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# Heels and Gumption: Tap Dance Empowered by Women

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Heels and Gumption:  
Tap Dance Empowered by Women

Rachel Benzing

Dance History  
Professor Jill Nunes-Jensen  
April 24th, 2012

Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Gene Kelly, Sammy Davis Jr., Gregory Hines, Savion Glover, Jason Samuels-Smith. These names create a list of some of the most famous tap dancers spanning over a hundred years of dance history. Yet something is missing--that extra X chromosome. Female tap dancers have been referred to as hidden over the years as tap research has started to increase in recent years. Little to no information is present that can aid modern day historians in understanding the lives of such spectacular artists. Although there is little written about many of these women, it is possible to draw conclusions based on what is known. Female tap dancers have been the backbone of the tap dance industry and have helped it to develop and adapt over the years. This level of influence can be seen through performance acts such as The Whitman Sisters, the stories of the Apollo Theatre Chorus Line dancers, and mid century tap renegades such as Brenda Bufalino and Dianne Walker. It is the stories of these women that reveal how they influences the tap dance scene.

Before television, film, and Broadway there was Vaudeville. Vaudeville shows were more similar to a three-ring circus than to a professional dance performance, filled with varying acts such as, song, dance, comedy and acrobatics.<sup>1</sup> It could be compared to a variety show, but informal and meant to entertain “a rowdy and impatient crowd of male boozers.”<sup>2</sup> While first developed as a colloquial exhibition of talents, born out of Vaudeville was the multitalented Whitman Sisters. This act of accomplished sisters, Mabel, Essie, Alberta, and “Baby” Alice, “were one of the most popular acts in black vaudeville and one of the longest-running and highest-paid acts on the Theater Owners Booking Association.”<sup>3</sup> Each sister had a unique talent. Mabel was the first black woman manager and handled the bookings, Essie was the costume

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Nunes-Jensen, “Musical Theatre” (lecture, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA, April 12, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Selma Jeanne, *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), s.v. “Vaudeville.”

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, Selma Jeanne, *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), s.v. “Whitman Sisters.”

designer, Alberta composed music, was the financial secretary, and also performed in drag as a man, while Alice was the paramount dancer of the four, and was titled the “Queen of Taps.”<sup>4</sup> Starting out as the New Orleans Troubadours they quickly grew their show into a full length and full cast performance. “The Whitman Sisters’ fast-paced shows were based on a variety format of songs, dances, and comedy skits; it included a cast of up to thirty performers, with a chorus of twelve to fourteen girls, and a five or six-piece jazz band.”<sup>5</sup> The group traveled across the country performing major Vaudeville circuits in the South, East, and Northeast.

The star of the show was “Baby” Alice and “Her high-energy, fast-paced tapping rivaled that of Willie Robinson or any of the picks in the chorus.”<sup>6</sup> Alice paved the way for female, especially African-American, solo artists in the early twentieth century.

She was a formative challenger to prevailing norms and expectations of black female artists, and she devised alternative strategies for female solo tap performance during the second and third decades of the century [...] Alice claimed power over her own self-representation as a star-soloist female rhythm dancer.<sup>7</sup>

Not only did Alice challenge social norms with her hard-hitting tap solos, but her sister, Alberta, also stretched the ideas of women’s capabilities within performance. After Alice would finish her solo, “Bert then rejoined Alice onstage, and somewhere in the middle of their duet, the audience realized that Bert Whitman...was actually Alberta Whitman [...] The audience found itself not only enjoying the performance but also accepting the broader spectrum of gender identities that Alberta’s cross-dressing implied.”<sup>8</sup> It was deemed normal for men to dress as women in

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<sup>4</sup> Rusty E. Frank, *Tap! The Greatest Tap Dance Stars and Their Stories, 1900-1955* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1990) 119.

<sup>5</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 58 & 60.

