

# A Fox Trot Through Ragtime Dance

**Evangeline Holland looks back to when there were dances called the Cakewalk and Fox Trot**

TODAY, THE CASTLES are as unfamiliar as the popular, but funnily-named dances that permeated 20th Century American culture, such as the bunny hug and the grizzly bear. However, from the mid-1900s until the outbreak of World War One, Western societies—and American society in particular—were swept into a dance craze that liberated it from the restrained and proper movements which characterized ballroom dance from the 1700s on. At the heart of the craze was a smart Anglo-American couple who epitomized the fizzing, ram-bunctious atmosphere of the 1910s, Vernon and Irene Castle. Through these dances and songs, the Castles, as well as other equally talented performers and composers paved the way in loosening societies relations between the sexes.



**Top: Vernon and Irene Castle.**  
**Left: A photo of classical Ragtime musician Scott Joplin.**



satirical roots, white plantation owners and their friends and family would prompt the slaves to perform the dance, during which the master's wife would gift the most talented "walkers" with a piece of cake or candy.

When minstrels became a popular act on the vaudeville circuit, the cakewalk made the leap from black culture to vaudeville and then Broadway. This usually involved actors of both sexes, black and white, blackening their faces and whitening their lips in a way that stereotyped black Americans as lazy and ignorant. These minstrel actors performed "coon dances" and sang "coon songs" in broad "slave dialect". Ironically, the cakewalk became the performance of white entertainers in

blackface who imitated a black dance created to lampoon whites. Nevertheless, the cakewalk became a national phenomenon, many black Americans participated in cakewalk competitions. Many of the best "walkers" would compete at the National Cakewalk Jubilee in New York City, as well as others, the winner could win luxurious prizes.

The cakewalk also took high society by storm through the sheer popularity of Bert Williams and George Walker. The minstrel duo of Williams and Walker dominated vaudeville of the 1890s, and their popularity was such that Williams became one of the first black actors to perform on Broadway, performing comic dialogues, song-and-dance numbers, skits and humorous songs. Williams and Walker also performed the cakewalk on stage in 1896. Walker's wife, the former Ada, or Aida Reed, an established singer and dancer herself, became their leading lady and choreographer and was soon crowned "The Queen of the Cakewalk" and inundated with invitations from society matrons to perform and teach the dance

From the "coon songs" accompanying the cakewalk, ragtime was born. Music scholars suggest the origins of ragtime point to the joining of the syncopated ragtime rhythms with the march, which was popular through John Philip Sousa's military two-steps. Wherever ragtime originated, it was instantly popular the moment it was introduced to the general public at the Chicago's World Fair in 1893. It wasn't long before a few enterprising composers capitalized on the sensation the music evoked and the first ragtime in print was William Krell's Mississippi Rag in 1897, followed by

Tom Turpin's Harlem Rag, which became the first instrumental ragtime publication by a black composer.

Ragtime's most characteristic element is its syncopated rhythm. When Scott Joplin was asked about the name of the genre he responded, "because it has such a ragged movement. It suggests something like that." The second of six children Joplin, showed an ear for music at an early age, his parents scrimped and saved to provide the precocious youngster with a piano and lessons. It was his early music instructor, a German named Julius Weiss, who imbued Joplin with a love of classical music that fueled his later desire to compose "classical" ragtime tunes.

As an adult, Joplin's social and musical life was connected with Sedalia, Missouri's two black men's social clubs, the Black 400 Club and the Maple Leaf Club. There he played the piano for the various dances the clubs sponsored, sang and did other general entertainments. Despite there being more than a hundred rags in print by 1899, Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" caught public attention. He found initial success with the sale of two songs, "Please Say You Will" and "A Picture of Her Face," but it was in ragtime his legacy endured. Joplin sold the "Maple Leaf Rag" to John Stark & Son, who provided him with an advance, a one-cent royalty on each copy sold, and 10 free copies for his own use. It promptly sold over one million copies, it is estimated that Joplin earned over 300 dollars each year from royalties.

With the astounding success of his first rag, Joplin moved his family to St Louis, where he composed other well-known classics, "The Entertainer", "Elite Syncopations", "March Majestic", and "Ragtime Dance". With the music in place, the emergence of dances to pair with the rollicking, jittery music soon followed. "Everybody's Doing It" In the 1880s, the waltz was considered a wicked, scandalous dance



**Top: A picture of James Europe. Bottom: James Europe's Clef Club Orchestra.**

in America. Unlike the Waltz, most social dances in America were group-based. Women and men were kept at arms length while they stomped and glided through turns and steps called out by a cotillion leader. The waltz challenged restraint, men and women were to touch, hold hands, and swayed just inches away from one another. And since the waltz was a two-person dance that isolated couples from the rest of the dancers, it allowed them to have eyes only for one another. Eti-

quette books of the period admonished any unnecessary contact between the genders while dancing, scolding the "hand placed at the waist" instead of "below the shoulder blades", and instructing that a woman's "left hand" should rest "lightly on her partner's arm".

