



Norma Miller and Frankie Manning

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I want you to put me in the moment when you were young and your were sitting on the fire escape behind the Savoy...?

Norma: Yeah. Well, being influenced by hearing music all night long, it's... You know, the windows was wide open and so, the music can come out blast right into our living room, 'cause every night we heard this marvelous music. And, in those days, in the summer, the fire escape was where you sat to be cool; there was no air conditioning, nowhere. So, by sitting on a fire escape and our fire escape faced the back windows of The Savoy Ballroom, and you ever see shadows in the shadows when people dance past the, the windows, we couldn't see the actual outline, but you can see figures dancing to that music. And we used to respond, my sister and I would respond to what we saw in the windows of the Savoy and we would get into the living room and dance to some of the best bands in the world. And that's actually how we started being connected to The Savoy Ballroom, 'cause every night, the bands played and every night it came into our living room.

How'd that music make you feel?

Norma: Aw!! It was the greatest; it was the influx of great jazz, great swing. And it was something that you can pat your feet to and even at that age, we could, you know, naturally, we can swing to the music anyway. And when we were kids, you know how kids dance in the street today open armed? Well, we did it up and down Lenox Avenue, so we used to dance outside on Lenox Avenue in the street. We used to get chased from in front that Ballroom all the time. But we were the kids from a Hundred Fortieth Street and we used to dance to the music in the afternoon, and it, every night our living room was filled with the band music of the Savoy Ballroom. And that was my connection directly to the Savoy.

Now, Frankie, describe for me how you first connected with this music and with the idea of dancing to it...?

Frankie: My mother used to tell me that , my mother was a party lady, understand, so she used to let, like to go to dances and parties and things with her friends, and she told me that when she was carrying me that, whenever she would go to these parties, and we would listen to the music, it seems like when I was inside of her that I would respond to that by kicking, you know, and she says at that particular time I must have had a pretty rhythmic kick, you know? So, and she says that when I was born, like I was born silent, you know, you know how the doctors hold you upside down and slap you? You know, and she says well, when the doctor slapped me and I started crying like I was crying like: Uh-h-h... uh, uh, you know (laughs), so I guess I was just kind of born you know, with, with the rhythm, so, and I think that's how I, I became connected with it because we used to live... I was born in Jacksonville, Florida, and we used to live across the river from one these Baptist churches, and we used to sit on our porch, like on Sundays and we'd hear the preacher across the river, preaching and we could hear the sisters and the brothers shouting and carrying on and we, as kids, we would get out in the yard, in the front yard, and pretend that we were in church and doing that same shouting and going on, you know, and, and I think that kind of rhythm kind of, kind of stuck with me from then on.

Now you're inside the Savoy Ballroom; take us in there and tell us what it was like...?

Norma: Well, precisely it was Easter Sunday, 12 years old, and Easter Sunday, you know in those days, you always had the little new outfit to go out to church. 4 o'clock, there's a matinee going to be at the Savoy Ballroom. I hurry up to church and after church I dash up to the to Lenox Avenue, because Lenox Avenue, you had the Easter parade. I mean the people that went into the Savoy were shocked. And we used to just stand outside to watch them when, that's what I was doing and we, and the music starts at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and as kids we were all outside watching it. We started dancing outside the Savoy Ballroom and I heard somebody say to me, "Hey kid!" And I turned a round and he was, he say, "You, you." 'Cause, and then I turned around and recognized immediately who it was. It was the great Twist Mouth George in a white hat, white suit, white everything. Asking me to come up to the Ballroom to dance with him. And he said, "Would you come and dance?" I say, "Would I?!?" Anyway, he got permission for me and everything, and then, eventually he grabbed me, we dashed up the stairs. And it's the first time I ever saw the inside, when the doors open and you go up these stairs and I don't know whether I hit each step, but I, 'cause he had such long legs. And I remember just flying up those stairs with him and you go through these doors and the music, now you hear the music actually from... I've always heard it outside; now I'm hearing the music inside. And I think it was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen in my life, the reds and the greens and the blues. And you turned around from the door, and that

was the first time I ever saw a band on a bandstand. I mean, I'd been seeing the shadows and he... I'm so excited. He took me over there in the corner and sat me down and brought me a coke and said, "You sit here, and I'll come and get you." And, oh, I was just flabbergasted because I'd never seen beautiful people in my life. The most best-dressed women, the best-dressed guys and the ballroom was filling up 'cause it was matinee. The dance don't start till night. And this was just a special exhibition, and I guess the reason why he called, he wanted to have something different to dance, 'cause he was the renowned dancer in the ballroom. I'm dancing with the greatest dancer in the world. So the exhibition went down and finally, it was his turn, for Twist Mouth George to come. And he came and got me and I'm in the corner. I'll never forget that, and he said, "Let's go." And they hit that music, all I know is I did everything he just, he just threw me out... My feet never touched the ground. 'Cause I was only 12 years old. And he could just lift me. It but the people were screaming and he put me on top of his shoulders, walked me around the Ballroom and the people is clapping and talking about Twist Mouth and he took me right around to the front, right outside, and put me back outside... (laughs) Greatest moment in my life and I'm excited, excited and I'm going to go home and tell my mother and my sister and then I said, "No, I better not say nothin' about this to anyone." And that's why the story's in the book, but no, my family never knew that happened when I was 12 years old, and that was my first time going into the Savoy Ballroom. I was 12 years old.

Fantastic.

It was a great moment.

Over to Frankie... tell me what you felt the first time you went into the Savoy...?

