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DJ Cultures and American Social Dance

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### The Cotton Eyed Joe

*Where did ya come from? Where did ya go?* That is the real question: *Where did ya come from Cotton Eyed Joe?* How did this song and dance become so popular? Why has it become a dance outbreak that has effected American pop culture of the late 20th and early 21st century? **The Cotton Eyed Joe is an example of how White American Culture has always been a spin-off of African American culture, and the dance is so appealing because it is a simple way to collectively perform this “American White Culture.”** The Cotton Eyed Joe dance is an iconic example of American Line dancing but has similarities to common steps associated with minstrelsy. The Cotton Eyed Joe song that is played during this dance is also another iconic example of American Fiddling and hill-billy culture, even though it originates from African American Roots and slave songs.

The origin of The Cotton Eyed Joe came long before the song and dance we know it as now. The Cotton Eyed Joe tune has been around since before the American Civil War through the oral tradition. This tune was sung in the fields of plantations in order to pass time, and make the days go by faster, serving purpose like many other slave songs. *Why did this song survive?* If it were not for the Alabama writer Louise Clarke Pynelle,

the song may have never been officially documented, and it could have been lost forever. *“The first known published version appeared in Alabama writer Louise Clarke Pyrnelle’s 1882 novel Diddie, Dumps, and Tot, or Plantation Child-Life, a nostalgic look at the antebellum South. Drawing heavily on her own childhood experiences on her father’s plantation, the novel gives credence to what most experts now hold as fact: “Cotton-Eyed Joe” originated with black slaves well before the Civil War.”* (Partridge) The full original lyrics of the song may have been lost, but the same story remains. There is a guy who loses his girl to this mysterious Cotton Eyed Joe. Nevertheless the song’s lyrics began to shift and change to appease every crowd, and by the 1920’s it had become a popular square-dance favorite.

The lyrics have shifted hundreds of times if not more, but that isn’t important, as long as the song’s story remains the same. Surprisingly over the years the story hasn’t changed much, only the vernacular due to the time-periods/culture. There are many different versions where the “Joe” has had different pasts, different reasons for taking the girl, and even has had different skin colors. The only thing that mattered was that this *Cotton Eyed Joe* was still so mysterious that he can fit his way into any culture. This is part of the reason why I think the song became so popular, and remained relevant for so long. It allowed people to dance to it for so many years, but this did not mean that the dance did not change over time.

The Cotton Eyed Joe dance we know today is not the one it has always been. These dances originated in African American Culture but soon became a huge part of

White American dance culture. White Americans knew where this song had come from, which is why I do not think that is a coincidence that some of the moves still resemble common steps associated with minstrelsy. The hybrid of the cultures and time period fused this dance to be both square-dancing and minstrel dancing. *“The Cotton Eyed Joe dance experienced a similar evolution over the many decades (and even centuries) of its popularity...The dance to “Cotton Eyed Joe” also has several incarnations, including a partnered circle dance and a line dance.”* (Manson)

The Cotton Eyed Joe song and dance we know today came from the 1992 Rednex techno version of the folk song. This change in tempo and feel brought the song to new audiences. *“The Rednex popularized the single line dance in popular venues like clubs and school dances. Though there are many versions of the line dance, the most popular involves kicks and stomps.”* (Manson) This remix brought the song to new audiences, and made it more popularized in younger crowds. Even though many will claim that the Rednex version and dance has nothing to do with origins, it makes sense when you break it down.

The Cotton-Eyed Joe Rednex dance is derived from minstrel-type jigs and square dancing. The outrageous over-exaggerated theatrical movements shown in minstrel dancing such as the hopping high leg motions are combined with the hoedown square dancing footwork patterns that are key elements in this line dance. This dance is made up of **6 steps**. The first **4 steps** resemble the minstrel dancing with a modern twist, while **steps 5 and 6** pull from the footwork used in square dancing.

**Steps 1-4:** Hop on the same foot which is typically/most commonly the left foot.

**Step 1:** Two hops on the left foot. As the two hops happen on the left foot, the right leg remains straight and is lifted slightly. While hopping on the the left foot twice, the right foot digs its heel in the ground (which is synced up with left foot's landings when hopping).

**Step 2:** Left foot hops twice again like step one, but this time the right leg swings behind. The right foot is bent behind and hits the ground with two toe tips (like before these toe tips are synced up with left foot's landings when hopping).

**Steps 3 and 4** are very similar, and are probably the most complex part of this line dance.

**Step 3:** Left foot hops twice again, like **Steps 1 and 2**, but the right foot hops with the left foot on the first hop. Then the right foot moves upwards and is bent in front, the left leg continues with the second hop. As the right leg comes up, the left hand hits the right foot (which is synced up with left foot's landing on the second hop).

**Step 4** is almost the same as **Step 3** but this time the right leg swings behind on the second left foot hop, and the right leg is bent. The left hand also hits the right foot on this step just like **Step 3**. (the left hand hitting the right foot is again synced up with left foot's landing on the second hop.)

**Steps 1-4** are steps that are intended to stay in the same place, so all of the left foot hops are hopping in place. **Steps 5 and 6** are the traveling footworks in this line dance, and these steps are derived from a more square dance style.

**Step 5:** After the right foot is backwards and is hit by the left hand at the end of **Step 4**, the right foot will start the traveling motion of this step. **Step 5** is comprised of three steps and a jump on both feet, and a clap. So the right foot comes down and steps to the side, the left foot crosses behind, then the right foot steps together to meet the left foot. After these steps, jump on both feet at the same time and clap your hands once as you jump.

**Step 6** is very similar to **Step 5** but instead of traveling right on the dance floor, this step travels left and involves a turn.

**Step 6:** is a four step turn that travels you back to your original spot from **Steps 1-4**. So starting with the left foot, step to the side and face your body to the left side. The right foot takes the second step turning you to the back (while still traveling to the left). The left foot takes the third step and your body faces to the right as you travel to the left. Then the right foot takes the last step, which faces you back forward, and places you back in your original spot. During this four step turn, your left hand is placed on your hip, as your right high mimics circling a lasso up in the air.

**Steps 1-6** are repeated over and over again until the song is completed.

This version of the dance has become so popular because it is so repetitive. Yes, it does take a lot of stamina, but once this version of the song is played, people flock to the dance floor. This repetitiveness of the dance has allowed many to learn it extremely fast, and once learned it is relatively easy to perform. The dance can be modified for older

people or people with less stamina by eliminating the hops. This allows the dance to reach an even broader audience. Between the catchy-ness of the tune and the popularity of the dance it becomes a simple way to collectively perform this “American White Culture.”

Even though it is a spin-off of African American culture, the song has changed so many times that many forget its origins. When you ask most millennials, they believe that the 1992 Rednex version is the only version. When you ask people between their 50-60's they believe that the song originated as a fiddling tune for square dancing. So unless, you dig back, or have interest in the the song's past, most do not know the history of the Cotton Eyed Joe. This makes it easier to absorb it as “White American Culture” even though that is not true. So *Why has it become a dance outbreak that has effected American pop culture of the late 20th and early 21st century?* It has effected American pop culture of the late 20th and early 21st century, because most people do not know the history of the Cotton Eyed Joe. The saddest part about the question: *Where did ya come from Cotton Eyed Joe?* is that most people do not care.

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