

Buster Brown Story

**To Buster
with love**

**By Kurt Albert
and Klaus Bleis**

*“Got a stack of magazines about this high
I can’t read them and you know why
I gotta go tap dancing tonight.”*

Buster Brown

Buster Brown died at Columbus Presbyterian Hospital in New York City on May 7th 2002, ten days before his 89th birthday. As Heather told us, he went naturally and had a smile on his face. That smile stands for his loving and happy personality that we all connect with Buster. At the service at St. Peter's Church where many great tap and jazz artists had their service, Jimmy Slyde said: “Buster didn't leave, he left something for us”. And Gregory Hines got to the heart of it: When he got into the tap business and closer to the circles of tap masters, everybody would eventually say some not so nice things about other colleagues. But there was one guy who would never do that. That was Buster as we all knew him. A friendly, positive, supporting man who always had a good word for the others. And as Gregory said that's what

he left for the tap community.

Buster really loved dancing, especially tap dancing. And through him, the whole Swing Era came back to life. His swing came from deep inside and he really lived it. He would go out dancing and partying whenever he could, even when he got old. That was his life. And he could sing any tune that you could think of, and many more. Everybody remembers him scatting the arrangements of “Fascinating Rhythm” and “Just You” during his tap classes, and always ending the classes with “Ballin' the Jack”. And he was definitely a “Ladies Man”. One time in Freiburg, asked on stage why he got into showbusiness, he looked around to the chorus line behind him saying, “I think it was the girls”. And they loved him, too. But not only them, everybody did. The auditorium at the service at

St. Peter's was filled with old and new friends who loved this man.

Baltimore

James Richard “Buster” Brown was born on May 17th 1913 in the Brown family's house on 414 Hamburg Street in Baltimore, Maryland. He was the sixth of eight children.

The last of his sisters, Ruth Jackson, a sweet lady of 86 years and with Buster's kindness and positive charisma, told us a little about their family life.

Ruth: Well, my mother said that when he was born he was such a little fat boy. And then my aunt said: “He's just like a little Buster.” James Richard Brown. But we called him Buster. And he kept that name.

The mother Mary Brown was born in 1879 as Mary Ella Otho in Calwed County, Maryland. Around 1900 she married Buster's father William Brown who worked as an oyster shucker in Baltimore. The father died young in 1919 when Buster was only six years old. So the large Brown family was mostly brought up by his mother and he was the only male surrounded by seven sisters. It were Isabel, Mary, Lilian, Grace, Sadie, Buster, Ruth and Mildred. The family's income came mostly from the mothers housekeeping for white families and later all the children had to support the household by taking jobs after school.

Ruth: My mother raised us all by herself practically. And we worked, all of us worked all the time, all seven of us. I worked every day after school and took home my salary and gave it to my mummy. Buster did that, too, as long as he was at home. And then he was sending money home when he could.

And, see, in those days neighbor families looked after each other. We were just like one big family. People watched over and made sure you didn't make anything wrong. They would tell your mother or they could spank you too. And you go home and get another spanking.

We belong to the same church as when we were babies. And I am the last one in the church. We were Methodists... Unified Methodist Church. We all went there as babies. We were all christianized there, everybody. Buster went to Sunday School every Sunday. And at that time we spent most of the day sundays in church. And these people loved to sing. And in the summertime Sunday school had a picnic down there near the water. Or we went on the boat. All day long. And we danced all day long. We had a band, and we were dancing. All the kids were dancing. Then we would go back to the table to get food for the band fellows. So they could keep playing for us. That was nice.

The musicality and love for dancing was also brought into the family by the father William Brown and their uncle.

Ruth: My mother had three brothers. One died young, the other one came up to New York and did what Buster did. He was a musician, he played the piano. His name was ... Otho, in the twenties. And our father was a cakewalker. He was a dancer, but not a professional dancer. He just liked to dance, and he taught my sisters, my oldest ones. So we all danced like ballroom dancing. And we all liked to go out and dance. We were called the

Brown Sisters (laughs).

That was life years ago. We just loved dancing. My sisters used to go out Friday night to go to dance. They never had any problem getting dancers 'cause guys were laid for them. And when the USO times came, they always would go to the USO and dance with the soldiers and try to entertain them. And then they would invite them home and feed them. There were so nice young men. My mother always liked to do that 'cause she was hoping that wherever my brother was that the people would do things like that to him.

