Buster Brown

11 May 2002 • 12:02am

BUSTER BROWN, who has died in New York aged 89, was one of the last great black tap-dancers of the 1930s; his long career took him from extremely humble origins to a Professorship of Dance at Harvard University.

Brown was a fast, daringly musical dancer, who was taken up by the composer and bandleader Duke Ellington, won acclaim from Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, and inspired some of the finest young tap-dancers of today, helping to encourage a new flowering of modern tap. He could be seen dancing in the film Something to Shout About (1943) and in The Cotton Club (1984), Francis Ford Coppola's picture about the black tap club of the 1920s and 1930s.

Although tap-dance is traditionally thought of in Britain as a glamorous, bravura ballroom style typified by such white stars as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Hollywood stole it from the dusty Southern streets of the black vaudeville circuit, on which Brown was to become one of the outstanding soloists.

James Richard Brown was born in Baltimore on March 17 1913, an only son with seven sisters. Brought up entirely by his mother, he first intended to be a doctor, until at the age of 16 he saw an acrobatic boy named Pops Whitman dance at the local Royal Theatre with his aunts, the Whitman Sisters, a popular and influential tap act.

Tap was a highly competitive discipline, and Brown and his friends would copy steps they saw at the Royal, and attempt to improve them on the street next day. "We didn't take lessons - we'd learn from each other," he told The Telegraph during his last tour to London in 1992. In 1931, aged 18, Brown went on the road with a dancing trio in a show called the Brown Skin Models, which was "full of beautiful brown-skinned girls, or models, as we called them at that time," he later remembered.

A segregated circuit of more than 200 black vaudeville theatres around America featured a constant flow of such popular dance acts as the Four Step Brothers, the Nicholas Brothers and Brown's own group, the Three Speed Kings, an outfit which was quickly to become famous for a new up-tempo energy and what Brown described as "flash work down on the floor, with the crazy leg things".

However, race laws made rewards thin and conditions dreadful. Black performers were obliged to take segregated buses between theatre stops, permitted neither to stay in hotels nor buy food in shops. Brown told how food would be handed in to them

through the bus windows, and they had to find black families to put them up on the road.

These were typical conditions. The only black tap-dancer with "white" respectability was Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Brown's idol, who had danced in wooden clogs before the metal-toed shoe became common in 1910, and who was by this time a fixture in Hollywood, where he played the part of Shirley Temple's servant.

Brown's breakthrough came when he met the great jazz musician Duke Ellington, who asked the dancer to join his tours, which Brown considered the greatest honour of his life. With Ellington he performed for the tap-mad Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, who awarded Brown the Lion of Judah Coin.

Touring the world with Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie and Cab Calloway, Brown was in his forties before he finally reached tap's citadel, Harlem, New York, but public taste was changing towards jazz and ballet.

By this time, Hollywood and Broadway musicals had romanticised the fiery black solo dance into a glossy social dance-form, which had been enshrined in musicals starring Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly. Brown admired both performers greatly, particularly Astaire - although he considered him primarily a ballroom dancer rather than a genuine tap-dancer.

In this climate, classic black tap-dancers found no bookings. Brown, supporting a wife, two children, his mother and the seven sisters back in Baltimore, took a job as a janitor, cleaning offices. Many other former tap-stars were in similar circumstances, but they refused to abandon tap-dancing, even if no one wanted to see it. This group dubbed themselves the Diehards, and during the 1960s would sporadically persuade hotels to let them dance for nothing.

In 1971 the musical No, No, Nanette heralded a sudden tap revival, and soon afterwards Brown starred in Bubblin' Brown Sugar (1976) for three years. By then, tap's cultural roots in Africa were as important to young black Americans as its athletic expressiveness.

An engaging, modest and unresentful man, Brown became a highly sought-after teacher, coaching the brilliant young Savion Glover, who evolved "power-tapping" and took the dance into the modern age. He also worked delightedly with women aged over 75, called the Silver Belles, to whom he taught gentler dances such as the Electric Slide and the Shim Sham Shimmy.

He noted drily that he and his fellow tap "legends" had far more work, appreciation and money in their old age than they ever had in their prime. This month he was to have been honoured by the Harlem Jazz Dance Festival.

Brown became a Professor of Dance at Harvard, Duke and New York Universities, but always carried his tap-shoes with him - "in case you run into a good tap-dance session somewhere."