

## ***Underfoot (Vooruit)***

The idea for this piece arose when I read about a small event that took place in Germany in 1950, which had its roots in the Savoy Ballroom in South Side Chicago 23 years previously. The Savoy, based on its counterpart in Harlem, New York, opened on 23 November 1927. For its first 13 years, it hosted dances every night of the week, with the jazz greats of the era – Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald – gracing its stage. But occasionally the dancing would yield the floor to a diverse range of events including boxing, figure skating, roller skating, mass political meetings and basketball.

According to some accounts, soon after opening the Savoy began to host semi-professional basketball games every two weeks, in an attempt to increase attendance. It is believed that Abe Saperstein was approached to put together a home team.<sup>1</sup> He searched for top African-American players to form the Savoy Big Five.<sup>2</sup> The Big Five's games in the ballroom took place before the dances, with the aim of attracting audiences that might be tempted to stay on for the dancing. The games were unsuccessful in this respect, leading Saperstein and his team, now named the Globe Trotters,<sup>3</sup> to leave their home base and tour South Illinois by the next year.

In 1927 jazz,<sup>4</sup> and particularly swing, were becoming increasingly popular. It was at this time that the dance performed in this piece, the Lindy Hop, started evolving from popular African-American vernacular dances<sup>5</sup> such as the Charleston, tap and jazz dance at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. The Lindy Hop<sup>6</sup> also incorporated influences from European partner-dance structures, specifically the formal eight-count.

The Jazz Age<sup>7</sup> came to an end with the onset of the Depression in 1929. However, jazz remained popular through the 1930s and 40s, with the 1930s often being cited as the golden era of swing. In 1941, the USA entered World War II. This brought wider attention to the Lindy Hop in Europe through the presence of American troops on the continent (although jazz had been growing steadily in popularity between the wars in Europe, particularly in Paris).<sup>8</sup>

The music used in the performance is *Sweet Georgia Brown*, written by Ben Bernie, Maceo Pinkard and Kenneth Casey. In 1926, Bernie and his orchestra were the first to record the song and make it popular. It was subsequently covered by numerous artists including Django Reinhardt, Louis Armstrong, the Dave Brubeck Quartet and Count Basie, but is most widely recognised as the theme song of the Globetrotters.<sup>9</sup>

The end of the war in Europe saw America actively promoting its culture and values across the Atlantic. During this period, the Globetrotters went from barnstorming to being a serious team. They won the World Professional Basketball Tournament<sup>10</sup> title in 1940. Over the next decade, the team became increasingly known for the flair and entertainment value for which they are famed today (although this still took a back seat to their competitiveness at the time).<sup>11</sup> In 1950, the Globetrotters began the World Series of Basketball Tour. They played exhibition matches against a team of college players known as the College All-Americans. The tour took the Globetrotters to Portugal, Switzerland, England, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Morocco and Algeria.<sup>12</sup> Although basketball had been an official Olympic sport since 1936, it was still largely unknown outside the USA. The tour was to create the beginnings of a greater international recognition for the sport.

This tour and subsequent ones presented the Globetrotters with a logistical problem. In countries with little knowledge of the sport, basketball courts were difficult to find. Bullrings, tennis courts and other surfaces had to be used instead. In one incident in Germany, the team was scheduled to play in a ballroom – the same type of surface on which the then Savoy Big Five played its first games in America. The Globetrotters returned to the dance floor, but this time they found it too slippery to play on. It was decided to cover the floor with Coca-Cola<sup>13</sup> to make it sticky.<sup>14</sup> This is the event that inspired *Underfoot*.

In 1910, the 'Samenwerkende Maatschappij Vooruit',<sup>15</sup> or Vooruit Cooperative, purchased the site of what would become the Vooruit in Ghent, the venue for this performance, with a view to establishing a community centre. Ferdinand Dierkens<sup>16</sup> was commissioned as the architect. The building was scheduled to open in 1913 to coincide with the World Fair in Ghent, but construction was delayed due to strikes. The Vooruit served as a successful socialist community centre from its opening in 1918 up until 1940.<sup>17</sup> After World War II, it entered a period of decline which lasted until 1980. It now serves as a highly successful multi-purpose art centre. The history of the Vooruit – in addition to its ballroom – made it an appropriate setting for this performance of *Underfoot*.

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<sup>1</sup> There are numerous contradictions in accounts of the origins of the Harlem Globetrotters/Savoy Big Five. The official history (<http://www.harlemglobetrotters.com/history/timeline/>) and some books on the topic claim that the team began in 1926 under Saperstein's guidance. But the Savoy Ballroom only opened in 1927, 11 months after the supposed end of their run there. The only documented reference from that time that has been located is for two games from early January 1928. In fact, it is likely that Saperstein took on the role of manager of a team in 1926, before the opening of the Savoy, but this was a previously established team, the South Side Giles Post of the American Legion.

