

Sammy Lyman (1913-2002): This vaudeville survivor found meaning in teaching tap to the next generation

By R.W. Bacon © 2010

Me? R.W. Bacon, eccentric comedy *dancer*? *Dancing* on stage in front of jaded “theatah” crowds ... on national tour ... at the finest venues?

Huh? What’s wrong with this picture?

How did this happen to a guy who, until he was in his mid-20s, showed his fancy *footwork* only at the sweaty third-floor boxing gym ... or on a gravelly infield, playing third base?

The answer? Sammy Lyman (1913-2002). It happened this way:

I was already performing far-and-wide in the mid-1970s as a variety entertainer when I met the veteran eccentric tap dancer and all-around versatile performer, Sammy Lyman. My career was progressing nicely. I was energized, and wholeheartedly involved in advancing my various specialties as a musician, acrobatic juggler, vaudevillian, and circus artist. I had plenty to do with my time. And I was *not* a dancer.

In the winter months, a handful of professional and amateur jugglers got together one night per week in Marblehead, Mass., to practice and “compare notes.” A co-facilitator of this group was enthusiastic hobbyist juggler Donald “Bud” Orne (1915-2005), at that time the human-dynamo head of the Marblehead Park & Recreation Dept., who in his youth had been a barrel-jumping exhibition ice-skater. (He wanted me to put

my juggling act on ice skates, but that is another story.) Bud opened up the Park & Rec facilities – a re-purposed 19th-century firehouse – for our motley group of jugglers, plate spinners, gymnasts, and card manipulators, young and old, and the word spread among Boston’s community of enthusiasts.

Sometime in the mid-1970s Sammy Lyman began showing up at our weekly meetings. He was not a juggler, but he clearly enjoyed being around variety performers. He loved to watch the juggling. He was a gregarious fellow, and he had a million stories about his own performing career, which he recounted in his brash “New Yawk” showbiz staccato. He was a slight, bespectacled man of about 70, with wiry brillo-pad gray hair. He always arrived wearing a billowy overcoat and felt hat. When he removed the overcoat, beneath that layer there was always a plaid checked jacket, usually two-tone orange or some variant, as if he was dressed to do his eccentric comedy act at a moment’s notice.

We learned that Sammy was a tap dancer (“a hoofah”), a comic dancer, an MC, and a comedy magician. He was still doing a few dates for some of the big-time, old-time Boston agents, but as he freely admitted, his best days were in the past. He lived in semi-retirement in Boston, in a small apartment with his wife, Catherine (1908-1991), in the upper floors of the YMCU building on Boylston Street, in the heart of the city’s old theatre district. He spent his days visiting his friends at dance studios where he used to teach, or hanging out at the offices of the old-time agents. He did not own a car, and he took public transportation everywhere. Every Thursday night he took the bus out to Marblehead to hang out with us jugglers.

Halfway through a typical night of juggling, we usually took a break for some fruit juice and a little gabbing. This would open up space on the floor for Sammy, who would illustrate and punctuate stories of his days in cabaret and burlesque clubs with a few dance moves. The first time he did this there was a roomful of bulging eyeballs. No one could believe this “old man” was really doing these wild tap combinations. After a few weeks, Sammy announced that he was feeling like a deadbeat, just watching the juggling and not contributing in any way. He asked if anyone was interested in tap lessons, and said he would be glad to hold a brief

class there every week. A half-dozen of us thought it would be fun learning from Sammy – and once he got started we were hooked.

In the first lesson he had everyone mincing around in a circle. Thank goodness there is no video of that session. In the weeks and months to come Sammy was like the “pied piper,” leading his parade of clumsy beginners through the paces, all the while counting out the rhythms in “New Yawkese.” He cast a spell. We would have done anything for him, no matter how ridiculous-looking. We learned that years before, Sammy had his own dance studio. He was in his glory teaching a group of beginners. We began to look forward to it. “Is Sammy coming this week?” people would ask? Everyone was eager to learn a new step or a new combination.

