

Profiles of Original Lindy Hoppers : Eunice Callen



The Lindy Hoppers in Australia including Eunice Callen (third from left) Frankie Manning (far right).
by Robert P. Crease

One day in the fall of 1936, fourteen year-old Eunice Callen stood on the southeast corner of 140th Street and Lenox Avenue. She was looking for a club at 101 West 140th Street where, she had heard, some of Harlem's finest Lindy Hoppers hung out. Eunice had foolishly bragged to her friend Bernice that she could enter the tryouts for the Harvest Moon Ball--the annual city-wide dance contest--and be picked for the finals at Madison Square Garden; Bernice bet Eunice 50 cents that she couldn't. Eunice was a superb dancer, only she didn't know the Lindy. She was hoping to convince someone in the club to teach her.

Eunice spotted the club and walked in. It was a simple, beige-colored room, formerly a laundromat, furnished only by a few wooden tables and chairs and a counter on which sat a phonograph and a stack of records. A few men and women were talking and eating sandwiches. Eunice announced to the multitude that she was going to enter the Harvest Moon contest and wanted to learn the Lindy.

A man in the corner snickered. But a tall, huskily built person with a white streak through his hair eyed her curiously. "Can you dance?" he asked. "Sure," she said, "I can do everything you all can do." "Swing her

out!" he ordered, and another man took Eunice through a few steps. Frisky, petite, and energetic, she followed all of his moves. The person with the white streak smiled--Eunice noticed that the others called him Whitey--and asked her to rehearse with the group. She would soon learn that he was Herbert "Whitey" White and the group Whitey's Lindy Hoppers.

Eunice had learned to dance the way most people in Harlem did--by hanging out on street corners and trading steps with other kids. From Baby Laurence, Bunny Briggs, and others her age she had picked up the fundamentals, so she found training with Whitey's crew easy. Everything, that is, except air steps, which Whitey insisted be executed with military precision. "He'd say things like, 'Land with your back flat on the floor at the count of two and a half--and if you didn't, he'd fine you. When we made mistakes, we tried to disguise them by doing the itch until we could recover. But Whitey would always notice and fine us for that, too.'"

After rehearsal at the Savoy, Eunice would get Cokes and chocolates at the corner candy store with fellow Lindy Hoppers Lucille Middleton and Connie Hill, and their friend Mary. When they got older, they began to frequent two bars across Lenox Avenue after work; Brittwood Bar, on the corner of 140th, and Lillian Johnson,

on the corner of 141st.

For the upcoming Harvest Moon contest, Whitey paired Eunice with a dancer named Walter Johnson, known to everyone as "Count." The two made a terrific couple, for whereas Count was smooth and slick, Eunice was wild and showy. In June of 1937, Eunice and Count triumphed at the semifinals held at the Savoy; the acclaim was so great that they were called out for an extra performance. Eunice collected her 50 cents from Bernice.

But disaster struck during the finals at Madison Square Garden. Eunice forgot to test the floor beforehand, and to her horror discovered that it was too fast for her shoes. "I lost control of my steps," she says, "and couldn't make any of them precise." Moreover, she popped two buttons on her uniform, further lowering her score. Though she didn't place, the Daily News did publish a full page picture of her hanging around the neck of emcee Ed Sullivan.

Later that fall, the Big Apple dance craze hit the Savoy. The owners of the ballroom built a low, apple-shaped stage for the Lindy Hoppers, which was rolled out in front of the bandstand for performances. Eunice and Leon James were the "core"--they would get up on the stage and call the steps, which the other Lindy Hoppers would do in a circle around the stage.

Eunice also performed in various shows, including one at the Roxy. Early in 1938, a pair of producers named Willie and Eugene Howard saw the Roxy show and recruited the entire team for their "Hollywood Hotel Revue," about to leave on a tour of Australia and New Zealand. Eunice's mother ran into trouble, however, when she asked the Board of Ed for permission for Eunice to leave school. Finally, they allowed her to go--provided that Eunice be tutored three hours a day (a teacher happened to be taking the same cruise) and formally chaperoned (Frankie Manning got the honor).

The Australia group consisted of four couples--Eunice and Billy Ricker, Lucille Middleton and Frankie Manning, Esther Washington and Jerome

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