulse is especially clear on this recording, as it denies the visual pleasure of his physical performance while using the resulting sound to embody both the technological

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[41] Seibert, *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*, 243.

[42] Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 221–22.

[43] *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars*, 223.

[44] Seibert, *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*, 247.

potential of recording and the vitality of the new American musical style being developed by songwriters and composers, including Gershwin. In other words, in concert with Astaire's own 'hoodlum' tendencies, capturing his tap dance on record simultaneously denied traditional expectations of the visual facet of the dance and expanded tap's artistic possibilities in a 'disturbance' to both the art form and its technological medium. After all, part of tap's energy and visceral aesthetic is constituted by body movements and gestures. What does it mean, then, when these are rendered invisible and tap is effectively rendered acousmatic? The answer may have something to do with the dual-modality of tap dance.

Tap as a Dual-Modality on Record

As dance scholar Ali W. Bresnahan[45] has considered, the popularity of jazz music in America during the 1920s and 1930s encompassed both a musical and a dance tradition, with tap at times operating as a dance form or percussive musical expression. This dual modality complicates its status on audio recordings, where the absence of visual cues shifts the focus to its rhythmic or musical contribution.[46] Does the musical break on Astaire's recording capture dance, a moment of percussive musical expansion, or perhaps something multi-modal which may be understood in dual-terms of music and movement?

For Bresnahan, a point of difference can be made between dance which accompanies music in responding to its rhythms and shapes, and dance which leads the music, assuming a primary percussive function.[47] The first of these would constitute 'jazz tap dance', exhibiting a

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[45] 'Is Tap Dance a Form of Jazz Percussion?', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XLIV (2019): 183–94.

[46] Thompson, 'Dancing in the Archive: Bodily Encounters, Memory, and More-than-Representational Participatory Historical Geographies', 4.

[47] Bresnahan further notes that the broader category of 'jazz dance' includes non-tap forms, such as those seen in later works for the musical stage such as *West Side Story* (1956), further complicating the distinction between jazz as a musical genre and jazz as a dance form.

physical response to the music being performed. The second of these would more properly be considered a kind of musical percussion, imbricated within the aural aesthetic of the work. Indeed, the notion of tap as musical percussion has been considered elsewhere by scholars such as Lee B. Brown, David Goldblatt, and Theodore Gracyk, who liken the sounds produced by metal taps on shoes to playing an instrument with one's feet.[48] With his improvisatory response to Gershwin's piano playing, spoken interjections checking with the composer how the tap sounded, and the visceral quality of Astaire's dance captured using the new electric engineering capacity, this recording initially seems to be an aural document of Bresnahan's 'jazz tap dance'. Indeed, this would also be the case with Hulbert, Buchanan, and Randolph.

Elsewhere, however, Bresnahan also references the concept of 'dance percussion'[49] an auditory experience that can be appreciated independently of any visual component. This includes forms such as stomping and juba, which foreground the rhythmic and sonic aspects of movement over any physical or embodied display. In listening to 'The Half-of-it-Dearie Blues',[50] this understanding of rhythm and timing thus enabled him to integrate complex and improvisatory tap into the music texture of Gershwin's piano playing in a manner that blurs the line; dance *becomes* percussion in the fleet-footed recording of Astaire. In a complementary example, on 'Doin' the New Low Down' by Billy Cotton and His Cotton Pickers, the tap dancing (likely metal taps on a wooden or tiled floor) is placed further away from the vocalists while the use of a hi-hat on the drum set accents key moments of the dance, supporting the idea that tap on record functions as a form of percussive addition rather

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[48] Lee B. Brown et al., *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art* (Routledge, 2018), 12.

[49] 'Is Tap Dance a Form of Jazz Percussion?', 187.

[50] The contemporary tap pioneer and choreographer Savion Glover is also known for his training in drumming and percussion.

than movement[51] On this basis, while the dancer defers to the composer and the aesthetic of 'liveness' in recording quality, and moments of conversation suggest a primacy of 'dance'; the auditory experience of the sound, the invisibility of the dancing body, and the rhythmic capacity of the dancer themselves suggest this artefact offers a complex dual-modality for the listener. When captured on record, might other instances of musical theatre tap be understood as constituting a similar dual-modality, given its predominance of auditory features yet generic deference to musical structures?

