

INTERNATIONAL LINDY HOP CHAMPIONSHIPS 2024

Frankie Manning, Norma Miller and Al Minns Harlem: A Self-Guided Tour

Monday, May 27th, 2024

10:00 AM - 12:00 PM

The Savoy Ballroom Historic Marker Program and Self-Guided Tour Lenox
Avenue between 140th and 141st Streets, Harlem

Meet at the plaque at 9:45am



The Frankie Quilt, 2009.

Cottons sourced from world-wide Lindy Hop communities, 100 x 89 in. Jen Pringle, United States. Collection of Lana Turner, New York City

PROGRAM

Welcome to Harlem Barbara Grant

Black American Dance Heritage

**Lifelong Grassroots Activist, Teacher, Dancer and daughter of the late great Al Minns
Denise Minns Harris**

Co-author of Frankie Manning's autobiography "Ambassador of Lindy Hop"
Cynthia Millman



Stop #1: The Savoy Ballroom Historic Marker. **Lenox Avenue between 140th and 141st Streets.**

Inspired and unveiled by Frankie Manning and Norma Miller on May 26, 2002.

This historic marker commemorates the site of the legendary Savoy Ballroom (May 12, 1926 – July 10, 1958), 596 Lenox Avenue, New York, New York.

The Savoy Ballroom was closed in late 1958 and subsequently demolished against wide community protests. It was long lamented by many people including Frankie that there was nothing to mark the historic ballroom where countless dancers and musicians created an artform that was exported around the world.

Instrumental in marking the spot we stand in front of today were Yvonne Marceau, dancer and co-founder of American Ballroom Theater, which is now better recognized for its Dancing Classrooms program, and Jun Maruta, a Lindy Hopper. Nevertheless, it was an inclusive effort. Most of the funding was raised through individual contributions from the Lindy Hop community at large.

On Frankie's birthday, May 26, 2002, both he and dance legend Norma Miller unveiled the marker positioned at what was once the entrance to the Savoy Ballroom. Amid the excitement and fanfare, Frankie would say, "I could not have been happier."

Norma Miller: *The opening of the Savoy marked a change in the social pattern. For the first time in history, the status quo in America was challenged. At last there was a beautiful ballroom with no segregation. Tickets cost 30c before 6PM; 60c between 6-8PM, and 85c after 8PM. The ballroom was decorated in gold and blue ... The walls were lined with booths ... The dance area was 50 feet by 200 feet, the length of a city block. The dance floor was layered with mahogany and maple ... and was replaced every three years from the constant pounding. You could purchase a dance with one of the Savoy Hostesses...they would even teach you to dance. Music never stopped. There were two, sometimes three bandstands. Whenever one band was about to end its set, the other would jump in on the final chorus and take off on its own. The Savoy played an enormous and largely unrecognized role in the history of jazz. The Savoy should always be remembered along with the men and women who created the music that all America danced to.*

Frankie Manning: *When I turned around and faced the room ... well, I just stood there with my mouth open. The whole floor was full of people – and they were dancing! The band was pounding. The guys up there were wailing! The music was rompin' and stompin'. Everybody was movin' and groovin'. Everybody was dressed elegantly. The ballroom itself was so beautiful ... We started saying, "Wow! Look at that!" "Man! You hear this music!" "Look at all these people dancin' and jumpin'!" "This is dancin' heaven!" It even looked like the floor was getting into the mood because it was bouncing up and down too. The Savoy could actually hold about 2,000 people without anybody even getting kicked. It was like, man, this is the place where we should have been all the time!*

Norma: *(1926) ... By evening we were in our new apartment. It was a third floor apartment on 140th Street (between Lenox and 5th Avenues) and the fire escape window faced the back of the Savoy Ballroom.*

Al Minns: *"The Savoy was number one . . . that's where I learned to dance!*

"We dancers, we would go there, say around 9:30. The place would be empty as the devil, and the bands get on the bandstand, they'd start warming up, we'd start rehearsing our routines. Cause you know the tourist crowd be coming in. Movie stars and things like that. Then around 10:30, all of a sudden the place would be crowded. The Savoy ballroom was a spectacular place! It was a block long, with two bandstands, and the floor was something out of this world. The floor had three layers, one layer of springs, and cork on top of those springs, and then this highly polished floor. And when they say bouncing at the Savoy, you didn't have to dance, all you had to do is . . . and the floor would push you up and down, from the rhythm of people patting their feet!"

