

Do the Funky Penguin-- With T.S. Eliot

by Con Chapman

T.S. Eliot offered to introduce Virginia Woolf to new dance steps including the Grizzly Bear and the Chicken Strut. The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 3: 1926-1927



My dearest Virginia—

Thank you so much for the British version of *Do the Funky Penguin*, Parts I and II, by Rufus Thomas, which I have been unable to find in any of the many used record stores here in Cambridge. I suspect it is because the artist appears in a somewhat risible outfit on the cover—I think the hot pants/go-go boots ensemble is a stitch!—but it does not conform to conventional notions of authenticity that prevail here.

I do so detest this place, with its faux-Negraux “blues” musicians and their affected hipster mannerisms and downwardly-mobile lifestyles. Must every apartment be decorated with brick-and-board shelves and milk crates?

Yearning to do the Shing-a-Ling with you in Covent Garden soon!

Fondly,
T.S.E.



Dear Tom:

The VHS tape of *The Funky Chicken* that you sent me has been watched—by me of course—and I am having trouble executing the final flourish. Would you say it partakes more of the *Loco-Motion* or the *Mashed Potato*?

Maynard Keynes has taken up with a Russian ballerina named Lidia Vasilyevna Lopokova. She is flighty and capricious; one day she says her surname is pronounced lo-po-KO-va, the next she insists upon lo-PO-ko-va. *Very tedious.*

Lytton Strachey had a Robin Collingwood quote—“Dance is the mother of all languages”—tattooed to his arm. His limbs are thin as sticks and so one must circumnavigate his entire bicep in order to read it, exposing one (by which I mean me) to his b.o.

Yours until the Huckle Bucks.

Virginia

Dear Virginia—

You do so get tangled up in the passive voice; you must learn to do things backwards and in sensible shoes, like a literary Ginger Rogers.

Speaking of which, I see that Fred Astaire is offering correspondence dancing lessons. I find the prospect troubling. What if you have to return them? Do they come with an extended

warranty? Buy local—it's your best guaranty of terpsichorean freshness.

Please rest assured that my offer to teach you the latest dance crazes was in no way conditional upon the favorable response of Hogarth Press to my longish poem *He do the Police in Different Voices*. Although I would be somewhat reluctant to reveal the precise steps to The Funky Broadway to someone who did not hold my work in the highest esteem.

Yours 'til cats kill mountains,
T.S.

Thomas—

So now you threaten to hold out on me; to retain for your own use and behoof those dances you deem too valuable to let go; to subordinate our friendship to your prickly poetic pride; to deny me the chance to sparkle and shine at Bloomsbury Group sherry hours doing the Shimmy, Shimmy Ko-Ko-Bop?

Let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that—like Smokey Robinson & the Miracles—I've got to dance to keep from crying.

A bit miffed,
Virginia



Dearest Virginia—

I love you when you get mad! You roll out those compound sentences with the clauses separated by semi-colons. Dash it—it's capital!

I would never, ever deny you access to my voluminous collection of dance step diagrams. The Swim? With vim. The Fly? Give it a try. Although I *had* promised Vita Sackville-West first dibs on The Chicken Strut.

Let me know what if anything I can do (that doesn't involve strenuous effort) to repair the rift in our friendship.

Until I hear from you again, everything I do gonna be funky.

T.S.



Thomas—

I accept your apology, if that's what it was. I shall be pleased to receive you in my room, which is my own, for private instruction in The Grizzly Bear and such other dances as you believe will eventually make their way to London from America.

More cordially than before,
Virginia



Dear Virginia—

Private lessons are directed at an individual student's goals and can be expensive, group sessions teach a dance step to *all* participants and are less costly. I'm having a special on Texas line dances that I would be pleased to offer to all members of the Bloomsbury set, which—I know, I know—is a loose association and not a formal group.

