

Profiles of Original Lindy Hoppers **Al Leagins**

by Robert Crease

The Lindy Hop has many roots, one of which is traditional ballroom dancing. Al Leagins learned to dance before the Lindy was developed, and he brought to it a ballroom feel that you can still see in his easy, relaxed style.

Leagins was born in Columbia, South Carolina, sometime around 1910-1915; he is not sure what year. His parents died when he was four, and he was brought to New York, where he was raised by a friend who was the organist of the Metropolitan Baptist Church. He was a devout churchgoer, and Gospel rhythm deeply influenced his dancing.

He started attending the Savoy shortly after it opened in 1926; the Savoy had parties for kids on Saturday afternoons. A year or so later, Leagins went to the Savoy after church on Sundays as well. "In those days, they

didn't allow you to dance the Lindy to most of the dances. They'd say it was too rough, and would put you on the sidelines. Then they started planning special numbers for the Lindy dancers. Little by little, as things progressed, they'd let you dance it more and more."

Leagins worked various jobs in those days, in drugstores and as a messenger. For a while he danced professionally here and in Europe. Today he is the superintendent of a building, still loves to dance, and is a regular at the Cat Club. He has taught several of our workshops. "Dancing's like driving a car," he says. "You have to watch out for other people, and you have to know how to lead your partner. Then you can relax and have a good time."

A while ago, I watched with amusement as a young woman showed up at a Swing Society dance, evidently not realizing

that the Sunday scene at the Cat Club is different from other nights. She was wearing a dog collar, spiked bracelets, black nail polish, and a toothpick through her nose. Her jeans were decorated with strange hieroglyphics, her sneakers were equipped with spurs, and her hair was dyed red.

Seeing her alone by the table, Leagins went over to her and invited her to dance. He brought her out on the floor, led her through some simple steps until she caught on, and soon the two were bobbing and swaying to the music, her in his arms, looking for all the world--almost--like grandfather and granddaughter at a prom. "You're real good," he said when the music finally stopped and he guided her back to her seat.

That scene could only have happened in New York City at the Cat Club. And only with Al Leagins.

Discs for Dancers

by Bryant DuPré

Created and perfected in black urban America and popularized by Benny Goodman, swing music has always been essential to swing dancing. The spread of the music nationally gave the world



millions of dancers with swing feeling in their steps.

In 1986 swing music is not "in the air" as it once was. Now it is often only an occasional choice of those who grew up on other musics. The resulting swing dancing today has little chance of being compared in intensity and feeling with that of the Savoy ballroom of the thirties. Though this music and dancing may never be so popular again (but don't rule that out), it is now experiencing one of its most healthy and encouraging revivals ever at the Cat Club. Fortunately new swing dancers can find inspiration from a wonderful bounty of great swing recordings on the market today.

Before listing recordings we should consider swing itself. Besides being the name of a music or dance style it is also

a rhythmic performance valve of the music or dancing. Thus it is not found in the composition, arrangement, or dance-step patterns, but in the feeling of the performer. Hence it, " 'Taint whatcha do, It's the Way 'Hatcha Do It," to quote the Jimmie Lunceford hit recording. It may seem obvious, but since each performance is different, we should not judge a band on just one recording or live appearance.

Great swing music is currently reissued by large companies such as MCA in its Jazz Heritage Series or RCA on its Bluebird label. This material is drawn from the classic studio dates from 1935-45. A helpful new trend in reissuing has centered on live recordings of bands taken from radio transcriptions of hotel and ballroom appearances. This allows us to hear how much better bands can play when inspired by live dancers. It is easy to find these records at, among other places, J & R Music and Tower Records.

Following are a few recordings that can provide excellent inspiration for swing dancers. The focus is on dance music only and the list is neither comprehensive nor given in order of importance.



THE BEST OF BASIE (MCA2-4050)

If you buy just one, get this. These '37-'39 sides are widely considered the most swinging studio sides of the most swinging band.

COUNT BASIE AT THE SAVOY

(Everest Records FS-318) Mohammed Ali wouldn't dare call himself the greatest in comparison to this Basie band (recorded live in 1937) and these Savoy dancers. JIMMIE LUNCEFORD (Jazz Heritage Series, Vol. 8 MCA 1307 '36-'39 and Vol. 15 MCA 1314, '38-'42) A more polished band with slower average tempos and great back-beat feeling--years before rock and roll and disco.

FLETCHER HENDERSON (Jazz

Heritage Series Vol. 19 MCA 1318, '31-'34) This band created the style that was the foundation of the entire swing era.

BENNY GOODMAN (The Complete, Vol. 7, Bluebird AXM2-5567, '38-'39) Goodman's 1935 band made swing a national craze. This later band is, to some, even more swinging.

So keep on swing dancing at the Cat Club,-- you are the lifeline of its future.