

Swing King: The Legend of Frankie Manning

by Lori Roblk Pfeiffer

If you have ever been wowed by a dancer bouncing his partner off his back and over his head, in time with the beat, you have witnessed an aerial move that was introduced by Frankie Manning decades ago at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. Once the home of happy feet, where an African-American dance style called the Lindy Hop stomped an indelible footprint on our national culture, this cultural landmark was leveled in 1958 to make room for a housing development.

In the Savoy's glory days, as many as 4,000 people a night would pack the football-field-size dance floor, leaving just enough space for ambitious young dancers whose experimental moves rocked a corner of the room. The legendary dance styles created at the Savoy live on in Manning, one of those young dancers who took swing dancing to new heights.

Manning was born May 26, 1914, in Jacksonville, Fla.; when he was 3 years old, he moved with his mother, Lucille, to Harlem just as its arts-and-culture scene was exploding. His mother worked as a dancer. "She knew all the steps," he says, recalling that he watched her and her friends do the Charleston, the Black Bottom and other 1920s steps at rent parties.

In an era when formal dance studios taught strictly ballroom dancing, Manning learned popular steps by watching and trying. He recalls that swing captured his attention because it was "a very exciting dance to do and see. I used to go to these ballrooms and watch the other kids dance. That's how I picked it up. It's not like ballet, where you had to go and train for it. You follow

your instincts and follow the rhythm of the music and just dance."

Manning had just entered his teens when he ditched his afternoon church group meetings for teen dances at the Alhambra Ballroom. Ballrooms had a hierarchy of skill and popularity, and Manning quickly moved up from the Alhambra to the Renaissance and eventually to the Savoy Ballroom, which was the top of the heap. The Savoy was where Manning first learned to do the Lindy Hop—a variation of swing's fancy footwork that was made popular at the Savoy and that was named for Charles Lindbergh's famous "hop" across the Atlantic.

The Depression held the country in a stranglehold during the 1930s, but the Savoy still jumped. Manning recalls that young dancers claimed part of the ballroom, which was called Kat's Korner, to show off their wild dancing. Savoy bouncer Herbert "Whitey" White set aside the area so that the teens wouldn't jostle other dancers on the ballroom floor. From this corner, Whitey picked dancers to perform at gigs, and the energetic bunch became an elite ensemble known as Whitey's Lindy Hoppers.

Manning caught Whitey's eye in 1934, and he eventually served as the Lindy Hoppers' chief dancer and choreographer. As the group's reputation grew, its members traveled the world, making appearances at the Cotton Club, Radio City Music Hall and other notable venues. "I didn't realize that I was involved in something big," Manning recalls. "It was just something that I enjoyed doing. And then I met so many friends and other kids that were doing it. It was like we formed a family of Lindy Hoppers."



Dancers competing in a contest at the Renaissance Ballroom, Harlem, 1950s. Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

