

tap of her field

**Debbi Dee,
master teacher**

By Heather C. Liston



Debbi Dee with her former student Shanna Lillis, a scholarship student at Alvin Ailey.

"My parents worked hard for their money," says Debbi Dee (who was born Debra Anne Maria Donofrio) "so when they decided to give me dance lessons, they wanted to make sure they got the best training their money could buy." They took five-year-old Debbi to the best Rochester, New York had to offer—a former vaudevillian named Curley Fisher, who was in his late 70's and teaching private lessons in his garage. Dee's father, who was an amateur clarinetist and sax player, understood the importance of space and time for practice. He made sure she had a room of her own with mirrors, a record player and everything else she needed to work at her craft. Dee also credits both her parents with instilling in her the discipline and dedication that a career in dance requires. "They told me, 'If you're going to start, you can't quit in the middle. You have to commit for the whole season.' And I was given that choice again at the end of each year. I could stop then, or I could commit to another year." Needless to say, she committed.

In addition to working with Curley on tap, Dee studied ballet three times a week at the Eastman School of Music and, she says, "I tried everything: modern, jazz, baton, voice and piano." She still loves the discipline of ballet and credits her ballet training with her ability to "spin like a top." It was tap-dancing that ultimately became her life's passion, though. And it didn't take long before other people recognized her potential. When she was seven and nine years old she was a three-time winner on The Ted Mack Amateur Hour. By the age of 13, she was traveling around the country performing in

beyond the dance

Dee's chosen artform is primarily traditional tap, and she considers it a great compliment when someone tells her she's a hooper. "Traditional tappers believe we're musicians," she explains. "We're making rhythms and melodies with our feet. So I work with people on pitches, shading, dynamics." She has also made a specialty of teaching dance to the handicapped, and she credits those special students with helping her develop the technique for which she is known. "When you're teaching the blind," she says, "sound is key, so I learned to be very precise about what each move sounded like." For her deaf students, she divided the area of the toe tap into six distinct regions, so she could show them exactly what part of the toe has to hit the floor in order to achieve each effect. That system turned out to be a breakthrough for hearing students as well, who gain more precision and control over their movements by understanding the subtle distinctions between one part of the foot and another. "And it works for babies, too," she says with pleasure, "because I labeled the six parts 'A, B, C, 1, 2, and 3' and even my youngest students can understand that."

The precision, and the success, of her teaching methods have made her a master teacher much in demand. She holds classes at several studios in Florida, keeps the performers at Walt Disney World on their toes with master classes and spends many weekends teaching at conventions for Dance Olympus, Dance Educators of America and Dance Power, among others. "I've

learned so much through the conventions," she says. "For example, I didn't know there were names for steps until I was in my 20's. All my early teachers were hoofers, and they'd show me a pattern, maybe sing along as they did it—you know, 'Diddly bop, dum de diddly bop BAH!'—and I'd just copy it. All of a sudden, at these conventions, teachers were counting out patterns and calling them by name. At first, I was very confused, but I found that if I turned my head, closed my eyes and listened, I'd get it." Soon she was teaching at the gatherings herself, and she had learned not only how to count but even how to write detailed notes on

what she was planning to teach. And some of the steps she'd

always done acquired names of their own—like the Debbi Dee Cincinnati and the Debbi Dee Time Step.

Dee's favorite gigs, among all this activity, are the ones that give her a chance to teach technique, which, she says, is where her heart is. This preference extends to her work at the Carol Colbert School of Dance in Boca Raton, where her students put on recitals only every other year. In between, they have a "technique year." Since they don't have to spend their time learning routines, let alone sewing costumes and selling tickets, they can concentrate on all the basics of dance. "Recitals are very important," Dee asserts. "We all need that experience, learning to perform and celebrating what we've accomplished. But sometimes I judge young dancers in competition, and they perform a great routine, and I think, 'I can't wait to get him or her in