Stop #2. Original Cotton Club Site. 652 Lenox Avenue.

**Northeast Corner of 142nd Street and Lenox Avenue. The building was demolished in 1958.
Now the site of the Minisink Town House Apartments.**



Site of the 'whites-only' Douglas Theater (1918). Later, opened in the fall of 1923.

The Cotton Club. The waiters and talent were black; the owners and patrons were white. The club seated 700, catered to the Park Avenue crowd, kept prices high, 'in-spot' for celebrities. Duke Ellington made the Cotton Club famous, and the Cotton Club did the same for Ellington. Closed February 16, 1936. Relocated to Broadway at 48th Street.

Norma: *Once the Savoy opened, others did as well. After-hour joints were kind of uptown speakeasies, and Harlem was crawling with them. It was the place to go to get anything you wanted, especially if it was illegal. The Cotton Club was near the Savoy at 142nd Street and Lenox Avenue. When people left the Cotton Club, a stop at the Savoy was a must. You could club crawl until the wee hours of the morning in Harlem.*

**Stop #3. Frederick Douglass Junior High School #139. 120 West 140th Street. between
Lenox & Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard
The school now a residential building for seniors.**

Frankie: *I tried to do well at Frederick Douglass Junior High School 139 so my mother and grandmother would be proud of me, but I admit I was more enthusiastic about athletics than academics.*

Stop #4. 228 West 140th Street & 230 West 140th Street.

between Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and Frederick Douglass Boulevards. The apartment buildings Frankie Manning and Frieda Washington lived in when they created the now famous, 'air step'.

Frankie: I have an idea for a step ... Instead of practicing at The Savoy, I decided to work at home because I wanted it to be surprise. Frieda and I lived next door to each other on top floors of two walk-up buildings. I was at 230 ... and she was at 228. I would holler out my window for her to come over to practice, and she'd run across the roof and down stairs to my place. I didn't have the slightest inkling of how to do what I had in mind ... There should have been a video, because the two of us trying to get this step was pure comedy. We had so many laughs. Finally, ... without breaking our rhythm we practiced until we could do the whole sequence each time.



It is 1935. The Savoy Ballroom. The Chick Webb Band. The swing tuned, Down South Camp Meeting. Dance contest. Over 2,000 spectators. Six of the greatest lindy hop teams in the world. Five teams dance off the chart. Frankie and Frieda are last to compete. Frankie is nervous and reluctant. The band drives. Frankie feels the music. Forgets about the contest. Swings Frieda out. They twist, jive, stomp, boogie, Charleston in the cup of every riff from the band. The place is rocking. Frankie says to Frieda, "you ready to do the step?" "Yeah, let's go for it." Together they performed the first-ever air step, a back to back roll. It would revolutionize the course of lindy hop. -LT

Stop #5. Former home of Harry Wills. 245 West 139th Street.

between Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and Frederick Douglass Boulevards

Prizefighter Harry Wills (1889-1958) was known as "The Black Panther." He lived here from 1922 to 1930. Wills fought from 1911 until 1932 and three times won the World Colored Heavyweight Championship (1914, 1916 and 1918).

Frankie: I also did jobs for Harry Wills, a world-class prizefighter whose career was held back by racism. He owned a townhouse on Striver's Row, which were these immaculate tree-lined blocks, West 139th Street and West 138th Streets between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, where lots of famous African Americans lived. When I cleaned his home, Wills gave me ten dollars, which was almost as much as my mother made in a week ... where famous African-Americans lived.

Others who lived in this neighborhood included: Fletcher Henderson (musician) 228 W 139; Will Marion Cook (composer) 221 W 138; Eubie Blake (composer) 236 W 138; Scott Joplin (composer) 246 W 138; Harry Pace (entrepreneur) Black Swan Records 257 W 138.