Frankie: Well, I would have different picture as Norma ... 'cause I didn't live on the back of the Savoy. Well, but I always knew about the Savoy Ballroom because I used to go to the Outhammer Ballroom, and I went to the Renaissance Ballroom. And there was a group of us, were friends that we were always together and we always went to dances together and our one ambition was to go to the Savoy Ballroom, you know. So we say, "Well, OK. Let's go to the Savoy Ballroom, but we can't go alone. Because if you go by yourself, nobody's going to dance with you." So, we were, we went up there as a group. And I remember it was 6 of us. And we're walking up these steps, and as we're climbing up the steps, I could hear this music coming down. You know, and as the music is coming down the stairway, stairwell, we're walking up there and we started, "Oh man! You hear that music? Wow!!" And we walked through the door. We opened the door and we turned round. As you come up the steps, when you come through the doors, your back is to the bandstand. So, you turn around the stairwell, and then you face the band. And as I turn around and face this, the floor was full with people. And it looked like everyone on the floor was doing the Lindy Hop. I

don't say that they were, but that's the way it seemed to me, like everybody was just bouncing up and down and the music was romping and stomping and we were, we started, "Man!" We started looking at each other, "Hey, man, you hear this music! Look at all these people in this place dancing and jumpin'!" And the floor was, oh. Looked like the floor was getting into the mood of dance, 'cause the floor was just bouncing up and down, you know, and the people were bouncing up and down and Chick Webb was on the bandstand, whalin', you know. And we say, "Hey man, let's walk ..." So we walked out on the floor, and we say, "Wait a minute, man. These cats are dancin'. Better not step on the... Then we walked over to the bandstand and Chick Webb was swinging out there, and we said, "Oh, man.... I have never seen anything or heard anything like this." Although we'd been to all the other ballrooms in Harlem, this was our first time in the Savoy, and it was such a wonderful moment in my life, to go in the Savoy and listen to the band swinging and watch those people dancing out there and we walked over to one corner and there was like a circle, you know, people had formed a circle and were some dancers was dancing in the circle, you know, and we were watching those, those guys dancing and we looked at each other, say, "Man, we can't dance over here (laughs), 'cause these guys are too good. We better go down the other side where..." Now, in the Savoy Ballroom, I'd like to explain to you. Savoy Ballroom had 2 bandstands side by side, and they would have, like, on the northern side of the ballroom, the northern side, a bandstand was the number one band, which was Chick Webb's band. And on the other side, with the south side bandstand, was Teddy Hill's band. Now, these are 2 big jazz bands. They had 13 pieces. Each band had 13 pieces, and what, what would happen is that Chick Webb would be playing, you know? And when it's come time for his break, he'd be playing this song, Teddy Hill's band is coming on to the stage. They would sit down on the stage and they would pick up the music where Chick Webb was playing. So, now you got 2 bands playing at the same time, and then, Chick Webb's band would kind of fade out and Teddy Hill's band pick up. And then, everybody'd start dancing temp, so it was continuous music. And, I had never... Boy, it was just such a wonderful time in, in our life, you know, to come up there, you know, as youngsters and, and be exposed to this kind of music. Oh, wow!

OK. Question for both of you... this feeling of ownership of the music, tell us when the dance floor first became integrated...?

Norma: Well, we say, jokingly, that it's a black thing, but that is really the way we definitely felt. We felt it really was a Black dance that had come from Black heritage. But the most amazing thing about the Ballroom was 1926, you, we lived in a very segregated country. It was the first building in America, ever in the world, that opened its doors completely integrated. At the time we didn't understand that. See, the whole time of the years of our dancing Black and white dance together in the Ballroom. It never dawned on us, at least not on me, that there was situation about Black and white, 'cause we always had white competitions. We knew we couldn't go outside our

ballroom, we couldn't go to the Roseland. People in the Roseland can come to our ballroom. So it was normal thing for us, any night, new, in, of the week you would see some of the great white stars come into the Ballroom, all kinds of white musicians. I saw Leopold Stokowsky in, in the Savoy Ballroom. Everybody came to the ballroom, so I was raised in an integrated dance world. I didn't know about the other until I went outside the Ballroom. So, my first experience as far as dancing was concerned, was always integrated, you know.

Frankie: Yeah, well, I kind of agree with Norma. Well, I'll tell you, when I was going to the Savoy, I wasn't realizing that white people and Black people were going there. All I could think about was dancers were going to the Savoy Ballroom.

Norma: Right.

Frankie: And whether you were black, green, yellow, or what. If you walked in the Savoy, the only thing we wanted to know is can you dance? And if you came in there, it wasn't like a white person walking in, and everybody turn around and look at them. You know. It was..., we come in there, and we see "Hey, he can dance! Right! OK." You know. But we didn't look up at his face to say he's black, green, yellow or what. And, and again, yes, we did look upon that music as, as ours, because outside of that, we didn't go any place else. I, I remember one incident, though, where Fletcher Henderson's band, a Black band, was playing at the Roseland Ballroom. And because it was a Black band that was playing at the Roseland Ballroom, a bunch of us said, "Well, let's go down to the Roseland Ballroom to see Fletcher Henderson." The Roseland Ballroom was on Broadway at that particular time, so we all went down there as a group. We got to the door and the guy said, "Well, you can't come in here. You know?" And we said, "Well, why not?" And all he said was, "You can't come in here, you know?" So we got very indignant, said, "Well, we don't have to come in here. We can go back to the Savoy." You know, so we felt like, "OK. This is ours. Ours. Our place is better than yours anyway." You know. One of those things like that. Oh, as I said, we got indignant then, you know, and, and it wasn't like, "OK. Let's picket the place." You know, we didn't feel like that. We just felt like, OK, we'd go back to the Savoy Ballroom. We can dance all we want to without anybody having to say anything about whether I was dancing with a white person, a Black person, a green person, or what. So we just got up there and danced with anybody we wanted to and the people just mixed, and, and it was place also like celebrities would come into the Savoy Ballroom. And they came there because they knew they could not, they would not be bothered. We never walked over to them and say, "Can I have your autograph?" And crowd around, "Hey man, there's Clark Gable. There's Marlene Deitrich. That's..." you know. It wasn't that. Only thing we know, hey, they can't dance so, we don't worry about them. Let them sit there and watch us dance, you know. So that was, that was the whole thing. I mean, was, was nothing like a... I mean, I didn't think about it.

OK. Frankie... let's move to the dancing, OK. Now, some people don't know what's meant by the Lindy Hop...?

