



Martin Munkácsi: Lindy Hoppers, 1936 Harlem

*Article by Elizabeth Waterhouse, dutch translation printed in **etcetera** #104, Brussels, December 2006*

The December 28, 1936 issue of Life Magazine included four dance features: photographs of dancers at the Arthur Murray studio, performers with the American Ballet of New York, the film dancer Fred Astaire, and a couple dancing the Lindy Hop. Martin Munkácsi (1896-1963), a pioneer of modern photojournalism who excelled in action photography, was assigned the later two shoots. Each of Munkácsi's subjects received a similarly formatted, two-page spread in the magazine¹.

The images reproduced in this issue of etcetera are a subset of the fifteen Life photographs and the same pictures that were reprinted for the Munkácsi retrospective „Budapest - Berlin - New York“ at Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin (August 5 – November 6, 2006). These enticing photos were not contextualized by the curators at Martin-Gropius-Bau, perhaps because the dancers were not named in the original publication of Life, nor suggested to be anything more than skilled social dancers who were an errand boy and laundress. In reality these dancers and pictures are very worthy subjects of research. This article begins a necessary dialogue about the photographs by contextualizing the couple’s dancing within the history of the Lindy Hop, suggesting the identities and accomplishments of these dancers, and questioning the role that race relations played in the original framing of the photos in Life.

The Lindy Hop is an American social dance that embodies a century of cross-cultural fusion. The Lindy melds African-American vernacular dances—including the Charleston, Black Bottom, and tap—with European-American ballroom dances such as the Two-Step and the Foxtrot. The dance’s improvisational structure, complexly syncopated rhythms, full-bodied movement, sense of weight, and relaxed posture with bent knees suggest its African lineage. The partnering holds, original verticality, and the eight-count structure indicate European influence.

The history of the Lindy is inseparable from that of the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, which opened on March 12, 1926 and was one of the first racially integrated spaces in America. Though the ballroom was frequented by novices and professionals alike, it provided a supportive community and ample space for dancers to perfect their craft. The most exceptional dancers, selected and marketed by bouncer Herbert “Whitey” White, danced in the consecrated Northeast corner of the ballroom. They also practiced together in the afternoons and competed against each other in Saturday night dance competitions.



Munkácsi’s photographs document the “breakaway,” the signature element of Lindy Hop, during which closed partnering positions were opened or “broken” to facilitate freer and more extensive solo dancing. The simple breakaway evolved into the “swing out” or “whip,” which is reproduced here, in the photo where the man and woman are separated at arms’ length but hooked together by their fingers. The swing out facilitated a poised sense of connection between partners, while still enabling intricate footwork. This coordinated improvisation was more complicated, smooth, and rhythmically playful than the Lindy’s predecessor, the Charleston swing².

While the term Lindy Hop is used specifically to refer to the “original” form of Swing Dance practiced by dancers at the Savoy, it is a difficult dance to pin down. As the dance evolved it became racially and geographically distinct. Yet the terms Lindy Hop, Jitterbug, and Swing Dance were used casually and interchangeably in press during the 1930s and 1940s. The dance was not standardized by its fundamental practitioners, only by ballroom institutions for which it was borrowed (or appropriated). It also embraced quotation of other dance forms, making its boundaries blurred. Lastly the Lindy Hop varied according to one’s skill-level and the context in which it was danced. The professional and competitive dancers at the Savoy Ballroom, many of whom danced for Whitey, were nuanced improvisers. They also accomplished fast and athletic choreography through rigorous practice.

One striking moment in the evolution of the Lindy Hop occurred in about 1935 (accounts vary on the exact year) when the dancer Frankie Manning invented the first “air step” or “aerial” for a dance contest at the Savoy—a movement in which he flipped his partner, Freda Washington, over his back. Aerial throws, swings, jumps, and lifts were invented and perfected by the best dancers at the Savoy, and were choreographed by Manning into a number of performances for Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers. Images of aerials have become the most common portraiture of Lindy Hoppers, making this series by Munkácsi a notable and interesting exception.