At the very least, Sammy always brought with him his weekly supply of amazement and amusement. For amusement, it was always a funny surprise when he revealed what he had brought with him to share with the group. It seems that he was longtime buddies with the proprietor of a bakery in downtown Boston who saved the day-old

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DOUBLE FEATURE!

All This Week
Leslee Lynne
from Miami

Sherry Sands
exotic from Pittsburgh

SAMMY LYMAN
Comedy MC

Novelty - Dancing - Magic
Balloons



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NO COVER CHARGE FOR LADIES OR MEN ACCOMPANIED BY A LADY

THE Blue Moon
Choice Foods and Liquors
Pizzas Our Specialty
FREE PARKING IN REAR from 6 P.M.

Above is an advertisement for **Sammy Lyman & Co.** appearing at the Blue Moon in Newport, R.I. in June 1960.

**NICK'S
HAPPY HOUR**
TYNGSBORO, MASS.
PROUDLY PRESENTS
SATURDAY NIGHT ONLY
The Harmonica Rascals
Admission \$2.50 Per Person

FRIDAY NIGHT
Sammy Lyman
COMIC
FOR RESERVATION 649-9181

ALSO
DANCING TO THE
Cliff Taylor Trio
FEATURING
Chris Farris Vocalist

COMING SOON
SOUPY SALES

Above is an advertisement for **Sammy Lyman** appearing at Nick's Happy Hour in Tyngsboro, Mass. in June 1972. Note that Sammy was booked ahead of Soupy Sales.

Sammy Lyman (1913-2002)

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bread for Sammy. Before Sammy boarded the bus for Marblehead, he would load his voluminous overcoat with bread and rolls of all shapes and sizes. When he got to the Park & Rec Dept., it was a comedy routine in itself watching a half-dozen baguettes come out of Sammy's sleeves, huge round loaves come out of the lining, and fist-sized rolls emerge from various pockets. When his methodical unloading was complete and all the loaves were laid out and the rolls piled on a long table next to our fruit juice, Sammy would turn, raise his eyebrows, shrug his shoulders, and say, very matter-of-factly: "Want some bread?" Variations of this scene were repeated many times to hilarious effect.

For amazement, we just had to get Sammy talking about tap dancing. When he was teaching, he did not depart from his disciplined approach. Afterwards, off to the side, he could be persuaded to demonstrate some combinations. He would take off his checkered jacket, limber up, and then launch into some spectacular twisting, pounding, stamping tap combinations. "... And that's how it's done," he would say every time, gasping for breath. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he always followed this with the rest of his script: "Of course, I can't do that one anymore!"



Sammy Lyman and his wife, Kate, lived for many years in an apartment at the Young Men's Christian Union at 48 Boylston Street in the heart of Boston's rundown theatre district. Today the 1876 building is on the National Register of Historic Places, and houses the Boylston Street Athletic Club. In the late 1940s its gym was known as the practice and meeting space for Boston-area amateur and professional jugglers.

Over time, we learned more about Sammy Lyman. He was born in Boston's Dorchester section, one of six children of Jacob and Emma Lyman, who arrived in the U.S. from Odessa, Russia, in 1905. Sammy grew up in Dorchester, coincidentally about a half-mile from the young Ray Bolger (1904-1987). As a youth he was smitten by vaudeville, and at an early age knew he wanted to be a tap dancer on stage. But as he reached adulthood, he saw vaudeville, that old standby of showbusiness, crumble before him. The Depression didn't help, either.

Nevertheless, as a young tap dancer, he wanted to put himself in the right place to have a chance for success, so he moved to New York City to try his luck in the 1930s. At the time, the most famous tap dancer of the age, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (1878-1949), was the "honorary mayor of Harlem." He was at the height of his popularity, having made a number of Hollywood movies with child star Shirley Temple. Capitalizing on his name, when back home in New York, Robinson conducted master classes in tap. And Sammy Lyman was there, front-and-center, soaking up everything he could from the master.