<sup>8</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 59.

performances, or white men to dress up as African-American men, but for an African-American woman to dress in drag as a man was not socially accepted at the time. Alberta was able to prove that women were just as capable as men on stage dancing, but unfortunately in order to do so she had to play the part of a man. Even her sister Alice was held back by her gender. She was never called the “best tap dancer,” but always the “best female tap dancer” or the “Queen of Tap,” alluding to there being a male counterpart who by assumption was superior to Alice. By Alberta dressing up as a man and dancing equal to, if not better, to a man, she was able to prove that women could be on an equal playing field as men in the dance world. ““They took agency over their images and experimented with constantly shifting portrayals of identity.””<sup>9</sup>

The Whitman Sisters were not only brilliant performers in themselves but they also gave way to many other talented dancers. “The sisters trained and gave a start to hundreds of young dancers who apprenticed with them....they created a homelike atmosphere by cultivating a family company, with themselves as motherly figures. They also cultivated a stream of talent that passed through the show.”<sup>10</sup> Some of the many great talents that passed through the Whitman Sisters loving arms were Bunny Briggs, Willie Bryant, Jeni LeGon, Leonard Reed, Samuel Reed, Tommy Hawkins, Clarence Taylor, and Alice’s son, ‘Pops.’<sup>11</sup> In a time when tap dance was taught by African-American men, through watching and learning, the Whitman Sisters cultivated a new style of passing along the knowledge of tap. They even were the co-creators of the tap dance “national anthem” the Shim Sham Shimmy. In the late 1920s, Reed and Bryant were playing the black vaudeville TOBA circuit with the Whitman Sisters. “We needed a quick finale, so simple and easy to do,’ said Reed. When Reed and Bryant made it to New York [...] they

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>11</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 60.

discovered that the dance had already caught on and was a favorite at a club called the Shim Sham.”<sup>12</sup> The Shim Sham Shimmy was then made famous across the nation by the chorus girls, but most notoriously the Apollo Theatre Chorus Line.

In the dance documentary *Been Rich All My Life*, filmmaker heather Lynn MacDonald explores the lives of the Apollo Theatre Chorus Girls. In 1985, the group “the Silver Belles” was formed as an homage to their days dancing in Harlem at the various nightclubs through the 1930s. The dancers, Marion Coles, Elaine Ellis, Cleo Hayes, Fay Ray, and Bertye Lou Wood have been dancing since their re-formation at various venues, tap festivals, and concerts with success as audiences everywhere adore the eighty to ninety year old women who are still sharing their passion for dance. These were not just ordinary chorus girls that one would see in a stage revue show. “The sixteen female dancers who made up the Apollo Chorus Line were considered to be the best female dancers in New York, unmatched by any chorus line on stage or in film.”<sup>13</sup> These women came from all different backgrounds and dance trainings, as explained by each dancer in the film. Marion Coles, age 88, had learned to ballroom dance from her mother and had no former training. Cleo Hayes, age 89, did not know how to dance but left from Mississippi to travel to Chicago in search of a better life for, as she implies, obvious reasons. Fay Ray, age 84, gives more detail about her upbringing. Born and raised in Louisiana she grew up picking cotton, like many Southern blacks at this time. She would move around the furniture in her house when her family was gone and dance around, inspired by the music on the radio. When she was a

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 107.

teenager she hopped a train and ended up joining a traveling show in Kansas City, where she formally learned how to dance.<sup>14</sup>

Although many of these chorus girls were technically “un-trained” dancers, they learned quickly from all of the male tap soloists and acts that would come through the Apollo. Famous tap dancer Honi Coles said, “A dancing act could come into the Apollo with all original material and when they left at the end of the week, the chorus line would have stolen many of the outstanding things that they did.”<sup>15</sup> In *Been Rich All My Life*, Marion Coles, Honi’s wife, speaks of her experience backstage: “When an act came into the theatre, I would stand in the wings...I would pick up the step and bring it down to the girls. All of the tap dancers were very generous. If they had a step, and you wanted to learn the step, they would take it apart and show it to you.”<sup>16</sup> Not only were the chorus girls just as talented, if not more skilled, than many of the headliners at the theatre, but they were also the backbone of the institution. Tap dancer Noble Sissle said, “Besides being superb dancers, those chorus girls were like cheerleaders.”<sup>17</sup> The Apollo Chorus Girls were the support system of the business, and kept it running. The girls worked from ten ‘o clock in the morning until eleven ‘o clock at night, performing in four to six shows each day. They would have rehearsals after the last two shows and every Friday morning they would open with an entirely different show, including three new dance numbers. The backstage entrance to the Apollo Theatre read, “Through these portals pass the most beautiful girls in Harlem.”<sup>18</sup> Many would argue that the sign should have also included, “the most hard-working.” Of course, these talented dancers were restricted by the fact that they were women. In

