DOCUMENT RESUME

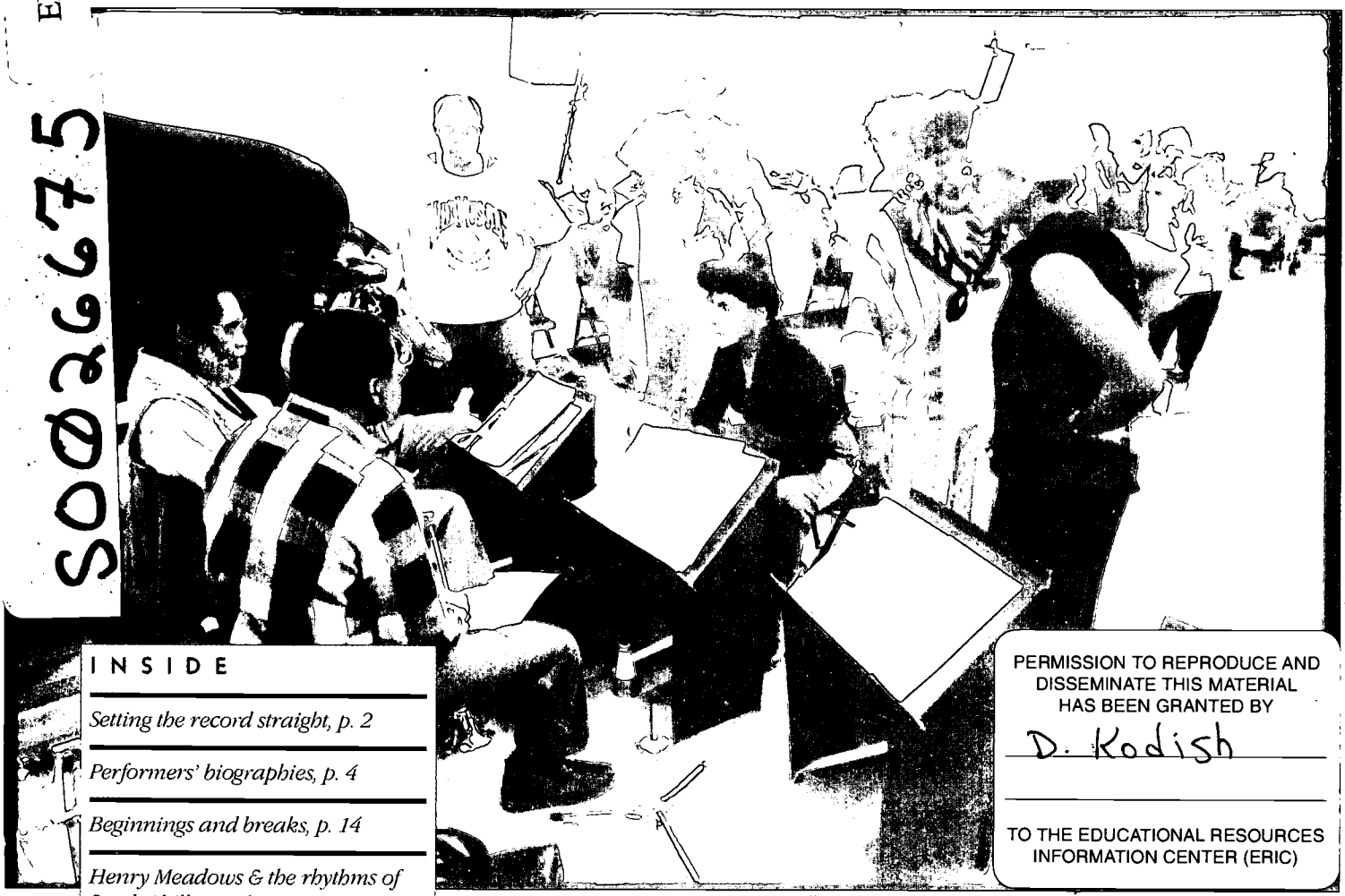
ED 407 293 SO 026 675

TITLE	Stepping in Time.
INSTITUTION	Philadelphia Folklore Project, PA.
REPORT NO	ISSN-1075-0029
PUB DATE	Feb 94
NOTE	45p.; Photographs may not reproduce well.
AVAILABLE FROM	Philadelphia Folklore Project, 719 Catharine St., Philadelphia, PA 19147.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Historical Materials (060)
JOURNAL CIT	Works in Progress; v8 n2 Feb 1994
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; Aesthetics; *Art Education; *Blacks; Dance; Drama; *Folk Culture; Higher Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Multicultural Education; Music; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS	*African Americans; Entertainment; Musicals

ABSTRACT

This special commemorative theme issue features a Philadelphia Folklore Project that sought to encourage a wider discussion about art and the politics of culture; to document and explore the history of a significant folk art form--in this case, tap dancing--from the perspective of the generation of African American women and men who "came up" in the 1920s-40s; and to create a forum for presentation and discussion of these issues. Following an introduction and a section titled "Performers' biographies," seven essays present in-depth testimonies from the artists as they trace Philadelphia vernacular tap traditions and discuss aesthetics of the art as well as the range of customs and performances. Featured artists include Hortense Allen Jordan, Libby Spencer, Edith Hunt, Henry Meadows, and Tommy Jordan. (DQE)

STEPPING IN TIME



INSIDE

Rehearsing, Hortense Allen Jordan talks with Charles Bowen and Paul Grant (seated). Marvin Jordan, Ruth Mobley, Kitty DeChavis, Isabelle Fambro, and Germaine Ingram (standing). Photo: Thomas B. Morton

Works in Progress, the newsletter of the Philadelphia Folklore Project

Special commemorative issue

Volume 8, number 2
February 1994
ISSN 1075-0029

Setting the record straight: an introduction to "stepping in time"

One point of beginning for this project (and there are many) is in recognition of the significant art, wisdom and accumulated experience of African American tap dancers—many of whom achieved prominence in the golden age of swing or rhythm tap (1930s-40s). Artists are passing, and it is not only a great and original American art form that is being "lost," but a way of approaching art, a vital kind of connection between art and community. We are also losing track of some hard-won lessons about what can happen when a vernacular tradition goes "uptown." We write this conscious that people have been announcing the "death" of various folk art forms for generations—while the arts themselves have continued to alter, change and evolve. We want to call attention to some real changes in what counts as tap dance these days, in how people learn to dance and sing, in who controls and who has access to art.

Tap artists for some time now have been in the peculiar (but unfortunately not unfamiliar) position of watching from the sidelines as younger dancers, critics and programmers (chiefly but not exclusively white, chiefly but not exclusively trained in school and classes) define tap and its possibilities, its milestones, its pantheon of giants and history, its so-called "death" and "revival." People talk to who they know, and within the so-called mainstream dance world, few question other peoples' authority, knowledge, or assumptions. But look who isn't doing the talking. Effectively, tap dancers schooled on the streets and in the business, by lifetimes of dancing—that is to say, dancers educated within what is conventionally considered folk tradition rather than formal school tradition—are scarcely represented in dance festivals, concerts, funding panels, dance faculties. They are excluded from substantive discussions about tap aesthetics, innovation, programming, education, funding, quality, history, or futures. It is all of our loss.

Results of these omissions—often unintentional—are lack of public awareness of both present and past politics of culture, lack of understanding of past African American tap innovation and experience, lack of appreciation of the complex features of the vernacular tradition—and less opportunities, prestige, and rewards for African American artists.

We began this project wanting to bring attention to the steps, styles, and voices most excluded by contemporary tap, i.e. folk artists, and especially African American women among them. We wanted to facilitate discussion of critical issues raised by the example of tap but present for most folk arts: How do histories of art affect the present? What happens when vernacular arts gain currency in mainstream settings? In what ways can buried assumptions about race, class, gender, color, and performance context affect the evolution and evaluation of an art form? Our aims were to encourage a wider discussion about art and the politics of culture; to document and explore the history of a significant folk art form from the perspective of the generation of African American women and men who came up in the 1920s-1940s; and to create a forum for presentation and discussion of these issues which, rather than coopting voices, instead facilitates understanding and communication.

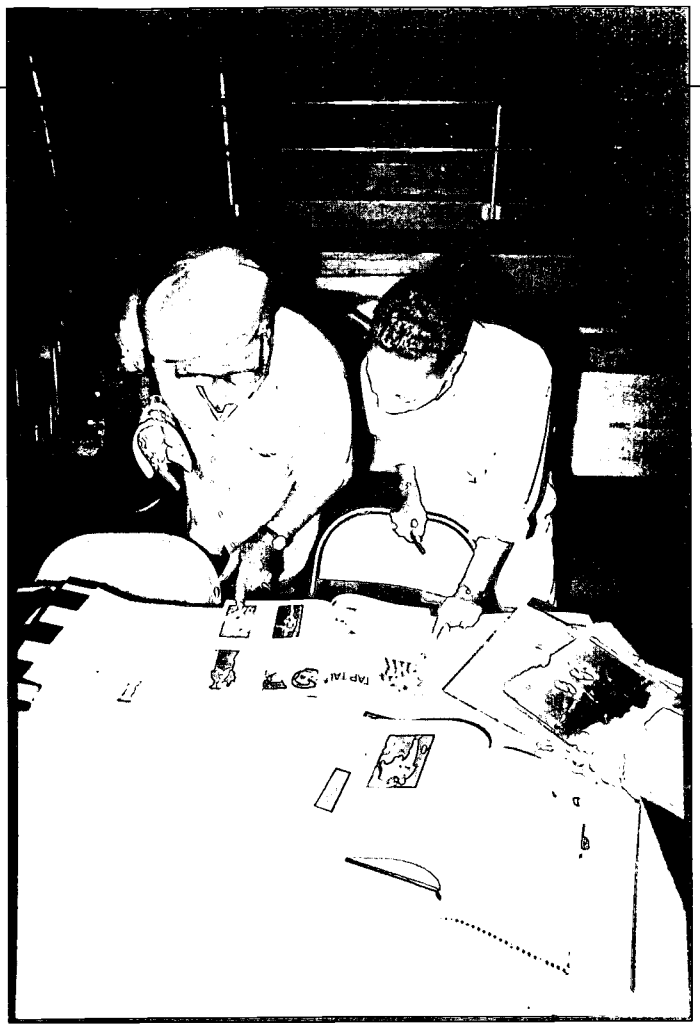
This booklet is one attempt to remove barriers to seeing and understanding dance itself. Included here are lengthy testimonies, artists' own words. These narrative traditions condense common experiences. Part of the occupational folklore of tap, these stories are an art as rich and resonant as dancers' steps.

The Philadelphia tap scene of the 1920s through the 1940s is a prime example of a folk or vernacular tradition, operating in a community milieu. The vital local dance scene was connected in many ways to the national scene, and Philadelphia vernacular styles entered and shaped popular culture. Oral tradition and folk custom emphasize the life of tap within the community, as well as the complex knowledge that tappers have about one another. They also reveal the aesthetics of the art: what people value and privilege, what they count as excellence. The folk history of tap—including this aesthetic "theory"— continues in peoples' narratives, in a range of customs, and (to knowing eyes and ears) in performances that reference, extend, reprise, or fall short of the magic and skill of previous artists.

When talking frankly with one another, hoofers—women and men—may speak about how race, gender, class, and color affected their own individual ability to work. They talk about the hard toll that life on the road took, of artists who fell victim to drugs, drink, fame and other tragedies. They talk of luck, good and bad, of what they could control and what was outside their

Artie Riley, Oscar McBurse and Patricia Perkins look at this volume in process, held by Debora Kodish. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

▼▼▼▼▼



LaVaughn Robinson and Germaine Ingram look at materials. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

▼▼▼▼▼

power. Some stories are often retold, for the pleasure of the telling, or because they seem to embody collective judgements, knowledge and truths. Few of those speaking are bitter. Most are clear-eyed realists. All are survivors.

These stories and the performances presented in "Stepping in Time" are rooted in an ethic and aesthetic that diverge frequently from those of today's mainstream dance world. The ambition of some latter-day tap disciples to establish tap as a "serious" art form has resulted in emphasis on the proscenium stage and concert format as preferred presentation modes; in uninformed distinctions between "routines" and choreography; and in celebration of lengthy pieces and what passes for improvisation over the pithy, carefully composed numbers performed by Bill Robinson, Tip, Tap & Toe, Coles and Atkins, the Four Covans, the Miller Brothers and Lois, and so many other major tap acts which graced stages in the twenties, thirties and forties.

The "Stepping in Time" performers need make no apologies for having plied their art in tent shows, on street corners, in bars and nightclubs, as well as at great theaters like the Apollo, the Howard, and the Palace. They need offer no excuses for harking back to material they honed through years of playing the Keith Circuit, the "Chittlin' Circuit," and T.O.B.A. (officially the Theater Owners' Booking Association, but functionally "tough [illegible] artists"), the Catskills, NYC, [illegible], Chicago, Las Vegas, London, Paris and Australia. LaVaughn Robinson recalls that he and his dance partners learned early to "pack the meat of our material into six to eight minutes," and cautions that if you can't "tell a story in two choruses [sixty-four bars of music]," you aren't going to do any better in five or six. And of today's idolizing of tap improvisation, tap great Jimmy Slyde says the most important part of the word "improvise" is the part that relates to "improve." "If you call it improvisation the first time [you do a phrase or segment of rhythm], what do you call it the second, third and fourth time you do it?"

Essentially, mainstream dance world categories of what counts as art—when used as measuring sticks—obscure understanding of the aesthetics and achievements of artists who came up dancing in different contexts. One aim of this project is to separate contextual and functional differences from aesthetic ones.

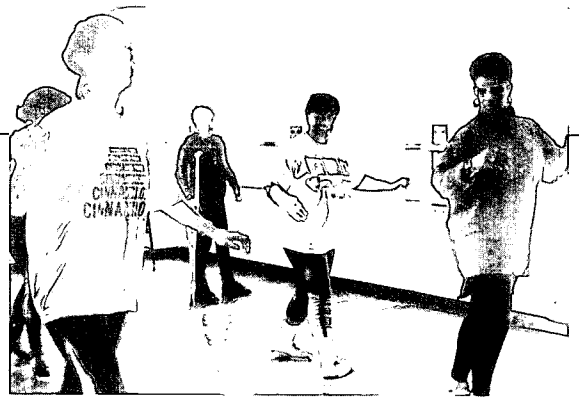
We always had a performance in mind, but somewhere in the middle of the process, the artists involved decided to put on a show, a real show, that would give this generation's audiences a chance to understand the glory and glamour of show business—and to see, as Isabelle Fambro put it, "that we ain't dead yet." The issues and the performance naturally moved from a focus solely on hoofing to the wider context of show business.

The conviviality and joy of the past months have been extraordinary. Meetings in Fambro's photograph-lined basement have been occasions for people to share precious memories, to debate art and history, to reconstruct great performances, and to enjoy the sociability of others who understand. We have been honored to be witnesses, to listen and to learn. The following "essays" are testimonies from people who have, collectively, more than 1,000 years of show business experience behind them. And what experience! These individuals broke ground, as women, as African American entertainers—as artists. We offer this booklet as a window into some of their world, and as a tribute to their indomitable spirit and art.

—Germaine Ingram and
Debora Kodish

Uncredited contemporary photographs throughout taken at Stepping in Time rehearsals by Debora Kodish

Performers' biographies



Clockwise, from top, this page:

(l-r) Jeanne Bristow-Pinkham, Vicki Diaz, Patricia Perkins and Yvonne Walton rehearsing.

(l-r) Peter Briglia and Henry Meadows.

A composite of Hortense Allen Jordan at the Apollo Theater.

▼▼▼▼▼

Hortense Allen Jordan was born in St. Louis, Missouri. Already dancing as a chorus girl and producing shows at the Plantation Club when she was "just a schoolgirl," she became widely known as a show producer. At a remarkably young age, she was not only dancing, but working as a choreographer, director and producer. Appearing in the midwest with a revue and her own chorus line, Allen came to the attention of Larry Steele who invited her to come east with him. She both produced and danced in his "Smart Affairs" shows at the Club Harlem in Atlantic City, directed and choreographed hundreds of shows, trained literally thousands of dancers and chorus lines, and designed and made their fabulous costumes. She was the first black woman to put a chorus line in the Paramount on Broadway. Often, she received credit only as a dancer. Among the shows she produced were those headlined by Sugar Ray Robinson, Louis Jordan and James Brown. Her shows at the Dell and Atlantic City's Club Harlem were widely reknowned.

Charles Bowen hails from Chester, Pennsylvania. He has been playing music for thirty-six years, and performing around Philadelphia for the last thirty years. A saxophonist and composer, he recently played in "Bo" at Bushfire Theater, and was the conductor for "Lady Behind the Gardenia" at Freedom Theater.

Peter Briglia. Born in 1947, Briglia grew up in West Philadelphia. To try something different, he started taking tap dance classes in the mid-1970s, and enjoyed it. His eyes were opened, he recalls, when he first saw LaVaughn Robinson perform—Robinson's hoofing was altogether different from the kind of tap Briglia had been learning. He began taking classes from Robinson, and came to know Henry Meadows through his teacher. Meadows asked Briglia if he wanted to dance with him before he ever saw the younger man dance a step—something that Briglia still considers both a great gift and an honor, "I was a raw recruit, and Henry took so much time with me and has worked with me." The two began to perform, and have been working as a duo since the early 1980s, first at Club Cornucopia and the Wynne Plaza, and then at casinos in Atlantic City—the Claridge, Taj Mahal, Trumps Castle, Trop World and many others. Briglia makes his living as a general contractor, but tap remains "a labor of love.'

Jeanne Bristow-Pinkham started dancing when she was six years old, at the neighborhood recreation center in Olney. She trained at the School of the Pennsylvania Ballet, danced with the Philadelphia Civic Ballet, and was Temple's fifth dance major graduate in 1972. She first encountered chorus and show dance when she worked for the City of Philadelphia's Recreation Department in a performing arts camp run by Libby Spencer. Around this time, she also had the chance to dance with Hortense Allen Jordan. Bristow-Pinkham had her own aerobics show on Prism and taught dance until about eight years ago when injuries curtailed this work. She has an MA, and is currently teaching adult education.

Robert F. Burden, Jr. was a street dancer, house dancer and party dancer before attending the University of the Arts. After a year of school, he moved to Florida, danced for Disney World and started a break dance group. He earned enough money from dancing to return to school. Back at the University of the Arts, he met LaVaughn Robinson, who he eventually worked with for four years. Burden recalls that it took him six or seven months to get a time step and other basics down to where he could study with Robinson. Burden has performed in 42nd Street at the Riverfront Dinner Theater, and for Young Audiences. In 1989, he and Arthur Taylor began the company, Tap Team Two. He received an IPAP grant from the Community Education Center to experiment with creating stories set to tap; this led to

his production of CyndiElla at the CEC and the Painted Bride. Exploring how to use tap as a form of music that is *heard,* he has used tap boards to produce different pitches, and is premiering a piece using these boards at the Williamstown, New Jersey, Grand Theater.

Barbara Clayton began dancing under Libby Spencer's direction when she was just five years old, at the Marian Anderson Recreation Center. She studied ballet, jazz and tap with Spencer. Clayton has performed with Pinkney Roberts, the D&D Review, and with the Copasetics in "Tapping Uptown."

She has also performed as a member of various African dance companies: Temple University's African Dance Ensemble directed by Kariamu Welsh Asanté, the Diaspora Dance Company directed by Katrina Hazzard, and with Jaasu Ballet. For the last four years, she has performed as part of the Women's Shekere Battery in the Africamericas Parade.

Kitty DeChavis first started singing in a local Philadelphia Catholic church. She recalls soloing with "Ave Maria," and thrilling at the sound of the chorus behind her. She performed at both the Standard Theater and Lincoln Theater Kiddie [illegible]ge six, and as a teenager, trying to sing in clubs.

