Alan Govenar | The Eyes and Ears of the People

Norma Miller

While growing up in Harlem, Norma Miller first saw swing dancing from the fire escape of her apartment, which afforded a view of the back of the famed Savoy Ballroom. Miller is regarded as one of the creators of the Lindy Hop, an acrobatic style of swing dancing that she says took its name from a headline about Charles Lindbergh's solo Atlantic flight ("Lindy Hops").

Too young to enter the club by themselves, Miller and her friends danced on the sidewalk outside. When she was 12, a popular fellow called Twist-mouth George invited her to come inside and dance with him, and she eagerly accepted. A few months later, she joined Whitey's Lindy Hoppers on a European tour, becoming one of the first dancers to perform the Lindy outside the United States.

From 1937 to 1940, Miller performed with Ethel Waters. During that period, Miller appeared as a dancer in the Marx Brothers' A Day at the Races. She formed the Norma Miller Dancers in 1940 and appeared the following year in the breathtaking Lindy Hop sequence in the film Hellzapoppin'. She began working with comedian Redd Foxx in 1963 and became a regular character, Grady's Lady, on Foxx's 1970s TV sitcom Sanford and Son.

In the 1980s, with fellow dancer Frankie Manning, Miller began teaching dance at conferences and classes across the country, which she continued. As a choreographer, Miller has created Alvin Ailey's Opus McShann, the dance scenes in director Spike Lee's film Malcolm X and Debbie Allen's made-for-TV film Stompin' at the Savoy.

Miller told her story in a popular 1996 autobiography, Swingin' at the Savoy. "Swing music is perfect," Miller remarked in an interview for Ken Burns' Jazz documentary. "It's perfect for the body. It has coordination. I mean, you could swing 'til you're 90 … it's no effort to dance. You ever heard of anybody 40 years old trying to do a hip-hop or break-dancing? We all end up swinging. Any time you got a little gray in your hair, when you know that music, you can get up. And today, now that they're reissuing the great Count Basie's things and things like that, people are dancing all over the world again. And it's marvelous, and that was the reason why I wrote my book Swingin' at the Savoy, to let you know it all started here, right up here at the embryo. It's a black thing, huh."

Henry Gray

While growing up on a farm in Alsen, Louisiana, a few miles north of Baton Rouge, Henry Gray began playing piano when he was about 8 years old. An elderly woman in the neighborhood, Mrs. White, gave him lessons, and he began playing piano and organ at church. The family eventually acquired a piano, but Henry wasn't allowed to play the blues at home. Mrs. White, however, had no such aversion, so he could practice at her house.

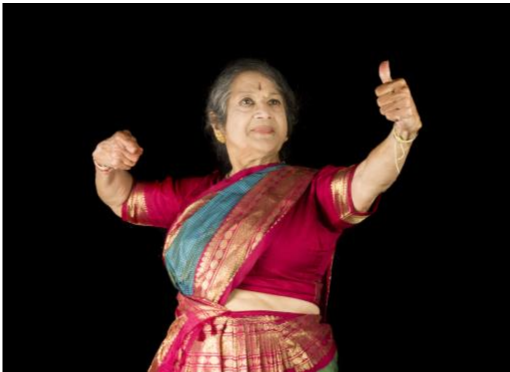
When Henry was a teenager, he was offered a gig with a band at a club in Alsen. His father agreed to let him play, but only if he went along to the club. "When my father saw that I could make money playing the blues, he liked that all right," Gray later recalled, adding that his father kept the money.

After serving in the Army in the South Pacific in World War II, Gray joined the African American migration from the South to Chicago. He found a mentor in Big Maceo Merriwether. The barrelhouse piano player had suffered a stroke and couldn't use his left hand, so Gray sometimes played that part. "That's how I learned his style," he told the Japanese Blues Market Magazine in 1998.

In 1956, Gray joined Howlin' Wolf's band. During his time in Chicago, Gray played and recorded with any number of other blues greats, including Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson and Jimmy Rogers. He worked regularly as a sideman on the Chess label, which issued many of the classic Chicago blues records.

In 1968, Gray returned home to Louisiana after the death of his father to help his mother in the family business. While working as a roofer for a local school district and raising a family, he played in clubs around Baton Rouge. Eventually he began recording and touring again, both and home and overseas, playing and singing classic covers and his own originals, including "Showers of Rain," "Cold Chills" and "Feel Like a Stranger." His festival performances included regular appearances at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. In 1998, he was nominated for a Grammy Award and played at Mick Jagger's 55th-birthday party in Paris. In 2003, Gray was featured in Clint Eastwood's "Blues Piano," which was part of Martin Scorcese's seven part series The Blues. In the same year, Gray was featured in a concert at Morgan Freeman's club Ground Zero in Clarksdale, Mississippi, which became the DVD Falsifyin'. In 2006, Gray starred in the independent film The Glass Chord as Saul Solomon, an aging musician suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Speaking of the 1999 recording Blues Won't Let Me Take My Rest, Nick Spitzer, host of Public Radio International's American Routes, said, "In working and playing in a musical arc that runs from Baton Rouge to Chicago and beyond, to wherever people love the blues, piano man Henry Gray has steadfastly carried forward the musical tradition that first touched him at a young age. Gray's ensemble playing with Howlin' Wolf for over a decade and his life-long contribution in bringing attention to the sometimes-overlooked Baton Rouge scene have earned him a reputation as a reliable veteran of the blues. This recording finally puts Henry Gray, his voice and piano — at once rough and ready, mellow and sweet — at the center of his friends and followers, live in Louisiana. He has never sounded better."



