Among tap's greatest stars, one little girl, a curly-topped bundle of joy, captured the hearts of Americans young and old. Something about the way this tiny tot tap danced simply made the rest of the world want to do it too. When Fred Astaire or Eleanor Powell tapped, it was the work of magnificent stars. But little Shirley Temple was just a kid. If she could do it, certainly any average Tommy and Suzie could, too. And so it happened that every time one of her films was released, tap enrollment skyrocketed across the country in dance schools.

Shirley Jane Temple was born in Santa Monica, California on April 23, 1928. When barely three years old, she became a student at the Ethel Meglin Dance Studio and simultaneously a Famous Meglin Kiddie. Even in 1931, The Meglin Kiddies were regarded throughout Hollywood as superbly talented tap dancers. They were hired in hoards of tiny, tapping, patent leather feet, for such movies as *Shipmates Forever* [1935]. Shirley Temple had not been with Mrs. Meglin long before she was discovered for a new series of one-reel comedies called *Baby Burlesks*. At the age of four, Shirley began earning ten dollars a day, an excellent wage in the Depression—especially for a dancer who had not even started grade school!

In 1934, Shirley Temple astounded the film industry with her performance in the Fox film *Stand
up and Cheer. She only had a bit role in the movie, however, when she sang and tap danced, the entire world smiled. Her fame was simply colossal. Her trademarks were dimples, bright eyes, and curly-top golden hair, and in the coming years she would have a musical film named after each of them.

Shirley Temple's movies were magic at the box office, too. When she first hit it big, the Motion Picture Herald listed her as number eight of the top-ten moneymaking stars for 1934. One year later, in 1935, she skyrocketed in popularity to become the number-one box-office star. She held that position through 1936, 1937, and 1938. The competition was tough, but Shirley Temple stayed right up there ranking above Clark Gable, Astaire and Rogers, Joan Crawford, Dick Powell, Claudette Colbert, Gary Cooper, James Cagney, William Powell, Myrna Loy, Robert Taylor, Mickey Rooney, Bing Crosby, and

Shirley Temple takes the country by storm, 1934.

Spencer Tracy. Exhibitors proclaimed her box-office salvation. Shirley Temple's unaffected personality and her extraordinary ability charmed audiences and critics alike. She was able to put herself across on screen without any hint of affected cuteness, while at the same time she was able to portray a wide range of adult emotional reactions. There was simply something magical about this child who cheered the soul of America during the Depression.

From 1934 to 1940, Shirley Temple made twenty-four films; of those films, fifteen included musical sequences in which she tap danced. When not performing alone, she was accompanied by first-rate veteran tap talent and vaudevillians. In 1934, she starred with James Dunn (Stand Up and Cheer and again in Baby Take a Bow). In 1935, she was first paired with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (The Little Colonel). This combination proved to be so utterly winning that they were featured together in three more films (The Littlest Rebel 1935, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm 1938, and Just Around the Corner 1938). Not only did Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson become great friends, but they were the first interracial pair in films. In 1936, she danced with Buddy Ebsen (Captain January), and Alice Faye and Jack Haley (The Poor Little Rich Girl). In 1938, she danced with George Murphy (Little Miss Broadway), in 1939 with Arthur Treacher (The Little Princess), and in 1940 with Charlotte Greenwood and Jack Oakie (Young People). Shirley Temple tap danced up and down stairs, jumping rope, picking berries, in the rain, on a roof, in a courtroom, on the radio, in China, in New York, and on the farm. It did not seem to matter where or when—Shirley Temple tap dancing delighted and inspired the masses like no other.
SHIRLEY TEMPLE — When I was making musicals, I didn’t think of myself as a tap dancing actress or an actress or a singer — didn’t really think about putting myself in any particular category. I enjoyed everything I was doing. And at the time, I didn’t have any idea of how much my tap dancing in those films impacted the rest of the kids in the United States. No — not at all! But Gene Kelly told me that every time a movie of mine came out, the enrollment at his dance studio just about quadrupled.

