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That takes the cake!

by Maurice Powell

The Cake Walk comes to Douglas

Dance fashions wax and wane, but few were as short-lived as the craze for the Cake Walk, which arrived in Douglas with a flourish at the Grand Theatre on September 20th 1897* as a feature of a six-night run of John W. Isham's play *Oriental America!* The play was followed by 'the Ludicrous, Mirth-making Negro Absurdity, *The Blackville Derby!*' during which 'the latest Darkey melodies will be sung by Jockeys, Touts, Plungers and Bookies. A Perfect Epitome of Negro Character'. The extravaganza concluded with a genuine 'Coon Cake Walk from the days of negro bondage', introducing 'the peculiar dancing step (that) is natural to the negro race', featuring Isham's 'High-born, Free-born, Anglo-American Ladies'.

* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 18.09.1897

'Sech dancin' you never seen before'

The Cake Walk (Cake-Walk or Cakewalk) derived from the 'chalk-line', 'walk around dances', or 'prize walks' which originated among American black slaves on the Southern plantations as a high stepping, strutting parody of the European ballroom dances favoured by the 'white folks' in the 'big house' who oppressed them. The dancers would parade up and down in 'posh' hand-me-down clothes to a lively tune; the slave owners were probably the first judges of these impromptu displays!

In the wake of the Cake Walk exhibition at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, the Cake Walk was soon adopted by Minstrel groups and became a grotesque parody of itself with evermore colourful and gaudy costumes and eccentric, prancing steps. By 1900 the Cake Walk had become a dance craze in ballrooms throughout Britain, and Cake Walk competitions soon became a feature of many dance programmes.

'A procession, less of a dance'.*

Couples formed a square with handsomely attired men in top hat, tails and cane on the inside, and paraded round whilst the judges, looking out for the elegant bearing of the men and the grace of the women, eliminated them one by one until last couple were declared the winners and presented with a decorated cake - hence the expression 'take the cake' - although in Douglas cash prizes of 3, 2 and 1 guinea were more usual.

* 'Who Takes the Cake', Regan Shrumm, 2016, citing the opinion of an English traveller who witnessed a cakewalk in Ohio in 1897 and reported their experience to the *Illustrated London News*.

The first piece of music played in Douglas associated with the Cake Walk featured in a concert at the Palace in 1902, *Whistling Rufus*, by Kerry Mills (1899), a 'jaunty, lightly syncopated march,' suitable for dancing the two-step, polka and cakewalk.

Cake Walk Competitions

An advertisement for the first Calk Walk competition in Douglas appeared in the *Isle of Man Examiner* in August 1903 promoting an entertainment 'new to Douglas' on 13th August at the Derby Castle. A second competition was advertised for 19th August and took place at around 8.30 during an interval in the dance programme. The *Examiner* of 15th August gives a brief description of the event under the headline 'Exciting Scenes':

'An immense crowd assembled at Derby Castle on Thursday might to witness a cake walk for prizes offered by the management. Not only were the pavilion and galleries crowded, but the people assembled so thickly in the grounds that the admission gates had to be closed, leaving hundreds outside'. Even the stage was besieged by on-lookers to the dismay of the band who nevertheless 'continued to play an excellent selection of airs'. Four couples competed on that occasion although 'so great was the crush' the officials had some difficulty in clearing a small space on the dance floor for them. 'The couples gyrated and stepped in the eccentric fashion which the negroes of the Southern States of America are supposed to have inherited from their fetish-worshipping ancestors'. The judge that evening was the great music hall comedian Wilkie Bard who awarded prizes to three couples.

The first Cake Walk competition at the Palace took place on 21st August. Some six thousand attended, six couples competed on the stage, and the adjudicator, the comedian Ernest Shand, selected three winning couples.

'a unique combination of eccentric walking and dancing'.

In September 1904, 'two little dots' of nine or ten years of age appeared dressed as a negro and negress and won first prize at a Cake Walk competition at the New Empire Theatre.* Later that month the Brothers Redmond - billed as 'acrobatic grotesques' - presented a 'comic and acrobatic exhibition of cake walking' at the same theatre.

* Situated in Regent Street, opposite the Post office.

The public's appetite for the Cake Walk did not diminish once the summer season was over, as demonstrated by an advertisement in the *Manx Sun** for a Benefit Concert at the Gaiety Theatre, which promised the appearance of The Gay Little Coons, a Cake Walk Competition, Plantation Frolics, Coon Songs and Dances - in which Miss Adeline Wood, the sister of Harry and Haydn Wood took part - Big Boot Dancing (*à la* Little Tich), Sand Dancing and Banjo and Mandoline Solos. The orchestra was conducted by F. C. Poulter; the leader was Haydn Wood.

* *Manx Sun*, 25.02.1905

The craze for the Cake Walk and Cake Walk competitions was, however, short-lived. There are no references to these events in the local newspapers after 1907, and Harry Wood dropped the Cake Walk from his dance programmes at the Palace and Derby Castle ballrooms after 1909. By 1911, the Cake Walk seems to have yielded to the Barn Dance in popularity.

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