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'Feel the Floor' Review: The Moves of Buddy Bradley

The dancer and choreographer was a virtuoso performer in his own right—and a valued mentor to others.

By John Check
May 20, 2026 8:46 am ET

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Buddy Bradley in Victor Saville's "Evergreen" (1934). GETTY IMAGES

When Jessie Matthews begins to dance, it's hard to look away. The English actor's star turn came in the 1934 movie "Evergreen," in which she performs the Rodgers and Hart song "Dancing on the Ceiling." She fills the space with an array of battements and bourrées, chaîné turns and arabesques; at one point she skips up a spiral staircase like a happy child. Buddy Bradley was the African-American choreographer who envisioned these moves and instilled in Matthews, a nervous performer, the confidence she needed.

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Feel the Floor: Restoring the Life and Legacy of Jazz Choreographer Buddy Bradley

By Maureen Footer

Beacon Press

360 pages

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Bradley takes center stage in Maureen Footer's "Feel the Floor," a welcome contribution to theatrical dance history. While Bradley's influence has been acknowledged by dance historians —Marshall and Jean Stearns's "Jazz Dance" (1968) includes a short chapter on him; briefer discussions can be found in books by Constance Valis Hill and Brian Seibert—Ms. Footer looks more closely into Bradley's life and surveys the range of his work for stage and screen.

The man who became Buddy Bradley was born Clarence Bradley Epps in 1905 in Clarksville, Ga. Orphaned at 14, he moved to Harrisburg, Pa., and soon went to work as a busboy. Enchanted by the stories he heard from his co-workers, he set out for New York around 1921, arriving in the early years of the Harlem Renaissance. After learning the basics of tap dancing from a boarder in the house where he was living, he caught the eye of more experienced tappers. Dance, writes Ms. Footer, "began to engross him."

Bradley got work dancing at Connie's Inn, the exclusive Harlem black-and-tan club where the draw for white patrons was bootleg liquor and black entertainers. In 1924 he danced in the Broadway production "Dixie to Broadway," which was, according to Ms. Footer, "the most expensive all-Black show to date." The following year, he began working as an instructor in the dance studio of Billy Pierce, a talent agent who found employment for black dancers. (Pierce, notes Ms. Footer, supplied a team of chorus girls for a 1924 show at the Moulin Rouge.) Bradley quickly became Pierce's star teacher; in turn, Pierce's promotion established and spread Bradley's reputation.

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Hired in 1926 to choreograph a jazz dance for the "Greenwich Village Follies" ("a sassy downtown alternative to the tinsel[y Ziegfeld Follies," Ms. Footer tells us), Bradley wound up reworking some of the other dances in the production, giving the foundering show, in the words of one review, a "blood transfusion." For 1927's "Show Boat," he served as the dance coach for Norma Terris, the original Magnolia. Later that year, he also came to the rescue of the Broadway musical "A Connecticut Yankee." Constance Carpenter, the female lead, chose Bradley to choreograph her numbers. Busby Berkeley was the show's dance director, but Lew Fields, the director, was dissatisfied with Berkeley's work. With time running short, we learn, Fields turned to Bradley to fix the dances. Nevertheless, it was Berkeley who received credit on the program, not Bradley.

At the invitation of Charles B. Cochran (a producer called by some the British Ziegfeld), Bradley moved to London in 1930 and for a year and a half shuttled between there and New York, working with George Balanchine in England and Adele Astaire in America. Settling in London, Bradley opened a successful dance studio in 1932 and choreographed shows and movies for Cochran and many others. He would continue to work in London until the late 1960s, when he returned to New York, where he died in 1972.

"Feel the Floor" benefits from its author's impressive legwork. Ms. Footer, whose books include "George Stacey and the Creation of American Chic" (2014), conducted interviews and correspondences with 45 different sources, analyzed archival footage and hired private investigators to locate long-ago dancers and co-workers of Bradley. Such is the dedication of a writer who made it her "mission" to tell the story of Bradley's life and work.

The admiration Ms. Footer has for Bradley is obvious, but it sometimes leads her to embroider the little that is known of his inner life. Bradley left no diary and wrote few letters that survive. He kept about him a reserve that, the author admits, was like "an impenetrable wall." Surprising, then, to read that, early in his career, the experience of walking from Times Square to Billy Pierce's West 46th Street dance studio "confirmed what Bradley already knew: he didn't really belong here, a brown face in a sea of white." It is plausible that Bradley thought something like this—but that doesn't mean he did.

Elsewhere, Ms. Footer states with certainty that in his choreography for "Evergreen" Bradley was "baring his soul as an artist." Clearly Ms. Footer conceives of Bradley as something of a tortured Romantic; what's unclear—in fact, what is unknowable—is whether Bradley did himself.

That said, a strength of Ms. Footer's book is its fineness of detail. We learn that the Harrisburg house in which Bradley and his younger brother lived was 1,200 square feet and shared with 18 other people. "It's Love Again," a 1936 movie that also features Jessie Matthews, includes "headdresses that required twenty weeks' labor to bejewel." The author notes that Bradley loosened his taps in such a way that they projected "a little brightness," like those of tapper extraordinaire Honi Coles. She appreciates Bradley's "glamorous" London residence, "kitted out with blue damask" and "cream strié walls."

Ms. Footer vividly captures the effect Bradley had on his students. One of them recollected with wonder the way music was "visible throughout his entire body." Another "idolized" him so much that he bought the same model of sweater favored by Bradley—and even wore it to class. Another would sneak at night into Bradley's dance studio; once inside, this student "borrowed" his teacher's shoes and got to work, practicing "in solitude," aspiring to Bradley's elegance.

In the epigraph to one of her chapters, Ms. Footer quotes Sammy Davis Jr.: "Part of show business is magic. You don't know how it happens." To have seen a performance choreographed by Buddy Bradley in his prime must have been magical indeed. In "Feel the Floor," Maureen Footer shows us the dedication that went into Bradley's work and the years of experience that informed his artistic decisions. Along the way, she reveals his immense professionalism and integrity. Thanks to her, we now know more about how the magic happened.

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Understanding what matters

—Mr. Check is a professor of music at the University of Central Missouri.

Appeared in the May 23, 2026, print edition as 'The Moves of Buddy Bradley'.

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