

FRANKIE MANNING

Since the 1930s, Frankie Manning has been one of the most important forces behind the development and dissemination of the lindy hop. He is credited with many influential and lasting innovations to this truly American art form, including the creation of the lindy air step and synchronized ensemble lindy routine, both of which helped catapult the dance from ballroom to stage and screen.

Born in 1914, Frankie lived in Florida until the age of three, when his mother brought him to Harlem, the birthplace of the lindy. Growing up in the midst of this Swing Era landscape, Frankie found he was part of a group of dedicated dancers that was to inspire the dancing and music of the 1930s and 1940s.

Based at the Savoy Ballroom, to which he was drawn as a teenager by the superb swing bands and fabulous lindy hopping, Frankie soon took his talents on the road as a lead dancer and chief choreographer for Whitey's Lindy Hoppers. He appeared in several films including *Radio City Revels* with Ann Miller (1937) and *Hellzapoppin'* with Olsen & Johnson and Martha Raye (1941), and toured the world with jazz greats Ethel Waters, Ella Fitzgerald, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Count Basie, and Cab Calloway among others. While dancing in London in 1937, Frankie gave a command performance for King George VI. In 1941, "Musclehead" Manning was featured in a *Life* magazine article that highlighted his acrobatic brand of lindy.

With the onset of World War II, Whitey's Lindy Hoppers disbanded and Frankie joined the Army, where he saw active duty. Upon his release from the military in 1946, he formed his own troupe, The Congaroo Dancers. This electrifying act toured with Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan, Tony Bennett, Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis, Nat "King" Cole, and Sammy Davis Jr., and appeared on Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theater* and Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town*. As the 1950s and rock 'n' roll moved in, Frankie could no longer find work as an entertainer, so he took a day job with the U.S. Postal Service. He married, raised a family, and danced socially, but for the next 30 years Frankie believed that his performing career was over.

In 1986, with the resurgence of swing dancing, Frankie was rediscovered. This living legend emerged to lead a new breed of jitterbugs, whose fascination with the lindy hop set Frankie globetrotting once again, spreading his dance magic through workshops, lectures, and performances. In 1989, Frankie was profiled on ABC's primetime news program, *20/20*. Producer Alice Pifer said, "Frankie Manning is one of our country's cultural treasures and for too long he did not have full recognition. That's why I felt he warranted a profile on national television."

Also in 1989, Frankie received a Tony Award for Best Choreography in the Broadway hit musical *Black and Blue*. The *New York Times* noted, "Mr. Manning is a choreographer we should see more often. His theatricalization of jitterbug styles is topped with a spectacular anthology of social dancing and tap in the chorus numbers 'Swinging' and ['Black and Tan Fantasy']." Frankie returned to Broadway in 1997 as Creative Historic Consultant to choreographer Mercedes Ellington for *Play On!*

In 1992, Frankie served as dance consultant for and performed in Spike Lee's film, *Malcolm X*. With fellow lindy hopper Norma Miller, he choreographed and danced in *Stompin' at the Savoy*, an NBC made-for-television movie directed by Debbie Allen. Since 1988, Frankie has choreographed for numerous dance companies around the world including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, American Ballroom Theater, Zoots and Spangles (England), The Jiving Lindy Hoppers (England), The Rhythm Hot Shots (Sweden), and New York's own Big Apple Lindy Hoppers, for whom Frankie served as artistic director and chief choreographer.

Frankie's many honors include induction into the City Lore People's Hall of Fame (1993), a New York Arts in Education Roundtable Award (1993), an NEA Choreographers' Fellowship Grant (1994), an NEA National Heritage Fellowship Award (2000), and a Flo-Bert Award for Lifetime Achievement in Tap Artistry (2004). In recognition of his historical importance, Oxford University Press included an article on Frankie, and one on the lindy hop, in their six-volume *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (1998). Laura Bush and the Librarian of Congress invited Frankie to share his stories at the 2003 National Book Festival in Washington.

Frankie's eightieth birthday in May, 1994 was marked by CAN'T TOP THE LINDY HOP! a 3-day celebration in Manhattan attended by over 750 swing dance enthusiasts from 8 different countries. In 1999, New York City's legendary Roseland Ballroom hosted 1800 well-wishers for his 85th birthday. Frankie was further honored when his footwear was added to the display case of famous dancers' shoes in the lobby of Roseland. Close to 300 admirers joined Frankie on a week-long Caribbean cruise for his 89th birthday, and again for his 90th in 2004.

Frankie's achievements have been considered newsworthy since the 1930s. As an international leader of the current swing dance revival, he has been interviewed for hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles, scores of documentaries and news programs, and a dozen books. In recent years, he was profiled in *GQ* and *People*. He was a highlighted dancer in the PBS special, *Swingin' with Duke*, featuring the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis, and was interviewed extensively on-camera for Ken Burns's acclaimed PBS documentary, *Jazz*. His autobiography, *Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop*, co-written by Cynthia R. Millman, was published by Temple University Press in spring 2007.

Frankie is truly a world ambassador of swing dance. His fabulous dancing and radiant smile have served as inspiration to generations of lindy hop enthusiasts, but he modestly claims, "I'm not interested in fame and glory; it's just that I would like others to know what a happy dance this is."