The Article that Invigorated Scholarship on Blacks in Dance

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In 1976, the New York Amsterdam News published an article by little known dance researcher Joe Nash as the complete September/October National Scene Magazine supplement. The 1976 article, Dancing Many Drums, quickly gained the attention of the community of African American dancers, artists and historians. This paper will focus on how the seminal article by Nash came to be written and published and its ultimate impact on the research and publication of articles and books on the artistic contributions of African Americans to the field of concert dance. Excerpts from personal interviews with Nash will illustrate how the publication forever changed his life.

In 1976, the New York Amsterdam News published an article by little known dance researcher Joe Nash as the complete September/October National Scene Magazine supplement. The 1976 article, “Dancing Many Drums,” moved quickly through the community of African American dancers, artists and historians, inspiring them to seek him for guidance and access. This article will introduce Joseph V(ictor) Nash and through Nash’s own words explain how his seminal article came to be written and published and examine its impact on the research and publication of books and articles on the artistic contributions of African Americans on the dance field and provide insight to its effect on his personal journal.

Who was Joe Nash?
Joe Nash was a dancer, dance historian, a lecturer on dance history and Christian education, and a consultant in both areas. He was a member of the Pearl Primus Company, from 1946–47 and performed in Donald McKayle’s Games in 1951 and danced in numerous musicals that toured the United States and Europe. Nash was a choreographer and instructor at the Judimar School of Dance in Philadelphia, PA, 1948–50s; for the National Council of Churches he advanced from clerk to religious educator to consultant, 1970s–2005; and for the American Dance Festival he served
as a consultant and history lecturer on blacks in dance from 1987–2005. For Arthur Mitchell’s Dance Theatre of Harlem, Alvin Ailey’s American Dance Theatre, Joan Myers Brown’s PhilaDanco and the International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD), Nash was the primary lecturer on dance history. Joe Nash was born in 1919 and passed away in 2005.

The Path to Dancing Many Drums in the Amsterdam News

On the evening of January 23, 1999, at the IABD Conference in Denver Colorado, Joe Nash told me about the genesis of, “Dancing Many Drums” and how his life was subsequently changed by the article.

Nash:

The New York Foundation of the Arts gave me a small grant of $5,000.00. I owe it all to Arthur Mitchell. I was speaking to Arthur Mitchell, one day in his office about some of my material that I had in my possession. [Nash was known for collecting concert programs and playbills, newspaper articles, magazines, photos and books that contained any information on dance] He [Mitchell] said, “Joe you need some money.” He got on the phone and within three weeks I had a check of $5,000.00 from the New York Foundation of the Arts. And what I did, I made a plan to work in three areas. One area would deal with the collection of playbills and memorabilia. The other area would deal with decoupage. Where we would have a person who was expert in decoupage take old programs and souvenir material and place it on this wood. [The items are in the Nash Collection at the Wilberforce African American Museum in Ohio.] The third area would be the slide show. That turned out to be the most successful; it’s the basis for my work with the American Dance Festival, from 1987. [Nash’s slide shows also became a regular feature of the IABD Annual Conferences.]

Joe Nash began collecting dance memorabilia as a middle school project. He was fascinated by the subject of dance and dancers of all idioms; he began teaching himself classical positions and movements by the drawings and photographs in the various books he collected. Nash continued collecting throughout his days in the Army, instructing his mother, “don’t throw away any of my clippings.” upon his departure for basic training. He kept up with the careers of
dancers he had previously read about while in the service during World War II. Later while on tour with national and international musical productions he continued to collect, finding publications that were decades old.

Nash:

I was aware that I was interested in dance and I was collecting, but I had no purpose, just for my own self-enlightenment and edification. I was collecting all of this material. When we were in Chicago, in *Inside USA*, I discovered this back issue shop. I said to the man, “Do you have any back issues on dance?” He said, “Go into the back, I want to get rid of all of those dance publications that are in the back.” I walked back there and I wanted to run out of the shop. They were only 25 cents apiece and they were *Dance Magazine* of the 1920s. You’ll find them in Lincoln Center.

