

**Tap Dance in Black and White:**

**Race, Representation, and the Film Career of the Nicholas Brothers**

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In 1932 at Harlem's hottest nightclub, you could witness the young Fayard and Harold Nicholas singing, tumbling, and tap-dancing their hearts out. That is, if you were white. Although most of the performers at the Cotton Club were Black, the club exclusively admitted white patrons. The club's performers were generally not permitted to fraternize with the audience, but the club made an exception for the Nicholas Brothers, partly because they were so well-loved. This was partly because they were so well-loved. "[The manager] said go on out there," recalled Fayard Nicholas in an interview, "Now we were just little boys, but the rest of the cast couldn't go. But I'm glad we did go out there because we started something...like—integration."<sup>1</sup> The young duo won the favor of the Cotton Club's performers and chorus girls, as well as the movie stars, celebrities, and Manhattan socialites who frequented the club. At a remarkably young age, the Nicholas Brothers' sheer talent and athleticism made for show-stopping performances that impressed adoring audiences while intimidating their fellow performers. Through their Cotton Club act and their subsequent performances, the Nicholas Brothers defied the racial norms of segregation that existed in the early to mid-twentieth century.

While maintaining their residency at the Cotton Club, the Nicholas Brothers transitioned from the stage to the silver screen. In the 1930s and 1940s, Black representation in film was rare. Whereas many aspiring Black actors struggled to find work in Hollywood, the Nicholas Brothers were featured in twenty films over the span of sixteen years, with a four-year hiatus in which they toured through Europe and South America. The Nicholas Brothers were merely children when they began appearing in films. However, many believe that the Nicholas Brothers never received the full credit that they deserved. Fellow tap dancer Gregory Hines described this when

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<sup>1</sup> *Biography*, "The Nicholas Brothers: Flying High." Written by Steven Smith, produced by Foxstar Productions and A&E Networks. Distributed by New Video, 2001. YouTube, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jH\\_INWhWNew](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jH_INWhWNew).

he presented the Nicholas Brothers with Kennedy Center Honors in 1991, stating that “They never even got close to a speaking part. It was dance in a three-minute bit or nothing. They made it everything.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the conditions of racial discrimination and segregation during their careers, they garnered significant popularity among white audiences and among people of color alike. They became two of the few Black American icons of Hollywood’s Golden Age. This thesis will argue that the Nicholas Brothers’ career reveals that the art of tap dance acted as a vehicle for a more acceptable form of Black representation in the minds of white filmmakers and audiences. Furthermore, the appearance of Black tap dancers like the Nicholas Brothers in films in the 1930s and 1940s improved audiences’ perceptions of Black Americans.

The history of tap dance in America is not yet widely studied. Most scholarship on tap dance describes its stylistic elements, such as its steps and physical techniques. There are few critical histories of tap dance. Those that do exist tend to focus primarily on the broad history of tap dance and not on particular periods within the existence of the style. Several biographies and autobiographies have been written that chronicle the experiences and artistic contributions of especially famous dancers, including Constance Valis Hill’s *Brotherhood in Rhythm: The Jazz Tap-Dancing of the Nicholas Brothers*. This book reveals some of the obstacles the Nicholas Brothers faced as Black dancers, such as their obligation to promote their name as sophisticated gentlemen to appeal to white audiences. However, race and representation are not central aspects of the book. Rather, it argues that the Nicholas Brothers are responsible for developing jazz tap dance. Such biographies of tap dancers do not highlight the social implications or cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Reelblack, “Nicholas Brothers Tribute (1991) | Gregory Hines Lou Gossett, Jr | Tap Dance,” Youtube Video, 16:03, May 27, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QS7vYOtKJ3U>.

underpinnings of tap dance development and instead they prefer to celebrate the stylistic contributions of these preeminent artists.

Like the style itself, the history of tap dance has primarily been passed down generationally.<sup>3</sup> History has been orally disseminated through tap dance lessons, collaborations between artists, and documentaries. Tap dancers Jerry Ames and Jim Siegelman published *The Book of Tap* in 1977, which aimed to record tap history.<sup>4</sup> Ames's and Siegelman's book acts as a manual for tap dancers and teachers rather than a piece of critical literature. As such, other scholars have heavily criticized the book for its inaccuracies and lack of a Black American perspective.<sup>5</sup> Not until the twenty-first century were any significant and inclusive efforts made to document the history of tap dance. Gregory Hines, an influential tap dancer and performer known for his many films and Broadway productions, endeavored to document the history of his craft in the late 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, Hines died of cancer at age fifty-seven in 2003 and could not see his vision realized. One of Hines's students, Constance Valis Hill, passionately took up the cause upon his death. Hill, a tap dance scholar at Hampshire College, helped establish the Gregory Hines Collection of American Tap Dance at the New York Public Library in 2005. She also went on to write *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* in 2010, which was the first complete written history of tap dance. In this book, Hill argues that tap was created through a cultural and social exchange and she describes how the early film era contributed to the idea of tap as an American art form.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Miller, "American Tap Dance History and Proposed Preservation," *Pace University Digital Commons, Honors College Theses*, 186 (Summer 2018):

[https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1193&context=honorscollege\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1193&context=honorscollege_theses).

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Ames and Jim Siegelman, *The Book of Tap: Recovering America's Long Lost Dance* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Brian Seibert, *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2015), 380-382.

<sup>6</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xv-xvi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Hill's contribution to the history of tap-dance was undoubtedly significant, however, she was not the only scholar to take up the task.. Several other scholars have made significant contributions to the field. Brian Seibert, a dance critic for the New York Times, wrote *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dance* in 2015.<sup>8</sup> In his book, Seibert claims that tap's broad appeal is due to the merging of sound and movement in a kinesthetically pleasing manner that early tap dancers like the Nicholas Brothers mastered. Seibert's narrative of tap dance development does not heavily account for racial and cultural factors, instead focusing primarily on the artform's appeal to audiences. In 1994, dancer and tap preservationist Rusty Frank compiled written testimonials from famous dancers, culminating in his book, *Tap! The Greatest Tap Dance Stars and Their Stories, 1900-1955*.<sup>9</sup> With its firsthand perspective, Frank's book presented more of a critical lens on how race and representation impacted tap dancers of color. This was especially prevalent in Fayard Nicholas's testimony in which he reflected on his time at the segregated Cotton Club. Other than Constance Valis Hill's biography, there is limited scholarship that focuses explicitly on the film careers of Harold and Fayard Nicholas. Even more limited is scholarship on this specific tap dance duo through the lens of race and representation.

Several scholars have written about the connection between tap dance and racial stereotypes in film, including Susie Trenka, Carol J. Clover, and Hannah Durkin. Susie Trenka, a dance and film scholar at the University of Zurich in Switzerland, examines the Nicholas Brothers' *Kid Millions* scene in her essay, titled "Vernacular Jazz Dance and Race in Hollywood Cinema."<sup>10</sup> Based on this scene, she concludes that Black vernacular dances (dance forms like tap and jazz which were created by Black Americans) were only included in films when white

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<sup>8</sup> Seibert, *What the Eye Hears*.

<sup>9</sup> Rusty E. Frank, *TAP! The Greatest Tap Dance Stars and their Stories 1900-1955*, Revised Edition (New York: De Capo Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Susie Trenka, "Vernacular Jazz Dance and Race in Hollywood Cinema," In *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, ed. Lindsey Guarino and Wendy Oliver (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 240-248.

filmmakers were able to combine them with more “sophisticated” aspects of their white culture. Trenka also wrote *Jumping the Color Line: Vernacular Jazz Dance in American Film, 1929-1945*. In this recently published book, Trenka examines various films and concludes that Black Americans could subvert white authority and power through the portrayal of vernacular dance.<sup>11</sup> American film scholar Carol J. Clover wrote a piece on the 1952 film *Singin’ in the Rain* in which she argues how film (and popular culture at large) was strongly influenced by Black culture in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> In this “Dancin’ in the Rain,” Clover discerns cultural homage from cultural theft, showing that many white American filmmakers committed cultural theft in films of the mid-twentieth century, presenting Black-originated art forms like tap dance as novel. Hannah Durkin, a film and literature scholar at Newcastle University in the United Kingdom, wrote a thorough analysis of Bill Robinson’s performance in *Stormy Weather*.<sup>13</sup> Since cinematic depictions of Black Americans such as Bill Robinson are often incredibly complicated, Durkin argues that we must interpret them through an analysis that transcends merely identifying stereotypes. Durkin’s arguments could easily be applied to the Nicholas Brothers’ careers. While these scholars provide an original framework on Black American dancers in films of the 1930s and 1930s, their arguments are not solely focused on the Nicholas Brothers. Although different in perspective and subject, Trenka, Clover, and Durkin’s arguments each reveal the racial tensions which existed by describing how Black performers operated within the early cinematic sphere.

