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## Frankie Manning, the Ambassador and Master of Lindy Hop, Dies at 94

By TERRY MONAGHAN  
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Frankie Manning, a master of swing-era dance who went from the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem to Broadway and Hollywood, and then after a long break enjoyed a globe-trotting second career as an inspirational teacher and choreographer of the Lindy hop, died on Monday in Manhattan. He was 94 and lived in Corona, Queens.



Steele, Auckland

Frankie Manning on tour with Lucille Middleton in 1938.

His death was announced by his companion, Judy Pritchett.

Excelling in what quickly became first America's and then the world's most popular participatory form of jazz dancing in the 1930s and '40s, Mr. Manning led the way in giving the Lindy hop professional expression. The dance, which enables both partners to improvise rhythmically at the same time, has had enduring appeal as both a social and a performance dance, sweeping aside hierarchical, class, ethnic and gender conventions. When questioned about the apparently irresistible allure of the Lindy, Mr. Manning invariably described it as "a series of three-minute romances."

Dapper and charming to the end, he always conveyed the muscular and pile-driving yet rhythmically rich style of his heyday, when he propelled partners through the air at lightning speeds to the swinging sounds of Chick Webb, [Duke Ellington](#) and Count Basie at the Savoy, Harlem's premier ballroom. From there he ascended the entertainment ladder, appearing in Cotton Club productions, Mike Todd's 1939 musical "The Hot Mikado" and movies like "Radio City Revels" (1938) and "[Hellzapoppin'](#)" (1941).

Born on May 26, 1914, Mr. Manning left Jacksonville, Fla., with his mother three years later as part of the great

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"Hellzapoppin!" Routine Choreographed by Mr. Manning (in overalls) (Youtube.com)



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OPINION



Bill Cunningham

Mr. Manning in 1989.

northward migration of Southern blacks. They settled in Harlem. One day in 1929, on his way to Sunday school, he experienced a cultural epiphany on Seventh Avenue, outside the Alhambra Ballroom, when he discovered that he could take part in a youth dance there instead. Dancing soon became his passion, and though his mother initially dismissed his dancing as “too stiff,” he practiced incessantly and kept getting better.

In the early 1930s the entrepreneur Herbert White invited Mr. Manning to join his elite troupe, Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, at the Savoy Ballroom. Granted free admission

to the Savoy, where he moved to the incessant rhythms of the major 1930s big bands, white as well as black, he rapidly progressed as a dancer. But Mr. Manning, who was working as a furrier, did not consider himself a professional; as he explained in his autobiography, “Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop” (Temple University Press, 2007), written with Cynthia R. Millman, “We didn’t get paid, but the people watching might throw some money on the floor near the dancers, and we would divide it up.”

Mr. White paired Mr. Manning with Naomi Waller, and his distinctive style took shape. By the time the two of them signed a contract to dance at the

Cotton Club, in 1936, shortly after that fabled room had moved from Harlem to Midtown, Mr. Manning was indisputably a professional.

Their success there led to a 1937 tour of France, Ireland and Britain, which included a royal command performance at the London Palladium. Mr. Manning was soon dancing in the Hollywood movie “Radio City Revels” and on tour across New Zealand and Australia.

Back home again he danced in “The Hot Mikado” at the New York World’s Fair and appeared in Hollywood’s version of the comedy team Olsen and Johnson’s Broadway show “Hellzapoppin’,” in a sequence widely regarded as the best example of the Lindy hop on film. Mr. Manning’s ebullient, athletic style was captured at its peak in a sensational acrobatic duet with his new partner, Ann Johnson. [Mr. Manning had choreographed a series of routines for four couples to Count Basie’s “Jumpin’ at the Woodside.”](#) but different music was used in the film because the studio did not want to pay for the use of Basie’s song.

After serving with the Army in New Guinea, the Philippines and Japan during World War II, Mr. Manning led a four-person dance troupe called the Congaroos, which toured England and South America and appeared in the movie “Killer Diller” in 1948. But work began drying up in the 1950s, and Mr. Manning finally abandoned professional dancing for a Post Office job in 1955.

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[Frankie Manning: Never Stop Swinging](#)

Video courtesy of WNET. The full documentary will air on May 21 and 28.

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After 32 years of service, Mr. Manning embarked on a hyperactive retirement, returning his full attention to the Lindy, which had begun experiencing a revival. He taught at the Sandra Cameron Dance Center in Manhattan. Many bookings in the United States and abroad followed, and he began teaching, and eventually performing, with his son, Charles Young, known as Chazz, who had followed in his professional footsteps.

In 1989 Mr. Manning and another veteran of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, Norma Miller, choreographed a Lindy routine for [Alvin Ailey's](#) "Opus McShann." That same year Mr. Manning shared the [Tony Award](#) for choreography with Cholly Atkins, Henry LeTang and Fayard Nicholas for their contributions to the Broadway revue "Black and Blue."

In 1992 he trained [Denzel Washington](#) for a Lindy scene in [Spike Lee's](#) film "Malcolm X," in which Mr. Manning also appeared. "We were just trying to keep up with him," Mr. Washington recalled.

Other awards followed, including a National Heritage Fellowship from the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) in 2000. Mr. Manning and Ms. Miller were the only dancers to be included in [Ken Burns's PBS documentary series "Jazz."](#)

Mr. Manning's marriage to Gloria Holloway ended in divorce. In addition to Ms. Pritchett, his companion, and Mr. Young, his son, who lives in Las Vegas, he is survived by another son, Frank Manning Jr. of Leonia, N.J.; a daughter, Marion Price of Atlanta; a half-brother, Vincent Manning of Tobyhanna, Pa.; seven grandchildren; and nine great-grandchildren.

In 1994, Mr. Manning celebrated his 80th birthday in New York at a four-day event billed as Can't Top the Lindy Hop, attended by Lindy enthusiasts from around the world, at which he established a new tradition by dancing with 80 successive partners. In honor of his 85th birthday in 1999, he danced with 85 partners at the Roseland Ballroom, where his name was emblazoned on the marquee — and where back in the 1930s he had once been turned away.

In recent years two hip replacements had slowed Mr. Manning down, but he was still planning to celebrate his 95th birthday in grand style at [a five-day Birthday Festival in New York](#) reaffirming his leading role in ensuring the recognition of the Lindy hop, including the premiere of a documentary, "Frankie Manning: Never Stop Swinging," on Channel 13 in New York. Organizers say that event — set for May 21-25, with some 2,000 expected to attend — will go on as scheduled, as a memorial.

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