And Buster liked Charleston. In the twenties, we had Charleston going around. And we both could do the Charleston. We practiced doing the Charleston, yeah.

Years ago, they had carnivals on the street. And they had the band up on a waggon. And the lady came around, said: "Miss Brown, do you know that Buster is up there on the thing doing the Charleston up on the waggon. We were about 14, 15 years old then. And at that time the Charleston was a rage. And I used to like to do it too. I used to do it all the time. We just liked to dance, the whole family.

All his life Buster stayed in contact with his family which always supported him and always was proud of him being a dancer.

Ruth: We had a big house, on Christmas time everybody went home. You know, Christmas was a big day for us. And when Buster came home, bigger. When Buster came home, everybody: "Buster's home, Buster's home". We always looked forward to him. When he came home, we were very happy around there.

Conrad: We called him "the Celebrity" of the family. He was the celebrity.

Coming up during the jazz age Buster naturally got interested in showbusiness. The whole family went, whenever they could, to the shows that came through town.

Buster: I started to dance when I started to walk. See, all of my family were dancers, not professionally ... We did have a lot of fun home. I had a large family. Seven sisters, my mother, my daddy, and we were just enjoying our life. My cousin used to come and play the guitar. (Ruth: His name was Carl Wallace) And we just had the family get together. And so, when I was able to walk, I was able to do what I call dancing (tapping). What got me interested in showbusiness was the vaudeville shows that used to come to town. And there was a show called the Whitman Sisters (1898 – 1942, Mable,

Alice, Essie and Alberta). They had a six years old that could really dance. His name was Pops Whitman. And that got me interested. I used to see his show, go home, and tear up my basement, trying to do what he was doing. (Albert "Pops" Whitman, 1921 – 1951, son of Alice Whitman of the Whitman Sisters, toured till 1932 with the Whitman Sisters Vaudeville Show, and then teamed up with Louie Williams of the Four Harmony Kings to build the famous tap and acrobat act Pops and Louie)

High School – Autumn Follies and The Three Aces

Buster went to Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore on Calhoun and Baker Street. It was the same school where many later famous musicians and dancers went through.

Buster: Noble Sissle, Cab Calloway, Derby Wilson, all those guys were alumni of Douglass High School. I'm so very proud of that.

Ruth: See, at that times schools were segregated. We only had one school for us. Everybody went there. Buster played basketball, and the team he played on was called "The Ramblin' Horsemen". And we had a wonderful music teacher, Mr. Lowell Wilson (Eubie Blake's music teacher). He was a lovely music teacher. He brought everything out of you, you know what I mean.

He got friends with his classmate John Orange, and together with John as his first teacher they learned dancing on the street and in the Brown house's basement by exchanging steps with the other kids. Here he got one of his biggest influences in jazz dance by the later famous Earl "Snakehips" Tucker who was an older neighbor kid (see Buster's snakehip moves in Brenda Bufalino's documentation "Great Feats Of Feet").

Ruth: The first act that he had were the Brown Brothers. Yeah, first it were the two of them. There's a friend of his from Baltimore. His name was John Orange, and John was just like a brother.

Buster: And that's how I got into show-business. Actually, we were the "Three Aces", and the "Speed Kings" name came later. Sam Campbell, John Orange, I met them in High School. That was the original act. They had an annual show in that High School. And every year they would give that show. They would do it in the auditorium, but my first

year we did the show up there, and the next year when they gave the show the audience was too big for the auditorium, so they went out and got a public dance hall. And from then on to the next three years, every year we did "Autumn Follies". (1928 – 1932, the shows were patterned of big shows of the Regal Theater.)

Buster, Sam and John would go through the night clubs of Baltimore dancing for tips. And, talking about famous schoolmates, Laurence Donald Jackson – Baby Laurence –, the later Charlie Parker of tap, also went to Douglass High.

Buster: Baby Laurence didn't go to school that much. But I knew him in Baltimore as a boy. He sang, no dancing. He was with the "Highlanders". He was about my age, some years difference. But we knew each other, we were close. We did the same thing, dancing and singing the same clubs and passing the hat in Baltimore. He was one of the guys that went out every night. We called him the "Midnight Hawk". And he lived in Baltimore till he was discovered by Don Redman and went with him to New York.