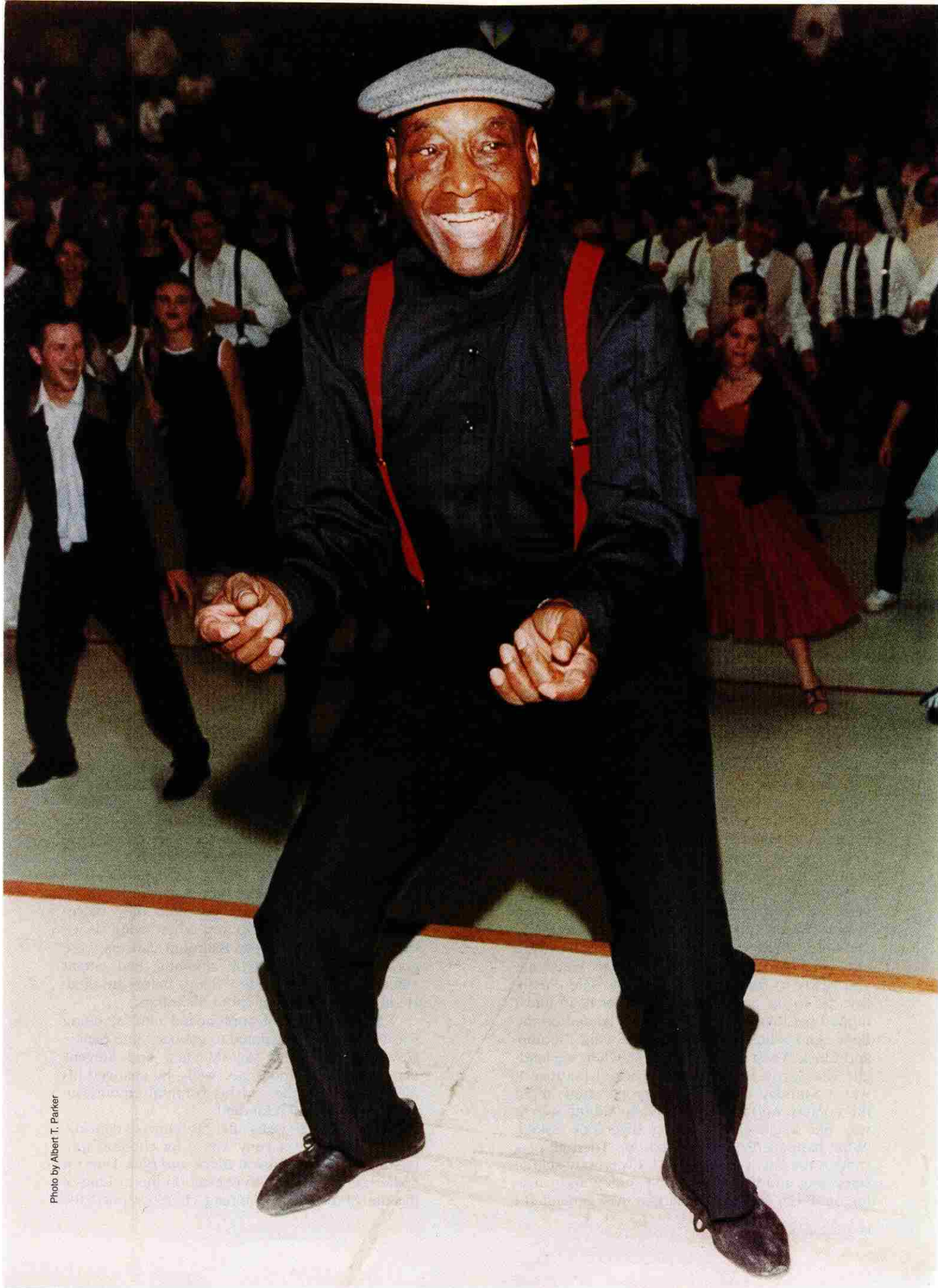


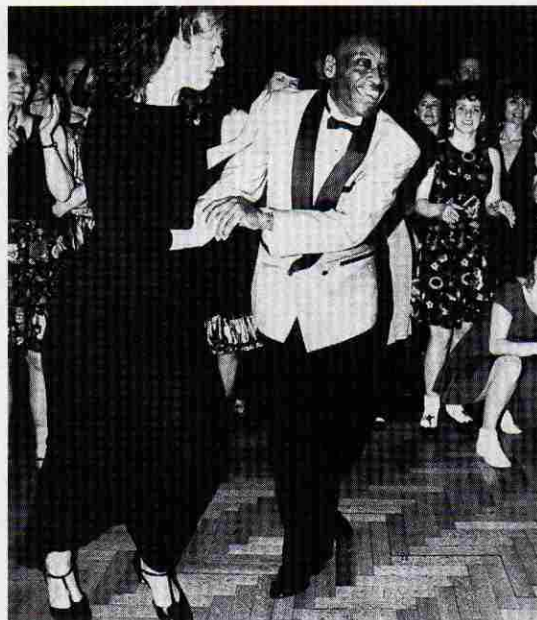
Photo by Albert T. Parker

Always an innovator, Manning shrugged off the staff-straight stance of the ballroom dancer and danced at an angle to the ground, leaning so far forward that it looked as though he might drop and do push-ups. He also invented several variations of the Lindy Hop. "It was spontaneous," he says of his experiments. "When I used to hear the music, it would penetrate me, just get into my body and make me want to do these moves. My body said, Okay, I can feel that."

The Savoy hosted Saturday night contests that gave dancers a chance to introduce new moves, and fierce rivalries led to the development of daring new styles. Manning had already won a few of these contests before he faced stiff competition from his idol and fellow Lindy Hopper, George "Shorty" Snowden. Snowden's partner, Big Bea, towered above him, a comic point that Snowden played off by having her carry him off stage on her back. (The move spoofed ballroom-dancing lifts, where the male dancer picks up his partner, spins her above his head, then deposits her gracefully.)

Manning was determined to devise a move that would top that comic lift. He asked his then partner, Freda Washington, to flip off his back and over his head. Manning and Washington worked on the over-the-back step for two weeks, using a mattress to cushion their mishaps. At the next Savoy contest, against five of the best Lindy Hop couples, they let it fly.

Manning recounted the event in a 1999 interview with *City Arts* on New York television station WNET: "Freda and I were out there dancing and the Chick Webb band was playing and we were just swinging out ... , and I said, 'Okay, Freda, are you ready to do the step?' And she said, 'Yeah. Let's go for it!' So I jumped over her head and I flipped her [over my back] and she landed on the floor. And when she landed she went 'boomp' and Chick Webb caught the music when we landed. The Savoy Ballroom was packed because it was a Saturday night and everyone knew about this contest. And when we actually did the step, it was like quiet—like nothing. Everyone asked, 'What happened? What did he do?' Then all of a sudden the Savoy just erupted. Everybody started screaming and hollering and stamping and carrying on. From the excitement that they generated I



Manning at his 80th birthday party.

Photo by Timothy Swiecki

thought, 'Man, maybe I did something.'"

Manning continued to do that something. He landed on his feet in such films as *Helzapoppin'*; *Everybody Sing*, with Judy Garland; and *A Day at the Races*, with the Marx Brothers. In 1937, he danced before King George VI. In 1941, he appeared in a *Life* magazine article about the Lindy Hop, captured forever in the act of tossing partner Ann Johnson into the air.

