I was very ambitious when I was dancing. I wanted to be so good, I wanted to surpass the two-leg dancers! And in a lot of cases I did.

Throughout tap’s heyday, legions of syncopated steppers lit the stages of American entertainment. Each of these tap acts had a specific style of putting the dance across: flash, novelty, eccentric, legomania, soft shoe, buck and wing, class. An act became known for one of these specific styles of tap dancing, and the dancers took the art soaring to new heights. It was not that the individuals were unable to do other types of tap dancing. It was just that they excelled specifically in one area, and the audiences loved them for it. The Four Step Brothers perfected acrobatic flash, The Nicholas Brothers, classical tap, Coles and Atkins, class and soft shoe, The Ebsens, comedy and eccentric. Indeed, their names were synonymous with their style. Bill Robinson’s name alone paints a picture of a derby-hatted, nattily-dressed dancer tapping his way up and down a staircase; Fred Astaire, a vision of gentlemanly grace suited in top hat, white tie, and tails wittily tapping out some clever romantic melody; Ann Miller, a dazzling array of riveting taps and turns.

But there is one tap dancer who defies this concept of singularity. He did everything including ac-
Peg Leg Bates demonstrates an uncanny tap dancing ability during his first year in vaudeville, 1930.

the Keith and Loews circuits, appearing in the reigning vaudeville theaters. During the 1950s, Peg Leg Bates appeared on Ed Sullivan's television show more times than any other tap dancer—a total of twenty-one appearances.

Part of Peg Leg Bates's success was the sound he created, especially when doing a rhythm dance. The end of his peg was half rubber and half leather; on the inside of the peg leg was leather, on the outside of the peg leg was rubber. When he was tapping, he worked inside on the leather for the sound. When he was doing novelty steps, for example, balancing on the peg, then he worked outside to keep from slipping. With his right leg, he used a tap shoe, with regular metal taps. But it was the peg that really brought it in a strong rhythm sound.

Like all others of his era, Peg Leg Bates actively "stole" steps. This was just the business. Tap dancers emulated each others' steps; that is, as much as they could, and then refashioned the steps to become their own. Whereas two-legged dancers had four taps with which to design their steps (a tap on the ball of each foot and a tap on the heel of each foot), Peg had only three contacts for the floor (a ball tap, a heel tap, and the peg). Every step he saw, he had to reinvent for this specification. And because his had a very deep and resonant tone, he was capable of producing intense rhythms that quite surpassed those created by many of the ace rhythm tap dancers of his time. In addition to his top-rate ability as a rhythm tap dancer, Peg Leg Bates was thoroughly accomplished in acrobatics, flash, legomania, and novelty repertoire, all of which he incorporated widely into his dancing. That Peg Leg Bates remains the leader in the category of one-legged tap dancers is a sentiment unchallenged by any of his peers. In fact, he figures in among the finest tap dancers ever to have lived.
PEG LEG BATES — I could not truthfully explain to you why or how I really started into dancing. I've been tap dancing since I was five years old, before I even knew that I was tap dancing. I used to tap dance barefoot, making noise with no shoes on at all! Not having any music, we would just clap our hands, and that's where the rhythm came from at that particular time.

See, I was born in a little town in South Carolina by the name of Fountain Inn. My father deserted my mother when I was three years old, and after that my mother had a pretty tough time taking care of me and her mother. We were sharecroppers raising cotton, corn, and vegetables. We were poor, very poor. Had to reach up to touch bottom.

When I was twelve years old, I started working in a cottonseed gin. This is 1918, during World War 1, when men was in service and women and children was working jobs of this caliber. This cottonseed gin was where they took cotton to a gin mill (not gin that you drink!), and they separated the seeds to be made into linseed oil and the cotton to be used for other purposes. There was an auger conveyer, which was like a giant corkscrew, that took the seeds from one building to another where they could be separated. One night around three o'clock in the morning, a light went out in the back. I'd only been working there for three days, and I went in the back to see why the light was out. Not knowing where I was going nor what I was doing, I stepped in the open conveyer. It started chewing my leg up. There was one other person in the building, and when he heard my screams, he ran over and stopped the machinery. The doctors looked at my leg, but it was so badly mangled, the next day they amputated it about eight inches below the knee. That it was amputated below the knee was important, because if I didn't have the knee, I couldn't be on the peg leg.

After losing the leg, for some unknown reason, I still wanted to dance. At first, I was walking around on crutches, and I started making musical rhythm with them. Then my uncle made me a peg leg. I removed the crutches and started walking and dancing on the peg leg. I just wanted to dance. It was just something that I liked, and something that I wanted to do. And at school, the more active I was on the peg leg, the more compliments I got from my school chums. That was an encouraging factor. I went into sports, swimming, horseback riding, riding a bicycle, playing baseball—anything that anybody else did. See, I did not realize the importance of losing a leg. I thought it was just like stubbing my toe and knocking off a toenail that was going to grow back. Being a kid, and a dumb kid at that, I didn't realize the importance of losing my leg. And I guess that was helpful.

I never took a dancing lesson in my life. If I saw a two-leg dancer doing a step, I would copy that step. But I would do it with one leg, which made it look like an entirely different step than what the two-leg dancer was doing. And I loved novelty things. I loved to be up in the air! I loved a lot of legomania. I was very ambitious when I was dancing. And the reason for these different styles—the acrobatics, the rhythm, the legomania—was I wanted to be so good, I wanted to surpass the two-leg dancers! And in a lot of cases I did.

