

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN DANCE HALL ENTERTAINMENT: A STUDY FROM 1890 TO 1929

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**Abstract:** Dance halls were incredibly popular during the late nineteenth-century and into the twentieth century. In New York City, there were four hundred and seventy-six licensed dance halls in 1920. Just five years later in 1925, this number had increased to seven hundred and eighty-six. A moral panic ensued as dance halls grew in popularity and women came to hold a prominent place within the space of the dance hall. Dance halls gave women the freedom to move, dance and behave in ways that never would have been acceptable or even possible in other social settings. Through dance, women were able to renegotiate their place in society and define what it meant to be a modern woman in America.

**Keywords:** Dance Hall, Dance, Gender Identity, Women, Flapper, Ragtime, Jazz

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The enclosed space of the dance hall was essential to the shaping of women's experiences in cities across the United States (Jensen, 2001, pp. 1-2). Dance halls gave women the freedom to move, dance and behave in ways that would have never been acceptable or even possible in other social settings within Victorian society (pp. 1-2). By the 1910s, the dance craze was not only visible in the dance halls but ragtime music inspired women to break out in dance on sidewalks, in factories, during lunch breaks, and in other nontraditional settings (Maples, 2012, pp. 243-244). Through dance, women were able to renegotiate their place within society and define what it meant to be a modern woman in America (Wiltse, 2013, pp. 1125-1126). This paper will look at how the active participation of women helped to shape the evolution of dance halls in America from 1890 to 1929. For a deeper understanding of this topic this paper will include a section on historiography before looking more specifically at the popularity of dance halls, space, changing gender roles, popular styles of dance, regulations on the body, and the dance hall reform movement.

The vast majority of scholarly articles already written on dance halls concentrate on the involvement of women in these establishments, and how the space of the dance hall helped to reshape gender identities. Many articles begin by looking at dance halls and music saloons in the Victorian period of the 1850s and then follow their evolution into the jazz clubs and speakeasies of the 1920s (Maples, 2012, pp. 243-245). A main focus of study for historians is space, specifically how women challenge societal views by occupying public spaces such as commercial dance halls (Wiltse, 2013, pp. 1129-1130). Joan Jensen's (2001) article "I'd Rather Be Dancing" looks at the movement of people from rural to urban spaces in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Jensen illustrates how this period coincided with the introduction of dance halls in American cities (pp. 1-2). Women, and the movement of women, are subjects essential to any understanding of public space and how the space of the dance hall helped to shape female experiences (pp. 1-2). Historian Holly Maples (2012) explains that women were renegotiating their place within society. By attending dance halls and participating in dance women were able to challenge traditional gender stereotypes (p. 254). Historians agree that women were no longer satisfied with being associated with the passive, quiet females of the Victorian era. Instead, women eagerly looked to take up the role of the dancer and in doing so hoped to create an image of a more modern American woman (p. 254).

Popular styles of dance occupy a place of prominence in many of the articles written on dance hall entertainment. It is noted that the dances that were featured in dance halls were vastly different from those which were performed in codified ballrooms (Thomas, 2004, pp. 196-7). A theme emerges wherein historians compare and contrast what was viewed as acceptable in Victorian society versus what was popular in dance halls, especially during the 1920s. The Victorian-era Gibson Girl and the rebellious 1920s flapper are then presented in conflict with one another (Ress, 2010, p. 119). These different ideals of femininity are placed within the space of the dance hall. There, historians are able to study what it meant to be a woman in America and how these feminine ideals evolved over time (p. 119).

Jeffrey Wiltse's (2013) article "'I Like to Get Around'", as well as Maples' (2012) "Embodying Resistance: Gendering Public Space in Ragtime Social Dance", Nancy

