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Glory days of Harlem's 'fab' chorus girls

The Silver Belles and Mercedes Ellington pose with former President William "Bill" Clinton

By Kam Williams

When the Apollo opened in 1934 at the height of the Big Band Era, one of the famed theater's most popular features was its chorus line of chocolate cuties. Comprised of 16 shapely showgirls, these enchanting tap dancers managed to upstage some headlining jazz groups led by the likes of Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and Count Basie.

Originally, forced to work a half-dozen shows during grueling, 15-hour days which generally kept them on stage well past midnight, the women eventually unionized and went on strike. Their efforts paid off, leading to better employment conditions not only for all of Harlem's hoofers, but also for the then lily-white Rockettes, who were high-kicking downtown at Radio City Music Hall.

After World War II erupted, out of a sense of patriotism this African American troupe decided to join the USO tour in order to entertain the troops, only to be disillusioned about the United States as their caravan criss-crossed the country.

For they experienced the sting of segregation whenever they were denied access to facilities or accommodations because of the color of their skin, hypocritical mistreatment which apparently even transpired on military bases in the "land of the free."

Although the dancers' popularity waned in the wake of the end of the war, five of them reunited to resume their careers in 1985. Now calling themselves the Silver Belles, and ranging in age from 84 to 96, their life stories are the subject of "Been Rich All My Life, a labor of love directed, produced, filmed and edited by Heather Lyn MacDonald.

Each of the Silver Belles is a joy to behold. There's 89 year-old Cleo Hayes who matter-of-factly explains her interest in show business with, "I'm from Greenville, Mississippi. I don't have to tell you why I left." Similarly, Fay Ray, 84, explains that she was only 11 or 12 and already picking cotton when she impulsively left Louisiana by rail for the North by stowing away aboard a freight train.

This enchanting, if bittersweet memoir seamlessly interweaves such wistful, tenderhearted reflections with archival film footage and the readily observable harsh realities associated with advanced age to yield a splendid slice of African American history.

These hardy survivors are nothing short of inspiring to observe as they shuffle out on stage, never embittered either by racism or by the host of aches, pains and diseases that presently beset them, ranging from arthritis to broken hips to heart disease to colon, breast and ovarian cancers.

Elaine Ellis, 86, maintains her cheery demeanor and grace under pressure in the face of asthma, high blood pressure, cancer and strokes, taking two buses and two subway trains to rehearsals right after her radiation treatments. Just as uplifting are the efforts of Marion Coles, an energetic 88 year-old who teaches tap to youngsters in order that the cultural tradition not be lost.

Senior spokesperson Bertye Lou Wood, 96, seen in the full bloom of youth here dancing astride Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in a clip from the Hollywood classic Stormy Weather, sums up the Silver Belles perseverance and overall optimistic attitude best when she announces resolutely with determination, "I'm going to dance, dance, dance, 'til I can't dance no more, and I'm going to live, live, live, 'til I die."

Excellent (4 stars). Unrated. Running time: 81 minutes. Studio: First Run Features.