



Photo Credit: Klaus Bleis

A tribute to Carnell Lyons

by Kurt Albert and Klaus Bleis

Carnell Lyons belonged, like so many American jazz musicians, to the so-called “American musicians in Europe” and so was a great influence on the tap scene in Europe.

Carnell was born 6th of August 1917 in Kansas City, Missouri. In the 20s and 30s Kansas City was a swinging town, a secret jazz center to the general public (until record producer John Hammond discovered Count Basie 1936 by hearing Basie on a radio broadcast from the Reno night club). It was the town of Benny Moten, Andy Kirk, George E. Lee, Jay McShann, Lester Young, Jimmy Rushing, Ben Webster and future jazz star Charlie Parker. The so-called “Vine Street District” in Kansas City, Missouri was full of all kinds of night spots and jazz clubs owned by the local mafia and protected by Kansas City’s “Al Capone” Tom Pendergast.

In this atmosphere of jazz and crime Carnell grew up. The dance of the time was tap dance and Lindy Hop. Many night spots like the Reno and theaters like the Lincoln Theater had a floor show which would feature America’s best tap dancers.

In the movies you could see Bill Robinson, Buck and Bubbles and the young Nicholas kids, a special inspiration for all youngsters. Seeing the Nicholas Brothers and the young Peg Leg Bates inspired Carnell to try to tap dance himself.

His first teacher was a neighbor kid by the name of Cornelius Redman, everybody called him “Perk”. He was a little older than Carnell and the other kids, and he would teach them on the streets the basic steps like Time Steps, Wings, Over the

Tops – what they would call “Plain Dance”. In a little barn in the backyard of his house Carnell and his friend Fuzzy built up a good wooden floor and all the neighbor kids met in there to practise all day long.

Carnell: “We had a big house, a backyard and a frontyard. And we had a shed like a garage. I made a dancing place there, takin’ up the floor and put a new floor down. And we had an old gramophone there to wind up – Tea for Two, Honeysuckle Rose – and we was dancin’ off that.”

This little practice room became the dance center of the neighborhood and new teachers came in. Virgil Bowles, a neighbor kid who was already in show business taught them the Soft Shoe, Harvey Collins, who specialized in the new style of Rhythm Tap, and Jimmy McFadden (father of the McFadden Brothers), who was the founder of the famous Kansas City tap quartet “The Chocolate Drops” also joined them.

In the middle of the 30s Carnell founded, with two of his friends, “The Three Rags of Rhythm”.

Carnell: “Yeah, now about my partners. I show you how I met them. ‘Cause in the neighborhood about ten of us started out trying to learn how to dance. And so, like Laurence David Jackson, everybody in New York knows him as L.D., and Cecil Groves. And that was the original – ‘cause we used to dance as “Three Rags of Rhythm” ‘cause we didn’t have no money to buy new costumes. So we go over there, at that time they had what they called rummage sale, and you can go and buy old clothes. So we went and bought some old tuxedos and made them real raggedy. And we was dancin’ up on the “Three Rags of Rhythm.”

With this trio they went to local amateur contests and theaters like the Lincoln which had the famous Vine Street Variety Show. About 1937 they auditioned for a

carnival named the "Hennies Brothers" which toured the whole USA. On this carnival he met his life-time friend, the great tap dancer Fay Ray who at that time, as a sixteen year old girl, was in the chorus line of the show.



Cecil Groves, Carnell Lyons and L.D. Jackson at the Hennies Brothers Circus

Carnell: "You know Fay Ray? Fay was a beautiful chick, she was a shake dancer. She was about fifteen years old and I showed her how to tap dance."

Fay: "Carnell, L.D. and Cecil, they were the Rags of Rhythm. They had their own music and we were together and danced. I learned their routines and I was just with them every day, you know. And it was fun because we were on the train together. I



Fay Ray

loved them. They did their dance, they tap danced. Their act was about six to ten minutes long, enough for each of them to get out there and do his thing. And they had that music, the Organ Grinder Swing. And as soon as Carnell got off that stage, he was on it rehearsing. That's where I always could find him. He was dancing and rehearsing. He really ate it, slept it, thought it. Everything to him was dancing. He always wanted to get

better. And he was like a spokesman for the rest of them. They would all follow him. They knew he was more into it than anybody."

Back in Kansas City Robert Wilson replaced Cecil Groves and the group's name changed to "The Three Businessmen of

Rhythm" and they invested all their new money in good clothes.