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<sup>11</sup> Susie Trenka, *Jumping the Color Line: Vernacular Jazz Dance in American Film, 1929-1942* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Carol J. Clover, “Dancin’ in the Rain,” *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 4 (Summer 1995): 722-747. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344065>.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Durkin, “‘Tap Dancing on the Racial Boundary,’ Racial Representation and Artistic Experimentation in Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson’s *Stormy Weather* Performance.” *Irish Journal of American Studies*, no. 2 (June 2010): 98-106. [https://www-jstor-org.libproxy.chapman.edu/stable/26234258?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www-jstor-org.libproxy.chapman.edu/stable/26234258?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

A plethora of publications examine representations of Black film personalities in the early sound film period of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1977, Thomas Cripps wrote one of the earliest comprehensive histories of Black achievement in film, culminating in the book *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film 1900-1942*.<sup>14</sup> Cripps argues that in the period before the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) agreement with Hollywood film studios in 1942, Black actors and performers were permitted to be in films so long as they appeared subservient and inferior to white characters. Although Cripps mentions several Black tap dancers, he does not fully address the impact of vernacular dance in films of the 1930s and early 1940s. Taking Cripps' central argument further, Ryan Jay Friedman's book *Hollywood's African American Films: The Transition to Sound* argues that the advent of sound film paved new avenues for Black inclusion in film, particularly from jazz entertainers like the Nicholas Brothers.<sup>15</sup> Arthur Knight, author of the heavily cited book, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film*, argues that there is a consistent connection between Black Americans and musical performance in films. In 2002, Sean Griffin drew upon the film career of the Nicholas Brothers to argue that Twentieth Century Fox paved unique (but sometimes problematic) avenues for Black performers in their musical films of the early 1940s.<sup>16</sup> These resources contextualize Black tap dancers among the broader group of Black actors and performers in Hollywood. Notably, however, most scholars in this field focus on Black musicians and entertainers, since, as Knight asserts, Black Americans were inextricably linked to music, dance, and comedy in films.

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> Ryan Jay Friedman, *Hollywood's African American Film: The Transition to Sound*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Sean Griffin, "The Gang's All Here: Generic Versus Racial Integration in the 1940s Musical," *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 1 (Fall 2002), 21-45.

It is widely known that the Nicholas Brothers' film appearances were well-loved by people of all backgrounds. However, few scholars have examined the connections between their film appearances, their race, popularity, and use of tap dance. Arthur Knight's scholarship establishes links between film, race, and music, but neglects dance.<sup>17</sup> Constance Valis Hill takes a more descriptive approach to her characterization of the Nicholas Brothers, preferring biographical preservation over analysis.<sup>18</sup> Dance, although similar to music in its ability to facilitate transcultural expression and communication, is a unique art form that is worthy of being distinguished from music. Tap dance is one of the only styles of dance created solely in America. Moreover, tap dance was developed almost exclusively by Black Americans.<sup>19</sup> Since tap dance has operated as a subcultural, underground art form, scholars have not readily nor critically examined tap dance. Given its tremendous popularity in films of the 1930s and 1940s, tap dance is an incredibly fascinating subject for emerging historical research and study. Furthermore, the Nicholas Brothers' film career provides an opportunity to examine film representations at the intersection of race, gender, and age.

Before analyzing Fayard and Harold's various film performances, it is necessary to provide short biographies of their early lives and careers. Fayard Antonio Nicholas was born in Mobile, Alabama in 1914 to young jazz musicians Viola Harden and Ulysses Domonick Nicholas. While listening to his parents play motion picture scores in Chicago and frequenting Black vaudeville shows, Fayard was enriched in the world of entertainment from an early age. After the Nicholas family moved to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Fayard's younger siblings, Dorothy and Harold Lloyd, were born in 1920 and 1921, respectively. Nourished by the melodies

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<sup>17</sup> Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Constance Valis Hill. *Brotherhood in Rhythm: The Jazz-Tap Dancing of the Nicholas Brothers* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Hill, *Tap Dancing America*.

of his mother's piano and the beats of his father's drums, it was no surprise that Fayard took an interest in entertainment. He quickly began imitating the older generation of tap dancers, including Jack Wiggins, Leonard Reed, and Bill Robinson, who were some of his favorite performers.<sup>20</sup> Fayard passed his skills on to Dorothy, and Harold joined in as soon as he could walk. Dorothy quickly became uninterested, but the brothers remained dedicated. Fayard and Harold began performing despite never receiving any formal training or attending dance lessons. First as a specialty act for the Theater Owners Booking Association (Black vaudeville circuit), then on the Horn and Hardart Kiddie Hour in Philadelphia, and later at theaters and clubs in Harlem, the “Nicholas Kids,” as they were known then, quickly made a name for themselves. Their family became considerably wealthy due to Fayard and Harold’s early fame and success. The Nicholas family enjoyed life on Sugar Hill, an affluent district of Harlem, from which they were lavishly chauffeured to and from the Cotton Club in the 1930s.<sup>21</sup>

After their performance at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem, a producer from Warner Brothers invited Fayard and Harold to perform in a Vitaphone short subject film. In 1932, at the ages of seventeen and eleven, the brothers first appeared on screen in *Pie, Pie Blackbird*.<sup>22</sup> They spoke several lines, sang, and tap-danced alongside a cast of all-Black performers, including actress and singer Nina Mae McKinney and musician Eubie Blake and his band. Soon after their appearance in *Pie, Pie Blackbird*, they began performing at the world-famous Cotton Club. Two years later, Fayard and Harold were cast in their first-ever major Hollywood motion picture, *Kid Millions*, alongside comedian Eddie Cantor.<sup>23</sup> *Kid Millions* launched the Nicholas Brothers’ Hollywood film careers, making them world-famous.

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<sup>20</sup> Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm*, 33-54.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> *Pie, Pie Blackbird*, directed by Roy Mack (1932; United States: Warner Bros.).

<sup>23</sup> *Kid Millions*, directed by Roy Del Ruth and Willy Pogany (1934; Calabasas, United States: Samuel Goldwyn Productions).

The Nicholas Brothers also performed in several Broadway shows, working with the likes of George Balanchine, Josephine Baker, Fannie Brice, and Vincente Minelli.<sup>24</sup> Touring through South America, they danced alongside the sensational performer Carmen Miranda in the mid-1940s. As the Hollywood spotlight dimmed on the brothers in the late 1940s, Harold and Fayard began touring as solo acts throughout theaters and nightclubs in Europe. However, as many critics and fans alike have described, the Nicholas Brothers lost some of their magic when they danced separately.<sup>25</sup> The Nicholas Brothers trained and influenced many popular Black artists through the latter half of the twentieth century, including Janet and Michael Jackson, Debbie Allen, the Copasetics, and Maurice and Gregory Hines. While the Nicholas Brothers' fame dwindled, they remained active in the world of show business, leaving their mark on the art of tap dance.

Although the Nicholas Brothers performed in various settings, they are immortalized mainly through their films. Because our society is so heavily entrenched in visual media, it is vitally important that we pay attention to how various racial and ethnic groups are portrayed in films today; we can begin addressing inequalities by examining how racial and ethnic groups have been portrayed in films throughout the past. Much of the current research examines highly degrading and stereotypical representations of Black Americans. These approaches are certainly important since they caution us on the harmful effects of negative representations. Examining representations that tread precariously between degrading and flattering, such as those in the films of the Nicholas Brothers, can prove particularly illuminating.

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<sup>24</sup> Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm*, 107-130.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Suskind, "STARDUST: ARMY BREAKS UP NICHOLAS BROTHERS," *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA), May 8, 1943,

<https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/stardust/docview/567648238/se-2?accountid=10051>.

The research and analysis are heavily grounded in the films in which the Nicholas Brothers appeared from the years 1932 to 1948. It is important to note that several of the Nicholas Brothers' films are no longer accessible in their complete form. To supplement the fragmented films, this analysis draws on other relevant primary sources, including textual sources. Evidence includes newspaper articles, film reviews, and magazine articles from mainstream and Black newspapers, magazines, and journals. Visual sources include photographs, advertisements, and movie posters. This thesis also references first hand testimony from various interviews in documentaries produced about the Nicholas Brothers. This includes Fayard and Harold themselves, as well as individuals who worked closely with them.

Through research on the Nicholas Brothers, this thesis aims to bridge the gap in the historical analysis of the Nicholas Brothers' film career by drawing connections between their popularity among audiences of all backgrounds and how they were represented. I examine how both Black and white audiences have historically perceived the Nicholas Brothers in film. This approach will allow me to analyze the Nicholas Brothers' film career from a new perspective that more directly relates to racial relations. Overall, I strive to link how the Nicholas Brothers were perceived through their use of tap dance. The first section discusses how the Nicholas Brothers' overall image and use of aesthetics impacted how audiences perceived them. The second section addresses segregation in the Nicholas Brothers' films, examining the use of the "special feature." This section also examines the Nicholas Brothers' films which featured all-Black casts of characters. In my third and final section, I compare the Nicholas Brothers' careers to the careers of contemporaneous Black celebrities, both those who were tap dancers and those who were not. Although my research and analysis focus solely on the Nicholas Brothers, I acknowledge that their careers are largely consistent with those of their tap-dancing

peers. Thus, my biographical lens may lend itself to broader assumptions as I argue that tap dance has historically bridged racial barriers.

### **The Nicholas Brothers' Hollywood Image**

Image was everything in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. As visual media, films were judged and categorized by their overall aesthetic value, much like they are today. In the early sound film era, most major Hollywood film studios were run by wealthy white men like Louis B. Mayer of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Darryl F. Zanuck of Twentieth Century Fox. Thus, a selective group of individuals was solely responsible for determining whose stories were depicted on screen. In this pre-Civil Rights era, Hollywood films were overwhelmingly created with white audiences in mind. It is a testament to the Nicholas Brothers' talent and dedication to their craft that they were included in the small group of Black performers regularly featured in films. The Nicholas Brothers had to be more driven, more motivated, and in many cases, more talented than their white counterparts to obtain a minutes-long feature.

