

Top of the Taps

Jane Goldberg

"Baby" Laurence
Baby Laurence—Dance Master
(Classic Jazz)

At the end of *Concerto in Taps*, "Baby" Laurence sings, "O, feet, take your time! What's the matter, boy, are you losing your mind?" His taps gradually slow down and as they fade out one pictures "Baby" reluctantly disappearing offstage.

But this is an album that Baby's dancing on, not a stage. Although he recorded it in 1959, it was just released this year under the Classic Jazz label (CJ 30) by Irv Kratka. It is probably the first album ever to treat jazz dance as music and it is appropriate that "Baby" Laurence, one of the finest practitioners of jazz tap dancing, be remembered for his sound.

For "Baby" Laurence, the legendary tap dancer who died three years ago, sound was everything. Claiming on the album to have performed his acapella tap concerto for such crown heads in Europe and America as the Duke of Ellington, the Count of Basie, the Earl of Hines, the King of Cole, "Baby" was not the only jazz dancer to travel and play with the big bands. But where other dancers stuck to eight-bar time, Baby continued to explore, taking tap into the complex rhythms of Bebop. He learned to dance faster, dropping his heels into zillions of cramp rolls (four quick sounds: toe-heel toe-heel), punctuating them with slaps and slides. He danced the melody often, instead of sticking to rhythm, and took the role of another instrument while jamming with Art Tatum, Charles Mingus, Max Roach, and Charlie Parker, among others.

Baby told Whitney Balliett in a *New Yorker* interview in 1960 that he was influenced by other tap dancers at the renowned Hoofers Club in Harlem but that he might have learned the most from drummers. It was a two way street. Mingus' drummer, Danny Richmond, told me last year that he used to study tap with Baby. In fact, Baby worked a regular gig with Mingus in 1961 at the Showplace replacing the pianist. On his recently released album dealing with the history of jazz drumming, *The Drums*, Jo Jones devotes one side to discussing his connection with the tap dancers. He plays the

Eddie Rector, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and calls Baby the great innovator, elevating the creative dance with the imagination the way he lived, that "nobody has ever surpassed."

Why did it take so long for *Baby Laurence — Dance Master* to be put out? Herb Abramson — who produced, conceived of, directed, and even bought the suit Baby wore for the recording — claims jazz records weren't selling in the early Sixties and his company was having problems. It is strange to read the old liner notes Nat Hentoff wrote in 1961. He refers to Marshall and Jean Stearns' classic book on the roots of tap dancing, *Jazz Dance*, as a work in progress. (Marshall Stearns died in 1966.) As Hentoff astutely notes, "It is difficult enough to find — let alone define — a real jazz singer, but no category has been so wildly confused as that of jazz dancing."

Business fell off for tap dancers after the Fifties and jazz dance never really did have the chance to develop an audience. Most people who study or teach jazz dance today strike sexy poses to jazz music instead of treating the body as an instrument. No form of jazz dance is more obvious than jazz tap, in which the dancer is responsible for sound as well as movement.

Baby's wide range of tempos can all be heard on the first side of the album, where he modifies traditional, buck and wing, sand, military, and swing numbers with his unique double and triple timing. One hears him trading fours and eights, taking solos, and fitting naturally into the combo consisting at times of former Basie tenor saxophonist Paul Quinichette, pianists Roland Hanna and Nat Pierce, flutist Bobby Jasper, drummers Osie Johnson and Dave Pochonet, bassists Arvell Shaw and Al Hall, and guitarist Skeeter Best. The texture of Laurence's sound radically changes in "The Sand," where he sounds like he's brushing his teeth. He often punctuates this broom-going-berserk with startling slaps. At times his steps sound very even, but what usually is incredible is hearing how he subtly switches from one time to the next. Interestingly, Baby's modern version of Bill Robinson's famous step dance was actually performed on stairs for the album. Despite the superb tapping here, I miss seeing him kick, knock, and hop up and down the stairs. My favorite number is his tap concerto in which, without accompanying music, one gets the full impact of his transitions and time.

Baby Laurence — Dance Master is probably the best example there is now of jazz tap dance and its tight relationship with jazz music. It's too bad other great tap dancers like Honi Coles, Charles Cook, Bubba Gaines (all still alive) or the late Pete Nugent and Eddie Rector haven't been recorded as a means of passing on the tradition. Steps probably couldn't be picked up, but the phrasing could give listeners today a chance to hear the great ways in which the dancers used time. The Baby Laurence album is no substitute for seeing him dance. But it is certainly proof that with jazz tap dance, hearing, as well as seeing, is believing.



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