
ON THE ROAD TO BEBOP

BRENDA BUFALINO

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Something happened in the 1940s. Music changed. And it did not just go through some tidy evolutionary stage, it went through a wild revolution that affected anybody who had anything to do with dance.

When Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie first took their band to the South, they stopped their audiences dead in their dancing shoes with their music. The crowd had come to dance; they loved to dance. It was the Swing Age, or so they thought. But they could not dance to this music—the music had started, and the dancers just stood there. Their faces fell in utter bewilderment. They were frozen by the rhythms emanating from the bandstand. Parker and Gillespie continued playing their music, but the crowd just never got the point.

What they heard from Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie was about to become a national sensation. They had come to hear swing, and what they got was a new beat which their ears could not understand. That beat was called bebop.

Bebop's definition is "jazz characterized by rhythmic and harmonic complexity and innovation, lengthened melodic lines, executed with loud bra-
In 1959, Brenda Bufalino encounters Stanley Brown's innovative jazz-dance troupe, joins the company, and experiments with new styles of dance and rhythm.

...vura.” But to most early listeners, it was just plain confusing. Dance fanatics suffered, but the tap dancers, in particular, struggled the most. The rest of America realized soon enough that they were not going to dance to bebop—bebop was something to listen to, to get ‘into the groove’ with. But tap dancers were resolved to conquer it. So they followed these new players around and listened for hours on end.

It was a struggle that, in retrospect, seems difficult to understand. But the musical chasm from jazz to swing to bebop was so vast, that it took great leaps of understanding for many. Some never got it. But the determined listened, and listened, and listened to this music until it seeped into their pores and became a part of their rhythmic existence. If they stuck it out long enough, they got it. Bebop Lawrence got it. So did Bunny Briggs. So did Jimmy Slyde. And there was a girl who got it, too. Brenda Bufalino became one of the major figures to bring tap right on through this musical revolution. She was a keg of dynamite, and she had a pair of feet that just would not quit.

Brenda Bufalino grew up learning the traditional tap shtick of the 1930s: suitcase tap, jump-ropé tap, hula tap. There was a lot of shtick in the 1930s. Brenda was the youngest member of a group called The Strickland Sisters, the “sisters” being her mother and aunt. They sang and recited, and she tapped. They came in on the tail end of vaudeville, so there was not much work there. However, there were plenty of USO and club dates to keep them busy. In the early 1940s, a tap act could really work.

By the time Brenda was fifteen years old, she began hearing a new rhythm inside her soul that was to become her obsession. She made her way to Boston to study with Stanley Brown. Stanley Brown’s studio was the place to learn tap in Boston, and many of the great tap dancers of the forties and fifties went through Brown’s school. Brenda joined his company of dancers, and, after a time, moved on to New York City. It was in New York that she, like many other tap dancers, really encountered the revolution of bebop.

She spent every free hour of her day and night in smoky jazz clubs listening to all the great players of the age, not just of bebop, but of every form of jazz music that was happening. She listened to Max Roach, Clifford Brown, Wilber DeParis—jazz clubs dotted the island of Manhattan. For a young person interested in music, it was jazz heaven.
Through this immersion in the world of music, Brenda Bufalino conquered the phenomenon of tap dancing to bebop and modern jazz. More important, she became part of the music—she became another great jazz player.

BRENDA BUFALINO — I used to sit under the piano for four or five hours a day when I was a little kid. My aunt was preparing for her master's degree, and I would sit under there doing my school work. Even though I didn't play an instrument—other than I play the concertina badly—music was obviously my biggest influence as a tap dancer. It really wasn't the dancers.

I was born in 1937 and grew up in Swampscott, Massachusetts. My family was a musical family. My grandfather had been a ballroom teacher, played the fiddle. My grandmother played the piano and sang. My aunt was a coloratura soprano and concert pianist. My mother was a lyric soprano and elocutionist. And my father was a contractor! He didn't have too much to do with all this, except he paid the bills.