Kamala Lakshmi Narayanan

Kamala Lakshmi Narayanan began dancing when she was 5 years old. She was born in Mayuram, in south India, but grew up in Bombay (now Mumbai) in the country's north. There she began learning the region's style of classical dance, whose name, Kathak, means "telling stories." She made one of her first screen appearances in 1939 in the Hindi film Ram Rajya (Reign of Ram). During World War II, her family moved to southern India and she began learning Bharatanatyam, a style that dates back thousands of years and, according to legend, was given to people by Brahma, the creator, as a gift of beauty and happiness during a time of great turmoil.

When Narayanan began studying, it was unusual for girls of the high Brahman class to learn Bharatanatyam. Her success inspired others to learn, and, as it gained popularity, Bharatanatyam moved from the temple to the stage and screen, though it retained its spiritual meaning. "It's not like sexual or anything; it's a divine dance which shows the stories of the gods, what they did to elevate the human beings," she explained. "Human beings, of course, you know, we make mistakes in our life, we try to understand our mistakes, we try to correct them and move on for a better life. That's what the audience comes to learn from the gods. … All these things are … performed on the stage with suitable music in all languages because India is full of languages, different, different languages and different, different ways of living." The dance style has been called poetry in motion because of its fluidity and expressiveness. Narayanan has choreographed more than 120 works based on the traditional forms.

Kamala, as she is known in India, became a top exponent of the Vazhuvoor style of the dance, named for her mentor, Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai. He choreographed the dance sequences she performed to patriotic songs in the Tamil language film Naam Iruvar (The Two of Us) released in 1947, the year India became independent from Britain. The following year, she became one of the youngest artists featured at the Music Academy in the southern Indian city of Chennai. She continued to perform annually at the prestigious institution until the

1970s. She represented her nation in performances all over the world and danced for such luminaries as Britain's Queen Elizabeth's and U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower.

In the 1970s, Narayanan began coming to the United States to teach and found that she liked the country, its people and its arts. In 1980, she moved to the U.S. and established the Sri Bharatha Kamalalaya School of Dance, which offers classes at several sites in New York and New Jersey. She continues to teach, though she seldom performs now, because, as she said, "I have gained weight, number one. Second, I feel the dance is for the young people who can be very pretty and who can dance very well, with stronger footwork and good expressions on their faces." She often accompanies her students when they go to India for their graduation performances for relatives who cannot afford to travel to America.

Bharatanatyam is growing in popularity in the United States, Narayanan says, though many of the Indian immigrant teachers "are not that well-trained." The traditional form survives in India, she says, despite the erosion caused by Bollywood, the Indian film industry. "I don't think it will die at all because as long as people believe in God, do rituals … at home, this art will not die. It's like classical music. Classical music never dies."

Frank Newsome

Frank Newsome was one of twenty-two children of a coal miner in Pike County, Kentucky. As a child, he began attending Old Regular Baptist services with his mother. "We used to walk over four miles just on Saturday and Sunday going to church," he told interviewer Alan Govenar. For a time he lived in Ohio, where he and his brother Johnny worked in a sawmill and sang on a radio station. With Frank's guitar accompaniment, they performed country songs by artists such as Hank Williams and the Stanley Brothers. After moving to Virginia, Frank worked in the coal mines for more than seventeen years. In 1963, he had a spiritual experience and became an active member of the Little David Church. He was called to become a minister in 1972 and devoted himself full time to his ministry after contracting black lung disease and leaving the mines four years later.

The Old Regular Baptists, found mostly around the junction of West Virginia, Virginia and Kentucky, do not believe in musical accompaniment in their services. They sing a cappella in a call-and-response pattern known as "lining out hymns." The preacher sings a line, and the congregation repeats it in a mournful blend of voices.

One of Newsome's early musical inspirations, Ralph Stanley, is a neighbor and friend who sometimes worships at the Little David Church. Stanley has made it a tradition to have Newsome open his Memorial Day bluegrass festival with a hymn. Newsome has also appeared at a number of other festivals, including the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C., and the National Folk Festival in Richmond, Virginia, and has performed on National Public Radio. In the words of Joshua Kohn, then program manager for the National Council for the Traditional Arts, one of those who nominated Newsome for the NEA honor, the minister "stole the show" in a 2007 National Folk Festival appearance with well-known performers Linda Lay, Maggie Ingram and Doyle Lawson.

None of this acclaim has altered Newsome's humble view of himself. "I most of all want to thank God Almighty that He's given me the gift that He has to sing, and if it will profit anybody anything, if it'll cause them to turn from their sins unto the Good Lord, then it's worth every bit of it," he said. "I'm not doing this for no big name or no pat on the back. No, I don't want that. I'm just an old country feller. I ain't got nothing, and I ain't looking for nothing, but I believe I've got a home in heaven when I leave here."

