

Tap Attack on Sky1's "Got To Dance"

Main photograph © Sky1. Inset, courtesy of Tap Attack



HAPPY FEET

"Tap is in all of us – it's the dance equivalent of a heartbeat," explains choreographer, actress and teacher Donna Berlin. "Before we had instruments, we expressed ourselves through the rhythm of native dance, and tap is the culmination of that, letting you communicate through dance and music simultaneously."

Heather Rees, ISTD senior international examiner, observes: "The rhythms are fascinating and infectious. You can see elements of English clog dancing, Irish

Marianka Swain finds out how tap has evolved and why so many of us are rediscovering the addictive form

step dancing and African drum rhythms. During the colonisation of America, these disparate

forms were blended together, with African slaves transported to the west and English and Irish dancers emigrating to America looking for opportunities, creating this unique, complicated mixture."

The style quickly became popular, aided by regular appearances in musical halls both in the US and the UK, "including touring variety shows," notes Heather. "Performers would watch each other and trade or steal steps, and audience members would go out on street corners and practise – and build

Top tap

CLASSES

Tap Attack
www.tapattack.co.uk

TapHeart
www.tapheart.co.uk

Pineapple Dance Studios
www.pineapple.uk.com

Tap Dancer UK
www.tapdanceruk.com

Dance Factory
www.dancefactory.co.uk

The Dance Workshop
www.dance-workshop.co.uk

To find your nearest ISTD-affiliated studio, visit www.istd.org

SHOWS

Singin' in the Rain
www.singintherain.co.uk

Top Hat
www.tophatonstage.com

World Tap Championships
www.ido-dance.com

on – what they'd seen. Once sound was added to films, tap became a screen sensation, popularised by Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Bojangles Robinson and the Nicholas Brothers."

The long-lasting appeal of such classic films still brings people to tap, says Jo Scanlan, creative director of teaching company Tap Attack, but it's the endless opportunities to create new variations that really excites dancers: "You don't have to conform to any stereotype. Being a great tap dancer isn't dictated by size, age or gender, and you can tap to any kind of music, or none at all – you create the beat. There was a perception in the 1980s of tappers as chorus lines or little girls in sparkly shoes, but dancers and shows like *Savion Glover* and *Tap Dogs* gave it a kickstart and it's now seen as really cool, for boys as well as girls."

Teacher Paul Charles of Tap Dancer UK notes tap is still under the radar: "It's not as

immediately accessible as street or ballroom – you can't learn a routine in the first class. It's a percussive instrument as well, so you have to take time to learn the ways your feet can move. But once you break through that barrier, it's absolutely exhilarating."

Donna agrees: "It's like learning an instrument – you

need to know the basic notes of a scale before you can play tunes and then start to improvise. Everyone can hear your mistakes, so there's nowhere to hide! You have to build up gradually and then be confident, whether you're learning a basic combination or creating new music." Paul adds: "Listening is key – hearing how your taps sound compared with your teacher's and not hiding behind the group. A good teacher can pick out everyone's taps, like a conductor listening to an orchestra."

Creating a dedicated tap environment was Jo's main aim when setting up Tap Attack in 2006: "Lots of studios offer it as an extra, whereas we focus solely on tap, taking students to international competitions and preparing them for the professional world. There are so many possibilities within the form, so our workshops are led by a variety of guest teachers,



Tap Attack's Dean Magri (co-founder), James Doubtfire (director) and Jo Scanlan (co-founder and director)

Photograph courtesy of Tap Attack

Then and now: screen sensation Fred Astaire. Inset, one of Tap Attack's small group silver medallists at the World Championships 2011

Main photograph from the Dancing Times archive. Inset, courtesy of Tap Attack



take the best of both worlds.

"Some hoofers are so focused on their work that they don't communicate emotion, so for an audience, it's like watching incredible musicians playing to themselves, and the extreme of the Broadway style can sometimes come across as cheesy. It's great to see tap in more films and stage shows at the moment, giving the audience a story to connect with the dancing."

Jo hopes Tap Attack's UK-wide workshops will bring new dancers to tap, "as there's something for everyone: it's social, lets you express yourself, is great for fitness and brings so much joy". Donna adds: "And you can tap until you die! I've worked with masters in their eighties who get better every year, so it's never too late to start. You don't need to be acrobatic or buy expensive equipment and costumes; all it takes is a pair of shoes and a hardwood floor and you can do something guaranteed to make you smile." ●

covering influences as diverse as hip hop, jazz, Irish dancing and contemporary. Sometimes, kids will be put off by unfamiliar music, so blending modern tracks with 1940s footwork gives them a way into the dance and allows them to bring their own flavour to it."

Donna would love to see modern tappers combine technique and creativity with emotion and expression, "so that more people can appreciate what an exciting form it is. There are

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two main schools of tapping – Broadway-style jazz tappers, who use their whole bodies to perform, and hoofers, who use the lower half of their bodies and focus on close-floor footwork – and it would be great to see dancers

Heather Rees's book, *Tap Dancing: Rhythm in Their Feet*, is published by Crowood Press.