

Grand Ladies of the Dance

Unfortunately, there aren't very many of these grand ladies left. I'm referring, of course, to those wonderful women who were instrumental in the birth, growth, and development of the dance, our dance, born in the Carolinas and nurtured through the years by the many special guys and gals who were proud to be called, *jitterbug*, *shagger*, *fast dancer*, *boogier*, or whatever label one might choose to slap on them. The name is not important. The dance itself is unique, as are those individuals who have helped keep it alive and well through the years.

Many fine ladies have contributed to the longevity and well being of the dance. There have been far too many to mention here, but we are fortunate to have a few of them residing in the North Myrtle Beach area. These ladies deserve a special kind of respect, similar to that usually reserved for heroines, movie stars, and the like.

I recently had the pleasure of spending an afternoon with Louise Hunsucker at her home in Ocean Isle. Louise is the *real deal*, one of the many fine women who helped create the jitterbug lifestyle and contributed to the continuation and development of the dance. Although she is getting on in age, and her health has been rather fragile for the past several years, her spirit and personality are as lively and as colorful as ever. We sat at her dining room table and I listened attentively while she talked about the good old days.

Louise was born and raised in High Point, North Carolina. She learned to dance during the 1940's while still in junior high school. During the mid-forties, Louise spent a lot of time dancing at High Point Lake. She mentioned a few of her favorite dance partners during this happy time of her life. Tinker Kennedy, Bunk Leach, Rick Lyman, and Chick Hedrick were names that seemed to come easily to mind. She told me Chick was one of the best jitterbug dancers around before the shag ever even hit the scene. She talked about the Big bands and how popular they were all through the forties. Famous names such as Woody Herman, Tommy

and Jimmy Dorsey, Harry James, Artie Shaw, and Benny Goodman played the big dances and festivals that were held in tobacco warehouses, armories, and other large facilities. Louise was able to attend most of these dances and enjoy the music of these great bands when they barnstormed through North Carolina.

In 1948-49, Louise spent most of her summer months at Carolina Beach. She laughed as she told me that Pink Lightning Lipstick, Ship and Shore long sleeved blouses with French cuffs, short-shorts, and Mexican sandals were the attire of choice at Carolina Beach in those days. She says her Carolina Beach days were probably the happiest of her life. Her favorite dance spots back then were *The Roof*, *The Ocean Plaza*, and *the Sugar Pot juke joints* along the boardwalk. She fondly recalls Jimmy Cavallo and his band playing all the joints around the beach, including *The Roof*. In those days, Louise danced a lot with Harry Driver, Lacey Moore, Louie Madden, Bobby Hicks, Tookie Lee, Bunk Leach, and Rick Lyman.

In 1950, the Carolina Beach crowd began drifting over to Myrtle Beach. Louise made the change along with everyone else. The daily routine went something like this: Those who weren't working slept late and lazed around in the sun during the day. Everyone gathered at the pavilion early in the evening and danced until around nine o'clock. Then the crowd went down to Spivey's and Moody's Recreation Center which were separated by a small bridge, easy walking distance apart.

Her favorite dance partner in those days was Charlie Boone from Fayetteville. She also enjoyed dancing with Lacey Moore, George Lineberry, and Harry Driver. She always stayed at Ma Regan's, one of the more popular and less expensive rooming houses on the beach. Ma was a well known personality in those days, and notable jitterbugs such as Charlie Porter, Jimmy Dingler, Harry Driver, and Charlie Boone always stayed at Ma's place.

In 1954, Louise married Billy Ray Hunsucker from High Point. Billy Ray was a football and basketball star at Catawba College. He and Louise were married some thirty years. She began to name her good friends and I had to stop her. There were far too many to list here. She mentioned Shirley Leach, Barbara

Stephens (deceased), Margie Ingram, Gloria Hayworth (deceased), Marilyn Smith (deceased) and Connie Fultz as close friends. She also mentioned Norfleet Jones as a good friend then and now. And, of course, there is also MiMi Benedict, the other subject of this article. Butch Metcalf's mother, Betty, was also a good buddy. Louise still teases Butch about changing his diapers back in the days when she used to baby sit him.

Louise kept dancing all through the 60's, 70's, and 80's. She fondly recalls the *Susie Beaver Shag Explosions* that were held in High Point on Friday and Saturday nights during the 80's. These were big dance events that included participants from all over North and South Carolina. Most of the shag clubs were represented and performed special dance programs. Turkey Martin was probably her main dance partner during these events, and Phil Pritchett was her favorite dance partner during the eighties.

Louise was inducted into the *Hall of Fame* in 1996. She is also in *Living Legends*. We salute you, Louise Hunsucker, as one of the original *Grand Ladies of the Dance*.

