

THE APOLLO THEATER

Where Stars are Born and Legends are Made.™

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TAPPING AT THE APOLLO



ON JANUARY 26, 1934, a chorus line of 16 female tap dancers described as “gorgeous hot steppers” tapped onto the stage in the Apollo’s first variety show.

For decades after, the hottest jazz tappers clicked and slid across the stage of the Apollo.

Among the greatest was **Bill “Bojangles” Robinson** who developed a graceful style of tap dancing called *soft shoe*. Born in 1878 in Richmond, Virginia, Robinson began dancing at age six in beer halls to help his grandmother who was raising him. By 1906, he was dancing in vaudeville shows and nightclubs, and by 1930 he was dancing in Broadway musicals. In the 1930s, Hollywood cast him in 14 movies in which he wowed audiences with his brilliant steps.

Harlem-born **Bunny Briggs** took one look at Robinson in motion in the 1920s and knew he wanted to be a tap dancer. Most dancers had a set dance routine, but not Briggs. His steps changed from show to show as he danced with bands led by **Duke Ellington, Charlie Barnet, Earl Hines, and Count Basie**. He let the music lead him and made up dance routines as he went along, dazzling audiences with his inventive dancing. He even danced along with the *bebop jazz improvisations* of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker in the 1940s.

Other tappers developed what became known as *flash tap*. Their routines were marked by speed and acrobatic stunts. **“Baby” Laurence Donald Jackson** and **Teddy Hale** developed *legomania* routines that had them twisting, turning, tumbling, and leaping, all done with fast and furious tap beats. Their routines had not just Apollo audiences, but also fellow performers wondering if the two were made of rubber.

Apollo crowds also cheered the flash dancing of the Nicholas Brothers, Fayard and Harold. The two brothers could stop any show by leaping over each other into full splits while dancing down a staircase. In 1935 the Nicholas Brothers became a leading act at the Apollo in the 1930s and 1940s and also were a popular part of Hollywood musicals like *Stormy Weather*.

The Berry Brothers started out with just Ananias and James. Warren joined them in 1922. Together, the three became known for their “freeze and melt” style. The dancers would go from a frozen pose to flash dancing.

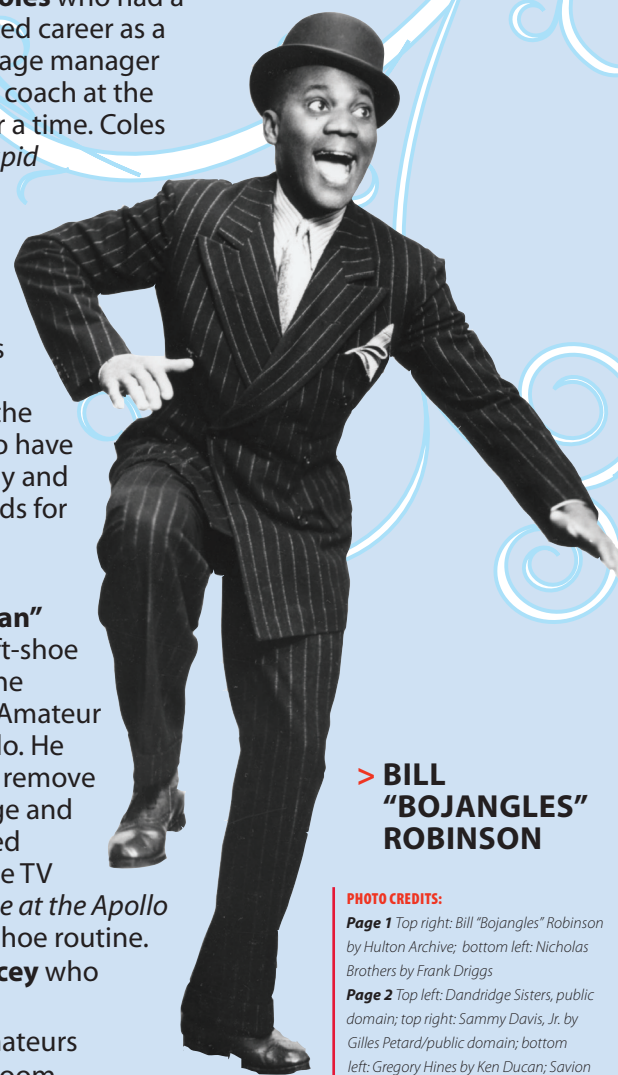
The Four Step Brothers also became wildly popular flash dancers. They were not really brothers, and members of the group changed over the years. The act began when Maceo Anderson saw **Al Williams** and **Red Walker** at an amateur night at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem. The three formed a trio until Sherman Robertson joined the group in 1927. Later, **Flash McDonald** became a member. He had learned show business as a solo dance act at the Apollo around 1941. The group became best known for their *challenge solos*. Each dancer tried to out-tap the others, and the only accompaniment was hand clapping.