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<sup>14</sup> *Been Rich All My Life*, directed by Heather MacDonald (2006; New York City, NY: Toots Crackin Productions), DVD.

<sup>15</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 107.

<sup>16</sup> *Been Rich All My Life*, directed by Heather MacDonald (2006; New York City, NY: Toots Crackin Productions), DVD.

<sup>17</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 74.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109.

a time where women's rights were deemed unimportant, the idea of a female headliner, no-less an African-American female soloist, was unthinkable. "They could have all had their own act, but they weren't given the freedom."<sup>19</sup>

Even though these women were restricted by their gender, they still found ways to speak out against injustices being done to them. In the 1930s, the time of the chorus girl, African-American women were only being paid twenty dollars a week, barely enough to make ends meet. Although they were happy to be dancing, they realized that they were being treated unfairly, especially when the chorus girls at the Cotton Club were earning twenty-five dollars a week. Dancer Ristina Banks organized a strike amongst the chorus girls and demanded, "We're going to get \$22.50 or we're not going to work,"<sup>20</sup> a small raise compared to how much money they could have asked for. When the demands of the dancers were not met, they struck. On February 23, 1940, the Apollo Theatre Chorus Line dancers walked out of the theatre. This event is of major importance not only in dance history, but also African-American history, because it was the first strike by African-American performers, both male and female. Marching up and down the street with picket signs they performed a type of protest dance, demanding their fair share of money. Proud and famous chorus dancer Bertye Wood boasts, "We closed it down,"<sup>21</sup> referring to the fact that on that night, the Apollo Theatre was unable to hold its show, all because of the influence that the chorus girls had. They were met with success and after only fourteen days, they settled and ended up with a salary of twenty-five dollars, the same as the girls at the Cotton Club. The Apollo Chorus girls were the heart and soul of the show, and as a dance critic from the *New York American* wrote:

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Been Rich All My Life*, directed by Heather MacDonald (2006; New York City, NY: Toots Crackin Productions), DVD.

At times it seemed as though nothing would stop the chorus from singing and dancing except bringing down the curtain [...] They reveled in their work; they simply pulsed with it, and there was no let-up at all. And gradually any tired feeling that you might have been nursing vanished in the sun of their good humor and you didn't mind how long they 'shuffled along.' You even felt like shuffling a bit with them.<sup>22</sup>

While the Whitman Sisters and the Apollo Chorus girls were spearheading tap into popularity during the early twentieth century, in the second half of the century tap dance was in dire need of a revival. There was "A smaller group of younger women [...] being drawn to the more elusive forms of rhythm tap as presented in the smaller, less commercial venues of jazz clubs, university stages, artist lofts, and studios [...] Many of them white, college-educated modern dancers."<sup>23</sup> These women, Brenda Bufalino, Lynn Daley, Linda Sohl-Donnell, Dianne Walker, and Jane Goldberg, just to name a few, were the driving force behind tap dance in a time where it had lost its spark in the public eye. The time in which these women were brought up was a time of civil unrest. They lived through the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the rise of the youth of America fighting for their rights. In an interview, Jane Goldberg recounts, "There were a lot of women of my generation...who were very politically conscious. We came out of the civil rights and the feminist movements [...] We had loftier goals that extended even beyond just wanting to dance. We were committed to pulling an entire lost art form back into the public eye."<sup>24</sup> These women also came out of the modern dance era in the dance sphere, leading them to take on the questioning of the popular norms present in concert dance. Brenda Bufalino describes her experience with the new ideas about music in the dance genre:

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<sup>22</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 70.

