

Meghan: You know, maybe that'll be the running joke if you do end up snoring, we'll just like... splice it in throughout. Be like, "ah yes, that's Dad again with his excellent dance history input!" [pause] Snore. We'll – we'll try to avoid the snoring. Um.

Murlin: Ok, you know.

Meghan: All right. So. Uh, first of all, this is An Incomplete History of Dance. We're on the sixth episode now? It's been going for a whole six months. [faintly] Whoo. Um, if you hear a weird clicking or jingling noises in the background, that's because Dad and I are recording in the same room for once, and it's at his place, where there is a dog and a cat, lurking. So. I'll try and edit out any particularly egregious noises, but there's just gonna be some nails on hard-wood in the background and I'm very sorry about that. Um... So. [In a sing-song voice] Today we're talking about the Savoy Ballroom and the birth of Lindy Hop. [Normally] Um, so yeah. The Savoy Ballroom was... I was gonna say what the Savoy Ballroom was and then I was like, "I should make this a pop quiz for Dad," but that never goes well. [laughing] I don't wanna put you on the spot.

Murlin: Thanks.

Meghan: Yeah. Oh, did I do, like, the name introductions? Hi, I'm Meghan. This is Murlin. I'm doing great tonight. Dad just waved. You can't see that, but now you know! All right. [laughing] Uh, back to the Savoy Ballroom. Whew! Here we go. We'll stay on topic for the rest of it, maybe? Um, so it was, um, a ballroom – you know, uh, people would go out to dance. It was a hub for jazz music and dance, um, during the Harlem Renaissance. Obviously, in Harlem, therefore, in New York, and, um, to this day it kind of stands as a symbol of, um, Black and jazz community and spirit and, like, innovation. Um [sigh], so, it was located on Lennox Avenue in Harlem. It opened in 1926 and operated at – until 1958. Um, music and dance in the Savoy Ballroom developed in this, like, interconnected way, um... Dancers would hear the rhythms that the musicians were making and, like, play off of that, and musicians would get inspired by the improvisation of the dancers and react to what they were seeing, um, so it's kind of a microcosm of how jazz interplayed all the ti- um, like, everywhere? But also, it was one of the main places where that happened, period. Like, it was a huge centre for that development. Um.

You... have a lot of legendary musicians playing here, um, we're talking like the Duke Ellington Orchestra, the Teddy Hill Orchestra, Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie. Um, this isn't a dance thing, but since music and dance are so intertwined in this, it's kind of exemplary of the sort of community-based, um... Existence the Savoy had, I guess? That – that's not the word I wanna use, but I'm too tired to think of a better one. Um, Dizzy Gillespie heard a radio broadcast of the Teddy Hill Orchestra playing at the Savoy, um, and then, by 1934, he'd been to the Savoy and met Teddy Hill there. Um, and that's how he – Dizzy Gillespie ended up playing for the Teddy Hill Orchestra. Um, so it's like this little cycle of jazz, you know, you're like, "oh, this is how I found this thing, and now I'm part of this thing because I have this place to go to," where all these different greats and up-and-comers get to interact. Um, so that's the kind of atmosphere at the Savoy, both for musicians and for dancers.

But, you also have, um, like, some really big names in dance turning up here, um... They say that Jack Cole, who was a famous choreographer on Broadway – um, who we'll probably talk about at some point, I say, looking down the barrel of the future like "I don't know when that's gonna happen" but, um – he was said to have danced the Lindy Hop sometimes there. Um, one of the main people responsible for helping to repopularise and sort of bring back Lindy, um, Frankie Manning, who was also one of the original big Lindy Hop dancers – he danced there, um, and he also has this story he said once that he remembered someone saying they'd seen Clark Gable come in, and that the

response to that was “Oh, yeah, can he dance?” Um, so it was very, very much about the dance at the Savoy. Um, yeah, it was like a social thing, but you socialised while dancing. You’re making a face, Dad.

Murlin: Oh, just picturing Clark Gable. “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a dance.”

