



## American Expression E2053 Cakewalk

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A "cakewalk" is a term with a rich and diverse history that has evolved over time to encompass various meanings and interpretations. Originally, it was a dance of African American origin that emerged in the United States during the 19th century. However, over the years, the term "cakewalk" has taken on several additional connotations, ranging from a simple and easy task to an extravagant or ostentatious display.

The cakewalk dance itself had its roots in the antebellum South, particularly among enslaved African Americans. It was initially performed as a form of entertainment within the Black community, often on plantations and during gatherings. The dance involved a series of exaggerated and comical movements, with participants strutting and competing to win a cake as a prize. The winner of the dance-off would be considered the most skilled or entertaining dancer.

Over time, the cakewalk dance evolved and began to incorporate elements of parody and satire, with participants mimicking the exaggerated manners and behaviors of the upper classes, including the way they walked and carried themselves. This subversion of social norms added an element of humor and commentary to the dance, making it both a form of entertainment and a subtle critique of the societal norms and expectations of the time. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the cakewalk dance became popular in mainstream culture, and it was even featured in vaudeville shows and minstrel performances. However, as it gained popularity among white audiences, it also underwent changes and adaptations that sometimes obscured its African American origins and social commentary.

Outside of the dance context, the term "cakewalk" began to be used metaphorically to describe any task or endeavor that was perceived as simple or easy. This usage likely originated from the fact that winning a cake in the cakewalk dance was seen as an effortless achievement, hence the association with something that required minimal effort. In the early 20th century, the term "cakewalk" took on yet another meaning. It was used in the world of music to describe a particular style of syncopated ragtime music, characterized by its lively and upbeat tempo. This genre of music contributed to the development of jazz and swing, further expanding the cultural influence of the term.

In contemporary usage, "cakewalk" retains its associations with ease and simplicity. When someone refers to a task or situation as a cakewalk, they are suggesting that it is straightforward and requires little effort. Additionally, the historical and cultural roots of the cakewalk dance are still acknowledged, especially in discussions of its origins and significance within African American culture.

In summary, the term "cakewalk" has a multifaceted history, encompassing its origins as a dance of African American origin, its metaphorical use to describe easy tasks, and its influence on music. It serves as a reminder of the complexities of cultural appropriation and adaptation, as well as the enduring impact of African American contributions to American culture, even in seemingly unrelated expressions like a simple cakewalk.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What are the historical and cultural origins of the cakewalk dance, and how did it evolve over time from its African American roots to mainstream popularity?
  2. How has the term "cakewalk" been adapted metaphorically in everyday language to describe tasks or situations that are perceived as easy? Can you provide examples from your own experiences?
  3. In what ways did the cakewalk dance serve as a form of social commentary and satire during its early years, and why was it significant within the context of racial and class dynamics in the United States?
  4. How did the cakewalk dance contribute to the development of music genres such as ragtime, jazz, and swing in the early 20th century? What musical characteristics are associated with cakewalk music?
  5. Reflecting on the historical roots of the cakewalk and its cultural significance, how can we ensure the preservation and acknowledgment of the African American contributions to American culture in contemporary discussions and representations of the cakewalk?
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