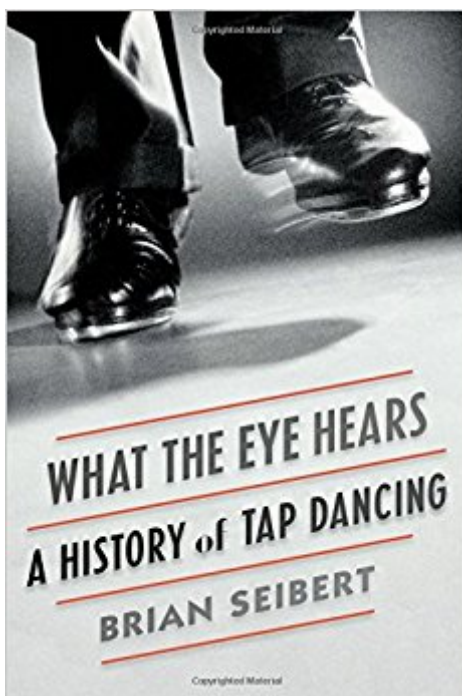


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# What The Eye Hears: A History Of Tap Dancing



## Synopsis

Finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Nonfiction Winner of Anisfield-Wolf Book Award Magisterial, revelatory, and-most suitably-entertaining, *What the Eye Hears* offers an authoritative account of the great American art of tap dancing. Brian Seibert, a dance critic for *The New York Times*, begins by exploring tap's origins as a hybrid of the jig and clog dancing from the British Isles and dances brought from Africa by slaves. He tracks tap's transfer to the stage through blackface minstrelsy and charts its growth as a cousin to jazz in the vaudeville circuits and nightclubs of the early twentieth century. Seibert chronicles tap's spread to ubiquity on Broadway and in Hollywood, analyzes its decline after World War II, and celebrates its rediscovery and reinvention by new generations of American and international performers. In the process, we discover how the history of tap dancing is central to any meaningful account of American popular culture. This is a story with a huge cast of characters, from Master Juba (it was probably a performance of his in a Five Points cellar that Charles Dickens described in *American Notes for General Circulation*) through Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and Gene Kelly and Paul Draper to Gregory Hines and Savion Glover. Seibert traces the stylistic development of tap through individual practitioners, vividly depicting dancers both well remembered and now obscure. And he illuminates the cultural exchange between blacks and whites over centuries, the interplay of imitation and theft, as well as the moving story of African-Americans in show business, wielding enormous influence as they grapple with the pain and pride of a complicated legacy. *What the Eye Hears* teaches us to see and hear the entire history of tap in its every step.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 624 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (November 17, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0865479534

ISBN-13: 978-0865479531

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 0.1 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 26 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #258,139 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #4 in Books > Arts & Photography > Performing Arts > Dance > Tap #1451 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Pop Culture >

General #1739 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > African-American Studies