Meghan: [groan followed by laughter] Why would you –

Murlin: This is what you pay me for.

Meghan: [laughing] I don’t pay you [crosstalk] but yeah -

Murlin: [crosstalk] Well, there you go.

Meghan: - I guess that’s about it. [laughing]

Murlin: You get what you pay for.

Meghan: I don’t know what Clark Gable looks like. I just realised that. Anyway, um, you’re probably noticing, however, that some of these names I’m saying are Black people and some of them are white people. Uh, the Savoy was an outlier even in Harlem for being one of the first, and a long time one of the only, integrated dance clubs. Um, many venues were segregated, like I said even in Harlem. Um, you had places like the Cotton Club, which would allow Black entertainers to come in and perform for completely white audiences, and then these places would have the Black entertainers, um, sometimes including people like fricking Nat King Cole this happened to, like really big names, who were the entire draw for the evening, um – those entertainers would have to leave by, like, a service exit. By, like, the kitchens or something. You know, if they were touring to a venue, um, they would have to stay in, like particular accommodations or, like, get identification with the police to prove that they were allowed to be there, like, it was – Yeah. So, the Savoy was really, really different from its inception because it was integrated. Um, and that didn’t happen even in Harlem, which is, you know, um – a – supposed to be a safe haven of Black art and community. Um...

Yeah, from the very start the Savoy – it was owned and opened by, um, two men – one man who I just found described as white, one man who was Jewish, and then managed by a Black man, so you had this sort of, like, different sort of, um – my brain is fried. Backgrounds! Going into it, um, racial and cultural, and the, uh, from the sound of it – I found this newspaper article that said that Moe Gale, who was the Jewish co-owner, um, he was fairly well-known in the local, um, Black community as being somebody who supported Black entrepreneurs and artists, so, like, um – it seems like that – the opening of the Savoy was, like, very actively, “we’re going to do this so that it creates this integrated space,” um – not so much necessarily like – like, yes a business move, but a business move with a conscious social, um, intent to it. So that’s cool, like it was meant to do that, it wasn’t just... [sigh]

I don’t know why it would be like some sort of brownie points thing at a time when integration was not the thing, but, I don’t know, if anybody was like. Wondering that. I don’t know. [laughing] I’m... maybe a little bit tired. It’s fine. And you know, this is relevant because, um, when people say things like “Oh, that was the time period, um, of course so-and-so isn’t going to be doing this, like, anti-racist work or whatever because that’s the time,” it’s like, well. There were people doing that kind of thing, um, actively choosing to support people of colour and other marginalised groups. Oftentimes they were members of marginalised groups themselves, but other marginalised groups, who could see what was going on and have solidarity. Um, but yeah. No, anybody who says “that’s just the time” doesn’t actually know everything that was going on in the time period.

And then I went and name-dropped Moe Gale, so I also wanna name-drop, um, the man who actually managed it. Like I said, he was a Black man, um, Charles Buchanan, uh, he was also a businessman, um, and he was a civic leader as well. So, like, he's actually – you know, in the community that the Savoy serves, presumably, considering he lives there and is a civic leader and I would assume he's a civic leader of the place that he is in – uh [laughing]. I don't know why he wouldn't be. My brain just said "there is a possible ambiguity here" but anyway. Um, so Charles Buchanan, um, the person who's actually, like, overseeing the day-to-day operations of the Savoy Ballroom.

Um, so! Let's actually talk about some actual dancing. Uh, the Lindy Hop. Which was – do you know where that gets its name, Dad? [pause] I'm just curious. I got told this once and then forgot completely until I was researching. No?

Murlin: No.

Meghan: No.

Murlin: No.

