

Norma Miller: Stompin' at the Savoy

by Alan Govenar, PhD

Heritage Fellow Norma Miller grew up in Harlem during the 1920s and as a young child loved to dance. She was among the original performers of the Lindy Hop and is renowned among swing dancers worldwide today. Here she describes her childhood dreams and her persistence in pursuing them in an excerpt from Stompin' at the Savoy: The Story of Norma Miller, Candlewick Press, 2006. Alan Govenar compiled this picture book from recorded interviews with the dancer. Read this story aloud or make copies for students to read.

House-Rent Parties

To help pay the rent, Mama used to hold house-rent parties. Everyone who squeezed into our small apartment paid twenty-five cents to listen to music and dance. Mama served pigs' feet, potato salad, and souse (a thick sauce made from cucumber, celery, vinegar, lemon, and cayenne pepper).

At house-rent parties, which we usually had about once a month, there were no bands. There'd be a wind-up Victrola, and sometimes an upright piano. Somebody'd play ragtime, or what we called stride. It was music that made people want to dance.

The parties often started late at night. I would sleep under the coats in the bedroom, but when I heard the words "ice cream," I'd get up and dance for some. I loved to do the Charleston, and everyone thought I was a champ.

I don't know where the Charleston came from. I just saw people doing it, and I did it. The Charleston was the rage of the 1920s.

Dancing was a major part of everything we did. Everything was jazz in those days: syncopated rhythms and dance. It was the Jazz Age, and Harlem was the center of it all.

Dance School

I was nine or ten years old when Mama enrolled me at Amanda Kemp's dance school. It cost twenty-five cents an hour, and we could barely afford that. All the kids in my neighborhood went to some kind of dancing school. And after dance class, I went looking for the new stage shows, the musicals and the revues, because all the shows rehearsed in Harlem.

In those days, everybody who wanted to put together a show came to New York, because New York had theaters, and these entrepreneurs would bring the shows to rehearsal halls in Harlem. You could go to

any of them, and there would be some show rehearsing. You always heard a piano tinkling. People were dancing. Tap dancers were off in the corner. I used to go there and watch. I'd stand off to the side and look in the door. I watched the routines and watched them dance. And when I'd come out, I'd know the whole routine.



Heritage Fellow Norma Miller fulfilled her childhood dream by becoming both a dancer and a choreographer.

Photo by Alan Govenar

I must have danced at every amateur night in Harlem. I did the Odeon Theatre on 145th Street, the Lafayette Theater on Seventh Avenue between 131st and 132nd Streets. Everytime there was an amateur night, Mama had me on that stage.

She made me a little pair of black shorts, and I had a white blouse with big sleeves. I'd sing a little song, then do a little jazz routine. I'd put a series of steps together. Each step had eight bars, and if I did four steps, that's thirty-two bars. Thirty-two bars is a chorus in jazz. With that, I could go in any direction: Charleston, Black

Lesson Ideas

- Heritage Fellow Norma Miller tells of learning to dance. After students interview a family member or friend about childhood lessons and dreams, have them make a picture book of the story.
- Norma Miller lists dances she learned as a child. Brainstorm a list of dances students know about and ask them to use this list to write poems that dance across a page. They can use movement as they recite their poems in class.

Bottom, Mess Around, Snake Hips, Suzy Q, Pickin' Cherries, Shim-Sham. Those were the steps everybody did. Jazz steps. I never won anything back then. I was just one of many little girls. There were others better than me, especially if they were singers.

My Dream

At one time, we lived on 140th Street, and the windows of our apartment faced the back door of the Savoy Ballroom.

The Savoy was on the second floor of a two-story building that sprawled across an entire city block between 140th and 141st Streets on Lenox Avenue. It had a giant marquee with black, bold, block letters. On the street level were a beauty shop, a barbershop, a furniture store, and a bar on the corner. The sidewalks were always bustling, echoing at times with the cackling gossip of the ladies in the beauty shop and the raucous laughter of the men getting their hair cut next door.

The Savoy Ballroom was a place where blacks and whites were able to mingle and dance together. The actress Lana Turner had nicknamed the Savoy the "Home of Happy Feet," and everyone who was anyone, black and white, went there.

In the summer, when windows were open, my sister and I liked to sit on the fire escape and watch the silhouettes of the dancers through the curtains of the Savoy. We could hardly wait for the music of the big bands to start. We could listen to the greatest orchestras in the world from our living room. And every time I got a chance, I'd dance. I loved to dance. I felt born to be a dancer. I'd make up dance routines and call out to my mother, "Look at me! Look at me!" I'd shimmy and turn a fast two-step, imitating the dancers I saw. Dancing was in my blood.