Writing the Book on Buddy Bradley

Near the end of her illuminating book on choreographer Buddy Bradley, Maureen Footer discusses Bradley's work on Cecil Landau's revue "Sauce Tartare." The year is 1948 and the London production includes a young Audrey Hepburn, "who had just had her dreams of a ballet career dashed by Marie Rambert," and had come to Bradley for coaching. Footer writes: "Bradley, with his keen eye for that indefinable something that transfixed a house, quickly placed her in the cast of "Sauce Tartare," where she sparkled in its mixed metaphors and send ups, poking fun with Joan Heal at Westerners adopting Eastern spirituality in "Boogie Woogie Yogi" then turning her playful malice on Broadway with the "Oklahokum" sketch."

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Buddy Bradley and Jack Buchanan. Photograph courtesy of Illustrated London News

She then notes that the success of this revue spawned a sequel where Hepburn was more featured, which then in short order led to a title role on Broadway and then *Roman Holiday*.

But what is truly astonishing is that discovering, teaching, and boosting Hepburn is really the least eventful anecdote in a volume full of stories like these. Bradley, who was previously unknown to me before reading this book, catapulted so many of his students into stardom, while also bringing vernacular dance and his own signature style to theater and films and choreographers we are more familiar with, like Frederick Ashton and George Balanchine. In *Feel the Floor: Restoring the Life and Legacy of Jazz Choreographer Buddy Bradley*, published by Beacon Press and in bookstores now, Footer charts Bradley's life and career, claiming his rightful place in dance history.

“Even in the highest levels of dance, the history had just disappeared,” Footer, who has also written books about Christian Dior and George Stacey, told me. The book, fueled by Footer’s investigative feat, draws the portrait of a talented but reserved artist who was not necessarily seeking the limelight but certainly earned it. Tracing his path from the Deep South to Harlem and then London, this history also unpacks the racism and sociopolitical conditions that left his immense contributions to dance and musical theater largely uncredited in New York.

Footer and I connected via Zoom in early May for a wide-ranging conversation about the rigorous research process that unearthed a fuller portrait of this nearly forgotten tap and jazz icon. On May 21, Footer will also be in conversation with Margo Jefferson at the 92Y, in person and streaming.

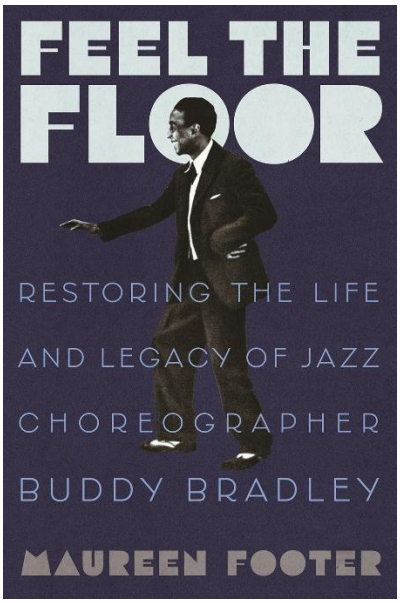
This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

In the introduction you talk about overcoming your doubts as to whether this was a history appropriate for you to write. Let’s be sure to circle back to that. But when you overcame your doubts, where did you start research?

I started in the natural places, the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, and the V & A [Victoria and Albert Museum], all of which have outstanding archives of dance. But there was very little—literally not a folder at the New York Public Library. There were a couple of sketches for costume designs, a couple of programs, but not much at the V & A. What did exist at the Library of Congress was a write up by a graduate student about Buddy Bradley that had quite a bit of erroneous information. It was the best she could obtain at the time, but it made me realize how elusive this man was.

So having struck out with those three first stops, I went to genealogical records. I knew his name, which was not his given name at birth. He dropped the name of his family's enslaver, but he also had to change it because there was somebody else with the same name working in the entertainment world in Broadway in the 1920s. Whether I was looking at ship manifests or marriage records, I had to go through all these different iterations of the name.