For Black performers in the 1930s and 1940s, their race was often what white audiences would notice ahead of their talent and expertise. Many film reviews and advertisements would qualify Black performers by their race. For example, one *Washington Post* review of the 1941 film *Sun Valley Serenade* referred to the Nicholas Brothers as a "pair of sepias."<sup>26</sup> A *Los Angeles Times* writer patronized them by calling them "a pair of little dancers of the Central Ave variety" after seeing them in a 1942 stage show.<sup>27</sup> A *New York Times* review called *Stormy Weather*, an

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<sup>26</sup> Mary Harris, "'Sun Valley Serenade,' Palace, Reveals New Henie Abilities," *The Washington Post*, October 3, 1941, <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/sun-valley-serenade-palace-reveals-new-henie/docview/151433606/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>27</sup> Dick Hyland, "Behind the Line with DICK HYLAND," *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1942, <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/behind-line-with-dick-hyland/docview/165348445/se-2?accountid=10051>.

all-Black film featuring the Nicholas Brothers, “a cavalcade of Negro entertainment.”<sup>28</sup> While most critics (along with the majority of the Nicholas Brothers’ critics) praised the brothers for their talent, they deemed it necessary for readers to be aware of the brothers’ race. As was true for most Black performers in the 1930s and 1940s, white critics and audiences saw their skin color first and their talent second. The Nicholas Brothers had specific characteristics, such as their joyful and youthful appearance, that made them likable. They strategically used their sense of style to improve their image among racially biased and prejudiced audiences.

Part of the fascination surrounding the Nicholas Brothers was their ability to execute such complicated steps and tricks despite their youth. Fayard was seventeen and Harold was eleven when their first motion picture, *Pie, Pie Blackbird*, was released in 1932. With then-twenty-year-old Nina Mae McKinney playing the boys’ nanny, both brothers appeared several years younger than they were (see Figure 1).<sup>29</sup> By the time the Nicholas Brothers danced in their last major motion picture of the 1940s, *The Pirate*, they could still pass as adolescents (see Figure 2).<sup>30</sup> *The Pirate* was released in 1948 when Harold was twenty-seven years old and Fayard was thirty-four years old. Toward the beginning of their career, Fayard and Harold were often referred to as the “Nicholas Kids.”<sup>31</sup> The *Baltimore Afro-American* referred to them as such as late as 1947 in an article about the plight of child actors.<sup>32</sup> Clearly, Fayard and Harold were late bloomers— not in terms of their talent, but in terms of their looks.

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<sup>28</sup> T.M.P., "' Stormy Weather,' Negro Musical with Bill Robinson, at the Roxy -- 'Hers to Hold' Opens at Criterion." *New York Times*, July 22, 1943, <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/stormy-weather-negro-musical-with-bill-robinson/docview/106679664/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>29</sup> *Pie, Pie Blackbird*, directed by Roy Mack.

<sup>30</sup> *The Pirate*, directed by Vincente Minelli. (1948; Culver City, United States: Metro-Goldwyn Mayer).

<sup>31</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm*, 55.

<sup>32</sup> Ralph Matthews, “What Happens When Child Prodigies Grow Up?,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 15, 1947, <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/photo-standalone-32-no-title/docview/531660015/se-2?accountid=10051>.



*Figure 1 – Pie, Pie Blackbird, directed by Roy Mack.*



*Figure 2- The Pirate, directed by Vincente Minelli.*

As was true for the Nicholas Brothers, appearing younger than one's actual age was advantageous for child actors. For *Black* child actors, a youthful appearance can prove essential to one's success. In some cases, the Nicholas Brothers' youthful look gave them a free pass to be integrated into the white casts and to dance alongside white women. Whereas adult Black men might be seen as a "threat" by white audiences, young Black boys were perceived as cute and charming on stages and screens, especially when they were as talented as the Nicholas Brothers. We can trace this phenomenon throughout the Nicholas Brothers' career, starting from the time they were young-looking children, and leading up to their adulthood. Young Black children in films fit into the comedic caricature of the "pickaninny" and were often referred to as such. "Pickaninny" or, sometimes, "picaninny" was a term that emerged during the era of American slavery to refer to disheveled, shifty, and foolish Black children. Although the Nicholas Brothers certainly did not portray these characteristics, the echoes of this stereotype would undoubtedly resonate with audiences when they watched Nicholas Brothers perform.

One of Nicholas Brothers' films, *The Big Broadcast of 1936*, ironically produced in 1935, provides a prime example of how the Nicholas Brothers used their youthful appearance to their advantage. This was one of the few films in which Fayard and Harold played named characters, "Dash" and "Dot," respectively, and interacted with white actors.<sup>33</sup> In the film, the brothers work at the WHY Radio Station, where Dot broadcasts tap dance lessons and Dash plays the organ and piano. One afternoon when the famous "Lochinvar the Lover" segment (most likely modeled after Rudolph Valentino, the "Latin Lover" of the 1920s) is scheduled, the men playing the speaking and singing voice of Lochinvar are essentially kidnapped.<sup>34</sup> Dot is forced to fill in for Lochinvar. He begins by singing a romantic ballad and then transitions into a bebopping jazz

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<sup>33</sup> *The Big Broadcast of 1936* by Norman Taurog, (1935; New York, United States: Paramount Pictures).

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/09/rudolph-valentino-biography-death>

tune where he improvises and scats. The film cuts to a reaction shot of a middle-aged Black woman peeling potatoes and smiling at her radio, mirroring the reaction shots of white women depicted in the previous segment with the actual Lochinvar the Lover. After watching this segment, it is difficult to imagine the same scenario, but with a then-young adult Fayard or a more grown-up Harold. As it plays in the Big Broadcast, Harold is charming and adorable. With his cherub-like face, knee-high socks, and pre-pubescent voice, he is not sexualized in any way. The woman reacting to Dot's version of Lochinvar smiles with motherly admiration and pride, indeed not the kind of romance and lust with which the women in the previous segment regarded the real Lochinvar. Asserting that the scene would not have been staged in the same way or received humorously if a fully grown Black man was filling in for Lochinvar is not an overstatement. Thus, it is safe to presume that Harold and Fayard Nicholas would not have played as substantial roles as they did in *The Big Broadcast of 1936* if they appeared several years older.

Moreover, Harold Nicholas was often featured more prominently than his brother. This was especially true for their films of the 1930s when there appeared to be a more significant age and height difference between the brothers. The 1934 film *Kid Millions* provides an example of this pattern. When the film's top stars put on a "minstrel show" (the implications of which will be discussed in the next section) for their fellow passengers on a boat to Egypt, Harold opens the show by singing the song "I Want to Be a Minstrel Man," without his brother.<sup>35</sup> He appeared alongside the Goldwyn Girls, a company of female dancers run by Samuel Goldwyn that was active in the 1930s through the 1950s (see Figure 3). In *Kid Millions*, the Goldwyn Girls wore slim-fitting, revealing costumes in the presence of the brothers, who later appeared together during the song "Mandy." Fayard does not receive a comparable solo feature to Harold.

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<sup>35</sup> *Kid Millions*, directed by Roy Del Ruth and Willy Pogany.

Although Fayard was generally considered the subtler, shyer performer of the two, it cannot be said that this choice was made because Fayard lacked talent.<sup>36</sup> Directors Roy Del Ruth and Willy Pogany most likely made this choice because Harold was the younger, cuter brother. If Harold were closer in age or height to the showgirls, audiences might have believed he was flirting with the Goldwyn Girls. This would have been frowned upon in the year 1934, especially in a country in which fourteen-year-old Emmett Till would be brutally murdered twenty-one years later for allegedly flirting with a white woman. Harold's look of youth and ultimate innocence meant that this moment was not mistaken for a paradigmatically inappropriate interaction. This is another example of how Harold Nicholas's youthful appearance led him to greater success in Hollywood.



*Figure 3 – Kid Millions, directed by Ruth Del Roy and Willy Pogany.*

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<sup>36</sup> *Biography*, “The Nicholas Brothers: Flying High.”

*Kid Millions* and *The Big Broadcast of 1936* were not the only films in the 1930s to feature Black and white dancers together across age ranges. In two separate 1935 films, *The Little Colonel* and *The Littlest Rebel*, a young Shirley Temple acts, sings, and tap dances alongside Bill “Bojangles” Robinson.<sup>37</sup> Temple was Robinson’s only white dance partner throughout his entire career.<sup>38</sup> According to scholar Karen Orr Vered, filmmakers and members of the press actively tried to counter sexualized representations and characterizations of Temple.<sup>39</sup> Clarifying that there was nothing remotely romantic or sexual about the relationship between Robinson and Temple made it so that producers would not face heavy criticism for including interracial dance scenes in their films. Overall, it is interesting to note that the singular common element of the depiction of Harold and Fayard Nicholas among white performers and the depiction of Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson together is tap dance. In this way, we see how tap dance was used to allow racial integration on screen in ways that otherwise may not have been possible.

For an industry that heavily sexualized women of all races, it was rare for Black men to be depicted in even a flirtatious manner in films. However, one instance of such takes place in the 1941 film *Sun Valley Serenade*.<sup>40</sup> Both Harold and Fayard resembled adolescents or young adults when the film was produced. They danced and sang alongside actress Dorothy Dandridge, who Harold married only a year after they appeared together in *Sun Valley Serenade*.<sup>41</sup> In the scene, Harold and Fayard are incredibly flirtatious with Dandridge. They sneak up on Dandridge

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<sup>37</sup> *The Little Colonel*, directed by David Butler, (1935; United States: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation) and *The Littlest Rebel*, directed by David Butler, (1935; United States: Twentieth Century Fox).