Meghan: That's ok. Um, supposedly it was named after Charles Lindbergh after his "hop" across the Atlantic. But there's no apparent reason why it would be, and at least some of the sources I've found were like, "yeah, that's – that's just something they said," so there's no actual connection to Charles Lindbergh but that's, like, the only story that's really out there about why it's called the Lindy Hop. So! According to the famous lindy hoppers, Norma Miller and Frankie Manning, who we will get back to in a little bit, um, Lindy was created when a guy named "Twistmouth" George Ganaway – I really hope it's Ganaway, otherwise my handwriting's really, really bad – um. [laughing] Uh, I – I typed up my notes and then I remembered, like, looking at my notes and going "Wow, I hope I can read my own handwriting," but it's fine. It's Twistmouth George Ganaway. I'm... ninety-nine percent sure. Uh... Anyway, uh, the story goes that he basically created Lindy when he threw his partner into what is now known as a "swing-out" – uh, dancers break close contact from the ballroom style position that they're in and they release one hand so they can improvise more freely, um... You're literally swinging out your partner. Um, when they say "throw" it's a fairly literal use of that word.

Um, Twistmouth George, the guy who started Lindy, um, was also the one who sort of found Norma Miller? Who I said before was a famous Lindy Hopper. Um, she was the youngest member of a group called Whitey's Lindy Hoppers. Um, and the story goes that she was, like, twelve; she was dancing on the sidewalk outside the Savoy, and he sees her moves and he's like "oh, hey, you're really good, uh, come on inside and dance." He may have danced with her outside first, um, sources I have differ on their telling of the story slightly, but, um – like, this man is so impressed by this twelve-year-old's, um, dance moves, that he got the Savoy to waive the age requirements, um, so she could, like, dance with all these older, more experienced dancers. Um. Norma Miller was just really good [while sighing] at what she did. Um, and I can actually say that, having seen her, and so can you, Dad, um, because she danced – among other movie scenes – in the sce- the dance scene in *Day at the Races*. The Marx Brothers movie.

Murlin: Ok.

Meghan: Yeah. So you've actually seen Norma Miller dance.

Murlin: Ooh.

Meghan: Yeah.

Murlin: Didn't know that at the time.

Meghan: No, I didn't either. [laughing] Um, but yeah. So, there's, uh, several of – I think several, if I remember right. Well, there's at least one who was Norma Miller, but, um, I think there's a couple more at least, members of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers in that scene. Um, so. Yeah. The Lindy Hoppers were founded by a former ballroom bouncer named Herbert White, or Whitey, hence the name. Um, like I said Norma Miller was invited to join as the youngest original member of the group, and then the other name that I keep bringing up, Frankie Manning, um, he was kind of the choreographer of the group, kind of like a leader sort of person. Um... They started out doing competitions in ballrooms and eventually they ended up travelling the world and [pause] dancing in movies.

Um, probably the most famous sequence in Lindy circles is gonna be the dance scene from *Hellzapoppin*, which is not, like, a movie people know about but it is widely considered the – like, that dance scene is widely considered the best filmed Lindy Hop in existence. Um, but like I said you can also see Norma Miller and various others in the dance sequence of the Marx Brothers movie *A Day at the Races*, which does also have some blackface towards the end of that. [sigh] For a while there, it's just entirely actual Black people dancing, it's just the Marx Brothers getting in blackface at the end. Every time. You're like, "Great! This is just an [pausing between each word] old time movie, [faster] with some people doing some good dancing," and then it's like, "Yeah, we needed to have a white person get in blackface at least at the end." Like! You're so close. So close. [pained groan] It's fine. Anyway. It's not fine.

Uh, Frankie Manning, um – I'm probably gonna end up talking about him in a future episode again, um... I wanna give, like, its own episode to the resurgence of Lindy Hop, um, 'cause he was a major figure in that, but I am gonna say some stuff about the first part of his Lindy career. Um, he and his partner Frieda Washington did the first Lindy air step, which are like the lifts and jumps and flips and things?

Whoop! I just fell off... the table. It's fine. [laughing] That's probably a really weird image if you're just listening to this. My elbow slipped off the table, I was not in fact on a table. Mostly. Um, Lindy air step. There we go. Dad, why do you let me forget what I'm talking about?

Murlin: How would I know?

Meghan: What I'm talking about?

Murlin: Or that you forgot it.

