

Tap Roots: *Fast Dancing in the Big City*



Doing the Shim-Sham: (left to right) Ernest Brown, Leroy Meyers, Leslie "Bubba" Gaines, Phace Roberts, Honi Coles, Jane Goldberg, Marion Coles, and Louis Simms.

By Sally R. Sommer

Tap-dancing is joyful and sassy, and even the names of the steps snap back: ruffle, shuffle, shag, slow-drag, buck-break, paddle-and-roll, buck-and-wing, nerve-rolls, toe-drops, clip, clap. Sound of course is the key to the whole thing, and tap demands attention because it is hearing dance. The body patters its own song even as it performs the dance. Tapping is talking, a rapid repartee of rhythms that astound the ear and tease the eye. The verbal repartee that tap dancers exchange mid-dance between themselves and with the audience is a natural extension of

feet are faster than the eye. But no matter how complex the rhythms, the good dancer ultimately triumphs with casual skill over flying feet.

The greatest tap dancers are (and were) blacks. In one of the uglier fallouts of racism, this brilliant, indigenous dance has come down to us filtered and diluted through white movies. Ann Miller, Donald O'Connor, Eleanor Powell, Ray Bolger, Ruby Keeler, Dan Dailey and Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire represent only the tip of a tap. Tap roots run deep, and black

except Astaire seems a pale copy.

Fortunately, there is a growing interest in tap. Jane Goldberg's recent tap event, *Shoot Me While I'm Happy*, at Dance Theater Workshop presented two of these old master hoofers, Charles "Cookie" Cook and Leslie "Bubba" Gaines.

"Cookie" and "Bubba" know just how to play that contradiction between the frantic feet and the loose easy-riding body. When they get off a good one, they seem almost as amazed as we are by the rambunctious clatter of the taps. Bubba pauses, mops his brow,

[meaning the applause], I will totally destroy myself for you." Then he breaks into fast double-wings while jumping rope. Cookie's style is one of irrepressible, bemused, nothing-to-it casualness. He almost grumbles about having to get his feet and head together before taking off into dance. The audience is being played like a finely tuned violin, and they love it.

As choreographer, Cookie builds a dense accumulation of rhythms that always retain a quality of lightness. Spatially contained, the footwork is central, the body rides along.