I started dancing when I was about four. The school that I studied in was Professor O'Brien's Normal School of Dancing, which was a kind of an esoteric school. He taught interpretive, Egyptian, Spanish, acrobatic, and tap; and that was every day. He had about forty people in the room—all ages. There were no children's classes. And they were not allowed to have any recitals or any flash, anything that wasn't really serious. Most of the older girls went on to be Rockettes. I always thought I would be a Rockette. That would be what I did, you know. 'Cause that's where they all went. But that didn't happen!

I guess I started with Professor O'Brien there when I was about six, and soon after, was incorporated in my mother and my aunt's show called The Strickland Sisters. And we did a lot of club dates in the New England area. It was a pretty great show, because they would have their Dutch medley, their Hawaiian medley, and then their Spanish medley. And I would do tap dancing to all that different music. My mother would do the monologue, and they would sing. They had beautiful voices! So it was pretty terrific. It was very atmospheric. My mother used to do Tennyson, Hiawatha, you know—it was heavy as well as entertaining. I came after vaudeville, but there were many examples for them. They were kind of vaudeville and classical. It's funny, though, my mother always kept wanting to be a jazz singer! But she was so trained, she could never make the switch!

During those early years, I was like the tap dancing kid. Aside from our nightclub work, I did a lot of USO, because that was during the war period. We would go to hospitals and army camps and traveled with a guy named Pop in a great big bus. And at that particular time, I think my specialty was roller-skating tap. I had a roller-skating act and a Hawaiian tap act! I mean, it was pretty strange. My Hawaiian number was, I think, "Lovely Hula Hands." I know I did a very big number to "Slow Boat to China." That was a big number, that was acrobatic tap. I used to do a lot of acrobatic things on stage, too.

By this time I had switched to a lady called Alice Duffy. She was much more theatrical. Mr. O'Brien had been very purist. It was all about "the dance," and "the spirit of the dance." Alice Duffy was about costumes! The more glitzy stuff that I did came from her. Jump-ropes tap that I did,
and the Hawaiian number, came from Alice Duffy. The more classical numbers, like suitcase dances to “I’m Alabamy Bound,” came from Professor O’Brien. Tap dancing on suitcases was classical, in a way. The mixture of genres—Alice Duffy was into that.

In 1952, when I was around fifteen years old, I decided I wanted a “primitive” dance. I didn’t even know what a primitive dance was. You know, when you’re in Swamplott but I wanted something primitive. So I used Ravel’s “Bolero.” I had a leopard-skin costume, and a hat with horns and fuchsia ostrich feathers, and claws, and I danced on this great drum. My mother’s agent was sitting in the audience at a recital, and he said, “I think she should go to Stanley Brown. I think that’s where she belongs.”

My mother, of course, didn’t know who Stanley Brown was. But the agent could see from what I was doing what I was after. My folks were divorced by then, so I kind of wandered into Stanley’s studio by myself. I was wearing my pink dress, my white hat, my white shoes, and my white gloves. Because, you know, if you’re from Swamplott, you always wore gloves, and you always wore a hat! And I remember standing downstairs at Stanley’s—I heard the drums upstairs. The contrast was quite shocking. And I just fell in love with it. Stanley tried to send me home. He said, “You don’t belong here. If you come here, you are going to be very unhappy. You’re turning your back on your own tradition. And you will never be happy if you try to do this. There is no place for you in this world.” And of course, that was all I needed to hear. That made it even more desirable!

And so, I went into Stanley Brown’s, and that really was the turning point for me. ‘Cause, although I had heard my mother a lot playing jazz in the house and trying to sing jazz herself, I never was in the world of it. Between the modern primitive that was taught there, and the jazz dance, and the jazz tap dance, which I had never heard before, that was probably the beginning of my style of dancing.

So I stayed there and joined the troupe from Stanley’s very quickly—in which we did these great galas. Then we started working in nightclubs. I was very much underage, only fifteen, and we opened up in a sailor bar. It was really seedy! There was sawdust on the floor, you know. We stayed there for nine months. We were so successful, they redid the whole club. By the time we left they had lights, a new bar, and a new floor! Needless to say, the sawdust was off the floor.

Stanley’s was a big dance group. We all did solos as well as the group work. It was outrageous, you know, it was really outrageous stuff—the one I remember the best was doing the “Red Shoes” on point with Afro-Cuban body work.

