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Tap for Your Torte

By Jane Goldberg

Tap dancing in Europe! Waltz-clogging in Vienna! Pulling trenches in Berlin! Paddle-and-rolling in Amsterdam! Doing the Continental! April in Paris! For years I'd heard how tap was popular in Europe, how Europeans loved jazz. Now I was going there to see for myself. So what if everyone I knew had already hitchhiked, backpacked, and Eurorailed at least three or four times. I was going there to lay down the irons and beat the boards. If I was lucky maybe I'd pull a Josephine Baker and have Europe at my feet.

"Tanz '84," a dance festival that was Vienna's answer to BAM's "Next Wave," brought Changing Times Tap Company overseas in mid-March. We were the late-night openers in a transformed art museum, Wiener Secession, a monolithic building constructed by modernist painters frustrated by the status quo. The Stuttgart Ballet was then playing at the opera house and Oscar Peterson was on our flight, about to go in there. Usually when we go somewhere we're billed under the heading "Tap Is Back." But in Vienna there was no conception of tap as nostalgia or revival. We were publicized as "new dance."

I'd been encouraged by the sponsor, Dr. Gerhard Brunner, to speak normal English and stay with the vernacular. No problem. It felt wonderful on opening night to have my silly Freud jokes laughed at. We had plastered "laugh" and "applaud" signs all over, but the laughing felt genuine. Vienna and cities in Germany had a histories of political cabaret, so our antiwar rapping and tapping went over. But in the land where

Mozart and Bach are the gods, and the woods are named after Beethoven, it was veteran tapper Leon Collins's rendition of Bach's *Prelude in C* on the night of Bach's birthday that drove the Viennese wild. Leon knew the classics and that surprised them.

I'd heard from a jazz freak over there that Vienna was morbid but swinging. Swing? I never knew what that word meant until I hit Opus One, a downtown jazz disco where I went to stretch out after the show each night. In all the years I've lived in the Village, I've never found a club where you could openly and freely social dance to jazz. In Opus One we were in a time warp; but it wasn't like going up to Harlem to see the lindy-hoppers stomping at the Savoy. These were young people swinging to contemporary music. My tap shoes blended right in. With all the browns and grays and dark colors and cloudy weather and people in furs everywhere else, I could see why Opus One would be a refuge for the upbeat.

Schnitzeled, Sacher-torted, caffeined, and chocolated out I rolled out of Vienna as the company flew back to the States. All I knew was that I wanted to be in Paris in April. I had names of hotels, friends of friends, agents, festival organizers, tap dancers, musicians, and some high school French. After a week of making the rounds, I called composer-saxophonist Steve Lacy.

I'd heard Lacy play his soprano sax in a solo Soho loft concert six years ago and loved his sound, knew I wanted to tap to it. Year after year when he came to New York, I'd try to persuade him to play with

me. In Paris, where he lived, surprisingly, he was receptive. As we set up a time to meet, he asked, "Do you play free?"

With all the strangeness I was feeling—money, food, hotel, subway, language—Lacy became like a long lost friend and his "free" became my definition of tight structure. I'm not a particular fan of the saxophone, but when I played his records, I often ended up humming his weird melodies out of the studio. How he developed his sound and where he traveled with it has always made me go back to hear more. Working with taps alone sometimes seems so limiting, but hearing Lacy play solo made me feel there was a way to go deeper into my own sound. And here we were playing together in the Studio de Marais, where housewives did aerobics to Michael Jackson and congas mixed with flamenco and all the rooms were named after composers. With each session he brought in music he'd written, structures he'd worked out, pieces he thought I could tap with. Like most good improvisers, Lacy was totally rooted in structure; it's what made his playing so "free." When he said we ought to get a gig, I swooned. As we made tentative plans to play together again he advised me to count unevenly, in threes, fives, sevens. "You're one step away from where this is," he said. "Stop listening to rhythm."

The experience with Lacy spurred me to give improvisation to my students in my final two weeks abroad. I had met a West German woman as tap-obsessed as I was at my shows in Vienna, and she had set up *stages* for me in Düsseldorf and introduced me to the tap heavies in Amsterdam and Berlin. After teaching a little rhythm tap in these workshop situations, I realized anyone could give them routines; what they needed was to hear themselves, their own timing, their own sounds. Many of the students had great feet but no time. It was as if they didn't know tap was to be listened to as well as seen. Balking at first, the students soon

began to tap conversations with each other. At the Werkstatt in Düsseldorf, a progressive '60s institution with a pragmatic view of social change through culture, my students and I performed an impromptu show at the end of the week that really swung, even without a piano player. I was beginning to see that swing was not just a feeling but a concept. The German students' growing enthusiasm for improvisation and getting their own sounds gave me more courage to break out of my own riffs.

It was a revelation for me to realize that what was most appreciated was something that the students already had themselves—like Dorothy discovering that home was right in her feet. Right in her shoes. Giving improvisational structures, which was certainly more demanding than having the students learn my style, I understood why Europeans would be into an American art form so heavily.

My last stage was set up by the resident veteran hooper of Europe, Cornell Lyons, once one of the "Businessmen of Rhythm" group that twirled trays in syn-copation to their tapping feet. Cornell was rheumatic but it didn't stop him, and as I taught his students, he'd jump up and paddle-and-roll and show his rhythms off with his top students. He'd settled in Europe after the World War II and had a great story about marrying an East Berlin contortionist whom he met in a circus, but was starving to know about how Honi, Cookie, Leon, all the cats, and his buddies had been keeping it together.

I had no idea how really into tap the European hoofers were until one of Cornell's students asked me how Leticia Jay was doing. Only an insider or a fanatic would know that Leticia was a lost figure in tap history responsible for the tap happenings in the late '60s at the Hotel Dixie. I flew out of Berlin thinking if some young German student halfway across the world would ask me about Leticia Jay, tap is alive and well and living in Europe.