

2026 DanceLife Teacher Conference Lifetime Achievement Award Honoree

Debbi Dee: A Lifetime in Rhythm

Some dance names are built over time. Debbi Dee's was born in a moment.

At 13, Debbi was performing on the New York State Fair circuit when a woman invited her to move from a smaller stage to the main stage. There, she would perform with Count Basie and his orchestra, and Lawrence Welk and his orchestra.

At the time, Debbi's full name was Deborah Anna Maria Donofrio. When she met Lawrence Welk, he struggled to pronounce it. Debbi, being 13, kept giving him the entire

name, middle names and all. Finally, he said, "Well, you dance. Your last name begins with D. I'm going to call you Debbie D."

That moment eventually became the professional name the dance world would know: Debbi Dee. The woman who brought her to the main stage became her agent and told her she had to keep the name. Debbi remembers her father sitting in the front row, looking confused, as if wondering, "Who in the world is Debbie Dee?"

It was the beginning of a lifetime in tap.



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As a young dancer, Debbi was inspired by Eleanor Powell and Ann Miller.

“Eleanor Powell had the speed and the turns,” Debbi said. “Ann Miller had the intricacy.”

She also admired Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and the legends of that era. Like many young dancers watching those films, she wanted to be part of that world.

One of Debbi’s memorable early professional experiences happened in Las Vegas, where she performed on a television show at the Dunes Hotel.

“It was really a life lesson for me,” Debbi said. “It was one of the very first professional jobs that I actually did.”

But through it all, Debbi discovered something important about herself. She loved performing, but she loved teaching more.



“I loved being a dance teacher,” she said. “I still love being a dance teacher. I loved the choreography much more than I loved performing.”

That love of teaching is why Debbi Dee became known as a teacher’s teacher. Her work was never only about steps. It was about how the body works, how sound is created, and how to break down tap so students could truly understand it.

Her earliest tap training came through private lessons with Curly Fisher, a vaudevillian. Because she learned one-on-one, her tap education was different from the group class structure many dancers know today. She says she did not even know what a shuffle was until she was in her twenties because her early training was rooted in scatting and sound.

When Debbi opened her own dance school, she began asking herself why she could create speed, clarity, and articulation in her own feet, but could not always get the same results from her students. That question became the start of a teaching method.

Debbi also taught programs for students who were blind, deaf, and in wheelchairs. Those experiences

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changed the way she taught. Everything had to be broken down to the most minute level. She learned how to dissect movement and sound so students of all abilities could understand. That process helped her develop her tap technique into a system of "1, 2, 3" and "A, B, C."

Eventually, Debbi's teaching brought her to major platforms across the country. Her first major organization was Dance Educators. While attending as a student, Grace Wakefield approached her and said, "You belong on the platform." One year later, Debbi was teaching at the national convention at the Waldorf Astoria.

When asked what she is most grateful for, Debbi first speaks of her family and their support. Beyond that, she is grateful that she realized her true

calling was teaching. She is also grateful for growth, not only watching her students grow, but recognizing her own need to keep learning.

When asked what receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2026 DanceLife Teacher Conference means to her, Debbi spoke as a teacher being honored by other teachers.

"To be given something as a teacher, by a teacher, by an organization that really honors teachers, it means a lot," she said.

For Debbi, the award feels different because it comes from people who understand the full journey: the children, the parents, the highs, the lows, and the years of showing up.

Today, Debbi continues to think deeply about the future of tap. Her hope is that

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tap continues to grow while honoring both tradition and evolution. She wants dancers to connect the body with the feet, blending the elegance of the classic greats with the rhythmic brilliance of artists like Gregory Hines.

"I love the process of leaving something behind," she said.

The 2026 DanceLife Teacher Conference is proud to honor Debbi Dee with the Lifetime Achievement Award, celebrating not only what she has accomplished, but what she has given to dance education: one sound, one step, one teacher, and one student at a time.



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