<sup>38</sup> Karen Orr Vered, “White and Black in Black and White: Management of Race and Sexuality in the Coupling of Child-Star Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson,” *Velvet Light Trap*, 39, (Spring 1997): 52, <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/white-black-managemen-t-race-sexuality-coupling/docview/1306638940/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *Sun Valley Serenade*, directed by Bruce H. Humberstone, (1941; Los Angeles, United States: Twentieth Century Fox).

<sup>41</sup> Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm*.

as she turns corners, and they escort her around the train car set. As dancer, actress, and choreographer Debbie Allen later recalled in an interview in the 1990s, this scene was one of the few times Black sexuality was displayed on screen in this era.<sup>42</sup> There is a noticeable shift in how the Nicholas Brothers were first portrayed as young, innocent tap dance prodigies and later as flirtatious adolescents. Following their *Sun Valley Serenade* performance, Fayard and Harold never appeared in a flirtatious manner alongside any women again. Perhaps this slightly sexualized depiction of the Nicholas Brothers was unfavorable among audiences who were introduced to the duo in the prime of their youth and innocence.

When it came to their overall physical appearance, the Nicholas Brothers had little control over how audiences perceived them. However, when it came to their sense of fashion and style, the Nicholas Brothers were incredibly strategic. “Mr. Beebe, he’s the man who knows/ Mr. Beebe sets the style in clothes/ Fancy pearl hats and those knocked-off spats/ Beebe’s the man who knows,” sang Harold Nicholas in the 1944 film *Carolina Blues*.<sup>43</sup> This was one of the only films in which Harold did not dance alongside his brother Fayard, who served in the United States Army briefly during World War II.<sup>44</sup> Dressed in a snappy tailcoat and top hat, Harold Nicholas was nearly describing himself and his brother when he sang as the character of Mr. Beebe. Because of their polished attire, the Nicholas Brothers became style icons. They strutted out onto stages and dance floors, looking charmingly handsome in suits, ties, top hats, and spats (see Figure 4). During a time when Black representation in film was rare, their image was as much a personal aesthetic as it was strategic.

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<sup>42</sup> *Biography*, “The Nicholas Brothers: Flying High.”

<sup>43</sup> *Carolina Blues*, directed by Jason Leigh (1944; United States: Columbia Pictures).

<sup>44</sup> Suskind, “STARDUST.”



*Figure 4 – Orchestra Wives, directed by Archie Mayo.*

From the time that Fayard and Harold were children, Viola Nicholas ensured her sons were dressed impeccably to exude an air of confidence while performing.<sup>45</sup> She understood that leaders in the entertainment industry would judge her sons more harshly than white performers. Looking pristine and polished gave them the distinct image of a “class act.”<sup>46</sup> This term has many associations. The word “class” on its own denotes wealth and social status. The expression “class act” has undergone a semantic shift and is now used to describe a person of character and integrity. In the early to mid-twentieth century, Black Americans were not necessarily associated with these traits in the minds of white Americans.

The Nicholas Brothers were undoubtedly not the only Black performers using fashion to elevate their status. Style was paramount in the jazz world, and many Black musicians had

<sup>45</sup> *Biography*, “The Nicholas Brothers: Flying High.”

<sup>46</sup> Anna Kisselgoff, “Dance: Tap of 30’s and 40’s” *New York Times*, March 12, 1987.

<https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/dance-tap-30s-40s/overview/110827375/se-2?accountid=10051>.

signature looks.<sup>47</sup> Billie Holliday wore a white gardenia in her hair. Duke Ellington often wore a houndstooth blazer. As Alphonso McClendon argues in his book *Fashion and Jazz*, jazz musicians and other Black performers historically have used their clothing to “counter negative labels.”<sup>48</sup> As tap was interconnected with the world of jazz music, this phenomenon extended to tap dancers. Furthermore, sophisticated dress quickly became the standard for Black and white male tap dancers. The title of Fred Astaire’s 1935 film, *Top Hat*, and the lyrics of the title song and tap dance, “I’m puttin’ on my top hat/Tyin’ up my white tie/Brushin’ off my tails,” are examples of the kind of attire tap dancers were expected to sport (see Figure 5). Black dancers were expected to conform to this standard so that they might better blend in with white dancers.

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<sup>47</sup> Alphonso McClendon, *Fashion and Jazz: Dress, Identity, and Subcultural Improvisation* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.



Figure 5 – *Top Hat*, directed by Mark Sandrich.

The only instances in which the Nicholas Brothers do not wear some semblance of a classy outfit occur in films where they are meant to represent distinct types of characters. For example, in the 1948 film, *The Pirate*, the Nicholas Brothers are dressed as clowns during their special feature alongside Gene Kelly.<sup>49</sup> Another exception comes from the 1940 film *Tin Pan Alley*.<sup>50</sup> Harold and Fayard play boys in a dance sequence is set in a Harem of scantily-clad women (within a scene that appropriates many aspects of Middle Eastern culture for comedic effect). They are dressed in turbans, hooped earrings, and loincloths. In a way, the Nicholas Brothers' Blackness is othered, or orientalized. Notably, the *Baltimore Afro-American* printed a

<sup>49</sup> *The Pirate*, directed by Vincente.

<sup>50</sup> *Tin Pan Alley*, directed by Walter Lang (1940; Los Angeles, United States: Twentieth Century Fox).

picture of the brothers in costume, and a reviewer criticized the *Tin Pan Alley* filmmakers for making the brothers unrecognizable.<sup>51</sup> The article's tone is somewhat accusatory, arguing that the filmmakers intentionally wished to deny the Nicholas Brothers credit as they had done similarly to Black composers and other artists. Despite this instance, it was rare that Fayard and Harold did not wear classy attire. *The Pirate* and *Tin Pan Alley* were exceptions to the norm.

The art of the "class act" was superseded by new trends in Hollywood after World War II. However, tap dancers like the Nicholas Brothers made a long-lasting impression on how tap dance in film is remembered for its nuances, sophistication, and class. Although the age of top hats and white ties is passé, we can still observe the Nicholas Brothers' stylistic influence among Black male dancers like Michael Jackson and even MC Hammer. The Nicholas Brothers exhibited how dance could be merged with gymnastics and acrobatics. Their athleticism was unprecedented and, in many ways, unparalleled in today's dance industry. World-renowned ballet dancer and choreographer Mikhail Baryshnikov said of the pair that, "They are the most amazing dancers I have ever seen in my life."<sup>52</sup> Testimony such as this reveals that their talent was indeed undeniable and transcended the medium of dance they revolutionized.

Nicholas Castle was a vaudeville and Hollywood choreographer who worked with many celebrity tap dancers like Ann Miller, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and the Nicholas Brothers.<sup>53</sup> Upon meeting the Nicholas Brothers, Castle said, "now there's somebody who can do my ideas."<sup>54</sup> Nicholas Castle went on to choreograph the Nicholas Brothers' dance number in the 1940 film *Down Argentine Way*, which was one of their biggest successes.<sup>55</sup> When the number

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<sup>51</sup> "If You Get it in Three Guesses, You're Good," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 15, 1941. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/if-you-get-three-guesses-youre-good/docview/531316155/se-2?accountid=10051>

<sup>52</sup> *The Nicholas Brothers: We Sing, We Dance*, directed by Chris Bould and Michael Martin (1992; United States).

<sup>53</sup> *Brotherhood in Rhythm*

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> *Down Argentine Way*, directed by Irving Cummings (1940; Los Angeles, United States: Twentieth Century Fox).

was almost cut short in the editing room, Castle fought to have it included.<sup>56</sup> Audiences loved the Nicholas Brothers' number at the premiere so dotingly that they demanded the film be rewound so they might see the duo dance a second time. This anecdote is just one instance that demonstrates Harold and Fayard's performance and entertainment value and how their abilities were unbelievably captivating.

One of the most daring athletic tricks the Nicholas Brothers managed to master can be seen in the 1943 film *Stormy Weather*. In their dance sequence toward the end of the film, Harold and Fayard proceed to travel down a large set of stairs on a stage by jumping over one another, landing in the splits on the following step, and finally rising out of the splits without using their hands to repeat this feat again and again until they land on the stage floor (see Figure 6).<sup>57</sup> This took place within one shot and was filmed fifteen years before the advent of the earliest form of computer-generated imagery. The New York Times' review of the *Stormy Weather* said that the film featured "the rubber-legged Nicholas Brothers and their incredible acrobatic dance number, leap-frogging down a flight of stairs spread-eagle fashion."<sup>58</sup> Another reviewer commented on this scene, "no other dance team has shown such [sic] marked progress as the Nicholas Brothers. They have absorbed the best of the Astaires and the Drapers, and then added something distinct and individual."<sup>59</sup> Through their performance of Cab Calloway's "Jumpin' Jive," the Nicholas Brothers insurmountably raised the standard for dancers in Hollywood.

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<sup>56</sup> *The Nicholas Brothers*, directed by Chris Bold and Michael Martin.

<sup>57</sup> *Stormy Weather*, directed by Andrew L. Stone (1943; Los Angeles, United States: Twentieth Century Fox).

<sup>58</sup> T.M.P., "Stormy Weather."

