

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 226

“Our Native Music”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Jazz is something Negroes invented, and it said the most profound things—not only about us and the way we look at things, but about what modern democratic life is really about. It is the nobility of the race put into sound ... jazz has all the elements, from the spare and penetrating to the complex and enveloping. It is the hardest music to play that I know of, and it is the highest rendition of individual emotion in the history of Western music.

Winton Marsalis.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 226. Our Native Music.

The word *band* is one of those good, old, short, punchy, earthy, Anglo-Saxon words the English language is blessed with. Like many Anglo-Saxon words, it is just one of a set of words that relate to a common meaning and differ only in their vowel sound. *Band. Bind. Bond. Bound.* They all describe various aspects of holding things together, or of restraining something.

Thus, the oldest meaning of the word *band* is something that holds other things together. Even in our time, we still use the word in that sense, most commonly in the phrase *rubber band*. But old words have a habit of acquiring new meanings over the course of time. By the 15th century, the word *band* was also used in English to describe a group of men united—or bound—by a common purpose, often involving violence. So one might, for example, speak of a band of thieves. In this sense, the word filtered into the Latin languages and then back into Germanic languages as the word *bandit*.

Apart from thieves and robbers, the most common usage was: a band of soldiers.

Speaking of matters military, armies have been using drums since ancient times to help soldiers get organized and march in time. And then there are horns. The first people to use horns were

hunters, and the first horns were literal horns, culled from animals and hollowed out to make a noise. Hunters used them to signal to one another over a distance; it didn't take long for soldiers to figure out horns were equally useful on a battlefield. Later, horns made of horn gave way to horns made of metal, because metal is more durable, but you still find in the name the origin of the instrument.

So drums and horns have been essential tools of warfare for a very long time. In the heyday of the Ottoman Empire, about the same time as English-speakers began using the word *band* in connection with soldiers, the Turkish military began organizing groups of musicians among their military units to play drums and horns and other instruments not only to help organize marches but also for ceremonial occasions. These groups of musician-soldiers in particular came to be called in English *bands*. Their music also helped to raise morale and inspire soldiers with patriotic tunes. The Turkish origins of the military marching band can still be found in the way many European composers, including luminaries like Mozart and Beethoven, would designate one of their works, or a portion of a work, as a "Turkish march," or in Italian, *marcia alla turca*.

European militaries adopted this Turkish innovation, and by the 18th century, bands were a common feature in armies across the continent. By the 19th century, civilian organizations in Europe and in the United States began recruiting their own bands from among their membership. Police forces. Fire companies. Labor unions. Clubs and civic organizations.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, military-style band music was a popular musical form everywhere in the Western world, but no place more so than the United States, and here we find the unusual American custom of universities, colleges, and high schools in every town each having their own band that dresses in quasi-military uniforms and marches and parades while performing music. At public ceremonies. In parades. Concerts in parks, especially in gazebos and bandshells. You heard them at circuses, and indeed at most outdoor gatherings, including especially sporting competitions.

Why did bands become so big in the United States particularly? Perhaps because of the Civil War, during which many military bands were organized and trained. And they kept right on playing after their return to civilian life. By the late 19th century, marches were a common form of popular music. I talked about this prevalence of marches all the way back in the first episode of the podcast. There are many examples' take for instance 1896's "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." Hey, we haven't heard that one in a long time.

[music: "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight"]

The undisputed king of the march, at least in the United States, was and is John Philip Sousa, who composed and conducted band music in a career that spanned more than fifty years, from the 1870s to his death in 1932. His music remains popular and well known even in our time, a century later. Marches like this one:

[music: Sousa, “The Washington Post March”]

And this one:

[music: Sousa, “The Stars and Stripes Forever”]

And even this one:

[music: Sousa, “Liberty Bell March”]

If that last one, the “Liberty Bell March” sounds familiar, that’s because in 1969 it would become the theme music to the BBC television program *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, owing to the fact that it was in the public domain by then and could be used by the cash-strapped program without the need to pay anyone royalties.