Indeed, the well-bred gentleman and lady of society were hemmed in by many other rules and manners of conduct, even to the point of outlining a proper conversation. Naturally, the debut of ragtime and its accompanying dances were viewed with relief by anxious youths and belles of major American cities.

From the 1890s to about 1910, the two-step shared center stage with the waltz; a sign of what was to come. With the success of Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag", a march-like bass line and melodic syncopation, and the 2/4 and 4/4 rhythm simplified dancing, and Americans became dance mad. Suddenly, dances long-popular in the South and the West Coast rapidly infiltrated the drawing rooms and lobster palaces of the East Coast. These dances, known as "animal dances" for their animal-derived names like Turkey Trot, Grizzly Bear, Monkey Glide, Chicken Scratch, Bunny Hug, Kangaroo Dip and permitted what was denounced as "lingering close contact".

Moralists were outraged, parents were horrified and Pulpits shook with thunder from rousing sermons denouncing ragtime as "a wave of vulgar, filthy and suggestive music" that "has inundated the land". Condemnation of the dances hopped the Atlantic Ocean, where a British noblewoman, in an anonymous letter to the editor described the Boston two-step as "the beginning of evil", and the Countess of Stafford agreed saying "the so-called dances can only be compared to the wild, abandoned frenzies of some ancient Bacchantic revel". The hysteria reached ridiculous levels, with German aristocrats challenging young men to duels for asking their daughters to

turkey trot or bunny hug, arrests being made of dancers during raids on dance-halls. It reached the point where newly-elected President Woodrow Wilson cancelled his inaugural ball fearing the "indulgence in the turkey trot, the bunny hug, and other ragtime dances" would "thus provoke what might amount to a National scandal".

Such publications as 1892's "From the Ballroom to Hell", 1904's "The Immortality of Modern Dances", 1912's "From Dance Hall to White Slavery," "The World's Greatest Tragedy," and various pamphlets written by Dr. R. A. Adams, including "Fighting the Ragtime Devil" filled newsstands and bookstores. In 1910, Harper's Weekly published an article entitled "Where Is Your Daughter This Afternoon?"—most likely "trotting to hell"

The changes these dances evoked were readily apparent with the relaxation of interaction between the sexes and the gradual shift away from the middle-aged towards the youth. Vigorous and boisterous, dances such as the turkey trot, a fast, marching one-step, arms pumping at the side, with occasional arm-flappings emulating a crazed turkey, seemed tailored to energetic young people, the steadily rising hemlines and shrinking silhouette of women's clothing required a slender and athletic build.

Unlike European societies, Americans prized a woman's ability to move about the country without much attention. But by the turn of the century young men and women indulged in activities and pursuits without parental interaction. Whether it was cycling, or playing tennis or trips in a new automobile, opportunities for unaccompanied courtship were plenty. The emergence of ragtime dances and the public venues in which they took place only exacerbated the fact. Unable to staunch the tide of "immorality," members of the upper-class and disapproving clergymen felt helpless to the demands of the

public for ragtime. To their rescue came Vernon and Irene Castle.

### The Castles are Coming! Hooray! Hooray!

First and foremost, the Castles made the tango and other animal dances "aristocratic". They were popular and



respectable because they were married, young and well-bred—particularly Vernon, who was of British ancestry. They cautioned potential ragtimers in their book of instruction: "Do not wriggle the shoulders. Do not shake the hips. Do not twist the body. Do not hop, glide instead, drop the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, the Bunny Hug. These dances are ugly, ungraceful and out of fashion."

The Castles fell into acting, as well as fame, entirely by accident. Born in Norwich, England, Vernon Castle followed his actress sister to New York, where the easy-going young man promptly made a name for himself as a vaudevillian in the productions of theatre magnate, Lew Fields. In New Rochelle, New York, Irene Castle, née Foote, nursed ambitions a theatre dancer. When Irene and Vernon met, it wasn't love at first sight. Tenacious to a fault, Irene initially pursued an acquaintance with Vernon for his success on Broadway, but



Top right: Elizabeth Marbury (right) on the left a Mrs. John Sherwin Crosby. Left Elsie de Wolfe.

soon they fell in love and despite reservations from her family and Lew Fields, they married in the spring of 1911.

A trip to Paris for a honeymoon and a performance that proved unsuccessful at first, particularly when the first half of Vernon and Irene's revue failed to elicit any positive response. In the second act though, they were able to break out in a "wildly energetic and very American dance routine to the tune of "Alexander's Ragtime Band", that caused the Parisians to go wild. The dance itself was hastily improvised, and was a rough mixture of the Texas tommy and the grizzly bear, that had Irene "in the air, more often than on the ground". Overnight, the Castles became a hit as dancers, and night after night, they danced in the famous Parisian Café de Paris, where customers tipped them generously to perform the unfamiliar animal dances.