<sup>59</sup> Peter Suskind, "STARDUST: 'STORMY WEATHER' HITS JACKPOT," *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, July 31, 1943,

<https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/stardust/docview/567691216/se-2?accountid=10051>.



*Figure 6 - Stormy Weather, directed by Andrew L. Stone*

The Nicholas Brothers were more talented than many, if not all, of their white contemporaries. When audiences watched them perform, this could not be denied. They began their career as young, cute boys whose tap-dancing skills were nothing less than precocious. Even as they grew into young men throughout the 1930s and 1940s, they maintained their popularity by increasing the acrobatic acuity of their performances. Audiences perhaps viewed them as superhuman because of their physical capabilities, and as such they were placed in a separate category from ordinary Black Americans. The Nicholas Brothers made the best of their short features. Despite their great talent, Hollywood refused to permit them to perform in lead roles in their films. Thus, they were often confined to what became known as the “special feature,” segregated from the remainder of the (usually) white cast.

### On-Screen Segregation and the “Special Feature”

Despite their elevated sense of style, the Nicholas Brothers rarely appeared within the same frame as white actors because displaying any on-screen integration was contentious in this era. The Motion Picture Code of 1930 listed the depiction of “miscegenation” as being forbidden in the same category as crimes such as rape and sexual exploitation of children.<sup>60</sup> While the Motion Picture Code did not explicitly forbid Black individuals from appearing alongside white individuals on screen, the subtext of the document made it clear that integration would not be welcomed. This was why the Nicholas Brothers performed within the context of the special feature. Ultimately, film studios played the most crucial role in determining who and what was featured on the screen.

As is true today, film studios in the 1930s and 1940s were concerned with making films that would draw in profit. In the early 1940s, the Black community began making demands for fair and equal representation in the media.<sup>61</sup> One article in the *Chicago Defender* discussed this phenomenon, highlighting the idea that film studios and even local cinemas saw representation as a financial rather than a social problem.<sup>62</sup> Studios were more invested in financial gain than social change. In his 1942 article, Al Monroe wrote that studios would be “chancing thousands of dollars” if they featured Black performers in their films.<sup>63</sup> Filmmakers thought they might face backlash for casting Black entertainers in more prominent roles. They were also concerned that local cinemas would perhaps refuse to play films that featured Black actors.

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<sup>60</sup> *The Motion Picture Code* (as published March 31, 1930), Association of Motion Picture Producers, Board of Directors of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, (Hollywood, California) <https://www.asu.edu/courses/fms200s/total-readings/MotionPictureProductionCode.pdfB>.

<sup>61</sup> Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Al Monroe, “SWINGING THE NEWS,” *The Chicago Defender*, December 26, 1942, <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/swinging-news/docview/492679504/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

As Monroe points out, by preventing Black actors from playing more prominent roles, filmmakers never truly allowed audiences to decide for themselves who and what was depicted on screen. He writes, “Somehow I feel that whites who rush to the black and tan theaters to see floor shows that for the most part do not include comedy would welcome a Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Bill Robinson on the screen in characters other than that of a servant.”<sup>64</sup> It was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that the film industry offered Black actors, like Sidney Poitier, more substantial and flattering roles. Although producers, directors, and writers depicted Black actors in less degrading and stereotypical ways after the 1940s, Black actors did not appear in films nearly as often as white Americans. We can observe the disparity of representation of minoritized peoples in the film industry well into the twenty-first century. This is especially evident when examining the lack of diversity among directors and producers.

As the silent film era ended with the advent of sound film in 1927, the “talkies” provided more opportunities for musical performers, particularly tap dancers, to showcase their skills. Sound film coincided with the Jazz Age, and the very first sound film was titled *The Jazz Singer*. Consequently, many performers who gained notoriety on the vaudeville circuit began performing in films. White performers like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were cast in starring roles which gave them the opportunity to showcase their talents in dance, singing, and acting. Hollywood producers also recruited Black performers from the vaudeville circuit. However, film studios opted to have Black musicians, singers, and dancers perform within “special features” or “specialty acts,” which were minutes-long segments often disconnected from the film’s plot. They were not afforded the opportunity to star in films unless those films featured an all-Black cast. Special features provided a way for film studios to include popular Black entertainers in

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

their films without facing criticism, thus the special features provided a way to halfway appease audiences on both sides of the aisle.

To illustrate this kind of on-screen segregation, we can examine the special feature in the 1941 film *Sun Valley Serenade*. Before the Nicholas Brothers' appearance, Glenn Miller and his orchestra play the "Chattanooga Choo Choo."<sup>65</sup> The film then cuts from the room where Glenn Miller's orchestra rehearses to a façade of a train car, an entirely different and unfamiliar setting. The Nicholas Brothers perform alongside Dorothy Dandridge to the same song. They do not appear before or after this sequence, and the white cast of characters never mentions or references them. The Nicholas Brothers were featured in this manner in most of the films in which they appeared with few exceptions.

Another illustrative example is in the 1944 film *Carolina Blues*. This six-minute and thirty-second long segment features a large ensemble of popular Black performers from Harold Nicholas to the Four Step Brothers and June Richmond.<sup>66</sup> *Carolina Blues* centered around the misadventures of Kay Kyser's band. This special feature occurs within one of Kyser's benefit concerts. The band is carted off the stage as an upstage curtain opens, revealing the statuesque shadow of Harold Nicholas. Harold Nicholas sings the number "Mr. Beebee," and the camera pans to reveal a stage set to resemble Lenox Avenue in Harlem. One sign reads "Cotton Club," under which Harold Nicholas sits to get his shoes shined. As the special feature sequence ends, the film cuts to a few spectators who look onto the performance absentmindedly. The ensemble of performers disappears as they are contained within an all-Black space, both physically and figuratively segregated from the white world in which the film operates. This special feature is

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<sup>65</sup> *Sun Valley Serenade*, directed by Bruce L. Humberstone.

<sup>66</sup> *Carolina Blues*, directed by Jason Leigh.

eerily symbolic of the nuances of the Black experience in Hollywood and more generally, in the United States.

Although many newspaper advertisements made readers believe that the Nicholas Brothers were the stars of the films in which they appeared, this was only an illusion.<sup>67</sup> Black-run newspapers wished to highlight Black achievements in the movie industry. In white-run newspapers, an advertisement with a photograph or even simply the Nicholas Brothers' names could attract fans to see films that might otherwise flop. However, it was rare that the Nicholas Brothers appeared outside of special features. It was even rarer that they spoke lines or played named characters. This was not for lack of talent; they were gifted singers, and both Fayard and Harold later appeared in films as dramatic actors.<sup>68</sup> There were also a few instances in which the Nicholas Brothers acted in roles outside of their special feature as characters alongside white actors.

As previously stated, Harold and Fayard played "Dash" and "Dot," two young performers at the WHY Radio Station, in the film *The Big Broadcast of 1936*.<sup>69</sup> The other instance was their first major motion picture, *Kid Millions*. In this film, Harold Nicholas briefly appears (for less than ten seconds) as a crew member on the ship on which the main characters are traveling to Egypt.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, Harold and Nicholas dance alongside a group of white performers during one of the many musical segments from this film. This film notably features other people of color among the majority-white cast. While this may seem progressive, a closer examination of the film reveals an adherence to the racial norms and tensions of the time it was produced.

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<sup>67</sup> "Of Local Origin," *New York Times*, September 5, 1941.  
<https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/local-origin/docview/106013951/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>68</sup> *Biography*, "The Nicholas Brothers: Flying High."

<sup>69</sup> *The Big Broadcast of 1936*, directed by Norman Taurog.

<sup>70</sup> *Kid Millions*, directed by Roy Del Ruth.

The star comedian at the helm of the film, Eddie Cantor, appeared in blackface alongside Harold and Fayard Nicholas (see Figure 7). By delving deeper into Eddie Cantor's personal history, it seems that Cantor's intentions in wearing blackface came from a place of ignorance rather than malice. In a 1935 interview with Cantor, published by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, he said of the Nicholas Brothers, "... my interest in these kids goes further than just the Nicholas Brothers. I am interested in your people. I am interested in the whole Negro Race, don't forget it."<sup>71</sup> Cantor explained that as a person of the Jewish faith, he felt a kinship with Black Americans, somewhat like a shared sense of struggle. He hoped to use comedy to provide an avenue for escape from discrimination, saying, "when one laughs, one forgets to hate."<sup>72</sup> This interview reveals Cantor's overall curiosity about and empathy for Black Americans. It also explains why Cantor was motivated to integrate people of color into his film more than what was standard during that era.

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<sup>71</sup> Bernice Patton, "EDDIE CANTOR, NICHOLAS BROS. TOP STAGE BILL: NOTED COMEDIAN PAYS TRIBUTE TO RACE ACTORS INTERVIEWED," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 10, 1935, <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/historical-newspapers/eddie-cantor-nicholas-bros-top-stage-bill/docview/201998632/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



*Figure 7- Kid Millions, directed by Roy Del Ruth and Willy Pogany*

However, it is essential to recognize how greater integration in films often led to greater adherence to racial stereotypes. During the minstrel show held for the passengers of the Egypt-bound ship, Eddie Cantor attempts to dance alongside Harold and Fayard Nicholas.<sup>73</sup> The two young performers quickly upstage the film's star, Eddie Cantor, with their advanced time steps. Cantor appears in blackface in this section of the film, conjuring up an image of Antebellum minstrel entertainment. In the same sequence of the film, young women appear wearing debutante ball gowns alongside Southern gentlemen. Referencing the Antebellum era implicitly recalls a time in which a strict racial hierarchy existed under slavery, one where Fayard and Harold Nicholas would have been stripped of their freedom. Depicting them through this dynamic perhaps lessened white discomfort. Thus, Black performers, like the Nicholas Brothers, were often portrayed in stereotypical ways that would possibly remind white audiences of the unequal social dynamic between themselves and Black Americans. This meant they would not fear the appearance of Black Americans on screen.

