

Nextbook.org interviews Jane Goldberg

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Q and A with Jane critic/writer Mindy Aloff

"During the late 1960s, when Wash. D.C. native Jane Goldberg was a student of historian/playwright political activist Howard Zinn at Boston University, she thought she was on her way to becoming a socially conscious journalist who would help to realize Zinn's pronouncement "If you can't liberate the world, you must liberate the ground upon which you stand."

And then, boom!, came Goldberg's eureka moment, by way of book review: Jack Kroll's account, in *Newsweek*, of Arlene Croce's landmark study *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book*. Goldberg had never even seen an Astaire-Rogers film, but she had studied dancing as a kid, and both of her parents loved to dance socially; and so her life took a hairpin turn, and she never looked back. She sought out other books on tap dancing, most important among them *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* by Marshall and Jean Stearns.

She sought out tap classes for herself. And then she started to seek out the wonderful, famous, and, for the most part, African-American tap soloists (John Bubbles, Charles "Honi" Coles, Chuck Green, her eventual teacher and stage partner Charles "Cookie" Cook) whose Golden Age had been during the big-band and be-bop jazz years of the 1930s and 40s and who, thanks to the drying up of live stage work with the advent of television and rock and roll, had become sidelined from show business.

Goldberg, an astute and brilliantly funny observer and oral historian, put herself at the service of this older generation to bring them back into the limelight. She arranged tap festivals at which they appeared, she interviewed them extensively for oral histories, she publicized them, and, as in the case of "Cookie" Cook, she performed with them, too.

Her 40-year tap odyssey took her across the United States, to the Hollywood set of Nick Castle's movie *Tap* (for which she served as a consultant and in which, at the request of her longtime friend and star of the film, Gregory Hines, she also appeared), and as far from her New York stomping grounds as India, where she brought her "rhythm-and-schmooze" tap act to quizzical audience in Nehru jackets and saris. Some of her many achievements and tribulations, along with astonishing and illuminating portraits of tappers she has spent time with—from Ginger Rogers to Meredith Monk—make terrific reading in her new memoir, *Shoot Me While I'm Happy: Memories from The Tap Goddess of the Lower East Side*."

—Critic/writer Mindy Aloff for Nextbook.org