## Customer Reviews

An Economist Best Book of 2015 A Finalist for National Book Critics Circle Award "His big, smart, wonderfully anecdotal and definitive history of tap dance...offers passion about its subject, deft evocations of dance action and a narrative mischief suited to tap's trickster mentality. . . Mr. Seibert's way of explaining tap constitutes nothing less than a social history of our country's deepest folk and pop roots. . . He rolls out a cast of thousands. . . and he layers their storiesâ•black dancers on white on blackâ•so deftly that a reader turning the pages gets a visceral sense of the art's constant overlap. . . Decorating each phase of this tap epic are terrific moments in which the art's rhythmical virtuosity seems to pass into Mr. Seibert's own prose. . . Nothing in this rich volume goes awry." â•Elizabeth Kendall, The New York Times "There have been some valuable works [about tap dancing] but never a volume that did the real heavy lifting: critical, analytical, historical, comprehensive. . . That book has now been published. . . [Seibert] himself is an artist -- he writes beautiful prose and is a crackerjack storyteller. . . It's hard to know which of Seibert's dance portraits to highlight because there are so many wonderful ones." â•Joan Acocella, The New Yorker "Brian Seibert's authoritative *What the Eye Hears* illuminates those beginnings [of tap dance] -- along with what happened afterward -- as well as anyone ever will. His research is as thorough about the 1820s as about last week. Seibert . . . has smoked out every clip, sat through every silly old movie, read everything and sorted it all out for the rest of us . . . [he] does a sterling job of telling the story of where tap has been, and why it matters." â•John McWhorter, New York Times Book Review "Seibert cares, first and foremost, about the dance as dance. Heâ™s done a marvelous job tracking that dance, too, digging deep into primary sources to help you see, and hear, dozens of tappers from the nineteenth century to the present . . . Seibert generously invites both the famous and nearly forgotten into his pages, making a case for why each of them matters as an artist. . . This is masterful storytelling." â•Megan Pugh, The New Republic "A comprehensive and engaging study and celebration of this lively art. . . *What the Eye Hears* is much more than a roll-call of tap stars. Mr. Seibert also stages a challenge-dance with the big themes entwined in tapâ™s history. . . His critical footwork dazzles." â•Tom Nolan, The Wall Street Journal "Seibert, a dance critic for the New York Times, documents every stage and hooper with passion, intelligence, and detail." â•Christine Smallwood, Harper's Magazine "Mr. Seibert's writing is so engaging, transporting the reader back in time. . . You would need a heart of stone for his enthusiasms not to rub off of you." â•The

Economist" Oh, but this book is fun. Brian Seibert's meticulously researched, breezily written history of tap dance, "What the Eye Hears," shuffles and slides and Shim Shams across the page irresistibly; when you close its pages, you still hear tapping feet." — Moira Macdonald, Seattle Times "Comprehensive, nuanced, and enlightening" — Jane Ciabattari, [bbc.com](http://bbc.com) "A glorious account of one of the most popular forms of dance . . . Anyone interested in dance, popular culture, and African American history will enjoy this comprehensive work." — Carolyn Mulac, Booklist "The word comprehensive comes to mind, but is insufficient to properly describe the depth of detail Seibert achieves . . . Fascinating, sharply written cultural analysis." — Publishers Weekly (starred review) "An intelligent, thoughtful assessment worth dipping into by anyone interested in American culture." — Kirkus Reviews "Tap is America's great contribution to dance, and Brian Seibert's book gives us—at last!—a full-scale (and lively) history of its roots, its development, and its glorious achievements. An essential book!" — Robert Gottlieb, dance critic for The New York Observer and editor of Reading Dance "Brian Seibert's What the Eye Hears not only tells you all you wanted to know about tap dancing; it tells you what you never realized you needed to know. Drawing on his massive research, Seibert follows the art through its roots, its vaudeville heyday, its forays onto Broadway and into Hollywood, its decline, its renaissance, and its dissemination beyond American shores. And he recounts all this in an easygoing style, providing vibrant descriptions of the dancing itself and illuminating commentary by those masters who could make a floor sing." — Deborah Jowitt, author of Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance and Time and the Dancing Image "In the best possible sense, Seibert is in love with his subject. He almost can't get enough of it, digging deeply into the lore as well as the history of tap's emergence as an original American art form. His observations are entertaining and at times—since minorities have been preponderant from the start—profoundly moving. When it comes to the greats—Astaire, Bojangles, Savion—Seibert's detailed descriptive insights seem to take us truly inside their artistry." — Nancy Reynolds, Director of Research, The George Balanchine Foundation

"Tap is America's great contribution to dance, and Brian Seibert's book gives us—at last!—a full-scale (and lively) history of its roots, its development, and its glorious achievements. An essential book!" — Robert Gottlieb, dance critic for The New York Observer and editor of Reading Dance "Brian Seibert's What the Eye Hears not only tells you all you wanted to know about tap dancing; it tells you what you never realized you needed to know. Drawing on his massive research, Seibert follows the art through its roots, its vaudeville heyday, its forays onto Broadway and into Hollywood, its decline, its renaissance, and its dissemination beyond American shores. And

he recounts all this in an easygoing style, providing vibrant descriptions of the dancing itself and illuminating commentary by those masters who could make a floor sing."--Deborah Jowitt, author of *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* and *Time and the Dancing Image*

