

Farewell to Tap Master Charles “Honi” Coles

By Sue Ceswick

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Tap dancing great Charles “Honi” Coles died last week at the age of 81. I got a tearful wake-up call from a tap crony, telling me the news. But it didn’t make me sad. I thought, now he can dance again. He hadn’t been able to in recent years and it was frustrating to him.

Now he’s up there with Steve Condos, Sammy Davis Jr., even Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and they’re tapping out a heavenly racket.

Honi had a special connection to Portland. From teaching classes and performing here, he’s made many friends. I met him several times, took classes from him, even interviewed him, but we never hung out. Maybe I just wanted to worship him from afar.

I first took a class from Honi at Jefferson high School. It was around 1979 and I’d just started tapping again after years away from my childhood passion. I think I went to the master class more for the celebrity aspect, so I could say I took a class from Honi Coles.

Crowded into the downstairs “dungeon” studio with dozens of kids, I squeezed into a spot front and center. He was tall, slim and graceful, and his legs bounced off the floor like a marionette. His feet barely moved and I thought “Where is all that sound coming from?” he must have maracas in his pocket

He launched into a jazzy be-bop combination that went right over my head. I could fake my way through it, but couldn’t say I got it. What I had gotten from this master was the first real lesson in tap: Steal steps and make’em your own.

Honi had just recently returned to tap himself. After coming up in vaudeville and becoming one of the best tap dancers in the world, he was sidetracked by racism and tap’s waning popularity. As a result, he spent many years as the production manager at the Apollo Theater.

He got back into theater in the ‘70’s with the musical “Bubblin’ Brown Sugar” and put together a troupe of his tap peers who performed as The Copasetics. He started teaching tap workshops and won a Tony award for his role in “My One and Only” starring Twiggy and Tommy Tune

I got a chance to really study with him in Boulder, Colo., in the summer of 1986. Dancers came from all over the world for this festival.

Standing in the studio, watching the stately Coles up front was a rush. So much history, so many stories those feet could tell. He taught us the ShimSham - a routine that every tap dancer needs to know. He’d show us a step and run over to the piano to vamp out a few chords.

What a task master he could be! He'd do it. We'd do it. I thought we'd done pretty well. "No, no!" he'd holler, "Like this!" With no effort, his feet would speak: "Sha-bop 'em bop de dop." And I would shake my head, hunch over and try with every shred of rhythm in my bones to get it or get close. We'd do it again, stamping our legs so hard that shin splints were assured, only to receive a reserved nod. And we loved it.

Honi's stories were legendary. He'd talk about tapping on the street corner in Philadelphia when he was a kid. He'd talk about his dance partner Cholly Atkins and their "Class Act." And he'd reminisce about the Hoofers Club in New York, where tap dancers could go and hang out, dance, have a drink and even spend the night. In the underacclaimed movie "The Cotton Club," Honi gets a chance to authentically re-create the Hooper's Club.

In November 1991, I found myself heading to Seattle for what would be the last class I'd take from Coles.

We worked on that same routine from Boulder. I remembered that funny waddling walk step, and no matter how hard I'd slam my taps against the floor, I'd never get it perfectly - and that perfection wasn't the point. Doing it was.

And now he's gone. Now we tap dancers are really being called upon to carry the torch. There are very few original masters left to learn from. It's up to us to keep this thing going. To tell stories and teach other people how to sing with their feet.

Honi gave us the tools to do it; his spirit lives within us. And all there is left to do is just keep on tapping.

I'm finally crying now.