Frankie: Well, the Lindy hop - OK, I'll tell, I'll give the, the story, as far as I know about the Lindy hop got its name. And this story comes from Shorty Snowden, who we call the father of Lindy Hopping because he named it. Now, Shorty Snowden's story is that he was dancing in a marathon. And they, and back in those days, they had this marathon at a lot of ballrooms, you know. So this one ballroom at the moment... Do you remember the name of that ballroom, Norma? Ah, Manhattan. Manhattan Casino.

Norma: I only knew one ballroom. See, I didn't go to any of those others, yet.

Frankie: OK. So, it was Manhattan Casino that the marathon was going on and Shorty Snowden was dancing there. Now, in the nighttime, a lot of people would come there and you know, watch the dancers dance, and so, at night, the dancers would, you know, they would put on a little show because people would throw their money. So, Shorty Snowden was putting on his little show, you know, dancing steps that he'd do at the Savoy Ballroom. And a reporter came over to him and said, "Hey, Shorty, what are you doing?" So, Shorty Snowden's story is that it was a couple of days after Lindbergh flew the Atlantic Ocean and the headlines in the paper read, "Lindy Hops The Atlantic." So, when the reporter asked Shorty Snowden, "What's that you're doing?" He thought of that headline, he says, "Oh. I'm doing the Lindy Hop." You know? But it's the same thing we were doing, a dance called the breakaway, which was the same thing that Shorty Snowden was doing, but he was at, I mean Shorty Snowden was one of the great, I mean, Shorty Snowden and Twist Mouth George, they were 2 of the greatest Lindy Hoppers, you know, like at the Savoy. So, that is how the Lindy Hop got its name. Now Lindy Hop, itself, is done to swing music. And, if you know what a swing is, it's very smooth and it flows, so Lindy Hop flows along with this music. When all, when this, when Chick Webb and, and Fletcher Henderson and all these guys came out with swing music, Lindy Hopping just, just melted right in with that. Before that, you were doing like the Charleston, you know, that ...Dom-dom-dom, you know, and the music was being played that way. So, when they started playing swing music, it was like... Yom-dom, yom-buh..., you know, so it just swung, so you just started to, the dance just started to evolve with that swing music. So there you have the Lindy Hop.

Norma: Right. The evolution of the dance was because up at, it, dancing is, is amazing. Dancing follows music. When you had ragtime, you had the jerky, jerky, jerky kind of style because the dancing followed the jerky, jerky thing. As the music progressed, you remember musicians played heads. Musicians didn't read music in those days. That's what made the extraordinary thing about, gave you such great individual artists. So, when Fletcher Henderson

began putting the pen to the paper, and making the trumpets blend with the saxophones...

Frankie: Yes.

Norma: .. and the trombones, that began...

Frankie ... then the responses...

Frankie: That's right. That began, the, the phrasing of how the music began to sound, to swing. And that became... musicians began playing together in harmony, and Fletcher Henderson is the father of that music and..

Frankie: Yeah, and also, also they had like these big tubas that uh... boom...

Norma: The tuba was a rhythm section originally, but, in the parades...

Frankie: Yes, and then they took that out...

Norma: Correct.

Frankie: And then they had bass.

Norma: And wasn't the guitar. When was the guitar added?

Frankie: The guitar, they would play the banjo before that,

Norma: Right.

Frankie: Then they came out with the guitar.

Norma: Right.

Frankie: And then that's when the music smoothed out...

Norma: Started smoothing out. Right.

Frankie: And that's when the swing, when you started to swinging.

Norma: And it all happened at the Savoy...

Frankie: And dance started swinging right along.

Norma: Right.

Frankie: With the music.

Norma: Right. Right. And everybody came to dance. Swing has a marvelous thing of bringing people together.

Frankie: Oh. You said it.

Norma: Ah, you know, it...

Frankie: It does. It brought, it brought you and I together. (Laughs)

Norma: We, we had white dancers in the Savoy Ballroom.

Frankie: Oh, yeah. Lindy Hop...

Norma: And I'm telling you they were good.

Frankie: Oh, man, were they ever.

Norma: They were so good that you wanted to hit 'em.

(Laughter)

Norma: But see, that was such an American thing. You saw, we had Italian boys that used to come from the Bronx. You had the Jewish boys that come from Brooklyn, and this melting pot...

Frankie: Oh, man...

Norma: . . .of everybody trying to outdance each other. We didn't know how rich we were in relationships but 50 years ago, when we look back, we realize we had a wonderful thing going with all races and that's what made the Savoy so, such a wonderful place...

Frankie: Wonderful place...

Norma: ... to be, right.

Frankie: And an extraordinary place.

Norma: That's why I don't go to the Roseland today. I'm still mad at 'em 'cause they wouldn't let us in there.

(Laughter)

Norma: I can't go into the Roseland. I swear it, Frankie.

(Laughter)

Norma: I get mad every time I look at it, you know?

Well, talk to me, both of you, about learning this dance and infusing it with your creativity...?

Frankie: If you can remember that, that was the, the early time of the dance.

Norma: Right.

Frankie: So, it was a time for creativity.

Norma: Yes.

Frankie: A time for, you know, improvisation, and everything, so, whenever you got out on the floor, and you did something, I mean, it, it'd be something that somebody else hasn't did yet, you know. Somebody say, "Hey man, that was great step! Show it to me.", you know, and you say, "What step?", you know? And say, "Well, you just, just something with your feet, you know?"

Norma: Right.

Frankie: Well, what was that...?

Norma: We had a lot of blending together, there's no question about...

Frankie: Right and so... And, and the reason why you found out that, OK, this is a step that can be done over and over again is because somebody saw you do it. You know, because you get out on the floor and you start improvising and you do, you know, you started doing a lot of little footwork and stuff. And, and you lose it. Unless somebody come to you and say, "Hey, man. You did a step, that was fine, you know?" And say, "Oh, yeah, man, it went like this. Yeah." Boom. So, after a while, that's step, this guy learns it, and somebody say, "Hey! Where'd you get that step?" "Oh, I got it from Frankie." "Show it to me." Then that picks up, you know, it just, from one person to the other, so we just start giving and sharing. You know?

Norma: And then we'd danced every night. You know, this was...

All right. Very good. Fantastic.

Frankie: It was at the Lafayette Theater, and my girlfriend and I, you know, we....