This book is a masterful history of tap. He weaves together so much: the roots of dances from slavery in America, Irish clubbing, early Blackface minstrel shows, actual Black minstrel shows and a whole array of dancers. He focuses on the art of Henri Cole, the Nicolas brothers, Fred Astaire, Eleanor Powell, Gregory Hines and Savion Glover and many, many others. Seibert is a dance critic for the New York Times and "What the Eye Hears" reflects that fact. Astaire and Rogers remain at the pinnacle. Gene Kelly not so much. He seems taken back by Glover, greatness mixed with - at times - a bad attitude. He lauds what is available on YouTube, as I sit back and watch perfection -- Astaire and Powell tapping to Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine." For anyone who loves dance, this book is an essential. One other plus: the photographs are amazing.

A much welcomed addition to the still scant historical literature on tap dance. Seibert is not only a dance critic but is a tap dancer himself. He has not only immersed himself in the art's history but is able to apply his own critical insight to those developments in the form that he has witnessed.

*What the Eye Hears: a History of Tap Dancing* by Brian Seibert (2015, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, hard bound, 624 pages with photos: \$23) Fascinating, well-written fun (and jargon-free), Seibert's definitive history and informed consideration about percussive dance offers more than its subtitle promises. Percussive dance found stages in minstrelsy, revue, vaudeville, jazz clubs, musical comedy, movies and television; in writing about tap, Brian Seibert places it within social history and show business. And much of what he tells us as a fellow tapper, dance reviewer and chronicler is not only how the eye hears but how we who attend dance respond to what we see and hear as our muscles and tendons contract, expand and nearly stomp and soar. In my opinion, this book is also a caution to those who are merely academic theorists: if you can't do it, don't know it in your bones and heart: don't try to write about it. *What the Eye Hears* is one big bargain of a book, in quality and quantity. I would not be surprised to find the publishers raising the price following this initial offering. Frank Cullen; co-founder of American Vaudeville Museum; author of *Vaudeville, Old & New: an Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*

This author is a little on the complex side as far as choice of words. (could be a little "show-offee")

but in spite of that he covers the subject in tremendous detail. I'm 87 and have been tapping for a year now. (maybe I'm a little show-off in mentioning that) Reading the book gave me a whole new look at the "art". With the names of all the famous dancers of the past, I'm able to check these people out on youtube and see clips from way back when of the people in action. It's a bit of a tough read but well worth it if you want the whole 9 yards.

I am only half way through this book and I'd thought I'd take a break and write a short review. What the Eye Hears is an astonishing work of scholarship and even better a remarkably entertaining read. More importantly it's a timely piece of scholarship that brings perspective to not only the art of tap, but to how oppressed people blend their cultures through the language of art...in this case tap dancing. On one level Seibert is telling us the untold story of America, a theme I did not expect to find in a book about tap dancing. This book isn't a fog of facts so don't be put off by its length. It's a good read, full of humor, joy and triumph. This is one book I'll read twice.

A big book. I assumed in 600 or so pages that a book about tap dance would have clattered on and on about Gene Kelly, but no. Kelly gets scant mention and -- guess what? -- Brian Seibert is right. It was an eye opener. This book is populated by long lost names and talents. Do yourself a favor, read the book with YOUTUBE close by. There are snippets all over of these great folks (Peg Leg Bates -- yes, a one-legged tap dancer who started before radio and was still dancing on the Ed Sullivan and Dean Martin shows). I am thrilled to have gone through this book, glad to have seen my eyes open to the real history of tap

I've just started the book, so it's a bit early to give an overall rating, but I like it so far and loved learning about the shim sham. It may be the "national anthem of tap dancing" as the author says but I hadn't heard of it before. Went on Youtube and am starting to learn it.

This is a masterpiece but an easy read for it really is the encyclopedia of the history of tap dancing. Makes you want to watch old tap dance movies and get yourself up and tap.

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