

# Why Do the Ushers Wear Tap Shoes?

By Deborah Jowitz

Jane Goldberg was a very good dance critic before she gave it all-up to become a tap dancer. Our loss is our gain. The simmering audiences who packed Elaine Summer's loft to see **IT'S ABOUT TIME** (which Goldberg produced) had the time of their lives watching Goldberg, Andrea Levine, virtuoso hoofers Charles Cook, Albert Gibson, Jazz Richardson, and unannounced guests.

It was wonderful to see virtuosity without slickness, theatricality delivered with a natural glee, dancing that was like a flexible idiom used with loving resourcefulness by superb linguists. The days are past when jazz dancers checked out each others' steps and competed at the Hoofers Club. But these men remember them all—Stanley Brown (to whose memory the program was dedicated), Pete Nugent ("a sweet man," said Charles Cook quietly with feeling), Bojangles Robinson. They know who did which step first and who did what variation on it.

What's remarkable about these dancers, about good tap dancing in general, is the fluid, offhand way in which the performers ride the complex footwork. Part of the fun for them and for the audience lies in whipping off an astonishing step—not as if it were nothing, but with a shy pride and delight. It has to look easy, while obviously being unusually difficult.

At one performance when Goldberg introduced Charles Cook, Bert Gibson, and Jazz Richardson, up from the audience, reaching out his arms, came Stump (of the comedy team Stump and Stumpy) and he fitted himself right in, dancing the steps he knew, singing, holding hats for people (hats were a big item), doing a wonderful lonesome song while boo-hooing elaborately into a white handkerchief. He never did go back and sit in the audience. How could he?

Cook, Gibson, and Richardson are terrific comedians, of course, as well as dancers. They insulted each other. They vied with each other to see who could do the most eccentric step. Gibson and Richardson ripped off risqué poems (one guy prudently clapped his hand over the other's mouth, just as the last raunchy word was about to come out). Each has his own style. Richardson, small and spry, did a lot of keep-your-balance arm waving and stiff-legged stumbles. Gibson, with his popping eyes and respectable paunch, has a looser way of dancing; he rolled his hips smoothly around, letting his feet flap wildly for a laugh. Cook has a bold, imperturbable attack, a wonderful sense of what makes one step different from another in terms of loud and soft, big and small, tight and easy. He also has an immensely kind, rather serious performing manner.

Cook in his pink suit and deerstalker hat, Goldberg in tails, top hat, and knickers performed a terrific teacher-pupil duet, full of tricky sounds and pauses. She protested, laughing that she couldn't possibly do a certain step as fast as he could, but she could. Her rhythms aren't quite as nailed down as his, but she has a frank, vigorous style and an easy sensuous way of letting her body fall. Round hips and sturdy calves—a harem girl with true grit. Her performing manners are lovely, very unaffected, modest; she looks tickled to be doing this with these people.

Andrea Levine is sparer and cooler than Goldberg. Her solo was like a virtuosic drum riff (and Chris Braun accompanies her on the drums). She kept her feet working very close to the floor so she could make rapid, tiny changes in rhythm. What she did was elegant and controlled, very different from Cook's sophisticated gusto and the ways in which he created variety in his *Wang* (which he dedi-

cated slyly to Hanya Holm, explaining that when he and his partner, Ernest Brown, were in *Kiss Me Kate*, Holm was always exhorting them to cover more ground than they liked to).

The sociability of the evening was refreshing, too. Braun, pianist Andy Wasserman, and sax player Harvey Ray (who collaborated on an intrepid improvised duet with Goldberg) played terrific old tunes for tapping to; and the dancers remembered to thank them often. A whole bunch of novices (I'd been wondering why the ushers wore tap shoes) joined in the finale. Stretch Johnson and his sister were lured out of the audience. And then somebody noticed Al Gusto sitting there smiling. He protested that he was wearing loafers, but he started tapping, hushing our applause to stop and think, then saying in a pleased way, "That's getting it now" and making his long skinny legs really fly out from the knees down. While his friends held up their hands for quiet so we could hear the muted flutter of his rhythms—murmuring every now and then, "my!" "mm, yes!" "look at that!"

thevillag

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LONG GREENFIELD

## DANCE

A harem girl with true grit, Goldberg looks tickled to be tapping with