Rosoff's (1999) "Recreation and Social Chaperonage in the Progressive Era", and Elisabeth Perry's (1985) "The General Motherhood of the Commonwealth: Dance Hall Reform in the Progressive Era" all look at the Progressive Period and the dance hall reform movement in the United States. While few historians focus specifically on the dance hall reform movement, the topic is important enough to be discussed by most historians writing on commercial dance halls. The introduction of women into public spaces often created anxiety for middle-class reformers because they viewed the active woman as a fallen woman or a woman in need of saving (Perry, 1985, pp. 719-720). Historians agree that these fears did not come from one single factor. Instead, the admission of both males and females in un-chaperoned public spaces, the promotion and sale of alcohol within venues, and the dancing of animal dances made reformers fear for the moral well-being of young, white, urban women (Rosoff, 1999, pp. 37-38). While many attempts were made to reform existing dance halls and shut down those venues that were considered amoral, Perry (1985) suggests that these attempts were made in vain (p. 733). Rather than having an impact on urban youth, these reforms simply eased the minds of city officials and social reformers (p. 733). There was a common notion that respectable girls entered the space of the dance hall but upon leaving every woman was deemed fallen or impure (Wiltse, 2013, pp. 1132-1133). Many scholars of the twentieth century believed these claims to be true because there were so few resources available focussing on the evolution of dance halls which were untainted by the bias of the dance hall reform movement (pp. 1132-1133). Wiltse (2013) further explains that the digitalization of period newspapers helped contemporary historians to better understand the space of the dance hall, as well as who the patrons attending these establishments were (p. 1133). With this recent new wealth of information, historians have learned that dance halls were not just places where prostitution and moral corruptions flourished. It is now understood that a wide variety of women – of various social standings – attended dance halls as a means of meeting up with friends, dancing, listening to music, partaking in amusements, and socializing (p. 1133).

Dance halls were incredibly popular from the late nineteenth century right up until the end of the 1920s. Industrialization and immigration meant cities across the

United States grew quickly. With these societal changes the populations of immigrant and working-class neighborhoods exploded (Rosoff, 1999, p. 37). Members of the working class spent long hours at work in industrial environments which were often both gender-segregated and monotonous. Workers soon demanded access to recreational pastimes that were centrally located within their cities and that were also affordable (p. 37).

By the 1890s, a leisure society was emerging in the United States. This was evident in the vaudeville theatres, nickelodeons, sporting events and dance halls that began to have a presence in American cities (Rosoff, 1999, p. 37). At the start of the twentieth century in the United States, most cities had at least one public dance hall operating inside city limits. These dance halls often incorporated live music into their venues, with ragtime being especially popular up until 1917 (Robinson, 2010, pp. 179–181). Commercial dance halls were places where all types of people could meet, dance, drink, and have fun for the small price of fifteen or twenty-five cents (Jensen, 2001, p. 3).

There were two main types of commercial dance halls popular in the United States. The first type was referred to as an "inside dance hall" and included restaurants, saloons, and other open spaces where dancing could be had. Large spaces were cleared for dancing within these establishments. Intermissions were often longer than the dancing, in order to encourage the consumption of alcohol by dancers (Perry, 1985, p. 722). The second type was an "outside dance hall" and included "closed dance halls" or "taxi dance halls". Taxi dance halls and closed dance halls were popular across the United States. These unregulated venues paid young women to teach private dance lessons and act as hired dance partners in male-only settings. While these dance halls were often passed off as dance academies, some of the women who worked as instructors within these private spaces doubled as prostitutes (Fritz, 2014, pp. 247–249). These venues offered unlimited dancing and alcohol throughout the day. They attracted customers by dropping their prices to twenty-five cents per person in the evenings (Perry, 1985, p. 722). By 1923, the city of Chicago had at least fourteen different types of public establishments dedicated to dancing and socializing (Fritz, 2014, p. 247–248). In New York City, there were

four hundred and seventy-six licensed dance halls located within the city in 1920; this number increased to seven hundred and eighty-six just five years later in 1925 (Bowman & Lambin, 1925, pp. 286–287). The introduction of dance halls signified the first time in American history when dance was viewed as an industry that could be produced and marketed to a mass audience (Robinson, 2010, pp. 185–187).

A moral panic ensued as dance halls grew in popularity and women came to hold a prominent place within the space of the dance hall. Critics of dance halls believed that, as the "softer" sex, women were more susceptible to moral corruption and deviancy (Fritz, 2014, pp. 247–248). The space of the dance hall came to be associated with the evils of society. This was considered especially troubling because dance halls were attractive to young women. Some women frequented these venues often (Bowman & Lambin, 1925, pp. 286–287). Within the walls of the dance hall, women were not only exposed to risqué styles of dance but also to temptations such as alcohol, cigarettes, and sex (Wiltse, 2013, pp. 126–127). The dance hall created an enclosed space that allowed women to remove themselves from the prying eyes of society as well as from their parents and chaperones (Fritz, 2014, pp. 247–248). Women could operate with a certain level of anonymity and secrecy while in the dance hall. This gave them a sense of freedom and agency (Wiltse, 2013, p. 1129) As historian Joan Jensen (2001) suggests, the act of dancing allowed women to "transcend place and space" and the atmosphere of the dance hall encouraged women to forget about the constraints placed on them by society (p. 1). The prominence of dance halls in American cities coincided with the entrance of women into public life and a move away from the domestic sphere (p. 14).

