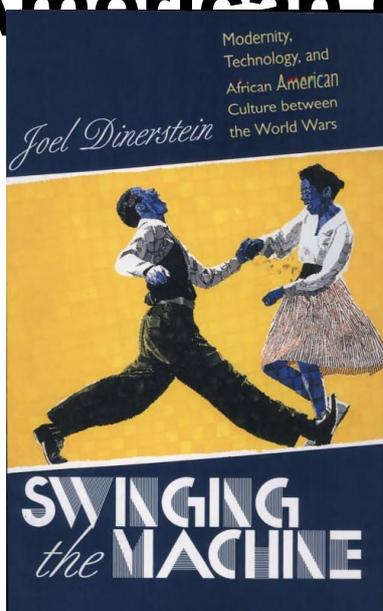


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J. Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine : Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars



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- In any age and any given society, cultural practices reflect the material circumstances of people's everyday lives. According to Joel Dinerstein, it was no different in America between the two World Wars - an era sometimes known as the "machine age" - when innovative forms of music and dance helped a newly urbanized population cope with the increased mechanization of modern life. Grand spectacles such as the Ziegfeld Follies and the movies of Busby Berkeley captured the American ethos of mass production, with chorus girls as the cogs of these fast, flowing pleasure vehicles.

Yet it was African American culture, Dinerstein argues, that ultimately provided the means of aesthetic adaptation to the accelerated tempo of modernity. Drawing on a legacy of engagement with and resistance to technological change, with deep roots in West African dance and music, black artists developed new cultural forms that sought to humanize machines. In "The Ballad of John Henry", the epic toast "Shine", and countless blues, songs, African Americans first addressed the challenge of industrialization. Jazz musicians drew on the symbol of the train within this tradition to create a set of train-derived aural motifs and rhythms, harnessing mechanical power to cultural forms. Tap dance and the lindy hop brought machine aesthetics to the human body, while the new rhythm section of big band swing mimicked the industrial soundscape of northern cities. In Dinerstein's view, the capacity of these artistic innovations to replicate the inherent qualities of the machine - speed, power, repetition, flow, precision - helps explain both their enormous popularity and social function in American life.

Information obligeamment fournie par Michael Cowan.