Sammy never cracked what was left of the "big-time" in New York, and was back in Boston during WWII to work as an electrician in the Quincy shipyards. Following WWII, there was a revival of the nightclub scene, and Sammy was ready. By this time in his 30s, he had acquired some polish as an MC and comic monologist to go along with his dancing. To this he added some small magic effects, which were really vehicles for more of his nonsensical verbal comedy. New England and New York newspapers of the 1950s & 1960s are peppered with advertisements for Sammy Lyman's appearances at supper clubs and cabarets throughout the region. They are usually small one-column ads that list Sammy's "novelty act" in support of a featured "exotic" dancer.

In the late 1950s, after playing hundreds of hole-in-the-wall clubs in New England, the 40-something Sammy finally got his exposure on the national stage. He was to be the touring promotional character for a new product. The national advertising campaign would include personal appearances, autograph sessions, TV spots, and performances that featured his tap dancing. The product was Stripe toothpaste. For the next several lucrative years, Sammy was "Stripe-O," the company's tap-dancing tube of toothpaste.

The "Stripe-O" character had a longer run than the company or Sammy ever expected. Years afterwards, agents and friends still called Sammy "Stripe-O," and he was quite

GRINALDO'S
TURF CLUB PAWLING AVE.
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PRESENTS NITELY! ★ **ALL STAR FLOOR SHOW!**

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<p>★ APRIL STAR</p> <p>★ HAPPY HALL Comedienne Dances on Roller-Skates</p> <p>★ ALMER DADE AND HIS CHORIS LINE</p> <p>★ BLUES SINGER</p> <p>— PLES MUSIC BY —</p> <p>★ NICK BARBER AND HIS ORCHESTRA</p>	<p>■ STARTING NEXT WEEK</p> <p>■ SHERRY SANDS EXOTIC</p> <p>■ PLUS SAMMY LYMAN M. C.</p>
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Why Pay for Your Entertainment? The Turf Furnishes Entertainment For Banquets, Parties At No Extra Cost. Call AS 2-9880

Sammy Lyman was one of the "host of stars" performing in the "All-Star Floor Show" at the Turf Club in Troy, N.Y. in 1960. Advertisements of the period indicate that dancer Sherry Sands and Sammy worked together often throughout New England and New York.

comfortable with his identification as a faceless, tap-dancing product.

On several occasions in the mid-1980s L.J. & I had the opportunity to work on shows with Sammy Lyman. These were shows put together by some of the ancient booking agents Sammy had known for decades. By this time he was doing short "filler" bits with his "nut comedy" monologues only, and no dancing. But I made sure the audience got a sample of "old-time Sammy" in my own dance breaks.

For me, Sammy opened up a whole new world. Sammy saw something in me that I was just discovering myself — my natural affinity for physical comedy. "You got a 'spressive style," Sammy would say, leaving off the first syllable. He observed while watching my juggling that "Even when you drop in practice, you *move* funny." So Sammy worked on me, coaxing out what was within.

He taught me the basics of tap that I needed, the framework onto which I added all the "spressive" stuff: the rubber-leg high kicks, the pretzel-like crouches, and the corkscrew arms and elbows. Sammy

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★ **Rollstone Lodge** ★

3 Harugari St., Fitchburg

**THIS SUNDAY NIGHT'S
ALL STAR SHOW**

Direct from New York City
SAMMY LYMAN — Comedy

JOHNNY MILES — M.C.

LETHA LYNN — Girl Dancer

May we remind you our hall is available exclusively to you
and your guests for all kinds of parties.

CALL DI 3-9688

Above is a 1966 ad for Sammy Lyman appearing at the Rollstone Lodge in Fitchburg, Mass. This "All Star Show" was touted as being "direct from New York City."



Above is a "Striperoo" – the custom-manufactured kazoo of the type **Sammy Lyman** would give away at his promotional appearances for Stripe toothpaste. This was back in his big-money days working as a tap-dancing toothpaste tube.