But I digress. I mentioned marches back in episode 1. I also mentioned ragtime over the course of the podcast. I think did. Didn’t I? Ha, ha. I kid. I talked a lot about ragtime back in the days before the Great War. Ragtime emerged in the 1890s, an era which people in the 1920s began calling the Gay Nineties, just as they were calling their own era the Roaring Twenties. Ragtime music originated in the African-American community, and the undisputed king of ragtime was and is Scott Joplin, who gave us piano rags like this one:

[music: Joplin, “Maple Leaf Rag”]

And this one:

[music: Joplin, “Magnetic Rag”]

And even this one:

[music: Joplin, “The Entertainer”]

Ragtime was not the first distinctively African-American music to emerge in the United States, but it was the first to be embraced by all of America and become mainstream. What is ragtime, exactly? That can get pretty technical. For starters, I’ll note that there was a lot of music in the ragtime era—say, 1895-1915—that people of the day called “ragtime” that we wouldn’t call “ragtime” today. Ragtime was mostly composed for the piano and mostly performed there, as was the case with the music of Scott Joplin. Before the phonograph became commonplace, the principal way composers and songwriters made money was by selling sheet music, music that would be played on piano in private homes and at public venues. Every respectable middle class home of the era had a piano, and piano lessons were *de rigueur* for middle class children, especially the girls. The rise of ragtime led to a huge increase in demand for pianos and pianists.

The distinguishing feature of ragtime is its syncopated rhythm, meaning that beats and accents land where you wouldn’t normally expect them. In this way, ragtime is the polar opposite of

marching band music, which has the most steady and predictable rhythm imaginable: *One-two-three-four. One-two-three-four.* If you think back to the origin of the marching band, that is, prompting soldiers to march in step, you'll realize that steady and predictable is the whole point of the thing. Ragtime, by contrast, places accents on the off beat, which makes it about as far removed from band music as you can get. In fact, the 1920s is when we first hear English-speakers use the word *offbeat* to mean unusual or unconventional. We can therefore say that ragtime is in some sense the world's first offbeat music. Most students of ragtime believe the ragged rhythms that give it its name harken back to the complex drum beats of African music.

A purist would say that ragtime is piano music, and that it is music meant to be listened to, as opposed to danced to. But whatever the purists say, people of the ragtime era could and did dance to it. You can dance to conventional band music too, but conventional band music, with its stately, foursquare rhythm, encourages a slow and sweeping style of dance. Ragtime, on the other hand, with its quirky, peppy rhythms, encourages a fast and jerky style of dance that young people quickly embraced, much to the disapproval of their elders, who were too old to dance that way. Not for the first time did the older folks complain that the music and dance of the younger generation was vulgar and primitive, lacking in elegance and exhibiting a thinly veiled obsession with sex. It won't be the last time either. Also, given the music's African origins and the casual racism of the time, the word *African* was for many white people practically synonymous with *vulgar* and *immoral*. The *New York Herald* opined that ragtime dances were "symbolic of the primitive morality and perceptible moral limitations of the Negro..."

Hey, no problem. You're welcome.

Bands played ragtime too, whatever the purists might say. And young people danced to it, no matter what the *New York Herald* thought. And though we use a narrower definition of ragtime today, back in the early twentieth century, any lively, energetic music was likely to be tagged as ragtime, whether it fit the formal definition or not. Remember "Alexander's Ragtime Band," by Irving Berlin, episode 60? There's a piece of music about a ragtime band, so you know that ragtime bands were a thing, and it is clearly an attempt to ride the ragtime craze, even though most students of music today would not categorize it as ragtime.

[music: Berlin, "Alexander's Ragtime Band"]

Scott Joplin passed away in 1917, at the age of 48. And just as you can date the end of Baroque music to the death of Johann Sebastian Bach in 1750, you can date the end of ragtime to the death of Scott Joplin in 1917. Ragtime faded away at about this time, and all but disappeared until the ragtime revival of the 1970s, episode 42. But it wasn't so much that the public lost interest in ragtime; rather, the public's interest in ragtime was redirected into a newer kind of music, one that incorporated some of the features of ragtime and could be every bit as peppy and energetic, but was also a broader and more flexible style of music.

I am referring to jazz.