Evalena Henry

While growing up on the San Carlos Apache Reservation in southern Arizona, Evalena Henry attended the Rice School in San Carlos and the Globe School in Globe, Arizona. Her mother, Cecilia Henry, was a basketmaker and was considered by fellow tribal members of her tribe to be the matriarch of San Carlos basketry. "Ma [born in 1901] lost her mother when she was 3," Evalena said. "Her grandma took her and her

sister Elsie in 'cause there was no one else to care for them. They all traveled around together on their horses through the mountains. Their grandma would go into town every month to trade baskets for everything else they needed. Nobody used money in them days. The old lady didn't want them to go to the white school. She wanted them to learn baskets and the old ways."

The Ineh (The People), or the Apache as they are known, are a large group of Athabaskan-speaking people who historically had occupied a large portion of the Southwestern United States and northern Mexico. Because Apache bands relied on hunting and covered great distances on horseback and on foot, they needed baskets that were relatively lightweight, durable and compact. Cecilia Henry continued to make baskets until she was 89 years old, when poor vision and Alzheimer's disease made it impossible for her to work.

Evalena learned to make baskets from her mother when she was 15. "My ma taught me the Apache way," she said. "She never asked me if I wanted to weave. I just started doing it, just by watching her. I started learning how to split the [willow] sticks — you know, you got to do it with your teeth. They got to be even. I kept trying for a week, and Ma finally said it was OK, but now I got to make it smooth. Then after more days she said it was OK, but now I got to make each strand thin, almost like paper. It took me three days to get it thin without breaking them!"

The designs on Henry's baskets vary: Some have very simple and straightforward bands or lines, while others have elaborate deer patterns — sitting or standing on stair-steps. Sometimes she uses elaborate borders and veers from traditional designs, incorporating Crown Dancers (sacred and magical dancers who take part in healing ceremonies).

The San Carlos Apache are well known for three distinct types of baskets: coiled trays and plates made mostly of cottonwood; the tus, an urn-shaped water container; and the burden basket. The tus and the burden basket are both twined woven and made primarily of cottonwood, squawberry, mulberry, cat claw, devil's claw and other willow species.

Around 1977, people began asking Henry to make burden baskets for the Sunrise Dance, a coming-of-age ceremony for 12-year-old girls. These baskets, Henry said, must be beautiful, with the young woman's name woven as part of the design, and strong because many sacred objects are placed inside. Since then, she has continued to make ceremonial baskets upon request from tribal members, though she also sells her work to art collectors. Though she had worked various jobs to support herself, she was able in her later years to devote more time to making baskets and teaching basketry to young people.

"My kids have picked it up. They've watched me. I think they're doing better than I did — real good at getting new designs. My youngest, she won a first prize, and she's in the fourth grade. She's getting better, and we all weave together."

Moges Seyoum

Moges Seyoum, born in the mountainous Shewa region of central Ethiopia, was the son of an accomplished church musician. Beginning when he was 8 years old, Seyoum studied music at traditional church schools. As well as becoming an accomplished singer, he mastered the various genres of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian chant, sacred dance and instrumental practices. In his late teens, in 1966, he was honored with the title of qanygeta, "the leader of the right-hand side," leading one of the two choirs that alternate in singing plainchant. The late Emperor Haile Selassie presented Moges the Kaba, an honorary black sash that he wears when he performs the liturgy on major holidays.

After a decade in Greece, Seyoum arrived in the United States in 1982. He has become an important figure in the Ethiopian community in Alexandria, Virginia. While working long hours at two jobs, he leads services at the Debre Selam Kidist Mariam Church in Washington, D.C., that draw as many as 2,000 people. He sings almost continuously and dances intermittently during these services, which can last for hours and involve the use of massive hand-struck drums.

Seyoum has become one of the world's leading experts in the complex songs and chants used in his church and sings from memory the entire Ethiopian Psalter (Dawit) and other liturgical books. He also is an authority on the Ethiopian Christian system of musical notation, Africa's only indigenous system of music writing, and a master of a style of sacred dance and of the movements of the ornate brass-handled prayer staff used in services. Despite his demanding schedule, he also leads weekly classes in church traditions and continues his own studies. He has written a monograph in Amharic on the teachings and music of Saint Yared, who founded the Ethiopian Christian musical tradition in the sixth century. Seyoum is credited with the growth of his

church, which began in 1987 with a handful of members. And in 2006, he recorded and published six CDs of the complex liturgy.

Kay Shelemay, a Harvard University professor and ethnomusicologist who nominated Seyoum for the NEA honor, said of him, “There is no simple thing he does. He is an immigrant, and he is struggling to have a home and to keep body and soul together in a new country. And then he has really established a wonderful musical liturgy at his church.”

One of Seyoum's students, Belilign Mandefro, said, “There are so many things we miss from Ethiopia.” Seyoum's singing, he said, “is a reminder. This is a moment when you are really taken back to your roots.”

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