<sup>73</sup> *Kid Millions*, directed by Roy Del Ruth.

In some northern and western regions of the country, having the Nicholas Brothers' names on a marquee attracted audiences. If cinemas predicted that a film might be a box-office flop, advertising a special feature from the Nicholas Brothers could boost ticket sales. One article from the *New York Amsterdam Star-News* states that the Nicholas Brothers were added into *The Great American Broadcast* last-minute, likely to increase interest in the film.<sup>74</sup> In some cases, the Nicholas Brothers' special feature was the only redeeming element of a movie. In two separate reviews, critic Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* highlights the Nicholas Brothers as bright spots in the films *Down Argentine Way* (1940) and *Orchestra Wives* (1942).<sup>75</sup> Crowther was highly critical of the plot, direction, and actors in both reviews. It is important to note that many, if not all, of the movies that featured the Nicholas Brothers, were B-List movies.<sup>76</sup> Susie Trenka makes this important distinction in her book, *Jumping the Color Line: Vernacular Jazz Dance in American Film*. Movies containing special features were not often well-known or celebrated as early cinematic masterpieces. Critics like Bosley Crowther often lambaste films while simultaneously praising the Nicholas Brothers for their incredible performances. The evidence of this lives on. Today, much of the remaining and easily accessible footage of these films is from the Nicholas Brothers' special features. Although the remainder of the films were not deemed worthy of preservation, the Nicholas Brothers' performances were.

Although the Nicholas Brothers were heavily praised in some regions, audiences were not so accepting of Black Americans on screen everywhere in the country, for instance, the American South. Aware of this dynamic, many film studios strategically ensured that special

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<sup>74</sup> "Movie Talk," *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, March 22, 1941, <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/movie-talk/docview/226063877/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>75</sup> ie., Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: 'Orchestra Wives,' An Indifferent Musical Film, Highlighted by Glenn Miller's Band, Opens At The Roxy Theatre," *New York Times*, September 24, 1942, <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/screen/docview/106391329/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>76</sup> Trenka, *Jumping the Color Line*.

features did not contribute to the film's plot so that these sequences could be easily edited out and shown in areas where racial relations were tense.<sup>77</sup> Films did not often feature tap dance outside of the special feature. The Nicholas Brothers were often the only Black performers featured in their films, which inherently linked Black Americans to the art of tap dance. There were several exceptions to this phenomenon. The Nicholas Brothers performed in four films throughout their career with all-Black casts. Three of these films, *Pie Pie Blackbird*, *An All-Colored Vaudeville Show*, and *The Black Network*, were short films directed by Roy Mack. As previously discussed, *Pie, Pie Blackbird* featured Nina Mae McKinney, Eubie Blake's band, and the young Nicholas Brothers.<sup>78</sup> As the name suggests, the 1935 *An All-Colored Vaudeville Show* features four specialty vaudevillian acts.<sup>79</sup> Performances include an acrobatic routine from the Three Whippets, ballads and a-buck-and-wing routine by Adelaide Hall, songs from the Five Racketeers with Eunice Wilson, and a lively tap dance by the Nicholas Brothers. The plot of the 1936 film *The Black Network* was a bit more involved.<sup>80</sup> This short film followed the antics of the "Black Network Broadcasting" radio station, where one radio sponsor and his wife attempted to take control of the station. Meanwhile, the Nicholas Brothers, playing themselves, sell "Lucky Numbers" and sing and dance on the show's amateur hour. This twenty-one-minute film also features performances from stars such as Nina Mae McKinney, and Emmett "Babe" Wallace. While the film does have a self-contained story, the plot exists merely to provide the film's stars with an opportunity to showcase their musical talents, much like the other short films mentioned.

The only full-length all-Black film the Nicholas Brothers performed in was *Stormy Weather*. This 1943 film was cherished by white and Black audiences alike, with many

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<sup>77</sup> Griffin, "The Gang's All Here," 35.

<sup>78</sup> *Pie, Pie Blackbird*, directed by Roy Mack.

<sup>79</sup> *All-Colored Vaudeville Show*, directed by Roy Mack (1935; United States: Warner Bros.).

<sup>80</sup> *The Black Network*, directed by Roy Mack (1936; United States: Warner Bros.).

newspaper articles recounting its outrageous success at the box office.<sup>81</sup> With its glaring lack of plot, *Stormy Weather* acts as one long special feature with countless performances from the era's most famous dancers, singers, and musicians. The Nicholas Brothers made a particularly indelible impression with their performance in *Stormy Weather*, with many calling it their best work.<sup>82</sup> The most outstanding common thread between the Nicholas Brothers' special features, their all-Black short films, and the film *Stormy Weather* is tap dance.

It is essential to recognize that musical performances, especially those that included tap dance, had a unifying effect between Black performers and white audiences. Audiences developed more positive associations with tap dancers like Harold and Fayard Nicholas because they performed in an inherently attractive, visually stimulating manner. Furthermore, the Nicholas Brothers fit the long-held racial archetype of the Black male singer-dancer, stemming from the history of the Black minstrel man. In many ways, white audiences believed that dance and musical abilities were innate skills of Black Americans. Interestingly, the way the Nicholas Brothers outperform Eddie Cantor in their *Kid Millions* appearance certainly implies this idea. It is as if Eddie Cantor, wearing blackface, cannot execute the dance steps as impressively as the Nicholas Brothers because he is merely imitating their Blackness.

Several other scholars have recognized this connection in films with other Black performers. Hannah Durkin wrote about Bill Robinson's performance in the film *Stormy Weather*.<sup>83</sup> She noticed that Bill Robinson's many performances in the film—particularly his spontaneous tap dance on the barrel of a drum—promote the idea that Black Americans are inherently impulsive. In his book on Black performers in musical films, Arthur Knight also acknowledged the connection between Black Americans and their perceived natural aptitude for

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<sup>81</sup> T.M.P., "Stormy Weather."

<sup>82</sup> *Biography*, "The Nicholas Brothers Flying High."

<sup>83</sup> Durkin, "Tap Dancing on the Racial Boundary."

music and dance.<sup>84</sup> As Durkin and Knight argue, the pigeon-holing or typecasting of Black Americans into musical and dance roles can be traced back to minstrel and Antebellum-era stereotypes. With stereotypes and archetypes in mind, it becomes necessary to assess how the Nicholas Brothers were portrayed compared to their Black counterparts, including not only Black performers who sang and danced, but also those who acted.

### **Comparing the Nicholas Brothers' Contemporaries: Representation of Black Actors and Performers of the 1930s and 1940s**

The Nicholas Brothers' careers, compared to the careers of other Black actors, are particularly unique. To assess the overall representation of the Nicholas Brothers, it is necessary to contextualize their appearances among other Black performers. This section will compare how the Nicholas Brothers were represented to other Black tap dancers, including Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and John William Sublett, and Ford Lee Washington of the tap dance act known as "Buck and Bubbles." Additionally, I will examine how these portrayals compare to depictions of Black actors who did not tap dance, including Lincoln Perry, known as "Stepin Fetchit," and Canada Lee. Finally, I will briefly describe and analyze subsequent Black actors, such as Sidney Poitier, to demonstrate how Black representation in film has progressed and shifted over time.

The way the Nicholas Brothers were represented in films is primarily consistent with representations of other Black tap dancers. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was one of the first, most prominent tap dancers in Hollywood. Indeed, he was the highest-paid Black performer of his generation.<sup>85</sup> Much like the Nicholas Brothers, Robinson was self-taught and learned to tap

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<sup>84</sup> Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical*.

<sup>85</sup> Cynthia J.W. Svoboda, "Bill Robinson," *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*, April 30, 2020, <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=8d4d5827-f79e-3faa-83ef-4b437176d4ed>

dance on the streets rather than through formal lessons. He got his start performing on the vaudeville circuit before appearing in films. He acted in his first full-length film *Dixiana* in 1930 as a Plantation Butler and dancer.<sup>86</sup> Robinson was well-known for his signature tap dances up and down staircases. This is similar to how the Nicholas Brothers were known for their acrobatic stunts, including their ability to slide down and up from the splits with startling ease. Although Robinson, born in 1878, was about forty years older than Fayard and Harold Nicholas, their Hollywood careers followed similar trajectories. Most of Bill Robinson's performances were confined within special features. Additionally, Robinson almost always appeared in formal attire such as suits, ties, and top hats (see Figure 8). The pinnacle of Robinson's Hollywood career was his final film, *Stormy Weather*, in 1943. At the time of the premiere, Robinson, age sixty-five, played the leading male role of Bill Williamson—a character whose life and career was based on Robinson's own.<sup>87</sup> Playing opposite Lena Horne, Robinson acts, sings, and tap dances in many of the film's twenty musical numbers. Notably, *Stormy Weather*, one of the few films of its time featuring an all-Black cast, was Robinson's most prominent screen role.

