

Seasoned Dance Troupe the Silver Belles Prove Grace and Beauty Defy Age

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When Harlem hotspots like Small's Paradise and Apollo Theater shuttered decades ago, most audiences forgot about chorus girls like Cleo Hayes -- the ones who revved up audiences with intricate dance moves that kept jaws dropping and tongues drooling while the club-goers awaited the main act.

But Hayes never forgot about them or the many routines she learned week after week. Those memories led her some 20 years ago to join the Silver Belles, a tap dance troupe of fellow retired chorus girls.

And she kept dancing.

Now, the fuller story of Hayes and women like her is being told through a new film, "Been Rich All My Life." And on Sunday, Hayes will return to the Apollo for the film's screening, accompanied by her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. And she may break out a few moves on stage, too.

After all, she is still performing, even if she is 91.

"At this point, it's hard to say how I'm going to feel when I go into the theater," Hayes **told BlackAmericaWeb.com**. "It will be a different emotion, a whole different feeling inside. And as far as the movie, well, I'm still up, walking on air about that."

The Apollo screening will serve as a preview to a wider release, expected this summer. A deal is in negotiations now, said filmmaker Heather Lyn MacDonald.

MacDonald was drawn to the Silver Belles after reading a blurb about them in a newspaper. After tracking them down, her camera followed their ups and downs for two years, and she spent another two-plus years editing the documentary, a story that is as much about friendship and aging with grace as it is about history, she said.



They are mothers, wives then widows, grandmothers and great grandmothers. There have been strokes, pacemakers, knee replacements and even death, but the Silver Belles (pictured above) keep hoofing. [Photo courtesy of Toots Crackin Productions]

“I find myself constantly awed by these women. There are these amazing stories that are available all around us in the elders,” MacDonald **told BlackAmericaWeb.com**. “People of this age are normally invisible. Our older relatives, they’re not going to say, ‘Let me tell you about my life.’ You have to pull it out of them. And so often we don’t.”

What she pulled within 81 minutes is the journey of five women who, like many others of their era, helped forge Harlem as the place to be in the 1930s and 1940s. There is Hayes, but also Elaine Ellis, Marion Coles, Fay Ray and Bertye Lou Wood, all Silver Belles with stories to tell -- from being among the first black USO shows to tour during WWII to Hollywood to shutting down the Apollo for unfair labor practices.

But these women were determined not to let their greatest moments lay behind them. As a troupe, the Silver Belles have performed at Carnegie Hall with Dizzy Gillespie, as part of Lena Horne’s 80th birthday celebration at Lincoln Center and more.

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In preparation for the Apollo show, 91-year-old Coles set about showing a few younger tappers how to really work it. After two hours straight, Coles was going strong, but her younger charge of trained, Broadway veterans still struggled to catch the steps.

“[The Silver Belles] teach young people something about history, and older people reminisce because they remember,” said Geri Rhodes-Kennedy, the group’s founder and manager. “This movie is a legacy. It’s them talking about their lives in their own words, not someone else’s words.”

And there remains a universality to those words for many black people.

Hayes was a Mississippi girl who dreamed of the big bands and swaying bodies she saw on movie screens. She held tight until she was 18, then she headed for the big city -- Chicago -- with her schoolteacher cousin and made her big break.

Once her show toured New York and she danced at the Cotton Club, Hayes knew there was no going back to Chicago. She hoofed around New York, in Harlem, one of scores of women who composed the chorus lines that drew applause from packed houses. She danced and danced, from rehearsal to show back to rehearsal and back to the stage, 12- and 14-hour days, until bunions and blisters burst and bled -- sometimes without her promised pay. She opened for the likes of Jimmy Lunceford, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington and all the other impresarios of the day.

But then post-War America brought rock-and-roll and other musical tastes. Hayes and women like her fell from favor and became ordinary black women looking to feed their families, overcome racism and just survive. It’s a reality that parallels modern video dancers and others, said choreographer and stage director Mercedes Ellington.

“Dancers are at the bottom of the totem pole, in many cases,” Ellington **told BlackAmericaWeb.com**. “They tend to be valued the least, paid the least, but they mean the most to productions -- whether it’s Broadway musicals, film, or television.”

“With dancers -- chorus line dancers in particular -- there was an expendability, and a certain lack of understanding of the work ethic and physical work that goes into it,” she said. “There are various women around who are not organized like the Silver Belles, but who are part of that heritage, and there are not so many of them left. That’s why I was overjoyed to hear someone had been persistent enough to stick by these women and do this film.”

But theirs aren’t the only stories shoved into corners and ignored, said Fred Strickler, a dance professor at the University of California Riverside and a choreographer. Focus often falls to the Bill “Bojangles” Robinsons and Fred Astaires, but even when Fayard Nicholas died in January, there was little fanfare. He and his brother, Harold, had reinvented tap with their aerials and spins on stage and screen, defying gravity and bone structure long before break dancing.

“While it is true that most of the writing about tap dance has been about the men, there has been very little of that, even,” Strickler said. “And there’s practically nothing written on the field as it exists today.”

Today, at least, there’s a new entry on the topic, and unlike years ago when she would head toward the Apollo stage, Cleo Hayes won’t be sweating bullets before this performance.

“For me, [Sunday] will really be awesome,” she said. “It really will be.”

More information about the Silver Belles and BEEN RICH ALL MY LIFE at www.tootsrackin.com/braml.htm.

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