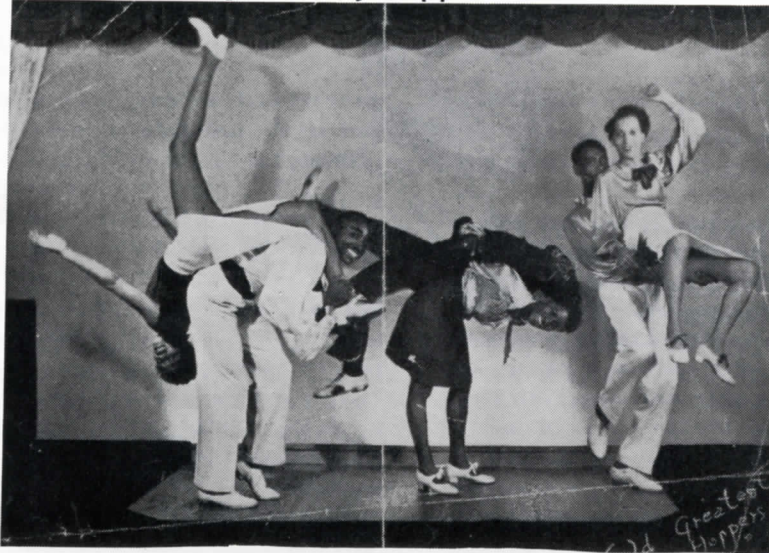


Profiles of Original Lindy Hoppers: **Mildred Cruse**



Whyte's Hopping Maniacs: Mildred Cruse far right, Frankie Manning left

by Robert Crease

Mildred Cruse, winner of the second Harvest Moon Ball, was one of the smoothest of the original Lindy Hoppers.

Cruse was born in Harlem in 1916, but her family soon moved to the Bronx. Though she loved dancing, it was a taboo to her extremely religious father. "I didn't even bother to ask him if I could," Cruse says. She practiced in her room in secret and slipped out of the house to go to places like the Renaissance. One day in 1935, on the advice of some friends, she went to the Savoy.

"At first I just sat back in a corner and watched," she says. "Then I got the courage to dance." She became a regular at the Tuesday evening meetings of the 400 Club. At one of them, a boy named Billy Williams approached her and asked her to be his regular partner. Early in 1936 Herbert "Whitey" White recruited them for his Lindy Hoppers, and entered them in the upcoming Harvest Moon Ball. To their surprise, they came in first.

Cruse's parents still didn't know

about their daughter's extracurricular activities. Unfortunately for her, that next week the Harvest Moon Ball dancers were featured in the newsreels shown by local theatres between double bills.

"A lady we called the Bronx Home Tatler told my parents that she'd seen me in the news at the Franklin Theatre. They came upstairs, threw open the door to my room and said, 'Get your clothes on, young lady, we're going to the [!] theatre.' I thought I was really going to get it!"

When the newsreel began, Cruse tried to excuse herself to go to the bathroom. "Just have a seat," her father said sternly. To her horror, during the Harvest Moon Ball footage the camera focused on her and Billy. She slunk down ever lower in her chair.

"But afterwards," Cruse says, "my father forgave me. He said, 'If you love dancing so much, why wouldn't you come and talk to us about it? Nothing too bad can happen to you that you can't come and tell us. We may not agree, but we'll try to understand.'" Having accepted his daughter's condi-

tion, he gave her permission to dance with Whitey.

By this time, Whitey was operating three teams of dancers in different jobs. Cruse and Williams wound up "Whyte's Hopping Maniacs," which besides Cruse and Williams included Naomi Waller and Frank Manning, and Lucille Middleton and Jerome Williams. Following an old tradition, the three couples danced in three different styles: comedy, flash, and smooth. Cruse and Williams were the smooth couple. The Hopping Maniacs played the Roxy, RKO houses, and then landed in Atlantic City for a three month engagement at the Club Paradise. There Cruse met William Martin, a tap dancer from Detroit working the Big Belmont in an act called The Three Gigolos. "She and Billy were the best dancers I'd ever seen," says Martin now. "They had such grace and elegance that my jaw just dropped." After three months in Atlantic City--days spent on the beach together, evenings spent apart performing in clubs--Cruse and Martin were engaged.

Whitey and the other dancers tried to talk Cruse out of it, for they knew she would leave the Hopping Maniacs, who had just landed new contracts. She finally agreed to dance until the contracts expired, and with the team worked the Cotton Club and toured the country with Cab Calloway's band, and Europe with Teddy Hill's. Upon their return in the fall of 1937 Cruse left the Lindy Hoppers and moved to Detroit, where she married William Martin in January of 1938. Afterwards, the two created their own dance act.

In 1950, the Martins retired from dancing. William took a job in an art gallery and devoted himself to music, while Mildred raised four daughters. In 1985, they began to dance together in an act again. The Martins, who just celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary, still put on a great show.