While she often got hired on the strength of her singing ability, she would lose jobs when club owners discovered she was underage (or when her mother found where she was singing.) By the time she was sixteen, she was under contract as a singer in Montreal, where her father then lived, at the Café St. Michel. Around 1947, on her way back home to Philadelphia, she mistakenly stopped in New York and met agent Jimmy Edwards, who launched her singing career. Later, she was "discovered" by agent Billy Shaw. DeChavis appeared at New York's Apollo and Small's Paradise, at Club Delisa in Chicago and many other places, touring nationally with Nat King Cole, Moms Mabley, Wynonie 'Blues' Harris, Paul Williams and Earl Bostic. Her recordings include the first vocal performance of the "Hucklebuck," "Be Anything But Be Mine," and other hits.

Vicki Diaz was born and raised in New York City. She began her dance career there at age fourteen, doing the mambo at the Palladium Ballroom. At the Savoy Ballroom, she was "top of the line" doing the jitterbug jive, an aerial version of the lindy hop. She won the Harvest Moon Ball Jitterbug Jive contest at the Savoy, toured nationally in such shows as Mambo USA, and appeared at Madison Square Garden in Shower of Stars with Milton Berle. After she moved to Philadelphia in 1962, she began dancing in Hortense Allen's line. With Allen, she performed in Count Basie's show at the Apollo, at the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., and with Duke Ellington and other top bands. Diaz has primarily been known as a variety dancer (including Latin, jitterbug and chorus line) and has had her own act, as well, incorporating acrobatics. She has worked in televison, on Arthur Murray's House Party and elsewhere. She makes her living as a programmer/analyst and enjoys riding her motocycle and swimming.

Isabelle "Eleanor Byrd" Fambro was born in 1917 in South Philadelphia and has been dancing since she was very young. When she was about seven, she would go with her father to South Philadelphia bars and dance on top of the bar for money. As a child, she danced at amateur hours, nighclubs and Elk's

Clockwise from top, this page:

Kitty DeChavis at the Apollo, about 1951

Barbara Clayton

Vicki Diaz in an Apollo performance; composite includes Arline "Artie" Riley and Michelle "Mike" Webster on left panel.

Robert F. Burden, Jr. Photo: PATENTED PHOTOS

▼▼▼▼▼

Clubs. At sixteen, she began performing professionally, as a solo act. In 1942, at the suggestion of her manager at the Jolly Joyce agency, she teamed up with tap dancer Billy Byrd. The duo toured as song and dance team Billy and Eleanor Byrd for eighteen years, sharing the bill with such acts as Moke and Poke, Bill Bailey, Ella Fitzgerald, Fats Waller, Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Charlie Barnet and the Sweethearts of Rhythm. She has continued to perform in cabarets and shows locally.

Cheri Graham is in the seventh grade. She dances at Philadanco, and has been a student teacher there. As well, she tap danced in Philadanco II. She was in "Bo" at Bushfire Theater.

Paul Grant started playing trumpet when he was about six. His father, also a trumpet player, gave him his first instrument. Grant has played for forty years. He has been a member the house band at the Showboat and has played at Trop World, and in the Clef Club band.

Raymond Adolphus Grant is a Philadelphia native. He began playing music in his late teens. Lee Morgan and Reggie Workman were among his first teachers. His main mentor was Owen Marshall who both started him playing, and encouraged him to return to music after he stopped. He has played with Sonny Fortune, and has worked with the Clef Club Band, the Philadelphia Elders, Bootsie Barnes and others.

Wilhelmina Scott Herbert was born and raised in Philadelphia. She began her dance career when she accompanied a friend to an audition—and was selected herself. She performed and toured coast to coast with James Brown as one of his dancers. She traveled widely, both here and overseas, appearing as far away as Sweden dancing in Hortense Allen's lines. Herbert has danced with various singers, and with the Royal American Showtrain, a carnival. She is a real estate broker and a certified real estate appraiser.

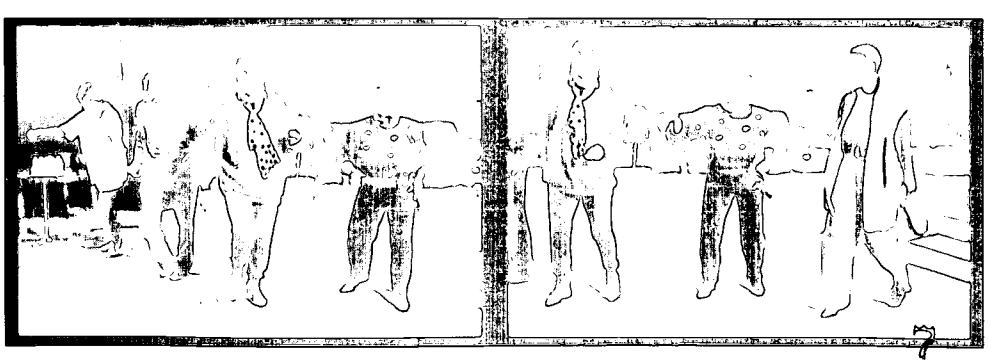
Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt was born in 1923 . She grew up in South Philadelphia and was performing in amateur contests when she was four and a half years old. When she was five, she was dancing and singing both on the Standard and Lincoln Theater Kiddie Hours. From her mother and a man at South Philadelphia's Standard Theater, Hunt began to acquire acrobatic moves; she was known for her flips and splits. (And she is proud that she can still can do the splits at 72 years of age). She was the first African American to perform on the Horn and Hardart Children's Hour radio broadcast, where she became a regular. She credits her brother, Harry Edwards, as being her best teacher; he taught other kids to dance in their kitchen. Hunt performed in New York and Philadelphia clubs and theaters in the 1930s and 1940s, and was cast in Erik Charell's 1939 important Broadway musical "Swingin' a Dream," which featured Louis Armstrong, Bill Bailey, Whitey's Lindy Hoppers and others. She worked as a soubrette at the Apollo, and in about 1940 teamed up with Willie Joseph, performing with him as the duo "Spic and Span," touring extensively both in the United States and abroad for more than twenty years and appearing in nightclubs, theaters, television, radio and

Clockwise, this page: Isabelle Fambro and her partner Billy Byrd from the Apollo, about 1943

Edith Hunt and Germaine Ingram, 1994. Photo: Jane Levine

Isabelle Fambro, John Hart, Libby Spencer, Edith Hunt and Germaine Ingram, 1994.

▼▼▼▼▼



on Broadway. She worked with such acts as Lionel Hampton, King Cole, Louis Armstrong, Bennie Goodman and others. Hunt worked for the City of Philadelphia's Department of Recreation as a dance instructor for sixteen years. Hunt was a rhythm dancer but was also known for incorporating acrobatics into her routines, including Chinese splits. She is respected as an "all-round dancer and singer." She came out of retirement to work with the S.C. Performers' Alliance.

Germaine Ingram began intensive study with tap master LaVaughn Robinson in 1980 and four years later, she began performing with him in a trio known as "The Philadelphia Tap Dancers." The two became a duo in 1988. Ingram has performed in dance concerts and festivals across the United States and in Europe. She has appeared on television in "Eye on Dance," and in the Emmy award-winning special, "Gregory Hines' Tap Dance in America," She has taught tap locally, at several American colleges and in Europe. She has choreographed for regional musical theater and was commissioned to choreograph a piece for the New York-based tap ensemble, Manhattan Tap. Ingram has been a practicing attorney for twenty-three years and is currently general counsel for the School District of Philadelphia.

Pearl "Peanut" Jackson-Bolvin was dancing at the age of three. She began to learn jazz and tap from her older cousins. She met Libby Spencer at the Marian Anderson Recreation Center, started taking classes from her, and has been with since. She has taught dance and performed for holiday shows, community events, and the school district. She appeared in the Broadway show "Tappin' Uptown" with the Copasetics and in McHarris and Delores' D&D Review with the Hortense Allen Dancers. She works at CoreStates Bank.

Marc Johnson plays trombone and keyboards. He has done musical direction for Freedom Theater, and participated in projects at Bushfire Theater and elsewhere. He performs regularly around town.

Tony Jones started playing music when he was six, and took up the bass when he was fourteen. He studied music at Overbrook High School and played in their jazz band. He has been the music director for Sister Sledge and Jean Carne, and has performed with Grover Washington, Jr., Sister Sledge and Norman Connors. He is currently working on a solo album.

Tommy "Redd Foxx" Jordan started dancing when he was a kid, out in the "meadows," the Elmwood area of southwest Philadelphia. He and his partner Clark used to dance in the talent nights when the minstrel show came through, and as teenagers, they won the St. Ignatius Catholic Club talent night prize. Jordan pursued every opportunity to dance, performing as a solo or duo at clubs and bars in his part of town. Dancers' reputations preceded them. Jordan heard about South Philly dancers before he met them—and vice versa. He participated in informal competitions on street corners with Blackie Johnson, LaVaughn Robinson, Harold Blow, Jerry Taps and others. Jordan taught dance—tap and modern jazz—at Judimar School of Dance with Marian Cuyjet for twelve years. Getting drafted in 1945 put an end to his career. He reflects that singer "Billy Paul and I had a debut together. He made it and I went in the army." Nevertheless, he found ways to perform, consistently winning the talent show on the Horace Height show. In the Army's Special Services Division, he produced shows for troops stationed in Germany, and toured with the

Clockwise from top left:

(l-r, facing camera): Wilhelmina Herbert, Jeanne Bristow-Pinkham, Mary Poteat Syres, Joan Miller.

Joan Miller, "Mike" Webster, Wilhelmina Herbert.

Mary Poteat Syres, Joan Miller, Davina Todd, Pearl Jackson-Bolvin.

▼▼▼▼▼

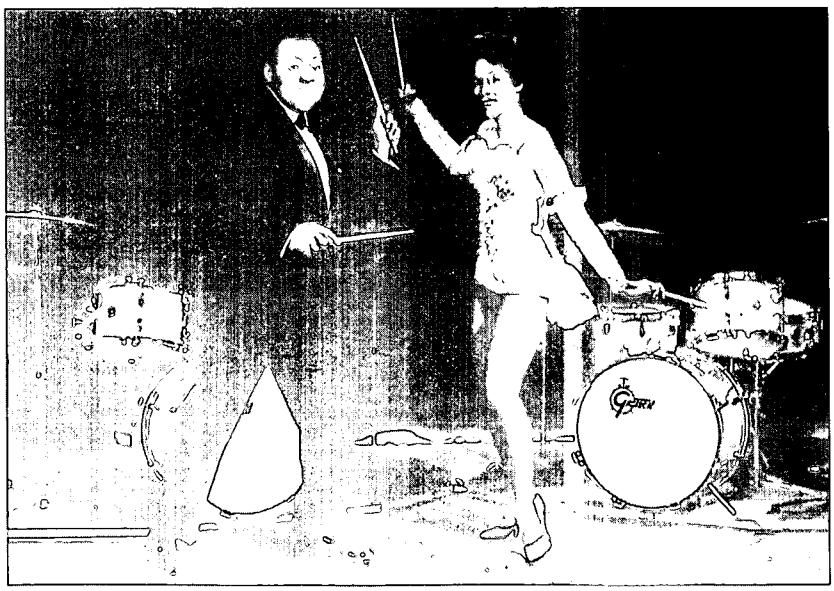
bands that came through, opening the shows, doing comedy, and dancing with Mose Allison, James Moody, Dakota Staton, Art Blakey, Al Gray, Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton. Jordan remained in the army through the 1970s, when he returned to his hometown and began working as a comedian, opening shows for Gloria Lynn, Nancy Wilson, Clark Terry, Jimmy Oliver and Shirley Scott. He is currently appearing on weekends with saxophonist Bootsie Barnes at Slim Cooper's at Stenton Avenue and Johnson Street.

Monica Justice started dancing when she was around four. Now thirteen, she studies ballet, jazz and dance at Philadanco. She has done recitals and performances and is a student at Enfield Middle School.

Oscar McBurse is returning to the stage after twenty years. He began dancing as a child, winning trophies for jazz and interpretive dance from the South Philadelphia and Germantown YMCAs, and appearing on the Paul Whiteman television show. For at least three years, he danced on the Mitch Thomas TV show every Saturday. He worked with Hortense Allen, dancing at the Dell for seven years with such artists as Count Basie, Sarah Vaughn, Duke Ellington and Illinois Jacquet, and traveling overseas with Allen's shows, as well. He danced on Broadway in a Haitian opera called "Wanga" with Ghanaian artist, dancer and drummer Saka Acquaye. For this production, McBurse performed in a dance specially choreographed for him, emerging from a basket doing a snake dance. He danced at the Metropolitan Opera and for Alvin Ailey, and studied ballet under the late John Hines and Eleanor Harris. For the last twenty-four years, he has worked in Philadelphia as an unemployment claims manager for the state of Pennsylvania, and as a part-time caterer for Fletcher Chisholm.

Danette McDonald started dancing at four. Now thirteen, she studies ballet and jazz at Philadanco, and has also studied at L&L Dance Studio. She performs for schools and hospitals and is a student at Meredith.

Delores and Dave McHarris
Delores McHarris was born and raised in Philadelphia. She was drawn to tap dancing by her desire to travel and share a performing life with her husband, veteran hoofer Dave McHarris. Dee started training under her husband's instruction in the 1940s, and made her first public appearance after a year of working "night and day" to hone her technique. Later, she studied intensively with a ballet master to develop greater finesse and stage presence. To develop their novelty act, the duo studied drums with the great Cozy Cole. Dave McHarris grew up in Pittsburgh, and was dancing at the age of three. As a child, he used to sneak out of school to see road shows coming into town. He ran away from home when he was 13 to join a tour of "Brown Skinned Models." Since then, he has danced his way around the world. McHarris and Delores performed as a team in theaters and nightclubs throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia; they played the London Palladium and performed at New York's Palace Theater every two months. The duo had many-sided talents: they did stage shows, musicals, and devel-



Clockwise from bottom, this page:

McHarris and Delores, c. 1970s.

Tommy "Redd Foxx" Jordan. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

(l-r) Wilhelmina Herbert, Oscar McBurse, Jeanne Bristow-Pinkham, Vicki Diaz.

▼▼▼▼▼

1963 at the Marian Anderson Recreation Center under the direction of Libby Spencer. She danced with Hortense Allen's Coppertones, in "Tapping Uptown" with the Copasetics on Broadway, and in McHarris and Delores' D&D Review. She went to college and became a registered nurse, but continues dancing "on the side."

oped their own music and dance revue. McHarris and Delores came to be known for their polished technique as well as their versatility and elaborate costuming. Although they do not consider themselves retired from the stage, Dee and Dave have limited their performance schedule in recent years.

Henry Meadows. Born and raised in South Philadelphia seventy-four years ago, Mr. Meadows grew up trading steps with such artists as the Nicholas Brothers, Honi Coles, and others. He toured in a number of duos, and for many years, Meadows danced elegantly with his partner LaVaughn Robinson. Meadows is known these days as "the granddaddy of paddling in Philadelphia." He first learned the close-to-the-floor tap technique from Darby Hicks, and perfected it by trading rhythms with drummer Kenny Clark during the war when they were both in Special Services. Returning home, Meadows went on the road with Robinson, touring the country through the 1960s, when he decided he wanted to stay at home and devote himself to his family. He couldn't abandon music and dance entirely, however, and returned to an old passion, drum and bugle corps. In the mid-80s, he began performing again with partner Peter Briglia.

Ruth Mobley grew up singing in church and school choirs. She was 23 years old and singing for fun with an acapella group, the Skylighters, when drummer Bunny Baker heard her, and asked if she wanted a job. Her first professional performance was at a cabaret, and after that, she "never looked back." She performed for a year at Kenny's Musical Bar, in Middletown, Pennsylvania, in a duo, and then toured with different bands, including Lindy Ewell, Curt Harmon and others, up and down the East Coast, at cocktail lounges, supper clubs, piano bars, and nightclubs. Most of her engagements were at least two weeks at a time, and some lasted several months; she enjoyed intimate settings and the chance to build a rapport with her audience. She raised a child and had a family while she was on the road; jobs at home were pleasures in those years. In Philadelphia, she performed at the Carver Bar, Postal Card, Catharine's Musical Bar, Budweiser's and Pep's.

Henry Mosley was born and raised in South Philadelphia, near 20th and Dickinson. Musician Jimmy Tisdale used to play in a bar at 20th and Catherine Streets, a few blocks away, and Mosley would sneak in to listen. When he was about seventeen, he was called up to sing. He was scared and didn't know what he was doing, but "to them, it came out pretty good," he recalls. They offered him a job on the spot, and he began singing, for $2.50 a night, two evenings a week. From there, he went on to play with Jimmy and Percy Heath, Owen Marshall, Oscar Pettiford and others. He has retired from singing, although he sits in with friends when they are playing. He came out to "help out with the show."

Patricia Perkins started dancing as a teenager, studying interpretive

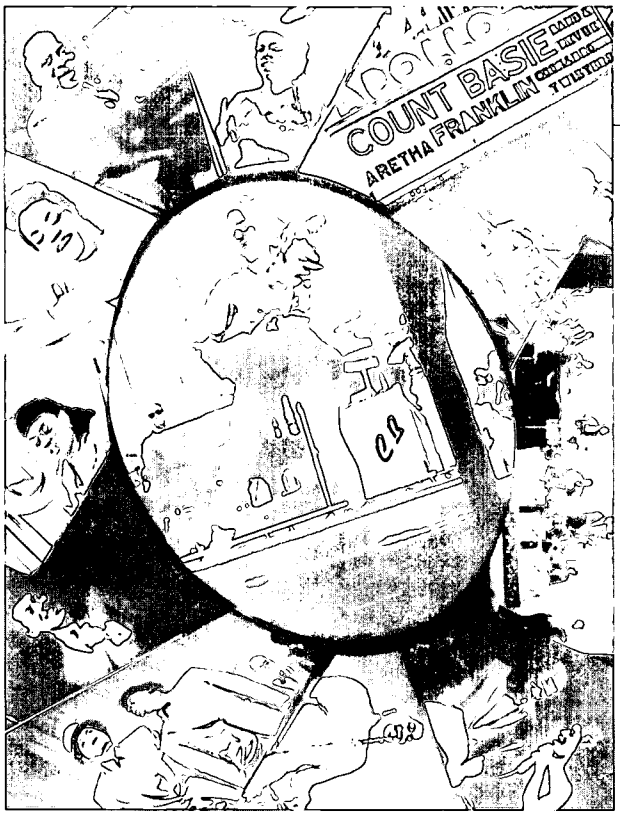
Clockwise from top left:

Pete Briglia, Henry Meadows, Edith Hunt, Germaine Ingram, LaVaughn Robinson, 1994. Photo: Jane Levine

Henry Mosely

Ruth Mobley

▼▼▼▼▼



Above: a composite of "Artie" Riley at the Apollo, "Mike" Webster in frame to left, Vicki Diaz in top middle, c. 1963-4

Middle: LaVaughn Robinson and Germaine Ingram. Photo: Londa Salomon

Right, this page: Mary Poteat Syres. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

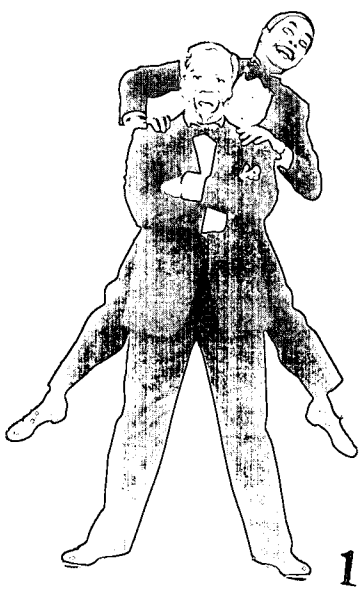
▲▲▲▲▲

dance first at city recreation centers, then at Sydney's School of Dance; Oscar McBurse was one of her teachers. She danced professionally when she was fifteen, working in Count Basie's show. She danced with the James Brown show, touring nationally in the 1960s, and with Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton and others. She has appeared at the Apollo, the Uptown, and elsewhere. She works for the Department of Public Welfare as a caseworker.