This duality becomes particularly salient when returning to George Reddick's taxonomy of use value with respect to musical theatre on record.[52] For audiences who have attended a live performance of a given musical (such as those audience members who saw Fred Astaire perform in *Lady, Be Good!* in London), the audio recording of music may act as 'sound souvenir'.[53] Listeners may have a strong ocular or embodied memory of the performance, with the sound of tap prompting recall of the visual elements of the dance onstage. This may have been particularly acute in an era when sound recordings were still a relatively new medium of entertainment. On this basis, tap on record could rightly function as dance.

Yet, notwithstanding partial or even vivid visual recall of Astaire as a performer on stage or on film, for listeners whose experience is predominantly aural, the tap dance on record is disembodied, functioning as a more acutely percussive element of the recording. In this respect, much like the voice in Michel Chion's thinking on cinema and sound, the taps

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[51] *'Doin' the New Low Down'*, UK Regal Zonophone MR2028, 18 January 1936, Shellac disc, British Library (1CD0211224). The tap dancer is uncredited in this recording. However, 'Doin' the New Low Down' was the signature dance of Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson. If it is 'Bojangles' dancing here, then the recording captures wooden clogs rather than taps. If it is not Bojangles, then the dancer would nonetheless be imitating or paying tribute to Bojangles in their steps and style. The author gratefully acknowledges the anonymous reviewer who provided this information during the peer review process.

[52] 'The Evolution of the Original Cast Album'.

[53] *Sound Souvenirs: Audio Technologies, Memories and Cultural Practices*.

become *acousmatic*: 'sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause'.[54] For Pieter Verstraete,[55] this acousmatising produces a new sonic materiality, which 'gives the impression of having a life of its own, moving uncontrollably through space as an invisible, immaterial body that produces a direct, physical sensation on the listener'.[56]

Returning to Feaster's notion of 'performative fidelity', this active engagement may have perceptually recontextualised and transmitted a sense of bodily presence, gesture, and movement.[57] In this sense, tap dance on record forms a kind of duality, a disembodied yet re-embodied archive of both dance and musical practices, with Astaire's 'time-capsule' recordings as a pertinent exemplar. Bereft of its visuality, recorded tap removes much of the embodied presentation of class, race, and gender that early Hollywood encoded. What remains are material differences in the use of heel or toe taps, the grounding of the performer, and the subtle clues to bodily movement, audible even on early recordings such as Astaire's. We may not see the dancer's skin colour (or that of their tutors and predecessors), but we can hear their weight distribution, the placement of their body, and their physical presence in sound. On 'The Half-of-it-Dearie Blues', for instance, Astaire shifts his weight forward and drives into the ground with increasingly frequent (if not consistently stable) heel taps, only to misstep near the end as his weight shifts back. By contrast, Buchanan and Randolph's taps on 'Let's Say Goodnight 'til the Morning' maintain a more consistent sense of weight and posture, again, discernible even in these early recordings.

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[54] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (Columbia University Press, 1999), 71.

[55] 'The Frequency of Imagination: Auditory Distress and Aurality in Contemporary Music Theatre' (Doctoral Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2009), 221–32.

[56] 'The Frequency of Imagination: Auditory Distress and Aurality in Contemporary Music Theatre', 228.

[57] On a related if darker note, Gustavus Stadler's work on 'descriptive specialties' – phonographic re-enactments of lynchings sold in the 1890s – notes that even without surviving examples, reports of these recordings testify to how screams or cries were imagined to sonically *embody* blackness, positioning the phonograph, not as a disembodied machine, but as something capable of performing the body through sound (see 'Never Heard Such a Thing: Lynching and Phonographic Modernity', *Social Text* 28, no. 1 (2010): 87–105, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2009-061.).

This kind of embodied analysis, even in tandem with the visceral energy of the sonic capture discussed above, is nevertheless limited. The ear, after all, can only 'see' so much. As Lucy Thompson notes, tap's dual-modality complicates its 'archivability' as it is an embodied form of performance.[58] Yet, approaching it on the basis of this duality opens up several new possibilities for contemporary listening and examination, positioning tap on record as both a staging post for its more visual manifestation on film, and as a discrete, disembodied archive of practice.

