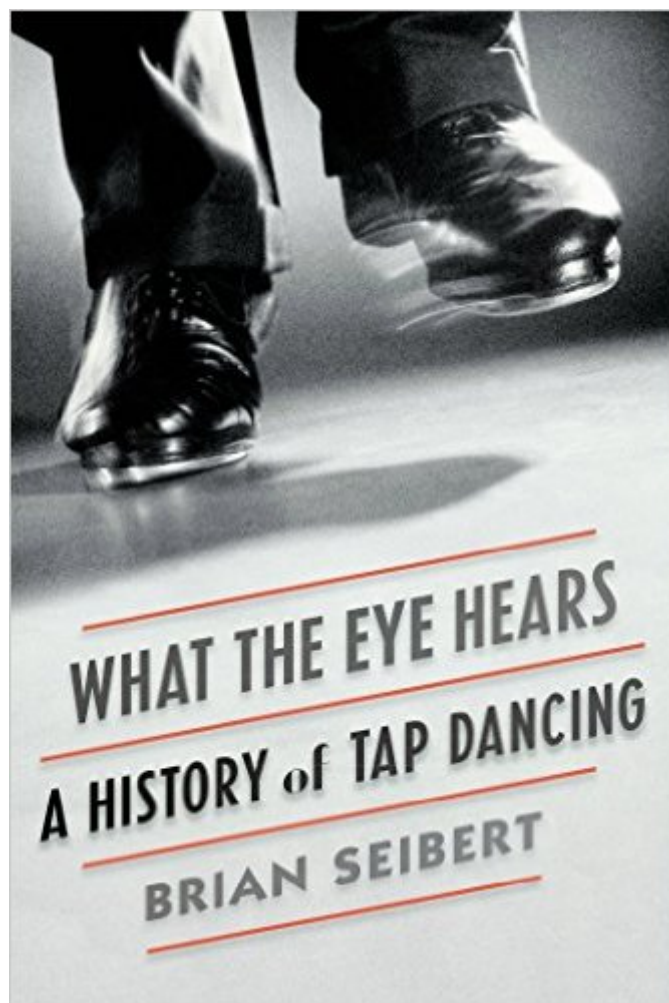


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# What The Eye Hears: A History Of Tap Dancing



## Synopsis

The first authoritative history of tap dancing, one of the great art forms--along with jazz and musical comedy--created in America. What the Eye Hears offers an authoritative account of the great American art of tap dancing. Brian Seibert, a dance critic for The New York Times, begins by exploring tap's origins as a hybrid of the jig and clog dancing and dances brought from Africa by slaves. He tracks tap's transfer to the stage through blackface minstrelsy and charts its growth as a cousin to jazz in the vaudeville circuits. Seibert chronicles tap's spread to ubiquity on Broadway and in Hollywood, analyzes its decline after World War II, and celebrates its rediscovery and reinvention by new generations of American and international performers. In the process, we discover how the history of tap dancing is central to any meaningful account of American popular culture. This is a story with a huge cast of characters, from Master Juba through Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and Gene Kelly and Paul Draper to Gregory Hines and Savion Glover. Seibert traces the stylistic development of tap through individual practitioners and illuminates the cultural exchange between blacks and whites, the interplay of imitation and theft, as well as the moving story of African Americans in show business, wielding enormous influence as they grapple with the pain and pride of a complicated legacy. What the Eye Hears teaches us to see and hear the entire history of tap in its every step.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I am only half way through this book and I'd thought I'd take a break and write a short review. What the Eye Hears is an astonishing work of scholarship and even better a remarkably entertaining read. More importantly it's a timely piece of scholarship that brings perspective to not only the art of tap,

but to how oppressed people blend their cultures through the language of art...in this case tap dancing. On one level Seibert is telling us the untold story of America, a theme I did not expect to find in a book about tap dancing. This book isn't a fog of facts so don't be put off by its length. It's a good read, full of humor, joy and triumph. This is one book I'll read twice.

This book is a masterful history of tap. He weaves together so much: the roots of dances from slavery in America, Irish clubbing, early Blackface minstrel shows, actual Black minstrel shows and a whole array of dancers. He focuses on the art of Henri Cole, the Nicolas brothers, Fred Astaire, Eleanor Powell, Gregory Hines and Savion Glover and many, many others. Seibert is a dance critic for the New York Times and "What the Eye Hears" reflects that fact. Astaire and Rogers remain at the pinnacle. Gene Kelly not so much. He seems taken back by Glover, greatness mixed with - at times - a bad attitude. He lauds what is available on YouTube, as I sit back and watch perfection -- Astaire and Powell tapping to Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine." For anyone who loves dance, this book is an essential. One other plus: the photographs are amazing.

