

January 4, 2009

Tapper's Tale: She Had the Time-Step of Her Life

By [CLAUDIA LA ROCCO](#)

WHEN Jane Goldberg talks — which is often, fast and usually accompanied by an endearing nervous giggle — chances are she is talking tap. The tradition, the history (or myth), the personalities, along with the racial, gender and class tensions that infuse the dance form, are all snarled up in a giant, impossibly messy knot. Just when the listener thinks she has identified one narrative, Ms. Goldberg begins unraveling another, or several at once.

No wonder it took 21 years for her to put her story down on paper. Ms. Goldberg, a diehard tap-dancer, journalist and historian, published "Shoot Me While I'm Happy: Memories From the Tap Goddess of the Lower East Side" last month through her publishing company, Woodshed Productions (available at janegoldberg.org). Eccentric and homespun, by turns fascinating and maddening, the memoir charts an obsession that began as a romantic search for a dance partner and evolved into a lifelong drive to unearth all things tap.

Ms. Goldberg, who graduated from [Boston University](#) in 1970, was teaching modern dance classes and working for the weekly Boston After Dark when in 1974 she decided to pursue her dancing dreams in New York. There she soon fell in love with tap, and she — along with a number of other white female modern dancers of her generation — saw it as a mission to spread the gospel of this largely forgotten American dance form. Her odyssey led her to many of the great old hoofers who had fallen into obscurity when performing opportunities dried up.

Ms. Goldberg not only found these dancers but also found opportunities for them: her many hats included manager, publicist, performer, student and journalist. She eventually organized her own events, like the seminal 1980 By Word of Foot festival, becoming a key player in the tap renaissance of the 1970s and '80s. And she highlighted the often overshadowed women in tap, forming an inclusive group called Sole Sisters that included Harlem chorus line standouts like Mable Lee and younger women like Sarah Safford, who shared Ms. Goldberg's modern-dance background, leftist politics and penchant for talking while tapping.

"She was absolutely essential in reviving tap," said Brian Seibert, who is writing a comprehensive history of the art form for Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Because Ms. Goldberg has backgrounds in journalism and dance, he added, she was able to get gigs and serve as a conduit to the press. "Her own story was good copy too. You had this frizzy-haired young Jewish girl with a persistent giggle and a taste for thrift-store dresses who was obsessed with this African-American art form. She was going to convince you it wasn't dead and wasn't going to stop till you listened."

In Ms. Goldberg's words, she had chutzpah, which she needed to track down, interview, study and perform

with men like Charles (Cookie) Cook, Sandman Sims and Bunny Briggs, who were sometimes eager to share their stories, their steps and the stage, and sometimes suspicious of her intentions.

“I think the reason I got as far as I did with them was that I was one of the few who was really interested in them in the mid-’70s,” she said. “If I had known that Honi Coles was the fastest feet in show business, I might not have called him and insisted on lessons. But I was very persistent, and I called him every week until he finally met me and said, ‘Well, you’ve got some feet.’ ”

Her curiosity-packed Manhattan apartment, which she shares with the painter Owen Gray, holds some of her vast tap archive (the rest lives in the [Gregory Hines](#) Collection of American Tap Dance in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts). A prized possession is the vaudevillian performer Eddie West’s painting depicting the Copasetics, a black male fraternity of entertainers organized in 1949 to honor the great tap-dancer Bill (Bojangles) Robinson. Whimsical clay sculptures by Dorothy Wasserman, another tapper, seem about to break into routines of their own.

But the real treasures aren’t so colorful: row upon row of cassettes, video and audio, containing priceless historical footage from interviews and shows. Many of these tapes are labeled “Gregory,” as in Gregory Hines, the great tap-dancer who died in 2003, at 57. Ms. Goldberg, 60, and Mr. Hines shared a long friendship, tempestuous but strong. He wrote her memoir’s foreword, and some of the book’s most intriguing sections are based on sprawling interviews in which the two argued over the issues she often confronted as a younger white woman working to revive an art dominated by older black men.

“When you think about it, well, black people didn’t own too much,” Ms. Goldberg said on the tricky subject of authenticity. “Maybe it was their right to feel that, you know, that tap was theirs. I’ve had lots of complicated feelings about that.”

Those feelings include sadness that she is seldom invited onto the festival circuit (despite her pioneering work with *By Word of Foot*), which offers most of the performance opportunities in tap.

“She has so much history, so I’m not sure why that’s not appreciated and sought after the way she sought after the guys,” Ms. Safford said. “She’s interested in these kooky things. It’s not sellable, it doesn’t have that external sheen that people are looking for.”

These days that sheen typically comes from the hard-hitting style popularized by [Savion Glover](#) in “Bring In da Noise, Bring In da Funk,” which opened at the [Public Theater](#) in 1995 before moving to Broadway. Tap festivals tend to be insider affairs, dominated by a small group of people and similar formats. In such a context a master class with a hot young dancer is sexier than a rambling history lesson.

“The people who run the festivals go with the formula of what sells, what attracts students from the surrounding dance schools,” said Michela Marino Lerman, 22, a rising tap-dancer who briefly helped Ms. Goldberg archive e-mail correspondence with Hines after his death. “They don’t want to go beyond the surface. I think that’s also a big part of why Jane is not invited.”

Ms. Lerman, Mr. Siebert and others said that tap suffers by ignoring the tradition represented by Ms. Goldberg, whose low-key, comedic style harkens back to a vaudevillian sensibility that had an eye toward a broad audience. At a recent performance and book signing at the Brecht Forum, a multidisciplinary arts

and culture center, Ms. Goldberg was dressed in a fabulous assortment of fabrics and patterns topped off by her mop of dark-red curls and a shifting assortment of snazzy shoes. She served up a meandering mix of tap, anecdotes, one-liners, non sequiturs and epic digressions.

“Rein me in,” she frequently implored the small audience. But there was no stopping her.

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