Then the next stop was going into newspapers. There wasn't much when you googled Buddy Bradley in the New York entertainment press, because the problem was that he was uncredited here. Well, partly that he was uncredited, but partly—people forget this— is that nobody considered what he was doing, jazz dance and theatrical dance, high art. While he was starting his dance studio on Broadway in 1926, Martha Graham was starting a company. But Graham, because it was concert dance, and because Martha was so imposing as a personality, got so much attention. What Bradley was doing—that just wasn't where the critics’ gaze was at. So that was a little bit of a challenge.



It seems like you had better luck with the British press.

And the African American press: the *Amsterdam News*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. They followed Bradley considerably. He was news. He was doing something noteworthy, and they realized it. He was a success story. When his career starts to flourish, he's living on Sugar Hill; he's no longer in an obscure little boarding house on Seventh Avenue. It also started to give me a timeline of the shows he worked on. The first thing you do with a biography is try to get the timeline in place, particularly if you don't have archives. So that helped get his New York chapter, which went from about 1920 to 1931, before he relocates to London.

From there, you can go get the shows. You can see the programs. You can see the reviews, what they're saying about the dance, if they do at all. Sometimes what the African American press was telling me about who made the dances and what the program was telling me were two different things. I realized he basically covered for Busby Berkeley on a major Rodgers and Hart show. This was a repeating theme.

London was another thing, but I repeated the same process. In the British newspaper archives and the British Library, and you find mentions of Bradley. There he was a celebrity. He was doing something unique. They wanted it. They were so implicated in the slave trade, but they didn't have the same social history of Africans on their soil. They didn't have the same sort of hesitancy to embrace Bradley. Within a year, every play that had dancing on it was influenced by what he was doing. Between *Variety* and *Billboard* and *The Stage* in London, so much of my material came from those sources. Again, this delving into the timeline, names of shows, reviews of shows, and collaborators. A lot of the programs are collected at the Westminster archive.

What about film footage?

The British Film Institute had virtually everything, so I could actually see the choreography. But the most exciting thing from his theater work is that he worked for Noël Coward, and Coward had this gadget fetish. He had a handheld camera in 1931, and he filmed excerpts of this show, and Buddy's choreography. You can see how it's evolving, how he's bringing in new influences, how he's experimenting, how he's moving forward. It was so exciting and little known. For me, it was like the Rosetta Stone because the film shows Bradley taking Frederick Ashton and putting it into jazz, whereas Ashton is also taking jazz and putting it in his ballets. It really showed so much right after Bradley and Ashton worked together—that was probably an 'aha' moment.

You also spoke with the few dancers of that era who are still alive.

He did work as late as the 1950s and '60s and I was able to find dancers going back to the '40s. Their stories told me so much about technique and process, but also about Bradley as an individual. Those interviews were hard to find, and they weren't all conveniently in central London, they were all out in towns where people retire. Finally, I was able to find the star from his last show in New York in 1967, Dr. Glory Van Scott. She helped me shape the context of Bradley's final years in New York.

Bradley's story crosses oceans but also crisscrosses many changes that were happening inside the art form of the musical and jazz music. He was both reacting to some changes and seeming like a catalyst for other changes too.

Definitely. The whole thing that propelled him down into Broadway was that jazz music was influencing George Gershwin and Richard Rogers, and they weren't just doing these sort of operettas and reviews anymore, and they needed a whole new form of dancing. My theory is that it was Bradley who was first linking dancers to lyrics and using it to express personality. It didn't always get into really informing the narrative, but the dance was becoming integrated. Agnes DeMille and "Oklahoma" would later get credit for this. But certainly, he was also responding to changes in the theater that were bigger than him. What made him so successful was not just that he was responding, but he was actually adding and evolving theatrical dance at the same time.

Reading the book, I was continually struck by how he had just ended up in dance and from that random fortune, achieved so much. In some way, it reminded me of reading about how George Balanchine was chosen for ballet school when he was just at the audition because of his sister. It kept making me think about dance as a way to survive, with passion for the art form coming later, though obviously both of those men also thrived. Is there a parallel there?