Norma: Yes, yes.

Frankie: Schoolkids, you know, so, you know, all our, all the kids around, they said, "Well, Frankie, why, why don't you and Julia go in a contest?" I'd say, "Oh, man, we ain't good enough." You know? And they just kept egging

us on so we said, Julia said, "Yeah. Let's try it." So we went a the Lafayette Theater and we dancing in this contest. And we get out there on the floor, you know, we're doing little things that we, that we thought was great, but..

Norma laughing

Frankie: ... crowd start booing (laughs) you know what I mean?

Frankie: And this guy comes up with this big book, you know, and he's trying to drag us off, and I'm still trying to, I'm still trying...

Norma: Well, all kind, everywhere. That's what, that's what it, you know, you just, you always was competing with someone in those days, you know...

And winning usually.

Norma: Yeah well, we always tried to win. We did anything to win. We did every trick, we pulled every trick in the book to win the contests.

Well, I'd like you to tell me how you would do every trick in the book.

Norma: Oh, honey, we pulled...

I want to hear...

Frankie: Let's hear you tell your tricks.

Norma: Well, we pulled everything the contests.

OK. Give me a couple of little examples?

Norma: Yeah, yeah. Right, right, right. You did everything to get that ten dollars.

That's what I want to hear.

Norma: Today, a first prize winner gets fifteen hundred.

OK.

Oooo!

So, we're still on the Lindy hop.

We want to know too how you actually danced together.

Norma: How we competed? The competition years?

How the two of you, you related to one another as a couple and created the dancing that you did....?

Frankie: OK. That, that will have to be individual. Because we were never partners.

Fine. All of a sudden, the Lindy Hop is the national obsession.

Norma: Right. Correct.

Tell me what you guys had to do to win these contests.

Norma: OK.

Any one. Take it.

N: Oh, now?

Yeah.

Norma: Oh, well...

Frankie: You're on.

Norma: Well, the whole thing, during the contestant years, all of a sudden, s..., and with me, in particularly, I, you, I used to go to the Renaissance Ballroom, and Sonny Ashby and I were high school kids and we were considered at that time, at, at the ballroom, at the Renaissance, we were the best dancers in the, in the Renaissance. Now, they were getting ready to have a contest at the Apollo Theater. So, one of our kids asked us, "Look, why don't you and Sonny go in that contest?" Now, Sonny and I are teenagers, and so, we signed up at the Apollo Theater for a contest that was the first Black and white contest at the Apollo Theater. Ralph Cooper started this at the Apollo Theater, 'cause Thursday night was a dead night at the Apollo. So, somebody came up with the idea, Let's have the Lindy Hop contest on the Thursday night. So, they brought 4 teams from the Roseland, 4 teams from the Savoy, to dance in a contest that was going to s..., and opened Apollo Theater Lindy Hop contest. Now, these 4 dancers that was from the Savoy Ballroom were the standard dancers, you know, Freddie and Madeline was one of the teams. Lenny Kepp was the team from the, from the Roseland Ballroom. Now, I didn't know Whitey, you understand? Now, Whitey had something with the teams that he was bringing down, his 4 teams, 'cause they were going to win first, second pri..., third prize, you know, that's what it was all about. But now, Sonny and I are the fourth team of the 4 Black teams from Harlem. For some reason, they put us on this bill, so they had 3 teams from the Savoy and the kid team from the ..., from the Ballroom, so naturally with the contest, being kids, we won. And because we won and took first prize, the next morning, somebody knocked on my door

and a man at my door was called 'Whitey.' And told me I had taken away their first prize. Anyway, the story led to the Black that he invited me to come to the Ballroom and that was my first encounter with Herbert White, 'Whitey,' who organized the Lindy Hoppers that became the Great Whitey's Lindy Hoppers.

Let me talk to you individually about relating to each other as a dance couple...? What did you guys have to do? Practice...?

Frankie: OK. What we did, we would go to the Savoy Ballroom in the daytime and we would practice. We had a victrola, you know those wind-up things, and we put a record on and we would get out there and we would dance and we would do steps and different things like that. And whatever we practiced in the day we would go to the Savoy and do it at night. So those steps were passed on to people other than ourselves. Every, after we practiced them all day long. You say, "Well, OK. Here's a step; let's do this step." So we would dance, dance, dance and maybe Norma was dancing with George or somebody, and I'm dancing with Ann or someone like that and I see a step that, that Norma was doing. I say, "Hey, Norma, show me that step." So, Norma would show me that step and I'd say, "OK. Let's do it tonight." So we would come in the Savoy Ballroom and this circle that I mentioned at the beginning, now we're in the circle. So we would get out in the middle of this circle and do these steps that we had practiced all day long. So, maybe Norma would do the step a little better than me, or maybe I would do it a little better than her. But, it was the same step. So, somebody else'd see it and say, "Oh, wow, that's a great step, man, show it to me." So, somebody else would get out of the circle and try that same step. But, the idea of... We, we would dance with, I mean, anyone in our circle, you know, like Norma had, a, a special partner that she danced with. But when we go out social dancing, I would pick up Norma, I'd say, "Come on, Norma. Let's dance tonight." And we'd get out on the floor and we would just dance, but she would know steps that I already know, and she, and I know steps that she knows, so we would do those steps ..?.. So, maybe Norma and I, we looked good, you know, to somebody and maybe we didn't look so good, you know, but we were dancing the way we felt like dancing. Because it was all social dancing.

Norma, you have something you want to add?

Norma: Well, yeah, well, it, it, almost like what he, he was saying. But see, we, in that corner, the man that was beginning to organize us without us even realizing we were being organized was Whitey. Whitey saw something in all of us because we were the second wave of dancers to come into the Ballroom. The other guys were guys who was Whitey's peers, so he couldn't dictate to them. So what he did, he wanted to get young dancers. How he found Frankie, he found Frankie in the Ballroom, he found me at a theater. But he brought us in to where we would meet every day in that ballroom. And out of that became of organizing dancing so that we could compete in

the contests. That's what it originally started, because our first encounter with Whitey for a big contest was when we had the first Harvest Moon Ball.

Frankie: Yeah.