In his biography Cab Calloway who was a schoolmate of Buster's older sister said that he also got his first contact with show-business through Douglass High.

The Speed Kings 1

Buster, John and Sam, "The Three Aces", graduated 1932 and went directly into showbusiness. They were renamed to "The Speed Kings" because their whole act was highspeed and precision tap dance. Their first real gig besides the Autumn Follies also gave them the first impression how tough business can be.

Buster: 1932 when I came out of High School, we went to a place fifty miles from Baltimore, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. That was our first show out of Baltimore and the first show not being in the school. That's when I got the first bite from the biz. This little show was playing round the corner in a little vaudeville house (Lafayette Theater) right where I lived. My partners and I were dancing in the show, and when they went away they invited us to go with them, a whole week, seem like two years. This guy wasn't paying any money and I wasn't enjoying it much. When I looked up on stage and seen one of my neighbors, almost like a brother, sitting out in the audience, I stopped right there, I said:

"Let's go, I'm ready to go home!" And when I came home my sister laughed at me.

Ruth: He was in Pennsylvania and mama didn't know where he was. And when we found out where he was, Mama told Bubba to find him. (The young man in the block, Nathaniel Butler, we called him Bubba, he adopted Buster because he didn't have a brother.) So he went up, finally found him and brought him home.

Buster: Then the same show got a job in Columbus, Ohio, and they would say: "Listen, man, don't worry about nothing! As soon as we get there we tell the man about you guys." And two days later we got a telegram if we would like to come to Columbus they would send us the money, and they did. We went to that place and we worked there a week and then an agent came in from Cleveland, Frank McSina.

Jeni LeGon Tour

Buster: Then we went to Cleveland. The last day that we were with the show in Philadelphia we were standing getting our stuff out of the bus when a guy named Emmet came up, he had been at a rehearsal right across the street at the Lincoln Theater where the bus stopped, and he asked for us, 'cause I met him before in Cleveland. He asked: "Is Buster Brown of the Speed Kings on this bus?". They said: "Yes, he is in the back." So he came back, said: "Listen, you guys wanna work? Jeni LeGon is rehearsing across the street." So we went there. Her manager and teacher was named Earl Dancer. And from that day we were with that show. So we stayed with that show for two weeks, a variety show featuring Jeni LeGon. We were in Philadelphia with her, then we went to Washington, D.C., the Howard Theater. After



Jeni LeGon and Bill Robinson.

Washington we went back with them, not to work, we just went with them. I was just enjoying showbusiness. I was really having a ball.

Brownskin Models

Their next big engagement was with the show "Brownskin Models".

Buster: I must have stayed with "Brownskin Models" with the "Speed Kings" for about two years, '36, '37, something like that. Al Stewart, he was with "Brownskin Models", he wrote down everything. He had a book, and everytime we seen him he had this book. I don't know where I was last night, you know. But I have been in New York at the Apollo with the "Brownskin Models".



Ruth: Buster got married. He had a daughter, Lolita Price. She travelled with them as a baby. Her mother was a Brownskin Model, she was a beautiful girl. We called her Bootsy. He married her in the theater. That was in the thirties, 1937. They lived in Cleveland. But they travelled all the time. He was on the road most of the time.

Buster: After two years, that show broke up. Then we went to Canada and that was where one of my act, John, was drowned while we were in Susan St. Marie, Canada.

Ruth: He died very young when they were in Canada. He was drowned. It just so happened. He stayed in the house and was sleeping and John went out to swim. And Buster had to bring him back home.

That tragedy was the end of the "Speed Kings 1".



The Speed Kings 2: Sylvester Luke, Emmet McClure, Buster Brown. Photo Credit: L. E. Bigham. Photo courtesy Buster Brown.

The Speed Kings 2 – Coming to New York

Buster: So I came home to Baltimore, stayed there a little while, then I went back to Cleveland where I met Emmet McClure and Sylvester Luke. And so I put the act back together, and that was the "Speed Kings 2".

