



Debbi Dee: Passing on the Art of Tap Dancing, Part 2

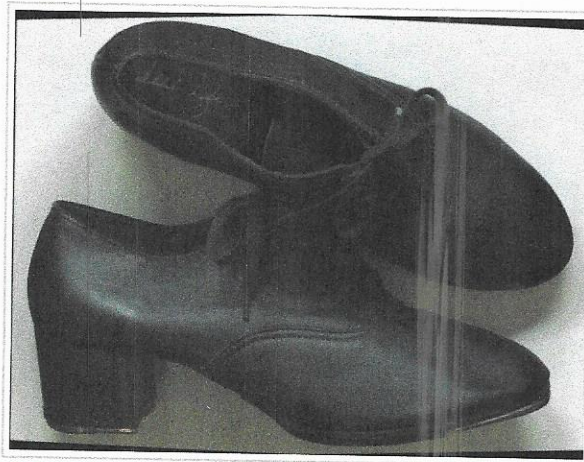
May 25, 2022 by [Morgen Stevens-Garmon](#)

In honor of National Tap Dance Day, here is the second part of Dance Curator Libby Smigel's interview with Debbi Dee.

Earlier this month (<https://blogs.loc.gov/music/2022/05/debbi-dee-passing-on-the-art-of-tap-dancing?loclr=blogmus/>), Debbi Dee shared her memories of learning tap dancing as a child and becoming an award-winning teacher. In the second half of the interview, Dee explains how her career grew into opportunities to perform and teach around the world.

Libby: Tap dance lessons in Rochester, New York, with vaudevillian Curley Fisher got you started, but what did you do when you outgrew Curley's coaching? How did you find a path to professional work?

Debbi Dee: When I was about 13 or 14 years old, Curley encouraged me to explore new opportunities and grow as an artist. I was performing more, but mostly locally. A year earlier, I had won first place at the State Fair in Syracuse, performing with a dance partner Curley had found for me. But that partner, who was several years older than I was, had become involved with school activities. So I entered the State Fair competition as a soloist. When I won that competition, I was approached by a talent scout, an agent named Val Shortall. She wanted me to perform that very evening on the main stage with the headliners of the fair. My father was over the moon when he found out that the headliners were the Count Basie Orchestra for the first show, and in the second show, the Lawrence Welk Orchestra. There was nothing better than a big band to my dad and me. When Val Shortall learned I didn't have representation, she negotiated my contracts for those performances. A quick rehearsal took place, and then it was show time.

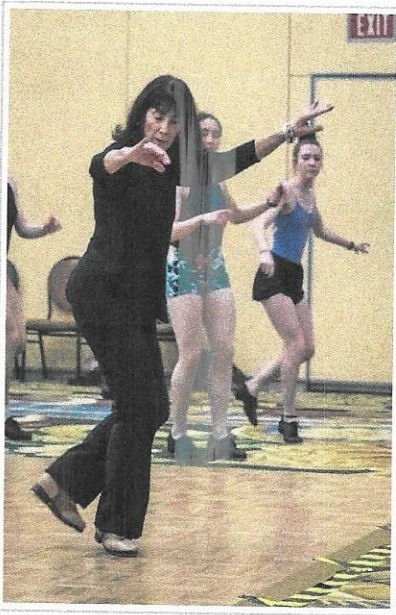


(<https://blogs.loc.gov/music/files/2022/05/5Dee-tapshoe-two.jpg>)
Debbie Dee signature tap shoes, circa 1995. Debbi Dee Tap Dance Materials (<https://lcn.loc.gov/2020570113?urlappend=%26loclr=blogmus>), Music Division, Library of Congress.

Libby: Debbi Dee is such a memorable stage name. It must have a story!

Debbi Dee: When I performed on the State Fair main stage in both shows with those two amazing orchestras, it really didn't sink in how incredible this opportunity was. Before that I had performed with bands and recorded music. Lawrence Welk was going to introduce me; he kept asking my name. He had a hard time with it, but in his defense, I kept giving him my full name including my middle and confirmation names. Anyway, he couldn't pronounce it, so he said, "Your first and last names begin with a 'D' and you dance. I'm going to call you Debbi Dee." Long story short, the agent was so impressed on how I handled myself, not only going on stage but being thrown into that whole situation, that she became my agent. My name changed for professional and legal reasons, and my performing career as a professional began at 13 years old. I toured the State Fair circuit and also with USO shows as a soloist tap dancer and singer at that time. All of that happened because of one day. It goes to show you—you never know what is in store for you day by day.

Libby: Our earlier talk focused on your career in teaching, Debbi. Did you have to choose between performing and teaching?



(//blogs.loc.gov/music/files/2022/05/DMA_DEEteaching2021_3.jpg)

Debbi Dee teaching at the Dance Masters of America convention, 2021. Photograph courtesy of Dance Masters of America.