Well, I was around fifteen, and people started complimenting my tap dancing. I went into amateur shows, and I won every first prize! It was definitely encouraging. I liked it, I liked to hear the applause. Then I went into minstrel shows.
From minstrel shows I went to carnivals. And from carnivals to the T.O.B.A. I was with T.O.B.A. from 1922 until 1926. I came to New York through the roof of the T.O.B.A. During those years, the T.O.B.A. brought you to the large cities. T.O.B.A. was not only in the South. T.O.B.A. was Cleveland. T.O.B.A. was Pittsburgh. T.O.B.A. was Philadelphia. T.O.B.A. was black theaters that played nothing but black performers. That's what the T.O.B.A. was. And it was through them that brought me to the Lafayette Theatre in New York, one of the most important black theaters in Harlem. While there, I was seen by Lew Leslie, who at that particular time was the producer of Blackbirds of 1928, and that started me on my career as a professional tap dancer. I went to Europe in 1929 with Blackbirds, where we played the Moulin Rouge for eleven months.

In those days, there were dancers. There were dancers, I'm talking about, that laid down some iron! And laid down some rhythm! There was a guy—he died before he really became known—Teddy Hale. And there was the team Buck and Bubbles, I knew them very well. Derby Wilson, Bill Bailey—he was Pearl Bailey's brother. And Baby Lawrence! Another guy that could lay down more rhythm, you couldn't believe it—Chuck Green. Those were all tap dancers that laid down iron. This was not novelty, not legomania. You saw it. It sounded good. It looked good. And made you feel good! That's what I'm talking about. There were some dancers that I knew that was dancers! Eddie Rector was something else. Now, I am referring to stylists. I'm talking about guys that had their own style. You didn't have to see them. Listening to the rhythm you knew exactly who that was. It's just like a singer that is a stylist. When you hear that voice, you don't have to see the person. You hear it. Tap dancers got their own language, just like singers got their own language. And the girl tap dancers! The best tap dancer among females that I've heard was Eleanor Powell. She could dance! I'll give you another one that could dance—taps, twist, turns—Ann Miller. Yes, there were some dancers out there! I'll tell you another guy, white guy, Steve Condos of The Condos Brothers. He can dance! Can lay down some iron. And this is the beauty of tap dancing that I have always found. I guess this is one of...
the nice things about race relations in show business. If a white boy can dance, a black boy gives him credit: "Hey, that guy can dance! He can lay down some iron!" And anytime you hear a good tap dancer saying that about a white boy, that means that boy can dance!

Well, after Blackbirds closed, we left Paris and I went into vaudeville and nightclubs in the East. In vaudeville, I played the Keith and Loews Circuits and an independent circuit called Fanchon and Marco. I worked my way up to the top independent theaters like the Paramount, the Roxy, the Capitol, the Strand. And I played the great uptown Harlem clubs—Connie's Inn, the Cotton Club, Club Zanzibar.

It was during the 1930s that I first met up with Ed Sullivan. At that time he was a newspaper man, and he used to emcee the Harvest Moon Balroom. They had amateur contests there, and he would take the winners on the Loews Circuit. At that particular time, I was booked from the William Morris office. He wanted a strong act to open his show, but he couldn't find anybody to really open the show, to get it off. So he got hold of the William Morris office. He had some friends in there, and asked them about an opening act. William Morris office said, "I got just the man for you. Got a man that, matter of fact, he is an opening act. Peg Leg Bates, a one-leg dancer." Ed hired me, saw to it that my salary was raised, and used to divulge his entire column to me! We played the Keith Circuit, the Loews Circuit.

This was all around 1937, 1938.

In 1938, I went to Australia and played the Tivoli Circuit, their big-time vaudeville circuit. Unlike American vaudeville circuits, which only kept an act in a theater for one week or a split week, the Australians would keep a vaudeville show in one theater for five weeks at a time! I was in Australia for ten weeks, five weeks in Melbourne, and five weeks in Sydney. The Australians had no color barrier and were very fond of blacks. They showed strong appreciation for my talent, and I was always invited to their homes and to parties. Remember that was 1938, and I was the only black on the Tivoli. As a matter of fact, most all of my career I worked with white performers. Very few black revues I've been in. Mostly white. Even in vaudeville. And back then there were not

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Through the use of his peg, Peg Leg Bates introduced a strong Rhythm element to his dancing. Here he performs in a Loews Unit at the Roxy Theatre, 1935.
an awful lot of black people on the circuit. Most of it was white. It was just a situation that existed. But, I am fortunate that I was able to do something with one leg and got the recognition from it. It was not a sympathetic thing. I was actually tap dancing! Actually laying down some iron. I'm thankful that I was blessed to be one of the main people in the tap dancing field, and in my category, the leader of dancing on the peg. There's no one to come near me. And I say that cocky. Because it's the truth. I don't know why, but nobody ever caught up with me. And there's been a lot that tried. I guess it was just 'cause I was just that good.

I rehearsed a lot. I'd get by myself, and I would see how it sounded to me, not how it sounded to someone else, but how it would sound to me. I had to be satisfied with it myself. It had to be pure—it had to be foolproof. I was an ad-libber, but I had to have some set things. I had some novelty steps that I knew was going to get applause, and I would ad lib around that. If I saw that something was not working, then I threw in a couple of my steps that I knew was going to get applause.

I'm into rhythm. Well, I'm into rhythm and I'm into novelty. I'm into doing things that it looks almost impossible to do. I guess that's the best way that I can describe it. I loved the compliments. I loved the applause. And it all came through tap dancing... I think that's the best way that I can describe it.

Tap dancing was my life. Tap dancing is my life. Tap dancing will be my life the longest day I live.

November 13, 1988
Kerhonkson, New York