

## IN THE MUSE Performing Arts at the Library of Congress

This Blog	Search	Q
-----------	--------	---

[Home](#) / [Debbi Dee: Passing on the Art of Tap Dancing](#)

[MENU](#) ▾

---

### ABOUT THIS BLOG

---

### CATEGORIES

 ▾

---

### ARCHIVES

 ▾

# Debbi Dee: Passing on the Art of Tap Dancing

May 4, 2022

Posted by: [Libby Smigel](#)

Share this post:



*The following is a guest post from the Music Division's Dance Curator Libby Smigel.*

Last year the Music Division was delighted to accept from master tap dancer and teacher Debbi Dee a gift of the records of her tap dance career and the teaching materials she developed. I recently interviewed her about her lifetime in dance. In this first half of the interview, Debbi Dee credits vaudevillian tap master Curley Fisher as being instrumental in getting her started, and she talks about her own love of teaching—a fitting topic during Teacher Appreciation Week.

**Libby:** How did you begin tap dance lessons?



Photographer Anthony Donofrio. Debbi Dee, circa 1959. Courtesy of the family photographs of Debbi Dee.

**Debbi Dee:** I started tap dancing at age 5½. My parents noticed that I had a real love for music, and every time I heard a song, I would start dancing—or, I should say, bopping up and down to the music. They told me that I also was a little clumsy (I'm not sure I believe them on that one), but it was one of the deciding factors of getting me into some kind of dance lessons. My parents found this wonderful vaudevillian who was teaching private tap dance lessons out of his garage-turned-dance-studio. His name was Curley Fisher, and boy, could he dance! Curley didn't know the names of the steps he taught nor that the steps had counts, so therefore neither did I. I learned the old traditional style passed down from one generation to the next. The foundation in dancing I received from Curley was priceless. But at my early age, he just scared me. He was so *LOUD* with his voice scatting out the rhythms, and his footwork was crystal clear. He never taught basics; he taught steps, routines, and rhythms. I loved it. My lessons were one-on-one. Curley's dog, Tippy, had the run of the dance room, so I remember having to dance around her.

I learned from Curley for eight years, three times a week. During those early years, I started adding on classes in ballet, jazz, voice, piano, and baton. I participated in community theater, all the while performing at local venues, nursing homes, fairs, and anywhere I could get on a stage. Curley encouraged all of this, but never really influenced me or my parents on where to study these various art forms. I was one of those kids who loved to practice. In fact, I was obsessed with it. My mom and dad always had a place that was just mine where I could practice, a place in the basement with a record player, a mirror, a piece of wood, and I would go to town. I would create for hours. I would put on show-tune albums and become every character. My parents gave me so much, but only because they knew I loved it, not because they thought it would be my career.

As I child, I also studied ballet at the Eastman School of Music. Their classical ballet program was just the best, and I was there on full scholarship after the first year. It was my first experience of being in a class setting. It was also my first experience of hearing names to steps and exercises along with counts. Tap gave me musicality, weight distribution, balance, and power to create and improvise, where ballet gave me flexibility, core strength, fluidness, upper-body control, class structure, and stage movement. It gave me the importance of being in a class setting and the discipline. These two major "art forms" set the ground work for every other form of dance. I still say today, "If you take only two forms of dance, these two, ballet and tap, set you up for such success for all that will come later."



Unidentified  
photographer. Curley  
Fisher, circa 1958.  
Courtesy of the family  
photographs of Debbi  
Dee.

---

**Libby:** You are so well known as a master teacher of tap technique. How does your teaching compare with the way Curley Fisher introduced you to tap dance?

**Debbi Dee:** When I first started teaching as a young person, I would copy how Curley taught as far as strength, scatting the sounds, and rhythms. However, as I began to take group classes in other forms like ballet, jazz classes, and voice lessons, I began to believe that classes were better than one-on-one lessons. My dad by this time had built me a full room with a wall of mirrors, sound system, hundreds of show-tune and big band LPs. It was a great studio, so I taught class with anyone in the neighborhood and their friends, and then their friends, and it kept growing. Their parents were okay with this, for I was getting the attention of newspapers for my professional gigs. A few months after my sixteenth birthday, I opened the first official Debbi Dee Dance Center. The combination of all my studies was incorporated in how I taught.

Later, I realized that I had to change my way of teaching tap. Students in a class setting compared to the way I learned one-on-one was not the same. I found tap challenging, but I never really encountered a step or routine I couldn't do. I started to dissect my own practice. I wanted to understand why I was getting the speed, clarity, articulation, and shadings of the sound that my students couldn't. When I started doing this, I was becoming a better teacher because I now understood that this was an "art form" to be studied and respected not just steps thrown to music.



Unidentified photographer. Debbi Dee teaching at a dance camp in Dallas, Texas for Dallas Olympus, circa 1985. Courtesy of the family photographs of Debbi Dee.

---

I was asked to teach the blind and deaf in my community. This was the “Aha!” moment for me. I had to learn how to break down every sound to the most minute level. Those classes taught me how to teach. A teacher never stops learning no matter what they are teaching. How wonderful is that!

Later, I taught kids in wheelchairs. We would sew taps on gloves for them, and they would learn rhythms, and I would make formations and movements using the chairs. Every time I was faced with a challenge, I learned how to work around it to put forward what I wanted on stage or in class. What followed next was learning that all of this tap stuff had names and counts. I learned tap’s rich history and passed that along. I found teachers in New York who could bring me further in every subject, and then one of those teachers/mentors found me. His name was Henry LeTang. He taught me the value of a step, the musicality of a step. Henry became a lifelong friend. I taught at his studio in New York, another stepping stone for me.

