

DANCE STYLE LOCATOR

South African: Gumboot dance



Gumboot dance developed from traditional African roots, to become a part of urban South African working-class culture. The practice began with rural laborers who came to work at the gold mines of Witwatersrand in South Africa. They brought with them strong traditions of rhythm, song, and dance. Facing oppression and hardship at the mines, including punishment if they talked to each other while working, they were forced to adapt and create new forms of communication and entertainment. The fact that many ethnic groups and languages existed side by side also

contributed to developing their associations through the shared language of rhythm and music.

In the mines they worked for three months at a time, doing long, hard, repetitive toil. In the total darkness of the mines, many workers were chained to their workstations and forbidden to speak with one another. Hundreds of workers were killed every year in accidents and many were beaten and abused by the foremen. The conditions of the mines were deplorable, where mine floors often flooded due to poor drainage, causing skin problems and disease. Rather than spending money to properly drain the shafts, the bosses issued rubber gumboots to the workers. The miners' uniform thus consisted of jeans or overalls, bandannas to absorb their sweat, hard hats, and gumboots.

The mine executives tried to divide workers from each other even when they were not working, for fear of solidarity and uprising. Their overcrowded living quarters were segregated along ethnic or tribal lines. At the same time, they were forbidden to carry on their traditions, or wear traditional dress, in an attempt to virtually erase their ethnic identity. Faced with this repressive regime, workers adapted traditional dances and rhythms to the only instruments available - their boots and bodies.

Inside the mines, the workers used the gumboots to communicate with each other, by slapping their boots, stamping their feet, and rattling their ankle chains. As the form also developed into a popular social activity, songs dealing with working-class life, drinking, love, family, low wages and mean bosses were sung to accompany the movements.

Some employers eventually became aware of this emerging dance form, and the more tolerant ones allowed the best dancers to form troupes. These troupes were used to entertain visitors and spread good PR by representing their company. It was not unusual for these performers' songs, sung in the workers' native languages, to openly mock their bosses and criticize wages and conditions, while the bosses listened on, blissfully ignorant of the content.



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(Gumboot dance, continued)

Gumboot dance is now a popular art form performed worldwide to entertain and pass on elements of South African history to new generations and other cultures. Like many folkloric art forms, it is adapted to the modern contexts in which it is performed.

The following is a translation of a song that is sung with Gumboot dance. The rich harmonies are characteristic of much South African music:

MAHLALELA

HEE MAHLALELA
HAMBU' UYO SEBENZA
HEE MAHLALELA
HAMBH' UYO SEBENZA

HEE HEE
HE MAHLALELEA
HAMBH' UYO SEBENZA
HE MAHLALELA
HAMBH' UYO SEBENZA

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

LOAFER GO AND WORK

MAHLALELA	...	LOAFER
HAMBHA	...	GO
UYO	...	YES
SEBENZA	...	WORK