I can't tell you how long I've been looking forward to this subject. I want to begin by discussing the origins of jazz, and surprise! I have already very sneakily introduced you to two of them: the band, in the sense of the marching band or the concert band, and ragtime, its seeming antithesis. But as I said, bands played ragtime music too, and when that began to happen, jazz was just around the corner.

But jazz has a couple of other antecedents, besides marching bands and ragtime, so let's take a moment to consider these. I said earlier that ragtime was *not* the first distinctively African-American music. That would be the spiritual, a musical form the existence of which was noted as early as the late 18th century.

The enslaved Africans brought to the British colonies, and later to the United States, arrived maybe one-third Muslim and two-thirds believers in traditional African religions. North American slaveholders generally suppressed African languages and religious practices and typically compelled conversion to Christianity. Some thought that Christian slaves would be more obedient. Most enslaved African Americans embraced the Baptist or Methodist religious traditions. Christian worship was often the only place enslaved people could gather in numbers and speak about their personal experiences with some degree of freedom.

African-American spirituals were typically sung solo, sometimes in groups or in a pattern of solo call and group response. The lyrics drew on the white British and American hymn tradition and were typically retellings of stories from Scripture. The music—well, musicologists detect African musical traditions in the spiritual; some find evidence of Islamic influence. What resulted was a musical style that walks a line between melancholy and hopeful. The lyrics were often about sin and salvation, about being lost and then found, about being carried home, or crossing the river Jordan, or striving for the top of Jacob's ladder, and you can't help but think that these spiritual metaphors also functioned as metaphors for something a little closer to home.

[music: Traditional, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"]

Sometimes the slaveholders wondered too, about those metaphors. One perhaps too on-the-nose spiritual was "Go Down, Moses," with its lyrics evoking the Lord God of Israel intervening to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt, which some slaveholders banned outright, because Christianity is all well and good, taken in moderation, but let's not get carried away with it or anything. We have historical evidence that subtler lyrics about crossing the Jordan or entering Canaan were understood by the enslaved peoples as references to escaping slavery by crossing the Ohio River or fleeing to Canada. Canaan/Canada. Get it?

Similarly, when the song tells us that "[n]obody knows the trouble I've seen," it's hard not to think that there's more to it than just a metaphor for the bondage of sin.

But for our purposes, I want to focus on that bittersweet blend of sadness at one's lot and the hope of something better that you hear in the music. That's part of the heritage of the spiritual,

but you also find it in the spiritual's evil twin, the version of the spiritual that comes from the Mirror Universe and wears a goatee. I am referring of course to the blues.

The blues first appeared after the Civil War, when slavery was abolished and African Americans could speak their minds, well, at least a little more freely than before. The name comes from *feeling blue* in the sense of feeling depressed, a usage that first appeared in the late 18th century. You wonder how the color blue got associated with depression. That's not entirely clear. It may have something to do with the association of blue with cold or illness, and the change in skin tone that these produce. Or it may have something to do with *blue devils*, an image long associated with illness and particularly with alcoholism.

As is the case with ragtime, a modern purist might want to define blues music in a narrow way, but in the latter years of the 19th century, when the blues were coming into their own, most people applied the label to a wide variety of styles. Blues music shares with spirituals that special blend of sadness and wistful hope. It differs from the spiritual in that the subject matter is relentlessly secular, often profane, to the point that religiously devout African Americans often deplored the blues. There are in fact blues songs on themes like "my mama doesn't like me singing the blues" or "the preacher told me to stop singing the blues."

Typical topics for blues songs are misfortune, economic adversity, the woes brought on by drinking or gambling, and most commonly, lost or unrequited love. But it would be a mistake to think of blues music as relentlessly downbeat. Blues songs can be humorous, indulge in word play, mock or satirize social conventions. Some of them got very explicitly sexual. Early blues music was sung solo, or accompanied with harmonica or banjo, a musical instrument with African roots.