Arlene "Artie" Riley started dancing in junior high school, in ballet club. She tried to get on pointe and yearned after ballet shoes—so much that she began working at Eleanor Harris' School of Dance at 52nd and Market Streets, teaching fundamentals of ballet, tap and interpretive dance to children so that she could pay for her own classes under John Hines, Vivian Certaine, Buddy Phillips and Savilla Forte. When she was fifteen, she began dancing with Oscar McBurse at clubs in New Jersey, and "thought it was great!" She danced professionally, working with Butterbeans and Suzie, Cooke and Brown, Dinah Washington, Leroy Watts, Jimmy Witherspoon, and others. Hortense Allen Jordan "found" her and she began dancing with Jordan's shows in clubs here and in Europe. For twenty years, she worked in retail at Wanamakers and Lit Brothers during the day, driving to New York at night to work as a dancer at Small's Paradise and the Galaxy Club, with such artists as Sam Cooke and Dakota Staton.

LaVaughn Robinson is South Philadelphia born and bred. "Hoofing" since he was seven, Robinson calls himself the last of the "street dancers," and remembers trading steps on South Philly street corners with many of the legends of tap dance including Bill Bailey, Teddy Hale, and the Nicholas Brothers. With Henry Meadows and others (Howard Blow, Eddie Sledge), Robinson performed as a member of the Dancing Dictators, and the Dancing Jets, gaining respect for his close rhythms, and touring widely as a real "class act." Over the years he has shared the stage with Cab Calloway, Tommy Dorsey and his Orchestra, Maynard Ferguson, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker and others. Robinson actively pursued his dance career through 1972. By then, most of the nightclubs which kept tap dancers employed were

going out of business as highly electrified music became more popular. By the early 1980s, Robinson began performing for contemporary dance and folk music audiences who were then discovering tap. Since about 1980, Robinson has been teaching at the University of the Arts, effecting the current course of dance through his many students there. He performs widely, from California to Lyons, France, with his current partner, Germaine Ingram. He has received many prestigious awards, including the National Heritage Award from the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, choreographers' fellowships from the Dance Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, and a Pew Fellowship in the Arts.



Maiya Satchell started dancing when she was nine or ten years old, following her sister, who was already dancing. Eventually Satchell found her way to Philadanco. She is a student at Meredith.

Dottie Smith was born in Wilmington, North Carolina and moved to Philadelphia as a child. She began to sing in church choirs, and sang for the first time on stage in the late 1940s at a local club where her "sister," Beryl Booker, was playing jazz piano. Booker coaxed her on stage, and she sang a few songs. In the audience that night was Percy Joell, a member of the Harlemaires. On the spot, he

offered her a job performing with the Chester Slater group, and within two months she was opening with them at the Baby Grand in New York. She toured with Louis Jordan for ten years, playing all the big theaters and appearing on the television shows of such stars as Perry Como, Patti Page and Steve Allen. She had her own band as well, the Dottie Smith Combo. Members of the group at various times included John Coltrane, Jimmy Mobley, Al Moore, Jimmy Oliver and others. Smith worked with such greats as Nipsey Russell, Timmie Rogers, Austin Powell and the Trenniers. In recent years, she has organized her own show, the Dottie Smith Review. She says that one of her most exciting "gigs" was working at the Apollo with Dusty Fletcher and later with Moms Mabley, who was godson to Dottie's only son, Roger.

Libby Spencer grew up in New York and learned to tap dance from family members and neighbors, including the Nicholas Brothers. In 1940, she needed a job and went to the Apollo where she tried out and was immediately hired for the chorus line. She was "a tall girl," and did a wide range of dance, learning three new numbers for each new show, every week. She danced at Small's Paradise, on Broadway with Bill Robinson who she much admired, in USO shows, and with road shows. She came to Philadelphia in the 1950s and danced in nightclubs, theaters and in Atlantic City with the Hortense Allen Review. In 1960, she opened her own school—Libby's School of [illegible]al Arts. Later, she became [illegible]der and director of the City of Philadelphia's Performing Arts Camp, teaching a range of dance forms in various recreation centers and parks. She has taught dance both to adults and children in many private dance schools as well. She believes in the importance of keeping African American vernacular tap alive by teaching it to the next generation, and was an early advocate of dance programs for youth to teach them "real ethnic tap dance."

Mary Poteat Syres started dancing when she was five, under the instruction of Libby Spencer at the Marian Anderson Recreation Center in South Philadelphia. When she was ten, she performed in a group that won a city-wide contest for ballet and danced at Irvine Auditorium. She always liked tap dance and began to perform, appearing at Club Harlem with Edith ("Baby Edwards") Hunt, with the Copasetics at Blue Monday, and in "Tapping Uptown," a tap dance musical at the Bardavon Opera House in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1982. She has also danced at civic and social events around the region. She is currently enjoying a career in banking and teaches tap dancing whenever time permits.

Barbara Thomas. Growing up in South Philadelphia, Thomas won neighborhood social dance contests at the "Y". She and friends Oscar McBurse and Arlene Riley all used to dance popular dances together. Thomas studied modern and interpretive dance with Eleanor Harris, John Hines and Savilla Forte. Through McBurse and Riley, she met Hortense Allen; this led to an audition with Larry Steele. Thomas worked at Steele's Club Harlem for three or four years, dancing in the chorus and traveling with his show to Puerto Rico and elsewhere. She "gave it up" and went to school. She has now been teaching special education in Philadelphia School System for 21 years. She takes an occasional dance class, and was involved with "Hucklebuck to HipHop:" ODUNDE's social dance cabarets and dance contests celebrating African American vernacular dance traditions.

Davina Todd. Dancing by the time she was seven, Todd took her first formal lessons with Philadanco, where she started studying ballet, then jazz. She joined Philadanco's training company when she was about fifteen. It was at Ms. Libby Spencer's Performing Arts Camp that Todd "got into tap." She assisted Spencer for a few years, and performed in some of Spencer's shows. Todd began auditioning for—and getting into—shows in cruise lines, casinos and dance teams. As a dancer for Ringling Brothers,

Clockwise, this page from top left:

Libby Spencer, Kitty DeChavis, Dottie Smith, Dee McHarris.

Yvonne Walton, Jeanne Bristow-Pinkham, "Mike" Webster, Patricia Perkins, Hortense Allen Jordan

Dottie Smith,playing with the Dottie Smith Band at Zanzibar on Philly's Columbia Avenue, c. 1950s

▲▲▲▲▲

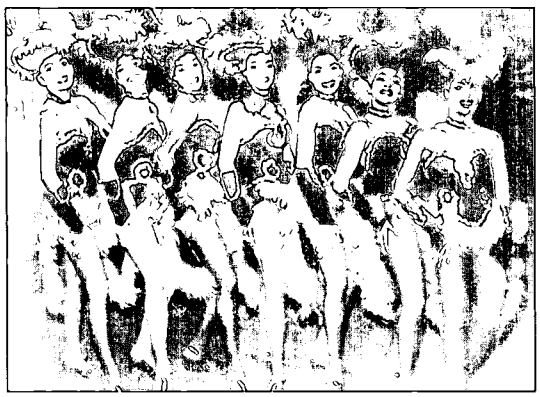
Barnum and Bailey's Circus, she performed in 44 cities and rode elephants. She performed with Greg Thompson's show, Carnival Lucaya, in Freeport, Bahamas for nine months, and the New Year's Eve show at Bally's in Atlantic City. Todd currently teaches ballet to young children at Philadanco.

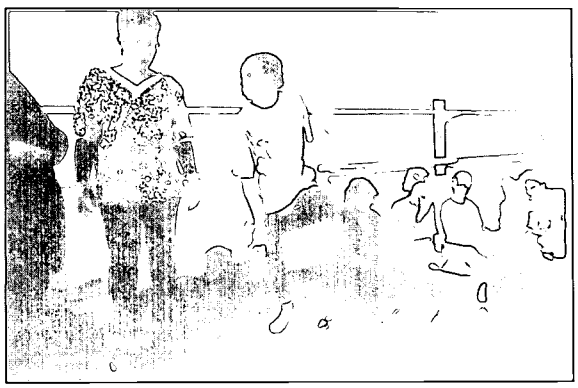
Yvonne Walton began dancing when a neighbor, Carlos Simmons asked her to dance with him. She was just sixteen, and had no dancing experience, but her mother said that she could try—so she wound up with her first professional performance on the stage of the Academy of Music with Dinah Washington. She received scholarships to Sydney King's and Libby Spencer's schools, studying ballet and modern dance, Afro-Cuban dance under Arthur Hall, and jazz dance with André Pitts. She has been dancing with Hortense Allen since she was eighteen. After she graduated from high school, Allen began to send her out with various shows. She traveled with James Brown, and worked in Atlantic City at Club Harlem with Larry Steele from 1967 to 1969. She put herself through college with her dancing and she now teaches health, physical education and dance at South Philadelphia High School.

Michelle "Mike" Roberts Webster started dancing because her husband, Pinkney Roberts—fashion plate, M.C., entertainer and impresario—was in show business. He was working in a club where the Ziggy Johnson dancers were performing. Webster learned the routine and never looked back, performing in Detroit and in Michigan resorts. When she came to Philadelphia, she studied dance at Sydney's Dance Studio and with Joan Myers Brown. "Mike" has danced with Hortense Allen since about 1960. She performed in the chorus with Larry Steele's "Smart Affairs" at Club Harlem in Atlantic City, and traveled extensively with the Hortense Allen Dancers and "Smart Affairs." She also traveled with Arthur Braggs' Idle-Wild Review. She worked with Pinkney Roberts and the Pinkettes for years, and with the Hortense Allen Dancers for the City of Philadelphia Recreation Department shows at the Dell. With Vicki Diaz and others, she put together a show, working cabarets and clubs locally. For the last seventeen years, she has

Clockwise from bottom right,

Pinkney Roberts' Pinkettes, at a club at Broad and Germantown Avenues, c. 1970s, l-r: "Artie" Riley, "Mike" Webster, "Penny", Barbara Thomas.





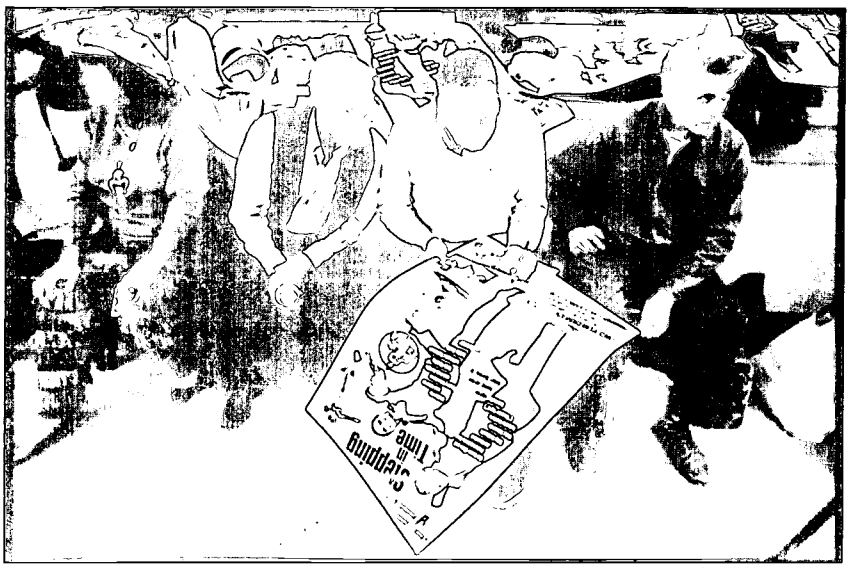
Mary Poteat Syres, Davina Todd standing. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

Hortense Allen Dancers: Sylvia, Bobbi Jean, Dottie, "Mike" Webster, Audrey, Rusty, Jan.

▼▼▼▼▼

worked at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania as a nursing assistant in the operating room. During most of these years, dancing has continued as a second career.

Johnny Williams and the Johnny Williams Band. Originally from North Carolina, John Williams moved to Philadelphia right after the Second World War and, at age 25, he began his musical career here. He got his first pair of drumsticks from drummer Skeets March, who used to play with Hortense Allen, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and others. March also recommended drum teachers, and Williams began studying seriously. Within a year, he was playing professionally, first with the Corban Brothers. He was part of a trio with Bill Hollis on piano, Joe Seel on sax and him on drums, for about a year before he formed his own group, Johnny Williams and the Four Notes. From there, he began playing widely, going on the road with musicians including Doc Bagby, Erskine Hawkins, Wild Bill Davis, Ruth Brown and others. He stopped traveling in 1959 and began working locally, first at Pep's, where his trio was the house band for more than four years, and then at Gerts Lounge in the 1400 block of South, where he played for more than ten years. Since then, Williams has worked in various clubs around Philadelphia. His trio included Gloria Coleman, keyboards and vocal, Charles Bowen on sax and himself on the drums. Musicians playing in the Johnny Williams Band for the performance of "Stepping in Time," are Charles Bowen on sax, [illegible]nt on trumpet, Raymond Grant on piano, Mark Johnson on trombone, Tony Jones on bass and Johnny Williams on percussion.



Nia Witherspoon, now twelve, started dancing when she was three. She always danced, so her parents sent her to lessons, first at McHenry and then to Philadanco. She has performed in Philadanco recitals at the Academy of Music, in Summer Stage, and at various events and community sites.

Top to bottom, this page:

Yvonne Walton and Barbara Thomas.

Dottie Smith, LaVaughn Robinson, Henry Meadows, Pete Briglia. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

Lee Grant, Johnny Williams, Charles Bowen. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

▼▼▼▼▼

Some beginnings and breaks: stories from virtuoso veteran dancers

To me, Bill Robinson was the best dancer until I saw Teddy Hale and then when I saw Teddy Hale I began to think of that thing all over again. . . To me, Teddy Hale changed the style of dancing. You understand what I'm saying? Dancers that came along in certain eras was great, but then here comes along somebody else that changed the style of that thing for you, you know? And that's what Teddy did for me when I first saw Teddy Hale was at the Earle Theatre, right here in Philadelphia and I haven't seen anything like that in my life. And then I began to break him down because I saw Baby Lawrence, from Baltimore. And then I said, "Wait a minute, something's happening here that ain't supposed to happen." Because Baby Lawrence took that thing another step further. But when I looked at 'em both and I said, "Damn, they're both doing it, but they just telling different stories." You dig what I'm saying? I mean, they both had that certain thing that was a notch above alot of dancers, including myself. You understand what I'm saying? But what I really began to understand about these guys—they were putting tap dancing to the instrument, or putting the instrument to the tap. You see what I'm saying. Which took a little time, because when I noticed, both of these guys were singers. You dig what I'm saying?... They did what a singer would do, but they did it dancing....—LaVaughn Robinson

From the 1920s to the present, people recall that Philadelphia has been home to a significant number of exceptional African American tap dancers—hoofers—who played important roles in shaping this folk art. "Dance was happening everywhere....On every street corner on Philadelphia's South Street," LaVaughn Robinson has often said, "you could hear a different time step." Peoples' memories of "coming up" routinely describe "picking up steps on the streets," and from family and neighbors.

The vital Philadelphia dance scene was connected in many ways to the national scene: young would-be dancers found their ways backstage and inside bars and clubs to soak up the steps of older tap legends in town to perform. After hours clubs were other places to mix and mingle, see and be seen. The Standard and Lincoln Theaters, the Earle, Budweiser's, Sim's Paradise, Palumbo's, Emerson's. Philadelphia dancers went to New York, on the road, to the mountains. Dancers from elsewhere came here, and (to hear it told) often stayed.

"Tap is the only original American dance form," says Libby Spencer. "Tap is the— relatively, I would say— the beginning....All of dance centers around tap because it's all...timing," says Mildred Thorpe. Tap, as it has been shaped by African American artists over the last fifty years, reflects an ethic and aesthetic that is markedly different from that of today's mainstream dance world. Germaine Ingram writes that "vernacular rhythm tap has a focus on subtle polyrhythms and aural presentation, a competitive milieu underscored by a cooperative ethic in which artists borrowed, adapted and made other peoples' steps their own, but in which—in theory—they did not perform another person's routine publicly."

Like many other African American folk arts, tap has many different faces, lives, or histories when viewed from inside African American communities and from "outside." And there are several "insides" to the story of tap—extraordinary women rhythm tappers faced the double discrimination of racism and sexism as they tried to develop as artists. They were less able to get "breaks" during the heyday of rhythm tap and restricted to certain kinds of dance because of their color and looks. The tap revival of the 1970s opened new venues to some African American men; few African American women hoofers were invited to the schools, festivals, or dance revivals then developing.

Dancers' stories about how they started, about big breaks and missed opportunities are subjects that begin to raise complicated questions about the mix between talent, opportunity, and the times, and about the complicated relations between vernacular and "mainstream," black and white traditions. There are no written dance histories chronicling the significant details of how Philadelphia dancers started out in the business, and about the significance of "breaks" to someones' career.

Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt and John Hart. Photo: Thomas B. Morton, 1993

▼▼▼▼▼

l-r: Germaine Ingram, Libby Spencer, and Edith Hunt.

▲▲▲▲▲

When I first met Willie Bryant was at Budweisers....16th and South. 'Cause Willie Bryant was the master of ceremonies when they used to have jam sessions on Thursday night when when all the performers used to come to Budweisers. And Willie Bryant was the Master of Ceremonies. Now, here's another thing.... They had a show in New York. When Willie Bryant left Budweisers, he went to New York and they had a television show called "Toast of the Town." Do you remember that? See. And when "Toast of the Town" got so big, they took it away from Willie Bryant and gave it to Ed Sullivan.—LaVaughn Robinson

Well, naturally, he was the wrong color. And he don't have the money, see.—John Hart

I was the type I never thought about it....I wasn't a pushy type. I would go and do what I had to do. And it's like when I went up to the Horn and Hardart, I left the Parisien [Tailor's Kiddie Hour]....I was one of the first. One of the fellows saw my mother somewhere and he asked and gave my mother this number, for my mother to go up 1622 Chestnut Street. And I went up there—I was a regular. And then they started coming up here and there. But I was on there regular. My picture was... at the Horn and Hardart restaurants. —Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt

Well, you broke the color barrier, that's what you did.—LaVaughn Robinson

And I'll say this while I'm talking. Baby Edwards [Edith Hunt]—[of those] all little girl dancers, from five to twelve—she's the best I've seen, and I'm talking about movies and everything else. But she didn't get the breaks. See if you don't know anybody and get breaks, you ain't going nowhere. She worked different places but I'm talking about getting the breaks...Shirley Temple's good. But Shirley Temple wasn't... as good as Edith. I'm not saying that for color—I'm talking about what I see. I hat I see. Now Shirley Temple's good now, but she was better."—John Hart

At the Standard, 1929. I was taking, you know, their data, you know, names. And while I'm taking their names, then the dancers go on. So [Baby Edwards] won the first prize. So the next week her mothr brought her back and Mr. Dunson said to me—he said to her mother first, "Baby cannot go on this week. Give somebody else a chance." He said, "John, scratch her name off." He said, "Well, you can go down and see the show....So they went to sit in the second row....So Harold [the MC] knew what Mr. Dunson said, so about three quarters of the way down the amateurs, Harold said, "There's Baby Edwards. Look friends. . .friends, do you want to see Baby Edwards?" And the peanut gallery said, "Yeah, yeah" and they started whistling and hollering. So she came on up. So she got on. And she won the first prize again.—John Hart

Well, they had a call for chorus girls. And I needed a job. I said, "Well, I think I'll go down there and try out for the line." And I was picked. And from then on, I just worked every week. I did stock in the Apollo Theater.... So we just went from week to week in the Apollo. And of course, we had to change routines every week. Three routines we had to change every week. And we were in competition with the Radio City Music Hall. And of course, they changed every four weeks. They had 42 girls. We had 16 girls. And we had to change every week. And they changed 24 girls every four weeks, see. They had several weeks rest. We didn't have any rest at all. We just had to go from week to week.—Libby Spencer

[My brother Harry taught neighborhood kids how to tap dance in our kitchen, our shed kitchen.] And when they couldn't learn, he said, "Go on, do it for them." And therefore, I would do it and then I would learn like that. And sometime they could get it off of me better than [him.]—Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt

I always had a yearning to be a tap dancer. In fact, in my adolescent years, or my youth, I used to hang around the Lincoln Theater in Philadelphia....at Broad and Lombard. And I was fascinated by this tap dancer Honi Coles. He was always so smooth—glides through and taps galore. And I used to hang out at the stage door.