Stop #6. The Renaissance Ballroom and Casino also known as The 'Renny'.

2341-2357 Seventh Avenue also known as Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd.

between 137th and 138th Streets. The building was 1921 & 1923; demolished 2015. Now 'The Rennie', a residential condominium, 2020



The Renaissance Ballroom & Casio, known affectionately as the 'Renny', was built by a three black businessman – William H. Roach, Cleophus Charity and Joseph H. Sweeney. It was the only upscale entertainment complex opened to blacks in the early 1920's sporting ground floor businesses, a casino, ballroom, theater, billiards parlor and a restaurant. It was the site of Joe Louis fights and a basketball court. Count Basie, Billie Holiday and a host of jazz greats performed there. Closed 1979.

Norma: *There was a local ballroom called the Renaissance ... which had matinees for young people. One Sunday after church I was hanging out with guys who were telling me about these dances. It sounded great to me. I was even dressed ... I was wearing a pink organdy dress ... I was so excited I could hardly wait in line. It was the first time I would dance the Lindy, the dance I had been watching at the Savoy from our fire escape.*

Frankie: (1926). At age 12 Frankie is very excited to attend an adult social club dance at The Renaissance with his mother. His mother asked him to dance. Frankie happily tried as he witnessed others. "As soon as the music was over, my mother grabbed me by the hand and started walking off the dance floor ... When I asked her what was the matter, she said, "Frankie, you'll never be a dancer. You're too stiff."

Frankie: (1929–30). *I heard about the Sunday evening dances at the Renaissance Ballroom ... for older teenagers aged fifteen to nineteen. (It) was known to have a higher level of dancing than the Alhambra. The dancers at the Renaissance were much better than the youngsters we had been dancing with till now. I don't remember the exact moment when I first saw the Lindy hop, but I'm pretty sure it was shortly after I started going to the Renaissance Ballroom.*

**Stop #7. Abyssinian Baptist Church. 132 West 138th Street.
between Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard & Lenox Avenue**

The church was founded in 1808 by free African-Americans and Ethiopian merchants. This edifice was erected in 1923. The church's development corporation was responsible for razing the The Renaissance Ballroom and Casino and selling off for a high-rise residential 'The Rennie'.



Norma: (1930's – The Depression). During this time (Mama) learned that the all-black Abyssinian Baptist Church was offering assistance to any family that needed it. Although we were Episcopalians, we were welcomed there. This is how Mama discovered the young assistant pastor, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Being a politically-minded woman, she was immediately drawn to him. He was a flamboyant man and a powerful orator, speaking out for the black community, which was also Mama's passion

Frankie: (1924). My father eventually moved to New York around my tenth birthday. After that, my mother... enrolled me in a day camp run by Abyssinian Baptist Church with activities such as arts, crafts, and sports. I especially loved the field trips to Orchard Beach in the Bronx, and the lemonade-and-cake parties that my counselor and her husband had for campers in the backyard of their brownstone.

Stop #8. Frankie's first home. 109 West 138th Street, 1st Floor between Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard & Lenox Avenue. Building demolished. Vacant land.



Frankie: (1918). *When we first got to New York, we rented two rooms in the apartment of this lady named Mrs. Brooks.... My Aunt Marie rented a room in another apartment in the same building. The landlady had two sons, Kenneth and Eric ...who took me under their wings and showed me the ropes. It was still summer, so there were lots of kids on the sidewalks playing hide-and-seek, and shooting marbles and soda-water bottle caps. At first, I just watched from our first floor, but after a while I began to learn how to play the games and joined in.*

**Stop #9. Harlem Hospital. Murals. Pursuit of Happiness by Vertis Hayes
Eastside of Lenox Avenue at 136th Street.**



The mural facades were created in the 1930's under the WPA, a federal works program created to employ millions of Americans during the Depression. Vertis Hayes's eight-panel mural spans both walls of the first-floor corridor of the New Nurses Residence. The work chronologically follows an arc of African American history, transporting the viewer from Africa to America, from an African village to an American city peopled by African Americans in zoot suits and white nurse's dresses. The mural also suggests the migration of African Americans from their agrarian lives in the South to the industrialized North, an experience of personal significance for the artist who himself migrated from Atlanta to New York.

