

Survival Ragtime

Back at the turn of the century ballroom dancing consisted mostly of the two-step and waltz. The elegant and graceful (and complicated) dances so popular during the 1880's had faded from current fancies. Ragtime music was starting to be heard, and cabarets were slowly developing and becoming socially acceptable places for proper men and women to be seen. After a decade of dancing the old two-step to the exciting new Ragtime music, a new dance form began to appear. First seen in San Francisco on the famous Barbary Coast, these dances were pretty wild, and included such names as the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, and the Texas Tommy. They took the country and the world by storm. Soon everybody was 'Doing It' - but not without social censure. It took Vernon and Irene Castle, in the fall of 1912, to tame these dances and make them Socially Acceptable in Fashionable Society. The "Trots" were transformed into the one-step and the Castle Walk. The Boston became the beautiful Waltz Hesitation. Even the sensual Tango became an acceptable dance.

The chief characteristic of these dances was simplicity. They were all dances that people could pick up by watching - lessons were unnecessary. And once you learned a step (or made one up) for one dance, you could use it in many others. What follows are some simple suggestions for the main dances that will be played at ragtime events. But keep your eyes open, and add what pleases you.

Two-step: Polka without the hop.

One-step: Just walk. Face your partner, man walks forward and woman backward. As a variation, step beside each other, right shoulder to right shoulder, and continue walking (this is called "Yale Position".) Try turning.

Tango: Any one-step figures, with either slow or fast steps (slow works better.) Or do the standard box-step for the modern fox-trot (which was called "Media Luna" in the early 'teens.) The main thing is to bend your knees and dance stealthily. Mix up slow and fast steps. Mix up closed and open positions.

Fox-trot: The early fox-trot was 2 slow steps followed by 4 quick steps, done in any direction. The slightly later version was 2 or 4 slow walking steps, followed by 1 or 2 two-steps (step-together-steps.)

Hesitation Waltz: Step on count 1, and swing the other foot on counts 2 & 3. Then take a waltz step on the 2nd measure. Can be done backing the woman or in open position, in place, traveling, or turning.

Remember:

- Keep doing whatever step you are dancing until you have made up your mind what you want to do next; then change so that your partner will know also.
- If you know a step from another dance, try it in this one.
- During the 'teens, people tended to do a step for a longer time than we do today; keep doing the same step for 16 or 32 measures, or even longer.
- Have fun!