By the 1960s, younger audiences were moving on to rock ‘n roll. Many people said tapping was a dying art. However, tap dancers thought otherwise. Some dancers went to Europe to perform. Others became teachers to new generations of tappers who learned tap dancing just for fun. **Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates** took another route entirely. In spite of having lost his left leg at age 12, he had become one of the most incredible tap dancers of all time. Bates moved to Sullivan County in upstate New York and opened the first black-owned resort in the Catskill Mountains. There, he continued to entertain audiences.

Some former dancers found other jobs at the Apollo. **Leonard Reed** hosted shows at the Apollo for some 20 years. In 1927 Reed and his partner Willie Bryant had perfected the *shim sham shimmy*. The dance combines tapping with shaking one’s hips and shoulders.

Charles “Honi” Coles who had a long and celebrated career as a tap dancer was stage manager and performance coach at the Apollo Theater for a time. Coles had developed *rapid rhythm tap* and teamed with the soft shoe dancer **Cholly Atkins** as a popular act. Coles also appeared on Broadway and is the only tap dancer to have won both the Tony and Drama Desk awards for performances in Broadway shows.

Howard “Sandman” Sims, another soft-shoe tapper, became the “executioner” for Amateur Night at the Apollo. He signaled when to remove acts from the stage and later ushered failed contestants off the TV show *It’s Showtime at the Apollo* with his old soft-shoe routine. Today it is **C.P. Lacey** who taps and sweeps disappointing amateurs offstage with a broom.



> **BILL “BOJANGLES” ROBINSON**

PHOTO CREDITS:
Page 1 Top right: Bill “Bojangles” Robinson by Hulton Archive; bottom left: Nicholas Brothers by Frank Driggs
Page 2 Top left: Dandridge Sisters, public domain; top right: Sammy Davis, Jr. by Gilles Petard/public domain; bottom left: Gregory Hines by Ken Duncan; Savion Glover by Shrazar

HOW DID TAP DANCING BEGIN?

TAP DANCE IS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN cultural development that began in the 1800s. It combines African drumming and dance movements and European dances. Its roots are much earlier than the 1800s though. Enslaved Africans brought their dances with them. They patted, hopped, and shuffled their feet as they moved in time with drummed and chanted music. The shuffling movement, in which they brushed the balls of their feet back and forth on the ground, is similar to the brush movement in tap dance. Tap dancers also borrowed from Irish jigs, reels, and clog dancing, which all emphasize footwork and fast beats.

William Henry Lane is credited with inventing tap dancing. He was born a free black in Providence, Rhode

Island, in 1825, and later moved to New York City. Lane began performing in minstrel shows in 1839. Touring the United States and Europe until his death in 1850, he was called the “greatest of all dancers” and was known as “Master Juba.” *Juba* is an Afro-Caribbean dance in which dancers shuffle their feet as they move counterclockwise in a circle.

During the second half of the 1800s, tap dancing became part of minstrel shows. These were variety shows in which white entertainers painted their faces black and sang, told jokes, and danced. These imitations were considered offensive by most African Americans.

Beginning around the 1880s, vaudeville shows replaced minstrel shows and lasted into the 1940s. In the early 1900s, tap dancers like the **Four Covans** were tapping to the new rhythms of *ragtime, jazz, stride, and stomp*. **Willie Covan**, the leader of the group, created the Rhythm Waltz Clog, developed acrobatic moves, and perfected the Buck and Wing, a series of classic tap steps.

John “Bubbles” Sublett perfected *rhythm tap*, a combination of heel and toe taps that highlight the beat in jazz music. With **Ford “Buck” Washington**, he was part of the famous duo of **Buck & Bubbles** that played the Apollo regularly.

