

20 March 23-March 29, 2006

THE NEW YORK AMSTERDAM NEWS

Silver Belles return to the Apollo in “Been Rich All My Life”

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Special to the AmNews

One of the last times they were celebrated in the pages of the Amsterdam News was in February 1940, when – as Apollo Theatre chorus line dancers – they were highly praised for daring to go out on strike and

walk picket lines along 125th street.

As the Apollo Theatre’s chorus line dancers they had walked off their jobs and, during a 34-hour picket, demanded that the Apollo’s owners respect its Black talent base.

At the time, the theater’s management policies were noto-

riously exploitative. “The strike hinged upon a refusal of Frank Schiffman, manager of the West 125th Street house, to bargain with the union in its demands for [a] wage increase and adjustment of working hours for the chorus girls,” a March 2, 1940 AmNews article about the strike noted.

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“Situated as it is in the heart of Harlem, [the Apollo] has employed actors, actresses, singers, dancers, musicians and others whose names are magic in show life.”

Today the showtime magic is back as the Silver Belles, the former Apollo Theatre and Cotton Club chorus line dancers, have been performing again ever since 1985. That’s when Bertye Lou Wood and the group’s manager, Geri Kennedy, reorganized the group and started booking them for performances once more.

Heather MacDonald, the director of the new film about the Silver Belles, “Been Rich All My Life,” says she read about one of their performances at the Cotton Club and thought about what an amazing group of women these dancers had to be: these were women in their 80s

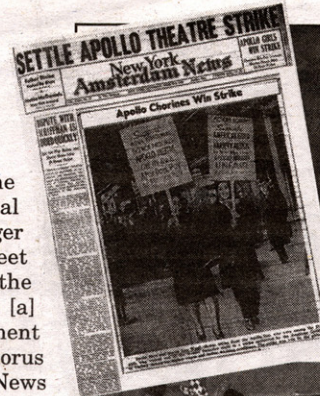
and some even in their 90s, but they still loved to dance.

“I immediately called the manager and started bugging her for a chance to meet these ladies,” says MacDonald. After meeting them and coming to an agreement about filming them at work, MacDonald said the story behind “Been Rich All My Life” developed its own strong story element.

The film shows us how these African American elders meet for rehearsals and share bonds on the dance floor that turn into caring friendships within their inner circle. It also gives us a chance to see the pure joy that music and dance has brought to the lives of these women.

“There’s tons of stuff I shot of their families, and all of that stuff was in the first cut,” says MacDonald. But as she contin-

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Clockwise: Amsterdam News front-page shows Apollo dancers won their strike. The Silver Belles, aged 84-96. Some of the Silver Belles in 1938, on tour with The Cotton Club Revue in South America.

Toots Cracklin Productions photos

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ued editing and saw the film’s story develop, the director said that, “A lot of what their stories were, the stories of what they had accomplished, seemed to just bubble up to the forefront, and their friendship became the core of the film.”

Besides their famous strike at the Apollo Theatre – a strike that led to the establishment

of the American Guild of Variety Actors (AGVA), one of the first unions to organize Black and white workers – “Been Rich All My Life” shows how the world of music and dance lifted young Black women with talent from areas like the rural South and encouraged them to make their own lives. We see them at work dancing in places like Harlem, Europe and South America.

Watching the Silver Belles, you see the pure enjoyment the

dance world can bring and even if you’ve never tap-danced before, you feel an urge to try because you feel their beat and want to be a part of it.

This Sunday, March 26, at 4p.m. the Apollo Theatre will present a benefit premiere of the film, “Been Rich All My Life.” Members of the Silver Belles will be on hand to perform their traditional show-closer, the “Shim Sham Shimmy.” For more information, call 212-252-2778 or 212-531-5305.