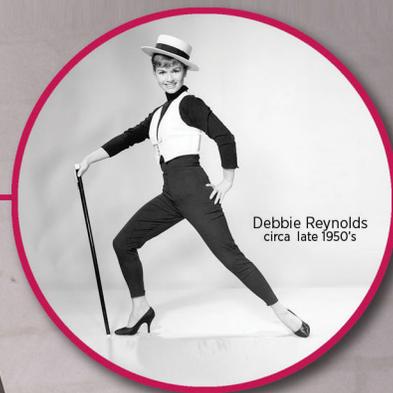


inside **DANCE**

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2018

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Dancing's Standout Moments

“When I hear from a teacher, even years later, and they tell me they are still teaching my technique, or ‘you changed my thought process’ on how I approach this or that, it means all the world to me.”

By Christy Sandmaier

Often copied but never duplicated, tap-dancing legend Debbi Dee has donned many hats throughout her illustrious career. She is known as a true technician as well as a dynamic stylist, innovator and one whose energy is unsurpassed. Her expanding knowledge can be seen on platforms throughout the United States and she has taught internationally as a “Master Teacher” in Japan, France, South America and Canada, earning her the honor of being referred to as a “teacher’s teacher.”

You were recently awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award by The ADCC. Congratulations! Talk about what the award means to you.

The lifetime achievement award from The ADCC meant so much to me because it came from this association. I have been working on the convention platform, as well as being a judge in dance for so many organizations for over 40+ years, so to be recognized by a group that brings conventions and competitions together... [and to be given] this honor for my life’s work is humbling to say the least. I felt like the bell of the ball and I am still so very grateful that I was honored in this way.

What drew you to the intricacies of embracing, learning and teaching tap?

Tap is a very difficult “art form.” It takes years to accomplish and yet with that said, a true tap dancer is always learning to better their craft. I had a very unique upbringing when it came to my education. My parents saw that I had rhythm and yet I was a little clumsy. They thought I would enjoy taking dance. They were right and so at the age of 5 ½ they sought out the best tap teacher in our town. I was born in Rochester, New York and there was this incredible man who was a vaudevillian and traveled performing as a tap dancer. He had a little private studio in his garage. His name was Curley Fisher, and although he didn’t know what the steps were called, he knew all about articulation, shading, dynamics and life lessons that he freely passed on to me. I fell in love with the “art form” immediately.

Although I turned professional at the age of 13, touring with the fair circuit with Count Basie, Lawrence Welk (who by the way gave me the name Debbi Dee), USO shows... it was when my dad passed away that the Debbi Dee Dance Center opened so that I could bring an income into our home. I was 16. For years, I ran the dance schools, performed and worked as a bookkeeper for my husband’s business. I wore many hats in those days.

You’ve been called a true “teacher’s teacher.” What methods do you use when instructing teachers about the art of teaching tap?

When leading any teachers class, I first find out what their needs are. I can’t tell them “the law” of tap because the beauty of tap is that of its traditions. I can however, teach what works for me. Very early on in my teaching, I became frustrated that my students were not accomplishing the speed or the articulation of the sounds I had. Around the same time, I was doing some special needs classes. This made me dissect myself and in doing so, I learned how I was getting that speed, that articulation. I applied that to my teaching and saw a world of difference in my students. I also try to teach students the beauty of the instrument that they are playing with their feet. Learn how to experiment with the sound, the dynamics, the shadings, the accents and add all of those elements to the piece of music.

“As a teacher, the stand out moments are endless.”

Take **5** with Debbi Dee

Debbi has been guest faculty for...

- 1 “Tradition-In-Tap” in New York
- 2 National Tap Dance Day in Dallas
- 3 St. Louis Tap Festival

- 4 Motor City Tap Festival
- 5 The Big Apple Tap Festival

For all the things Debbi Dee, see debbidee.com

How have you seen the convention circuit evolve over the past five to 10 years - are teachers asking for anything different now than in years past?

Early on, there were not the conventions or festivals that we have now. During those early years of convention teaching, teachers received most of their teaching needs from those conventions. Through the years, especially in the past 15 or so, teachers have so many options to choose. I was one of the first to have a "tap intensive" for teachers in Florida. Now... how wonderful it is to see more of those. All individual needs are being met today. If you want to compete, if you want to just take a workshop, you can. I have been going to more private studios in recent years and bringing master classes to fit that individual studio's needs, and then taking a couple of hours of just working with the teachers in the studios afterwards.

You have quite the list of accolades as a performer, but did you always know you wanted to teach?

Teaching was a necessity at first. My focus early on was performing, however, the more I performed the more I found myself fascinated with behind the scenes. I started choreographing local community theater, assisting on some off Broadway shows before choreographing some on my own. I was young on those convention platforms, and I felt I was doing some good, because of that I strived to be the best teacher I could be. My focus changed very early on and teaching became a passion, and still is today.

Is there a standout moment in your career so far, something that you treasure or embrace as a moment that was just perfect?

As a performer, I worked with some amazing people both on stage and behind the scenes. I was only 13 when I performed with the Count Basie Orchestra, only 7 years old when I did *Ted Mach TV Show*, I didn't know how truly special those and many other times in my life were until much later. Or, having a "moment" with Bob Fosse and was given a true life lesson. Having a "star" come see me perform and wait backstage to give you a compliment. Dancing as a soloist at Lincoln Center, having my own nightclub act... they were all special, all treasured moments. As a teacher, the stand out moments are endless. I hope to continue to teach an art form that has been a part of the rhythm of my heart for my lifetime.

