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Difficult Steps: The Tap Goddess Keeps Dreaming

By GREGORY JAYNES

People of ambition are always coming to New York, sights set high, but it takes a particularly large personal store of grit to aim for a career in tap dancing. We're talking Jane Goldberg here, the self-described tap goddess of the Lower East Side, who has found, as one might imagine, there isn't much call for that sort of thing nowadays.

"The tap revival is kind of over," Ms. Goldberg was saying earlier this week. "There was kind of a lot of play in the media in the 1970's and I was a big part of it, but it seems to have gone away. My business has, at least. So I came up with Tap-A-Gram. I was worried every tap dancer would have the idea so I went down to City Hall to copyright the name, TM it, but so far there's not been a major threat."

Nor has there been much demand, except once in a blue moon. "The last one I did was for an Argentinian corned beef princess who these people from England wanted to marry off. She was 50, it was her birthday and they wanted the gram to say something to the effect that even though she was single, she should be married. I, being the flaming feminist that I am and single, too, thought the idea obnoxious." But she did it.

"I kind of do what I imagine Isadora Duncan once did, which was to dance in rich people's salons. Well, they don't have to exactly be rich, but they do have to have 100 bucks to roll out for 15 minutes." So far this year, which will end in moments, she has had two bookings.

"See," Ms. Goldberg explains, "a lot of people think tap people are happy people with happy feet. Well, I've been tapping for about 15 years and I'm still depressed."

Tap, according to a book called "History of the Dance in Art and Education," is descended from "traditional steps found in the Jig of the Elizabethan period, the shuffling and foot-tapping steps of Latin countries and the British

Isles, and Negro plantation dances."

Another book, "America Dances," notes that the explorer Charles William Beebe (1877-1962) said that "though he sometimes used to barter beads with savages, his ability to tap dance for them was much more efficacious." It added, "Rhythm absolutely charmed aborigines



Jane Goldberg

in all quarters."

Jane Goldberg rather sees it that way herself, ever since she began taking lessons, at the age of 4, from a former Rockette called Miss Maxine. This was in Washington, where her father was a lawyer and her mother knitted. She went on to a political science education at Boston University, loosely intending to do something a little more conservative with her life than the way it turned out. But after a summer in Greece, dancing like a fool, Terpsichore took hold. She packed up her silver shoes and moved to New York in the fall of 1974.

In the basement of a church on Columbus Avenue she found a world of old men in suits, telling jokes and doing steps she wanted to make her own. Here was John T. McPhee — "the world's greatest tap dancer; rhythm is my business" — and Sandman Simms and Cookie Cook and Honi Coles. "It was great. I asked them for lessons on the spot. I remember I had to pay one guy \$6 for a lesson and \$25 for a parking ticket."

Over the years there have been some small successes — she founded the Changing Times Tap Dance Company and worked up a little musical comedy, "The Depression's Back and So Is Tap," which toured Europe — but mostly it has been a hard slog.

Every time Gregory Hines appeared in something like "Cotton Club" or Tommy Tune took a turn in "My One and Only" she has hoped that tap would once again take the country by storm. It hasn't happened and sometimes it is an age between paychecks.

"Hey, this is a sore point with me!" Ms. Goldberg says. "I mean, dancers don't make money. But I'm not bragging about my marginal living. I still intend to make it with tap. I give lessons. I always do a show every year. I did a festival. I had John Bubbles come out from California. I started a newsletter on tap, called 'Footprints.' I started Tap-A-Gram."

That said, she looked at things coldly, sighed and went on, "It is definitely not a secure way of making a living at all." She will turn 40 soon. She lives in a tiny studio apartment in TriBeCa. She is thinking of performing for her birthday a sad little song sung to the tune of "You're The Top."

*"I did tap
I tapped live at the Vanguard.
I did tap
I was in the top avant-garde.
I performed with Honi
I tapped for big money
but now it's all a sham.
The tap revival's finished
and my career's diminished
to doing tap-a-grams."*