For decades, the blues were a regional American folk music, well known in the African-American community, but ignored, when not outright looked down upon, by the larger American culture. Let me introduce you to the person who changed all that. William Christopher Handy, better known as W.C. Handy, was born in 1873 in a log cabin in Florence, Alabama, which lies in the northwestern corner of the state. The cabin had been built by Handy's grandfather, William Wise Handy, who after the abolition of slavery became a preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. His son, Charles Barnard Handy, followed his father into the ministry, but his son, W.C., had no interest in anything but music. Which was unfortunate, given that his father believed secular music was an instrument of the devil.

The family was well off by the standards of the time, and W.C. got a full public education. By the time he was sixteen, he was already organizing and directing his classmates in barbershop quartet performances. At that same age, he earned enough money on the side, picking berries, to buy a guitar, his first musical instrument. When he showed it to his father, the elder Handy asked him, "Whatever possessed you to bring a sinful thing like that into a Christian home?" and made the boy return it.

W.C.'s father arranged organ lessons for his son, so he could play music in church, but that never took. He bought a cornet and joined a local band, this time keeping it secret from his family. He supported himself as a laborer in various jobs and observed that, as he himself put it later, the African Americans of his youth "sang about everything... They accompany themselves on anything from which they can extract a musical sound or a rhythmic effect... In this way, and from these materials, they set the mood for what we now call blues."

By 1896, at the age of 23, W.C. Handy was a bandleader and he and his band toured across the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Cuba. In 1900, he took a teaching position at what was then called the Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College for Negroes, and is today known as Alabama A&M University. He only lasted two years there, because first, he chafed at the music department's insistence on a very formal, European style of performance that rejected the African-American students' own musical heritage, and second, he was making more money touring with his band.

So he returned to touring. In 1903, he took a job directing an African-American band in Mississippi. He describes an incident that happened two years later, when he and his band were performing before an African-American audience. Some in the audience asked his group to play "our native music." Later that same evening, while Handy's band was taking a break, three local musicians got up on stage and filled in the time. Handy's description of them has little good to say about their scruffy looks or the quality of their instruments or their musicianship, but when they played, the music was haunting, and the audience responded by showering the stage with silver coins. Quarters, half-dollars, dollars. That was big money at the time, and it made W.C. Handy sit up and take notice. One of the things he took notice of was that this scruffy ad hoc trio had just made more money than his much larger and better trained band had agreed to accept for that night's performance. Clearly, there was a large and untapped demand in the African-American community for more of "our native music."

Handy became a close student of African-American folk music in rural Mississippi. His training and his ear were acute enough that he could listen to and transcribe what he was hearing from the Black people around him, becoming perhaps the first person to make a serious effort to record and study blues. He took note of its characteristics. The number of bars, the repeated lines, the flattened thirds and sevenths that give the music its distinctive sound. He began to incorporate these characteristics into his own music.

Handy's band was successful enough that in 1909, they moved to Memphis, Tennessee, to play on Beale Street, the African-American entertainment district in that city. That same year, a white Democratic politician named Edward Crump was running for mayor of Memphis. Crump, unlike many Southern Democratic politicians, welcomed African-American votes, indeed courted African Americans as a constituency and advocated for voting rights. Handy wrote a campaign song for Crump, who went on to win his election, but the song itself became so popular that Handy reworked the music and lyrics and it became "The Memphis Blues." Handy sold the

publishing rights to the song for \$100, which had to have been the equivalent of a couple of months' salary, and a New York publisher sold it in sheet music form, which you'll recall was the principal way songwriters made money back then.

That was 1912. "The Memphis Blues" and a couple of other blues songs by other composers became the first blues published and marketed by Tin Pan Alley. This was the heyday of ragtime and perhaps it had helped whet the American appetite for more African-American music. Blues sheet music did not sell spectacularly well at first. Then in 1914, the Victor Recording Company made a recording of "The Memphis Blues" performed by the company's house band, the Victor Marching Band. Here's a sample:

[music: Handy, "The Memphis Blues"]

Maybe people needed to hear it in order to "get" it. The record was a big success, and it in turn sold copies of the sheet music. To Handy's dismay, "The Memphis Blues" made a whole lot more money than the \$100 he got out of it. He went around complaining he'd been robbed, though of course this is the kind of robbery that's legal. Handy was determined never to let anything like this happen to him again. He partnered with an African-American businessman in Memphis named Harry Pace, who was an associate of W.E.B. DuBois, and together they founded their own sheet music company, Handy and Pace, and here is where Handy's future work would be published. After a few songs that produced only lackluster sales, Handy came up with his next big hit, a piece he said was inspired by a meeting with a woman in St. Louis whose husband had left her. She told Handy, "My man's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea." He incorporated the line into his song and called it "The St. Louis Blues."