I don’t know too much about Stanley’s background, but Stanley was one of the major teachers of tap dancing in the country. [Jimmy] Slyde came out of Stanley’s. A lot of people came through Stanley’s. It was a very hip place. He really turned out a polished professional. It was a great time, and there was a lot of jazz music there. He had Sandy Sandiford, a fine arranger who was a mentor to a lot of future arrangers. And so it was the first time for me that I really was able to work with arrangements and musicians—although all the stuff that I did with my family was live—my aunt sang or we had another accompanist. But this was when I really began to understand jazz arranging.

Stanley gave me a number to “I Like New York in June” (“How About You?”)—I hated that song.
At age fourteen, Brenda Bufalino is the sweet image of a girl from Swampscott, with no hint of the explosive percussive dancer lurking within, 1951.
And I cried! I was very temperamental. Terribly temperamental. And I went to Sandy in tears and said, “I hate this song!” But, that’s when I learned that a tune is only a tune—it’s what you do with the arrangement that counts. And he made the most smashing arrangement for me.

At that time, there was a lot of jazz in Boston. I would go from high school, take the bus into Boston, take classes, and either work or go to the jazz clubs. Then I’d go home late, late, late, and get up and go to school. Needless to say, I didn’t do too well in school! Because I was really seriously in training and listening to music. It was a great time. Modern music was beginning to come through. There was a musical change. And that’s how it happened that I was a “cusp” dancer, I was right on the cusp of the change. The old influences were there; I learned the old stuff, but I was very excited about the new music that was coming out. But I didn’t figure there was any way to incorporate modern jazz and tap. It took me a long time to figure out how to use the newer music when I was tapping.

By the time I got to New York, which was soon after joining Stanley’s troupe, I got really involved in Max Roach and Clifford Brown, that great group [Max Roach and Clifford Brown Quintet]. In fact, I used to listen to them every night, because it upset me. I didn’t understand it. I didn’t understand what they were doing. I was really trying to grapple with it. And I have a funny sort of mind—everything goes in the back door. Things don’t hit me frontally. I can’t tell you who I heard, or any particular moment when the light went on. It’s just that I was there at that cusp period. And I think, probably, the biggest turning point for me musically, where I really began to understand where I was going, was the period I was studying Max Roach. You know, where I would just go every night.

I didn’t have much opportunity to play with these players who were stretching. I was playing with much less, you know, club bands who weren’t particularly great. I never had that wonderful opportunity of traveling with a Cab Calloway. My opportunity with music was always to have a terrible band! That was my good fortune! Which is not altogether bad. Because you learn how to deal with music. To make bad music good.

I used to go to the 125 Club up in Harlem every night after I finished my shows and listen to the
jam sessions up there. There were after-hour jam sessions from four till seven or eight o’clock in the morning. I was really saturating myself with music, and my ear got very developed at that particular time. It kind of stayed with me. I was fortunate enough to work later on in my life with great players in the avant-garde. I went even past the modern jazz and just completely into the avant-garde.

I also got interested in how pieces were put together. I lived upstairs over Jilly’s Black Magic Club. So I would listen to the cocktail lounge players. And they played very sophisticated songs. My lyrical sense also got very titillated, and I started putting things in my act at that time like Billy Strayhorn’s “Lush Life.” My arranger, Sandy, said, “What are you doing with this song? You’re too young to use this song!” But at that time, I was into a lot of dissonance. I would find songs that were pretty out there and fairly dissonant and complicated to dance to.

I liked dissonance, and I liked a certain amount of chaos and cacophony. The degree of it that was coming out of bebop—the kind of splitting, the splitting of phrases, the harmonics—was getting more complicated. It sounded quite frenetic and wild. Now, it doesn’t. Now, we say, “Well, what was the big deal about that?” It seems quite tame by comparison. But at the time, it was pretty unsettling what they were doing. And it was a time that musicians were really exploring. So anyway, it was pretty hot. Pretty wild.