With the advent of the First World War, women began to leave the private space of the home and enter the workforce out of necessity (Jensen, 2001, p. 14). It became more popular for young women to leave their families and travel to cities. There, they could both find work and discover exciting recreational pastimes that big cities had to offer. While it was not always accepted or permitted, by the 1920s women were becoming bolder with the ways they used their bodies to express themselves. More and more frequently, dance began to move outside of the dance

halls and into unconventional public spaces such as city streets, department stores – even into the workplace (Robinson, 2010, p. 246).

Leisure activities and public spaces were often dominated by men in the 1890s. The introduction of dance halls created heterosocial spaces in which women as well as men could seek pleasure and have fun (Wiltse, 2013, pp. 1126–1127). Dance halls offered mixed-gender venues that were vastly different from the controlled environments of Victorian ballrooms. There, women were sheltered from the opposite sex by etiquette, strict courtship practices and chaperones (Maples, 2012, p. 249). At this time it was still thought that women should be kept within the confines of the home and away from the public sphere. Women who attended dance halls in the 1890s greatly risked their reputations because these spaces were widely associated with alcohol, prostitution, and deviant behavior (p. 249). Still, women attended dance halls in large numbers and anyone from ladies to factory workers and shop girls could be found at these establishments (p. 249). Wiltse (2013) points toward a late nineteenth-century account from Protestant minister Matthew Hale Smith which describes the diverse crowd who then frequented dance halls as including:

girls of great promise and education; girls accomplished, and fitted to adorn any station... the only child of a judge, the wife of an imminent lawyer, showy, flashy, and elegantly dressed, and women of a lower degree, all mingle. (Wiltse, 2013, p. 1132)

Critics believed that the presence of alcohol in dance halls would make young women more susceptible to sexual temptations and critics worried that prostitution would not only increase but thrive in such settings (Perry, 1985, p. 720).

The uncontrolled contact between men and women and the exciting atmosphere of the dance hall allowed dancers to forget about propriety, and the societal constraints that were placed upon them and their bodies (Wiltse, 2013, p. 1129). While the female sex drive was acknowledged by contemporary critics, many believed that it was the woman's responsibility to resist male advances because men did not possess the same level of control and restraint that women did (Perry, 1985, p. 720). Even so, waitresses flirted with male customers, women danced with



men that they did not know, couples attended dance halls on dates and some meetings between men and women even led to sexual encounters (Wiltse, 2013, pp. 1126–1127). Dance halls were revolutionary because they allowed women to enter into the public space, enjoy themselves, and meet men in ways that were incomprehensible to respectable, middle-class society (p. 1133).

While dance halls allowed young women to socialize and dance in mixed-gender settings, these venues also served as a means for reshaping female gender roles and identities within society. Inside the space of the dance hall, women acted bolder and flaunted their sexuality through the dresses they wore, the songs they sang, and the ways that they danced. Women took up identities and behaviors that differed from the quiet, passive femininity of the Victorian era as they entered into public spaces traditionally defined by, and dominated by men (Wiltse, 2013, pp. 1126–1127). Women matched male behavior – much to the horror of reformers – which they exhibited at dance halls by smoking and drinking, talking loudly, putting their feet up on tables and actively pursuing the opposite sex (Wiltse, 2013, pp. 1126–1127).

The introduction of the flapper into 1920s society created a new image of the American woman that moved toward a more androgynous style of dress and performance (Ress, 2010, p. 119). Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald popularized the image of the flapper in *This Side of Paradise* and *The Great Gatsby*, describing the flapper as a beautiful, young, vivacious and wilful woman who was just a little bit dangerous (Ress, 2010, p. 118). The image of the modern flapper with her short dress, bobbed hair and rebellious persona came into sharp contrast with the image of the well-concealed, high-collared Gibson Girl who preceded her (Ress, 2010, p. 119). American writer and Pulitzer Prize winner Edith Wharton believed that the introduction of the flapper into American culture and literature was a form of childish indulgence within society. In her writing, scholar Sheila Liming (2015) suggests that Wharton viewed the female flapper as "a child in a woman's body, irresponsible, uncaring, and unabashedly selfish," further declaring that "she is, in essence, the personification of jazz..." (p. 105). By the 1920s, women were striving to escape from the mental, physical, and moral restraints that had restricted them in

the past. Women flocked to jazz clubs, speakeasies and dance halls as a way to rebel against societal constraints and find freedom in the music and dance that those venues offered (p. 100).