Tap dancing has continued to change and adapt to new musical styles. Today, tap dancing is often combined with hip-hop to form a new beat.



Try This: Check the *Guinness Book of World Records* to see who holds the title of fastest tap dancer in the world. Write a one- or two-paragraph news article about this person and how he or she gained the record. Be sure your article answers the questions who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Put on Your Tap Shoes!

May 25 is National Tap Dance Day. In 1989, Congress passed a bill making May 25, the birth anniversary of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, National Tap Dance Day. Tap dancing is celebrated by dedicated tap fans around the world in places as far away as Japan and England.



Ladies, Tap Those Shoes



> **DANDRIGE SISTERS**

Chorus lines gave many talented African American women an opportunity to dance. In the 1920s through the 1940s, big bands employed female chorus lines to open and close shows. At least one woman was always showcased in solo dances in front of the line.

The chorus line at the Apollo had 12 dancers. One dancer was captain of the line and it was her job to *choreograph* the chorus line's dance routines as well as dance in the line. Chorus dancers worked 15 hours a day, often six days a week, performing in one show and rehearsing for the next one. Shows changed weekly, so the dancers had to learn new routines each week for the next week.

When famous big bands were playing the Apollo, the chorus line danced as many as 24 numbers in a single day. The work was hard and the pay was low. "We had to buy our own shoes, too," said **Libby Spencer**, captain of the Apollo chorus line from 1939 to 1948. In the 1930s, the Apollo dancers led a strike for higher wages. It ended

with the founding of the American Guild of Variety Artists, a labor union to represent dancers and other performers—African American and white.

In the 1980s, five members of the original Apollo chorus line decided to dust off their dancing shoes. Known as the **Silver Belles**, the five—**Fay Ray, Elaine Ellis, Cleo Hayes, Marion Coles**, and **Bertye Lou Wood**—had been part of the strike against the Apollo 50 years before. During World War II, they had danced in the first black USO (United Service Organization) tour to entertain the troops.

When they regrouped in 1985, the women were in their 60s and 70s. They took their act to the Cotton Club and other halls in New York. The five continued to appear together until 2004 when Wood died at age 96. She had only recently given up dancing. The Silver Belles—now four—continued to tap and kick across the stage to the rhythms of jazz.



> **SAMMY DAVIS JR** began tapping as a child. He was a brilliant flash tapper who combined speed with complicated footwork, leaps, and splits. As an adult, he added comedy, singing, and acting in movies to his career.



GLOSSARY

bebop jazz improvisations: jazz with complex harmonies characterized by rapid syncopation (shifting the accent on beats) of the trumpet and saxophone; improvisations occur as the musicians make up the music as they play

challenge solo: one dancer challenges another to do more complex and faster steps; the dancers take turns challenging and dancing

choreograph: to plan the movements in a dance

flash tap: tap dance characterized by speed and acrobatic stunts

jazz: lively music with a strong rhythm that began among African Americans in the South in the late 1800s; mixes Afro-Cuban, Mexican, and French musical influences

juba: Afro-Caribbean dance characterized by shuffling the feet

legomania: tap routine with twisting, turning, tumbling, and leaping, all done with fast and furious tap beats; form of flash tap

ragtime: musical form developed by African Americans and popular in the 1890s to 1920; used influenced jazz

rapid rhythm tap: group of taps performed in rapid succession

shim sham shimmy: tap dance in which the dancers shake their hips and shoulders

soft shoe: form of tap dancing done without using metal taps on the shoes

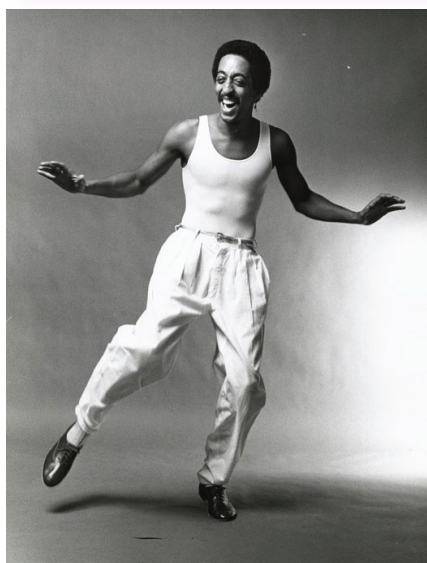
stride: form of jazz with strong beat; a dance to this music

stomp: form of jazz with a lively rhythm and strong beat; a dance to this music



Try This: If you wanted to learn tap, how would you find a program that teaches tap? Write a paragraph describing how you would research it. Then try your research and see if it works.