Sammy Lyman (1913-2002)

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introduced me to the terminology – "legomania," and "centric," again lopping off the first syllable. He gave me the foundation to build on. Even though I was a musician fully capable of *playing* music for tap dancers, I never thought I had the aptitude to *be* one myself. I never even considered "comedy tap" as a genre. Sammy gave me the confidence to "go for it," even as a non-dancer.

In those days we practiced the acrobatic juggling at our studio or at the gym. But I practiced the *dance* at home. Where we lived at that time had no rooms bigger than 10-12 feet wide. So I fashioned routines that spanned two rooms – the entire width of the house – to simulate the width of a stage. I was "shuffling off to Buffalo" through doorways and over thresholds, with my cane flailing to within inches of assorted breakables. Then I would show my creations to Sammy for his critique. When we worked in Boston, Sammy would attend our shows if he

could, and always had a smile and a good word. "You're 'centric!" he would say.

Today, 30-plus years later, I look back at a career that has been a fulfilling odyssey. For 23 of those years I toured with my wife and partner, the juggler/musician L.J. Newton, in our theatrical show, *The Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival*, a panorama of music, song, *dance*, comedy, and juggling. The unlikely development that *dance* would ever figure in thousands of my performances is directly attributable to Sammy Lyman.

My routines never had Sammy's flashy combinations. It was mostly simple soft-shoe tap – doubles and triples – as an excuse for the comedic "legomania," gangly arm gestures, and cane-juggling. I choreographed complete routines to "Doo-Wacka-Doo" (Gaskill, Donaldson, & Horther, 1924) in the 1980s and "Shakin' the Blues Away" (Irving Berlin, 1927) in the 1990s, but most often the comedy dance was a break within a hat-and-cane juggling routine performed to a ragtime version of Antonin Dvorak's "Humoresque" (1894) or George Hamilton Green's "Log Cabin Blues" (1924).

In a vaudeville theatre extravaganza I was enlisted to produce in 1981, I engaged as one of the acts the superb jazz tap ensemble, "Toe Jammin'," directed by Dorothy Anderson Wasserman. I was also the MC, and in every show, for 20 seconds at the start of their piece, I vamped along with them, then got offstage via my rubber-legged shuffle before I was thoroughly outclassed. A few years later Dorothy was the choreographer (and Shim Sham dancer) for the movie *Tap*, with Gregory Hines.



Unfortunately I have no photos of **Sammy Lyman** from his days hanging out with the jugglers at the Marblehead Park & Rec Department. Nor do I have photos of Sammy as "Stripe-O," the tap-dancing product. While I can conjure up my memories of Sammy at will – his checkered jackets, his fabulous dance moves, his corny jokes, and certainly his ready supply of day-old rolls – readers are left to use their imaginations. Perhaps the above graphic will help.

Just a few months later in 1981, we were surprised to find that we were on the entertainment lineup with Ray Bolger at a giant convention. He was still kicking high at age 77. Needless to say, my dance routines were under wraps at this engagement.

On national tours of the *Riverboat Ragtime Revue*, I had to strut my stuff night-after-night before discriminating theatre-goers, dancing a solo in a George M. Cohan medley. Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly need not fear for their reputations.

Showbusiness is known for its ego-inflating rave reviews and its superlative-laden, head-swelling compliments. It's important to learn early-on not to take this stuff seriously. Some of the most outlandishly flattering compliments I have received are those that compare my movement, dance, or physical comedy with that of Ray Bolger or John Cleese. I protest, even though the validity of the comparison is not for me to judge. But I can say that if it were not for the encouragement of Sammy Lyman, I would not even be included in the discussion. Thanks, Sammy! ■



Comic dancer
R.W. Bacon
30 years later:
Same jacket.
Same shoes.
Same moves.
Less hair.



Comic dancer
R.W. Bacon
shows off
a selection
of moves inspired
by "old-time Sammy"
in the late 1970s.
Check out those two-tone
wing-tips ... and that
thick mop of 70s hair ...