Manning was drafted into the Army in 1942. He organized some entertainment for troops before his tour of duty ended in 1947. Back in civilian life, he formed his own dance troupe, the Congaroo Dancers, who specialized in a cross between the conga and the Lindy Hop. His troupe toured with Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie, Nat "King" Cole, Sammy Davis Jr., Tony Bennett and others and appeared on the *Milton Berle Show*.

After decades in the spotlight, swing dancing fell by the wayside as the big-band era declined and rock 'n' roll became a mainstay. Manning married in 1954, and a year later he took a job at the post office.

Imagine his surprise when, 31 years later, Erin Stevens phoned him from a New York City phone booth in the middle of the night, in the middle of a rainstorm, and asked if he was *the* Frankie Manning. He told her that he didn't dance anymore, but Stevens persisted. She and her partner, Steven Mitchell—true swing aficionados—had picked up most of what they had learned from watching old movies. By the time they began recreating the Lindy Hop and other swing dance steps, many of the Savoy Ballroom dancers were gone. Al Minns, a Savoy alumnus, had taught Mitchell and Stevens a few things before he died. He also had told them about Manning.

When Stevens first approached him, Manning wasn't sure that he wanted to get back into dance. However, when he saw Mitchell and Stevens dance together—and dance well—he changed his mind and the embers of his youthful enthusiasm and talent quickly rekindled.

At age 75, three years after his return to dancing, Manning received a Tony Award for choreographing the Broadway musical *Black and Blue*. Director Spike Lee tapped him to consult on the making of the film *Malcolm X*. Manning choreographed the

Lindy Hop scenes and even performed in them, imparting an authentic flavor to the movie.

When Manning danced at the Savoy Ballroom in the 1920s, 30s and '40s, he was nicknamed "Musclehead" for the fabulous, well-toned muscles that flexed visibly on his shorn head when he danced. Though his head is still smooth and muscular, he doesn't receive too many "Go, Musclehead!" exhortations anymore. Nevertheless, he still gets the ladies. Some people blow out candles at their birthday celebrations; Manning dances with a line of women whose number marks his age. Sometimes the lineup of women exceeds his age, but the octogenarian graciously dances with each one.

Wherever Manning appears, young ladies shyly approach him, dolled up in retro party dresses or pedal pushers, sometimes with their hair styled a la Greta Garbo. Gracious and attentive, Manning takes them on his arm and limps ever so slightly onto the dance floor.

On January 15, the setting was an elementary school gym in Phoenix, where the New Year's Eve Swing Jam was being held. When Manning began to dance, all traces of stiffness disappeared. He danced flawlessly with the eight-count beat, his feet barely touching the ground. So light were his moves that he seemed suspended like a puppet on invisible strings. He literally swept his partner off her feet. His dance technique speaks perfection, but his feet are driven by emotion.

At the dance, which was organized by the Arizona Lindy Hop Society, young and old came from 30 states to dance with him. A few gray-haired folks looked as if they had taken turns on a dance floor to a swing band in the original era.

Most of Manning's followers today are white—a fact that bemuses him. "I don't think it has hit the black community the way the white community has taken to it," he says, a smile playing over the corners of his wide mouth. "Most of the blacks have been doing this dancing almost all their life. The whites are just catching up now."

Manning spends much of his time teaching groups of young people—hordes, really—to swing. He patiently counts off beats and demon-

strates basic steps that he could probably do in his sleep. He also teaches them about the romance of dancing—about the thrill of holding someone in your arms. Of course, he keeps up with the changing fashions. "The young girls today, they want to do their own thing," he tells a group of young men. "So when they want to do their own thing, you say, 'Oh, I'll do my own thing, too.'"

Manning believes that today's youth can benefit from the grace and happiness of swing: "I would prefer these kids be out there dancing than see them on the corner smoking crack and dope and all of that. When we went to the Savoy, we weren't into drinking and smoking or into drugs or anything. Dancing was our high; that is the way we felt good."

Today, from his home in Corona, N.Y., Manning travels around the country as the Ambassador of Swing. His son Charles "Chazz" Young comes along, and Manning sometimes dances with Savoy alumna Norma Miller. He also serves on the board of directors of the New York Swing Society.

In recent years, he has choreographed *Stompin' at the Savoy*, a television movie directed by Debbie Allen, and he consulted on the TV film *Gotta Dance*, which focused on American social dancing. In addition to his work in the United States, Manning has choreographed shows in Sweden and England. He has been inducted into the Swing Dance Council Hall of Fame, and he has received two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. The ABC News television program *20/20* has profiled him.

Manning's recent fame has surprised him, but he claims that it hasn't become the mainstay of his life. That, he says, is teaching others how to swing: "I was thankful that [swing] was coming back. When I was invited to do workshops and things, I gladly jumped at the opportunity. I've been doing it for such a long time. If there is something that I can help these youngsters with, I would do it. That's how I got into doing all of this."

The Savoy Ballroom is gone, but Manning seems determined to create a home of happy feet wherever he travels.

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Couple dancing to the music of the Erskine Hawkins band, 1930s. Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

