

Profiles of Original Lindy Hoppers **Billy Ricker**

By Robert Crease

Billy Ricker, one of the original members of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, was born in midtown New York in 1914. He learned to dance as a kid during the summertime visits to his grandmother's place in Far Rockaway. There he met a girl a year his junior named Willa Briggs, and the two used to earn money entering dance contests up and down Rockaway Beach. They fell in love and got married in 1934. "It was a real courtship," Billy says.

As a teenager, he frequented Harlem ballrooms like the Alhambra and the Renaissance. "I liked to dance," Ricker says, "but didn't think I wanted to make a career of it." In 1935 his friend Frankie Manning told him about Whitey (Herbert White), who was on the lookout for young people with rhythm and style for a dance group. "I joined," Billy says, "but I was still doing it only because I liked it. I was working downtown at the Reliance picture frame factory, and had to come up to the Savoy on weekends to pick up what was new."

At that time, Billy and Willa were Whitey's only married couple. But Whitey had a policy--which everyone recognized as wise--of separating couples so they would not dance together. In 1936, for instance, Willa toured with a group backing up Ethel Waters, and wound up in Day at the Races. Billy, meanwhile, stayed in New York with a group working the Harlem Uproar, which included his partner Helen Bundy, Tiny Bunch & Dot, and Champ & Wilda. "Back then," Billy said, "clubs were different, and working them was a full-time job. You had to do three shows a night; an early show, a supper show, and a late show that began at 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning." He gave up his factory job.

Billy danced with Norma Miller in the 1936 Harvest Moon Ball. The two were



Norma Miller and Billy Ricker and the Jazz Men in 1961

expected to win, but Norma's blouse caught on Billy's button and ripped open; "she was virtually nude onstage," recalls Billy. Points were subtracted, and the two were disqualified.

Ricker introduced the Mutiny, a routine consisting entirely of air steps, during one of the Savoy's Saturday-night contests. In 1938, he left with Frankie to tour Australia and New Zealand with the Hollywood Hotel Revue. When they returned, Whitey tried to put them in the grueling Savoy exhibition at the 1939 New York World's Fair, but they refused. They wound up in the Hot Mikado with Bill Robinson, which moved from Broadway to the World's Fair; they did the "Three Little Maids" scene, a first act number, in coolie hats and Japanese outfits.

Billy and Willa appear in Hellzapoppin' and the Duke Ellington soundie Cottontail, both filmed in 1941. Later that year they went to Brazil with Frankie, Norma, Ann Johnson, and Al Minns to work the Casino da Urca in Rio. Shortly after their return, in 1942, the men in the group were drafted, and Whitey's Lindy Hoppers broke up. In

1948, Billy joined the Norma Miller Dancers, and continued to perform with Norma for two decades. Once, in Venezuela in the 50's, the group was even in the same show with Frankie Manning's Congaroos. In 1967, Billy had a toe amputated--"from doing too many jungle scenes dancing barefoot," he says -- but continued to perform off and on for two years afterwards, when he gave up dancing to work in the post office. Willa died of cancer in 1978.

Willa and Ricker were a little older than the others in Whitey's group, and got into more conflicts with him over money. "I think Whitey was a brilliant man," Ricker says. "The only thing he didn't do right was pay us enough. But to me, he compensated. I wouldn't have been in show business without him. He gave me the best experience I ever had in my life."

Date Changes

Swing dancers, take out your date books. Al Cobbs' C & J Big Band dance scheduled for JULY 12 has been POSTPONED to JULY 19. The dance on SEPT 6 (Labor Day weekend) has been POSTPONED to SEPT 13. The rest of the schedule remains the same.