We danced a Soft Shoe, then we did rhythm. We did a whole medley of tunes, three numbers. Soft Shoe, the rhythm dancing. We opened with the Soft Shoe, and the music never stopped from the point we started. From the Soft Shoe we segued into something else, and everytime the dancing would do some-

thing different dancewise. Very fast and with precision. When we danced everybody's hands were together. We admired "Pete, Peaches and Duke" who were one of the greatest precision dancers. I heard so much about them before I actually seen them. When we were in Cleveland that's the first time we seen them. I remember we were working in a place, the "E-light Club", and they came in town for a one-nighter. And they were playing an auditorium. We went over to see them. We didn't care whether the man (for whom we worked) liked this or not, we've got to see "Pete, Peaches and Duke". 'Cause we had

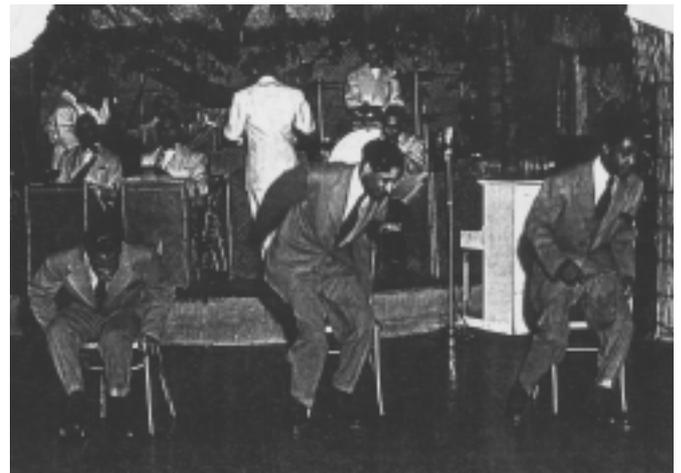
tried to imitate them but we never seen them. They did everything. Everything they did looked like they had almost ... Everything they did was together. And they dressed well. They were the best dressed tap dancing act ever.

With the Speed Kings 2 I actually really came to New York, that was in 1939. We stopped at my home in Baltimore, and that's when we wrote the Apollo Theater, we sent pictures, and they sent a contract. So we went to New York and made New York our headquarters. We played the Apollo with Chick Webb's band.

Second job was at Small's Paradise with Earl Bostic's band. But then we didn't work for a year. We had good friends there in New York, and dancers were great friends. They would say: "Come on, man, come home with me!" And my two partners would get a girl and wherever they stayed I stayed.

I remember the Hoofers Club. The Hoofers Club was a club where you just go and dance, you know. If you feel like you wanna rehearse, you go in there and rehearse, put an act together, go there rehearse, you know. And some of the guys in there would give you some help. All the great dancers sooner or later came there. I did only see the last year of the Hoofers Club. The owner used to fix the floor when it kinda broke down. When we went in there, there was nobody in there but us. A guy named Duke, a bass player, said: "I will bring you round the Hoofers Club." A guy named Acie, a very good dancer, he was from Philadelphia, he and the bass player took us, and then we danced a little bit. At least we could say we danced in the Hoofers Club.

Then, after one year, somebody gave us a job. We met a girl who had been a big chorus girl in New York, and she did ask me



The Speed Kings 2: Sylvester Luke, Emmet McClure, Buster Brown. Photo courtesy Buster Brown.

did I know Green. This girl said her husband was an agent. And she said: "You should get in touch with this guy." And we did. And that's when we started getting work. This guy was great for us. We were very lucky to get him. And that's when we started doing mostly club dates, like all the big hotels had big bands back then in New York. We worked for "Beckman & Pransky". I stayed with Emmet and Sylvester about seven years till the war broke us up, 1942.

One of the last things they did was in 1942 the Hollywood Columbia Musical Movie "Something to shout about" directed by Gregory Ratoff. Stars were Don Ameche, Janet Blair and Jack Oakie. Also on the bill were Hazel Scott, Charles Walker of Chuck and Chuckles and Cyd Charisse (her first film appearance). The film came out 1943. It was a bland Cole Porter Musical with one hit song, "You'd be so nice to come home to" which was nominated for two Oscars (song and scoring). It's about an ex chorus girl who decides to put on a show herself.

