

DANCE

Shoes in the Night: How the Festival Took Over Tap

By JANE GOLDBERG

GREGORY HINES, who died in 2003, loved to rap about tap, to promote the art, to perform with his band, to carry his shoes everywhere. To the end, he talked about how young people can learn tap through the now numerous tap festivals, but can't make a living as dancers.

Hines was born a tapper; he grew up as part of a family act — Hines, Hines and Dad — in the late 1940's, when tap still thrived. He earned his tap chops in the black male hooper tradition, in the alley of the Apollo Theater under the tutelage of greats like Sandman Simms and Honi Coles. Tap for him was about being "the champ," just like a prizefighter. He loved sports, he loved to watch dancers challenge one another and compete. "I just love watching a person who's got great feet," he said. "The time is right there in the feet, whether the music is playing or whether they're dancing a capella."

Tap dancers no longer travel across the country to do battle. They do travel, however, to tap festivals in the summer. The festival has become a major vehicle for tap's survival, offering classes, merchandise, showcases and performances — an answer of sorts to the vaudeville circuit and the big-band era.

Children, youth ensembles (often festival hoppers with parents and chaperones in tow), professionals and die-hard closet hoofers are now signing up at festivals for beginner, intermediate, advanced and mixed-level classes instead of getting their chops (feet) in theater alleys. They learn the classical routines of the old greats, repertory, technique, music, improvisation, all under the heading of "rhythm tap," what Sammy Davis Jr. in the 1989 movie "Tap" called "the real thing."

John Bubbles, of the song-and-dance act Buck & Bubbles, considered the "father of rhythm" in the 30's, would have laughed if someone had asked him to teach his material. His steps were sacred. If Bubbles taught at all, it was to someone like Fred Astaire — for \$400 a session. Bubbles did fly to New York from California in 1980, however, to give chats at the old Village Gate at the groundbreaking prototype tap festival called By Word of Foot. He couldn't dance anymore, but 17 of his generation of hoofers did teach the style he popularized, rooted in jazz, now known as "rhythm tap." A tap revival was born.

The Colorado Mile High Tap Summit, in Boulder, in 1986 was an even closer model for festivals today. Marda Kirm and Sali Ann Kriegsmann created a format that included classes, performances with the old masters and films and panels, some about tap's controversial heritage. Hoofers argued. Hines didn't like the word "hooper," calling it a negative term. "That's what we are," Bunny Briggs yelled back. "We're hustlers of the feet." Ms. Kirm, who edits On Tap, the international newsletter of the tap world, walked into the room saying: "I know, I know. The issues are women and floors."

In 2001, Tony Waag, a tap dancer from Colorado and an entrepreneur, felt it was time for New York to take tap seriously again, and he set out to do something about it. And this week, hundreds of hoofers will once again descend on Manhattan, as the indefatigable Mr. Waag and company produce Tap City, their fifth consecutive year of the ambitious New York Tap Festival, which offers classes along with staged shows. Masterminding Tap City, Mr. Waag came up with ways to honor the past and encourage the

present and future. This year his smorgasbord of performances takes place at the Joyce Theater in Chelsea, where he hopes to attract a more general audience than the ones that attended previous festivals on 42nd Street. "We want to show the young people how to do the festivals by giving them all the different styles of performers as well as styles of tap, and show them how to do it," Mr. Waag said.

The new wave of interest in tap dance started in the 1990's and can be traced to the influence of one young man: Savion Glover. Mr. Glover, the wunderkind of hooperdom, became a one-man revival. Through his sheer virtuosity and force, and his Broadway show, affectionately known now as "Noise/Funk," he made tap a very cool thing to study again. He shook up the scene by making tap raw and giving it true grit. Youngsters imitated him; they wanted to study tap.

In that period, Mr. Glover didn't want to have to please, to "grin and flash" the way black dancers had to ingratiate themselves in earlier days onstage to earn a living. And he has lived up to his word. Dancing to Coltrane and to classical music, he has brought in crowds, even though he literally turned his back on the audience to get closer to the music.

Mr. Glover is still concerned about how tap is passed on. He used to work the tap festivals and youth tapping summits, but these days he is often on tour with his own brand of "improvography." Hines's inventive word for tap's ultimate expression, improvising on the known steps. Before heading up to Jacob's Pillow in Becket, Mass., last week, he said: "When I do a step, it's like taking communion. A step is like Malcolm X being known for the phrase 'By Any Means Necessary.' When I'm doing Lon Chaney, I'm paying tribute to what I was given. I'm honoring the past."

Barbara Duffy, one of the popular teachers and performers who has worked in the New York festival's Tap City since its beginning, said recently: "You have to know the grammar and vocabulary and where it came from. Someone created what we've been able to pass on. It's about respecting the conditions and struggles our teachers had even when they were developing the language during those four shows a day." In her classroom, Ms. Duffy consistently refers to her main influences, Leon Collins and Brenda Bufalino.

She has reset a Hines piece, "Boom" (originally made for President Clinton), and will perform it on Saturday and Sunday evenings in "Tap Masters/Tap Mentors/Tap Divas/Tap Legends" at the Joyce Theater. The tap divas on the bill are Ms. Bufalino, Mabel Lee, Dianne Walker, Lynn Dally and Sarah Petronio. The last of the tap "divos," Jimmy Slyde, will make a guest appearance. Mr. Waag has also programmed Tap All-Stars/Tap Internationals, which highlights how tap is catching on globally with Germans, Russians, Brazilians, French and Japanese dancers leading the way.

Youth ensembles are involved in a big way at Tap City. New this year is a preprofessional program for advanced tappers, ages 15 to 21. Closet hoofers have their opportunity, too, with Ms. Lee, 82, a grande dame of tap, who will teach the moves that made her a soloist in Europe. For the tap intellectual, there are the daily talks and films in which the great debates on tap lineage will undoubtedly continue.

While tap may not be on the tip of everyone's tongue right now, it is incubating in festivals in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Atlanta, Austin and Chicago. There's even a seven-year-old "Rhythm Explosion" in Bozeman, Mont., next month. It looks as if those restless young feet won't be "preprofessional" much longer and will be demanding work, onstage and off. Can the Tap Fringe Festival be far behind?

Closet hoofers now get their tap chops at festivals instead of in theater alleys.



At left, Jimmy Slyde, the last of the tap kings. Top, Tony Waag, a producer of Tap City. Above, Sarah Petronio, one of the bill's tap divas.



Nan Melville

Jane Goldberg, a New York tap solo dancer and historian, is teaching a class at this year's Tap City.

TAP CITY: THE NEW YORK CITY TAP FESTIVAL

JOYCE THEATER
175 Eighth Avenue, at
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