So one day, he came out and I said, "Mr. Coles"—I think I was about 14 or 15 then. I said, "Mr. Coles, would you show me that step that you did in the show?" He said, "Which one?" And I tried to interpret the step that I was referring to. And he said, "Hey, hold it. I like your version better than mine." Maybe he was

Dave McHarris, Isabelle Fambro and Germaine Ingram examine a LaRay tap.

▲▲▲▲▲

kiddin' me, but that's what he said.

In fact, I grew up—I left home when I was about 16. I had my tap shoes in my hand and I went down to the waterfront. This was where your produce trucks leave and go with their produce to New York. And I conned one of these drivers and I say, "Hey. I'm broke and I gotta get home. Do you go to New York?" He says, "Yes. Where do you live in New York?" Now we're on the highway now. I says some wierd street. He says, "No, you don't live in New York." He says, "We don't have any streets with that name." I says, "Oh, well, you see my shoes here?" I say, "I want to be a tap dancer. And I've read so many times that you have to go to New York to be recognized. And this is what I am doing." He says, "OK." When he got to New York, down by the waterfront, he let me off. He said, "Listen, dear." He said, "You take this two dollars. Git you a subway. Get off at 125st Street and St. Nicholas Avenue." He said, "You walk down a block and you'll find the Apollo Theatre." He said, "They have amateur nights there." This I did.

In the interim I get down to 126th Street. Another stage entrance and I hung around there for about a hour, then I walked up to Seventh Aveniue. And this place was called The Alhambra Grill. . . And this where all the actors used to go between shows and eat, you know, and drink if they preferred to drink. So I was in there. They had black-eyed peas and rice. Cornbread. This is facts. Fifteen cents. Man, I was living.

So I got me my black-eyed peas and rice and just to a little right of the counter where I was eating, they had a stage. And all these chorus girls was up there, you know. . . this producer was takin' them through their paces. His name was Clarence Robinson. And I would sit there and I'd watch and then, when they'd get through, like you know, tell 'em to take a five minute break, et cetera, I walked over to him. I said, "Sir. . . I'm from Philadelphia and I want to be a tap dancer. Would you let me do a number for you?" He said, "Sure." I got up there, did my little thing, you know.

Now the amateur night is about three days away. And I ain't got no roof, no pot, no nothing. Serious. So I, oh, I don't know, I've just always been one to survive. So I would go down to the bus terminal at 42nd Street and I'd stay in there at night 'till the day came and then I'd come back up. I'd surface, as we'd say. And I did that for about four days and four nights.

Now I only got fifty cent in my pocket, now. I go to the amateur night. I didn't get the first prize, I got the second prize. O.K. So that was a little extra money in my pocket, right? I turn around, I said, "Boy, New York—people, they don't have time for you, they don't say hello. You know, being from Philadelphia, you have a certain comradeship, you know what I mean? And I was beginning to get a little frightened because like I said, I would say. . . I didn't know how to get to Broadway. Nobody would tell you anything. So I lasted with this money,

from the amateur contest, I lasted about two more days, so. I was tired, I mean, I was beginning to talk back to myself because I hadn't took a shower or anything—I mean, you know, I'm serious.

And I just got disgusted and I... called home, reversed the charges, and told my mother, I said, "Mother I'm here in New York," I said, "And I am sick, I am tired, I want to come home." She said, "OK Baby, I'll send Billy for you...." And he came and picked me up and I came home and I made myself a promise. I says, "I been to New York. It's not easy to become a star. I say, the next time I come to New York, I'll have a contract." And those words became true when I teamed up with Pepper.—Mildred "Candi" Thorpe.

[Jolly Joyce] said, "Come in the office, Dave, I want to talk to you." But Dee sat out in the other part—outer office. He said, "Look," he said. "I got a good job for you, three months in South America." I said, "Yeah?" And he says—I don't know what the money was, but it wasn't that much, but it was that much in them days. I said, "OK. . ." I said, "Well, my two tickets—" He said, "I can't buy a ticket for your wife," he says, "She's dead weight." I said, "She ain't dead to me." I'm just saying. He said, "But they won't pay for her unless she's workin with you." I said "OK." So I come out and... I said, "I'm going to South America." And Dee said, "When do we leave?" I said, "No, we don't leave. It's just me." She said, "No, no, when I said 'for better or worse', I mean for better or worse—and that's what its been. . ." So I said, "OK." I got so mad at Dee that I went out and bought her a pair of tap shoes, and opened that door, right there in the Douglas Hotel and threw 'em to her and she's been jumping with them shoes ever since.—Dave McHarris

I said, "What is this?" He said, "You want to travel, you got to work." So, I said, "I don't care." My famous words—I don't care.—Dee McHarris

But you know what? She could do tep and a over-the-top, her Uncle Billy had taught her that.—Dave McHarris

[Harry Edwards and I met and decided to dance together.] And we started rehearsing right on the street there—Lombard Street. Twenty-hundred block, we were living in. . . And we started rehearsing there. So. What happened, we had a job coming up at this dance hall. A white club, giving this dance, now. . . and a show. So we went up there. But he said to me, "Hey John." He said, "We aren't—we're not rehearsing with any music." I said "You're right." He said, "How I know all this will be in time with music? Two choruses of this and.... " I said, "It's in time with music." He said, "I 'm gonna hold you responsible if it's not in time with the music." I said "OK."

Well, Edith ["Baby Edwards," Harry's sister] was on the program too, but she was working by herself at this time, you see..... and we come on. And this fellow, I don't know his name now, kind of cross-eyed. White fellow. Good rhythm dancer. He was a good rhythm— that boy could dance. Kind of cross-eyed... And we went out next to the last. 'Cause the boy that I say was kind of cross-eyed, he went out last.

We danced with "Liza," and we flash danced, you know, fast. . . He was a rhythm dancer. But audience do not know anything about a whole lot of rhythm or like that. When someone's flashy, the audience, it catches the audiences' eye. See, that's what catches the eye. Not because you [go], "that's good, very good, that's a very good dancer"—if [it's] all dancers there. But now you got people who don't know anything about dancing and they want some flash and fast. And that's what we was doing. And while he was out there dancing, that man who hired us, he put his ear down. Because, see in a dance hall, you have to roll out the mat. You have a dancing mat. He rolled out the mat. He put his ear down to hear if he could hear where all this tap's coming from. . . and this man put his ear down and he listened and listened and we was putting a whole lot of snatch in— brrr, brr, nbrr, brrrra, brrrm [imitates rhythms] and when we went off—well, the audience went wild about it.

Apollo theater handbill for a show featuring Hortense Allen's line

▲▲▲▲▲

And uh, Harry says to me in the dressing room, "Hey, John, they're still applauding." I said, "I know they are." And this, when this white fellow went on—I forgot his name now—good rhythm dancer, I'll give him credit, he was a good rhythm dancer. But the people don't know anything about rhythm, and when he came off—see, he didn't get the applause we had, so he got angry. And he came off. . . and when he was in the dressing room, he said, "They weren't doing anything but a whole lot of snatches and pull-ups and wings, that's all they was doing." He was fussing, to hisself, see. But he didn't realize—an audience like this, that audience don't know anything about that. You got to sell what you got to the audience. . . The fellow got angry with us, but he should have got angry with the crowd. It was the audience there. But that happens, you know.—John Hart

Just playin' from the heart: Henry Meadows and the rhythms of South Philadelphia

You could love to dance, and not love the business. Or you could be a great dancer and not get the breaks. If you wanted to raise a family, the unpredictable income and time away on the road were a hardship—however great the rewards. Here, a dancers who "gave it up"—only to return to dance—reflects on some of his experiences.

My name is Henry C. Meadows, known as Hank as of my teenage days. [I was born in South Philadelphia in 1923.] Inspired by mother and sister Penny who was a singer during my early days. I never took dancing lessons but I watched my sister rehearse around the house at home and she would explain to me what it was all about—show business and what you had to do to be in it, and about the different dances and acts.

My mother also explained and would imitate various entertainers like Marion Anderson and Bert Williams. She could do this. Marion, she lived in the same neighborhood as my mother. She also took me to the various stage shows at the Standard Theater where the Nicholas brothers' mother and father played in the house band. Also, I attended E.M. Stanton School, Philadelphia with the Nicholas brothers who also inspired me very, very much in my decision to want to be a dancer. Harold, the youngest then, was in the third grade with me. Fayard, the oldest, he was in the sixth grade. Their sister, Dorothy, was in between. This along with Pearl Bailey, Pepper Welch—also a great dancer, Philadelphia dancer—and other entertainers, used to come to my house to visit my sister and I would sit in on their conversations, you know. This also played a bit part in my decision to want to become a part of show business.

In my neighborhood, there were such dancers as Roland James of Son and Sonny, Ernie and Rosie [Oz], Simmie Collins, Jerry Taps, who constantly toured with Jan Savitt's band, Baby Edwards and her brother. And being a part of this surrounding along with acts like Stump and Stumpy, who were nationally famous, Moke and Poke, I became more and more involved in show business....

After I started dancing, I was drafted in the War. When I docked in Liverpool, England, they sent special orders down and took me away from the company and they asked me if I would like to travel with this show that was touring—which I readily agreed, you know. When I went ashore, I had to do an audition first. I had got placed with the show and toured for three years. We just about played all the theaters there. We played opera houses, concerts—the troops would be on their leave, maybe weekend leave and they could bring their guests. And we had a very beautiful show. In fact, in our battalion, Mickey Rooney was in one of the shows. The battalion was made up of all show business, you know....The name of the show was called [Jives a Poppin] which later became a part of Seventeenth Special Services of the 92nd Division Infantry.

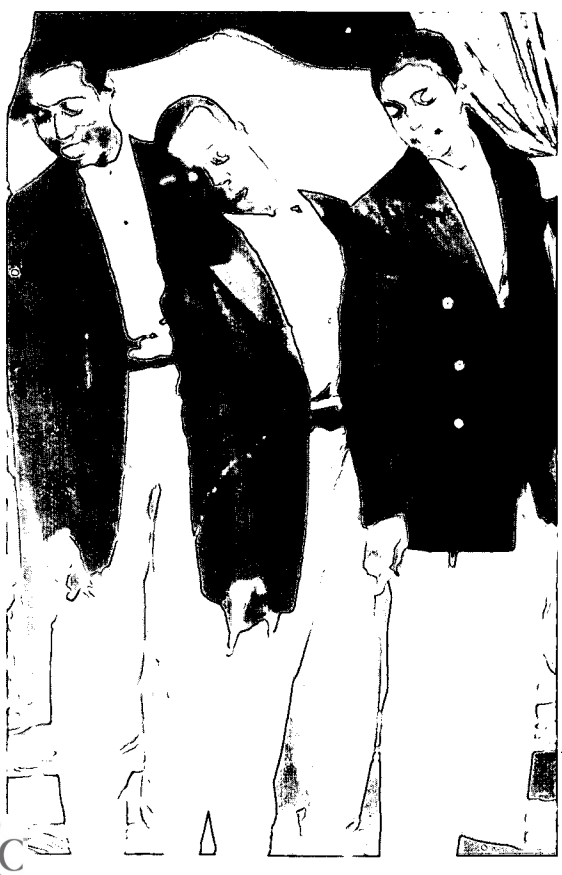
Now, in the band, in our band anyway, John Lewis, well he's the leader now of the Modern Jazz Group, he was the musical conductor. Our drummer, Kenny Clark, just died in Paris. He was the father of modern drumming. He was the father of it. He created it. Him, along with Dizzie Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and these people. So, you know, being with these type of people, you first of all, you get the inspiration. And you learn.

You take for instance, like Kenny. Kenny, when we weren't doing shows, we would, he'd set his drums up and I'd put my dancing shoes on, and we'd answer each other. That's how—this all come from that paddling, you know what I mean? Darby Hicks, one of the fellows that danced with me in the show, I actually picked paddling up from Darby Hicks, but then I went to experimenting, doing what a drummer would do, d'you understand? And when I came back here, LaVaughn [Robinson] and all of us got together and these things was cooking in my mind. So the musicians, all the musicians arund here, they used to call us the musicians' dancers, because we did so many things that a drummer would do when they're taking their breaks, you know, in between the music, like 2-bar, 4-bar....

And then, [when I came home], one of my sisters' former managers, Frank Belmont, beautiful, he was a buddy, he was a manager. Took so much interest and he had so many big connections. You know, when LaVaughn and I and all of us was working together, we worked out of the biggest office in New York, you

Henry Meadows and his dance partners John Lance ("Butch") and Tony Lopez, c. 1942

▲▲▲▲▲



know. We weren't on the contract with him, only for the jobs. And Frank would sit down. He'd watch us dance, and he'd say, "Take this out. I want a split here, I want knee drops here" and certain things.... He said, "I can ask for more money." You know what I mean? He also was the manager—he had three acts : LaVaughn, Myself and Sledge, also Tony. And then he had the Clark Brothers. And he had another act named the Wong Sisters.

But he was the type of guy, he was just like your Daddy. You know, he'd sit there. He'd, he would, when we went out on the road, he would figure out the cheapest way

to get there. He'd have hotels set up, connections, that would save us a dollar, you know. Because we all had families. And we had expenses there and then we had to send money home, you know. He was just a beautiful guy. But he died....

I knew Frank ever since. . . he used to come around the house for my sister....and then when I got into show business, he took so much interest. In every thing that we did. The clothes, the pictures, the jobs. He would turn 'em down. I remember one time, we were supposed to go in the Moulin Rouge in Los [illegible] We had that choice or we could have—if we'd a went in there, we would have went in with Lionel Hampton's band. And we had a chance to go out, tour Canada, with Louis Armstrong's band. He had a Dixieland band. And we wanted to go with Lionel Hampton because he had this big jumpin' band. You know—it made you want to dance.

And Frank was the type of guy like this, he said, "Yeah," he said, "But we gotta go where the most money is," you know. And he picked Louis Armstrong, you know, for us, to tour Canada with. [I went along with most of his decisions, but] LaVaughn didn't....LaVaughn agreed with the work, but the thing was, when we got finished dancing, [our] suits, shirts and everything would be soaking wet and we would be out of breath, you know what I mean? Frank didn't give us chance enough to get to the dressing room and sit down for a minute. He'd meet you right as you were coming off. "Jeez—what was you guys doing out there this time? His hand was here. Your hand was down here." He'd go, "What was happening?" You know. He said, "Now, I want to know one thing"—you know, he'd ask us little things like that. "D'you think you can do a spin and run up the wall and stay up there for two minutes?" LaVaughn would say, "Frank, c'mon leave us alone." He'd walk away from him, you know. I'd stand there. I said, "Well, we might try it, Frank, in rehearsal." I had no intention of doing it, you know. But there was alot of things that he told us became very—it played an influential part in our act moving up, you know? And we got so we worked with some of the biggest stars. We worked in the biggest, some of the biggest theaters and clubs. When I stopped dancing...late fifties, early sixties, we had just closed at the Palace Theater. We had a week off....

I used to come home, because Frank used to keep us working....I used to come home and the kids didn't want me to go back out on

the road. So when I came home that time, I was a little disgusted and tired and I wanted to be with the kids, so I just told LaVaughn and Sledge, "I'm not going out on the road no more." I said, "I'll take work around here." You know, like we were working out of New York.... so we worked around here for a long time. And when this Ray Charles date came up, we were getting ready to go back out on the road. That was Frank's idea. Stick us in there and then send us out on the road. Talk us into going back out.... we went into Palumbos and stayed in there three years....

I joined this [drum and bugle] corps, [Ship Post, about 1935 when I was about 12]. I was so enthused about parades. But this was my first love and I got into that from, I used to see these movies with Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler like Flirtation Walk, about West Point and Annapolis. I liked the way they marched. I liked the music that they played. They had bands then. And I had the inspiration to want to go to West Point—just [because of] the march and the uniforms...So I got in this corps, this is a "G" bugle corps. Actually, everybody in there was

Far left: Henry Meadows in high school, c. 1941

Above: Henry Meadows, about 1943, in Special Services Division, Armed Forces

▲▲▲▲▲

good—good musicians, kids. Ship Post organized it. Major Moore. Had beautiful uniforms...[Later] we left Ship Post and we went to the Elks.

Anybody could be in it, they taught you how to march and how to drill. We kept watching these big corps like Penn Treaty from Fishtown. They'd pull up in busses.... it took up a whole block and they could march and they could play. But we couldn't understand how they could play these tunes like Oklahoma....

What was happening, we knew music. All we had to be taught—and then we added—we were taught those kind of songs with the harmony. Wherein this corps we just played the melody.... For one thing, we had, when this corps—Lincoln Post Invaders Drum Corps. We called it the Invaders because we were the first and only colored corps to venture into that field and could do it. See, now Ella Fitzgerald's drummer, Bobby Durham, he was in this corps. See now he was the one who taught me rudiments. See, I was just playin' from the heart. Bobby had been in the Marine Corps, drum corps. So he learned....and he taught and everything I would learn, I would teach my kids. . . now, one of my kids is with Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes.

So when we stopped dancing and I had to be affiliated with music, that's the way my mind— that's when I said, I'm going to go back to this project. I'll try to build this type of a corps...My sons ended up being in some of the best corps, the best drum corps. When they started integrating, they started being in some of the best corps.... This was during the gang war days.... corps turned people around. Instead of hanging on the corners....we had rehearsals every day in the week....

We had gangs. But nothing like it is today. What we would do if you had a disagreement, this gang would line up on that side of the street. Our gang would line up on this side of the street. And you'd pick, you know, who you wanted, you know, who you had the problem with. That's why alot of good fighters came out of our day, Joe Lewis' time. But near the end, they did pick up some pistols. But they had a better justice system then....

[As a dancer,] everybody looked up to you. One minute they'd see me with my dancin' shoes on. The older people—we didn't call people old then, you know—and the older people used to say, "This boy's going to be a movie star." That was inspiring, too, you know. And then on Saturdays and Sundays, when we wasn't there, they'd see me in one of these uniforms, you know, and they'd say "Where you parading at today?" "I'm coming, you know." You hear LaVaughn kid about—that's one thing he never forgot. We were working in a stheater up in New Hampshire and in between shows, I heard this drum corps coming down the street. I got out of my tails and started running. I said, "I'll be back—what time is the next show?" They didn't know—LaVaughn and them didn't know where I was going. So finally, it became—actually, I had only went outside because the parade was on the main street. And LaVaughn started looking, and he said, "I don't know where Hank—better go find that guy, you know." So, he came out and here I was on the front line, busy looking. LaVaughn said, "What time is it?" And he say, "Boy you're something." He say, "Hank, you could have missed the show!"

—Henry Meadows

Clockwise from above:

Henry Meadows (3rd from left) in the Invaders Drum and Bugle Corps, about 1968

The Elks (Ship Post) Drum and Bugle Corps waiting for the parade to start, about 1935-7

Henry Meadows and Peter Briglia, partners, 1993

▲▲▲▲▲

"Not everyone can be in a show:" John Hart

Elsewhere in these pages, John Hart testifies to the talent of his long-time friend Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt. He has known her since they were children more than seventy years ago. He was a partner with her brother, Harry, and for awhile Baby and John danced together, as well.

In gatherings of hoofers that have occured over the last few years, John Hart has often been the elder statesman, filling in details that others had forgotten. He gave up dancing to make a living, but he never gave up his love for dance or his appreciation of its subtleties.

Oh! 1925-26, [I was a teenager] and I lived [by] 13th and Christian Street. And Webster Street is between Catharine and Christian and every night the men around there would ask the kids to dance and they'd put a pot and this one and that one would put a nickel and a dime and I got 15 cents. And the pot would be about 40 or 50 cents. The best dancer get that pot. And the Charleston and the tap Charleston was out too, you know, and Buster [Smith] could Charleston pretty good and I always used to say, "I bet my buddy'll win." One man say "What could you do?" "Can't do anything."

