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NOW ENTERTAINMENT



CHECK IT OUT:
Touring South America in 1938



ON THEIR TOES:
Coles, 91, Hayes, 91,
Ellis, 89, and Ray, 87

Dancing Belles tap 'Rich' vein

When Gene Kelly sprang up in "Singin' in the Rain" and hollered "Gotta dance!", it was hard not to think, "He's right." But until you see the Silver Belles, you have no idea how deep that "gotta dance" instinct can run.

The Silver Belles are four women — in their mid-80s and older — who started dancing in chorus lines at the Apollo, the Cotton Club and other theaters in the 1930s.

Their work gradually wound down, but then in 1985 they decided tap-dancing was too much fun to quit. They formed the Belles and have been dancing ever since.

But they're not just showing up to collect the applause. They understand dancing the way great older singers like Mabel Mercer understood songs. They

work out steps, they rehearse. They owe the art no less.

Gotta dance!
The next gig for Marion Coles, Elaine Ellis, Fay Ray and Cleo Hayes comes Sunday at the Apollo, on the bill with a new movie called "Been Rich All My Life," which tells their story.

Directed by Heather Lyn McDonald, "Been Rich" follows the dancers for two years and lets them talk about their lives, from 12-hour days onstage through movies like "Stormy Weather" and tours through South America and Europe, where they were greeted as goddesses.

That's not a stretch. While male head-



DAVID HINCKLEY

CRITIC AT LARGE

liners got the ink, the chorus lines were the backbone of a show, laying the foundation upon which the rest was built.

More than a few featured artists would start a week's run at a theater like the Apollo by standing in the wings and taking notes on the chorus line.

Their routines weren't just flashy kicks. They were steps, moves, ideas and execution.

Gotta dance!
The title "Been Rich All My Life" does carry a mild irony. None of these dancers — nor original Belle Bertye Lou Wood, who led a strike against the Apollo over chorus line wages in 1940 and died at 96 during the making of this film — ever got to a mansions-and-caviar life.

Cleo Hayes has been a bartender since 1956. Fay Ray was Rosie the Riveter in World War II, drove a cab and worked on the Alaska pipeline.

They married and lived the kind of lives most people live, except their tap shoes called one more time, and they answered.

Not all dancers get that chance. The great John Bubbles, in his last years, was confined to a wheelchair. He would work out steps in his head and drum them with his fingers.

The Silver Belles, seven decades later, are still tapping their steps out on the wood-floor stage of the Apollo Theater.

Gotta dance!
E-mail: dhinckley@nydailynews.com
Tribute to Harlem's legendary chorus dancers, featuring "Been Rich All My Life," 4 p.m. Sunday at the Apollo, 253 W. 125th St. Tix: \$10-\$40. Call (212) 531-5305.