

Dancing through the decades

BY ROBERT JOHNSON
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

NEW YORK — These women had long, beautiful legs. They were chosen for their looks, as much as anything, and during the 1930s, when they shimmied and tapped in the chorus line at the Apollo Theater in Harlem or at the Café Zanzibar downtown, men couldn't take their eyes off them.

Amazingly, some of these women are still dancing today. Now in their 80s and 90s and as frail as they are feisty, these veterans of the vaudeville stage make guest appearances as The Silver Belles, living relics of a glamorous era. Their story, as dramatic as it is inspiring, is the subject of a documentary film "Been Rich All My Life," which opens Friday at the Quad Cinema in New York.

"Tap dancing is not just steps. There are people behind the steps. There are lives behind the steps," says Karen Callaway Williams, a dancer with the New Jersey Tap Ensemble in Bloomfield, who knows the Silver Belles and who appears in the movie.

Williams says she met the Silver Belles 10



HEATHER MCDONALD

Dancer Fay Ray in a recent photo. At 85, she's still dancing and choreographing.

years ago at an outdoor dance festival. She appreciated their kindness and encouragement and immediately formed a bond with the older women.

"I started to see my future in them," Williams says. "They've been tap dancing their whole lives; and that's what I want to do, too."

Independent filmmaker Heather Lyn
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FIRST RUN FEATURES

Ray in a publicity shot from 1950.



Fay Ray, center, with Louis Armstrong, drummer Paul Parker and Pearl Bailey in the mid-1940s.

The rich legacy of a chorus line

MacDonald's movie tells the stories of five of the seven Silver Belles — the late Bertye Lou Wood; Cleo Hayes, Marion Coles, Elaine Ellis, Fay Ray, and their manager, Geri Kennedy. (Original members Harriet Brown and Hazel Walker Rogers died before the movie was made.) For two years MacDonald followed the dancers behind the scenes and onto the stage, delving into lives filled with jazz and dance.

In their heyday, these women were members of an artistic elite, keeping company with such stars as Louis Armstrong and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. But "the ladies," as they are referred to, also spent long, grueling hours in rehearsal. Among other details, the film describes the historic 1940 strike by the Apollo Theater chorus line that led to the creation of the American Guild of Variety Artists.

When vaudeville theaters began closing during World War II, the women faced an uncertain future. It wasn't until the 1980s that alumnae of the chorus line came together as The Silver Belles. The revival of interest in tap dancing won them a new generation of fans.

Yet when recognition came at last it was accompanied by the infirmities of old age and a new set of hardships. "Been Rich All My Life" depicts these trials, too, which the women confront with the same grace and dignity they bring to a step ball-change.

"It doesn't just show the good parts. It shows the bad parts, too," Williams says. "I appreciate that. Tell me the whole thing. Don't sugar-coat it for me."

In an interview with The Star-Ledger, Fay Ray recalled her astonishing life, which is covered in the documentary. Her story seems as incredible as the fact that, at age 85, she is still dancing and choreographing.

Ray grew up in Natchitoches, La., where as a child she sang and danced ("I've got the world in a jug/And a stopper in my hand") to earn the fried chicken and cake her guardian brought home in an apron from the Masonic lodge. Ray's guardian died when she was eight, leaving her alone in the world.

Ray described herself, at that age, as "an entrepreneur," picking cotton for a penny a pound and blackberries for 15 cents a bucket. "I wanted to get away from there," she said. "All I saw was girls getting pregnant, girls having babies, and nobody helped them. I cried most of the time. I didn't want a life like that."

So, when she was 11, Ray donned boys' clothing and started to jump freight trains, each time traveling a little farther out of town. "I hopped that freight because I figured they were going somewhere that I hadn't been. I had been looking at books and I had seen a couple of musicals. I had seen Shirley Temple, and I said, 'If she can do all that, maybe I can!'"

Three years later, she was in Shreveport when a traveling circus with a vaudeville troupe recruited her for the act. "These people come there looking for girls and I jumped up and I said, 'Look, take me! I can do it, whatever it is.'"

Ray served her theatrical apprenticeship with tapper Carnell Lyons and his group The Three Businessmen of Rhythm, then struck out on her own as a solo act, eventually traveling to New York, where she won a dream job at Café Zanzibar.

When she first saw New York, in

BELLES

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DANCE

Been Rich All My Life

Where: Quad Cinema, 34 W. 14th St. between Fifth and Sixth avenues

When: Opens Friday

How much: \$10; \$7 seniors and children under 12. Call (212) 777-3456, ext. 636

the 1940s, it was "beautiful," Ray said. "All the lights and the shows. They picked me out, right away, and asked me to come to the Zanzibar, on Broadway. I went down there and the man said, 'Let me see your legs.' I hoisted up (my skirt). I turned all around. Hired! I made more money than I ever had in my life — 50 bucks a week. Oh, that was money. I worked for 20 dollars a week, for 15 dollars a week, dancing."

At the Zanzibar, Ray danced seven days a week. "We worked as long as it took and we did three shows a night — a dinner show, and then one at midnight, and then another one at 2 o'clock in the morning. I was glad to work. I thought I was rich."

The Zanzibar didn't last forever, though. During the 1940s Ray danced at the Apollo Theater and worked as a welder in a shipyard in Providence, R.I.

During the 1950s, still the entrepreneur, Ray traveled to Paris and began booking herself as a solo act. Combining tap with comedy, she learned a song in the language of each country she visited. ("Sakura, sakura . . ." she began crooning in Japanese.) She moved from one hotel and nightclub to the next. She traveled across Europe, the Middle East and Asia, visiting lands she never believed she would see, when, back in Louisiana, she sat with a geography book open across her lap and started to dream.

Ray danced in USO shows through the 1960s. In the 1970s she drove a taxi in New York and worked at an oil-pumping station in Alaska. She joined the Silver Belles and revived her dancing career in the early 1990s.

Now she lives on social security in a studio apartment in Harlem, and while Ray says she would like to find a director who could help her break into hip-hop, her main gig is teaching the secrets of the old-time hoofers to the young generation. For the current Tap City! festival in New York, Ray choreographed a number that a group of female students performed at the Duke theater on 42nd Street on Tuesday.

Williams worked with her, as her assistant. "She is energetic, feisty, and extremely enthusiastic," Williams says. "She doesn't really worry about her age, which is fine. If she's not worried, I'm not too worried."

"She's been bringing in steps from the past," Williams adds. "She'll say, 'This step was done by Pete Nugent'— somebody way back. She'll say, 'This is Bill Robinson's break.'"

Though a few LPs exist, recording the work of by-gone tap artists, Williams points out that some tap steps sound the same, so it is only by watching an old hooper that youngsters can grasp what they are doing. The dancers of Ray's

generation impart a particular flavor to steps and offer variations on familiar themes that even a highly skilled professional like Williams may never have seen before.

Speaking of the impact of "Been Rich All My Life," Williams says: "People are really blown away, because they didn't know the ladies existed. They were living among them, but didn't realize such history was there."