

## Profiles of Original Lindy Hoppers: Willie Jones



From left to right: Big Red & Belle Hill, Billy & Harriet, Willie Jones & Bennie, 1937.

From the collection of Willie Jones.

by Robert P. Crease

His face is unmistakable when he shows up every so often at the Cat Club or at a Copacetics gathering: a round, friendly countenance with a foot-long white beard that forks in the middle. Though he looks for all the world like Santa Claus, his name is Willie Jones, he's the cousin of Copacetics member Bubba Gaines, and he was a Savoy regular before Whitey formed his famous group.

Jones was born in 1910 in St. Kitts, Virgin Islands. He came to the United States at the age of four -- after his father, who worked on a banana boat that traveled to and from the United States, one day decided to jump ship in Florida and bring the rest of his family there. The family then moved to Georgia and then to Atlantic City, where Jones first began dancing. In 1929, Jones decided to go to New York City, where he stayed with his aunt and uncle and their son, Bubba Gaines, who at the time was dancing with the Three Dukes. By day, Jones shined shoes and pushed hand carts in the garment district; at night, he would head up to Harlem and dance at the Savoy with the likes of

Shorty Snowden (who was the first Lindy Hopper to make money dancing, with Paul Whiteman), the Shiek (so-called for his bizarre Arabian appearance), and Shoebush (who earned the nickname from the peculiar appearance of his hair).

Jones says, "Charles Buchanan, the manager of the Savoy, would let Snowden and his partner, me and my partner Bennie, and a few other dancers in for free, because we provided entertainment for him, and we also taught the hostesses how to dance." When not at the Savoy, he would earn money dancing in the amateur contests at the Lafayette Theatre, which until 1934 was Harlem's most popular musical stage, and at the Cotton Club uptown, thanks to a gig with bandleader Claude Hopkins in 1934.

Jones was befriended by a bouncer at the Savoy named Herbert White, an ex-prize fighter and head of a local gang known as the Jolly Fellows who became a valuable contact for Jones. Jones soon joined the Jolly Fellows, and would hang out at the headquarters on 133rd Street between 7th and 8th Avenues. Around 1934, White began to organize the Lindy Hoppers at the Savoy, and moved into a new hangout in an old

laundromat in the basement of a building at 101 West 140th Street.

"I was with Whitey before Norma and Frankie and everyone," Jones says. "I could dance just as fast as they could. But when they came in, they were younger and had new ideas for moves and routines. So Whitey put me in the smaller shows, though I sometimes substituted in the big shows when someone got sick because I knew all the routines."

His biggest show was *Knickerbocker Holiday*, which rehearsed in New York City went on the road to Hartford, Boston, and Washington before opening at the Barrymore on Broadway on October 19, 1938. In that show, a team of eight male members of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers played the members of the Algonquin Indians who came to attack Walter Huston and who exhibited their ferocity by performing a frenzied Lindy routine with numerous air steps.

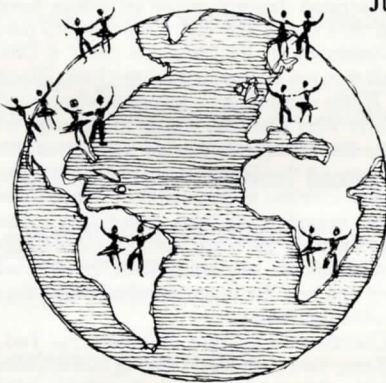
"We were so good," Jones said, "that we broke up the show, and they cut down our act because we were getting too much attention. At the beginning, our number ran to five minutes, but by the time we got to Boston, it was cut to a minute and thirty seconds."

Afterwards, Jones worked a number of clubs and shows and during the war landed a job as a dancer in a movie with Joe Louis. Later, when Whitey's dancers broke up, he kept in contact with Whitey, who still often landed gigs for him. Jones would work these gigs with a group called the "Six Swingers," composed of six former members of Whitey's crew: Count & Harriet, Blue & Jessie, Willie & Bennie. "When we'd perform," Jones says, "people would come up to us and say, 'you guys can dance, good but not so good as Whitey's Lindy Hoppers.' We'd say, 'we are Whitey's Lindy Hoppers!'"

Today, Jones lives in Philadelphia, where he continues to perform his comic repertoire in concerts and school programs of the Folklife Center of International House of Philadelphia. But he still remembers his years with Whitey fondly. "Whitey did something for us that nobody else would have done. We were poor and he helped us get money. We didn't know nothing, and Whitey turned us into ladies and gentleman. But most of all, he made people respect us, and made us respect ourselves."

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