

## Profiles of Original Lindy Hoppers : Harry Rowe



Photo: G. WINKEL

From left to right: Elnora Dyson, Frankie Manning, Mildred Cruse Martin and Harry Rowe-- former Whitey's Lindy Hoppers reunited at Manning's 75th birthday party.

by Robert P. Crease

Harry Rowe nearly leapt out of his chair. The 70-year old Seattle dentist was reading a review of the musical, *Black and Blue*, in the February 6 issue of the New Yorker. The article stated that one of the choreographers was "a former Lindy Hopper" named Frankie Manning -- someone Rowe had known, danced with, and idolized as a teenager, but had not heard of since.

Rowe promptly shot off a letter to Manning, care of the Minskoff Theatre. When he learned that Manning was about to celebrate his 75th birthday, Rowe rearranged his schedule, jumped on a plane, and headed for New York. There, on May 19th, the two were reunited for the first time in nearly half a century.

Harry Rowe, né Rosenberg, was born in the Bronx in 1919, which back then was largely inhabited by Italian and Jewish immigrants. His parents, both Europeans, separated when he was two. Young Harry remained with his mother, who struggled to make ends meet as a seamstress; she placed

her son in an orphanage for four years because she was too poor to support him.

Harry was shy, but independently minded and a little bit of a show-off. He began to hang out with the local hip characters, who in those days were called "sharpies." To be a sharpie you had to first of all dress with class--zoot suit, baggy pants, slicked-back hair, hat with brim turned up on one side and down on the other, gold chain running from your belt down past your knees and up again to your pocket. To be a sharpie also meant a certain demeanor; one remained aloof, and stood around checking out the girls and making passes at them. And sharpies rarely danced. "They were too cool for that," Harry says. "They weren't about to sweat."

But one day a local sharpie invited Harry to accompany him to a dance that was taking place on Southern Boulevard. "It was a typical Bronx party of the time," he says. "Crowded loft, admission a quarter, white crowd, black band. But it was the first time I saw the Lindy, and I couldn't believe its energy. I thought, 'This is my dance,' and threw myself into it. In

about three weeks, it was clear I was going to be good."

Harry soon began competing in local Lindy Hop contests, and got a reputation as the best Lindy Hopper in the neighborhood--a wild man on the dance floor. "It was very heady. The sharpies were proud of me, the girls told me how great I was, the big shots were impressed. My ego was constantly being stroked." Harry became the principal attraction at the Club Fordham, the hangout for the Bronx Lindy Hop crowd. But he quickly outgrew that. "If you were an ambitious Lindy Hopper," he says, "sooner or later you needed to find out just how good you really were. And there was only one place to do that--the Savoy."

Sometime in 1936, Harry began attending the Savoy Ballroom on Saturday evenings. That night drew a big downtown crowd, and the racial mix was generally about fifty-fifty. The highlight of the evening was a Lindy Hop contest in which couples competed for a \$10 prize. Even though Harry had never seen any white couples participate, he entered the contests with his partner Ruth Rheingold. On several occasions, they won. Harry was characteristically but justifiably proud. "I used to look into the mirror at night and say, 'Harry, one day you are going to be the best damn Lindy Hopper on the planet.'"

Naturally enough, Harry's dancing attracted the attention of Herbert White, manager of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers. "In spite of the fact that I was white, square, and not a sharp dresser, I got along fine with Whitey and the other Lindy Hoppers," Harry says. "I was acceptable because I could dance. And I could really dance." One day White mentioned to Harry that if he was serious about finding out how good he was, he ought to come to the Savoy on Tuesday evenings. Those nights, in the absence of the downtown crowds, the

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