Another Grand Lady is MiMi Benedict. She likes to refer to herself as a *poor little barefooted country girl from Fuquay-Varina*. (In case you wondered, Fuquay-Varina is about fifteen miles from Raleigh, N.C.) MiMi graduated from Fuquay High School and King Business School. She always liked music and showed an interest in dancing at a very early age. Her father was a night club entertainer and she spent lots of time in clubs, enjoying live music and watching him perform while she drank her Shirley Temples.

In 1944, she developed a sincere love for black music and the dance that seemed to fit it so perfectly. She began spending time at her uncle's house in Carolina Beach. She learned to dance, and by 1946 she was hanging out with the regular Carolina Beach crowd. She says she can still hear Wynonie Harris singing *Good Rocking Tonight* just as he sang it some 60 years ago. She recalls how the crowd sort of moved around from one juke joint to the next, dancing and having fun. She first saw Clarice Reavis upstairs at *The Plaza* and was thoroughly impressed

with her beauty and style. She had no idea at the time that she and Clarice would one day be best of friends.

Most of the dance floors around Carolina Beach were made of concrete. MiMi danced for hours on end, wearing holes in the soles of her shoes, ignoring the blisters and swelling on and around her feet. She sometimes got in trouble because, when dancing, she lost all sense of time and often missed meals or got home much later than she was supposed to. Harry Driver, George Potter, Chick Hedrick, Chicken and Bobby Hicks were among her dance partners in those days.

When MiMi was about seventeen, she met Clarice at a Stewart's Lake dance in Raleigh. Jimmy Cavallo's band, one of the more popular bands with the jitterbug set, was playing that evening. Bobby Wrenn was the drummer in that band. Clarice danced a lot that evening, putting on quite a show. MiMi was completely taken with her smooth, graceful style and originality. A lot of the steps done by women today actually originated with ladies like Clarice.

MiMi danced whenever and wherever the music happened to be. She had no car, but she was always able to hitch a ride with a carload of jitterbugs going somewhere to dance. It made no difference to MiMi whether they were going to some small, local joint or all the way to Myrtle Beach, as long as there was a dance floor and juke box waiting when they got there.

Around 1950, the Carolina Beach crowd gradually began moving over to Myrtle Beach. *Spivey's*, *Moody's Recreation Center*, and *the pavilion* were the dance places of choice at Myrtle. The *in crowd* sort of moved from one of them to the other, making the same basic rounds every night. *The B&L* was open after hours for those diehards who didn't get quite enough before two in the morning. Although MiMi was a little younger than most of the regulars, she hung right in there, dancing with Driver, Charlie Boone, and all the rest of the good dancers. In 1950, she and Mitchell Duke won a dance contest at Raleigh Memorial Auditorium.

In 1951, MiMi married Barry Marshburn. Barry was a good dancer, so she was able to continue dancing after their marriage. They danced at small, local juke

joints, nearby lakes, spent time at Myrtle Beach when possible, and continued to enjoy the lifestyle. They were married for about twenty years and parented two children, a girl and a boy.

MiMi's best girlfriends through the years were Jean Allen Ferguson, Louise Hunsucker, Teresa Shedan, Joyce Lawson, *Big Red*, Peggy McCurdy, and Clarice Reavis. They were all very good dancers and kept a little friendly competition going among them all the time. There were no dance classes in those days. Everyone either made up his or her own steps or "borrowed" steps from someone else. Most people were very cooperative when it came to teaching someone a step. Usually, all you had to do was ask. Some people simply stole steps from the better dancers. The smart thieves would always make subtle changes in the step in order to give it a slightly different look.

Clarice and MiMi finally became inseparable friends just after the second SOS gathering in 1982. They maintained a solid friendship from that time on, traveling around the Carolinas together, just dancing and having fun. Clarice introduced MiMi to Phil Benedict, and they were married in 1996. Clarice exhibited keen judgment in pairing them up, because Phil and MiMi are simply perfect together.

Later, when Clarice was in her eighties, she asked Phil and MiMi to teach dancing at the assisted living rest home where she then resided. They taught there every Tuesday for nearly two years. The old folks really looked forward to their weekly lessons. Some were only able to go through the motions while leaning on a cane or walker, and a few were even in wheelchairs. MiMi says one ninety-five year old woman even called her children and proudly announced that she was finally learning to shag. She and Phil still recall how spiritually rewarding it was to bring a little joy into the otherwise empty lives of these lonely men and women.

Everyone in the North Myrtle Beach area knows and loves MiMi and Phil. MiMi is still a terrific dancer, smooth and graceful, capable of following anyone who can keep time. Phil, a smooth dancer in his own right, has gained somewhat of a reputation for dancing well with several ladies at once. You can usually find them at Harold's on Wednesday nights and the pavilion on Sunday afternoons.

MiMi was inducted into the *Hall of Fame* in 2003. She is also a *Living Legend*. We salute you, MiMi Benedict, as one of the original *Grand Ladies of the Dance*.

David V. Smith