Hayes's work deploys numerous motifs of progress, which, for many artists of the period, was symbolized by capitalism and Western civilization. In this mural, Hayes describes the irresistible force of progress symbolized by a giant cog. Most likely, he borrowed this symbol from another African American artist, Aaron Douglas, who uses a cog in his 1934 mural *Aspects of Negro Life*, also created under the patronage of the WPA for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library.

Stop #10. Formerly The Lincoln Theater. 58 West 135th St. between Lenox and Fifth Avenues. Built 1915. Now the Metropolitan AME Church. 1960's.



Frankie: *When I got out of school at three o'clock, I would go across the street to the Lincoln Theater. My mother had a friend who worked there as an usher, and this lady would let me into the theater to watch the show for a couple of hours until my mother came to get me. This was a vaudeville theater. There was a movie following the stage show, with the whole thing repeated four times a day. Since I went every day, I saw the same program over and over and watched a lot of famous performers.*

Stop #11. Former site of Public School #89. 458 Lenox Avenue between 134th and 135th Streets. Now Clayton Apartments Co-op.

Norma: (1933). *I stayed at P.S. 136 for a year and half before I learned of P. S. 89, where they had a better music program. With my love of music and dance, Mama allowed me to transfer. At P.S. 89 I took music appreciation. Mrs. Jones was our teacher and she truly loved music and children. She introduced us to all the classics: Mozart*

Frankie: (1920). *My mother was working downtown at a laundry on Lexington Avenue in the sixties when I first started school. Every morning at seven o'clock, she would drop me off at PS.89, then catch the subway at the corner. School didn't start until eight-thirty, but the hour and a half passed like crazy because we were playing handball. Bach, Beethoven. We were more interested in Swing ... She encouraged us ... we took assigned songs and gave them a beat. We made them swing!*

Stop #12. Public School 89's former footprint. Now P.S. 175's School Yard. 135th Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues.

The partial site of PS 89's former footprint, a school both Norma and Frankie attended.



Stop #13. Formerly Small's Paradise. 2294 Seventh Avenue also known as Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard between 134th & 135th Streets. Now Small's Paradise (1925-1955); now International House of Pancakes.



For many years a hotspot with an illustrious past, Smalls' Paradise, was widely known as one of Harlem's famous nightclubs. In the 1920's Smalls Paradise was the only one of the well-known Harlem night clubs to be owned by an African-American and integrated. Other major Harlem night clubs admitted only white patrons unless the person was an African-American celebrity.

The entertainment at Smalls Paradise was not limited to the stage; waiters danced the Charleston or roller-skated as they delivered orders to customers. Waiters were also known to vocalize during the club's floor shows. Unlike most of the Harlem clubs which closed between 3 and 4 am, Smalls was open all night, offering a breakfast dance which featured a full floor show beginning at 6 am.

Frankie: *In 1984, just about thirty years after I'd gone to work in the post office, Norma Miller called to tell me that Smalls' Paradise, an old nightclub in Harlem, had begun holding swing dances on Monday nights to live music with Al Cobbs's C&J Big Band. I was still working, so I couldn't go very often, but I went up there a couple of times to check it out.*



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Jun Maruta

Co-creator, Savoy Ballroom Historic Marker and Lindy Hop Dancer

Frankie Manning's quotes

Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop

Frankie Manning and Cynthia R. Millman
Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2007.

Norma Miller's quotes

Swingin' at The Savoy: The Memoir of a Jazz Dancer

Norma Miller with Evette Jensen
Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1996.

Al Minns' quotes

dancehistory.org

*Pure beauty, rarely, if ever,
emerges as an end to itself.
Often, it simply attracts.
And, evolves
Lighting a spark in one; an idea in
another
And, then
many
Moving in the radiance of nature's
light
As one.
-LT*

Thank you for your participation and assistance today for
without you surely our 6-count and 8-count would falter:

Samuel 'Sammy' Coleman
Julia Loving
Jun Maruta
Cynthia R. Millman
Tena Morales-Armstrong
Marie N'diaye

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