[music:

"The St. Louis Blues" would become a big hit, a bigger hit than "The Memphis Blues," in fact, and the biggest hit of Handy's career, and this time he would get to keep every cent of the royalties. In fact, this one song would bring in enough money to support Handy for the rest of his life. W.C. Handy would become known as "the father of the blues," although maybe "the discoverer of the blues" is closer to the truth.

All right, now we have our ingredients lined up on the counter. Spirituals. Blues. Ragtime. And marching bands. If we tossed all these into the cooking pot, what sort of stew would we get? Or maybe I should ask, what sort of gumbo would we get? Because the town where all these musical ingredients came together and simmered was New Orleans, an American community with a long musical tradition, and a lot of distinctive cultural elements. Including gumbo.

Another distinctive cultural element in New Orleans is the use of marching bands in funeral processions, which was a common practice by the early twentieth century. And that's how you end up with these loosey-goosey marching band renditions of African-American spirituals. For example:

[music: Traditional, "When the Saints Go Marching In"]

Which brings us to another word I want to talk about: jazz. The origin of this word is obscure. There are various hypotheses, the most persuasive of which suggest that the original meaning was sexual. By the early twentieth century, the word was being used in the sense of "lively" or "energetic," as in the case of the sportswriter in 1906 who reported that a baseball player "put jazz on the ball." All I can say is, I hope someone washed it off afterward.

For a period of ten years, more or less, from 1907-1917, jazz, or jass, j-a-s-s, as it was more commonly called back then, was New Orleans' best kept secret. Jazz was the gumbo that came out of the pot after you tossed in marching bands, ragtime, spirituals, and blues and let them simmer for a while in the sultry climate of New Orleans.

In 1938, the radio program *Ripley's Believe It or Not* asserted that W.C. Handy was both the father of blues and the father of jazz. This is a dubious claim. Father of blues for sure, father of jazz, not so much, though some of Handy's blues songs would be enthusiastically taken up by jazz musicians, "The St. Louis Blues" being the most obvious example. When that radio program made that claim, it elicited a sharp objection from a jazz musician who insisted he had invented jazz back in 1902.

His birth name was Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe, and he was born to a Creole woman in New Orleans about 1890-ish. No one knows for certain. His parents were not married, and his father left when Ferdinand was still a toddler. When his mother married, he took his stepfather's surname and became Ferdinand Morton.

His claim that he invented jazz in 1902 has to be an exaggeration. He was only twelve years old or so at that time, although he was demonstrating musical ability on a number of different instruments and was singing spirituals at funerals in exchange for a ham sandwich from the buffet table. When his mother died, Ferdinand and his two sisters moved in with his great grandmother. Soon afterward, at the age of fourteen, he got a job playing piano in a brothel. The job didn't pay especially well, but he made good tips, enough to afford fine clothes and a Stetson hat. There he also earned his nickname: Jelly Roll. Knowing his great grandmother wouldn't approve, Ferdinand told her he was working night shift in a barrel factory. That covered him until one day when he was seventeen and his great grandmother ran into him on her way to church. He was dressed in fine clothes, which led to sharp questions, which led to a confession. His great grandmother told him he was a bad influence on his sisters and kicked him out of the house.

And so Jelly Roll Morton was on his own from the age of 17, in 1907 New Orleans, but talented enough he could support himself touring and performing, with enough left over to send money home to his family. It may be a stretch to say that Jelly Roll Morton invented jazz, but if there *is* any one musician who can make that claim, he's the one. He developed his own raucous style of piano playing, intended to imitate the sound of a band. For just as ragtime seemed most at home

on the piano, jazz seemed to sound best when played by a band with a cornet, clarinet and drums at minimum, and as loud as possible.