Carnell: "And the guy there, who came through, his name was Harry Seagram, a comedian from New York. Now, we were workin' at this big club now in Kansas City. It was called the Key Club. And we were workin' with Jay McShann's band. And this comedian was sayin', "Listen", he says, "that name I don't like". He says, "Let me think. I got an idea: The Three Businessmen of Rhythm". So we said, "Yeah, well, that's great." Now, after we got that name, that means, we had to try to dress up like businessmen with the homburg and things like that".

In 1938 started the decline of Kansas City as a jazz paradise. First of all Pendergast, the big protector of the mafia, and that means show business, went into jail. Count Basie went to New York, Jay McShann went to Chicago. And like them, many young musicians and dancers were looking for new and bigger possibilities in the big jazz centers. And like their school-mate Charlie Parker who hoboed to Chicago in autumn the Three Businessmen

of Rhythm jumped on a train heading for Chicago.

Carnell: "Let me tell you. When we first came to Chicago, we hoboed, 1939, freight train, we didn't pay the ride, no damn place. We was ridin' the blind, that's between the engine and the first coach. We were ridin' in the winter time. Chicago from Kansas City, it's 500 miles. Now we come in town, at that time they had round about 20 or 30 different bars, you know. We would bust, and you put a nickel in the juke box, and we was dancin' off "Bill Berry Poker" and passin' the hat."

Soon they auditioned for the Club de Lisa, one of the most famous night clubs in town. They got the gig which turned out to be a steady job whenever they came to town.

Carnell: "The de Lisa was a dream piece. Everybody worked the Club de Lisa, a gangster place, you know. Pimps, hustlers, gangsters, everybody was there downstairs. They had about fifteen beautiful chicks, good god, in the chorus line. And like Mike de Lisa, he was from Al Capone's days. I mean, Ralph Capone used to come to the club. Now, that was the wildest club in America. The first show would go on at 12 o'clock, the second one at 2.30, the last one at 5 o'clock in the morning. And Mike de Lisa was like our father. We had a steady job there, we'd go there and work there for four or five months, you know. We'd see 'em come and go, but Mike liked us and he would keep us there. 'Cause at that time we had our own whole routine of doin' kneefalls and doin' that rhythm and things like that. So, at that time we had a very exciting act. We lived at the Club de Lisa, that was our joint. We worked there with Tip, Tap and Toe, we worked there with Baby Laurence. Now, Baby, nobody could outdance the Baby. Baby changed dancin' all around. Now, I was tryin' to copy him. Impossible, that perfect. That's when I come up with tidldidldidl tidldidldidl tidldidldl ... - I changed it to a double roll, my way. They named it the Paddle and Roll. That was my thing. I was tryin' to copy the Baby, I couldn't copy him, so I did my own thing. So that's why I'm sayin' you got to do your own thing. You been doin' this and you been doin' that, now you got to find yourself."

In 1942 they got their first professional management by the Frederick Brothers agency which was looking for dancers to accompany Fletcher Henderson's band. And so they made it the first time to New York playing the Apollo Theater.

Carnell: "Man, we were so sharp. We



The Business Men of Rhythm with the Fletcher Henderson Band at the Apollo Theatre, February 1942

always wore a white shirt and tie, clean like a whistle. We were wearing homburgs when we first came to New York. And they said, "Who are these m... from the West, and who they think they are?". That was a lot of damn nerve."

But they made it. They stayed in New York playing all the famous spots.

Carnell: "Now, in New York we all used to dance up by the Braddock Hotel, not so far from the Apollo Theater. We'd have jam sessions, you know. I'd hung with Chuck. Me and Chuck, we used to be drinkin' some wine, we'd have our little smoke and we'd jam. And he'd show me different new things. We worked Leon and Eddie's down on Swing Street. From Leon and Eddie's we went down to the Latin Quarters, we was workin' for Beckman and Pransky. We used to do ten or fifteen club dates a week. One time we had three shows a night. One for the Democrats, one for the Republics, and coming up in Harlem, a communist piece, with Powell, the preacher. Our main big piece that we travelled was with Nat King Cole. That was six months two years straight. That was when Nat first came to New York, and that's "Straighten up and fly right" and "Paper Moon".

In 1943 they had their Broadway appearance in the Broadway Revue "Artists and Models" with Jane Froman, Jackie Gleason and the Peters Sisters. Right after the show Robert Wilson was drafted and Carnell and L.D. continued as a duo and got their first taste of European show business when they were hired by Val Parnell for

the musical "Here, There and Everywhere" with Tommy Trinder and the fabulous Mable Lee at the London Palladium (April 1947 – January 1948).

Carnell: "Mable Lee, yeah! Mable Lee would have been like ... you've got another

Josephine Baker. She was doin' a hell of a solo act, you should've seen her."