Returning to America flush with success and cash, the Castles conquered New York, where they demanded of Louis Martin, manager of the lobster palace Café de l'Opera, \$300 a night. He paid and nightly, the spotlight fell on the slim, fashionable Castles as they twirled about the small dance floor. And, just as their fame and profession before it, they created their famous "Castle Walk" accidentally, when their exhaustion caused them to go up on the beat, instead of coming down. This

dance increased the number of private lessons taught tenfold. This would lead them into the arms of a high society searching for the next hot dance, as the animal dances began to wane in popularity. They soon became protégées of socialites Elizabeth Marbury and Elsie de Wolfe. The exposure these ladies gave them even more prestige, with society matrons such as Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish (of monkey dinner fame), endorsing the Castles and hiring their services for parties.

Besides setting new dance trends, the Castles, Irene in particular, set new fashion trends. Initially financially-strapped, Irene danced in slim, simple frocks, since that was all she could afford. When Elsie de Wolfe stepped into their lives, she steered Irene toward simple designs from the designer Lucille (Lady Duff-Gordon), Irene emerged in long, sleek gowns with low necklines and slit skirts, which made other women, still clad in the fussy designs of the mid-1900s, appear overdressed. To complement this pared-down style of dress was Irene's short, bobbed hair. She had gotten into serious trouble as a teenager when her impulsive chop of her locks while at boarding school encouraged a similar revolt against long hair amongst her classmates, sparking such outrage from parents and instructors, she ran away in fright. Now, as the famous Irene Castle, her "Castle Bob" adorned with the "Castle Band", a pearl necklace Irene placed on her head to keep her hair tamed or the Dutch lace cap purchased on her honeymoon, there was no censure from her inspiration of other women.

James Reese Europe soon joined the Castles, creating the ragtime music that has endured longer than their dances. Born in Mobile, Alabama, yet raised in Washington D.C., Europe developed his musical talent from an early age. He entered show business as musical director for all-black shows before conducting and composing captured his interest. In 1910, Europe helped found the Clef Club, a combination booking agency, "union" and social club and by the time he crossed paths with the Castles, he was a star of New York City's

musical circles. He rose to fame when the Clef Club Orchestra played at Carnegie Hall in 1912, 1913 and again in 1914. So popular were the Clef Club Orchestra, they played for President Wilson's daughter, for the Governor of Virginia, at Boston's Copley Hall and the Manhattan Casino. When Europe's Society Orchestra signed with Victor Records in 1913, they became the first-known black orchestra to obtain a US recording contract. When Europe and the Castles' collaborated, the combination of Europe's masterful music and the Castles' chic dances created a sensation.

The Castles, with Europe and his orchestra in tow, staged their next coup in 1913 when they opened their dance studio, Castle House. A modest, two-story brick house on 26 E. 46th Street, here society could take dance lessons from the clean-cut, demure dance instructors hired for their apparent respectability, and in the evening, from 4 to 6:30, general dancing, at which the Castles occasionally appeared. Later, Vernon was persuaded to open a nightclub, which they christened the "Sans Souci". Unfortunately, the club fell apart as soon as it opened, poor management and cheating waiters caused "Sans Souci's" quick demise, and four months after its debut, it was closed by the Fire Department. Castle House lasted until 1915, but in the meantime, Irene and Vernon expanded their "brand" into the growing medium of the cinema, filming their dances to the delight of eager cinema-goers.

When the Great War broke in August 1914, the Castles continued to tour the vaudeville circuit and dance in the chicest nightclubs. Vernon, however, as a British citizen, itched to enter combat and by 1915, he was resolved to enlist. The end of the year saw him enlist in the 84th Royal Canadian Flying Corps Squadron and begin flying lessons. He passed his flying test February of 1916, and was granted a license that same month. He saw action in France as an aerial photographer on reconnaissance, and later, as a bomber. During Vernon's time in Europe, Irene embarked on a solo career, making a splash in

silent films ranging from mysteries to romances. They were never to dance together again.

In 1917, it is said ragtime died, with jazz gaining preeminence and new dances such as the Charleston and the Black Bottom slowly traveling the same trajectory of the turkey trot and the bunny hug some twenty years before. The following year, Vernon was stationed in Texas to train fliers. Mid-February, he crashed his plane, perishing in the field hospital twenty minutes after the fall. He was thirty years old.

### **The Show Must Go On**

After her husband's death, Irene spent her remaining years as an actress, remarried and became a mother. She had no patience for the dances of the advancing years, and jumped at the opportunity to recreate the frantic years of her success as one half of the Castles, when in 1939, Radio - Keith Orpheum Pictures acquired the rights to produce a movie based on Irene and Vernon's life. The movie would feature that generation's "Vernon and Irene Castle", Though Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire would become more famous. The movie was aptly titled, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, and Irene was brought on as "costume designer, technical advisor, and writer," she helped shape the movie of her life with Vernon. Though the finicky Irene moderately approved of the movie, and of Fred Astaire, she and Ginger Rogers would have their share of disagreements most especially when Roger's refused to cut or color her hair. The Castles and their famous dances though, are best known through this somewhat accurate movie, which preserves a slice of long-forgotten American life that nevertheless parallels the rise and fall of dance fads.