I was a sponge, learning everything I could: how to work a stage, how to put a choreographed piece together for any level and make it showstopper, how to tell a story through the choreography and not just put steps to music. These were lessons that I still teach today, and they all stemmed from my foundation, from Curley Fisher. He was a master.

I once heard a quote that I love: “Learn to hear silence.” It relates it to what I want to express to my students. It was something I did naturally, but I didn’t know how to express it to my students. You can teach steps, technique, and choreography, but timing, musicality, and dancing from your soul is a gift. “Learn to hear silence.” Without the sounds of silence within your rhythm patterns, there would be no rhythm patterns. Breathe.

I love teaching. My heart is in teaching teachers and advanced students. I love teaching adults, for they have such a love for being there. I love teaching the younger students and seeing their eyes light up when they master a step they had difficulty doing. I have been called a “Teacher’s Teacher.” What an honor that is for me. I don’t take that title for granted. Never did, and I never will.



Photographer George Koller. Debbi Dee teaching the World Dancers at Epcot Center, 1992. Courtesy of the family photographs of Debbi Dee.

---

The [Debbi Dee tap dance materials](#) are currently being processed so that researchers and Library visitors can enjoy them. Check back for Part 2 of this interview to learn how Dee’s career grew into opportunities to perform and teach around the world.

## **CATEGORIES**

[Dance](#) • [Interviews](#) • [New Acquisitions](#) • [Women in Dance](#)

## **COMMENTS (10)**

### **1. Dianne (your sister)**

May 4, 2022 at 10:26 am

Debbi,

Watching you over the years develop as one of the best dancers of our time has been an unbelievable journey. The early days of your lessons with Curley Fisher and your mastering the art of dance is truly remarkable. You have given back so much to children, their parents, young adults, older citizens, dance teachers and the audiences that enjoy your work and craft. Thank you for sharing your work with the world.

Your Sister

### **2. Debbi Dee**

May 4, 2022 at 10:49 am

Thank you to Libby for a fun and great interview.

### **3. ToniAnn**

May 4, 2022 at 1:35 pm

Thank you for everything you have taught me and shared with me through the years. You are a true mentor and teacher!

### **4. TonieLynn**

May 4, 2022 at 4:16 pm

What an honor and amazing accomplishment to have your legacy recognized in the Library of Congress. Immortalized for generations of dancers and others to appreciate and lifting the world of dance in Tap form.

You have truly mastered the craft of Tap and have selflessly shared your gift with such passion and dedication. I am so excited for you, but above all this there is one thing that I celebrate each day and that is you are the most wonderful Aunt and God mother. I love you and congratulations!

### **5. Mary Ann**

May 5, 2022 at 9:01 am

Having grown up with Debbie, I know first hand how devoted to dance she has been since she was a very little girl. I don't think I have ever seen a child with such a passion at such a young age. Debbie is an amazing dancer, performer and master teacher of tap, but in addition, she is an amazing human being. She has a heart of gold and is always there for anyone who is lucky enough to be in her life.

### **6. Annette DuBose**

May 6, 2022 at 8:42 am

Debbie is one of the best! Her teaching is incredible and have reached so many. This is so wonderful to archive her history, talents and teaching! Looking forward to the next blog. She has influenced me in my life time and so glad to call her friend!

### **7. SharonM.**

May 7, 2022 at 7:17 pm

Delightful interview. I've never met Debbie, but I'd love to study with her!! Teaching the out-of-the-way folks, the deaf, blind, and folks in wheelchairs, is a special and loving skill. It makes Debbie one heck of a wonderful person!

### **8. Tami Thomas Valentine**

May 16, 2022 at 4:03 pm

What an honor and privilege to have known Debbie for many years. How grateful I am to have been able to personally learn from Debbie through the years, which helped shape my teaching. She is truly a teacher's teacher, and I am thrilled her work is being recognized in this way! Bravo, Debbie!

### **9. Cheryl Johnson**

May 20, 2022 at 7:15 pm

[Skip to content](#)

Cool! Congratulations on all that you do. I am interested in Curly Fisher. My mother took lessons from him and she said he was the best. Can you share more about this man?

Thank you

#### 10. Patricia Oplotnik

May 26, 2022 at 1:44 pm

Debbi Dee is a deep well of tap knowledge! Every time I am in one of her classes I learn something new and I have studied tap for more than 65 years! She gives every teaching tip she knows to every interested party. I join others in saying she is a longtime friend whom I treasure!!

Congratulations on this awesome honor!! ❤️ Fast Pat

## ADD A COMMENT

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked \*

Name (no commercial URLs) \*

Email (will not be published) \*

Comment:

Post Comment



[Blog Home](#)



---

## DISCLAIMER & POLICIES

These blogs are governed by the general rules of respectful civil discourse. By commenting on our blogs, you are fully responsible for everything that you post. The content of all comments is released into the public domain unless clearly stated otherwise. The Library of Congress does not control the content posted. Nevertheless, the Library of Congress may monitor any user-generated content as it chooses and reserves the right to remove content for any reason whatever, without consent. Gratuitous links to sites are viewed as spam and may result in removed comments. We further reserve the right, in our sole discretion, to remove a user's privilege to post content on the Library site. [Read our Comment and Posting Policy.](#)

Links to external Internet sites on Library of Congress Web pages do not constitute the Library's endorsement of the content of their Web sites or of their policies or products. Please read our Standard Disclaimer.

[Please read our Standard Disclaimer.](#)

[Please read our Comment & Posting Policy.](#)

---

[CONNECT WITH THE LIBRARY](#)

[Skip to content](#)