

TAP TALK

FOR INTELLECTUAL RHYTHMIC SUPERIORS

by Melba Huber

The Tap World of Debbi Dee



Most fathers wouldn't dream of sending their 5-year-old daughters to a garage to take tap lessons from a man in his 70s. However, one father did just that. His daughter's name is Debbi Dee, and the old man in the garage was vaudeville veteran, Curley Fisher.

"Curley became the biggest influence in my tap career," said Dee. "He taught by sound and there were no names of steps. He believed your shoes and feet were your instruments and insisted on clarity. He taught me waltz clog, soft shoe, and many routines. I regret that I never got to say 'thank you' before he passed away. But I've thanked him many times and continue to do so."

The lessons Dee learned from Fisher laid the foundation for a strong tap technique that she passes on to thousands of students through her tap video series.



Debbi in 1980



Debbi Dee at 7 years

Tragedy has also influenced Dee's technique. In 1975 her husband, Bob Mancuso, was injured in a car wreck and in 1984 a train crashed into her mother's car. Both went through extensive rehabilitation after their accidents. The knowledge Dee acquired from the therapists about human anatomy made her a better teacher.

"I have changed my entire way of teaching, especially in jazz," said Dee. "I know about alignment and organized and controlled movement. I've also changed my way of teaching tap. I make sure that the students land in plie (bent knees) after wings and over-the-top, so there is no trauma to the hip socket."

From this experience Dee learned how to do exercise properly and continues to study in that field. She has produced seven videos and will have two new ones in '96 and a CD. The videos are a basic beginner class and progressions across the floor. There will even soon be a Debbi Dee tap shoe made by La Mendola on the market.

At seven years of age Dee won the Ted Mack Amateur Hour and appeared in many U.S.O. shows. At 13, she performed in many State Fair circuits. These were big

shows with headliners like Lawrence Welk and Count Basie. She danced in an off-Broadway show, choreographed by Henry LeTang, and was a headliner for opening acts in Vegas and in the Catskills. When she was 16, Dee opened her own dancing school in Rochester, New York.

Dee studied music and ballet at the Eastman School of Music and continued her classes with Curley Fisher through her teens.

When her students won a competition at a New York dance convention, Henry LeTang asked to meet their teacher. He invited her to his studio for class and exclaimed, "You've got the most melodic feet I've seen!" Dee took classes with LeTang whenever she visited New York.

Dee closed her school when a business opportunity opened for her husband in Florida in 1979. He was still recovering from his car wreck and the warm climate would help.

"I didn't take to Florida too well, so I spent time in New York for three years teaching at Hines and Hatchett, now Broadway Dance Center," said Dee. "I also performed in the off-Broadway show, *Sud-*



"My first L.P. cover,"
(1983)

denly, *the Music Starts*, which toured for more than a year."

In 1981, Dee decided to try Florida again, this time as a free-lance teacher. "After owning my studio for twelve years, I had no desire to open a studio again," she said.

When Grace Wakefield asked her to teach for Dance Educators of America,

most major dance organizations followed suit. She works regularly for Dance Educators, Dance Olympus, Dance Master of America, Dance Makers, and for Disney, where she choreographs and teaches technique. She has taught in Japan, France, South America and Canada.

Dee's all-time favorite female dancer was Eleanor Powell. "I have all her movies. There was a classy way about her dancing," Dee said. "She had also studied ballet and acrobatics and was never given enough credit."

The Nicholas Brothers are her favorite male dancers for the same reasons — "great upper body movement with a lot of class."

Dee believes the future of tap is secure

because of movies like *TAP*. National Tap Dance Day has contributed to recognizing tap as a true American art form.

Dee is proud that the New York Tap Committee honored her friend and teacher, Henry LeTang. She enjoyed and appreciated the Kennedy Center tribute to the Nicholas Brothers.

Dee has been married for over 25 years to her high school sweetheart, Bob Mancuso. "I dreamed of more performing, but the school and my personal life were more important. Also, I love teaching because it challenges me."

All over the world, Dee's tap videos continue to challenge tap students and teachers. For this we thank you.



Debbi with Henry LeTang
(1990)



Curley Fisher

"I love teaching because it challenges me."

