

What's In a Name?

Where did the shuffle originate?

- By *Debbi Dee*

Because tap dancing combines the cultural heritage of the United States while simultaneously reflecting the African and European cultures from which the art comes, Congress passed a bill in 1989 that recognizes May 25th as National Tap Dance Day. The bill continues, "[I]t is in the best interest of the people of our Nation to preserve, promote and celebrate this uniquely American art form."

So what is tap dance? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines tap as "a step dance tapped out audibly by means of shoes with hard soles or soles and heels to which taps have been added." But to me the definition should be more fluid than that. For a five year old just starting out, tap is all about noise and how much noise they can make on their mom's new tile floor. But to a true tap dancer - to me - tap is about the rhythmic patterns and sounds that are created and executed with the feet.

Clearly, I am passionate about my craft, and I, like our Congress, think it needs to be preserved, so I did some research to discover where some of the most popular steps came from and how they got their names. Whether you dance a more traditional style of tap - where the metal tap is considered an instrument and the style emphasizes the quality of the sound and how it fits into the music - or contemporary style of tap - where the main objective is to create a dancer that focuses not only on the sound but also on the total body movement of the dancer - I hope you find this mini dictionary helpful. Remember, no matter what style of tap you most enjoy, the two really live side by side, utilizing many of the same basic moves.

Research for this article was, in part, obtained from those of my favorite tap dictionaries.

Tap Works - Beverly Fletcher

The Tap Dance Dictionary - Mark Knowles

Al Gilberts' Tap Dictionary

Who is Debbi Dee?

Debbi Dee is known world wide as a "teacher's teacher" and master tap technician, who has been honored for her contribution to Tap Education. She continues to teach throughout the U.S. for major dance organizations as well as in Japan, France, South America and Canada. She has held faculty positions in New York at Broadway Dance Center and has worked side-by-side with her mentor, Henry LeTang. She has been seen on the covers of many dance magazines, including "Dance Teacher" and "Dancer," as well as featured and published in many publications. She has been a guest teacher/choreographer for Walt Disney World, as well as a private coach to many top performers. As a professional dancer and choreographer, she has worked on Broadway and at Lincoln Center and has worked in theater, nightclubs, movies and on TV with some of the biggest names in showbusiness. Debbi has over 25 educational DVDs on the market and now offers a Tap Intensive 1 & 2 seminar for teachers and advanced dancers. She has a unique understanding of her craft and has devoted her career in sharing that knowledge with teachers and students. For information on the Debbi Dee Tap Intensive or her DVDs, please visit her web site at www.debbideetap.com.



Shuffles: a brush forward followed by a brush back. A shuffle has two sounds, both of which come from the ball of the foot striking the floor. The movement is traceable to clog dancing. A shuffle is also known as a "brush-brush," a "double," a "double beat," a "double off," a "front-back," and a "rattle."

- You might wonder: How something so simple has so many names? But I wonder: How can it have so few? I teach 21 variations of the shuffle so I think it deserves even more!

Buffalo: a leap shuffle leap (1&a2). This is a single or standard Buffalo. The Buffalo is also known as "off to buffalo," "roll the log," or "shuffle off to buffalo," as well as the "traveling buffalo."

- Did you know? This step was popularized by Pat Rooney in the 1880s. The story goes that it originated in a Buffalo theater in Buffalo, N.Y. It was used as an exit step for a dance troupe known as the Tiller Girls. When the director of the show refused to give the choreographer a black-out at the end of the number, he then came up with this step for the dancers to exit the stage at Shea's Buffalo theater.

Back to the Woods: a brush back (spank) hop, shuffle step (&1&a2). This very old term originated because they say the step came from the very heavily wooded area of Cincinnati. In later years, the "hop" was replaced with a heel drop and Back to the Woods became known as a Cincinnati. The Back to the Woods term was lost in the shuffle... No pun intended.

Drawback: a single or basic drawback is defined as brush back, heel step (&1). It is also known as a "brush heel back," "brush heel step," "Grabback," "Sandwich Step," "Spank heel step," and "the train." This step was around for years and years and was recognized in the style of "rhythm tap," which is footwork done close to the floor but had no name before Jack Stanley, a teacher from New York that eventually put the name "drawback" to the step.

- I'm sure you noticed: A Cincinnati and a triple drawback are the same step!

Maxie Ford: a leap shuffle leap toe (1&2&3 or 1e&a2). A Maxie Ford is also known as Maxie or Jackknife. This step as well as different variations of the step was created by a man named Max Ford. He was known for his Buck & Wing dancing in the 1900s.

Rat-a-Tat: starts with a chug, but then continuous shuffle hops follow (1&a2&a3&a4...etc.). The Rat-a-Tat is also known as a Roll variation.

Punch: to strike the floor with the tip of your shoe and then rebound quickly. It is also known as a toe back, toe hit or toe jab.

Time Steps: There are many famous time steps, as well as the standards we all know and love. Everyone has their own Time steps, Ruby Keeler, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Shirley Temple, Ann Miller and me. But did you know that "The Traveling Time Step" is also known as "The Boston Time Step," The Cubanola, The Cubanola Glide, The Cuban Time Step, The Run a Long Time Step and the Bambalina? The Standard Time Step is also known as The Buck Time Step, Rhythm Time Step, Simple Time Step, Single Basic Time Step and the Broadway Time Step.

- Did I mention: I love time steps and have created over 200. (I know, I know, I need a life, but as I said I'm passionate about my craft!)

So I ask you: *What is in a name?* Well... I am just getting started. I haven't even touched on the Shim Sham, Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich, The Shorty George not to mention Shave and a Hair Cut, and the Paradiddle.

Tap and its history are a wonderful journey, just to be waiting to be explored. The art form lives in all of us who dance it, teach it and choreograph it, so that it can be enjoyed by everyone. So until next time...

Tap Happy!