Debbi Dee: I loved performing of all kinds. I was on a cloud when I was performing. I loved engaging with an audience. I began performing only a few months after starting my dance training and my performing continues today, as recent as just last week. Performing takes on very different roles and different contexts. I stopped performing on stage, in nightclubs and theater, and on film in my late 30s, but I was continuing to “perform” for my students, whether it was in the studio or on teaching platforms all over the country and in faculty shows. Performance just took on another form.

I had many reasons for leaving the stage—personal and family obligations as well as the lifestyle. More importantly, I was also building my teaching career. My teaching was always growing and has always been a major part of my life. I loved creating steps and choreography, and somehow, I blended teaching and performing careers together and made them both thrive. I look on that time now and wonder how I did it. I started teaching in New York at two of the most prestigious dance schools. All the while, I was still performing, auditioning, and running my own business.

At one point, I caught the attention of a wonderful lady, Grace Wakefield, who hired faculty for the dance convention of Dance Educators of America (DEA). She approached me and said, “I want to put you up on that platform to teach.” I told her that I had learned by sound and scattin, and the convention teachers were using terminology and counts. I knew there was terminology for ballet, but not for tap. She assigned me a year to learn to use the counts and terminology, and said I would need to learn how to write the required dance notes. She just handed me the contract and walked away while I stood there, stunned. I didn’t want to let this woman down, I didn’t want to let myself down, so I did exactly what she told me to do, and a year later I was on that platform. The rest, as they say, is history. Teaching opportunities for Dance Masters of America (DMA) and Dance Olympus under the direction of Art and Nancy Stone followed within a couple of months. I have been teaching on platforms at conventions, festivals, master classes, universities, camps, Disney, workshops, intensives, and many others from that day forward. I have taught

for more than 30 dance organizations locally and nationally and loved every moment of it. Invitations came from organizations abroad, and I jumped at every opportunity I could. I was in the right place at the right time: I had mentors along the way guiding me and teaching me. You see, performing takes on many different hats; it just depends on what hat you’re wearing on any given day. I didn’t need an audience’s applause; what I needed was to grow in something that I started when I was just 15.

Libby: Tell us about your most recent award, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the DMA in 2021.

Debbi Dee: I have been recognized for this gift I have been blessed with, but I feel I’m the lucky one to be able to pass along this amazing art form to students and teachers throughout my 55 years of teaching. Nothing comes without putting in the hours and hard work, and yes, the sacrifices that you make along the way. I was one of the first to have a signature shoe for woman tap students and teachers. The lifetime achievement awards I received over the years aren’t just recognition but something that touches my heart to the fullest.

The Dance Masters of America award was from one of the organizations that gave me my start in teaching on platforms throughout this incredible country of ours. DMA believes in teaching and in keeping their members current with the latest styles and techniques out there. To be recognized for my contribution to this incredible art form of tap had me almost speechless.

In 1884, the American National Association Masters of Dancing was founded in Boston, and in 1894 the International Masters of Dancing held its first convention. The two organizations met in a joint convention in New York City in 1926, and soon after united under the name Dance Masters of America. To get a lifetime achievement award from an organization with this type of history in dance and to see the names on the list of all who came before me was, and is, an honor that touches me in ways hard to explain. I am honored, humbled, and grateful.

The [Debbi Dee tap dance materials](http://lccn.loc.gov/2020570113?urlappend=%26loclr=blogmus) (//lccn.loc.gov/2020570113?urlappend=%26loclr=blogmus) are currently being processed so that researchers and Library visitors can enjoy them.

In the meantime, enjoy these other tap dancing resources at the Library of Congress:

- “Tap Dance in America: A Twentieth-Century Chronology of Tap Performance on Stage, Film, and Media” by Constance Valis Hill, a searchable encyclopedic resource available at: [//memory.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/html/tda/tda-home.html](http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/html/tda/tda-home.html) (//memory.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/html/tda/tda-home.html?loclr=blogmus)
- [Joan Hill Tap Notation Collection](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.music/eadmus.mu016012?urlappend=%26loclr=blogmus) (http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.music/eadmus.mu016012?urlappend=%26loclr=blogmus), featuring the tap routines of Leon Collins recorded in symbols by pianist Joan Hill.
- [Performance recording](http://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-9481/?loclr=blogmus) (//www.loc.gov/item/webcast-9481/?loclr=blogmus) of Caleb Teicher, tap dancer, and Conrad Tao, pianist.



(//blogs.loc.gov/music/files/2022/05/DMAHo)

Debbi Dee with Dance Masters of America president Cindy Larsen at the award ceremony, 2021. Photograph courtesy of Dance Masters of America.

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