

Strutters QuarterlyTM

Autumn 1998 Volume 8, Issue 4

published by CINDY'S SWINGERS

All That Chazz



by Cindy Geiger

A spectacular dancer with a successful stage career, Chazz Young was first inspired by his father, Lindy Hop master Frankie Manning. Today he tours worldwide, spreading the gospel of Lindy Hop and Tap. In addition to his work as a choreographer and performer, he teaches Lindy Hop in his home town of Las Vegas to the most important dancers of today: the young people who are just now learning to partner dance. Chazz and I spoke one afternoon this past July in Sweden at Herrang Swing Dance Camp. Here's the first part of this fascinating conversation.

SQ How long have you been dancing? When did you start? Tell me about dance in your life.

CY All right. I started dancing, dancing school that is ... I started getting serious around 12 years old. And generally I always thought of this topic, had it not been for my mother taking me to see my dad perform, I don't think that I would have ever gotten in the business. I went to the famous theater downtown in New York called the Roxy Theater and there was my dad and his group of performing.

SQ Was that the Congaroo Dancers?

CY The Congaroo Dancers, correct. Not Whitey's Lindy Hoppers. And of course, there were the colorful lights, the music and the colorful costumes, and Frankie was throwing these girls around like crazy, and ... and it was very, very exciting. And my mother turned to me and asked me, "Did I think that I'd like to be up on stage, too?" So, quite naturally I said, "Yes." I don't know that I could say anything else because the surroundings were perfect for everything as far as performing was concerned. So next thing I knew, I was in the famous Harlem dance school called Mary Bruce. It was a famous dancing school in Harlem. I started learning tap, and they did not only offer tap dancing, they had acrobatic dancing and they also had social dancing. And when I say "social dancing" that's when I learned the basic Lindy. I was twelve years old at the time.

So anyway, I started going there once a week, and I got good enough to teach. And then I stayed there, with the Mary Bruce Dance School, until I was 17 years old. Norma Miller was a very

dear friend of my dad's -- they worked together in Hellzapoppin' -- she had organized the Norma Miller Dancers and they were looking for some dancers. My dad sent word to me and told me to come on down. So I went on down there and before you know it I was dancing, because the steps that they were doing I had learned in dancing school -- a few of the simple steps. So that actually started my career.

I performed with the dancing troupe at the famous Apollo Theater with famous bands like Count Basie and other famous bands which I can't remember at this time, but Count Basie is certainly a name that I would never forget the rest of my life.

And while working with the *Norma Miller Dancers* there were many changes. By that I mean we had been performing all over the United States, and they were getting ready to go to Curacas, Venezuela, with my dad's group, the Congaroos.

SQ So Norma's group and Frank's group were collaborating?

CY No, not collaborating. It was a show being taken to Curacas, Venezuela. *The Congaroos* were picked, *The Norma Miller Dance Troupe* was picked to go. Plus other acts. And that was one of my first traveling abroad experiences. I know I was seventeen because I celebrated my

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Chazz tutors a young dancer in Herrang, Sweden.



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eighteenth birthday there! That was quite an experience.

SQ More of an eighteenth birthday than most kids get.

CY Oh, yes. Right, right, right. So we traveled to various countries, Bogota, Columbia, and we came back and then we toured all over the United States. We also made a change. We had about eight boys, eight girls. It started getting expensive to travel, so we got rid of the girls and we were down to four fellas, so then it was called *Norma Miller and the Jazz Men*. And that was an act, such as my dad had *The Congaroos*. I was with *Norma Miller and the Four Jazz Men*. I was one of the *Jazz Men*.

SQ Were all the dancers as young as you were?

CY Well, now I've gone past 17, 18. Now I figure I must have been maybe about 30-something then.

SQ So you had been dancing professionally for many years.

CY Yes. I made my living dancing with the troupe. By that I mean I didn't do anything else but that. And I was still living at home. So, anyway, as *Norma Miller and the Four Jazz Men* did nine months in London, and ten days in Paris, and...

SQ Nine Months! That's incredible.

CY Oh yes. It was in a night club called the Club Pegalle, with a show. And we performed in the show for twelve months. We did one show a night and were off on Sundays. Most shows that went into the Pegalle did nine months, a year, or whatever, it depends on the show.

SQ That was in London?

CY That was in London. And while we were there in London, the famous Sammy Davis, Jr., came in the same club, so we took three weeks off, and did ten fantastic days in Paris while Sammy Davis, Jr. was performing at the Club Pegalle. I'm so glad we did that because I never had another chance to go back to Paris, not in dancing that is. We booked in at the Olympia Theater. I point out the Olympia Theater because it was a famous theater. Josephine Baker used to perform there. They had these stairs that went ... I mean they looked like they went up into that ceiling, and you had to come down, and it was scary! It was scary, but the cast had to come down these flight of stairs built on-stage. You had to go up a ladder at the back of the stage and then come down,

you know with the costumes and everything. And the lights. It was the greatest.

