

Tap-Tap: Culture, Pleasure and Liberation

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Why do I dance tap?

When I'm dancing tap I feel the marriage of dance and music. I love music. I love dance and it is the best way for me to combine them both: by dancing tap I liberate myself and feel I can create...

I dance tap because of my admiration for the great tap dancers: Fred Astaire, the Nicholas Brothers, Gene Kelly and others who marveled me with their technique. It is also because I am fascinated with tap music and U.S. African-American culture. I was and continue to be spellbound by the evolution of the turn-of-the-century musicals of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, and by the development of Southern black culture in the United States.

Samuel Rigal is a twenty-five year-old young black man from Havana. While a student at the University, he discovered the fascinating world of dance through the school's dance troupe, *Alma Mater*.

As he tells his story, his words come out to the rhythm of a melody that makes his feet go tap-tap-tap-tap-tap on the floor. It's a chilly afternoon and we're in his living room. I start to inquire about his passion for tap



dancing. Normally seen as a dance style, tap is one of the clearest examples of the marriage of dance and music. It is not just a dance form, but also a bona fide percussive musical instrument, because the dancer creates a melodic rhythm when his feet hit the floor as he moves his body.

Tap is not an element native to Cuban musical taste. Its continuity in Cuba is only a reference to its existence in the United States. Official Cuban radio and television stations prohibit its transmission.

For Samuel, tap represents a sort of liberation, a mixture of pleasures, of creativity; because it is basically an American dance form, it is not given sufficient space or enough exposure in Cuba for it to become known, or for people to just enjoy its duet of tapping and melody. This might be partly due to the fact it is the product of jazz, which is black music, and blacks in Cuba are on the lowest rung of the social ladder. From first to last, there are whites, grocers, gardeners, teachers, and then, finally, blacks.

Samuel knows all too well that dancing tap in Cuba comes with a substantial price. His wildest dream, for the dance troupe of which he is a member to become known in international jazz circles.

Alma Mater is a university-style dance troupe. Could you tell me something about it?



I started to dance tap with the Alma Mater troupe. I used to see tap as impossible to do because I was unaware of any movement to promote it in Cuba: it was inaccessible. But Alma Mater gave me the opportunity to dance. It has been around for 30 years and has helped several generations of students develop their interest in dance or even double major in it. Alma Mater has participated, and been successful in numerous competitions and contests.

(One must recall that Samuel was born after the Revolution's triumph, after which a "healing" process caused vestiges of this U.S. tradition in Cuba to start disappearing).



His teacher, Papito (Abraham Peñalver Beltrán) was born in Guanabacoa, in 1928. He taught himself dance. By watching U.S. television shows, he discovered Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson, upon which he decided to do the same thing: tap dance. He has dedicated his life to cultivating this art form. Currently, he is an independent dancer, gives lessons, and helps shape new generations of Cubans who want to continue this tradition. His relationship with *Alma Mater* began when he started teaching a subgroup of its members, Samuel among them.

Tell me about Papito.

I met Papito a few years ago. He is a wonderful person who gives freely of himself and his possessions—even to the point of being left with nothing. He was a carpenter at one time, but health problems caused him to abandon that profession. He usually teaches people who are interested in tap dancing and serves as an advisor to dance companies and Cuban television. Because of him I know of a jazz dance club in Santa Amalia.

Papito tells us that he once got away from him mother to go downtown and see the Nicholas Brothers, who had come to perform at the Campoamor Theatre (an old theatre, currently in ruins, that was located behind the Capitol building in Havana). He had already made up his mind that he was going to be a famous tap dancer, like them—but a Cuban one.

La Casa del Jazz is currently in Santa Amalia. People get together there to listen to, dance and enjoy jazz music on the first Saturday of every month.

What does Santa Amalia mean to you?

The Santa Amalia Dance Club is a wonderful place where we feel at home, where we go to listen to jazz music and dance to it.

This great idea came about in 1955-1956, at the same time tap clubs started to pop up, among them the Juan Gualberto Gómez Sociedad de Color. It was a place

where young lovers of African-American music went to dance and listen to jazz music. Later in the evening, when the club was closed, they would go to Papito's house, where they continued their evening till dawn. Upon the advent of 1959, Papito stopped offering his home for these musical evenings, for ideological reasons, which caused the club's move to Santa Amalia, where the tradition has lived on for fifty years. Santa Amalia has the distinction of keeping alive the jazz tradition; it is a place where those who wish to traverse the ideological frontier find the freedom to listen to southern, African-American black music.

Walls covered by colorful memories of the history of jazz and tap characterize this joyful and hopeful place. In it we find not only some of the 70 and 80 year-old founders who are still active in the club but also young people who are interested in this ephemeral element of Cuban musical culture. Among them is Samuel, who upon hearing a few chords starts tapping his feet on the floor, anxious to dance and keep on dancing.