I think Bradley's story is very different. Although it wasn't by Balanchine's volition that he ended up at the Mariinsky, he was being trained at a very young age. Buddy Bradley ends up dancing because he's a lonely orphan living in a boarding house on Broadway, and some young guys invite him to hang out while they're practicing their tap moves. For the African Americans who ended up in the Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, they came prepared to do service jobs, or else they had an education and could enter the liberal professions, like doctors, lawyers, dentists, some writers, some artists. But Bradley knew he didn't want to be a waiter. Sports or entertainment were often the two ways out. But I don't think Buddy thought about that. He was planning to be a cinema film mechanic when Thaddeus Drayton discovered him. Then Leonard Harper put him into shows. He became the go-to chorus boy, and the highest paid. It turned out he had talent, but because it was vernacular dance, because you didn't have to be in the academy from age seven, it was different than Balanchine's path.

But you're right in that it just kind of happened to him, and fortunately, he was very musical and moved in this amazing way, because if not, we wouldn't have a book on Buddy Bradley.

You describe his reserved nature throughout the book and offer it as one of many reasons he didn't ruffle feathers when he was wronged or snubbed by others in the industry. But you also write about some letters he wrote near the end of his life where pointedly asks for his story to be written.

Buddy Bradley came from Birmingham, Alabama. He was 13 when he was orphaned and started to migrate. The life lessons of being an African American boy and young man in Birmingham, really impressed themselves, to not make waves, to not demand too much. I think he carried some of that. I do not know for sure because he did not leave me a journal or pour his heart out letters to friends. But I suspect that that was a factor.

But there was one important letter, in a small batch of letters between Bradley and musicologist Marshall Stearns, where Bradley did make a bold ask. Can you talk about the impact reading it had on you?

I'm just realizing now, as we talk, I think he was emboldened by the fact that Marshall Stearns, who wrote ***Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*** and interviewed everybody—Pete Nugent, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Eddie Rector, John Bubbles, all the greats of tap and jazz—went out of his way to go to London to interview Bradley. I think it made Bradley see his own work in another perspective. Plus, this was in the early '60s, and Stearns had brought four hoofers to the Newport Jazz Festival, and that was the very beginning of the renaissance of tap. When Bradley saw his colleagues getting this institutionalized respect from the Newport Jazz Festival in articles and newspapers, I think he thought, what about me? But also, I think he started to realize that what he was doing was more than just entertainment and a job, but it had greater merit.

Those letters are very transactional, asking things like: I need a picture for the book, or can you send me the program of this or that for my reference? But there was this little plaintive sentence that just broke my heart: I would really like to tell my story. Would you help me? It was one of the first times Bradley asked for anything in his life, as far as I can tell, which made it even harder for me to read. He was just such a lovely but retiring, gentle individual, and it was so easy, for many reasons, including what he was doing on the theatrical stage, to just kind of bypass him.

What do you hope will happen now that this book is out there? Do you think it's possible for some of the records to have an asterisk, particularly with this new information about the dances he created and the other dance makers he influenced?

That's why I wrote the book. I realized the expanse and reach of Bradley's career and his influence, and it still affects our stage to this day—the fact that Camille Brown can put stepping on the Metropolitan Opera stage or that the Guggenheim Works and Process shows hip-hop. Bradley made it legitimate to look at the possibilities of vernacular dance. He exploded so many ideas about dance: what constitutes dance, where we can draw our influences, why we don't have to stay in narrowly defined lanes. I really wanted all of this to be lifted to the light because it's so unjust that he didn't have credit.

How did you get over your initial concerns about appropriation and whether Bradley's story was yours to write?

Dr. Thomas F. DeFrantz was really the person who gave me confidence. He said, "This doesn't belong to one person; African American culture is seeped into all of our culture." And, "Nobody is following this story. If you don't get to it, we're not going to have a story." Of the interviews I've had, I think four of the people have died already. Another generation can put another spin on it and write another Buddy Bradley history, but we can't recreate some of this stuff that I collected. If someone else wants to amplify this story that would be fantastic.

It's just such a big gift that you did this work for future generations.

I feel like Buddy gave me a gift too. I grew and learned and thought about so many things that were new to me. He was so open and so permeable to new ideas. He was interested in dialogue and exchange and learning and growing from that. We see a political situation now where, I guess out of fear, we just become so barricaded behind our beliefs that we do not open ourselves up. But Buddy always did that, and it was to the benefit of our art. I think that's an important lesson for all of us looking at his life.