We did ten days. What they did, they took a nightclub show and put it in a theater show, in a theater, and it doesn't often work too good. They found out, so we had to close. We went back to London and they put us on half-salary. We used to go in practically every night and watch Sammy Davis, Jr. That was great! That was great!

So years went on and we went to Australia. We spent eight weeks in Australia with *Norma Miller and her Four Jazz Men* ... and Hong Kong, and also Republic of China and Taiwan! And then we came on back. Then things started to slow down for dancers. That was during the rock 'n' roll era.

SQ This was in the '50s and '60s?

CY In the 50s and 60s. And like I said, jobs started slowing down, 'cause they basically wanted ... if you didn't have a guitar, forget it! The only place you really could go was Europe. I had some offers to go to Europe, but I was married then and I had kids.

The rock 'n' roll era started and we weren't getting very much work, so I started driving taxi cab. Then my dad said, "Hey, they're hiring at the post office," (he was working there) so I got an application. It took a year and a half before they called me, but I was driving taxi. I went in the post office, but I was still teaching. I started teaching just to keep limber and keep a link to show business.

SQ In New York City?

CY All of this was in New York City, what I'm going to talk about now, 'cause I'm no longer on the road.. You understand, I was married with kids.

SQ Now I'm curious about that. How did you find ... how did you get married and have kids when you were on the road so much? Or was it just a gradual transition?

CY One of the girls in the *Norma Miller Dance Troupe* -- we got tight and we got married. My kids were like five years apart, because I was mostly on the road. And that's what happened, like every five...four or five years, in that order. I had four kids, so that's how that happened. In New York.

And so that's all I did for the entire 26 years that I spent in the post office. I taught. I performed for the Board of Education in New York. We did shows for them and for the children, and gave them the education of what

Lindy Hop was, and where certain dances came from. And there were other gigs around New York. And then, when Frankie started getting involved with the Cat Club and started teaching, then I started going down there. And the Lindy started getting bigger and bigger, and the Rhythm Hot Shots were involved with Frankie, so Frankie told them that that I was a teacher. This is my 10th trip to Herrang teaching tap. Ten wonderful, great years.

I moved out of New York, got a divorce, things didn't work out. I moved to Las Vegas where I'm living at this time, and I still have the good fortune to come here to wonderful Herrang where people come from all over the world to dance. That's what's so fabulous about Herrang -- meeting people from all over the world.

SQ Do you still teach now that you're living in Las Vegas?

CY Yes. I teach Lindy also. I started that because Lindy has spread so much throughout the world, throughout the nation. I got a call. They said that there are a lot of youngsters very much interested in learning the basic Lindy and how to swing out, things like that, from the Hard Rock Cafe. I said, "From the Hard Rock Cafe?" They said, "Yes." So, I went down and here come these youngsters, the age ranging from like 20 to maybe about 30, something like that. And they were very eager to learn. Commercials on TV such as Gap came out, and they were swingin' there, they're swingin' everywhere!

SQ I'm glad you're teaching there!

CY This is at a place called Arthur Murray's. This young fellow that I met organized it so on Mondays I dance with a partner that I've been dancing with while I was teaching for many, many years. We went in and started teaching basic Lindy and the old Shim Sham, and they loved it! Shim Sham is also being done all over the world. It was called one of the first line dances that they ever had.

SQ When you teach Shim Sham, are you teaching the social version?

CY Social version, not the tap. Only by request, maybe a tap dancer wants to learn it or something like that, but ordinary people -- they just want to get out there and do it.

SQ Who do you teach with?

CY Debbie Williams, from New York, moved to Las Vegas. We run the Austin Dancing School and we both teach there. *The Austin Dancers*

is a group that I'd been teaching in New York, and they moved out to Las Vegas. And then I moved to Las Vegas, because that's one of the most exciting places to live nowadays. They've built homes, and a lot of retired people have moved there. I'm 15 minutes from the strip, with all the excitement. The neighborhood I live in is nice and quiet at night, so if I want excitement, I can get up at 3-, 4-o'clock in the morning and just go down to the strip. They don't close up there. They say 7 & 24 -- 24 hours, 7 days -- you've been there.

SQ People like you and Norma are a treasure that they have there.

CY It's a whole big turn-around. I say it's time that people start getting together again. They've been dancing separately for the past 20 - 30 years, since the '70's or when disco came in, so it's nice to see them actually dancing together, and looking each other in the eyes, and holding the young lady, and it's just ... it's wonderful.