Had a girl around there with us. Ivory Jo. [She] could dance. She was good at the Charleston.

I couldn't dance. They used to get on me so much, I used to get down in my basement and try to learn how to dance. And after awhile, I was able to go amateur, see.

Pete, Peaches and Duke came to the Standard. And Harry [Edwards] said to me, " Hey Johnny," Say, "What." He say, "Pete and Peaches there, and Bill Bailey. Go to see the show." Now Pete and Peaches and Duke, their name up in lights. And Bill Bailey was stealing the show every night. . . great rhythm dancer, Bill Bailey. Good salesman. . . He was as good a dancer as I've ever seen. . .

Oh, well see, I had a booking agent and Fox Theater used to be 16th and Market. I had an agent in there. A fellow showed me the ropes. Then at the Shubert Theater which used to be at Broad Street. They had a building there and I used to go up there and at 13th and Market, the Colonial building, I used to go up there. See I'd make my rounds on Monday, try to pick up maybe one night here, seven dollars a night, see during the Depression. Edith [Edwards] didn't know anything about this. Before I started dancing with Harry [Edwards, her brother], I used to do this see. . .

But some of those agents were slick. He'd say, "Well, Hart, I never seen you work. He'd say, "How 'bout workin' to this club?" And he called the name of this club, Friday night. "How 'bout workin'?" Oh, I say, "I have got, I got work Friday night." But I didn't have any work. But I know he was tryin' to be slick, sayin' "Let me see how you work." But now he'll tell me—he'll get paid for it and tell me he's goin' to see how I work...."

See, what happened when I first tried to learn how to dance, me and Buster [Smith, he was Bessie Smith's nephew]. And Bessie [Smith] came, come to town, and....Buster's mother said to Bessie, "Bessie, I want you to see John and Buster." The living room was quite large, had a large floor. She said, "Get out on the floor, let me see what you can do." Like that. So we did. But I think, we were— I was about fifteen and he was about fourteen. She said, "When you get a little older, well, I'll take you." Sure enough, when we got older, she took us, she took us on the show with her. But I had to bring my mother [to make the arrangements]. I was about just going on 18. During that time, most the time, your mother got to have the authority, not like now, your kids do what they want at those ages... and so she said, "Bring your father." I said I had to bring my mother. "OK, bring your mother." So they talked it over. Whatever I [earned]... . so she fixed it so that she'll send half of the money home to mom and the other half goes to my rent, room and board. That's the way she had it...

My mom was a little concerned because I never was away from her that long, see. And... before that bus pulled off that morning, Greyhound, she said [to Bessie Smith], "Take care of Johnny." [Bessie] said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of him... " But like anything else, you know when you go away from home first time like that, you get a little homesick. You're not around your parents. At night, after the show, Buster'd say, "Do you miss home?" I'd say, "Yeah, I do..." You get a little homesick... After the show, you come home you sit down, 'bout 11:30 or 12:30 and you start thinking this. But during the day you don't think about it 'cause you're working.

[I was with Bessie Smith on the road for five or six months.] I got dissatisfied because the Depression was getting worse and the show sometimes didn't make a lot of money so she didn't have the money to pay. Hollywood was turning out movies that you could see for ten cents, but you couldn't see a live show for ten cents. And that's why I dropped off. People didn't have the money....There were so many dancers in Philadelphia, a dime a dozen because unless you have a contract for a show....snot everyone can be in a show

—John Hart

"The real untold stories of tap": African American women dancers

right: Dee and Dave McHarris

below: Poster for Broadway show Memphis Bound featuring Bill Robinson and others (including Libby Spencer in line, third woman from right, first line).

▲▲▲▲▲

Remember Bernice Lacey? Bernice Lacy was on Kiddie Hour [about 1933-34], she was another tap dancer.... But they had alot of—they had quite a few female tap dancers. You remember, I told you in them days there was alot of female tap dancers that never got that recognition because they wasn't, you know, aggressive as the male.—LaVaughn Robinson

And then I met another young lady that was a good dancer—Juanita Pitts. See. Juanita Pitts used to come through Philadelphia and she would always stop at the Two Bit Club, 16th and Fitzwater. And anytime she came through there, she had a job. Do you understand what I'm saying? And regardless to who the dancers was, if she came through and wanted to work....she was always welcome to dance at the Two Bit Club—LaVaughn Robinson

When I first saw Louise Madison dance, I didn't think there was nobody like that dancin'. This was —I must have been about fourteen years old, dancin' on the street.... buskin'. And I met this guy called Lawrence Patterson—Sy. He used to work with an act called "Popcorn, Peanuts and Cracker Jack." He told us one day, he says—there was three of us then—He says, "I'm going to take you all to Jersey so you can see somebody tap dance." I said, "OK." He had a little old beat-up car. And he took us to the Cotton Club, in Lawnside, New Jersey. And he set us in the back of the club and he told Ted, "Give them a little drink, and ginger ale and put a cherry in it and make it look like a drink," you know. And this lady came out on the stage and and did so much dancing, in white tails, that it was unbelievable. Now, she was one of the first female dancers that did a solo with low-heeled shoes....Well, she had shoes on just like a man would wear....but then I had the pleasure of working with her in the Apollo Theater with Boyd Rayburn's band and Maynard Ferguson and Ella Fitzgerald. And man, she was doing so much dancing. But you know what I never could understand—why she never did make it like she should have.—LaVaughn Robinson

You know why? Her looks. That's what stopped her.—Dave McHarris

Women danced in the line but they never did get any kind of recognition, you know. Like oh, if they was dancers, the producers may tell 'em, why don't you do me a routine or something like that.... All my steps, I'd never write anything down. Like alot of them would write steps down. I would never write nothing down.... I was the first Black woman to put a line in the Paramount on Broadway but they did not give me the credit. They didn't give me the credit.... June Taylor Dancers and Jackie Gleason, that's who they said. But I was the first Black to put a line.... .Well, you know, just that's the way it was. That's just the way it was.—Hortense Allen Jordan

Regularly, we'd do three shows a day, but with the big bands we'd go into six and seven shows a day. [We didn't get paid more.] Sure, we always thought it was wrong, especially me. Oh yes, sure did. I was always the first one to say something and would strike. Listen, I started a strike there and at Small's. I did. But

it's hard getting people to follow you. They'll say they'll follow you and then they won't. But I ended up getting a raise and they didn't. And they didn't speak up. "Well, who's dissatisfied in here?" No one opened up their mouth but me. So I was the only one got the raise.... I said, "He's not going to give it to you because you won't—didn't speak up and that was really dirty of you to leave me standing by myself, when I was speaking up for all of you. But see, that's not going to stop me because I wasn't only speaking up for you. I was speaking up for myself.

[That was over] more money. You know. And Small's should have been more money anyway. You don't get anything if you don't ask....It was the same thing over here in New Jersey. Just tell him we're not going to work. Just walk out....They did it, and he gave them the raise. He knew it was me. You know. Well, I didn't care because it was—I knew it was right. I wasn't doing anything that was wrong. Like I say, you're never going to get anything if you don't ask for it.

And we deserved it. The salary was small enough as it was, you know. You see all the people *jammed* in the place, you know. Goodness. And he was bragging himself, you know, "My goodness, we never had it so good. You know, "Where did all these people come from?" Him and his wife. He wouldn't offer you another dime. Wouldn't think of it. I didn't find it any problem to ask for what I thought was right.—Libby Spencer

[About women not getting the chances or credit], I didn't let it get to me but I knew it was happening all along. If I can't—If I don't see a way of doing something about something, I can't worry about it. See, I can't spend my time and energy worrying about that. Because that can only hurt me, see, it can't hurt anyone else. Now, if I [illegible]here I can do something about it, then I won't have to worry about it. I'll *do* something about it. But when I see I'm by myself and I don't have anyone to back me up or to go into it with me, there's no need. Just leave it alone....And you make yourself happy with something else that is positive.
—Libby Spencer

Edith Hunt performed as a child as "Baby Edwards," and as part of the "girl and boy" act "Spic and Span." Dee McHarris performed with her husband Dave as "Dave and Dee," and "McHarris and Delores." Isabelle Fambro performed with her partner as "Billy and Eleanor Byrd." Her agent thought that Marge and Gower Champion were what people wanted, so he created a name and image that suggested an elegant married couple—and Isabelle Fambro became Eleanor Byrd: "So that's how that come about. It didn't matter [what we were called]. It didn't matter. What was in a name? Look, there was Scoop and Doop and everything, and Spic and Span and Tip Tap Toe. There was names. People just used names. Slim and Slam.... .and all those type of names. They weren't no real names. They just wasn't real names. The Ink Spots. Who knew who they were? Other than whatever name they called themselves.—Isabelle Fambro

Hortense Allen got a name from another dancer: Yeah, they called me "the Body." I used to think I was a corpse!....I got the name "the Body" through Peg Leg Bates. So, the majority of exotic dancers, they have the name "Princess So-and-So and So-and-So." I said, "No, my name is Hortense, and I ain't no Princess So and So. Now, they just coming to see an act. So Peg Leg Bates started calling me, said "Be Hortense 'the Body' Allen. So I picked up the name.
—Hortense Allen

Mildred "Candi" Thorpe performed with Jewel Welch as "Candi and Pepper"— an act that was unusual in presenting two women together. The duo altered standard conventions in the clothes they wore, as well: [The M.C. at the Apollo used to say, introducing us] "Ladies and gentlemen, we've got an act for you out of Philadelphia. The name is Candi and Pepper, he says—Candi is sweet, Pepper's hot, come on girls and show us what you've got." And boom we went out there. And that's what I mean—we showed 'em what we had. They'd never seen two girls. And we were young, we were young. We never exposed any part of our body other than our face and our hands....Our costumes were zoot suits—shirts and ties. We used to wear the Windsor knot—big, big knot. And that alone—people....wanted to see flesh. And for us to go into the Apollo and to score like we did is just amazing. And that was it, We never exposed our body. Never.
—Mildred "Candi" Thorpe

Isabelle Fambro (Eleanor) and Billy Byrd, with her sister Claudine at the Two-Bit Club, c. 1942.

▲▲▲▲▲

Women's looks—and their color— made a difference in the kind of work available to them as dancers: You couldn't be but so brown. It was like you couldn't be but so brown. Dark brown-skinned girls were, they were out. Brown skinned and light, that was the thing, you know, lighter complexion, that was the thing. That was true mostly everyplace.... [Memphis Bound, Bill Robinson's show] was one of the first shows that was broken down. Well, the producer, the man that had the money, he broke it down, because he wanted who he picked in his line, [and she] was the darkest brown skinned girl.... .and girls had to learn that it had nothing to do with color, it was talent. So..... It's like anything else, you had to be in. And if you're in, you can get by. And Louis Armstrong's wife, they used to call her Brown Sugar, she was in the Cotton Club and she was a dark-skinned girl....—Libby Spencer

Lillian Fitzgerald put iodine on her face to look brown and Isabelle Fambro used a different shade of Max Factor on her hands, arms, and face to make herself lighter. Others never got a chance: Clarence Robinson used to produce for the Cotton Club back in those days and the Zanzibar....The majority of times, Clarence Robinson would use like the lighter girls. You had to look either like a Indian or foreigner or Mexican before he would use you. Now, Clarence Robinson, had a girl, they said, named Ristina Banks, used to choreograph his shows, cause Clarence couldn't dance. And used to choreograph his shows, teach the girls, you know. But she couldn't dance in the line because she was a brown-skinned girl. They never would use her, they say. I never met her, but they say she was a terrific dancer. —Hortense Allen Jordan

"Well, you know what I always thought? Chorus girls was a throwaway.... that's what I called them. What they called a throwaway, they come and do an act. They don't give them the applause—very seldom you saw chorus girls unless you was a soubrette that got applause. And they opened, in black clubs they would do a middle number which was their very best, their very best. And most of their middle numbers they did for the oncoming act to follow them. So that's why the name throwaways come in. Plus they never got a salary like a performer. Never did. They got scale. Or if they were a little above scale, they get maybe ten or fifteen dollars more. But they never got up in the hundreds unless they were in some huge big show. Now the chorus girls—like Larry Steele....they were his show. Because of their costumes and at that time, a little bit of nudity and they were pretty. And they got paid for their beauty, their figure, and not so much as their dances. Because I know they had showgirls that couldn't do a—couldn't cut a step. But then they made the show and they made it a beautiful show."—Isabelle Fambro

The story of chorus girls is the real untold story, really....Because they would have you to think that the acts did it, because the acts did not carry the show, it was the chorus girls that carried the show. And that's really who people used to come to the Apollo to see—what the chorus girls was going to do the next week, because we had to change every week, three numbers. That's right. And we were very good, I must say. You know, we were very good. We didn't think we were very good at the time, but looking back at it, we did a lot of stuff...We didn't want to create an act. We wanted to be chorus girls...because we did more, we learned more, we knew more. An act didn't know anything but their act...You'd have to know more...but we were not qualified, we were not looked upon as better than the acts. Because they were acts and we were chorus girls, so we're the little, you know, low on the totem pole. But many of the girls in the chorus had more talent than an act. Well, that's true. But the acts that were good, they were excellent, you know, they had to be.... —Libby Spencer

If you ever was a chorus girl, you learned all kinds of dancing. But if you had an act, you only do that act until you retire. See, well, in St. Louis, we had to change shows every two weeks and had to do five numbers. So, a lot of people will come out of school and say, "I'm a dancer" but their brain

don't function that well to learn all five of those numbers and have to change them. That's the difference.... Some of em say, "Well, this is my technique," but that's the only kind they have learned, one style or one kind of dancing. Just like Dunham—the only one style or one kind of dancing."
—Hortense Allen Jordan

For the "tall girls" in the Apollo line, the boundaries between acts and chorus were blurred. Libby Spencer danced as captain of the line at the Apollo: We always liked whatever acts came in. We'd stand in the wings and watch and learn different things from them, you know. What they were doing...Mr. Harper used to make us go down and learn from different acts that came in, some of their steps, and then he would put it in our routines. Different [acts] would teach the tall girls.—Libby Spencer

The performers themselves appreciated the chorus girls because they wouldn't dare want to come in the Apollo without 'em, you know, because they knew what they meant to them as acts. We would come on, open up a show, that would open it up for the warmth of it, and then the different acts in between and then we would do a middle number. And then the rest of the acts would come on. And then we'd do a big finale...You had a tap dancing group or duo, like "Spic and Span," or "Billy and Eleanor Byrd." Then you had a blues singer. You had a pop singer, a comedian, and you had little acts in between. You know, they would do little different acts....Shake dancer, they would call 'em, interpretive dancer. You would have an act like the Nicholas Brothers. They would be the act before the finale. The big act would be the act before the finale. It was always set up like that. —Libby Spencer

The chorus—it was fun. We were like sisters, we helped one another. Life was really fun. We looked forward to coming to work because we really liked one another, you know. Just learned different routines—those that wasn't, that didn't pick up on the routines as fast as the others someone else would help them, you know, to make sure that they learned it so they could be able to work, because if you didn't learn the steps, you was out. And one moment, the producer would not, you know, they weren't....they would not put up with you not knowing. See, you had to know how to dance when you came to the Apollo. But some girls was slower learning. It's not that they couldn't dance, but everybody don't pick up as fast as the other. So then we would get them aside and make sure—and drill them, and make sure that they would get in.... Because the girls that came from the Cotton Club, when the Cotton Club closed and they came to the Apollo, they were not very good dancers. See, the girls at the Apollo was very good dancers. And the Cotton Club girls were—very pretty, and you know, and they were looked up to. So they wanted to come in the Apollo. But they just couldn't learn those routines. So I would take a couple of them....that made it through. But like I said, Leonard Harper, he didn't stand for you not knowing. He said, "You're a professional, you're supposed to come in and learn and get it," you know. So that was that.—Libby Spencer

Composite photo of Isabelle Fambro at the Apollo, c. 1947.

left: Libby Spencer at the Ebony Show Lounge, Broad and Spruce Streets, c. 1952-3.

▲▲▲▲▲

What happened at the end of our act is, we were booked in the mountains....Emersons up in the Catskills and the agent from [Japan] came over to see us. And my son was sick. He had TB as a little boy. And he liked the act. So this time we was in the agent's in NY, we had left Jolly [Joyce].... we went with the Morris Agency and I mean we were booked with the biggest of acts and the biggest of stars.... we were the dance team....And they came in here, and they bought the act and I kept telling Billy, "I don't

want to go to no Japan, I want to stay close to home" because Sonny [my son] was sick. And he got disturbed about that, and he hadn't been to Japan and he wanted to go. So he rehearsed another girl. I knew her, Vivian. Out of New York. And he didn't let me know that he was passing Vivian off as "Billy and Eleanor." Now I'm brown and she was fair. Plus she didn't work like me 'cause she danced up on her toes, but she could tap. That was a good novelty act. And he went on to Japan and when he got there, after a few shows, I don't know how many, whatever, the agent came into the club and he says, "this is not the act that I booked." And he was very disturbed about it. So they cancelled him. First time, ever, in the history of show business, was he cancelled. So he got very disturbed at me, and very angry at me.... For not going. For not going. And it was good money....I wasn't going to Japan. Suppose something happened to Sonny and I was in Japan?—Isabelle Fambro

I left show business after Billy and I split...See, it was double salary with us. And naturally, when he went on with the Ink Spots, and I'm only doing two nights a week, I couldn't make it. And the War then was over and I wasn't getting the check, and I went to work for the City. My first cousin, which we were raised as brothers and sisters was a [PA state] Senator. So I went to Freeman, Freeman Hankins. And I told him I needed a job. And he said what can you do, and I said, "Sing and dance." At that particular time. "Act," whatever. So, he says, "How 'bout clerical work?" I said, "Whatever you get me, if I don't know it, I'll learn it." So he got me a job with the City....But I would work Friday and Saturday, still doing my show business....And I started *living*—without the help of Billy, without the help of anybody. Except—I owed Freeman my life.—Isabelle Fambro

*Jazz Dance *was initially published in 1968, two years after Marshall Stearns' untimely death. (See pp. 122, 145, and 195 for references to the women cited here.)*

***In 1990, Rusty Frank's* TAP! *was published, listing nearly 20 African American women tappers. Cheryl Willis' 1991 dissertation at Temple,* Tap Dance, *lists more than 80 African American women hoofers.*

****Some performers whose original acts involved comedic or eccentric dancing reinvented themselves as tap dancers when hoofing found a new audience.*

▲▲▲▲▲

This year, Marshall and Jean Stearns' book *Jazz Dance*, long out of print, was republished, with a new foreword and afterword by Brenda Bufalino, a New York hoofer and former protegé of Honi Coles.* Bufalino, through her teaching, performing and choreography, has become a nationally and internationally recognized exponent of tap's claiming a place on the concert stage (vernacular no longer). She writes that the Stearns' book has become "the Bible for the new generation of tap dancers and a reference manual for the tap masters still living who worked so diligently to pass on the tradition as well as the technique." (xi-xii)

The republication of *Jazz Dance* is a graphic reminder that even some of the most thorough and thoughtful researchers have tended to discount the participation of African American women in the development and popularizing of the tap form. Stearns and Stearns mention "excellent tap dancer" Mae Barnes who was quoted as insisting that "a few of us chorus girls knew more flashy steps than the dance directors or choreographers." They also mention Katie Carter, Muriel Ringold, Cotton Club dancer Cora LaRedd, Maud Mills ("nicknamed 'Hardfoot Maud' because she hit the deck with such force"), Alice Whitman (who "was tops," had "clean, clear taps," and "could cut a five-tap wing like a man"), and Etta Gross who was "as good as Alice Whitman," Florence Covan (wife of Willie), Bessie Dudley, Jodie Edwards (of Butterbeans and Susie), "excellent woman tapper" Lavinia Mack and "eccentric dancer" Ada Overton, George Walker's wife. Their references to a dozen black women only scratched the surface.**

While the underrecognition of African American women in *Jazz Dance* might be explained by the premature arrest of the Stearns' research due to Marshall's death in 1966, it is harder to understand why it is that through the 1970s, the 1980s, and up to today, veteran black female hoofers—now in their late 60s to early 80s—have remained overwhelmingly in obscurity while the careers of numerous black male dancers have been revitalized, sustained, and even transformed*** by the so-called "tap revival." The "women's movement" notwithstanding, veteran African American women hoofers are still waiting for their phone to ring while their male counterparts have been appearing and performing in film (e.g. Tap, No Maps on My Taps), on Broadway (Black and Blue, My One and Only), at prestigious venues in the U.S. and abroad (Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, the

Smithsonian Institution, the 1990 Dance Biennale in Lyon, France) and in a growing array of tap festivals.