I worked with a lot of the great male tap dancers of the 1930s, including Bill Robinson, George Murphy, and Buddy Ebsen. All the men I danced with had different styles. Yes — George Murphy and Buddy Ebsen were more expensive in their moves. Bill Robinson was close to the floor — not doing broad jumps, or so forth. His was a closer range — you didn’t have a great distance to move around when you worked with Bill.

The resident tap teachers at Fox Studios were Nick Castle and Geneva Sawyer, and they would help out. During a picture they were usually around, and if Bill or George or Buddy were doing something else like working on scenes, I could also work with Nick and Geneva. Nick was the primary teacher. Oh, he was super, too. He was very intense, he didn’t like anyone to take any time off! But he was a very, very good teacher.

But I didn’t really have any dancing teachers, per se, at the time I was working on these films. My dancing “teachers” were just the ones I was working with at the time — Bill, or Buddy, or George. When I worked with them on a film, each worked out their own dances, and then I learned them. Sometimes we’d have only a few days and sometimes we’d have a couple of weeks. It would depend on the schedule. With Buddy Ebsen, from the movie Captain January [1936] — “At the Codfish Ball” — we did that whole dance in one take. They had several cameras on the dance, so they were getting side shots and close-ups and long shots. But it was all done in one long segment. Then we did a couple of spot takes for close-up

Shirley Temple in Stand Up and Cheer (Fox, 1934). She inspired more tap pupils than any single dancer before or after her.
Shirley Temple and Buddy Ebsen, whom she remembers as being "very tall," dancing to "At the Codfish Ball" in Captain January (Fox, 1935).
By 1935, Shirley Temple was the nation's number-one box-office star. She held onto that position in 1935, 1937, and 1938, topping Clark Gable, Fred Astaire, and Ginger Rogers, Joan Crawford, and many others along the way.

parts of the dance. But basically, the number was done all in one big long take. And we both felt very proud that we got through it, you know. I've always loved that number. When I think back about what it was like to work with Buddy, what I remember is that he was very tall. That's a child's perspective, right? I remember during the dance, Buddy actually picked me up to dance, because I was so tiny. He picked me up, and we danced cheek to cheek.

None of the dancers I worked with were patronizing to me, or treated me like a child—not at all. I'd say that they all treated me as an equal. I would include George Murphy and Buddy Ebsen and the others in that category. It was hard work and concentration, and it was no time to be a baby. But Bill Robinson was the one who treated me most as an equal. Bill Robinson and I became very close personal friends throughout our lives, and I have always had great love for him. He still is important in my heart. What was it about him that made him so important in my life? He just became a really good friend.

It was Buddy de Sylva who introduced Bill Robinson, waiting outside our cottage with his wife, Fannie. The first thing I noted was the way his arms and legs moved with a silky, muscular grace. He was square-jawed and shiny-cheeked, his great round eyes showing whites all around. I was instantly attracted. Mr. Robinson will show you how to do the dances, was the way de Sylva put it.

Following introductory chitchat, we all started across the lot. Robinson walked a step ahead of us, but when he noticed me hurrying to catch up, he shortened his stride to accommodate mine. I kept reaching up for his hand, but he hadn't looked down, and seemed unaware. Fannie called his attention to what I was doing, so he stopped short, bent low over me, his eyes wide and rows of brilliant teeth showing in a wide smile. When he took my hand in his, it felt large and cool.

For a few moments we continued walking in silence. "Can I call you Uncle Billy?" I asked.

"Why, sure you can," he replied. After a few steps he again stopped.

"Mr. Robinson doesn't fit anyway." He grinned broadly. "But then I get to call you darlin'." It was a deal.

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BILL ROBINSON'S "DARLIN'"
Here Shirley Temple dances with a lifelong friend and "the world's greatest tap dancer," Bill Robinson, for the first time in The Little Colonel (Fox, 1935).