From Disembodied Archive to Re-Embodied Record

First, early recordings which feature tap offer revealing historical details about the development of sound recording practices. Kaetlynn Marie Eckles has noted that there is 'minimal research in recording tap dance, it is often unknown to many audio engineers'.[59] This is echoed in Thompson's further observation that 'due to its marginalised history, tap dance remains fragmented and less well collected in institutional archives compared to more codified European dances';[60] a marginalised history which Benae Beamon has considered in relation to its historical and cultural lineage from African-American dance, and the subsequent 'limiting notions' of tap, even on Broadway, as mentioned above in relation to figures such as Buddy Bradley.[61]

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[58] Thompson, 'Dancing in the Archive: Bodily Encounters, Memory, and More-than-Representational Participatory Historical Geographies', 2.

[59] 'Recording Tap Dance as a Form of Musical Percussion: Microphone Types, Placements and Techniques' (MSc Thesis, University of Colorado, 2022), iii. https://www.proquest.com/openview/7eb611bcae418742f94a0ea623eed180/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar.

[60] 'Dancing in the Archive: Bodily Encounters, Memory, and More-than-Representational Participatory Historical Geographies', 4.

[61] 'Tap and the Broadway Musical: Subversion and Subjectivity through Historical Consciousness', 201. In their work on the status of tap dance in American culture, Beamon cites Ted Shawn, a pioneer of modern American dance, as suggesting that the only 'legitimate place' for tap 'is in vaudeville and the revue as a cheap form of entertainment' (in Beamon 2023: 190).

A project in media archaeology, digital musicology, or dance studies which analysed the recording techniques heard and used for various performances would allow a history of recording musical theatre dance across the twentieth century to emerge – a history not yet explored fully. Recording practices are documented from Astaire's work on Hollywood films of the 1930s,[62] but less is known about earlier recording practices in this regard. For example, on the recording of 'The Half-of-it-Dearie Blues', what shoes is Astaire wearing? What surface is he dancing on? Notwithstanding the age of the recording, a close listening might suggest he is wearing aluminium taps on a highly polished floor.[63] In later work, along with tutelage in African American dance styles from Bradley, Astaire and his cinematic collaborator Hermes Pan would go on to experiment with different ways of recording tap dance: one wooden board on a polished Bakelite or tiled floor – about 2m x 3m; two such boards on top of each other; changing from wooden-soled buck shoes to teletone aluminium taps. There is even a report of Astaire placing a wooden board across a swimming pool to try and dull the tone when dubbing for a movie.[64] These anecdotes relate to the endeavour to perfect the synchronisation of sound and vision in movie musicals, which is already a well-documented area of media history. Given tap dancing found its way to Hollywood from musical theatre, however, a re-evaluation of recording techniques discrete from the sound quality needed for film synchronicity is surely a further area for research.

Second, the presence of dance on record allows us to trace the evolution of dance styles and steps in musical theatre, contemporaneous as it was to the development of sound

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[62] John Franceschina, *Hermes Pan: The Man Who Danced with Fred Astaire* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Seibert, *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*.

[63] I want to express my thanks to my colleague Phoebe Rumsey for her time spent discussing this facet of the paper while it was in development.

[64] Seibert, *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*, 241–42.

recording techniques and cinematic practice.[65] When given life beyond sound and audio collections, or listening carrels, the sonic traces of tap dancers on record – including Astaire, Hulbert, and others – may therefore act as a rich treasure trove for dancers, students, and scholars who wish to study, through embodied practice, the work of such performers in relation to tap as a dual-modality, research movement practices, explore 'embodied nostalgia' in the cultural status of musical comedy, or otherwise seek to activate historic movement styles.[66]

As noted above, during this period, the commercial and commodified form of tap dance Astaire spearheaded was still in development, with many dancers – Astaire included – liberally borrowing from, incorporating, and sharing steps with younger dancers. Sociologist Donna-Marie Peters calls this 'passing on', and has examined the practice in the context of African American culture, in which an older 'head' dancer would orally pass on steps to a younger mentee.[67] Crucially, then, early audio recordings of tap dance offer contemporary practitioners and scholars a powerful and active 'record' with which to interrogate the circulation of Black performance practices in white spaces. Part of the use value of such recordings, therefore, lies in their agency as a tool to support what Benae Beamon advocates as an ethical imperative to engage in embodied practice to reveal the racial complexities of Broadway tap dance, such as those mentioned throughout this article. After all, from George M. Cohan's love of the form through to even the Hollywood dances of Fred Astaire, musical theatre tap dance emerged from forms that often 'assumed the fungibility of Blackness' and

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65 Its development for cinema extended beyond the synchronisation of recorded sound and moving images; as Jodi Brooks notes, 'tap numbers were also often performed live in cinemas at this time' Jodi Brooks, 'Ghosting the Machine: The Sounds of Tap and the Sounds of Film', *Screen* 44, no. 4 (2003): 356.