They can also be seen in a soundie featuring Bill Robinson's wife and the Three Speed Kings.

The Three Riffs

Buster: The Speed Kings broke up in Detroit, and then I went with "The Three Riffs" who were also in Detroit. This was a singing act. And I taught them a chorus of a tap routine to "Just you". We did two songs and we closed with this dance routine. I knew them from before, they lived also in the Braddock Hotel in Harlem. None of us working at that time, and we all lived in the Braddock Hotel. So we been always in their room listen to them sing. So I knew the tunes. They had a great act, "The Three Riffs". I stayed with them six months.

Buster first time solo

Buster: Then I left New York for Boston to form my single act. It must have taken six months to learn a single 'cause I didn't want to use nothing I used with the trio. So everything I did was brand-new. So I put together everything. I talked, told jokes, opened up with a Soft Shoe, then I would introduce the other things as I went along, and then I did flash at the closing. Same pattern, Soft Shoe, rhythm dance, flash dance, and over. And it was getting kind of funny, I always was used to step back and let somebody else do some-

thing, but now I was solo, no rest. But I enjoyed it. Everything was enjoyable.

Brown and Beige (1945 – 1951)

Buster: While I was in Boston putting my thing together I met Pippy, Ernest Cathy, the later "Beige", and we put something together. There was nothing else to do, you know. So we danced together a little while, maybe five or six years. We got a good act. But

then he started to get in trouble. He would always be in trouble. We were getting ready to do the Kate Smith Show, we went to the rehearsal early, did the rehearsal, come home, dressed up before showtime, then couldn't find him. Could not find him. Didn't show up for it. So I went back for one of my partners of the "Speed Kings", Sylvester Luke. I said: "You remember our first dance?" He said: "Yeah!" So we opened up with our first thing, then we did our own, single.

Conrad: Pippy never married. He just came down to visit when Buster came. He was



Brown and Beige: Buster Brown and Ernest Cathy (Pippy).
Photo Credit: Gaby of Montreal. Photo courtesy Buster Brown.



Brown and Beige at the Apollo. Photo courtesy Buster Brown.

a happy-go-lucky guy. He was definitely a happy-go-lucky guy. The guy who likes to do his own thing. Buster had to father him. Buster had to keep him close 'cause sometimes he didn't show up for the gig. What happened to him? He had a condition that he was trying to feed and then took him over. One of those things. Buster never took those drugs, but Pippy. Heroin was the drug of the time. And when Pippy wouldn't show they lost the job. Buster hated to let him go because he was a good dancer. Boy, he could dance. On stage at the Royal Theater they had a good 15 minutes. They would come out, say a few words, jokes, he could emcee a bit while they were dancing. And all of a sudden they cut loose. And then they would do acrobats that was part of the act. Splits and all that kind of stuff. They were very good. The video that we saw from the sixties that was his rhythm. That was the same thing. He danced the rhythm. He was a rhythm dancer, you know. He mastered it. And he stuck to it. That was his thing.

Brown and Beige used the tunes "Laura" (1945 by D. Raksin), "I Got Rhythm" and "Just You, Just Me" for their act.

Again solo

Buster: Around 1950 I was doing a single. I broke up the act. We did several TV shows when TV first came in. "Beige" messed up so many times. We were in Canada and he felt like going home. So he just left and went home. That's when I had to work alone. I was ready for that. I did a single in the fifties, I worked everywhere. I worked Chicago. The Regal Theater, the new Club de Lisa. I don't remember all the dates and places. I was sure being busy having a good time. I couldn't keep money two minutes. Money burned my pocket. I could be paid that night and three days later be broke. I just started picking money when I was with the Ink Spots (70s). I didn't think that money was that important before that.

Chocolateers

Buster: I worked with the "Chocolateers". I didn't work with them that long 'cause I was in for Eddie Jefferson. So Eddie told them:

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"Go and see whether Buster can do it." Chuckles was with them when they were in Germany (1956). And he was with the "Chocolateers" just before Eddie Jefferson. Eddie Jefferson was tap dancing, doing everything. Eddie, when he was a little kid, he had a hell of a radio show. He was a star. He could do everything. The "Chocolateers" were Eddie West, Paul Black and Gib Gibson. I replaced Eddie. It was comedy dancing and singing. They were originating the "Peckin'". They did "Peckin'" in a picture, a soundie. That was a big thing, the "Peckin'", that's what put them on the map.