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<sup>86</sup> *Dixiana*, directed by Luther Reed, (1930; United States: RKO Radio Pictures).

<sup>87</sup> *Stormy Weather*, directed by Andrew L. Stone.



*Figure 8 – Bill Robinson c. 1935*

Although Robinson presented himself in a similar fashion to the Nicholas Brothers, he was often portrayed in more stereotypical ways. Robinson's stage and screen persona were derived from the minstrel tradition. As discussed, Robinson acted and danced alongside child star Shirley Temple in two films, *The Little Colonel* and *The Littlest Rebel*. Robinson played a servant, Walker, in the former and an enslaved person, Uncle Billy, in the latter. Both characters fall into the category of the "Uncle Tom" stereotype. This could likely be attributed to Robinson's age. Robinson acted as an "Uncle" figure to Shirley Temple and other children he danced with, such as in the film *One Mile From Heaven* from 1937.<sup>88</sup> When examining the Nicholas Brothers' career, they were clearly too young to be cast as the "Uncle Tom" stereotype.

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<sup>88</sup> *One Mile From Heaven*, directed by Allan Dwan, (1937; United States: Twentieth Century Fox).

Overall, this reaffirms that the Nicholas Brothers' age played a vital and mostly positive role in determining how they were represented.

Black performers in films of the 1930s and 1940s were often connected to the idea of music and dance. Arthur Knight's book, *Disintegrating the Musical*, traces these connections throughout film history.<sup>89</sup> However, those who were not were usually connected with some type of schtick. Many of these performers were recruited from the vaudeville circuit in the early sound film era. Whereas white vaudeville performers such as Fred Astaire could expand on their vaudeville acts and play more noteworthy characters in films, Black performers like Bill Robinson and the Nicholas Brothers were not afforded the same opportunities. They were relegated to the special feature in which they performed their signature acts. While white entertainers were fully actualized and humanized by the roles they were offered, Black entertainers were confined to a gimmick. This is evident in the career of Lincoln Perry, known in the vaudeville and film world as "Stepin Fetchit."

Comedian Lincoln Perry, born in 1902 in Key West, Florida, is remembered as "America's first Black film star."<sup>90</sup> Perry began his career performing in minstrel shows and later transitioned to the Black vaudeville circuit or Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA).<sup>91</sup> Perry's character Stepin Fetchit was lazy, thoughtless, and dimwitted. In films such as *Marie Galante* (1934), white characters he acts alongside often become frustrated with his foolishness.<sup>92</sup> In his book, *Stepin Fetchit: The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry*, Watkins characterizes Lincoln Perry with a newfound sense of agency. He argues that while Fetchit's ineptitude humored white

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<sup>89</sup> Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical*.

<sup>90</sup> Roy Hurst, "Stepin Fetchit: Hollywood's First Black Film Star," NPR, March 6, 2006, <https://www.npr.org/2006/03/06/5245089/stepin-fetchit-hollywoods-first-black-film-star>.

<sup>91</sup> Mel Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit: The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

<sup>92</sup> *Marie Galante*, directed by Henry King, 1934; United States: Fox Film Corporation.

audiences, he used his laziness to subvert white authority in a way that only Black audiences familiar with the slavery-age tactic would genuinely comprehend.<sup>93</sup> Despite the potential humor in Fetchit's subtle sabotage, many Black audiences believed that Stepin Fetchit perpetuated a stereotype that was harmful to the perception of Black Americans. Civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, fought to rid Hollywood of these portrayals.<sup>94</sup> Once a cinema icon, Stepin Fetchit quickly became a reminder of Hollywood's formidable racism.

The Nicholas Brothers are revered in Hollywood's memory. Many want to forget Stepin Fetchit and the era of on-screen minstrelsy. While the Nicholas Brothers used various tactics to counter racialized depictions, Perry was inexplicably viewed in a racialized manner. No matter the contrasts between these portrayals, the entertainers have a few similarities. Both the Nicholas Brothers and Lincoln Perry were connected to a unique act. For the Nicholas Brothers, it was tap dance and acrobatics. For Perry, it was comedy. Just as filmmakers did not allow Black tap dancers to showcase their full range of talents as performers, filmmakers never allowed Perry to move beyond the "Stepin Fetchit" stereotype. In other words, he was caricatured. Filmmakers wrote his Stepin Fetchit into films to increase their comedic value, much like they utilized the Nicholas Brothers' special features to impress audiences.

At the intersection of tap dance and comedy were Ford Lee "Buck" Washington and John William "Bubbles" Sublett. The song and dance team known as "Buck and Bubbles" used physical comedy in their tap routines. Like their contemporaries, the pair began their career on the vaudeville circuit and even performed at the Cotton Club.<sup>95</sup> In their film appearances, elements and patterns of Bill Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers, and Lincoln Perry are reflected in

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<sup>93</sup> Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit*.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>95</sup> Hill, *Tap Dancing America*.

the dance team's style, humor, and showmanship, however, neither member of the dance team achieved the Nicholas Brothers' or Bill Robinson's level of prominence in Hollywood. "Buck and Bubbles" provides a unique example of how Black performers at this time were confined to the media of dance, music, and comedy in show business on both screens and stages.

Although the Nicholas Brothers were certainly not as well-represented as their white counterparts, they were represented in a much more positive and flattering manner when compared to Lincoln Perry. This suggests the overall value of tap dance in films of the 1930s and 1940s. In all of its style, class, glitz, and glamor, tap dance could elevate the status of Black Americans like the Nicholas Brothers. The representation of Perry's character, Stepin Fetchit, reflected the nuances of the twentieth century's race-based social hierarchy. The Nicholas Brothers could escape this, mainly because they were rarely integrated into white casts. In this era, depicting Black actors alongside white actors could reveal social tensions. Segregating Black performers into special features would allow them to operate in a "separate but equal" universe, which was, in actuality, unequal.

Although rare, two prominent mid-twentieth century Black actors, Canada Lee and Sidney Poitier, reveal the potential for fairer representation. Canada Lee was a professional jockey and boxer-turned-actor and director. Lee was born in 1907 in Manhattan, New York.<sup>96</sup> He made his way into the film industry after acting in several stage productions, including a then-controversial all-Black production of *The Tragedy of Macbeth* directed by Orson Welles. Lee made his film debut in *Keep Punching*, an all-Black film from 1939. He is best known for his work as the character Joe Spencer, a stevedore, in Alfred Hitchcock's 1944 film *Lifeboat*. He

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<sup>96</sup> Thomas W. Buchanan, "Canada Lee," *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*, July 31, 2020, <https://discovery-ebsco-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=bdbc674b-9a8f-3be1-abb4-c7c1c59c52ac>.

then became the first Black director of a Broadway play.<sup>97</sup> Notably, Lee advocated for himself and other Black actors by refusing to play into stereotypes and speaking out against negative depictions of Black Americans in Hollywood films. The screenwriters for *Lifeboat* appeased Lee when he requested that his lines be rewritten after noticing that they were degrading to Black Americans.<sup>98</sup> His outspokenness angered politically conservative groups, but as a controversial figure in Hollywood, Canada Lee was more committed to his onstage work than his work on the screen.

It was not the norm for Black Americans to be equally and fairly represented in motion pictures of the mid-twentieth century by any means. Lee's somewhat more positive representation demonstrates that Black actors had to push hard to advocate for better roles and less degrading characterizations. As a result, Hollywood studios often punished or blacklisted these actors. In this, we see the value of tap dance as a means of more positive on-screen representation of Black Americans. In their tap dance special features, the Nicholas Brothers were neither forced to conform to racist stereotypes nor pushed to advocate for fully humanizing depictions. Tap dancers could operate in an ambivalent sphere, tiptoeing carefully between the two alternatives. In films like *Kid Millions*, the Nicholas Brothers' representation leaned into the more stereotypical sphere, with calls back to the minstrel era in their special feature.<sup>99</sup> Conversely, in films like *The Big Broadcast of 1936*, the Nicholas Brothers played named characters and were integrated into the white cast, placing them on more of a level playing field with their white peers.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> *Kid Millions*, directed by Roy Del Ruth.

<sup>100</sup> *Big Broadcast of 1936*, directed by Norman Taurog.

Nearly a generation after the height of the Nicholas Brothers' fame, Sidney Poitier followed in the footsteps of Canada Lee and refused to play roles written in a degrading manner. Like Lee, Poitier's acting career began on the stage rather than on the screen.<sup>101</sup> Poitier played Dr. Luther Brooks in the 1950 film *No Way Out*, which was his first major film appearance. As the first Black man to win an Academy Award, Poitier is remembered and celebrated for his contributions both as an actor and, later, a director. In many ways, Poitier is an anomaly. Poitier did not sing nor dance. He did not have a comedic schtick. He was one of the first Black *actors* to obtain stardom. Those who came before him—such as the Nicholas Brothers, Bill Robinson, Lincoln Perry, and others like them—were *entertainers*. Entertainers were on a different level than actors, and, unlike actors, their presence in a film was not obligatory to further the plot. Thus, his career marks an essential shift in the greater humanization of Black Americans on screen. At the same time, however, he was one of the only prominent Black actors of his era, which demonstrates that Black Americans were still seldom represented.