Jelly Roll Morton the music theorist believed that blues music was full of passion, but too simple musically. Ragtime was all about a certain kind of syncopation, and, he said, only certain tunes could be played in that fashion. Ragtime music always tempted the musician to play faster, to the detriment of the music, a sentiment that Scott Joplin certainly would have endorsed.

Jazz, by contrast, wasn't about the composition itself. It was about the style of performance. Jazz music swings, which means the tempo varies. Jazz is full of interpretation and improvisation, which puts it in stark contrast with what we call classical music, which demands of its musicians strict adherence to the written score. Jazz musicians, by contrast, play with a minimal score, sometimes with just what is called a "lead sheet," that contains no more than a melody and some chord progressions. Jazz musicians often toss the lead melody back and forth, with the other musicians organizing a counterpoint around it. A typical jazz performance also includes breaks, in which the musicians take turns playing the melody solo and improvising their own riffs on it.

Jelly Roll composed a number of original piano pieces while he was still a teenager, including a little number called "The Jelly Roll Blues." He and other performers have created many lyrics for it over the years, including a song about himself: "In New Orleans, Louisiana town/there's the finest boy for miles around/Lord, Mr. Jelly Roll, your affection he has stole./He's so tall and chancey,/He's the lady's fancy/Everybody know him/Certainly do adore him."

"The Jelly Roll Blues" was published in sheet music form in 1915, probably about a decade after Morton first composed it, and many music historians would point to this moment, and this song, as the first published jazz composition.

But jazz was not yet well known outside of New Orleans. Remember, jazz is more of a style of performance than a style of composition, and a musician who's never heard a jazz performance isn't going to pick it up from a sheet of paper. In another time and place, jazz music might have remained a local specialty and never achieved wide circulation. But at this moment in history, in the second decade of the twentieth century, jazz musicians were bringing the news of jazz to the outside world one performance, one tour at a time.

And more important still, the phonograph was becoming commonplace, and owners of the new machines were looking for new records to play on them. Sound recordings represented a whole new technology for introducing jazz to a broader audience.

But it would not be Jelly Roll Morton, or any other African-American New Orleans musician who would introduce jazz to the mainstream audience. African-American musicians weren't getting recording deals in 1915. So the first band to cut a jazz record would be—

Well, that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Betsy for her kind donation, and thank you to Mark for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Betsy and Mark help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to everyone else who has pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as I finally divulge the name of the first jazz band to cut a phonograph record, and we look at how jazz became the most popular music of the time, so much so that we now call this era "the jazz age." Next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned the new style of dancing that the new music inspired, and how it was deplored. In 1914, the same year that "Memphis Blues" was published, two of the most noted dancers in America were the husband-and-wife team of Vernon and Irene Castle. Mr. Castle was an Englishman from Norwich; Mrs. Castle was an American from New Rochelle, New York. The Castles toured in Europe and in the United States, dancing in vaudeville and on Broadway. Irene became a fashion icon; millions of American women copied her look.

They danced the latest steps to the latest music, including tango and ragtime. When they toured, they brought along a ten-member all-African-American band, led by James Reese Europe, a musician we've encountered before and I'll be talking about again. But whatever discomfort white America might have had with African-American music was dispelled by the Castles themselves. They were white; they were classy, elegant, clean cut, and sophisticated. And they were married to each other, so that made the rhythms and the close contact of their dance routines totally innocent. They had a license. Their popularity and polish helped make the new dances respectable to mainstream America.

In December 1914, the magazine *Ladies' Home Journal* included a photo spread of the Castles demonstrating the latest dance steps, including what the magazine called the "Castle Fox Trot." The foxtrot was named after Harry Fox, a vaudeville performer who helped popularize it, but Fox and the Castles both learned the step from African Americans. It was part waltz, part tango, and said to have been inspired by "The Memphis Blues."

Thanks to the Castles, the foxtrot would become not only respectable and accepted, but indeed the most popular dance step in America for the next fifty years or so, until the rise of rock and roll, and it remains a standard ballroom dance to this day.

[music: Closing Theme]

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