



The Contagious Passion of

DEBBI DEE

By Meg Segreto

In 2002, Oklahoma City University awarded honorary doctorates to nine legendary tap dancers. The “Doctors of Dance,” Bunny Briggs, Henry Le Tang, Jeni Le Gon, Fayard Nicholas, Prince Spencer, Jimmy Slyde, Buster Brown, Leonard Reed and Cholly Atkins were recognized and given their Ph.Ds by the protégés who most closely understand their work. Of the aforementioned protégés, there in tribute to one of her mentors Dr. Henry Le Tang, was Debbi Dee.

Debbi Dee is a “professor emeritus” of traditional tap dance. The sheer scope of her theory, technique and support for educators is immense. She has spent the last 40 years in pursuit of her passion to dissect and pass on the wealth of information she has gathered and created in her jam-packed tap dance career. This marks her 30th year of sharing her knowledge through conventions and workshops worldwide.

Traditional tap is all about the sound. Tap shoes are the instrument. The dancer is the musician. For the sake of simplicity in understanding her methodology, Debbi has created “The Break Down Theory.” In this theory the ball tap is divided into six sections (1, 2, 3, across, A, B, C, from top to bottom), each section correlating to the area used on the tap for every sound you make. She teaches every basic step (i.e., shuffle, flap) on each of

the six sections. Once you learn to master the art of using all areas of the tap, your movements create the music. There are 23 shuffles in Debbi's repertoire. That's up from a previous 19. She never stops exploring, inventing. The inside, outside, circle, rotation inward, rotation outward, frappé, scuffle, flat tap, sloppy, and tip are just a few samples.

Debbi's workshops are indispensable for teachers. Young teachers will find her work to be a perfect guideline for their new careers and seasoned teachers will find renewed inspiration. Not only do you get enough material to keep you busy and stimulated as a teacher and choreographer, but you will also get to spend time with a woman who treasures teachers and respects their jobs like very few people can. She has good reason. She started her first dance studio at the ripe old age of fifteen, in her basement, in Rochester, N.Y. Wait; I am getting ahead of myself in telling her story. I mean, by the time she was fifteen she already had a lot to teach.

Debbi found her passion for tap under the tutelage of a retired, 75 year old vaudevillian named Curly Fisher. He taught in his converted garage. There were no group lessons, he taught each student one-on-one, while parents watched and waited on a couch in the same room. He sang the rhythms, and insisted on the perfect sound from each hit of the tap against the resonant masonite floor. His larger than life presence, beautiful dancing, and demanding teaching style inspired her and laid the foundation that defined her future. His impression was so strong that she can still remember the first waltz clog routine that he taught her when she was only six years old. Knowing that she needed more advanced training than he could give her, Curly sent her off when she was thirteen. At that time, she started working professionally, doing USO shows, state fairs, and theater. Two years later, she opened her own studio.

Although Debbi loved performing, it was not enough to satisfy her drive to create and teach. Having her own studio meant that she could dive into the project of analyzing what she knew about tap. She taught and did choreography for her students, all while attending high school and performing in her spare time.

5 KEY COMPONENTS OF THE PROCESS OF LEARNING A STEP OR ROUTINE:

1. **Mastering:** the learning process—the breakdown with rhythm, leg position, where the sounds hit on the tap, all components of the step.
2. **Clarity:** the articulation of each sound. Clean muffled or scraping sounds, rebound where needed and check that the sounds flow properly from one to the other.
3. **Shading:** This is where the understanding and mastery of “The Break Down Theory” comes in handy. Remember the 23 shuffles? All six areas of the tap are used to create highs and lows, soft and loud sounds. Shading is the art that creates musicality.
4. **Dynamics:** the accenting, or phrasing of the sound.
5. **Stylization:** the visual performance, including character development, or authentic interpretation of period music.

By the time Debbi was twenty, she had three studios, had married her high school sweetheart, and been invited, at the first convention she ever attended, to teach for a major dance organization. Grace Wakefield, then of Dance Educators of America, recognized the talent in her students' performance and wanted Debbi to share it with the members of DEA. She asked for a year to prepare. You see, she had to learn the terminology to describe her technique and write the required notes. At that point in time, she had taught everything with the same methods Curly had used to teach her, singing the sounds and demonstrating.

The preparations she took for her debut as a teacher's teacher began a process that has yet to end. Within a year, she was teaching for three major dance organizations. As the convention circuit grew, she quickly became a member of each faculty. She has become a highly respected teacher in this country as well as internationally, a principal scholar, historian, and professor of tap dance. She has documented everything she has learned and created. Her body of work is comprehensive.

“Debbi Dee's Tap Library” consists of close to thirty videos and DVDs containing a profusion of material. From “Tap Tradition...The Theory”, where she starts at the beginning of her methodology, through the expansive “Technique Series,” Debbi takes you carefully through each detail of her material. “The Dynamite Collection,” with 100 progressions on each video (plus a bonus of pullbacks, wings, or a capella warm-up routines), will keep your classes interesting and your students progressing. In “Flash Tap,” “Tap



Revolution" (with 100 turns), "The Dancers Warm-up" for (jazz dancers), and the massive "Tap-In Action" series with three routines on each hour-long video, Debbi has created a resource library every teacher should own. Did I mention that she has created 365 time steps? There are CD's, written notes, and over 500 choreographed routines available. She is always working on something, inventing and recording new material.

Debbi's career has taken her in many directions. She has performed her own nightclub act in Las Vegas. Not many people know that she is also a singer and song-

writer. She has performed on television, in movies and in the theatre. Debbi danced at Lincoln Center in New York City, which was the highlight of her performing life. In a career that has spanned so many venues, teaching is still her favorite job, her calling. When I visited her at her home office and practice studio in Boynton Beach, Florida she showed me her notes for Tap Intensive III and IV. She has a hundred things going at once and she fires on all cylinders. Traditional tap is more than safe in her hands, and her legacy will be the teaching she loves, the educational tap library she has created, the passing on of her contagious passion for tap.

Fortunately, for the next generation of teachers and students, Debbi Dee is still busy teaching at conventions and tap festivals. She is available for master classes (I

gave a master class with her, as a Christmas present to my teachers one year, and they loved it!). She is also available for choreography, technique, teachers' training, specialty classes, and private coaching. For information on these or her "Tap Intensive Workshops", call (561) 736- 3052 or contact her on the web at www.debbideeproductions.com. ■

All educational information in this article was used by permission of Debbi Dee, and came from her *Tap Intensive Workbooks, I & II*.