Reflective of the way that African American women have been overlooked and denied recognition for their contribution to developing and sustaining the tradition of tap dancing is an essay entitled "Super Moms of Tap" which appeared two years ago in the dance periodical *Attitude*, as well as in a publication of the International Tap Association. The essay's author, Katherine Kramer, described how a community of women—primarily white, middle-class, college-educated and forty-something—supported, promoted, and encouraged the revival of the careers of a community of veteran tap dancers—primarily black, male, unlettered and 60-80-something. The "Super Moms," according to Kramer, were the resuscitators and caretakers of a "waning" art form; the vehicle for their restorative power was the nurturance and inspiration they provided the male dancers who became their "lovers...fathers, brothers, storytellers and friends." Kramer urged that it was time for her and the other "Moms" to abandon their self-sacrificing handmaiden roles and concentrate on developing their own prominence as tap performers and choreographers. Had Kramer taken a longer historical perspective on her topic, she might have recognized that there were many African American women who, like her male idols, distinguished themselves as performers and stylistic innovators. She also might have acknowledged that long before her generation of tap disciples entered the fold, there were African American women dancers who struggled against anonymity, discrimination, and exploitation, and who sacrificed personal career goals for the sake of the children and men in their lives. This essay is an introduction to just a few of those women.—Germaine Ingram and Debora Kodish

Edith Hunt dancing as "Spic and Span," far left and as "Baby Edwards," this page.

Hortense Allen Dancers at the Dell, c. 1970s. Top row (l-r): Libby Spencer, Hortense Allen Jordan, Arline "Artie" Riley, Michelle "Mike" Webster, Wilhelmina Herbert, unidentified dancer, Yvonne Thomas, two unidentified dancers. Bottom row (l-r): Jeanne Bristow-Pinkham, Patricia Perkins, two unidentified dancers, Barbara Thomas, unidentified dancer, Vicki Diaz, Oscar McBurse

Staging the shows, all the way down the line: Hortense Allen Jordan and Libby Spencer

Hortense Allen Jordan

When I was real small, I guess about seven, eight years old, my brother... he used to teach music and he was learning me how to play the horn and everything. But I guess that's what brought me through the idea of wanting to dance. You know. 'Cause the majority of times, if you didn't have no money to go to college with—what were you thinking of doing? Run the elevator or dance! I'd get in the chorus girl... and only way you'd get to travel— Well, you be a chorus girl and you'd travel all over...

See, I had good teachers... I've been dancing since I was say about fourteen years old, in St. Louis, Missouri, where I came from. In St. Louis it was a little different. 'Cause the producers all, like Leonard Reed, all of them could dance. Now Leonard Reed could blow a horn, teach you all kinds of tap dance— he was a producer. I don't know if he was white or not, but he looked like a white man. And I think why he didn't get a break they was wondering is why is this white man carrying on this show [of black entertainers]. And he would write shows like operas. I mean a production. He was really terrific...he had a wonderful brain. But producers that came up out way, they had to dance and they was the ones that had to teach.

[At the clubs there], they'd need some girls and so they'd pick up six girls, [and you had a chance] if you knew a little about dancing or something...The Plantation [was the largest club in Saint Louis,] and it used to close down in April, oh from September to April, and well, the other months you didn't have anything to do...There was one girl, Mickey, she was put out of school for dancing professionally at the Plantation, but that never happened to me because my teacher was a chaperone...I used to go in and ask the Dean if I could get out of school

Hortense Allen and her line at Atlantic City's Club Harlem, c. 1955-6

▲▲▲▲▲

to go to the dances because I was tall and could match up with the other girls...

When [Larry Steele] met me I was in St. Louis. He was the MC. He came in as the MC of my show [that I was directing]. And Larry told his wife to catch my show and catch that girl that has the show. 'Cause I took Charlie Morrisey's job in Chicago at the Rumboogie. So his wife asked me [to go to Atlantic City]. I said, "I don't know, I got to go home and see if it's okay with my family." So that's when I came out this way. So with Larry doing that, that's when he said, I have to do an act in the show besides teaching the girls. 'Cause he told Mr. Williams, you know, that I was leading the line, not telling him the truth, you know, that I was staging his shows all the way down the line, you know, and I went in front of the line...and I went on down the line that way....

'Cause every time Larry asked—I didn't mind working hard. And I used to go on the floor twenty-five times a night. And people said, "How'd you do it?"

....You had to do five shows, and you'd do—I was in five numbers and...we did seven shows right behind it. And how he used to do it because he'd have two production numbers, I had to lead the production numbers and then I had to do my act. And then I was in the opening with the line. So I didn't mind. They wrote me up one time in a magazine. A thousand, so many thousand steps...then I took the show to Newark... .

And the costumes the same way, the costumes the same way. If I could, really, if I could have drawed, to draw costumes, I could have made alot of money. But I can't draw! I can't draw a stick figure like this...but I could go tell you how to put it together... .

I made all [my own costumes], I had to. Because they wouldn't—it was so hard to get costumes to rent. And they would charge so much. For me to give the girls a chance, I make 'em. But I learned how to make costumes from books [and from the professionals]...I used to could always sew...I used to make big headpieces for them...Made all of 'em. Cut it out with no pattern. This was the way regular professional costumes were made. See when you're making the costumes, see ...they have to be boned and everything...I was lucky enough to work with the professional ones, to be around them. They would show me, "Look, this is how this was done...."

(l-r) Libby Spencer, Hortense Allen, Mickey Adams (deceased) at the Bandbox, c. 1960s.

▲▲▲▲▲

See, when they'd have me puttin' the show together, you'd have the opening number, which was the girls. The girls always opened up. Then, you'll have either a singer or some little simple act behind it. Then you take on maybe like a team or something... [or a comedian]. So that would have to be like two acts in between. Then the production number come on. Two more acts and the finale and that's your whole length of the show. Sometimes, they hire two singers together...

Whether a person believes it or not but this is true because I've been there. I sacrificed. I went out there. I remember on the show there with Marva, Ben [Bart] had to go in to get our food because they didn't want blacks in there. That's the way they were, traveling through the South. I said, "I never thought the South was like that." I had to go down there to see... Sixteen weeks, I slept upon a bus seat, that was all the one-nighters we did. We didn't go into no hotel rooms or something. Traveled just like that... And the majority of times you played a theater, you're doing seven shows. When you come off that stage, your feet be hurtin' so bad... .

When you hit a theater, my opening, all my arrangements I knew how to handle 'em before I came there, because I was taught to, back home. So you know, you could be doing an opening, you have to know how to place that music and use those songs [because] that opening could be only three minutes long. See, alot of people choreograph or they come from out of dance school, they will teach forever, a step, over and over doing it. You can't do that. You have to know where to put those punch steps. They tell you that, and that's true. A singer's the same thing... a singer if she sings, she have to sing a good opening song to put the people in the mood. Then she can put the

above: Hortense Allen Jordan and Libby Spencer

below: Libby Spencer teaches Davina Todd and Barbara Clayton

▲▲▲▲▲

tearjerker, that's the second one. Then she have to bring people back up with another for them to remember her....

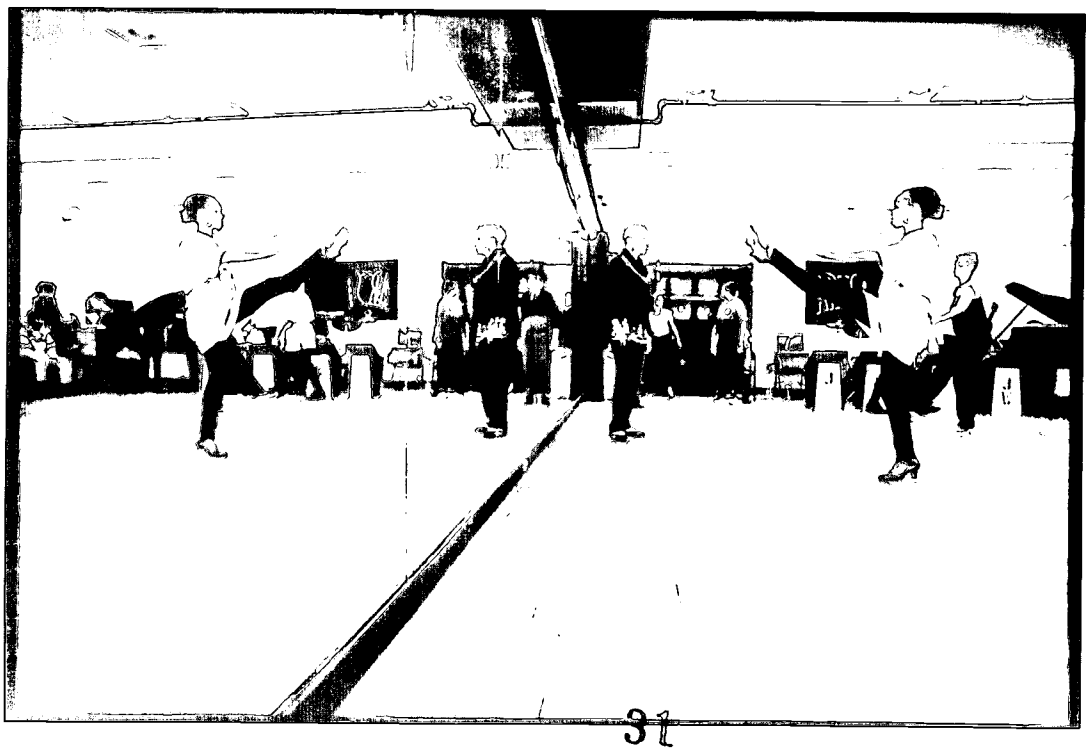
You had to learn. If you didn't learn, they'd fire you....You had to learn different names of a step. "Fall off the log" and then a "sham" break, and you'll know that...without them saying it... So when they teach you, you'll look at it and know it's triple from so and so...I used to teach all my kids to hum the arrangement so if you miss something you can catch up with the next one so they can't make you look bad...

[Chorus lines started going out] I'd say soon as they start doing like rock and roll and go-go girls, then they found that, they didn't need, really—you don't even have to teach anything, just put 'em up in a cage and let 'em shake and dance. That was it... . They'd just take a dance act and put four girls with it and call that a show. But to really have a show, they wouldn't really have it...

Libby Spencer

Tap was always the hardest thing to do so if a girl tap danced she was considered very good. Because dancing—anyone danced. I never thought people couldn't dance. I thought everyone could dance, you know. I really did. But it was all forms, all types of dancing. It was these guys, the Berry Brothers—they were *fabulous*. You know, they just did so many different things that you don't see today. You don't see performers performing like these people. Oh, they did all kinds of high kicks, splits, jump off of the tops of steps into splits... they did everything...But the way that they *presented* their movements was so different....The way that they put their acts together was unlike anything you see today, you know. It was just so out-of-the-ordinary. Until, you just thought they were just out of this world. You know—they'll jump over tops of each others heads and all kinds of stuff, and spinning up in the air and down into splits, you know. They were really, really different....

Well [the dancing] just came...that's a natural thing. You know, if you come from a family of dancers like my mother and father were waltz queens, king and queens in Virginia. And that's dance....Well, they were in contests...ballroom dancing....They didn't teach it at all. I never saw them waltz. [I just picked it up in the house] among other relatives. I had aunts, all of them danced. We would just dance in the house. And then when I was about ten I went to Ella Gordon's dancing school for about six months and that was all. And I only went because a couple of my friends was going and I wanted to go. Henry LeTang, that's on Broadway now... And I went to him for three months. So that was



professional tap class. But I was a kid. So I learned alot through that. And then I came out and finished school and I needed a job. So I said, well, the best thing that I know how to do is to dance. So that's when I went in the Apollo.

[The schedule was grueling, especially if there was a big band like Ellington or Dorsey in the Apollo. Then they would have shows every fifteen minutes, because more people would come, so] "you had to give them the show because he wanted to make the money. So every fifteen minutes was another show. We'd finish one and then you'd have fifteen minutes break, and back into another show. Yeah, that was...well, that was sort of hard. But we did it and you know, you get through things...

Girls, no, we weren't accustomed to doing anything but looking pretty and doing little cute steps. But in the Apollo, the tall girls did all of the tapping. See and the little girls were called "ponies" [tall girls were called "show girls" or "tall girls" and we did the hard work. We did the hard dancing, as they called it. But we did every type of dance. We danced can-can, Robin Hood (swinging from ropes out, from side to side), oh just any idea that came in the producers' mind. If he wanted something to do, then he would put it in the form of dance. ... The work was pretty much set and then he would use some of the girls, like myself, as captain of the chorus and choreographers. See, because most of those producers were not good dancers. They had the ideas and then we had to bring out the ideas with their music... .

That's what the Apollo was all about. Chorus girls. That's what people used to come from all over to see, was the chorus girls. Because we were a very unusual group, very unusual and good dancers, you know... They didn't have any chorus that was as good as the Apollo girls. You know, they had dancers in different clubs and the like. But we were closer to Radio City Music Hall, that type of thing, but with less people to work with, you know, and less money... .[The story of chorus girls is the real] untold story, really.

[And for alot of time, tap dance wasn't appreciated. People thought it was] like an Uncle Tom type of thing. Because blacks was going in for just ballet and modern jazz and the heck with tap... this was in the sixties... There wasn't any support at all, because everybody was, they thought that was Uncle Tom dancing in the black dancing schools. They really, wasn't that happy with it, you know, until someone that taught tap—kids would hear those taps and they would go crazy and that would be their money. But they really didn't advocate it, so to speak, as anything that—to be proud of.

above: Line at the Underground Rathskellar, Libby Spencer fourth from left, Hortense Allen, fourth from right.

▲▲▲▲▲

"Tryin' to get my knowledge together:" Women entertainers in the business and on the road

[How did I get started?] I got a chance to go on. Didn't make any difference as long as I had a chance to sing, I was right there... I didn't know if I really wanted to do it, but I knew that I liked doing it. [I used to harmonize with a neighbor.] The point is, going to church. It was mandatory that you went to church and I was attending a Catholic Church at that time and I used to sing "Ave Maria" and they had a chorus of boys in back of me and I liked that sound—that's what it was. You know, it usually does start in church. So the point is, you are singing with other people and you have a master there to direct you and teach you, it's more or less like coaching. Actually, I didn't have any what you would say voice training but I had alot of coaching. I've been coached by the best.—Kitty DeChavis

Let's say [I started] in school, in church, as I was growing up, I always liked to sing. It was really in church that I discovered that possibly I had maybe a good voice. Because I joined the choir and they used to let me do a lot of solo work. And the first solo I did in church, I remember hearing my own voice, you know, reverberating, you know, all over the place, and I thought, "Ooh that sounds good!" And I liked it, you know, and I liked the response of the audience, so then, you know, that's where I got my enthusiasm for singing.

And I always loved music. And we always had music, you know, at home—the radio, and... we had one of those wind-up phonographs, you know. And so, I loved music and my mother and father used to take me to the Pearl Theater and the old Standard Theater, and all for all of these stage shows. We used to see the big bands like Duke, and Count and Cab Calloway, and all of these people and I was just fascinated by these people... .—Ruth Mobley

Ruth Mobley, at Cleo's Carver Bar, 15th and Bainbridge Streets, Philadelphia, c. 1950s

▲▲▲▲▲

Did it all myself. Nobody taught me anything. I did it myself, watching other fellows that would dance on the corner and around the corner. 'Cause at that time street dancing was out there. I remember when the dancers would—didn't have taps and put bottlecaps between their toes and tap dance... And my grandmother, actually, who raised me, she'd have to send and get me, from off the corner, as a little girl, just watching. And I'd come home and try to do what they did. And most of the time I could do it. And singing, well that just came. My father was just a gospel singer and singing was just in the family. Cause they were southerners and West Indians and singing was it.—Isabelle Fambro

Artistry and talent of young women and men—singers as well as dancers—was often recognized within the community, early. Some women describe being taught, helped, brought along. Others speak about challenging what others thought was acceptable, making opportunities for themselves:

But I was doing a little work here, like I couldn't get into the clubs because like I was [underage]... I'll never forget. They had a place called Sim's Paradise and at that particular time they had swinging doors. So I'd get down on my knees so I could peep up under the door and see what's going on. So then one night I had nerve and I pushed the door open because I heard the band. Mr. Sims was a big man who had frog eyes. He sit behind the bar. He had about twelve bartenders. But nobody touch his cash register but him. And he's sitting up there drinkin' a Planter's Punch. He didn't drink any alcohol. When I peeped there, he caught me. He said, "Come here. You're Eula Bell's daughter." I said, "Well, he certainly knows me." 'Cause I looked just like my mother. Everybody says so. So he said, "Your father is Bill Chavis." He called him Chavis. I said, "OK." So he said, "Come back behind this bar. I'm not going let you stand out there and get my place closed up." I went back behind the bar, with him, standing up there with him, drinkin' a Coca Cola. The show went on. Oh honey, I was elated. Didn't make me no difference. So I said, "You let me sing a song?" He said, "You come back next week, I'll let you sing a song." Next week I was back. "Not tonight. You come in the daytime." Well, I didn't have any sense. He had me there singing at rehearsals! Long as I was singing it was OK...

Well this is true because whatever your destination is, I have found out, it will materialize, whether you perfect it to a degree or not. But long as I can remember, since you're asking me, I was singing... Well, the people, for some reason, liked me singing....I just got a little more concerned about it as the years went on. I will not, I am not a ham, I will not perform any place. You know, like occasionally, people have said to me, "Sing a song." I said, "For what reason?" I said, "I don't sing too well free." And I defi-

Kitty DeChavis (center) with Ruth Brown (left), her agent Joe Wade and others after a performance, Small's Paradise, c. 1950s

▲▲▲▲▲

nitely don't do well out of costume. I like to be, I like good presentation, definitely. If I'm presented correctly, good, you know.

... But getting over the teenage barriers. You know, up and down, going to school, one while you're in, the next while you're out. And then— One time my mother had the police come get me. Underage. She said I had no business up there....But you know, it didn't matter to me. That just goes to show you how children will be if they really want to do it. So it was destined. I would go right back. She came and snatched me out of a club. Pulled me by the ears like I was ten and the people laughed. Didn't make no difference. So.

I went to a caucasian night club at that time... I came in, I was seventeen. Got a friend of mine to take me up there. And he was a friend of my mothers. So he says, "I'm [gonn]a take you someplace they'll let you sing." Well they didn't know 'cause I was with him. I'll never forget it. His name was Robert Black. He worked in a hospital. He was thirty-one. So I was with him. So... who cares? So he took me to this place where everybody was singing. So I was singing "Sunny Side of the Street." The man saying, "You got a job, you got a job!" I said, "Look, I got a job—singing!" I was there two nights before they put me out because of my age. Well, I wasn't aware of it. It didn't matter to me. As long as I was singing. It didn't matter to me. That was too funny. Then I didn't care about that.