My collection really came into its own while I was working in Christian Education because of Clarence Holmes who was an archivist and a book collector … what do they call them? He was a lover of books, a…bibliophile. He came to my office one day and said, “Joe, Joe Nash, I heard that you have a collection of materials on dance. Would you be interested in writing an essay?”

I said, “I’m not a writer.” He said, “Why don’t you try it? We’ll use photographs from your collection to illustrate your essay.” Well once I started, I had problems getting started because my work, my 9 to 5 work, was my priority. So how could I do both? So I started and I stopped. So he came by the office one day and said, “You will write this essay. I said, “Oh Mr. Holmes.” He was really such a charming man and I did not want to disappoint him so I really started once again and I finished the essay. And when I handed in my manuscript his eyes popped. He said, “I had no idea, the scope of your writing on history.” This publication was supposed to share space with another essay on art. He wiped that off the books, because he used my entire essay in this publication. It was a supplement to the *Amsterdam News*.

The Nash article, published in 1976, was so extensive and comprehensive that it far exceeded the scope of Clarence Holmes’ expectations. Nash believed that any job worth doing deserved his utmost in commitment and diligence, he applied the same principles to his writing that he applied to performing.

Nash:
And when that hit the stands, people called from all over. “Are you the same Joe Nash that I used to know as a kid on 99th Street?” From California! People in New York said, “Joe Nash, I used to dance with Joe Nash. I wonder if it’s the same person.” My life changed overnight and there I am in Christian Education, in an office. And here this dance essay introduces me to the dance community. My life became so involved in the subject of dance. That’s when ADF heard of me. And that ushered in a whole new chapter of my life.

After the Publication of Dancing Many Drums

In the meantime, my collection was still growing and I was asked to do an exhibit right there on the premises at the Inter-Church Center. This was the opportunity for me to bring it [the collection] out of mothballs. The person who coordinated the exhibit was so enthusiastic about an exhibit of this nature, on dance. It was the first time in the history of the [Inter-Church] Council that dance as an art form, was going to be featured. She worked diligently to help the exhibit become a reality. I took my materials down to the art department, and here again, the art department, they became fascinated with all this material I was giving them for the first time. So they wanted to meet the challenge of seeing how they could display it to an advantage. There was a series of display cases in the lobby and a chamber itself where you could put up three-dimensional things. I just went wild with it…I was so carried away with this exhibit. For the first time my materials would be on display.

Anna Kisselgoff [Dance Critic for the New York Times] came to see the exhibit. People from the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture] heard of the exhibit. And the dance community came out. Some of the dance pioneers, who thought people had forgotten about them. They themselves thought they had been forgotten, but they saw that I had featured them. Oh, you should have seen the expression on their faces. Al Bledger, Randy Sawyer, Frances Atkins, all of them, Talley Beatty, Frank Green, who was a survivor of the [Eugene] Von Grona Group. They all came up at some point to see themselves in my exhibit. And they were almost in tears, because they were part of an era that no one was interested in. But, I had made them very prominent once again and they were so appreciative.

Randolph Sawyer, a member of Hemsley Winfield’s male dance group, the Bronze Ballet Plastique, was the first Black dancer to perform with the Gluck-
Sandor, Felicia Sorel Dance Repertory Group performing the Blackmoor in *Petrouchka* in 1931. Frances Atkins, another Winfield Bronze Ballet Plastique dancer, continued with the company under the name New Negro Art Theatre Dance Group and performed in the *First Negro Dance Recital in America* on April 29, 1931, as did Sawyer. (Nash, 1990).


Nash:

I wasn't a well-known person at this time. Suddenly, my name was spread everywhere because of this Amsterdam News essay. People began to flock to New York to speak to me. Naturally my office was quite a meeting place, and I would set these guests at a table, out in the outer area, and give them books for their research. People rewrote their syllabus on dance. My office became quite a place, a showplace for people in the arts to meet. People who were producing tapes and programs wanted to talk to me; they would come by and look at my collection. All because of this essay! I mean...that's why I said to Clarence Holmes, do you realize how you changed my life with this essay. And it was, my life changed overnight. (J. Nash July 31, 1999)

So, so many people began to spread the word about my name and I was asked to be interviewed on radio talk shows. It was just amazing how my life just turned around. All because of that essay that I did.