Munkácsi’s Lindy Hop pictures, shot against a white background using state of the art equipment, capture the poise and grace of the dancers’ transitions without suggesting that they are posed. It is clear from the dancers’ leg positions and the placement of weight on the balls (or heels) of their feet that the dancers are actively shifting weight, but the photography belies their speed. While the longer series of photos in *Life* effectively illustrates variations of foot work and partnering holds, they do not illustrate the dancers’ momentum and dynamics. What reads is the dancers’ elegance, as well as their joyful connection to each other and to the dancing itself.

The Lindy in vintage videos is the energetic cousin of the dance in Munkácsi’s photos. Films from 1937-1941 show Whitey’s dancers performing footwork that is fiendishly fast: dancing performed at the rate of a sprint, not a jog. The weight shifts are syncopated, performed on the balls of the feet, and punctuated with stomps, kicks, and turns. Embellishing moves of the head, arms, and hips accent the phrasing. In the Marx Brothers’ major Hollywood film *Hellzapoppin’* (1941) the partnering includes air steps that not even the most skilled musician-cheerleaders, if there could be such a thing, could dream of. Bodies are thrown, caught, flung, and dipped, all within a frenzied pace.

The discrepancy between the photographed and the filmed Lindy Hop is especially poignant when you consider that it is not the dancers who are changing, but rather the medium and the context in which they are being shown. The savoystyle webpage, maintained by researcher Judy Pritchett in correspondence with Frankie Manning, states that Munkácsi photographed George Greenidge and Willa Mae Ricker, both prominent dancers at the Savoy Ballroom and members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers³. One can confirm independently that this is Willa Mae Ricker by comparing the full set Munkácsi’s pictures to her second photo shoot for *Life* Magazine with photographer Gjon Mili⁴. Her dancing is also featured in a number of films, including *A Day at the Races* (1937), *Hellzapoppin’* (1941), *Hot Chocolates* (1941), *Killer Diller* (1948), and *The Spirit Moves* (1950). Although there is no other published confirmation of Greenidge’s identity, the man in Munkácsi’s images also dances in *A Day at the Races* and in *Keep Punchin’* (1938). Thus he is clearly one of Whitey’s dancers and probably “Long-Legged George,” the innovator of the “Long-Legged Charleston” the “Turn-Over Charleston” and the “Side Flip.”

Munkácsi was quoted in the November 1935 issue of *Harper’s Bizarre* to have said „Never pose your subjects...Let them move about naturally.“ If this is the case, why are there no photographs of kicks, variations of the Charleston, and aerials? Why is Greenidge standing much more vertically than he does in *A Day at the Races*? Why doesn’t Willa Mae exhibit the strength that she was known for, as she does in *Hellzapoppin’* when she holds her partner in an impressive inversion?

It's difficult to definitively account for these discrepancies. The dancers may have been inspired by different music or by none at all. Perhaps they were instructed by Whitey or a reporter to perform specific material in their breakaways. Or possibly, with choreographer Manning working for the Cotton Club, the dancers were left improvising as they would in a social dance setting. Thus these photographs might document the difference between professionally choreographed Lindy Hop, as seen in the movies, and the social dance version that was practiced at the Savoy ballroom. It is also plausible that the images were chosen or made as a deliberate foil to Astaire, whom Munkácsi photographed under conditions that enabled clear capture of tenuous, quick positions. Astaire slices Munkácsi's framing with off balance diagonals. In two photos he is airborne; in three more he is in the midst of takeoff or landing.

While we may never separate the influence of the dancers, Munkácsi, and the editorial team at Life, it is valuable to question the boundary between documentation and fiction, and to analyze the photographs within the context of the Caucasian-American response to the Lindy Hop⁵. The December 28, 1936 issue of Life marks a pivotal time; the Lindy Hop had gained uncontrollable momentum but was still controversial. Life Magazine, a conservative and jingoistic publication, promoted mainstream politics, gender roles, and racial ideals. Thus it was certainly in Life Magazine's best interest to present the African-American dancers as tactfully as possible.