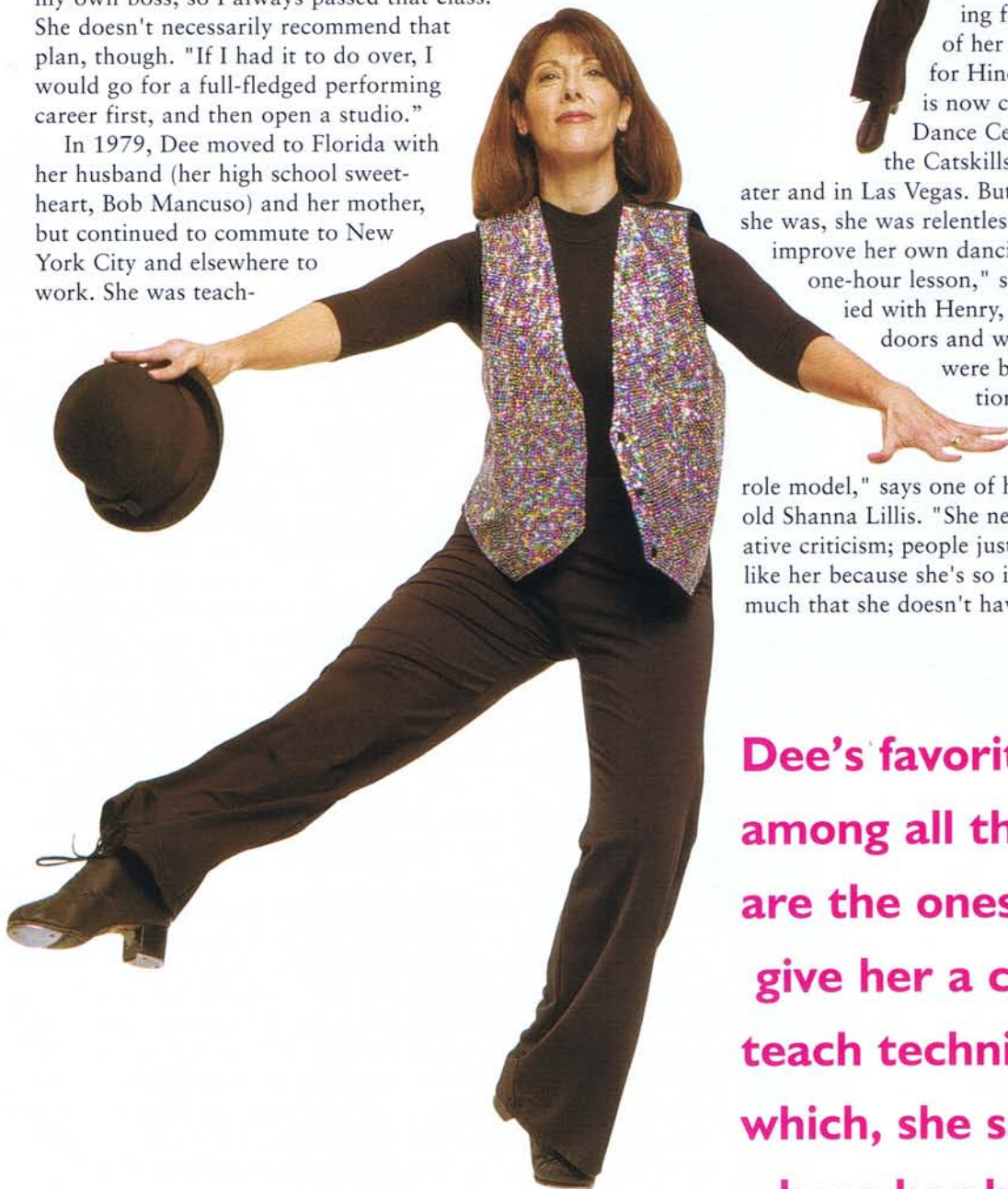


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USO shows. The neighborhood kids started asking her to teach them, and her father transformed her personal practice space into a studio where she could hold classes. After her father's death, when she was just 16, Dee needed to make some money to help out the family, so she grew her business. Soon she was running four studios of her own, and employing 11 teachers and assistants. She made special arrangements with her high school so she could go to classes half the day and work the other half. "You were supposed to get a grade from your employer," says Dee with a laugh. "But I was my own boss, so I always passed that class." She doesn't necessarily recommend that plan, though. "If I had it to do over, I would go for a full-fledged performing career first, and then open a studio."

In 1979, Dee moved to Florida with her husband (her high school sweetheart, Bob Mancuso) and her mother, but continued to commute to New York City and elsewhere to work. She was teach-



ing for Henry LeTang, one of her main tap mentors, and for Hines & Hatchett (which is now called the Broadway Dance Center), performing in the Catskills, in off-Broadway theater and in Las Vegas. But no matter how busy she was, she was relentless about continuing to improve her own dancing. "I never heard of a one-hour lesson," says Dee. "When I studied with Henry, he used to lock the doors and we'd work till my feet were bleeding." This dedication has naturally benefited her teaching. "She's definitely a role model," says one of her students, 18-year-old Shanna Lillis. "She never has to use any negative criticism; people just want to learn to be like her because she's so inspiring. She's done so much that she doesn't have to prove anything."

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class!' and then it turns out they're no good at classes. They don't have that sharpness, that complete grasp of basic technique that helps them learn new things quickly.

"Traditional tappers have machine-gun feet," says Dee. "What we do is concentrated in the feet, and it's very fast." Contemporary tap, she explains, is more lifted, and involves more of the whole body.

"But these days, you need speed in your feet, and you also need the class and the full-body grace that you learn from other dance forms. You must be a triple threat, excelling in ballet, jazz and tap . . . and other things, too, if possible. Look at where the work is: Broadway directors expect you to know ballet, jazz, tap, swing and ballroom—or at least to have the ability to pick those things up very quickly."

Dee's plan for the future is to concentrate more on her work as a choreographer. She makes dances for Disney, for individual nightclub performers and for industrial shows; and she's hoping to work on television commercials, and ultimately, to choreograph a Broadway show. Before she shifts her focus from teaching to choreography, however, she wants to make sure she's left something behind so that dancers and other teachers will continue to have access to her knowledge. To that end, she has produced 10 teaching videos, The Education Tap Video Series, that explain and illustrate her technique. And, not for nothing was she a businesswoman from her early teens: She has also produced 15 CDs of music for dance teachers and even created her own shoe, the Debbi Dee Tap Shoe, which produces the best sound of any shoe and is manufactured by La Mendola. You can get a catalogue of her videos and other teaching items by calling Debbi Dee Productions at 1-561-736-3052; for information about her shoes, call Art Stone Theatrical at 1-800-522-8897. **DT**

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