Norma: You know, that was when we began being the first team, but we were still individuals.

Frankie: Yeah.

Norma: We were always trying to, when Frankie would get up to be with his dancing partner, well, me and my dancing partner, first thing, everybody tried to shoot at Frankie because Frankie was just the best dancer. I mean, he'd represent what the dance look like. You know what I mean? In every sense of the word, so everybody shot at Frankie. See, whatever the competition was, you wanted to be better than Frankie. Even though Frankie didn't always win the first prize, it wasn't because he wasn't the best dancer, it was just the fact that all dancers whoever they were, Harry Rosenberg, whatnot, they always tried to cut Frankie's off at the knees and of course, we too, because, I mean, when we'd get out there, we'd do a step and, you know, George and I one time took and he cut his coat, wait a minute, and pinned it so when he fell, I'd take the coat and pull it and it would rip off.

Frankie: Rip apart, yeah.

Norma: So, anything to get a first prize.

Frankie: Yeah, so, like you were asking me before about what you would do to win a prize and she'd just put like Harry Rosenberg which brings me to a point, you know, where she was speaking about Black and white contests. Harry Rosenberg was a dancer that danced, trained with us at the Savoy Ballroom and he was a white dancer. But he was one of the best. And I don't mean he was one of the best white dancers, he was one of the best dancers.

Norma: That's right.

Frankie: In the Savoy. And there was this Black and white contest that was being held like Norma was, was talking about and he won and Harry won the contest for the, for the whites and I won the contest for the Blacks. Now Harry and I appeared at the Apollo theater to dance this off, right? So now, Harry and I, we practiced together at the Savoy and so I, I taught him, you know, a lot of stuff that I know, you know, and he said, "Yeah, man." So we get in this contest and when they, Harry, Ralph Cooper was the MC and the audience was always the judges so he would put his hand over my head, you know, and we got, I got big applause to put it over Harry, he got big applause so it was a tie. So we had to dance it off. And I would go out there and I'd do a step and I'd come off and Harry'd go up behind, he'd do the same step, you know. And he'd come back, and we'd come back he'd put his

hand over, it was another tie, so I had started to do in slow motion. So when I went out there to dance against Harry, the third time, I started dancing, I was swinging out, you know, real fast then be-um, I would stop all of a sudden and I would go into these slow motion moves, you know, and well, before, before I went into the slow motion move, I'd turn my partner, I jumped over my partner's head and turn around and I fell off the stage, you know, adding a little something to it, you know. And then I got back up, started climbing back up on the stage, you know, real slowly, and my partner would say, "OooooHah" you know, and she was grabbing for me to help me up, you know, and she'd pull me up, you know, and I would come up very slowly and we would do it slow motion, you know, and all, and then the music was still playing, the music is, you know, and so I got back up and I start swinging out again and the house just fell in. So we went off, we come back, I got the prize, I won the first prize. So we got off stage, Harry say, "Frankie, you didn't show me that." So I said, "Harry, I got to keep something to myself." So that was how I beat Harry, you know, because I said, well I got to do something to beat this guy.

Okay let's turn to Norma. Tell me about Chick Webb and his music.

Norma: He was the king of swing. He had, Chick Webb didn't die, Benny Goodman would have never been king of swing. Me and John Hammond argue about this all the time. Now what do you say.

Frankie: I say the same thing.

Norma: Chick Webb was the king up here. He was the king. And of course everybody shot at him and John Hammond brought, and that's what led John Hammond to bring Benny Goodman into the ballroom and had the greatest battle of the bands in 1938 in the Savoy ballroom. We had as many people outside the ballroom as was inside the ballroom.

Frankie: That's right.

Norma: I mean, and that was the night that Gene Krupa went up against Chick Webb.

Frankie: The great Chick Webb. And Gene Krupa dropped his drums.

Norma: John Hammond, you know, John Hammond says that Benny Goodman, I said, "Wait a minute," He says, "Because you got to have that down stomp, stomp, beat." He said, "Chick Webb played too fast." I said, "The reason why he played fast was that was how he got rid of y'all." He goes, "He was going to kick Gene Krupa all the way back downtown." And, and Chick Webb did not take no, he was the feistiest, testiest and that's how he played those drums. He was the mightiest guy, he made Harlem. He made the Savoy.

Frankie: But not only that, Chick Webb would play for us. He played for the dances. And we had this wonderful communication between the dancer and the band. And you know, like Chick, we, we would get out on the floor and we'd be dancing and you know, Chick Webb would focus on, oh, he'd see somebody out there dancing and they'd be doing this step and he would catch it. Boom, bluump, bluump bluump. You know, and he would catch what we were doing and we were kinda, anyway he'd catch what I'm doing and he'd say, "Yeah." And so we would, we would try to do things to trick him and he was playing back at us and he would, "Oh, you ain't going to trick me, man, no, I got you." You know. And he would play to us and also the musicians in his band was the same way. That wonderful Taft Jordan.

Norma: Taft Jordan

Frankie: Louis Jordan. I mean Louis used to play with Chick Webb at the time. Where Taft would be playing a solo, you know and we'd be out there dancing and he would play a solo to what we're dancing, the way that we are dancing and we'd pick up on the solo that he's playing and we would respond to that solo by doing little rhythmic steps with the music that he was playing. So the band played for the dances.

Norma: Do you know when foreigners landed in this country and learned two words of English, they learned where, where Harlem was and where was the Savoy Ballroom.

Right.

Norma: We were the entertainment capital of the world. At, at nighttime Harlem was the most dazzling place you ever saw, you talking about, you know, ermines and furs. You know, the "Lady is a Tramp" and all that.

Tell me.

Norma: I've got a picture of Orson Wells coming into the Savoy ballroom with Dolores Del Rio and... And I mean he's walking like he's walking to music, you know.

We're talking about all of the bands and tell me why Harlem was so special and all the bands.

