

Goldberg From typewriter to tap shoes



Jane Goldberg

(Photo by Lois Greenfield)

By Carole Mazur
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"Somebody should grab them fast and learn their special brand of dance. After all, they were famous long before film became sophisticated enough to reproduce their sounds, and when they go, so will old-time hoofing."

Jane Goldberg wrote that in a 1974 review she wrote for The Patriot Ledger about a group of former vaudeville hoofers whose act she caught during a trip to New York City.

Her plea became prophetic, because not long after she wrote it, Jane packed up her barely broken-in tap shoes and moved to New York to learn she could about jazz-tap. Today she is probably the most noted historian of that kind of tap dancing and one of its brightest hopes for continuance.

Jane's New York performances last winter piqued the interest of the city's serious dance critics and played to full houses. But it was too late to book her into this summer's schedule at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Becket, Mass., where she teaches a three-week course each year. But when "Los Indianos" developed visa problems and had to cancel their appearance for this week, Jane Goldberg was the first choice as a replacement (performing through Saturday evening). That kind of booking is in the blue hooper tradition.

She was in Cambridge over the weekend to do some last-minute rehearsing with her pianist, Andy Wasserman of Brighton. Curious to find out how a former writer for my paper got to the big time, I made a breakfast date and we talked. Mostly, I listened while Jane talked.

As a former writer and interviewer, she anticipated questions before they arose, and her answers rushed out with the fervor of an evangelist. She leaned back into the banquettes at our table and pulled page after page of interview and reviews out of her blue nylon knapsack. Some were by her and others were about her.

Jane is 30, but looks half her age — probably because she is small and has short curly hair and un-mascaraed round eyes. She had lived in the Boston area for about eight years before moving to New York and still seemed at home in Cambridge.

She was performing modern dance works with Claire Mallardi in Cambridge when she first became interested in tap dancing after reading Arlene Croce's "Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book" in 1973. At that time Astaire-Rogers movies were just coming back into vogue at the theaters that show old movies.

Infatuated with her new discovery, she bought tap shoes and began studying tap in Boston with Leon Collins and Stanley Brown, Stanley was a member of the Brazilian Nuts, an old vaudeville team. But he believed his students wanted to get jobs, so he emphasized tap as danced in then-current Broadway musicals. That's not what Jane wanted. So she made her move.

Even in New York, finding the jazz-tap roots was not so easy. She looked up the names of old hoofers in the reference pages of "Jazz Dance," a book by Marshall and Jean Stearns and would ask tap dancers she knew, "is so and so still alive?" Most of them weren't, but those who were soon got a visit from Jane Goldberg. She carried a tape recorder to accurately get down both the words they had to say and the syncopated rhythms their feet tapped out.

Unlike performers in other styles of dance, tap dancers can keep tapping into old age. It's an art to be listened to as much as seen. And much of it is improvised steps danced to improvised jazz music. "Dancing to recorded music is like playing violin to a record," Jane says.

The dancers Jane studied with had names that sing. Two favorites were vaudevillians Charles "Cookie" Cook and Leslie "Bubba" Gaines, who will be appearing with her at the Pillow. There was Honi Coles, one of the last class acts (a sophisticated, Astaire-type presentation); Sandman Sims; Chuck Green of "Chuck and Chuckles," proteges of John Bubbles; Paul Draper who does ballet-tap, and others.

"Jazz tap dancers were generally black males," Jane says, "but the people who are taking it seriously right now are mostly white women."

Through this past year, Jane's efforts have been concentrated on the historical aspect of tap and preserving the art. Although she also has created a few routines she currently performs with dancer Andrea Levine, Jane said she is just now confident enough about her ability to begin working towards taking jazz-tap out of the realm of nostalgia and making it more of a contemporary movement.