NEW GENERATIONS OF TAP



> **GREGORY HINES**

Tap dancing never completely faded from the stage during the 1960s and 1970s. Two dancers who brought tap dance back front and center stage were **Gregory Hines** and **Savion Glover**. Audiences were dazzled by their inventive footwork. Glover especially transformed tap dance into something new and contemporary.

Gregory Hines was born in New York in 1946. When he was two years old, his parents sent him and his older brother Maurice to study with dance teacher **Henry LeTang**. Tap was very much alive at the Apollo during the 1950s, and the Hines boys grew up dancing there. They first appeared at the Apollo when Gregory was six and Maurice was eight. In addition to learning dance techniques from LeTang, the Hines brothers watched and learned from old-time tappers at the Apollo like **Sandman Sims, Honi Coles, the Nicholas Brothers, Jimmy Slyde**, and other tap masters.

At first, their act was known as the **Hines Kids**, then the **Hines Brothers**, and finally Hines, Hines, and Dad when their father, Maurice Sr., joined them on the drums in 1963. For ten years, the three toured the country appearing in nightclubs and theaters and on television with their song and dance act.

Gregory left the act in 1973 and turned to acting and singing. A natural comic actor as well as strong dramatic actor, he appeared in a number of movies and Broadway shows. Among his movies were *History of the World: Part I*, *The Cotton Club*, *White Nights*, *Renaissance Man*, *Wolfen*, and *Running Scared*. Perhaps his best remembered and most honored performance was in the hit musical *Jelly's Last Jam*. Not only did he sing, dance, and

act in the show, but he also choreographed it, creating all the dance routines for it. Hines won a Tony Award for his acting in *Jelly's Last Jam*, the highest honor for an actor in a Broadway show.

In the late 1980s, Hines began hearing about a talented young tap dancer who was appearing on Broadway at age 10. Hines's former dance teacher Henry LeTang had auditioned him for the role in *The Tap Dance Kid*. The young dancer was Savion Glover. Hines first saw Glover in Paris dancing in the touring company of the jazz musical *Black and Blue*, and immediately decided to help him. In 1988, Glover costarred with Hines and **Sammy Davis, Jr.** in the film *Tap*. They danced with microphones on their tap shoes to enhance the sounds of their dazzling footwork. Glover also performed with Hines on Broadway in *Jelly's Last Jam*.

Glover belonged to a new generation of tap dancers. In addition to being a dancer, he was also a drummer, and he had rhythms from hip hop as well as jazz beating time in his mind. Glover believed tap, especially when enhanced by microphones, could fit with hip-hop music and the latest street dances. By 1996 Glover had redefined tap by co-producing the Broadway hit *Bring in 'da Noise/Bring in 'da Funk*. The show and his choreography captured the history of slavery and the vibrancy of today's Harlem and won him a Tony Award.

In 2006, Glover provided the dance routines and tapping for Mumbles, the star penguin, in the movie *Happy Feet*. Glover began his own dance company called Not Your Ordinary Tappers (NYOTs), which trains young dancers interested in tap.



> **SAVION GLOVER**

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Learn About Dance

International Tap Association: www.tapdance.org
 Internet Movie Database: www.IMDB

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History, Thomson Gale, 2006. Farmington Hills, MI

Tap Dance Fundamentals by Colleen N. West
 TAP! The Greatest Tap Dance Stars and Their Stories, 1900-1955 by Rusty Frank
 The Tap Dance Dictionary by Mark Knowles

Answers: 1. Gregory Hines; 2. Savion Glover; 3. Silver Belles; 4. Master Juba.

WHO AM I ?

Write the name of each dancer on the spaces.

1. I danced with my dad and my older brother Maurice.

2. I mixed hip hop and jazz in my tapping.

3. We took up tapping again when we were in our 60s and 70s.

4. This is my nickname. I'm credited with starting tap.