The Three Chocolateers became famous in 1937 by creating the "Peckin'" in the films "Murder at the Vanities" and "New Faces".

The tap decline – jobs

Buster: The work got so bad right after Bill Robinson died in 1949. That's when everything just fell. Bang. No more jobs. It was not in the same moment when he died, but it slowly went down afterwards. Theaters were closing. You know, before when we were dancing, there were many theaters. All the movies came to that theaters. There were many theaters and night clubs to work. We got fortune enough to get to the real famous theaters and the real famous night clubs. It was great. But then in the fifties and sixties I had every kind of job you can think of to survive. Tap dance became something on the side, you know. I was working for a record company ... that was located on 50th Street and Broadway, they had Basie. Oh, I had a lot of jobs. I had a restaurant on 7th Avenue and Holland. I managed it. It was named after the guy I was working for, Bobby's Restaurant.

The Hoofers

Buster: Then I danced with the Hoofers, but that's in the sixties. They started here on 125th Street in the sixties. Every

Monday, you know. But the one that I thought that really financed the show was Letitia Jay. She had the money to put down for the theater. That's why I said she was responsible for the Hoofers getting really started. Lon Chaney, Baby Laurence, L.D., a guy named "Big Red" ("Rhythm Red"). All the guys that thought about dancing would go down there on Monday to jam and so the man gave them the theater every Monday night. It turned out to be a good performance with



good press. We were getting great press, you know. And Letitia was in the show. She loved tap dancing and she was a dancer, too. She used to do crazy stuff, eccentric dance. She worked with

Chuck. One show she did with us. That was in 1966 in Berlin, that wasn't yet the Hoofers, we called it "The Harlem Allstars".



The Hoofers: Buster Brown, Baby Laurence, Chuck Green, L.D. Jackson, John McPhee. At the Newport Jazz Festival 1972. Photo Credit: Josef Werkmeister.

Around the same time Letitia Jay produced a TV show with Buster Brown, Gib Gibson, Jimmy Slyde, Fred Kelly, Chuck Green and Ralph Brown.

Buster: Then in 1968 we went to Africa. And I know that really started doing the Hoofers. This started really in '68. We been there in Africa eight weeks and it was during the summer. (The Hoofers toured Africa with the State Department sponsored Jazz Dance Theater. While in Africa, they gave a command performance for Emperor Haile Selassie who awarded them with "The Lion Of Judea Coin".)



The Harlem Allstars: Buster Brown, Jimmy Slyde, Baby Laurence, Chuck Green and Letitia Jay at the Berlin Jazz Festival 1966. Photo Credit: Josef Werkmeister.

Duke Ellington

During 1966 Buster also toured as a soloist with the Duke Ellington Big Band throughout the United States and Canada doing Ellingtons famous "Sacred Concert" ("David danced before the Lord").

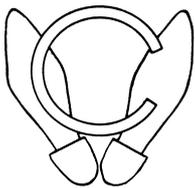
Buster: I think it was the greatest thing like ... when I had the opportunity to work with Duke Ellington. It's like going to heaven. Really, I still look at this ... I'm dancing with Duke Ellington. I never did get over that. Never have. That's the beautifullest thing in my life.

1967 Buster moved with his second wife Dorothy and his two sons Ricky and Shawn into the apartment that he held up to now on 884 Riverside Drive.

Ink Spots

Buster: I was working with the Ink Spots, singing in the seventies. Ralph Brown was with us. I was with them before Ralph came. We both sang. This was jazz singing. We hum with them and then we go out and tap danced. But that wasn't the original Ink Spots. There were about eight or ten Ink Spot acts working everywhere. I was working for Joe Bothman. He had been with the Ink Spots for a half minute. I went to school with one of the original Ink Spots, Billy Kenny. We went to High School, and he was in the "Follies" with us.

Everything gets copasetic



At the beginning of the seventies Buster became a lifetime member of the Copasetics Club founded in the honour of the late Bill Bojangles Robinson and so became the only dancer who danced with the Hoofers and was a member of the Copasetics – the only Hoofersetic.