What a wonderful book! Tap is such a quintessentially American art form that it certainly deserves for someone to finally write its history. Happily, it couldn't have been written any better than this. The writing is captivating -- at times I felt like I was actually watching these men and women perform -- but the discussion is an honest history and appraisal that is anything but fawning, dewy-eyed fandom. Instead, Seibert writes with clarity and understanding about the nexus of race, racism, and popular culture as it has manifested in this one specific and very public forum, and the fact that he was able to get to know and interview many of these people while they were still tapping is a real gift to historians. It's a big book, but I was never bored reading it, the photos are amazing, and the author's website has a whole host of terrific videos to accompany the stories, making it that much more revealing and useful -- and enjoyable. If you're at all interested in American history, dance, the entertainment industry, or just great storytelling about fascinating people, do yourself the favor of picking up this book.

As a musician with an abiding interest in African-American history and culture, I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Full disclosure: the author is a close friend, but I have no special interest in tap dancing. While "What The Eye Hears" is nominally about tap (and it seems certain to become the definitive text on the subject), it's about much more than that. Like Alex Ross's "The Rest is Noise: Listening to the 20th Century," it is an expansive history told through the lens of an evolving

art form. The book delves deeply into other artistic disciplines -- music and film in particular -- and engages directly with questions of race and appropriation. Above and beyond all of that, the writing is superb. This is a seminal book that anyone interested in American history and art is eventually going to have on their shelf.

This book looks a bit daunting at first -at 612-pages in length (130 of those pages being footnotes), plus an 22 page index but, honestly, you will breeze through it. The print side is easy to read and the author "dance critic for The New York Times" writes in a conversational style. I liked the fact that the notes are all in the back so they are there if you need them. I've been a fan of tap dancing since "as a child in the 1950s I watched brothers Maurice and Gregory Hines dance with their dad on The Ed Sullivan Show as Hines, Hines & Dad". And of course there were the Fred Astaire films too. Since I'm a record collector (since childhood) I bought the superb LP set featuring Astaire and the jazz musicians from "Jazz at The Philharmonic" and realized that tap dance was a musical art in itself. The Taps replaced the drums and percussion and you could judge the talent of a dancer by closing your eyes and just LISTENING to the rhythm. Even the legendary Bill "Bojangles" Robinson made 78rpm records for Brunswick where he took a "tap break". Living in Philadelphia I became interested in many of the legends from here like the Condos Brothers and I discovered even more legends when I saw a screening of George Nierenberg's documentary "No Maps On my Taps". Savion Glover's first TV appearance (on a PBS documentary hosted by Gregory Hines) showed me he was the next generation. He was about 13 years old then and he is 42 now. Anyway, back to this book, which features all those mentioned above plus many more. After a history of the art of tap dancing author Siebert takes us through vaudeville and the movies (the amazing Nicholas Brothers "who tapped a lot but were really acrobatic dancers" and on to the Broadway stage shows that featured the Hines Brothers, Hinton Battle, Tommy Tune and the tap conventions held all over the world. He gives more exposures than most tap documentaries to the female dancers like Jane Goldberg and Brenda Buffalino and includes the recent MacArthur Genius Grant winner for 2015 "dancer/choreographer Michelle Dorrance (who I was lucky enough to see perform last month). Though he backs up his deep research with all those footnotes, Siebert has his own opinions on which dancers were really talented and which were just "popular". And his opinions show. While the feature film "Tap" did raise the interest in the performance art among the general public, Siebert didn't like it and calls it tacky. (I disagree

“ anything that brings new interest is welcome and I play the soundtrack CD often). The one thing I missed most in this book (not enough to drop any stars, but still a big disappointment) is the last of a bibliography or filmography (and even a discography of records featuring tapping as an instrument). Films featuring tap or documentaries about tap dance are listed in the index as titles and they are discussed in the text. But a list, year of production and sources, would have made this book perfect. It’s a MUST READ for any person that tap dances but I also highly recommend to anyone who enjoys musical theater. (By the way, Siebert also covers tap dancers outside the United States as well). I hope you found this review both informative and helpful. Steve Ramm

Anything Phonographic

This book isn’t just essential reading for lovers of tap dancing, though it is certainly that. It’s for anyone who wants to understand American popular culture, and the mixing of blacks and whites at its core. The subject is fascinating, the characters rich, and the writing is smart, funny, and beautiful.

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