The action of dancing allowed women to express themselves and their female identity while actively embracing their sexuality. The dance styles and dance moves that were performed in commercial dance halls were more sexualized than dance had ever been before. Also, in the dance halls there were no proximity rules stating how closely couples could dance to one another (Maples, 2012, p. 251). The increasing popularity of dance halls in America signified a change in the styles of dance from socially acceptable ballroom waltzes and polkas to more problematic animal dances and ragtime dance styles (Thomas, 2004, pp. 196-197). Animal dances and ragtime dance were troubling to white Euro-American society because, like ragtime music, these dances originated in African American communities, though it is also documented that some came from South American, Native American and working-class European communities within the United States (Maples, 2012, p. 248). In many ways the dance hall craze was unique to America, though it is certainly significant that the dance styles and music that were present in these venues had their beginnings in working-class and immigrant neighbourhoods (Robinson, 2010, p. 189).

Ragtime dance encouraged men and women to use the whole body while dancing and dancers often physically interacted extensively with their partners. Ragtime also allowed for creativity and imagination on the dance floor: couples were encouraged to create and even name their own dance steps (Robinson, 2010, pp. 183-184). It became increasingly difficult to tell the difference between male and female choreography because popular dance styles contradicted the image of the female dancer as delicate and graceful (Maples, 2012, p. 254). Popular animal dances such as the bunny hug, the turkey trot, the kangaroo dip and the grizzly bear countered traditional gender stereotypes by imposing jerky, clumsy, and even violent dance moves onto the female dancer's body while managing to remain intimate and sensual in nature (Maples, 2012, pp. 248-249). Many of the new styles of dance encouraged dancers to hold their partners close, as song lyrics like Irving



Berlin's "Hug up Close to Your Baby", and "Everybody's Doin' It Now" played across the dance floor (Perry, 1985, p. 727). Both men and women role-played using dance, were able to act out fantasies, and projected their deepest desires into their dance moves by holding, throwing, rubbing up against, or even biting their dance partners (Maples, 2012, p. 251).

However, the body of the dancer (especially the female dancer) was looked at as a body that was transgressive, in need of control and reform (Maples, 2012, p. 254). During the dance hall craze in the United States, women began to leave the realm of the passive spectator and move into the active role of the dancer through their participation in dance hall culture (p. 254). Scholar Rishona Zimring (2007) suggests the female dancer ... embodies the quest for freedom. She represents a revolt against the confinements of domesticity, she invents, she breaks taboos, she is mad, she is criminal, society will not tolerate her, she is subversive. (p. 707)

The image of the solo female dancer in music and dance halls elicited strong images of female sexuality and power that were not welcomed or accepted by patriarchal society (Wilson, 2012, p. 342). The female dancer symbolized a new, independent woman who was able to resist the confines that gender placed upon her (p. 342). Critics saw the dancing of "exotic" animal dances by white females as scandalous and indecent because these dances crossed cultural and racial boundaries (Maples, 2012, p. 248).

In the 1920s, African American singers and songwriters from the Deep South were being featured in dance halls for their signature combination of jazz and blues music. Songs such as "Hellish Rag", "Devil Dance Blues", and "I'm Feeling Devilish" were popular songs to which white women both listened and danced (Gussow, 2013, pp. 616-617). Music was believed to have a certain power over its audiences. This was deemed especially troubling when the music was combined with alcohol and sensual dance moves (Wiltse, 2013, p. 1134). Dance hall reformers worried about the effects that exotic – even sinful – African American music and dance would have on the body of the white, female dancer (p. 1134). The Black Bottom dance was popular in dance halls beginning in 1910 and was arguably more popular than the Charleston

throughout the 1920s (Maples, 2012, p. 246). The Black Bottom originated in an area of Detroit known for its African American culture; the dance specifically focused on the female's body through spinning, reaching, squatting and continuous slapping of the bottom (p. 246). The focus on the white female form and the visual pleasure that the female body elicited while it was in motion became a point of contention, as male spectatorship increased and female passivity declined (Manlove, 2007, pp. 83-84).

The popularity of dance halls amongst American women and the reputation of dance halls as lewd establishments caught the attention of middle-class reformers during the Progressive Period. The Progressive Period in the United States, an era of social reform, began in the 1890s and lasted until the 1920s (Thomas, 2004, pp. 196-197). Reformers focused their energy on a wide range of social issues from better working conditions in factories to increased educational opportunities for working-class children, the enactment of prohibition and a general concern for the well-being of urban youth (Rosoff, 1999, p. 37). The sexually-charged environment of the dance hall, along with the presence of alcohol within these venues, deeply troubled reformers (pp. 37-38). A 1913 article published in the *Ladies' Home Journal* referred to dance halls as a place where the "wayward girl" risked social ruin (Maples, 2012, p. 250). It was believed that girls who came from troubled homes, working-class neighborhoods and immigrant families were the most likely to be enticed by prostitution, moving-picture shows, vaudeville theatres, and dance hall entertainment (Maples, 2012, p. 250).