Shirley Temple and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in the finale number "Toy Trumpet" from Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (20th Century-Fox, 1938). Their partnership and rapport were so winning, they were featured in four movie musicals.
From then on whenever we walked together it was hand in hand, and I was always his “darlin’.”

At first we practiced in the regular mirrored rehearsal hall. Then we found it more convenient to use a contraption that when folded looked like a wooden box, but when unfolded, became three steps, up one side and down the other. At any spare moment, anywhere, we could practice.

“We’ll have a hand-squeeze system,” he proposed. “When I give you three quick squeezes, means we’re coming to a hard part. One long squeeze, really good, darlin’! No squeeze at all? Well, let’s do it again.”

Before long his system of signals became superfluous. “Now we just let those hands hang loose,” he instructed. “Limp wrists, loose in the shoulders. There, that’s it! Copacetic! Now let’s get your feet attached to your ears.”

It was the same message as from Mrs. Meglin [Meglin Kiddies], but with a superlative teacher, imperturbable and kind, but demanding. Although bubbling with energy, his physical motions were so controlled and fluid, they came out looking relaxed. He made it look easy, but was not one to pick his way gingerly. I must be guided solely by muscular memory. I must visualize my own sounds, not think about them. It must all be reflexive and unthinking, the sound of my taps telling me how I am doing, setting the pace and controlling the sequence. Every one of my taps had to ring crisp and clear in the best cadence. Otherwise I had to do it over.

That sort of repetitive rehearsal lay behind our familiar staircase dance in the southern plantation mansion in The Little Colonel. We made an unusual couple. A raggedy urchin with tousled curls paired with a regal black man in striped vest and brass buttons and patent-leather shoes. Every sound matched, every gesture, the scuffle, the staccato tap, a sharp-toed kick to the stile, a triple-time race up and down the staircase, tapping as we went. The smile on my face was not acting; I was ecstatic.

Fondest memories of dancing with Uncle Billy come not only from our camera takes but from rehearsals, up and down that portable stile, or in any convenient corner. Practicing until each

Just Around the Corner (20th Century-Fox, 1938) is Shirley Temple’s and Bill Robinson’s last picture together.
move became unthinking was a joy. Learning, an exhilaration. In devising some nuance of movement or sound to make the dance only ours lay the ultimate satisfaction. Once we had reached the point of "roll 'em," each of our routines had been perfected, ready for only a final moment of elation in a long sequence totally devoid of drudgery.

But making movies is not all rehearse-and-perform. We sat around a lot, talking about boxing, for instance, and diamonds. Uncle Billy enthused about Joe Louis, then only a promising fighter from Detroit, and demonstrated uppercuts and vicious hooks while I watched transfixed.

"A dancer just like us," he said, bouncing around on tiptoe and jabbing out at an unseen opponent. "One day he'll beat Max Baer. He's world champion. But then, so am I," and he went on to describe how in Olympic Games tryouts he had won a 100-yard sprint in fourteen seconds, but running backwards.

Directors always reminded Uncle Billy to remove his ring before shooting. It was a brilliant diamond, and time and again we crouched like two mystics over his hand while he flicked his finger to catch the light and spun talks of African mines and bejeweled crowns. To him, diamonds were endowed with powers unrelated to monetary value. Perhaps that is why he gave me a gold-plated chief's badge for my police force. In the center was mounted his talisman, a small diamond.

Everyone I danced with was wonderful to work with. Buddy and George were certainly two of the finest ones. But Bill Robinson was my favorite. He was the easiest teacher I had, because we could do it by holding hands.

I think we all loved tap dancing, or we wouldn't have been doing it. We all loved what we were doing. And it was easy for me to learn from such good teachers. When you work with fine professionals, I guess it rubs off on you.

June 28, 1989
Woodside, California