The next night, I come up, went to the next club, down the street. And this particular man he was redhead. Never forget him, name of Harry Salmon. He smoked a cigar, hung out of the side of his mouth. "Yeah, go up there and sing a song. If you can sing good enough, I'll give you a job." I sang a song. I never—I don't remember the song at this time, but anyway, when I got [illegible] he looked at me. He said, "[illegible]d are you?" I said, "Eighteen." So okay. Went back to work. Went to work, you know, the next night. But what *did* it—I rode a bicycle all the time. In the daytime, no make-up with the hair in a braid. Ran smack dab into him. He said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, aren't you that kiddy—" I said, "Yeah." "Let me tell you one thing. Don't you ever come in my club again. Come back in two years..." That's right. So I had to cool it, go to school, and just sing in the church, you know..."—Kitty DeChavis

When I was at White's Wonder Inn, where I was forever, at night time...[my grandmother] would sit at the back of the club and everybody knew her, and wait for me to walk me home which was only half a block away. But she [was a dressmaker and she] knew exactly what to make and would go to South Street and get the material and come in and make the little shorts for me... and you'd go in and do your singing, and sing all around the tables and then you'd go back to the stage and you'd pull up the gown and that was your finish. And you always had tights that would match the gown. Well, my grandmother, she was always so stage—everything, stage grandmother, that she would make me the prettiest tights that you would ever want to see. And if I didn't pull my dress up high enough, that she would tell me...When I went to New York with Willie Bryant, she wanted me to have a fresh gown... and at that particular time, she didn't have any money to go to South Street and get this material. And she was sitting in the dining room, looked in the living room and she had made eyelet curtains for two windows that we had in that living room and she got my brother to get the ladder, bring them curtains down, She cut them curtains up and made me one of the most gorgeous dresses that I've ever had. That's the way she was...—Isabelle Fambro

Show business was a way to make a living. Matter-of-factly, both Hortense Allen Jordan and Libby Spencer comment that when they thought about the kind of work available to them, dancing as a chorus girl was the most satisfying option. It was a business, and there was alot to learn. Both Kitty DeChavis and Ruth Mobley describe musicians helping them "get their keys together," figure out the keys in which they sang their songs. Kitty recalls how Rex Stuart, Duke Ellington's trumpet player, wrote out an arrangement for her for one of her songs—when she had never even heard of an arrangement. (I said, "What's that—an arrangement?" she recalls herself saying).

And we were poor. My father was a policeman. My daddy worked for the City of Philadelphia and he was making eighteen dollars a week. Well, and I would do two nights and

I would get ten dollars. You know, so how much more was he making from me, then, he working every five days a week and I was working just two nights a week and just a few hours and he was doing a full eight and I'm making just about as much as he's making? And if I doubled, [working two clubs at once] like the time I was working at Sim's across the street, well, that's like twenty dollars, y'know on the weekends. So, you know, it was easy.—Isabelle Fambro

I went with Eddie Suez, Jolly Joyce's son Norman, Earl Ball and agent after agent... Most of the agents were in the Shubert Building, and you could go from agent to agent, [asking] "You got anything for this weekend?"...

You better be business... you better be business... because they have stolen from us. We were supposed to be paying ten percent and agents were selling us for fifteen percent. Oh yeah, oh, it's alot of thievery. Definitely. But I liked every minute of it. Plus, even with the thievery, it was a better salary than anybody that's gonna work eight hours a day, a much better salary. I loved everything about it.—Isabelle Fambro

Above: Kitty DeChavis at the Blue Coronet, Brooklyn, 1969.

Below: Dottie Smith, Louis Jordan and others, after a Chicago performance, c. 1959

▲▲▲▲▲

[I was in an a capella group, the Skylighters, still in existence] "and a fella by the name of Bunny Baker, a drummer, very good drummer, heard me singing a solo with this group, and he said, he called me up the next week, and he asked me if I would like to have what they called a gig, you know, "Would you like to have a gig?" I'd never worked anywhere in my life, and I said, "Well, yes." And he said, "Because you're, you're wasting your time just singing with a group, you, with a voice like you've got, you should be, you know, professional." And so I said, "Well, yes, I'll work." So he said, "Well, what would, how much would you want?" You know what I mean. Now, to show you how naive I was, now this was in 1948. I said, "Well, I would have to have at least five dollars." So he laughed. He laughed. He said, "Oh, I'm sure we can give you more than that." But I was, I never—no-one had ever asked me, you know, nobody ever offered to pay me to sing and I didn't know what the going rate was, I just had no idea. You know, I didn't have a clue. So anyway... he said, "I think we can do a little better than that...."—Ruth Mobley

And due to the fact that I was young and with the older performers [looked out for me], see Moms Mabley was eight years older than my mother. So you weren't taught how to smoke and how to drink. I mean, they used to, when I was on tour with Moms and them, [the fans] they would come—"Can we see Miss Hucklebuck?" Well I wasn't aware that people were excited, you know, over performers yet. Moms would answer the door, "No, she can't come out. She got to sing. She got to watch her voice." I hadn't even opened my mouth. And I would, I wouldn't dare say anything, because I wasn't raised that way. That was one thing. We were taught not to talk back.—Kitty DeChavis

Many women working alone in show business describe the continuing presence of supportive communities. The band of five people with whom Ruth traveled felt like a family, and Kitty describes an almost mystical ability to walk into strange places and find someone who knew her family. Baby speaks of how people protected her. People helped them make their way in a rough world, alone and on the road:

My mother traveled with me, and then as I got older, she would take me—even when I worked clubs with my partner—she would go get my room. She was with me quite alot. And then, when she left, my partner... protected me after that. He always walked me home after rehearsals. I wasn't afraid, it was just that I was always protected. And like, if we would stop at Horn and Hardart to eat or anything, she would be—like, I remember, I worked a club, it was the Gay Nineties, I was underage. My mother would wait for me to come from the club and I would stop—I liked the hot apple pie. And I would stop with the other performers to get the hot apple pie and then the friends would walk me home. And then my mother would say, "What are you doing late?" Because she would be waiting outside the house for me... I guess that's why they always called

Dottie Smith, first row, right, and others, after a show at an Atlantic City club at Maryland and Arctic Avenues, c. 1950-1

▲▲▲▲▲

me Baby from a small thing...'cause I was baby... I was the baby of the acts, the baby of the club...

When we worked Club DeLisa, Joe Louis, I'll never forget, he wanted the girls to come upstairs. And I would drink fruit punches. He wanted all the girls. Well, I would stay in the dressing room. 'Cause my partner protected me then. Then when I wouldn't go, they would say, "What's wrong with the little one?" He was treating everyone. Then I would get a fruit punch and go right back to the dressing room....it didn't bother me. I was happy.

I liked to play cards and they would say "Do you want to play tonk?" And they liked me because I didn't curse...and they would say, "Don't say that around Baby." Because they knew I didn't curse, and they respected me like that. I remember so well, Dinah Washington saying, "Baby's here, and don't you say that in front of Baby..."

When I was on the road, it was some of the same ways. I was very close to my partner because he studied alot. He studied piano and he studied music alot. And he stayed to his self and read and so therefore, I would read. I would always pick on the quiet ones to be with and we would sit and talk about show business or "back in the days" or something like that. And there's the one I would pick, one of the older ones and that's how I would learn about show business. That was good experience for me. That's why. I could listen to John Hart, when he talked about his experience, when he was with Bessie Smith, back in the days, and I could listen to him....

I loved traveling at the time. Because it was exciting, it was really , three weeks here, you're t of a bag but each place you go, you make it your home. Each hotel, you get little doilies to make your hotel room look nice, for your dresser, so you can be comfortable for that week or two. And sometimes you were there longer. Like Chicago, we'd be there a little longer, because we'd be held over at Club DeLisa and that would almost be like home. Even met a girl I went to school with there... But of all the places we've gone, Chicago was the coldest place... oh my goodness...

[About performing,] I love it. Because the doctor told me that he didn't think I'd be able to dance again after my heart again. But I can dance, I don't feel the pain—but when I walk alot, I ache a little bit when I walk alot. But when I get out and dance, the doctor can't understand it. I get that adrenaline or something.... something about that, when I'm on stage, I get a different feeling.
—Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt

When I came in from Montreal, dig this. I got off the train, one morning at six o'clock. Actually, I was coming to Philadelphia but I made a mistake, and that's the only reason I took the train, 'cause I wasn't going back. I always flew if I was going back. I got off at 125th Street and Lexington [in New York City]. Six AM in the morning. Came downstairs and said, "Oh my God! This is not Philadelphia. This is not Penn Station. " Standing up there and I looked and saw a man sweeping. I said, "'Scuse me sir, can you tell me—" He looked around, he said, "Young Eula." So this—he knew my mother! He said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I just came from Montreal and I could— I got off the train here." He said, "Don't worry about it. Go across the street," he says, "and knock on that door and tell that minister I said give you a room." That's what really stopped me from coming back to Philadelphia. I went over there, the minister gave me— I had my little money strapped to waist in a money belt and I went over there. The minister rented me a room. Very nice room, you know what I mean. It was like one of those rooms where they had a little small gas stove, frigidaire, everything...

But the point is— I came down that steps, Lexington and 125th Street....it was a celebrity club, it was a night club, and whomever he was, he knew my mother. 'Cause when he looked around, he said, "Young Eula what are you doing here?" I said—"See the train," and I was crying and screaming, and all my clothes on there, my trunk. He said, "It'll go down to the station. Go over there and get yourself a room."

Well I was always worried, thinking about money. I had my money put away and I said, "Now I got this room, I got to find me a job, " I said, "Because I don't know no place here to go, to sing...." So in the meantime somebody told me 125th Street...Well I was sort of looking for something to do and I passed the Five and Ten. I think it's still there, not far from the Apollo Theater. I went in the Five and Ten. They wanted somebody to sell cookies. I went right on back there. I applied for the job. The lady hired me right there on the spot, put me behind the cookie counter. So my idea that I had was thinking, somebody that heard me sing somewhere will come by. Sure enough. Inside of a week, an entertainer by the name of Muriel Nichols, she was old enough for my mother, that's why she knew me. Right? She said, "What are doing back there selling cookies?" I said, "I'm waiting on you so you can come tell me where to go I can get a job and sing... I only been here a week." "When you leave Montreal?" I said, "Last week." She said, "Well, when you get off from work, go right across the street. There's an agent there name of Jimmy Edwards." And he had a little booking agency, right. I said, "OK,"

and I did that. He booked me in Jersey. I went to Jersey and worked....—Kitty DeChavis

No jeans was out. So. But I had two suits made and had slacks made with 'em, cause I was traveling with men....Nat King Cole's wife was with us and she was pregnant so naturally she was growing and she was getting, you know, a little ill, so she had to leave us... And we were the only women. Eighteen men..his trio...Hal Cornbread Singer had six, and then they had maintenance men, two bus drivers and people who handled the luggage, who carried your luggage...So this was why I had pants made, because you don't know what's in men's mind two and three o'clock in the morning and you're on the road. So that's the reason I had on the pants, I wore a little money belt.

Nat King Cole gave me a little small gun which he might as well have kept. They gave me target practice. I never have hit the target yet. 'Cause I was totally afraid of the gun. The can's sitting over here and I would be 360 degrees off... .

[Hal Singer went on for forty minutes. I would do 20 minutes and Nat King Cole would pick up then. So after the show,] I'd be waiting in the wings and [Cole] would take me to the hotel and I'd get in there and I'd say, "Thank God." I'd be glad. Because I was really afraid, because I was by myself. So one night, the band boys say—I heard 'em outside my room door. Now I'm in there sewing. "I don't believe DeChav is in there by herself." That was Willie Moore, the trumpet player. The bass fiddle player was named Mr. Chips, "No, man, there ain't no young gal in there sittin' by herself." They decided to get a chair and a box and get up and look though, you know, like that little...transom. Peep through there. I'm in there sewin' and they fell down. While they was looking. I opened the door and I said, "Yes, gentlemen? Oh...no, I'm in there myself..."

But I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it. But I mean you can't make a bum out of yourself because you are on the road. Because I was really tryin' to get my knowledge together, with being a performer, being a showman, and at that time I was back and forth, on that road. When Nat King Cole came back, then I went out with Moms Mabley. Wynonie Blues Harris, that was that show. Then came back and I went with Paul Williams, and then I was with Earl Bostic. You know.. well, that was my life, you know, at that point. —Kitty DeChavis

Baby Edwards at the Apollo, c. 1960s.

▲▲▲▲▲

There were many perils on the road. As entertainers, many African American women sometimes enjoyed more freedom and independence than other kinds of lives allowed, but they were still working in a racist, segregated society, and in times when women's roles were circumscribed.

[Agnes DeMille] was the choreographer of the show...and she was telling us how to sit and what to do while we were on the show, on the set, so she said, "Well, I tell you what, now you just sit down like that, and when Bill Bailey comes towards you, just shut your eyes and open them like real pick-aninnys when he come toward you. And we all just looked at her and you should have *seen* our... every eye was looking at her and they gave her one look...Well, you know what I mean... everyone looked at her just... they really gave her one look. When I saw her on a show last week, I thought, I thought about it. I thought about what she'd said.—Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt

You had to put up with it. What were you going to do? You had to work. I had two kids to feed. You had to work. Oh, I've been in restaurants, even in the Primrose Country Club in Newport, Kentucky. The line of girls there, which was white girls, because we were always the only black act on the bill—and, oh, they called them colored acts... So we had a car and they had a car and we were [all] going to this diner over in Cincinnati, right across the river, like from here to Camden, and have something to eat—early breakfast, after the show and all was over. And we went in this here, nothing fancy, just a common diner and we sat there and the waitress kept walking past, so one of the girls says, "That fellow there just come in. We've been sitting here." So she got up enough nerve to say, "I know, I can serve you all, but I can't serve them." So they, my white friends said, "No." And left... And well, this particular time...well, you know, we were just tired. But [we were] hurt. You know. And then, going to get in the car, the waitress run out of the diner, that had seen the show and came to get our autograph...

And it's several places—Oh, we went up to Wheeling, West Virginia, and oh, my goodness, we could—had to stay in the train station all night. We stayed in the

train station all night, right up here in Allentown, Pennsylvania... [there] wasn't no place for us to stay...You accepted it. You accepted it. It was almost like you're stayin' in your place and if you get out, you know you're doing wrong. You accepted it. You had to accept it 'cause that's the way, that was the only way you knew...It was toilets for white. Toilets for black. Lunchrooms for white. Lunchrooms for black. Even in the five and tens. Sit down for whites. Stand up at the hot dog counter for blacks. We went through all that. But at that particular time, I didn't know no better.

...And we have been turned away in St. Louis again, we were turned away in a restaurant 'cause he—they told Billy that they were very sorry, that they didn't serve colored. Billy says, "Well, I didn't come here to eat colored. I come here to eat." He says, exactly what he said. He says, "Come on, Elly" and we went. So then we went on to Delmar Boulevard and to the restaurant and that's where we ate.

...But that's how bad it was. It was really awful. I have lived through it. I was—I marched with Doctor King. That's how much that I felt that I should be a part of this Movement. Because it was—and second-rate hotels and some places you'd go you couldn't get a room. Unless it was where we lived, down by the railroad in most major cities... I know what segregation is all about.—Isabelle Fambro

Entertainers saw many of their peers fall into drugs and alcohol, gamble or spend all of their earnings. Isabelle Fambro looked around and decided that she wasn't going to let it happen to her; she saved her money carefully and bought her own home so that when she left show business, she could be secure. Kitty DeChavis also thought about the future, and plans. When Ruth Mobley sang on the road, she left a husbad, family and house at home. Having a place to go to—or to go back to—gave women some independence.

But I quit really at the peak of my career and went to school, because I realized that you needed something else. I had seen too many performers fall by the wayside and didn't have anything, and I knew I didn't have anything. So you better do it before you get too old. OK? I remember Myra Johnson. I didn't know her. She was before me, but she was, had been a singer with Fats Waller. And I met Fats Waller when I was fifteen, OK? So I was going to the office to pick up a contract. They used to call you up to come down pick up your contract. Myra Johnson was in front of me going into the office. Fabulous lady. Oh, I admired her, she was a fantastic singer. You know the agent looked up in her face. He says, "You mean to tell me you're still singing?" He says, "I thought you was dead."

I never forgot those words. I say, "Nobody will ever tell me that." I'll take myself off the stage...

Well, the point is, that was new to me. I hadn't been in New York long. And one thing you'll find out in this business. When they want you, they find you. You see. And some people don't accept defeat. Some people don't look, like they say, "Wake up and smell the coffee." I watch me, I watch other people and see what's happening, you understand what I mean? When he said that to her, I almost fell out. He wasn't talking to me 'cause I was all of 21 or something like that. But he told her, to her face. I heard him, he said, "You're not dead yet? You're still singing? I thought you [were] dead." She said, "Well, I see you're still living." Well that was the best answer she could find. You know what I mean...

You do keep your hand in the [business]... but [I] had something else to fall on. There was always somebody calling me to do a weekend or something, here, or in Lawnside, or somewhere, and due to the fact that I worked independently as a hair stylist. I could easily close the door and go on where I was going. I had independence. Because I figured it out. I'm looking and watching these people. Why do you want to go down the drain when you watch what's transpired with, in other events, with people. There's something else besides show business. And you can watch the world turning. It's revolving. —Kitty DeChavis

above: Isabelle Fambro (Eleanor) and Billy Byrd at the Plantation Club in St. Louis, early 1940s

below: Ruth Mobley after singing, between sets at the Hurricane Lounge, a club in Pittsburgh, c. 1958

▲▲▲▲▲

You had your own style: tricks of the tap dance trade and how you learned them

"You know, when you came off the street, it was natural. That's the way you are. You had your own style. You created your style. And that's what you was about. But when you came out of a dancing school, it was all the same. Your style was like his style and his style was like her style and—'cause, you see how they carry their arms in a dancing school? I mean it's nothing natural about that...You follow where I'm coming from?

...You know. And dancers would steal from each other, but it was allowed then. You know, you was allowed to steal from a dancer—if you could... Dancers don't show you things like they did when I came up. You know, dancers are very secretive. Lot of dancers, lot of the dancers today are very secretive."—LaVaughn Robinson

Many veteran hoofers will tell you that you can look at a tap dancer and tell if they came out of dancing school. As Robinson states above, it has to do both with a dancer's style and with their approach to learning. In a dancing school, you were taught steps. On the streets, you developed style—an approach, steps always in some kind of context, going somewhere, doing something *audible*, making a rhythm. Paradoxically, a dancer who came up on the streets developed an individual style by "borrowing," "stealing," "making someone else's moves their own"—in other words, by mastering and becoming part of a collective aesthetic and ethic and by carving out a place uniquely for themselves within that tradition.

Spic and Span (Edith Edwards Hunt and Willie Joseph)

▲▲▲▲▲

But it isn't quite so simple. All hoofers didn't share with one another. Libby Spencer has observed that very few women dancers were taken under anyone's wings or shown the secrets to a combination. Some dancers didn't take kindly to competition. Some were generous; others were not. And performers didn't just develop their art on neighborhood streets but in show business, where power was overwhelmingly held by white male producers, theater owners and agents with their own notions of what would sell. Some hoofers trade war stories about exploitative agents who skimmed money; others talk about agents who were like "fathers" to them, a mixed blessing. Most talk about other dancers, musicians and entertainers who taught them the tricks of the trade, took them under their wing.

Stories about other performers were part of an entertainers' education, as well. You could learn from the stories, but the pleasures of telling stories, of talking shop, were (and are) many. They make a good time, give you a sense of where someone else stands, what they think of themselves and others, and provide nuggets of information—that always need interpreting. Trading stories is also a way of developing relationships, of fitting yourself into a social world. Veteran dancers say that these days, school-trained dancers tend not to ask—either for hints about dance or for stories about the entertainers of the past.

Dancers today don't ask like they did when— If I saw you do something and I would say, "Now show me how you went into that. Show me the key to going into that combination." Well, you would say, "OK, come on." But dancers today don't ask... You know, they don't ask you to show them anything today. You know, they don't do that today.