During the 1920s - 1940s many white-Americans were shocked by the frenzied, wild spirit that swing music unleashed in their youths—that made dancers hop up and down like “jitterbugs.” Acceptance was gradual, and was certainly aided by the public performances and film appearances of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers. In October 1942 the New York Society of Teachers of Dancing acquiesced to teach a modified version of swing dancing:



The jitterbug, handmaiden of swing, is rising from its lowly estate... This delight of the youngsters, hitherto scorned or derided by the conservative pundits of the ballroom floor, and a direct descendant of the „Lindy Hop,“ no longer can be ignored, according to those who spoke of the trend of social dancing. With its cavortings refined and modified to fit the usually crowded floor, this season it will take its place beside the rumba, samba, foxtrot and waltz⁶.

On August 23, 1943 *Life* ran a larger feature on the Lindy Hop, where the magazine embraced the Lindy as “America’s Folk Dance.”

While the talent of many African-American dancers was irrefutable, racism still prevented professional African-American dancers from enjoying the respect, formal accreditation, and working conditions accorded by their talent. Pioneer African-American social dancers, who were in the case of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers paid-professionals, were not acknowledged by critics at the time. On May 19, 1940 *New York Times* dance critic John Martin wrote:

The exhibition dancer in the first place is simply the recreational dancer who finds himself especially skillful and concentrates on his skill so that his friends will assemble to watch him and admit his superiority. To see this process developing we need only to go to the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem and watch the Lindy Hoppers, still thoroughly non-professional and recreational, extending themselves with a full realization of their especial gifts. Or stop for a moment on Broadway at theater time to applaud the little Negro boys who dance for pennies with a real pride in their accomplishments, meager though they generally are. It is a long step from here to the achievements of an Alicia Markarova or a Paul Haakon, but it is a step in the same direction⁷.

Three and a half years earlier, *Life* belittled Greenidge and Ricker in a similar fashion. The text that appeared in the magazine touted their achievements while clearly marking them as a separate, non-white, and non-professional other:

These Harlem Negroes are dancing Harlem’s favorite dance with a native gusto and grace that no white couple could ever hope to duplicate. The Lindy Hop is a combination of fox-trotting, truckin’, the Susie-Q and adagio dancing. The expert Lindy Hoppers whose dancing is shown on these two pages are now an errand boy and laundress. Soon they may be on Broadway.

Though Broadway was not their destination, this issue of *Life* coincided precisely with the transformation of Greenidge and Ricker’s dancing careers. By the end of 1936 Whitey was managing two groups of dancers: the first group had a six month contract with the Cotton Club, the second made their Hollywood film debut in 1937. In the upcoming years, Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers toured Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. They also traveled with major swing bands, and performed at venues such as Radio City Music Hall in New York City and the Moulin Rouge in Paris.

Given this context of resistance, perhaps it was intentional or the result of unspoken racial-prejudice that *Life*’s sequence of Lindy Hop photographs emphasizes the European and ballroom aspects of the dance (verticality, footwork, agility, and grace) and omits the dynamically empowering kicks, spins, and air steps. The dancers are joyful but not out of control, skilled but not threateningly virtuosic. These pictures are certainly well-made (or well chosen) for the *Life* audience of 1936: upper and middle-class white Americans that were assumed to be fascinated, ignorant, and even threatened by “these Harlem Negroes” and their dancing.

Footnotes:

¹ The Lindy Hoppers are pictured on pages 30-31, Fred Astaire on pages 36-37. The first page of each series consists of an enlarged, introductory photo contextualized by a brief text, printed inconspicuously in small font. The second page shows a cutout image surrounded by a captioned series of 12-13 small pictures, suggestive of a dance sequence. The Lindy Hop photos are framed by additional text at the top of page 31, the title and lyrics of the song “Spreadin’ Rhythm Around.” ² *Jazz Dance: the Story of American Vernacular Dance*, Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns (1994) Da Capo Press (originally published in 1968 by Macmillan) ³ Through personal correspondence with Pritchett, she has indicated that the Grenidge is misspelled on the savoystyle webpage. The dancer’s name should be spelled Greenidge. http://www.savoystyle.com/george_grenidge.html ⁴ August 23, 1943 ⁵ It would also be fruitful to examine the performance of Lindy Hop in vintage videos from this point of view. ⁶ October 12, 1942 *New York Times*, page 13. ⁷ Martin, John. May 19, 1940, *New York Times*, page 111.