Sidney Poitier's success compared to his predecessors can mainly be attributed to his self-advocacy, much like Canada Lee. Additionally, the time at which Poitier gained prominence impacted how he was represented. Poitier's career coincided with the civil rights movement, in which Black Americans fought for equality in all aspects of life, including representation. Furthermore, the themes of many of Poitier's films, like *No Way Out* from 1950 and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* from 1967, deal with the issue of racial discrimination. In his early acting years, Poitier rarely played a character who was socially and politically equal to the white characters in the plot of the film. Poitier was criticized by more radical Black Americans in the 1970s for, in his words, "playing the 'noble Negro' who fulfills white liberal fantasies."<sup>102</sup> Black

<sup>101</sup> *No Way Out*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950; United States: Twentieth Century Fox.

<sup>102</sup> Sidney Poitier. *The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. 2000), 118.

actors faced criticism from social and political groups on both sides of the aisle, as demonstrated by Lincoln Perry's career. Interestingly, there is an absence of criticism of the Nicholas Brothers. Critics, both Black and white, praised the Nicholas Brothers for their talents. Black-run newspapers were known for their lack of criticism of Black actors in the early Hollywood years. Yet today, as contemporary scholars criticize early film representations of Black Americans, Fayard and Harold Nicholas's names are rarely mentioned.

As several scholars on Black representation have described, many white Americans held a concurrent fear and fascination with Black individuals in films.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps because tap dance is often perceived as an expression of joy, viewers of tap dance may lean more heavily into fascination while watching Black performers. There is no question that Black Americans experienced discrimination in the Hollywood film industry. Particularly in the period before the NAACP's reckoning with the film industry in 1942, Black actors were portrayed in stereotypical and demeaning ways.<sup>104</sup> They played characters who were subordinate to white characters, and filmmakers rarely credited Black actors. With such infrequent representation, it seems an anomaly that the Nicholas Brothers, among other Black tap dancers, were so well-loved from the 1930s onward. From these comparisons, we can gather that the portrayal of tap dance in films blurred racial norms.

### **Conclusion: The Nicholas Brothers, Tap Dance, and Representation Beyond the 1940s**

Despite the popularity of tap dance, Hollywood studios began sidelining performers like Harold and Fayard Nicholas in the late 1940s. More white Americans were learning to tap dance,

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<sup>103</sup> Trenka, *Jumping the Color Line*, 12-18.

<sup>104</sup> Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 3.

which meant that tap dance was no longer viewed as a strictly Black American art form. Essentially, the special feature became obsolete and musical films in general were no longer attracting large audiences as television became more prominent.<sup>105</sup> Had musical films continued to be popular into the late 1950s and 1960s, there may have been more opportunities for integrating Black dancers into Hollywood films, especially in response to the civil rights movement. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Black Americans began to be depicted in more positive ways on screen. However, credit for this shift is due to the actors themselves, like Sidney Poitier, who refused to play into stereotypes or harmful depictions.<sup>106</sup> Black actors' opportunities in Hollywood were still few and far between throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. In many ways, Black actors could not escape being viewed primarily through the lens of their race like the Nicholas Brothers and other Black entertainers who came before them.

In the 1970s, a new film trend often referred to as “Blaxploitation” emerged in Hollywood with films like *Shaft* in 1971 and *Superfly* in 1972.<sup>107</sup> These films reflected the ideals of the Black Power movement and, therefore, were criticized by the mainstream public and even civil rights organizations like the NAACP. Through the 1980s and leading up to the present day, more Black Americans are now featured on screen. Today, Black Americans are commonly portrayed through the narrative of the white savior, such as in the 2011 film *The Help* or the 2009 film *The Blindside*. American cinema has evolved since the era of blackface and minstrelsy but,

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<sup>105</sup> Donald Simpson, “Black Images in Film—The 1940s to the Early 1960s,” *The Black Scholar* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 20-29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41067681>.

<sup>106</sup> David Rooney, “Critic’s Notebook: Sidney Poitier Rewrote the Book on Screen Representation,” *Hollywood Reporter*, January 7, 2022. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/sidney-poitier-black-screen-representation-critic-1235071548/>.

<sup>107</sup> LaShawn Harris, “Blaxploitation films,” *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, January 1, 2022, <https://discovery-ebsco-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=d07892fa-4745-3d60-a3d4-3297a730b5e9>.

in many ways, reflects the current situation of racial relations—woefully unresolved but too often ignored by those who hold power.

The film industry continues to grapple with Black representation today. According to a September 2020 study from the National Research Group, two in three Black Americans do not believe they are represented adequately and appropriately on film and television.<sup>108</sup> The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has been heavily criticized for its lack of diversity, primarily through the social media campaign that inspired the “#OscarsSoWhite” trend that many influential celebrities posted to address this issue.<sup>109</sup> While some strides are being made toward diversifying the casts of characters who appear on the American screen, Hollywood corporations and studios are primarily managed by white American men. The competitive Hollywood studio structure, which locked actors and performers into strict contract in the name of making them stars, collapsed post-World War II. However, the imbalance of power in Hollywood that existed in the 1930s and 1940s remains.

When Fayard Nicholas recalled that he started “integration” during his residence at the Cotton Club, he was on to something.<sup>110</sup> Tap dancing did have the ability to obscure racial boundaries in the 1930s and 1940s. During the 1950s and beyond, class acts lost notoriety, and Black performers had fewer opportunities to demonstrate their skills.<sup>111</sup> The Nicholas Brothers recognized this loss of opportunity and began touring throughout theaters and clubs in Europe. Harold Nicholas recalled that Europe was less racially diverse, yet the racial norms of discrimination and intolerance that existed in the United States were not present in Europe.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Danielle Turchiano, “Two in Three Black Americans Don’t Feel Properly Represented in Media (Study),” *Variety*, September 17, 2020.

<https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/representation-matters-study-nrg-black-americans-media-1234772025/>.

<sup>109</sup> Reggie Ugwu, “The Hashtag That Changed the Oscars: An Oral History,” *New York Times*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/movies/oscarssowhite-history.html>

<sup>110</sup> See page one, *Biography*, “The Nicholas Brothers: Flying High.”

<sup>111</sup> Trenka, *Jumping the Color Line*, 12-18.

<sup>112</sup> *The Nicholas Brothers: We Sing, We Dance*, directed by Chris Bould and Michael Martin.

Both Harold and Fayard faced difficulties in their personal lives, likely because of the fame they achieved at such an impressionable age. Harold was a womanizer, and both brothers were unfaithful in their marriages.<sup>113</sup> Harold maintained a solo career until the 1990s, but Fayard's arthritis made dancing difficult for him. For the most part, the Nicholas Brothers never again achieved the level of recognition or fame that they once had in the 1940s. Only when they were presented with Kennedy Center Honors in 1991 did they have some semblance of their due reward. Fayard commented on the experience, "Here I am, 84 years old, and I'm getting all these awards that I should have gotten years ago."<sup>114</sup>

Harold died on July 3, 2000, from heart failure. In his obituary, the *Associated Press* praised Harold as "the younger half of the legendary Black tap-dancing Nicholas Brothers who inspired generations of hoofers with his grace and spectacular agility."<sup>115</sup> Harold's obituary recognized the struggles the Nicholas Brothers faced as Black men in their careers but also highlighted their incredulous achievements. Upon Fayard's death from complications from a stroke on January 24, 2006, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "the handsome, dapper duo is considered by many to be the greatest dance team ever to work in American movies."<sup>116</sup> The Nicholas Brothers are remembered for their unique talents as tap dancers. Film and dance scholars alike are beginning to delve further into the study of Black representation, allowing the Nicholas Brothers and other Black entertainers like them to receive some of their long-overdue credit, if only in historical memory.

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<sup>113</sup> *Biography*, "The Nicholas Brothers: Flying High."

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> "Harold Nicholas, 79, Half of Tap Dancing Nicholas Brothers," *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 7, 2000. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/harold-nicholas-79-half-tap-dancing-brothers/docview/533354776/se-2?accountid=10051>.

<sup>116</sup> Dennis McLellan and Lewis Segal, "Obituaries; Fayard Nicholas, 91; He was Elder Half of Tap-Dancing Nicholas Brothers: [HOME EDITION]," *Los Angeles Times*, January 26, 2006, <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/obituaries-fayard-nicholas-91-he-was-elder-half/docview/422020187/se-2?accountid=10051>.

As the Nicholas Brothers' career shows us, representation, especially through dance, has the power to bring people of different races together and improve white Americans' perceptions of Black Americans. This is evident when comparing the representation of Black tap dancers with Black actors. Additionally, the use of special features, which frequently included tap dance, meant that Black entertainers were included in multiracial films despite being segregated from white actors and performers. Furthermore, Black tap dancers like the Nicholas Brothers strategically used fashion to promote a personal aesthetic of sophistication and class to set themselves apart from the common perception of Black Americans. These elements coalesced to determine the Nicholas Brothers' success in Hollywood.

The Nicholas Brothers paved paths for future generations of Black tap dancers. This includes dancers such as Gregory Hines in the 1980s, Savion Glover in the 1990s and early 2000s, sisters Chloe and Maud Arnold of the Syncopated Ladies, and Jason Samuels Smith today. Tap dance is being reclaimed and celebrated as a Black American art form. Reflecting on the history of Black representation, the Nicholas Brothers defied the norm in their onstage and on-screen careers. They are remembered as some of the most remarkable dancers to grace the screen. No matter their race or background, fans viewed the Nicholas Brothers with joy and admiration rather than hate. Ever-trendsetters, they sprinkled their style, class, and athleticism into their tap dance to defy stereotypes and break racial barriers. For two young Black men in the mid-twentieth century, this was no small feat.

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