Dance halls were often centrally located in cities and most halls attracted women by admitting them for free. Reformers believed that the dance hall was not a space that respectable girls should occupy because it attracted undesirable patrons such as gamblers, gang members and prostitutes (Rosoff, 1999, pp. 37-38). The concern over the innocence and purity of young girls in urban centres led to a dance hall reform movement across the United States that coincided with temperance and anti-prostitution reforms (Perry, 1985, p. 720). Cities attempted to regulate existing public dance halls and reformers worked to create new dance establishments that were chaperoned and free of amoral behavior (p. 723). In Chicago, civic authorities

temporarily banned both women and music in several dance halls and music saloons. These regulations usually only lasted brief periods of time and were typically not meaningfully enforced by police or city officials (Wiltse, 2013, pp. 1134–1135). Various cities, including New York City, attempted to have dance halls obtain an official licence in order to operate. Such reforms were often met with setbacks and some halls continued to operate without a licence (Perry, 1985, p. 725). Most cities did not want to enact laws against dance halls because of the uproar that these laws caused elsewhere. City police often ignored violations by dance hall operators. Violations ranged from sanitation issues to fire code violations or the illegal sale of alcohol after-hours (p. 731).

Reformers did not deny that young people needed forms of entertainment and recreation, but they believed that young women should be offered wholesome entertainment in safe, chaperoned environments (Rosoff, 1999, p. 38). Reformers acted with good intentions, and believed that the responsibility for sexual health health fell largely to women. At the time, abortions were illegal in the United States and there were few options in terms of birth control or sexual education (Perry, 1985, p. 732). Notable dance hall reformers such as Chicago's Jane Addams and New York's Belle Israels Moskowitz heavily criticized dance halls. They believed dance halls promoted dangerous activities that were masked as acceptable forms of entertainment and leisure (Rosoff, 1999, p. 38). In 1910, Israels and the Committee on Amusements opened the doors of their own dance hall – to serve as a model to other public dance halls across the United States. Differences between Israels' model dance hall and other public dance halls within New York City were the inclusion of a bouncer at the door, the sale of soft drinks instead of alcohol, and a well-lit, ventilated space for dancing. Chaperones were present in the model dance hall and any dancers caught dancing too close to one another, or otherwise acting inappropriately or immodestly were immediately expelled from the venue (Perry, 1985, p. 726–727). While Israels' model dance hall was a success and the Committee on Amusements continued to sponsor dance hall events and venues, the effect that reformers had on the dance hall craze as a whole was minor (p. 733). As historian

Elisabeth Perry (1985) suggests, "...dance hall reform was more important for the reformers' peace of mind than for that of the working girl" (p. 733).

Dance halls were part of a larger dance craze that swept the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Dance manuals and sheet music were widely distributed. The media covered popular dance partners who frequented public dance halls. Films were produced and dance shows toured the United States (Robinson, 2010, pp. 180–181). Dance halls provided public spaces where women could challenge gender norms and achieve a level of freedom through the act of dancing (Jensen, 2001, pp. 1–2). Mixed-gender settings and the merging of male and female choreography worked to reshape gender norms and allowed women to move into the realm of the active participant, rather than remain as a passive spectator (Maples, 2012, p. 254). Women flocked to dance halls in numbers that were never seen before. They went there to work as waitresses, singers, prostitutes, and dance instructors; but women also went to dance halls simply to partake in the fun and the freedom that these venues offered (Wiltse, 2013, pp. 1125–1127). Truly, dance halls helped to define what it meant to be a modern woman in America. Dance hall culture continued and flourished in the 1920s (Ress, 2010, pp. 118–119). The lasting impacts of the American dance hall on women's role in public society were found not only in the rebellious image of the 1920s flapper but in the anti-rock'n'roll campaigns and the awakening of youth culture in the 1950s onward (Perry, 1985, p. 732). Dance introduced the private body of the female to the seductive space of the American dance hall and in doing so created a platform where women could begin to define what it meant to be a modern woman (Maples, 2012, p. 257). As Holly Maples (2012) points out, it is much like American performer Jen Miller reminds us: "this is about more than just dancing ... it's a free speech issue. Once you attack dance, what's next?" (p.257).

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