**Nash’s Focus on the Preservation of Cultural Documentation**

The importance of preserving this material, that’s what was crucial and how it’s used. Because I’ve gotten requests for materials being included not only in dissertations, master theses, but in publications, journals, monthly or quarterly or yearly publications. That has been a delight for me.

I remember once being asked to give a list of some of the sources that I have supplied information for; I was surprised to learn how many sources there were. As I said before, publications, magazines, and what-not. And all because they had heard about my collection and thought I had all the
information. I kept trying to remind people, that I do not have all of the information. You still have to go to the archives. Lincoln Center or the Schomburg. Don’t assume that Joe Nash is another Schomburg or Lincoln Center. No. No. In fact, I got communications from Europe…France and they had a list, a two-page list of material they wanted me to send without contracting with me to be the photographer, photo-researcher or what-not. They just took it for granted that I would just send the pictures. I said, “I’m sorry, you have to send this letter to the Schomburg or Lincoln Center for this material.” They went through a book and picked out all the photographs that they wanted in the book that were in my collection. They just took it for granted that [at] my house I had all these laying around ready to send around the world. I got letters like that and phone calls from people, “we are doing an archive on so-and-so.” (J. Nash, Jan 23, 1999)

Nash first began collecting when in school in response to an assignment to pursue a topic that interested him, he elected to collect information on dance. It was no wonder, with so much dance surrounding him as a youth growing up on 99th Street in New York City. With the exception of a short break, he continued collecting materials on dance throughout his life. Once people found out that he was so involved in this activity, many individuals gave him items from their personal or family collections because they did not know what to do with these materials or how to manage them.

You have to stress the importance of collecting and its significance in Black culture, the preservation of these materials [and] the documentation of our contributions to society. Since there was no interest in this subject, I just took it upon myself. I wasn’t aware what I was being involved in. It was just something that appealed to me. It wasn’t until I began to talk to so many people that I was aware, good gracious, [of] the scope. What I’m doing has such significance because no one else was doing it. When I’ve gone around the country to talk about dance history, they’ve said, “We had no idea.”

Nash encouraged many scholars with the following information:

When I got my first grant, I wanted to find out what was available for me to collect; I wrote a letter to many of these repositories around the country. I said, what’s in your vertical file on African American dances? Many of them wrote back and said, “We do not have a category for African American dance or Black dance. There might be some things in our vertical file, but it remains for someone to come and look.” Because they were not going to look! Repositories are all over the country that just might have something,
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because I got a letter from a person who said, “Joe, I was looking through some materials, vertical files in a particular repository, I’ve forgotten the exact name, and there was this photograph of Hemsley Winfield.” I said, “Now how did that wind up outside of New York, in this area? So you see, there might be gems of material lurking somewhere, but you’ve got to have a budget to travel to these places to locate them.

Joe Nash became the Griot for the International Association of Blacks in Dance, providing at least two featured history sessions annually, with performers, scholars, teachers and students all sitting at his feet to learn about the lives and experiences of African American dance artists who were rarely mentioned in most books about dance history. He was a lecturer and project scholar for the American Dance Festival’s “The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance” and “African American Genius in Modern Dance” and spent time with any and all who sought him out for private discussions, using this opportunity to share even deeper knowledge of the history that he loved in an effort to support future dance history scholars.

Conclusion

Though the New York Amsterdam News is still in publication, the article can be difficult to find, though it is possible through newspaper databases. Information now canonized by the article became the primary source that led numerous researchers to further their explorations, searching information in the Nash Archives and various archives across the country and ultimately writing books on their particular area of focus. Nash emphatically stressed that researchers determine a focus for their research. Over the past 35 years there is rarely a publication written on blacks in dance that does not draw from Dancing Many Drums, one of the Nash Collections, one of his lectures or an interview with Joe Nash.

Publications Influenced by Dancing Many Drums and Nash Interviews

Note: Photographs selected and annotated by Nash, J.
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**References**