Norma: Came to, came to, came to Harlem. Every, well, I think it was, it was every band's dream to play the Savoy. I mean it was what was the ultimate of coming, I imagine when the, when the, when bands are on the road and everything and now you're going to come to New York. Nothing in America compared to coming to the Savoy. I heard directly from Count Basie, when Basie came to, to Harlem for the first time and he was at the Woodside and these are his words, when he walked down 140th Street from 7th Avenue. And he walked and saw Lenox Avenue and he saw his name on the Marquis

and this was his ambition to play the Savoy Ballroom, this was the great Count Basie. But we didn't know Basie then. Not to what he had become. He was the incoming band out of, he was bringing the blues, swinging the blues out of Kansas City and that was the first time we had heard the music come from that direction. And that one particular time, I remember th, Basie himself said that was the greatest moment in the world when he saw his name at the Savoy Ballroom. That was the ultimate to play the ballroom. And every band had that desire.

Talk to me about the respect that all bands were accorded.

Frankie: Well, Goodman.

Norma: He was there that night.

Frankie: Well Goodman was a giant because they called him the king of swing at that time. And we all knew, we bought records, I mean and any band that played swing, we would buy their records.

Norma: Buy their records.

Frankie: So we knew, we knew about Benny Goodman. But the night that Benny Goodman came to play against Chick Webb.

Norma: 1938

Frankie: This was an electrical night, this was, I mean, with all Harlem being around the Savoy Ballroom. Here's Benny Goodman, the king of swing and here's

Norma: Chick Webb, the king of swing.

Frankie: The king of swing, you know as far as we are concerned, you know, there's Chick Webb going up against Benny Goodman, now I don't know, a lot of people may not realize that a lot of arrangements that Benny Goodman had, Chick Webb had the same arrangements and when they get on a bandstand, now this is when you can know which band is the best, by listening to them play the same arrangement. And to me, Chick Webb out swung Benny Goodman.

Norma: I say the same thing, yeah.

Frankie: That was my feeling

Norma: John Hammond disputed me but

Frankie: I'm not saying this because

Norma: Not being prejudiced

Frankie: Yeah, because it's Chick Webb. Or because I'm being prejudiced. But to me, I feel that Chick Webb outswung Benny Goodman that night, you know, because I saw guys on Benny Goodman's band, bandstand when Chick Webb was playing. I seen guys on there, they'd stand up there and say, they just shook their heads.

Norma: That's about musicians though, they admired each other.

Frankie: You know, they'd turn away and say, "Man, you know." I mean and but a lot of other bands also played at the Savoy Ballroom. I remember the night that Jimmy Dorsey's band came to the Savoy Ballroom and was playing against Benny Carter. Now, Jimmy Dorsey at the time was supposed to be the king of the alto saxophone. Jimmy Dorsey came on the bandstand; he played the first set. And he played his alto sax. Benny Carter came on behind him and he played his alto sax. After that, Jimmy Dorsey did not play his alto sax, no more that night. Because Benny Carter blew him out of the place. Blew him out of the joint. And there was another night that Count Basie and Chick Webb was playing. Now this is the night where even the Lindyhoppers were invited because a lot of us liked Count Basie and a lot of them liked Chick Webb, you know and we were saying, "Okay you Chick Webb guys, Count Basie boys going to blow you out." You know, so we would dance to, you know, like say, "Okay, you dance to Chick Webb. We'll dance to Count Basie." You know, one of those things like that and now Norma has a story about what happened that night, too.

Norma: Well, we used to hang in the ballroom in the daytime. Snookie, you know, was the one that had all the records. Snicker came, used to come in and say, "Listen you're going to hear. . . this is the band that's going to be da da da da." Talking about this band is coming you got to hear this band. See, I never bought records. Frankie bought records. Snooky bought records. So Snooky was telling everybody about this Count Basie band. And he said, man, he going to blow Chick Webb out of the cellar. And talking, kids just ranting in the . . . evidently Joe Saunders, Chick Webb's band boy related the story to Chick Webb and told Chick Webb what we said about him that Basie was going to, going to run him off the bandstand. And of course, naturally, Chick Webb being Chick Webb, he hit the ceiling and called us all kinds of names. But unfortunately, he happened to say, and Whitey was standing there when he talked about his Lindy Hoppers. And that set a fire to Whitey. If you said anything to his Lindy Hoppers, you got trouble in that ballroom. So that night as we were coming up, the word was passed down, we don't dance to Chick Webb's music. So that corner was empty when Chick Webb played the band and when Basie got on the bandstand.

Frankie: Everybody was on the floor.

Norma: And of course you know, there came Charlie Buchanan and everybody, so it was resolved. But that, Whitey showed the power that he could, that he had over any band who came in there and if you did anything to his Lindy Hoppers, you had to reckon with Whitey. And Whitey was one of those guys who was a tough street hustler and his dancers was his business. And he and he had that ability to make everybody respect him and he made people respect us out of that way

Frankie: So what happened is when that was resolved, then we started dancing to Chick Webb and, and, and Count Basie. But the, but the point was that Whitey showed his muscles. And so he said, "Without the dancers, Chick Webb, it doesn't mean anything."

What do you remember, how did it affect you, how did you feel?

Norma: Capiche. Yeah. Serious. That was serious time.

Tell me about Harlem in the 20s and 30s.

Norma: Well, Harlem was rich in culture, you know. Do you realize, all of our entertain, we could work in Harlem. We never even had to go out of Harlem to work because there were so many places you could work in Harlem. Here you had the Savoy Ballroom that featured bands. One block up the street was the Cotton Club which played the greatest stars in the world, course we couldn't go into the Cotton Club, but the Cotton Club was White patrons, Black shows. Another place where I used to listen to the music come out from, at that time I was living 142nd Street and we used to look and can see Duke Ellington playing the Cotton Club. I wasn't allowed to go in there. Then we had, up there on 7th Avenue, we had Connie's Inn, we had Small's Paradise. Our main drag in those days was 125th Street. We didn't go any further than 125th Street. I worked one whole year in Harlem, never had to go on the road. I played a year at Small's Paradise. So that was how much entertainment that you had in Harlem. And any night of the week in the Small's Paradise, you had Langston Hughes, Thurgood Marshall, all the great basketball players, everybody came to Small's Paradise because that was a part of that whole fabric of what made Harlem so special. Tallulah Bankhead and movie stars all used to hang into our clubs and we had the biggest all, you know, what they called the after hours spots.

