

PROFILES OF ORIGINAL LINDY HOPPERS: NAOMI WALLER GAY

By Robert P. Crease

Blessed with a mixture of southern elegance and northern vitality, Naomi Waller Gay was one of the earliest and most well-trained members of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, and Frankie Manning's first professional dance partner.

Naomi was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina, on September 21, 1919, but her family moved to Philadelphia two years later when her father landed a job in the post office. She learned dancing on the streets and used to win the contests for kids in Philadelphia's vaudeville shows. She and her friends would obtain movie money by dancing for nickels and dimes outside working-class bars of North Philadelphia on Saturdays.

This did not amuse Naomi's mother, in whose religious perspective dancing was the occupation of fast and loose women. Rules of the house were: no dancing, no card playing, and on Sundays after church, to sit around the piano and sing hymns. The rules were enforced by threats of a thrashing with the cord from an electric iron.

In 1930, Naomi and her mother moved to New York, where the latter found work as a furrier and caterer. New York partially mellowed Naomi's mother; she sold her piano and soon permitted dancing and cards. She even sent Naomi to Grace Giles, a Harlem dance studio on 131st and 7th. But after dancing, Naomi still had to be home precisely on time.

It didn't take Naomi long to discover the Sunday afternoon dances at the Renaissance ballroom, where the boys lined up for the chance to swing out wildly with her. This gave Naomi's taffeta dress a regular beating, and by the end of the evening it would be torn; her mother would stitch it back together every Monday and send it to be dry-cleaned at 19 cents a shot. But if Naomi wasn't in by 6, her mother came calling with the electric cord.

One Tuesday late in 1935, Naomi was walking by the Apollo and heard of a dance contest there. Curious, she went downstairs to the rehearsal hall, where a group of young dancers was showing off, trying to be selected as contestants. Apollo staffers needed but a glance to see that Naomi was a shoo-in. She refused, saying, "My mama would kill me!" They insisted, and Naomi took first, dancing with a boy named George whom she'd never met before and with whom she split the \$15 prize.

Winners of the Apollo contest would give an exhibit afterwards at the Savoy, and a man named Herbert White directed her over there. It was



Naomi Waller Gay circa 1941.

her first time at that ballroom. She went on at 9:30, and was home by 10:00 -- way overdue. As feared, her mother was waiting, cord in hand. "I got a real beating that night!" Naomi says. She was grounded for weeks.

But White negotiated with Naomi's mother for her return to the Savoy, and teamed her up with Frankie Manning. The two won the Saturday night Savoy dance contests so regularly that soon other couples dropped out. Savoy manager Buchanan then excluded them from the contest, letting them perform an exhibition afterwards. The two worked theatres such

as the Apollo and Roxy and spent the summer of 1936 working the Club Paradise in Atlantic City with two other couples; Mildred Cruz and Billy Williams, and Lucille Middleton and Jerome Williams.

At the Savoy, she met a brash young trumpeter named Dizzy Gillespie, whom she taught how to dance. "She was my regular partner there," says Gillespie today. "She was one of the best."

On September 24, 1936, the new Cotton Club opened downtown on 48th Street right off Broadway; the principal stars of the first show were Cab Calloway and Bill Robinson. But the show included a Lindy Hop act performed by the team that had been in the Club Paradise; Naomi celebrated her 17th birthday three days before opening night. That show was crucial to the spread of the Lindy; thereafter, Lindy Hop couples (by now also known as "jitterbugs") were standard acts in shows and clubs.

After a few months, the show went on the road. When it returned, the William Morris agency organized a "Cotton Club Revue" to tour Europe in the summer of 1937, landing in Paris at the time of the Paris Exposition of Arts and Techniques and in London at the time of the coronation of King George VI. The show, billed as "the Ziegfeld Follies of the Colored Race," was the same as the original Cotton Club show, but with Teddy

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Louis Armstrong and Naomi Waller Gay, center, in *Swingin' The Dream*.