

# Tap Dance

Jane Goldberg is known as the 'Tap Goddess of the Lower East Side' and is currently a visiting instructor teaching at the New World School of the Arts. You

## Tap Revival Parallels Art Deco Revival

by Jane Goldberg

Six years ago my dance colleague Sarah Safford told me, "I can see you in Miami. New tap, new Art Deco." She knew about my early days in the tap revival, ferreting out old hoofers, and with them, reintroducing tap throughout America. She also knew I loved the beach and NYC was becoming "glutted" with other tap "revivalists." I decided to check out South Beach.

I knew nothing about Art Deco when I first walked along Ocean Drive in June, 1992. Even though there had been a lot of media attention already paid to the district, I was seeing it anew. I had come for a dance convention and there were few tourists in June. Every morning I'd jump into the ocean, swim out a distance and stare at all the Deco hotels. I hadn't even heard of Barbara Baer Capitman then.

The following winter, however, I met Jeff Donnelly, an historian and activist in local Miami Beach politics. He told me about a Miami Beach preservation league that Capitman founded, and her campaign to save the Senator Hotel and the Art Deco architecture on the Beach. It all smelled of the tap revival! Capitman sounded as fanatical as we hoofers were, if not more so. We were all obsessed women saving 1930's American art. Still, it was eerie to read the introduction to the book *Rediscovering Art Deco U.S.A.* where Capitman's introductory words were "Art Deco is my whole life." I could have replaced the words Art Deco with tap. I was married to tap dancing. Like Capitman, I wasn't alone. There were a bunch of young white women tap revivalists throughout the country finding, studying with, and "preserving" old time black male hoofers in mid to late 1970s. With tap there was always a race and gender issue involved with the preservation of what was considered a black art, although the issue of young white women and old black tapping men has still never been dealt with in the media. Capitman, too, had her band

CETA monies to catalogue the buildings, Changing Times Tap was funded to send Charles 'Cookie' Cook of the vaudeville act Cook and Brown and myself around to tap everywhere. We also brought tap to the prestigious festivals, Jacob's Pillow and the American Dance Festival, where tap hadn't been presented for 37 and 18 years respectively. We even tapped at Harvard University in 1979.

Like Capitman, I had a background in journalism. In fact, reading about Capitman's promotional skills, I wish I'd have had more of her Madison Avenue approach with tap. Although it might have turned some purists off, tap could have used every bit of publicity and hype it could get. Our problem in the media was that we were always "coming back." We were never "here."

Buildings were more concrete, no pun intended. But both still needed the media attention to gain public awareness.

Where Capitman and friends had to "fight" the developers, there was no "bad guy" in the tap revival. MDPL's Dennis Wilhelm speculated that tap

any way they could during "The Great Tap Drought." I met bebop dancer Leon Collins in Boston when he was repairing cars. Levaughn Robinson was cleaning ice in Philadelphia. Buster Brown worked as a hotel clerk to support his family. Honi Coles stage managed the Apollo Theater. Cholly Atkins managed to stay in dance by choreographing for the Motown acts.

The Deco District has often been referred to "holistically" as an entity. It wasn't just one building, but the whole district that created the beauty. In fact, on a recent bicycle tour of the District, I began to "see" an analogy between the black tap acts and buildings: Like "Cook and Brown," "The Chocolateateers," "The Nicholas Brothers," "Moke and Poke," "Buck and Bubbles," "Chuck and Chuckles," "Tip Tap and Tod," the buildings were all part of the same genre. The acts and the buildings spoke the same "language," but each building was known for its imprimatur, speciality, uniqueness. There were different styles: class, soft shoe, flash and rhythm.

Similarly, Hobausser, Dixon, Anis, France, and Sislewicz were architects who contributed to the whole effect as a way of life. And while all these Deco buildings had a common language, i.e., eyebrows, rule of threes, use of smooth stucco surfaces, and employed materials such as glass, aluminum, and vitrolite, all were individual statements. And is it any wonder that aluminum was the material of choice for the metal taps as well as a lot of the Deco fixtures. Remember, this was the depression and aluminum was economical, modern, but still flashy