Meghan: Ok, fair.

Murlin: I don't have a script.

Meghan: [laughing] You have the script right here. [crosstalk] For once.

Murlin: [crosstalk] I don't have it, you have it.

Meghan: Yeah. Um... [singing nonsense] Bu-bum ma ba.

Murlin: I'm just crushing Candy Crush here. That's it.

Meghan: [laughing] Just expose yourself, that's fine. Um...

Murlin: I did no such thing.

Meghan: I meant, like figuratively. Thank you for not -

Murlin: [quietly] Mm-hm. Ok.

Meghan: Yeah. That would – no. No. [pained groan] Ok, uhhh... Lindy air step. Third time's the charm. Here we go, so... Frankie Manning and Frieda Washington did the first Lindy air step – lifts, jumps, flips, that kind of thing – in a competition [with teasing emphasis] at the Savoy. I'm making jazz hands. Um. Hey... jazz! Thank you, Dad.

Murlin: You're welcome.

Meghan: We both made jazz hands. Um, it was at the Savoy in 1935. Um, the air step that they did was a flip over the back and it was the first in what became, like, a major thing for Lindy. Um, a lot of these surviving, um, Lindy recordings that we have, as well as modern Lindy Hop is really actually characterised by the really dynamic, like, flips and jumps and throwing your partner literally around into the air and stuff like that. So, um, yeah. There – Um...

There's also some mention of Frankie Manning being, um, the person or one of the people who influenced the very, like, posture of Lindy Hop, um... One source that I found says that the style started with more upright ballroom position, um – you got your hands holding, and the – the waist and the shoulder, and that's basically how Lindy is, too. But instead of standing two people upright, you lean forward, and you're actually, like, using your hands that you're holding to sort of pull, um, against each other, especially if you don't have that other hand connection, you've got it open. Um, and... yeah. So, he started leaning forward as he did Lindy, and that's where that position apparently comes from. Um, he just – like, he did it 'cause it felt more fun. Um, the source that I found says, like, he just wanted to feel more like he was flying. [sigh]

Murlin: Gotcha.

Meghan: Thank you, Frankie Manning, for that, 'cause that's why I really like doing Lindy. Um, unfortunately, things were not all fun and dance at the Savoy. Um, getting back to a little bit of the history of the building, um, the club – in April of 1943, the – it was announced that the police had closed the Savoy on charges of vice. [pause] Most of the newspaper coverage of that ambiguous vice charge is left really vague and unclear. I did find one source that says it was supposedly because of prostitution, um. The NAACP and local groups protested the closure. They appealed to then-mayor La Guardia, who said that his hands were tied because the courts upheld the closure. Um.

Also, one of the articles I found said that, like, [with confusion] the army made the request to close the Savoy? I don't know why it was the army, but like... Apparently, they hired some detectives to – I don't know, it's – Most of what I've found on this are actually, like, newspaper blurbs, which are very, very short and don't cover a lot of detail. But apparently the army was involved as well as the police, um, and then the mayor couldn't do anything about it, or said he couldn't do anything about it. Probably a little of both, um. [laughing]

But the thing about the vice charge, the so-called prostitution – there was and is speculation that the revocation of the Savoy's license was rooted in fears of its integrated clientele and mixed-race dance couples, [with annoyance] rather than because of any bathroom solicitations. Pause for fake shock. [pause] Yeah. [sigh] Um, another New York politician, um, a Black man named Adam Clayton Powell, Jr, referred to the closure as “a first step towards segregation,” and the *People's Voice*, a newspaper that I did not find a lot of information on but I believe was Black-run given context, um... It's gonna be really embarrassing, there's probably a lot of information about it that I just didn't find. [laughing] Um, anyway, so the *People's Voice* investigated white dance establishments for the same “vices” the

Savoy was being accused of, and then reported that eight of these so-called better venues had more widespread prostitution than the Savoy. And yet, of course, there's no threat of their licenses being revoked. Pause for more fake shock. [pause] Anyway.