Frankie: Yes.

Norma: I mean, we were, we had 145th Street, Johnny Walker's. We, we had after hours spots, we had Dickie Wall's great place, 133rd Street. So Harlem was a bed of all kinds of great excitement. Great entertainment. And we were part of the Savoy, but we weren't part of the club world because we couldn't go into clubs, you know, and things like that.

That's what made it special, what made it ordinary?

Norma: The daytime was ordinary. You understand? The daytime. You, there was, Harlem was for us in the daytime. At nighttime, the whole picture changed. You saw men coming into Harlem, you saw the limousines, you saw top hats and tails and capes and gorgeous gowns. Women came to Harlem like the Lady was a Tramp, that, you know, she wore her ermine's and furs and they wore them in Harlem. Nobody got mugged in those, I don't think nobody, too many people got mugged.

Did you have a take on this, Frankie?

Frankie: Well, well that's the same thing, you know, same thing that I experienced, like alot of musicians from the South. You, know, they say, "Well, I'm going to the Apple," and that was before New York was called The Big Apple.

Norma: Exactly.

Frankie: The musicians, because there were so many places, as Mamma was painted a picture, there's so many places for musicians to work that they wanted to, "Man, I gotta go to Harlem. I got to go to The Apple. I gotta, man, I can work there, you know." But it was not just musicians. My Mother came up here from the south because she could get a better job, she got a paying job, you know, and a lot of other people came from the South for that same reason. Because they had a better paying job, they could live better, I mean, although when I first came here, I, I saw these apartment buildings, and I said , "People living up on top of each other? How they do that?"

Norma: Really?

Frankie: Yeah. Because I came from a place where there was...

Norma: ...two stories.

Frankie: ...one story.

Ok, so now take to me to a time when dancing was not nearly as important to the music.

Norma: The Stone Age. Well, the Stone Age, I think musicians began to want people to sit down and listen to his, to their music. Particularly Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman. They wanted to do concert-style performances and they didn't want people to jump up and dance in front of them while they were playing their music. And I always had the idea, Frankie, that of all the bands, now you know, every band that came out of the Savoy Ballroom always took Lindy Hoppers with them. Benny Goodman never did. I always said, I thought, he just didn't like us. Because how could anybody dare go into the Paramount Theater, or someplace like that, and don't take Lindy Hoppers. He

never, he wanted people to listen to his music. Now, from what the story I get, when Benny Goodman was playing the Paramount Theater, and the kids got up and started dancing in the isles and everything, I understand that he was the one that said they looked like a bunch of jitterbugs. And I heard that was how the phrase got, 'cause we were Lindy Hoppers. We didn't get the jitterbug phrase until afterwards, when, 'til the white Bobbysockers did it at the Paramount Theater. And that's what's, I always had the idea he didn't want dancers with him. That's competition. Wherein Chick Webb never went out and didn't have Lindy Hoppers with him.

Frank, we're gonna talk about early 40s and how dance became less of a factor.

Frankie: Yeah, well, well, I, I would like to start by saying, I went into the army in like 1942, right? And when I went into the army, I was listening to bands like Glenn Miller, like Count Basie, Jimmy Lunsford, Cab Calloway, all those big bands. I was in the army for five years, I came out in 1947, and I come out of the army and I hear "blll, blll, ddd, ddd,...." and, and, I just could not get accustomed to that. I said, "Well what is this, what, I mean what's going on, you know? And I hear all this be-bop music. I work with Dizzy's band, I formed my own group called The Congerers. I worked with Dizzy's band in 1947, Dizzy Gillespie's band, in Washington, DC. We went on the stage, I gave him my music, "Jumping at the Woodside," Count Basie, and he's got this drummer up there, and he's giving me all this "chuck a bong pim, chick a pim" and I'm usually hear "chick a chu, chick a chu, chick a chu." And he's playing this stuff. When we finished the act and I come off, I said to Dizzy, now can I say these words? I said to Dizzy, "What theis this you doing, you know?" Dizzy just looked at me, you know, because I know Dizzy when he was a little kid playing with Teddy Hill's band. So, he just turned and walked away. Because he knew that I did not understand this music. We could not swing to this music. And the difference was, was so much. We tried to. I mean even at the Savoy they tried to dance to the music, but they started to getting a dance that they called a be-bop, which was staccato, I mean was almost like going back to the Charleston stuff. They're doing "chung, ung, ung..." and you see the kids up there doing this jerky kind of dance with the music. So, it was different from when I used to see, you know, kids out there on the floor swinging. So, I mean, it was, I just could not understand it. But I mean, eventually, I got to understand the music and I, of course, there was so many musicians coming along who was trying to play and they were not as good as people like, like Charlie and uh, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonius Monk and those guys like that. So some of these musicians did not play it that well. So, but it was not music for dancing. And that is the thing that I had been used to, music for dancing. So, it was a, a...

Norma: The Stone Age came in

Frankie: ... a heck of difference.

Norma: Right, it was. I used to be, you know why I call it the Stone Age, because Birdland took over. Now Birdland was a very small nightclub. With the musicians up on the stand, but the tables and chairs was right up to the bandstand. So therefore you were compelled to sit and listen to this music. Other than when Basie played Birdland, you didn't have no swing music in the Birdland. The guys who were the top guys in Birdland, which was the leading thing on Broadway in New York in those days was guys like Miles, and guys like Max Roach. And Max Roach never played for dances as far as I'm concerned. I've never been able to understand Max Roach playing, so consequently it was the era where our guys had all gone away to war. So our dance life had started changing and after they all, all of our dance partners was taken away from us, it made us go and divert into different directions, which made me go into another way. I did, I stopped dancing the Lindy Hop in 1942 and went on to producing shows and I'd, that was what I was doing at Small's Paradise, I produced shows there for a whole year. But I was still in Harlem. But the music was definitely beginning to change all the way around and the whole be-bop era was in the '40's and they took away the swing.

Frankie: And that was the thing, too, that it was saying, the Be-Bop music was not music for dancing.

Norma: It wasn't, it wasn't.