66 Rumsey, *Embodied Nostalgia: Early Twentieth Century Social Dance and the Choreographing of Broadway Musical Theatre*.

67 'Passing On: The Old Head/Younger Dancer Mentoring Relationship in the Cultural Sphere of Rhythm Tap', *Western Journal of Black Studies* 34, no. 4 (2010): 439.

reduced Black performers, tutors and choreographers and performance styles to 'units of commerce'.[68] For today's tap dancers, engaging with historical forms therefore becomes a complex act of recreation, interrogation, *and* at times, reclamation. On this basis, early audio recordings not only serve as evidence of historic racial sublimation but also as tools for re-inscribing Black subjectivity and presence in the history of sound recording and musical theatre dance practice.[69]

Conceived of as sonic moments which capture an energy, offer a kind of 'performative fidelity' related to an age or time period, reveal details about developing sound production and audio engineering, provide a source of information for younger dancers or contemporary scholars, and act as evidence for the complex circulation, inscription, erasure, and indebtedness to African American performers and artists, recordings like Astaire's and Gershwin's (along with those by Hulbert, Randolph, Buchanan, and others) ask us to approach the sonic documentation of tap dance differently. While it might be tempting to consider them as a kind of 'disembodied archive',[70] these historical works instead operate as a further dual-modality, functioning as disembodied 'records' in both an aural and analytical sense. As summarised by Erica Charalambous, an 'archive' may be understood as containing inactive and even accidentally preserved objects, while a 'record' in collecting practices is a term more commonly ascribed to an active character or use value.[71]

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[68] 'Tap and the Broadway Musical: Subversion and Subjectivity through Historical Consciousness', 191.

[69] This kind of re-inscription is already seen in contemporary work by scholar-practitioners including Michael J. Love 'Mix(Tap)Ing: A Method for Sampling the Past to Envision the Future', *Choreographic Practices* 12, no. 1 (2021): 29–45, https://doi.org/10.1386/chor_00027_1., who uses samples from recordings in their practice.

[70] Thompson, 'Dancing in the Archive: Bodily Encounters, Memory, and More-than-Representational Participatory Historical Geographies'.

[71] 'Embodied Approaches in Archiving Dance: Memory, Disappearance, Transformations and the 'Archive-as-Body'' (Doctoral thesis, University of Coventry, 2022), 43–44, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/files/80568619/EC_8037723_Final_resubmission_Amended_Thesis_CU_July_2022_Redacted.pdf.; Charalambous makes these distinctions – and articulates their complexities – with particular reference to the work of Greek scholar Marianna Kolyva. For further work on archives and dance studies, see Timmy De Laet 'Expanding Dance Archives: Access, Legibility, and Archival Participation', *Dance Research* 38, no. 2 (2020): 206–29.

What, then, might the potential be for a re-evaluation of Astaire's first tap dance on record? What would such re-inscription offer as a means of placing such recordings as the centre of a *re*-embodied record? What would be revealed if the same was done with the recordings by Hulbert, Randolph, and Buchanan? What if the findings of such embodied practice were placed in concert with a consideration of works such as two contrasting demonstration recordings of 'Bandana Days' from the African American musical *Shuffle Along*? First recorded by its writers (Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake), this song was issued by Paramount, and features Sissle giving dance instructions in the middle of the recording, but with no audible dancing included.[72] However, on a later recording,[73] 'Bandana Days' features soft shoe dancing and toe tapping, along with the title song of the show ('Shuffle Along' (Demonstration recording)) including an audible soft shoe shuffle.[74] Approaching these sonic documents as records of dance practice across the history of musical theatre at large, and exploring steps, stylistic developments, and the racial history of the form, along with what such records reveal about sound recording techniques, may serve to enhance their use value as living, re-embodied records, rather than historical and disembodied archives.