Buster: I was with the Ink Spots, and when I came home my wife said: "You are now a Copasetic." I said: "How had that happened?" They looked out for new members and somebody mentioned my name. They said: "Okay, he can come in." I never tried to, they asked me. I worked with the Hoofers and I worked with the Copasetics. And I worked with the Hoofers again. These guys formed the club when Bill Robinson died, same year



The Copasetics: Leslie "Bubba" Gaines, Charles "Cookie" Cook, Ernest "Brownie" Brown, James "Buster" Brown. Photo courtesy Brenda Bufalino (from "Great Feats of Feet").

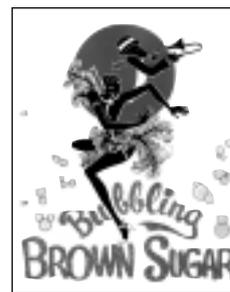
(1949). Honi Coles, Cholly Atkins, Billy Strayhorn, he was President, and then, Charles Cook. Everybody in there was in showbusiness. Gib was with us, Bubba Gaines, Cookie, Brownie, all of the Copasetics. Paul Black, Brownie, Gib, Stump of "Stump and Stumpy" – James Cross –, Stumpy was Harold Cromer. And with the Copasetics we did a lot of benefits. One we had in a mental institution – they were C R A A A Z Y about us. There was a guy hangin' from the ceiling. And another one brooming the floor beneath him. I asked the doctor: "What's this dude doin' up there?". He said: "Oh, don't pay him no mind. He thinks he is a light bulb. But follow us, he's ready for getting his treatment. The doctor got up, screwed him out of the socket and we went to the treatment room. When we turned around we saw the brooming guy following us. The doctor said: "What are you doin' over here?" He said: "Do you think I wanna broom over there in the dark?"

In 1974 one of the best tap documentaries, "Great Feats Of Feet", was done by Brenda Bufalino. It shows the putting together of a Copasetics show by Charles Cookie Cook. It features Buster Brown, Charles Cookie Cook, Ernest Brownie Brown, Leslie Bubba Gaines, Albert Gib Gibson and Charles Honi Coles.

Around this time must have been Buster's tour with Cab Calloway's "Jazz Train" through South America.

1980 – 2002 Getting an old master

In the eighties and nineties when tap dance really started to come back one could find Buster wherever tap dance was featured, dancing in the Broadway shows



"Bubbling Brown Sugar" and "Black and Blue", dancing and teaching at all the upcoming tap festivals and workshops in America and working with the Hoofers, the Copasetics, Leon Collins ("Schnitzel Brothers") and as a single in Europe.

In 1980 you could see Buster with the Hoofers in the TV production "Tap Dancing" and in 1984 in the Francis Ford Coppola movie "Cotton Club". In 1987 he was in Susan Goldbetter's video production "Cookie's Scrapbook".

In 2000 Buster toured with "Savion Glover And Friends – Footnotes" (with Jimmy Slyde and Dianne Walker).



Jammin' at Swing 46 with longtime friend, tap dancer Fay Ray.

The last few years Buster had his own weekly tap jam session on Sunday at Swing 46 in New York City.

In February 2002 he was honoured as a "Doctor of Performing Arts" at the Oklahoma City University.

During the last two years when his health got bad, he was fortunate to have many good friends like Max Pollak,

Heather Cornell and his son Shawn who helped and took care of him. The last weeks in hospital he was surrounded by loving visitors.



Monday night swingin' it out at Wells Restaurant with swing dancer Norma Miller

This article was made from interviews with Buster Brown (1994) and with Ruth Jackson (sister) and Conrad Turner (nephew)

(May 2002), completed with excerpts from Brenda Bufalino's interview in "Great Feats Of Feet" (1974).



BALLIN' THE JACK (1913, Smith/Burris)
(Buster's favourite workshop closing)

*First you put your two knees close up tight
And then you wiggle 'em to the left, and you
wiggle 'em to the right
Then you walk around the floor kinda nice
and light
And then you twist around, twist around,
with all of your might
Put your two loving arms out in space
And then you do the Eagle Rock with a lot of
style and grace
Put your right foot up and bring it back
THAT'S WHAT WE CALL BALLIN' THE
JACK.*