<sup>2</sup> The team was largely made up of players who had graduated from the same high school (Wendell Phillips Academy) and lived on the South Side. The players were Tommy Brookins, William Grant, Inman Jackson, Lester Johnson, Joe Lillard, Randolph Ramsey, Walter Wright and William Watson. Jackson, Johnson and Wright would go on to form the core of the first Globetrotter team.

<sup>3</sup> It was Abe Saperstein who suggested the name. The decision to call the team after Harlem was to capitalise on the reputation of Harlem as the centre of African-American culture, adding a mystique to the team while touring Illinois. The team would not actually play in Harlem until 1968. The exact progression of the names is also disputed, with variations including Globe Trotters, New York Globe Trotters, Saperstein's New York Globe Trotters, Harlem New York Globe Trotters and New York Harlem Globe Trotters, before it was settled on the Harlem Globe Trotters. The joining of the two words into one, Globetrotters, would happen still later.

<sup>4</sup> Jazz developed out of both African and European traditions, originally coming from the American South, particularly New Orleans. The use of pentatonic scales of West African music led to the development of blue notes and the swung note that are characteristics of jazz. The style also uses the polyrhythm and syncopation of traditional African music. However, its harmonic structures follow a more European concept of harmony. By the late 1920s the jazz scene was increasingly dominated by musicians from New York and Chicago.

<sup>5</sup> African-American vernacular dances are dances that developed within African-American communities in informal settings, rather than in dance schools, studios or companies.

<sup>6</sup> One theory as to how the name originated is that Charles Lindbergh, whose nickname was 'Lucky Lindy', inspired the Lindy Hop. Lindbergh 'hopped' across the Atlantic in 1927.

<sup>7</sup> The Jazz Age usually describes the period from 1918 to 1929 in the USA. The period is characterised by post-war modernist developments such as Art Deco, jazz, the rush of new technologies including automobiles, cinema and radio, as well as the stock market boom. It is also seen as a period of decline in traditional values.

<sup>8</sup> The Belgian guitarist Django Reinhardt was important in popularising the swing sound in Europe, particularly with his band, the Quintette du Hot Club de France. The Lindy Hop, along with jazz, had grown a following in Europe in the 1930s through film reels of the period. Jazz was banned in Germany during the Nazi regime, although there were some underground scenes. The 1993 film *Swing Kids*, directed by Thomas Carter, depicts a fictional story about a number of youths involved in the underground swing scene in Germany during that period.

<sup>9</sup> The version used by the Globetrotters is a 1949 instrumental by Brother Bones & His Shadow. It was adopted by the Globetrotters in 1952.

<sup>10</sup> The World Professional Basketball Tournament existed from 1939 until 1948. The tournament was invitational and was contested by American teams, with most of the teams coming from the National Basketball League (NBL).

<sup>11</sup> In 1939, while leading against a local team by a score of 112-5, the Globetrotters began to clown around and show off their skills to entertain the crowd. After the match Saperstein encouraged the team to do so again but only if they had a substantial winning margin.

<sup>12</sup> This would be the first of the World Series of Basketball Tours (1950–62). The tour at its peak would be the most popular event in the basketball calendar, overshadowing even the NBA finals.

<sup>13</sup> In 1950, Coca-Cola had only recently begun to re-emerge in Germany. Shipping restrictions had prevented the Coca-Cola syrup from being sent to German bottling plants during the war. As a result, the German chemist Schetelig developed the Fanta brand in 1940 in Essen. Coca-Cola was invented in 1885 by John Pemberton in Columbus, Georgia, USA. Pemberton was supposedly inspired by Vin Mariani. This was the first 'cocawine', a combination of wine and cocaine, invented by the Frenchman Angelo Mariani in 1863. The drink was popular at the end of the 19th century before cocaine was banned.

<sup>14</sup> This event was referred to by Tom Friend in 'The Man Who Wanted to be a Globetrotter', ESPN.com, 29 July 2008 (<http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=friend/080725>). Besides this mention, I have not found further references to the event. I have been unable to verify the exact city it took place in or if it even happened at all. I attempted to contact the Harlem Globetrotters to verify the event but have not yet received a reply.

<sup>15</sup> The 'Samenwerkende Maatschappij Vooruit' was one of the Ghent co-operatives led by the Belgian Workers' Party and the socialist trade union of the time.

<sup>16</sup> Ferdinand Dierkens is best known for the Vooruit Cooperative building. His work is largely in the style of 19<sup>th</sup>-century eclecticism, incorporating elements of Art Nouveau.

<sup>17</sup> Although the building was completed in 1914, it was occupied by the German Army during World War I. Its opening thus took place after the war.