Conclusion: 'That's great, Freddy – do it again!'

Listening to the plural presence of tap dance on early musical theatre recordings, this article has sought a re-evaluation of the capture, mediation, and function of a fundamentally visual and embodied practice as a sonic artefact. Through close listening to examples such as Fred

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[72] '*Bandana Days (Demonstration Recording)*', Paramount 12022(B), 1921, Shellac disc, British Library (1LP0105277 BL).

[73] Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake,*'Bandana Days (Demonstration Recording)' on Sissle and Blake Sing Shuffle Along*, Harbinger Records HCD3204, 1950, Vinyl.

[74] Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, *'Shuffle Along (Demonstration Recording)' on Sissle and Blake Sing Shuffle Along*, Harbinger Records HCD3204, 1950, Vinyl.

Astaire's performance of 'The Half-of-it-Dearie Blues', this article has considered how such recordings function as aesthetic and technological time capsules, capturing both the evolving energy of the jazz age and the improvisatory energy that underpinned the development of early musical theatre in America across the first two decades of the twentieth century. Far from being mere archival curiosities, such recordings offer a fascinating insight into the emerging and coterminous relationship between musical theatre performance, recording technology, and even early cinema, while challenging conventional hierarchies of engagement in musical theatre historiography.

In this case, the article argues for an understanding of the dual-modality of tap dance on record, as both percussive musical gesture and a surrogate for embodied performance, situating these recordings as a disembodied artefact that perceptually preserves and complexifies the corporeal and cultural presence of the dancer via a kind of 'performative fidelity'.[75] As a methodological proposition, this dual-modality invites us to engage with tap as an active artefact, a historical and choreographic text capable of being reactivated through contemporary listening, media archaeology, and embodied practice as a tool for research and training. Further, with the racialised lineage of tap dance and its complex circulation through white theatrical and recording institutions, this study calls for a critical re-engagement with early recordings as sites of cultural appropriation, erasure, and potential re-inscription through contemporary re-evaluation.

Ultimately, these recordings are active records, sonic sites of memory, performance, and pedagogy which can be re-embodied and considered anew. They can offer new avenues of listening and analysis, which may reshape our understanding of musical theatre's formation, recover marginalised histories of dance and sound recording, and support new

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[75] Feaster, "Rise and Obey the Command': Performative Fidelity and the Exercise of Phonographic Power'.

ways of hearing, seeing, and embodying performances that are found stored in sound archives. Tap dance on early musical theatre recordings therefore deserves further attention as a resonant and dynamic interlocutor in the ongoing project of musical theatre scholarship and histories of early recordings.

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Abstract: Tap dance is a predominantly visual and embodied art form, yet its capture on sound recordings paradoxically renders it sonically disembodied, raising questions about modality, mediation, and archival presence. Drawing on sound studies, dance scholarship, and media archaeology, this article examines the presence and implications of tap dance on early musical theatre recordings, focusing particularly on the first recorded tap dance by Fred Astaire, the 1926 recording of 'The Half-of-it-Dearie Blues'. The article identifies the characteristics of Astaire's recording as an aesthetic and technological 'time capsule' (Maslon 2018), capturing both the improvisatory energy of the Jazz Age and the evolving practices of musical theatre performance during the early 20th century. Through close listening, it explores how early electrical recording technologies enabled the sonic capture of percussive dance and how performers like Astaire utilised rhythmic spontaneity to integrate tap within musical textures.

The article introduces the concept of tap on record as a 'dual-modality' performance – operating simultaneously as percussive music and embodied dance – and challenges traditional hierarchies in musical theatre historiography. Further, it repositions early recordings as disembodied archives that may also serve as *re*-embodied 'records' with application and agency in contemporary listening and performance practice. By interrogating the racialised lineage of tap dance and its appropriation within white theatrical institutions,

the study advocates for critical re-engagement with historical recordings by contemporary students, scholars, and practitioners as acts of examination, interpretation, and reclamation. This article argues that early recordings of tap dance offer more than nostalgic or historical curiosities – they are dynamic interlocutors in the cultural memory of musical theatre. This study opens new pathways for understanding sonic heritage, embodied archival research, and the political implications of listening anew to tap dance mediated through sound.

Keywords: listening, early recordings, musical comedy, tap dance, disembodied archive, media modalities

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