Uh, the license was renewed in October of 1943, so thankfully it didn't last for a full year, but uh. Also, when it was announced the license was renewed, spokespeople for the Savoy said that they would need time to make repairs. Which... you know. If you just – if you just close the building down for a couple of months, I can imagine you'd need clean-up. [faux-carefully] There might be some... things that need maintenance, that haven't been taken care of in a while. But the implication of needing an indefinite amount of time for repairs says to me that probably the police weren't terribly nice when they went through closing the Savoy and [sarcastically] investigating their so-called vice charges. And this is, of course, rampant speculation on my part, but also I'm like... I have some thoughts and some questions about that. You know?

Murlin: Yeah, but we can't talk about it 'cause all those Republican states are making it so you can't talk about racism.

Meghan: Oh, god, yeah.

Murlin: Institutional type especially. Yeah.

Meghan: Yep.

Murlin: Whitewashing [inaudible mumbling].

Meghan: Because that way they can keep doing it. Um. So, yeah. [sarcastically] Fun times. Lots of, um, yeah, lots of baked-in institutional racism in that particular story. Um, and then as I said the Savoy closed in 1958 for good, and it was destroyed to make way for a housing complex, [quietly] which makes me so mad? It makes a lot of people mad. But, um. Yeah, for a long time, Lindy Hop was basically forgotten, um. In the eighties and nineties like I've alluded to interest was revived after some Swedish dancers saw the dance sequence in *Day at the Races* – hey, it's *Day at the Races* again! Go, Norma Miller! Uh, and began to look into reviving the style. And then that revival in turn sparked an interest in the history of Sav- of the Savoy. So nowadays there's a plaque in Harlem commemorating the club on Lennox Avenue where it used to be, and um. Yeah, like I said at the very start, in the memories of jazz and Lindy dancers, the Savoy is like this symbol of the height of that particular dance and music moment, and the innovation of it all, and of course, the power of specifically Black artists, um, [crosstalk as a ringtone starts] within that culture -

Murlin: [crosstalk as a ringtone starts] Oops, I'm out.

Meghan: Great! That was a great – Ok! I'll just do the sign-off later. Ok. Quick pause while Dad is on the phone. You will, of course, not hear this pause, but so it's not a weird transition, here I am, talking about the fact that there's a pause that doesn't actually happen.

Murlin: So Lindy Hop is sort of the precursor to the dancing I learned, which is the swing.

Meghan: Yeah.

Murlin: Yes.

Meghan: Yeah, um...

Murlin: And we threw people around a little bit, too, but it – Miss Triplet really didn't approve of that in my dance class at WSU.

Meghan: [giggles] Nice. Also, her name was Triplet?

Murlin: Her name was Triplet.

Meghan: I love that. 'Cause Lindy has, like, triple steps in it.

Murlin: Took two classes from Miss Triplet. Beginning and intermediate.

Meghan: Nice. Um, yeah. So...

Murlin: PE credits.

Meghan: [laughing] Um, so, swing – yeah. Swing, kind of... a lot of people will refer to Lindy Hop as swing but swing really is a more modern invention, like...

Murlin: Well, the – the –

Meghan: Kind of –

Murlin: The footwork is different.

Meghan: Yeah. Yeah, the footwork's different, it is a different style, and like... A lot of swing today is more, like... the re-interpretation of that early stuff? Um. Anyway. [crosstalk] Um.

Murlin: [crosstalk] But I'm talking about the kind of stuff from the fifties.

Meghan: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, there was like the bop then too, which is also coming from that but a different, sort of, set of footwork. But it's still very much...

Murlin: Well, in the swing, people got a little further apart than in the Lindy.

Meghan: Mm-hm.

Murlin: Leading to the point of the 1960s and 70s, the twist and everything else [crosstalk] where the two dancers hardly ever even touched.

Meghan: [crosstalk] Where you got, like – [laughing] Which is funny.

Murlin: Sometimes you couldn't even tell who anybody was dancing with.

Meghan: Yeah. Also funny, because they were still shouting about how indecent it was but they weren't even touching, by then.