<sup>23</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 229.

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Jo Sagolla, "Real Women Don't Tap," *Black Stage East* 47, (2006): 2.

Modern music was beginning to come through. There was a musical change. And that's how it happened that I was a 'cusp' dancer, I was right on the cusp of the change. The old influences were there, I learned the old stuff, but I was very excited about the new music that was coming out. But I didn't figure there was any way to incorporate modern jazz and tap. It took me a long time to figure out how to use the newer music when I was tapping.<sup>25</sup>

These women saved the art of tap in various ways. Many started up their own concert tap ensembles such as Brenda Bufalino and the American Tap Dance Orchestra, Lynn Dally's Jazz Tap Ensemble, Heather Cornell's Manhattan Tap, and Linda Sohl-Donnell's Rhapsody in Taps. "They choreographed by fusing traditional jazz-tap material with a modern-dance aesthetic, a fusion which shaped tap's concert presentation during the 1980s."<sup>26</sup> By bringing tap into the concert dance world, they gave tap an advantage that it lacked. Tap was now represented as a dance form that was not purely for entertainment, as it was in its vaudeville days. Tap could be taken seriously as an art form rather than seen as a cheap night show.

These women also helped to codify the dance. Many of them, such as Dianne Walker, studied with the old masters of tap. Walker got her training from Leon Collins, becoming his protégé and is known for teaching his technique and historical pieces throughout the world. Without these women seeking out and learning from the old greats, that generation of tappers would have been lost to the twenty first century. "It was more interesting because it had been less visible, less attainable. And dancers like myself, and those before me coming onto the scene,

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<sup>25</sup> Rusty E. Frank, *Tap! The Greatest Tap Dance Stars and Their Stories, 1900-1955* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1990) 276

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, Selma Jeanne, *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Predd, 1998), s.v. "Tap Dance."

were trying to find those dancers who were more elusive,”<sup>27</sup> Dianne Walker says of her attraction to studying with Collins. Due to Walker’s concern in preserving Collin’s dances, such as Routine 1-3, 53, and his various waltzes, the new generations of tap dancers are able to study them as well at festivals hosted throughout the year across the country. These tap dance festivals were also brought into existence by these tap renegade women. “In the 1980s and 1990s national tap festivals and conferences began to be held [...] These gatherings of venerated tap teachers, performers, and historians helped strengthen the community by offering opportunities for study, performances, and tap exchanges among tappers from all over the country.”<sup>28</sup> Without these festivals, where the world’s greatest young and old tap masters teach, tap knowledge would be concentrated in the hands of a very few. Since dancers are able to attend these festivals and learn from the tap masters, tap is able to continue to thrive on as each generation is engaged in what came before them and what is still to come.

Without female tap dancers the field of dance would not have become what it is today. This is supported by journalist Brynn Wein Shiovitz who explained, “Women have been a crucial part of tap’s development, and had they not felt driven to achieve and to rebel, tap dancing would not be where it is today.”<sup>29</sup> Without these important female artists, tap would be very different today. If the Whitman sisters had never started their own troupe, some of the most celebrated tap dancers like Jeni Legon and Leonard Reed may never have picked up a pair of tap shoes. The Apollo Theatre Chorus Line girls gave a backbone for the touring solo artists in the 1920s and 1930s and helped to break down racial boundaries by holding the first ever strike by African-American performers. Without tappers such as Brenda Bufalino and Dianne Walker, tap

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<sup>27</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 231.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen, Selma Jeanne, *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), s.v. “Tap Dance.”

<sup>29</sup> Brynn Wein Shiovitz, “Tapping Into Race, Women, and Rhythm,” *Dance Chronicle* 34, (2011): 299.

may never have made a comeback and regained its popularity. These women all contributed to the history of tap dance in unique ways and have made an imprint on the dance world but go unappreciated or undervalued. Women tap dancers have always faced this challenge, within a male dominated art form. Hopefully by learning about the past and these great performers the younger generations will be able to realize how important these women were and still are to tap, because without these women, the present day tap dancers would be living in a very different world.

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