When they came back the act broke up and Carnell joined the duo of two successful acrobats, Jesse Franklin and James Hawthorne. The trademark of Jesse and James was the spinning of huge trays. Carnell learned the tray spinning and with "Jesse, James and Carnell" his most successful years in show business followed.

Carnell: "I learned to spin the tray ... Jesse and James showed me that a long time ago. I was practicing for years. Now, to turn that tray up and catch it and to dance with it is something else. Me and L.D., we did eight months at the Palladium. When we came back to New York, that's when we split up and that's when I joined Jesse and James, and I didn't look back. The tray piece. We weren't just tap dancing, we had a novelty."

With Jesse, James and Carnell and their new agent Eddie Smith they climbed the heights of black and white show business. They've been in the Kate Smith, Jackie Gleason, Milton Berle TV shows and they were one of the few black acts playing Las Vegas (El Rancho) and Radio City Music Hall (May 23rd 1953).

After a tournee through South



SIDELIGHTS . . . Jesse, James and Cornell (see photo on this page), now working at Radio City Music Hall, is one of the few Negro dancing groups—or any type of Negro act—which ever worked this theatre . . .

America and the Far East with Xavier Cugat Jesse left the act and was replaced by L.D. who came back (1955). The act of Jackson, James and Carnell can be seen, billed as Businessmen of Rhythm, at the Harlem Variety Revue (studio film clips with Willie Bryant as MC, Coles and Atkins, Little Buck and many others). The midfifties was the time when the possibilities for tap dancers to perform in USA died out and only very few acts could continue. So like many other artists who didn't want to stop, the trio emigrated to Europe where this type of show business was still en vogue.

Carnell: "And that's when we left and went to Europe, you know. Like Tavail (agent), he did all them auditioning, and he signed us up for three years to come to Europe. And we would go up to Denmark with the Follies Bergeres Show from Paris for eight months, and that's when we came to Paris."

With Paris as their headquarter they toured whole Europe and in 1956 they were engaged for the German picture "Liebe, Tanz und 1000 Schlager" starring Caterina Valente, Peter Alexander and also John W. Bubbles, who was another emigrant.



"Liebe, Tanz & 1000 Schlager", 1956, with John W. Bubbles

They can also be seen in the Austrian TV production "Fatty George's Black and White Show".

At the end of the 50s, first L.D., then James went back to America. Since 1961 Carnell was a solo act, living in Frankfurt, Germany, jumping from military base to military base to perform in the different sol-



Carnell Lyons and Eddi Dorino, 1970s

dier clubs. In the famous Vagabond Club in Wiesbaden he met his future life and show business partner, the contortionist Edith Fügert billed as "Eddi Dorino". They fell in love. But tragically short after that, when she was back in East Germany, the "Iron Curtain" fell and East Germany built up "The Wall". And for them a ten years fight for freedom started until 1970 when Edith

could legally emigrate from East Germany (Moskau Treaty).

In 1972 they were engaged to Tokyo through dear friends and colleagues, Peter and Romaine McKay. To work on the same spots every night Carnell and Edith put a duo act together and toured five years in Japan and the whole Far East.

Coming back to Berlin, Germany at the end of the 70s tap dance was no longer a way of making a living in Germany. So, around 1980, when Carnell was asked to teach tap dance, this was the start of his new teaching career which made him the man who brought Rhythm Tap to Europe. Almost at the same time when tap started to come back in the USA, Carnell started the tap revival in Europe, teaching all the dance festivals and schools. After twelve years the highlight of his teaching career was that he was invited through Jackie Shue to teach the 1992 Tap Festival in Portland and the coming back to New York where Jackie Shue arranged a performance party for his 75th birthday. Jackie organized a show where many of his old and new friends like herself, Buster Brown, Fay Ray, Chuck Green, Lon Chaney, Harriet Browne, Brenda Bufalino, Josh Hilberman, Hank Smith, Rod Ferrone, Joe Orrach, Herbin van Cayseele, Jane Goldberg and us danced for him.



Carnell's birthday party in New York at Sweetwaters, 1992

With the sweet memory of this late recognition in the tap revival Carnell went back home to Berlin. – Thank you, Jackie!

Alan Carnell Lyons died on September 12th 1992 in Berlin, Germany.

Through working on Carnell's biography we got to know some of the nicest and most helpful people in show business. We put that down to his open and loving personality. He had friends all over the world who loved him like we do.

Kurt Albert and Klaus Bleis are protégés of Carnell Lyons and have been performing together for over 15 years (Tap and Tray). Since 1992 they have been working on a biography on Carnell Lyons.