



photograph by Paul Armstrong

At the Apollo Theatre, Norma Miller then and now

Profiles of Original Lindy Hoppers **Norma Miller**

By Robert Crease

Norma Miller was one of the first members of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, the team of dancers from the Savoy ballroom who performed the show-stopping numbers in many movies and musicals of the 1930s. She has danced ever since, and her troupe, the Norma Miller Dancers, often gives performances in New York.

"I was always a dancer," Norma says. "I never did anything else. I wasn't about to go into a laundry, which is what a lot of black women had to do to survive in those days." She lived right in back of the Savoy, and was lulled to sleep many a night by the music from next door. At the age of 14, she ran off to join a chorus line in Glens Falls, New York. Her mother alerted the truant officer, who called the police.

Norma's break as a dancer came a few months later, after she and a partner won a talent contest at the Apollo theater. The next day, Herbert White or "Whitey", head of the dancers at the Savoy, showed up at her doorstep. Whitey's dancers entered every talent contest and threw their earnings into a kitty, and Whitey was somewhat put out that his dancers had been beaten. He wanted to make sure that, from then on, Norma danced for him.

In 1935, she won the run-offs for the first Harvest Moon ball, which were held at the Savoy. Norma and her partner Bill Hill competed in the finals at Madison Square Garden with Milton Berle as the emcee. Two months later, Whitey arranged for Norma and some other Lindy Hoppers to tour England, France, and Switzerland for nine months. They left on a cruise ship one Friday at midnight, the first dancers to take the Lindy Hop to Europe.

When she returned, Whitey arranged for her to travel with big bands--who usually toured with three Lindy Hop couples--to dance in Broadway shows, and to perform at the Savoy pavillion in the 1939 World's Fair. While on tour with Ethel Waters, Norma and the other Lindy Hoppers were spotted by an MGM executive who had just finished filming "Day at the Races." Astounded by their dancing, the executive called Norma and the others to the studio, filmed their routine, and promptly stuck it in the movie.

Norma's biggest and greatest show, however, was "Swingin' the Dream", a Swing version of Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream". One of the most lavish Broadway musicals of the era, it starred Benny Goodman on the clarinet, Louis Armstrong as

Bottom, Maxine Sullivan as Titania, and Butterfly McQueen as Puck. Agnes de Mille did the choreography, and the stage design was after Walt Disney.

The show was a colossal flop, one of the costliest Broadway failures of the decade. Brooks Atkinson, reviewing it for The New York Times, called it an "assault" on Shakespeare: "it would have been better," Atkinson wrote, "to throw Shakespeare out of the window." The show's only saving grace, he continued, was the music, as well as the "dark-skinned steppers who take to rhythm as though it were created for them and who aroused the audience last evening whenever they got going."

Just before the Second World War, Whitey sent Norma and other Lindy Hoppers on a Brazilian tour. When she returned, Harlem was declining as an entertainment center, and Swing was dying out. Many other Lindy Hoppers eventually took other, more secure jobs. "I can understand how they felt," Norma says. "But I told myself, I'm going to dance as long as I live!"

A few years ago, she began to write a book about the Savoy, based on her memoirs and interviews with friends. "This isn't just for me," she says. "This is something for all of the Lindy Hoppers, because we all shared it."

Her dancers have performed at the Village Gate, the Red Parrot, Roseland, and other places. Most recently, they have performed with the C. & J. Band at the Latin Quarter. Norma is a regular at the Cat Club. "The dancing is not like it was in the 1930s," she says. "You have to remember, the Cat Club is twice a month, while we danced at the Savoy every day of the year, with the energy of teenagers. But I like the Cat Club, because everyone enjoys themselves, and is there to dance! In that sense it is like the Savoy."