SQ What has brought about the re-evolution of partner dancing?

CY I think if there's any truth in the rumor that the world goes around in a cycle, then I think it's time. Evidently the time is right. They've danced apart, as I said, for all these years. They still can do that.

The music, these young bands, these youngsters playing in these young bands -- they get a chance to play the early music that we used to listen to, the jump tunes that they enjoy playing, and there's a dance that goes along with it. Whenever there's a change in music, there's a change in the dance. There're a lot of these groups. I was invited down to the Desert Inn in Las Vegas where they had a group called the "Big Six Something-or-other." They're from London. They said come listen to this band and some of the youngsters will be dancing there. And when I got there it was a nice crowd. This was before I started teaching. It was so nice to see a few people there doing the actual Lindy. Some other youngsters were doing something that I didn't ... I had to ask "What was it?" I was told it was the Rockabilly. That's what they knew. But, I've gone other places, and now I've actually seen the Lindy being done more and more. And really swingin' out. They're looking good and they're not sloppy.

The group that I've helped, by them coming to me, this is great. I definitely know the basic Lindy steps. So, that's what's been going on in Las Vegas.

SQ What do you think of the new swing bands that are out there. Do you have favorites among them?

CY Not yet... Yes! I was just in Catalina, and one of the bands that I like very much was out there -- Lavay Smith ...

SQ and the Red Hot Skillet Lickers.

CY That's right. They were good. And there's another, George Gee, who has a big band. I've heard them in New York, and that's a *swingin'* band! So, I haven't ... I'm just giving you the names that I know of, and I'm, sure that there are others. As the time goes by I'll be hearing more bands. But they're playing the Glenn Miller, the Count Basie charts, music for the kids to dance to. And that's what so fabulous, that's another thing. Like I said, the music changes, the dance changes. And, youngsters, if they want to rock, they're still a lot of places to go to. I think they should know both. They can always rock, they've been rockin' for a long time, but they need -- it'd be good if they'd learn how to swing, those that haven't started learning yet.

SQ Have you heard of bands like Big Bad Voodoo Daddy or Cherry Poppin' Daddies?

CY I've heard of them, but I haven't been ... well, I haven't even started buying. I've heard of Big Daddy Voodoo Daddy, but I'm not too familiar with what he plays. Maybe he plays some of the old charts, too. All these new groups are coming up playing the music, and youngsters are learning to dance to it.

SQ Do you do any choreography? Are you active in that right now?

CY Yes, I do some choreography also. I do performances, choreography, and I teach.

SQ What's your process when creating a new choreography? How do you go about that?

CY If somebody wants choreography, they can give me the music they want [or if I'm going to do a number, I'll pick out music that I like], tell me the theme, and then I'll go about it from there. Just organizing it, choreographing it from there.

SQ What do you look for in a good follower?

CY A good follower is half of the team. A good follower could dance with anybody; she doesn't have to just be able to dance with one person. I'll dance with her a few minutes and I'll do everything I know, and right behind that she can dance with

somebody else. And they can try to trick her. That's a good follower. They can't cause she's good.

SQ Who has most influenced your personal dance style?

CY My personal dance style would have to go to tap and jazz dancing. I go back and think of the wonderful style of Fred Astaire, the dynamic styles of the Nicholas Brothers, and Gene Kelly, the Barrie Brothers ... I like dynamic dancing, I like acrobatics, I like those type of things. And that's what inspired me. And of course the Congaroos, they had all of that in there, too. Acrobatics and things like that.

SQ What's your favorite thing about teaching?

CY I don't mind getting beginners that have never danced before, because then it's quite a challenge. Can I get this person to dance? And if they stay with me long enough and do what I ask, then ...

I used to do this in New York, teaching at a place called the YMCA. It was advertised this way: "People who always wanted to dance, and never had the chance." From scratch, as they say. I take these, and show them different methods and steps. And then we put on a show, and that person gets out there and does the best they can. And I sit back and say, "Did it again!"

Of course, they have to have the will, you know. They have to be able to sit and listen to music if they don't have the rhythm, maybe. They have to be able to help. I just can't just take a person ... just once a week they come to me and they don't listen to music or nothing like that ... they gotta practice a little bit.

SQ What is your best advice to a new dancer?

CY Oh, like anything ... like a musician, or like a dancer. Learn what the teacher says and ask questions. And then practice and listen to the music, get the feeling of the music and practice. And that's about it.

SQ Do you have any final thoughts that you want to share with people?

CY Dancing should be a part of everyone's life. And those who have not tried it, I think they're missing something. So, I say dance, dance, dance to everybody. Any kind of dancing. Just dance. I think it's wonderful therapy. I think it's good exercise. And if you haven't tried it, I think you should. □