



# The History of the Cakewalk



The fun dance we now know as the "cakewalk" originated as a way for enslaved African Americans to find joy and humor amidst hardship. These talented dancers would hold 'prize walks' or 'walk-a-rounds,' usually on Sunday afternoons, and compete with one another while dressed as their owners, adding their own flair and exaggerations to their owner's dance moves. While the owners were unaware of the playful parody, they loved the performances and would award the most entertaining dancers with a slice of cake. Eventually they upped the ante to a whole decorated cake.

After the Civil war, in 1870s, a cake walk was a popular feature of minstrel shows, where men exclusively danced it until the 1890s. These minstrel shows featured white performers in blackface makeup. In these shows, white performers would imitate the dance moves of enslaved African Americans, often exaggerating their movements for comedic effect. The black vaudeville entertainers evolved the cakewalk into a more elaborate form of entertainment. It involved a group of couples performing a stylized dance in a circle while a caller directed their movements. The couple who executed the most intricate and impressive steps won a cake, hence the name "cakewalk."

In the 1890's women began to include cakewalks in their vaudeville shows. The cake walk was so ingrained in American popular culture and entertainment that beginning in 1892, local cake walk championships were being held. New York's Madison Square Garden hosted a national championship in 1897. The dance was exported to Europe, and it was performed in 1889 at the Paris World's Fair. As cakewalk dances became more popular, they gave rise to their own form of music, an early predecessor of what is now known as ragtime. With the increase in popularity, the dance became something of a crossover hit, and started being performed by Whites and Black people alike. The dance became associated with high society and was performed at various events such as balls, weddings, and social gatherings. Cakewalks began to decline in popularity, as jazz and other forms of popular music became more prominent. The cakewalk dance has left a lasting impact on dance and music history. Today, we still enjoy the cakewalk, however, as a carnival game loved by many. Participants walk or dance around a circle while music plays, and when it stops, a number is called, with the lucky winner receiving a cake.

**We can thank our ancestors for inventing the cakewalk**, a testament to their creativity, perseverance, and ability to find joy and humor even in tough times.



**Join us Saturday, 10 June 2023,  
Noon-4PM, for the Annual Juneteenth  
Cakewalk, happening during the  
Juneteenth Arts Festival, on the corner  
of 24<sup>th</sup> & Lake Street, Omaha Nebraska.**