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## The Origins of the Cake Walk

*The cake walk became popular in the late 1800s as white performers in blackface performed the dance in the popular minstrel shows that mocked black life in the plantation South. But the original cake walk was in fact a parody in which black people made fun of the pretentious and dandified style of white society. Blacks would strut about in their best clothes with pails of water on their head so that their upper body would remain absolutely rigid. The winner was the dancer who spilled the least amount of water. Often ignorant of the fact that they were the objects of ridicule, whites would wager on the outcome of the cake walk competition unaware that the dance was in fact making fun of them.*

When people use the term “cake walk” today, they usually refer to a task that is incredibly easy to accomplish. But the original cake walk, which had its origins in southern slavery, was anything but a “piece of cake.” It was a complicated dance requiring a number of different skills. It almost always involved a strutting posture performed generally for whites. Black dancers would prance about sometimes with a pail of water on their head. The best dancer, usually the one who spilled the least amount of water, would win a cake or other prize. Whites would wager on the outcome.

The dance has its origins as far back as 1840. It seems likely that the cake walk originated in slaves’ quarters as a parody of the refined European waltzes and minuets that were the mainstay of the lavish balls held by whites on the plantation. Mocking their masters, the black dancers were accompanied by musicians who played the fiddle in a performance that corresponded to the string orchestras which played at the master’s ball. Pails of water were set on their head so the dancers would be forced to mimic the rigid style of European dance. Sometimes these parodies mocking the snobberies and smugisms of nineteenth-century white elites were held on the lawn of the plantation house while whites danced inside.

The slave dancers quickly came to the notice of their masters, who viewed the dance as splendid entertainment. Soon,

cake walk competitions were held between plantations so that the phenomenon quickly spread throughout the South. Black dancers would dress in their finest clothes to impress the white judges. The dancers who succeeded in moving the

most below the waist while maintaining a rigid neck and shoulders to balance the pail of water on their head were considered the best cake walkers.

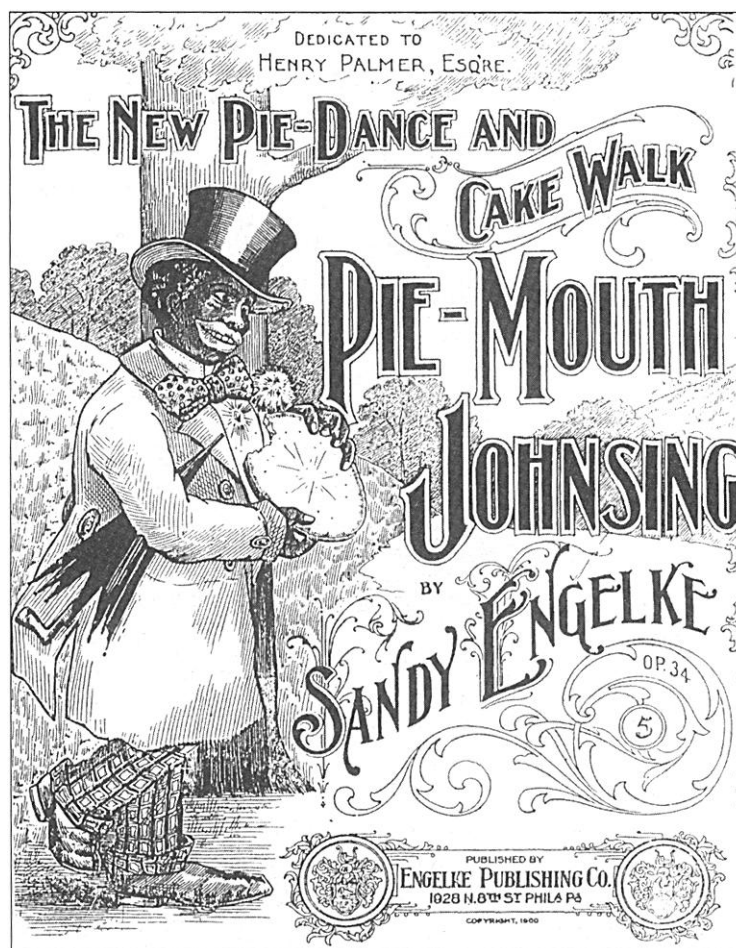
Subsequently, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the cake walk became immensely popular in minstrel shows nationwide as whites in blackface ridiculed black life on the plantation.

As a result of the popularity of the cake walk, some enterprising young white performers in minstrel shows tried to popularize a new dance. This new offering was called the pie dance. But this offshoot, featured in the sheet music pictured here, failed to find much favor with the public.

Throughout slavery and the Jim Crow years, blacks were never permitted openly to make

whites the butt of their jokes. But here in the cake walk and pie dance there was an indirect route of mimicry and ridicule.

Ralph Ellison’s father told his son: “I want you to undermine them with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction, and let ’em swallow you till they vomit or burst wide open.”



*The dandified black was a parody of hifalutin’ whites*