When we came up dancing—like all the little streets, you would find, at certain times, dancers dancing. On corners. Like the streetlight would be like shining down, like a spotlight, and the dancers would be dancing in that spot. But you don't see that no more... I know, because I'm one of the last of the street dancers. I learned on the street. But you don't see that no more. You know, you don't see street dancers no more. You know, when I came out of the street, that was the end of the street dancers. You know, you don't—all up and down Chestnut Street and Broad Street and stuff, tap dancers was on the street dancing."—LaVaughn Robinson

Through my sister working in the various booking agents office, I finally started dancing, performing professionally—out of Eddie Suez' office, Jolly Joyce, Charlie Marrano and many others, doing weekends upstate. I was still in school. I danced on the corners with fellows, Charlie Preston, John Lance, Tony Lopez. We used to pass around the hats on the corners after we got finished dancing and we'd take in alot of money. Everybody knew us. And LaVaughn and them, they were a little younger, and they were on another corner, and then sometimes we all would hook up and go and dance on Fridays, Saturdays, and pass the hat around. That was our movie money, money we used to buy clothes, money we used to take our girls out on the weekends. Various kids like Howard Blow who was also a member of the Dancing Dictators along with LaVaughn Robinson and

myself. Many others and we would dance as I before mentioned, for street money. We called it street money.—Henry Meadows

Robinson talks about a young group of street dancers active in Philadelphia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Disco Kings and Queens, commenting that they had the idea of street-based dance but they had no one to learn from, no one to "feed off of." "With us it was lot of dancers on the street so you had a chance to learn that art form... You learned from other dancers... [Disco Kings and Queens] you could almost say they were the last but they didn't have anybody to feed off of. Nobody out there to give them any kind of competition to make 'em dance, nobody showed them anything... But when we came along there was alot of dancers on the street.

You know, and when you came out after you had your dinner and came out on the corners, you saw alot of dancers that was on them corners, you know, and that's how you'd learn. You could walk down 11th and South, on 12th and South, or 13th and South, 16th and South—all the way down to 22nd and South and find somebody dancin' on the corners, so you had a chance to learn. But all you had to do to learn was stick around there, and cats would pull you and say, "Come on, let me see what you know, you know..." Very few dancers became—this is my opinion—I can't, I mean, this is how I look at it. Very few dancers that went to dancing school really, never got that art. You know. They really never really learned it, you understand..."—LaVaughn Robinson

On street corners, the art was honed, shaped and created—at least by male dancers. African American dancers who came up in South Philadelphia from the 1920s to the 1940s take pains to point out that those dancing on the corners were African American and male, but the corners were integrated and multicultural, open to all. If you "had some stuff" you were appreciated. To make this point, people speak often of the close rhythms of the Condos Brothers, whose father, a Greek, ran the restaurant next to the Standard Theater at 12th and South Street. John Hart recalls watching on the corners and going home to practice in the basement or shed kitchen. Isabelle Fambro danced at 17th and Fitzwater, one of the few girls among the crowd there. Tommy Jordan, who came up dancing in Elmwood, the Southwest Philadelphia "meadows," knew about the scene in South Philadelphia. Other women—Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt, Libby Spencer—remember dancing on the linoleum of the shed kitchen, or the halls of apartment buildings, practicing in the safety of home. Young "students" of the art were disciplined and self-motivated, and what they took in was not only footwork, steps or routines, but a sense of those steps in context, as part of someone else's individual creative style and approach. You came up in a social world, where the art was always performed—and performed before a critical and knowing audience. Tap and other vernacular arts weren't learned in the abstract, away from other artists, or separate from performance.

Nor was it only on street corners that tap was learned, shaped, created. You never stopped trying to learn. The first two rows of the Lincoln Theater here, and the Apollo in New York, and the "peanut gallery" at the Standard, were all legendary as places where dance was appraised, closely watched. They could make you or break you—and some of them were dancers watching carefully to try to steal your steps, to figure out what you were doing—if they could:

Dee McHarris, Dave McHarris, c. 1950s

▲▲▲▲▲

John Hart: The Lincoln Theater first two rows. All the dancers sittin' down there, lookin' like this. I was upstairs and I said, all the dancers down there—and I know most of the dancers...

LaVaughn Robinson: Well, that's the way they did anyhow. Because when you, even when you was in the Apollo Theater. That first two rows was nothing but dancers. You understand what I mean? Because I can remember when I played, first played the Apollo Theater and the first two rows—you knew they were dancers because they had their bags with them, when they came in the theater...

Germaine Ingram: What were they there for?

LaVaughn Robinson: They was there to scare you to death! And thats what they did, too. You know, you walk out on stage and you a dancer and soon as you hit the stage, them first two rows nothing but dancers, you know that'd scare the hell out of you...

Henry Meadows and partner, "Butch" (John Lance).

▲▲▲▲▲

The peanut gallery ruled the theater there, the Standard. Because most of those fellows up there, they... could dance, too. And sing. Up in the peanut gallery. So if you mess up or something like that. Of if you'd mess up... or if they didn't like the show—they'd boo. Tuesday, that show was canned and they'd get somebody else in there. And that happened... If the peanut gallery gave you a hand then you knew you were good.—John Hart

Dancers could appreciate fine dance, but by and large audiences wanted flash—fast and showy moves, over the tops, wings. Dancers had to learn how to "sell" their show, not just how to master some moves, but how to put them across. Some dancers fought the tide of audience preference; others coached younger dancers in what it took to get applause:

And I met a guy, when I was real young, I met a man called Sy. His name was Lawrence Patterson. His mother had a restaurant at Second and South. You remember Lawrence Patterson? Used to be Popcorn, Peanuts and Crackerjack... Well, he used to teach us how to wing, he used to teach us how to do them wings and stuff, you know. And he told us, he says, you could do all the close dancing in the world but you won't get any of this [applause] until you start doin' flash. And you have to learn how to do a wing.

And that's when we started doing them wings, with over the tops and stuff... That's when the people start the clappin' for you. But we did alot of close dancing and a lot of syncopated rhythm, but the people just looked at us and, I don't know, they might have enjoyed it, but they didn't show it, like [clapping] you know what I mean—when you did a wing, or did a toe stand or something like that.—LaVaughn Robinson

Performers pay their debts with their stories, crediting those who helped them along. There was alot to learn. For example, you had to learn how to accomodate to different settings. Every club or theater was different, and the dance act had to look good everywhere:

John Hart: "We left this one night, we left Jersey, come to Philadelphia. We went to the Kent Theater, up in Kensington, on Front Street. It's an opera house. I thought of it as an opera house because it was very large and because I didn't know it, because I was back of the stage talking to the orchestra leader. And when I hit the stage, I looked, I said, "Gee, the center of the stage is way out there. I said, "Wow!" So next show, I had it down. I know what to do, see. I had to get out there, see. Because you got to get on and off. I liked knowing how to get on and off a stage. You know, one of the best things in show business—"Don't come off clumsy, now." So then I found out how to get on a stage quick, move a little...

LaVaughn Robinson: I had that happen to Howard Blow, when Howard Blow and I were workin together. This was Elsie Blow's brother. We did a show right out here at Convention Hall, 34th and Spruce at that time, and we never got to the center of the stage... because the stage was so big when they, when we gave them our music and stuff, what we did, we had a rehearsal but the rehearsal was backstage, see what I'm sayin'? And we never looked at the stage, you understand? And we didn't have no idea how big that stage was. We had an eight bar introduction and sixteen, no, we needed twenty-four bars... 'Cause, to show you how big, that stage was like a block long. You understand? Because they ran, like dog shows. And when they played our introduction, we had an introduction on "How High the Moon," eight bars, and when we hit the stage, and they went right into our introduction—when we started dancin' we were still on the corner of the stage. We never got to the center of the stage....

John Hart: [This man] ...who was a comedian, he said, he was backstage, he said, "Hey boy, cover, cover that stage." I didn't get out to the center of the stage, he was talking about cover the stage! I got fooled. But the next show I wasn't fooled.

LaVaughn Robinson: Yeah, because you saw what you had to do.

The audience. A stage. Some music. A band. A costume. Shoes. A place in a show. A place in a tradition. Managers. Competitors. Hard times. Around each of these (and many more) dimensions of the business cluster stories that line out the issues, explore the possibilities as an individual sees them:

Well, see, listen. I got these LaRay taps on these other shoes that I bought. Yes, see these was one of the best taps that you could buy at one time. You can't find these no more... I mean you don't have to work hard with this tap. You never had to work too hard with that tap." [You put it on so that there was a little space between the tap and the shoe.] Give it a little space, give it a little... give it space to let the tap breathe. It'll sound better. You don't want it to be dead... You let the tap breathe. You understand what I'm saying? You give it a little

tightening every now and then, you know.

See, what I do, when I put my taps on. I puts my own taps on. I refuse to let anybody put my tap on. You understand what I mean? I remember one time I was talking with Gregory—you remember we went over to New York? Gregory Hines. And he says—he saw me with the screw driver, you know. And I was screwing my taps on. He said, "You put your own taps on? I said, "Yeah." He says, "Oh man."

See, he has his taps put on in the stores, the way he buys his shoes... Look, look. All dancers, when I came up, put their own taps on. See, 'cause the shoemaker don't know how to put on your taps for you... —LaVaughn Robinson

Dave McHarris: That's the first time I lost a shoe in Oklahoma. They got gumbo mud, it's red, in Oklahoma City. And I stepped out the bus and my brand new shoes, I went to get back and the shoes come up with me—no shoes. They went down in the mud. I never found them shoes. And they dug all around in the mud... In them days it was bus, big bus, like them Greyhound busses now... Then they had two road trucks to carry the scenery—the instruments went on the bus. But like Brown Skinned Models in them days, they had forty people in their show, or more, and the most gorgeous women in the world. Brown Skinned Models. And they carried all kinds of platforms, and this or that and wardrobe—plenty of wardrobes... I remember down, we did a show down South one time. And the guys were so pretty and the women, the white women was lookin' at em. They run the whole—the guys said, "Let's get out of town, they comin'— and nobody—everybody had their costumes on, handed them on to the bus and left. That's funny... it's funny. Well, the guys, they were sharp lookin' guys and the girls, I guess these guys didn't like that... I could understand that...

Dee McHarris: Back in those days, all the guys looked pretty on stage. Not like today...

Dave McHarris: ... In them days, there's certain parts of the states you go in if the theater was small, they'd put a rope and a sheet up. And the blacks on this side and the whites on this side. That's what that was in them days. And then, upstairs in the balcony. You'd go to down in Virginia, [Roanoke]...the theater had five balconies. And it was so high...when you go up there and you look down, you look at the people on stage, they look like an ant....and they played black shows, white shows, whatever came in....But it was a segregated theater in them days. All the blacks had to go around the back and climb the stairs, all the way up....And them theaters was packed in them days when them shows come in, you know?

[Now, Frank Belmont was our agent.] He brought a contract over for LaVaughn and I to sign, to go into the Latin Casino with Ray Charles. And took him to 30th Street. Put him on the bus, on a Sunday. We signed the contract. And LaVaughn kept saying, "We haven't heard from Frank, and the show goes in next week." So I told LaVaughn, I said, "Well, Frank is business. If hasn't wrote, he will. Or if he hasn't called. So LaVaughn went on and called anyway. And when he talked with the hotel manager, he said, "He never arrived back into New York alive." He had a heart attack. I don't know whether he was on the train or the bus or what. But he never arrived. So when this come about, I just said, "Well, I'm gonna take it easier now."

I was lost without Frank. And in a way, I'm lost without LaVaughn. Because we did so many things that was so tight and so beautiful and we didn't care about none of the dancers out there. We learnt from 'em. But we didn't care about em. You know? Because that's the way we felt. And we both could always handle our feet pretty good. And this fellow, Blow, this fellow—a good flash man. It was nothing for him to jump out of a balcony. We used to do all that kind of stuff. We was trying to get to the top, you know.—Henry Meadows

Henry Meadows, Dee McHarris, Dave McHarris, Isabelle Fambro, 1993. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

▲▲▲▲▲

STEPPING IN TIME: Credits

Stepping in Time

a revue of fabulous Philadelphia artists
At the Philadelphia Arts Bank
February 4 & 5, 1995

PERFORMERS:

Pete Briglia (tap dancer)
Jeanne Bristow-Pinkham (chorus line)
Robert Burden, Jr. (tap dancer)
Barbara Clayton (chorus line/tap)
Kitty DeChavis (singer)
Vicky Diaz (chorus line)
Isabelle "Eleanor Byrd" Fambro (song and dance)
Wilhelmina Scott Herbert (chorus line)
Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt (tap dancer)
Germaine Ingram (tap dancer)
Pearl "Peanut" Jackson-Bolvin (chorus line/tap)
Tommy "Redd Foxx" Jordan (comedian)
Monica Justice (dance ensemble)
Oscar McBurse (chorus line)
Danette McDonald (dance ensemble)
McHarris and Delores (variety/novelty act)
Henry Meadows (tap dancer)
Joan Miller (chorus line/tap)
Ruth Mobley (singer)
Henry Mosley (singer)
Patricia Perkins (chorus line)
Arlene "Artie" Riley (chorus line)
LaVaughn Robinson (tap dancer)
Maiya Satchell (dance ensemble)
Dottie Smith (singer)
Mary Poteat Syres (chorus line/tap)
Barbara Thomas (chorus line)
Davina Todd (chorus line/tap)
Yvonne Walton (chorus line)
Michelle "Mike" Roberts Webster (chorus line)
Nia Witherspoon (dance ensemble)

Stepping in Time rehearsal. Photo: Thomas B. Morton

▲▲▲▲▲

MUSICIANS:

The Johnny Williams Band
Charles Bowen, sax
Paul Grant, trumpet
Raymond Grant, piano
Marc Johnson, trombone
Tony Jones, bass
Johnny Williams, percussion

PRODUCTION:

Director and choreographer: Hortense Allen Jordan
Tap dance teacher and choreographer: Libby Spencer
Dance ensemble teacher: Chauntée Andrews
Project director: Germaine Ingram
Technical director: Janette Howard Gillis
Light designer: Pamela "Sparkle" Hobson
Stage manager: Lisa Duggan
Sound engineer: Paul Eaton
Assistant stage manager: H. Kevin Gillis
Production manager: Marvin Collins
Publicity: Carole Boughter
Videographer: Barry Dornfeld
Sound editing & video sound recording: Steve Rowland
Projection services: Steve Wildemann/Advanced Audio Visual
Copy photos: Professional Color
Design & printing: Garrison Printing Co., Inc.
Project coordinator/folklorist: Debora Kodish

Produced by the S.C. Performers Alliance with the assistance of the Philadelphia Folklore Project

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

We are grateful to all of the performers involved in this project for help with research and photographic documentation. Thanks to Carole Boughter for insights and help from the start. Thanks to Thomas B. Morton and Jane Levine for photographic documentation and to Mildred "Candi" Thorpe, John Hart, Cheryl Willis, and Geraldine Duclow of the Theater Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia for assistance with research. For production assistance, thanks to Teresa Jaynes and Michelle Jackson, Philadelphia Folklore Project staff, and Arts Bank staff.

We are especially grateful to supporters of the Philadelphia Tap Initiative: The National Endowment for the Arts—Folk Arts Program, the Lila Wallace-Readers' Digest Community Folklife Program, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Philadelphia Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and members of the Philadelphia Folklore Project.

About the Philadelphia Folklore Project

We're an eight year old public folklife agency committed to supporting the folk arts of Philadelphians. We work in partnerships to research, interpret and present those diverse folk arts that testify in important ways to powerful human experiences often written off, ignored, or overlooked. Please join us...

Our aims are to: • Expand opportunities for traditional artists to perform, teach and practice their skills, and to share their knowledge; • Support communities' efforts to preserve, maintain, present, and attain respect and parity for their own folk arts and folklife; • Deepen public understanding of local communities' arts and cultures; • Build bridges across and within Philadelphia's communities; and • Advocate to increase the responsiveness of institutions to the perspectives of folk artists and community members.

We offer annual exhibitions and public programs, often in collaboration with grassroots agencies. (Stepping in Time is one such partnership). This year, our exhibits will burst the bounds of our building and be installed in community sites all over the city in the Art Happens Here project. Quarterly artists breakfasts bring artists together. We offer a range of public workshops: on funding opportunities for folk arts, doing folklife research,'anti-racist folk arts in education, and other topics. We've produced more than 30 publications like this one which amplify the voices of Philadelphia artists and activists and provide resources for public use. We organize around issues of concern, and have been working to make arts funding practices and processes more equitable. We offer extensive technical assis- partnership efforts to local grassroots folk cultural agencies and traditional artists. We maintain an archive of more than 15,000 items—including photographs, field notes, audio and videotapes preserving a record of this city's folk arts. Recordings with veteran entertainers done in the course of this project are a part of this work of documentation and preservation.

Composite of Spic and Span (Edith Hunt and Willie Joseph) at the Apollo, c. 1950s

▲▲▲▲▲

Please join us! See the form on back. Or give us a call or write: Philadelphia Folklore Project, 719 Catharine St., Phila., PA 19147. 215-238-0096.

Generous support for PFP activities is provided by: ARCO, Carpenter Foundation, the Samuel Fels Fund, Independence Foundation, Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Community Folklife Program, the National Endowment for the Arts—Folk Arts Program, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Pennsylvania Humanities Council, The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Philadelphia Foundation, the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, William Penn Foundation and individual members. We invite your help!

STEPPING IN TIME
Interviews with veteran virtuoso entertainers
Edited by Debora Kodish
A special commemorative issue of WORKS in PROGRESS, newsletter of the Philadelphia Folklore Project

Vol. 8, number 2 (February 1995)
Published by the Philadelphia Folklore Project
719 Catharine St.
Philadelphia, PA 19147
215-238-0096

ISSN 1075-0029 $10.00

Philadelphia Folklore Project
719 Catharine Street
Philadelphia, PA 19147

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PHILADELPHIA, PA
PERMIT NO. 1449

Address correction requested

PHILADELPHIA
FOLKLORE
P·R·O·J·E·C·T

WORKS IN PROGRESS

About the Philadelphia Folklore Project

Folklore means something different to everyone—as it should, since it is one of the chief means we have to represent our own realities in the face of powerful institutions. Here at the Philadelphia Folklore Project, we are committed to paying attention to the fundamental ways in which people organize, understand, and share their experiences and knowledge.... We're an 8- year-old independent public folklife agency with local roots, scholarly perspectives, activist programs, and a commitment to taking arts and culture seriously. We assist artists and communities, conduct research, organize around issues of concern, develop exhibitions, offer public programs, workshops and technical assistance, maintain an archive, and issue publications and resources. We depend upon your contributions to produce this newsletter and carry on the work described in its pages.

Join the Philadelphia Folklore Project and we'll give you the shirts off our back!

▸____**$10 No frills.** You'll get issues of newsletters like this 3x/year, PFP news (quarterly news briefs to members only), invitations to our events, and public thanks

▸____**$25 Individual.** Receive all the above benefits as well as reduced admission to PFP events, your own copy of one of our publications, 25% discount on PFP publications, a free set of PFP postcards, and a new ART HAPPENS HERE t-shirt!

▸____**$35 Family.** (2 or more at the same address). All the above benefits, with reduced admissions for all at your address.

▸____**$60 Contributing.** All the above benefits, two books, and more undying gratitude. ($15 tax-deductible)

▸____**$150 Supporting.** Receive all of the above benefits, two more publications and your choice of a PFP video. ($75 tax deductible)

▸____**$250 Benefactor.** Receive all of the above benefits, and make a substantial contribution to keeping our programs vital. ($175 tax deductible)

▸____**$500 Angel.** Receive all of the above benefits and a framed photograph of an image from the PFP archive. ($250 tax deductible).

▸____I want to join (and receive mailings) but am facing my own financial shortfall. I would consider providing in-kind services, helping with mailings, providing computer (MAC) consulting, working on a committee, or something else.

▸**PLEDGE:** I wish to pledge $_____ per month to the PFP.

The PFP is registered with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a charitable organization. A copy of the official registration and financial information may be obtained from the PA Dept. of State by calling toll free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.

Yes, I support local folklife!

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY / STATE / ZIP _____ PHONE _____

AMOUNT ENCLOSED _____

PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO THE PHILADELPHIA FOLKLORE PROJECT
MAIL TO: PFP, 719 CATHARINE ST. PHILA., PA 19147

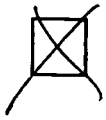
WE THANK YOU.

Philadelphia FOLKLORE P·R·O·J·E·C·T

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

REPRODUCTION BASIS



This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

☐

This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").