Murlin: Really, I mean, it was – [while Meghan laughs] the – there was more objection then for indecency than the folks back when talking about the waltz!

Meghan: [tongue clicking noises] No, the waltz, you're like, up close!

Murlin: [inaudible crosstalk] ...indecent at the time, they said.

Meghan: Well, it's 'cause they did it to African American music. [sarcastically] That darn rock and roll! Ok, uhh... Where was I going after this? Oh, I – While you were on the phone doing your adult business – That sounds so weird. I should not have said it like that. Um, your – your banking nonsense. There, that. Yeah. I did look up the *People's Voice* and finally found [laughing] uh, like a fool I forgot that Wikipedia exists and was a thing I could look at so I finally found a s- actual source on the *People's Voice*. I'm so ashamed that I didn't do this beforehand, but oh god, I was losing my mind. Oh, I left this all way too late. But anyways, so the *People's Voice*, um, actually was affiliated with that, um, politician I mentioned, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Uh, he founded the newspaper, um –

Murlin: He was a big deal back in the sixties, too.

Meghan: Oh, really? Cool. Um, so he founded that newspaper and it was, um, founded to – based in Harlem to serve the African American community. Uh, mostly focused on racial issues and local events and some investigative stuff, um. That’s all just taken straight out of Wikipedia, I’m not bothering to rephrase it. I trust the many citations in this little introductory paragraph.

Murlin: You wanna read more you could always look up Wikipedia for Adam Clayton Powell.

Meghan: Yeah, that’s true. Um, but yeah. [crosstalk] This is a dance history podcast; I’ll save that for my –

Murlin: [crosstalk] He had some important, he had some important roles in the sixties.

Meghan: Yeah, he did – he did some *stuff*. I don’t know why I said it like that.

Murlin: All right. So, are you done with me?

Meghan: Uh...

Murlin: Or do I have to say goodbye?

Meghan: I was gonna – I was gonna do, like, the sign-off.

Murlin: Ok, let’s do it –

Meghan: Yeah.

Murlin: – and get it over with because I wanna go do some math and then go to bed.

Meghan: Yeah, that’s fair. So, thank you to my teachers, especially in this instance, um, Laura Ann Smythe for being both my dance history teacher as well as the jazz and lindy teacher at Cornish. Any nonsense that I have spouted has been on my part and not hers. Um, and... if you like this go ahead and subscribe or follow or whatever it is you do on your particular podcast listening thing. Um, if you want to engage with me about this episode, like you have corrections or thoughts or questions or whatever, um, I have a Twitter that I always forget but I think it’s just my name, but “Varner underscore Meghan”? Or “Meghan underscore Varner” it’s one of those. Um, and then Varner-arts on Tumblr and that’s the website as well, so you can communicate or find out more about me. Not so much Dad. He doesn’t have an internet presence.

Murlin: I do so, too.

Meghan: Your Facebook has a fake name.

Murlin: I know. Turtleman Books on biblio dot com.

Meghan: Ok, yeah, if you want some [laughing] used books! That’s – that’s the plug.

Murlin: There you go.

Meghan: Go buy some used books.

Murlin: But there’s no dance history in those.

Meghan: No, I’m keeping all of those.

Murlin: There – there is a little bit of music there.



Meghan: Yeah, any – any – any dance history books that come your way, Dad, I want first – first dibs on those.

Murlin: I haven't seen any.

Meghan: I will pay you for them. [laughing]

Murlin: Haven't seen any, but yeah, you – I'll let you pay me.

Meghan: [with a laugh] Yeah. All right, uh... I think that's it.

Murlin: I'm good.

Meghan: Ok. Sign-off. Ooh! Wait, I found my Twitter handle. It is "Varner underscore Meghan." I remembered it. That thing I never use. All right. Um... Cool sign-off goes here. I think I used that one before, but I still don't have a cool sign-off.

Murlin: Bummer.

Meghan: I know. All right.

Murlin: [like a fanfare] Da dada-daaa!