Frankie: It was music for listening.

Norma: For listening.

Frankie: So that that was the big change. From bands that were playing music for dancing and bands that started playing music for listening.

What I need to hear from both of you how did this change make you feel?

Frankie: Well, I, I was...

Norma: I just didn't like the music at all.

Frankie: Yeah, I was kind of devastated because I could not get the feel of the music to dance to it. Although in my act I did try, because the music was new and people were listening to it, I did try to build an act around, you know, be-bop music. As a matter of fact, I even wrote a tune, you know, to be-bop music, so that we could dance to it. "Buddy a don, buddy a don, buddy a don, don, unh, unh." See, this is something that I thought of and I choreographed a routine to that particular music. But it, to me, it just didn't, you know, didn't have the flow of the music that I had been used to listening to.

Norma: Well, you know...

Frankie: I kind of changed our, changed our lives.

Norma: But you know, a lot of influence, you know, that era of the late 40's, when I say is Stone Age, I mean exactly that. Dope came into the music world, heavily. See, prior to that, booze was the big thing for the, the extra entertainment for the musician.

Frankie: And whiskey.

Norma: The, exactly, what I said, booze. But here came this new dope that came into Harlem. I mean, it just come right in and sauntered in and it caught up, the musicians was caught up into this terrible bag. And you could go in any night and sit in there, and there they were, sitting stoned, just, "Man, dig, dig Miles. Dig..." and that's why I called it the Stone Age. Because nobody danced, nobody moved, everybody sat still and just listened. You didn't tap your feet. And that I missed I more than anything else in the world because I sat for the whole session with Thelonius Monk. I mean, I imagine he's the great Thelonius Monk, but so help me, I didn't know what he was playing. I didn't understand what he was playing and we had a lot of individuals who came into the Birdland era in those days, and it was a strange music to me and it was, I think, a lot of that had the influence of the dope that came in, 'cause the music came in that way. Everybody was flying, everybody was living in another world.

Frankie: I do want to say something about, I was speaking about Dizzy Gillespie band like in the '47. But like in the 50s, Dizzy did have a big band. He had a different drummer, Kenny Clark, who could swing and play bop. Ok, so what happened was that, although the musicians, what, and the music was written for be-bop, Kenny could give them a beat behind that music. So, so consequently Dizzy had a big band that really swung. It really swung modern jazz. Start to call it modern jazz. And he could really, the band really swung modern jazz.

Norma: What about the band that Billy Eckstein had? That he had all those great...

Frankie: ...well, he had all those great musicians.

Norma: Wasn't he another one that had that, he had all the great musicians in his band? Charlie Parker

Frankie: Charlie Parker,

Norma: Sarah Vaughan,

Frankie: Dean Amazin, Dizzy Gillespie...

Norma: Yeah. And that was when B was playing the valve trombone and he had what they called the modern, he, he was trying to do in the band with modern music and that was, but you didn't have it long, but his band was outstanding because of the individual musicians that was in his band.

Frankie: Yeah, well all of those, they came out of ..

Norma: ...became stars.

Frankie: Out of Billy Eckstein's band they became big stars..

Norma: Charlie Parker, all of them, yeah, yeah. And they all played for Bill, for Billy.

Norma: Again, it started in Harlem. Again, there was a big band playing up at the, up at Small's Paradise called the, the, Al Cop's band. Right. And we used to just go up there on Monday nights and just be, be dancing. And at the time, there was a group of kids who used to come up from downtown, that used to come to the, Small's Paradise and it was then began the resurgence, that's when I began writing the book.

How many years ago?

Norma: This was 1982.

Frankie: About 10, 13 years, about 10 years ago.

Norma: Exactly 14 years ago, see, 'cause it's 13 years Larry, Larry's son is 13 years, so it was the year before that. But that began, we wanted, kids used to all come to me and wanted to know all about the time Al had gotten sick. And they wanted to know all about the dancing. I was saying, "There's one man that can show you everything about this dance." And I said, I told this person who was, I says, "You gotta, you're talking about dancing and the greatest dancer in the world is here in New York, and you didn't know this man's name was Frankie Manning."

Frankie: Working in the Post Office.

Norma: Right, that's it, and he's working right, well, I said, "He's right here." And that was when I say, "Frankie, I want you to come up to so and so and so and so," and the rest is history. But he began teaching people what the Savoy dance was all about. He had that kind of patience. I've never had that kind of patience.

Norma: Here, all of a sudden, when we started going outside of this country the past 10 years, Frankie has been, had started out...

Norma: All of this was, basically what he has done, (clap) ten years work of Frankie.

Norma: Well, but Frankie came back to start teaching dancing, he hadn't been into this, he always did dance, you know, we, we never even went no further to, we know Frankie, I know Frankie, but when they started talking about Lindy Hop, I, now I said, "Wait a minute. There's only one person that can show you what we did." I mean alot of people can Lindy Hop. I'm talking about, I want a certain style. There's the one man who can do it and we got, we brought Frankie back, who began teaching. Frankie began going around the world teaching people how to dance. And all around the world today there's an explosion of jazz that was created here in Harlem 50 years ago. Today, we've got dancers who are recreating this in Sweden, London, Germany. He's going to Norway next week. They're dancing around the world, and they're dancing the Lindy Hop the way we created it. And the man that showed all these people how to do this was Frankie.

Why? Why is this music so infectious?

Norma: Because swing music is perfect. It's perfect for the body. It has coordination. I mean, you could swing 'til you're 90. Listen.

Frankie: And I'm almost 90.

Norma: He's right. Frankie's 83. I'm 78. And we're still dancing.

Frankie: Yeah, that's the swinging 78, let me tell you.

Norma: But I mean, you know, see it's no effort to dance. You ever tried anybody 40 years old trying to do a hip-hop or breakdancing. We all end up swinging. Anytime you got a little gray in your hair, when that music, you know that music, and you can get up. And today, now that they're reissuing the great Count Basie's things and things like that, people are dancing all over the world again. And it's marvelous, and that was the reason why I wrote my book *Swinging at the Savoy*, to let you know it all started here, right up here at the embryo. It's a Black thing, huh.

The End