I lived down on Fifty-second Street, so I could go to Birdland; I could go to Basin Street. I used to go to Jimmy Ryan’s on Monday nights, and that was New Orleans jazz. There was Wilber DeParis and Sydney DeParis. They were wonderful players. They used to take all the chairs and everything out, and I could dance with them on Monday nights, because that was the slow night. And so I was just in it. You know, I was right on the street.

I was living on the street, and I was a kid. So the people were pretty nice to me.

It was a very hot moment for jazz, “cause as I said, the mix was still being done. You had the really modern players, like Basie would come in—and then you would have Wilber DeParis playing the New Orleans—and the Australian Jazz Quartet would come in—so that it was a big wonderful creative mix of music that really, I think, took me for the rest of my life. Plus, it was still a time when people were jamming. To be able to go to the clubs uptown and hear jam sessions for hours on end was something else. They were just playing nonstop.

And as much as I listened to music, I’d have to say that a lot of times the tap dancers did know more about music and the rhythms than the musicians did. I was studying tap with Honi Coles for a short time when he had his studio on Fifty-second Street with Pete Nugent. Honi’s phrasing seemed revolutionary to me—as much so as the music of the time. His influence on both tap dancers and musicians was tremendous. I think musicians were stymied by the rhythms that tap dancers were laying down. I could definitely see a few of the dancers of that time influencing the transition of music. It’s very logical, because the tap dancers were there before the changes happened. And everything comes in to everyone through the back door. I don’t imagine that someone would say, “Well, I think I’ll take that from that tap dancer.” I don’t think that’s the way it’s done. I think it just kind of evolves. ‘Cause a tap dancer’s rhythms are much more sophisticated, even to this day, than the drummer’s rhythms.

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very complicated rhythmically, but, in fact, nowhere near what we do still.

It's pretty sophisticated what a tap dancer can do. Which is why, I think, the public has such a hard time with its form, because it is so sophisticated. Unless it's the traditional three steps and a break. Then it can be heard! You know, that's part of the reason, I think, that it's hard to get tap across. 'Cause it's still ahead of its time. I think tap is a very visceral form. There's a double-edge problem, because people identify tap dancing personalities so strongly, that a lot of times the art of it will get lost behind the personality. And yet, that's what it is. But even the great jazz players could play their figures with wit. And those are the ones that are really remembered. An audience is subliminally waiting for the wit, as well as the rhythm. They don't want to be disturbed with glitches. Rhythmic glitches disturb an audience without any of them knowing why. So if something's steady, they can relax behind it and really get into it. I think audiences expect a certain degree of wit in presentation. And part of the reason the personality is so important is because it is also a way of executing a figure with a certain wit. It will help describe the figure clearly.

I learned that an audience will also go along with the narrative of tap. They will go along with an indeterminate narrative, if the emotional substance is correct that's behind it—what is being said emotionally is what is being done rubato with the taps, the poetic figure of tap. They feel it, yet it's very rare that they're gonna know why they're feeling it. It's a very educated audience that says, "That's so interesting the way that figure played against the other figure."

I've spent a lot of time thinking about how the audience perceives the form. It's really important for us to do that. Why certain things work and others don't. I'm always telling dancers when they're learning tricks [complicated, difficult steps or rhythms]. "If you learn to walk four steps in the right way, you'll get a hand. You do your tricks and you'll get nothing, if they're not done in the right way and in the right place. Some other guy will come in and just walk across the stage and he'll get all the applause, and you just killed yourself!"

It's all very complex, the business of tap. And I think what drew me to it was the ability to be a musician—what the form implies musically—that I can compose. Because I'm not that much of a visual person, I'm a much more oral person. And I love music. That gives me the opportunity to arrange and compose, to write music for it. So it's quite perfect. I never lose my interest in it. And I think rhythm is magic. One day I have a wish to take a roof off of a building with rhythms. I have a very strong feeling that rhythm is the magic component. You know—that it can change things. That rhythm can really change levels of other people's energy—this is a very exciting thing. And if you can make it in just the right connection, you can take a roof off a building! I'm waiting for that day!

May 25, 1989
Washington, D.C.

(On the day of this interview, Congress declared May 25, Bill Robinson's birthday, National Tap Dance Day. The bill was signed into law by the President of the United States.)