LaVaughn Robinson

08 February 2008 • 12:01am

LaVaughn Robinson, who died on January 22 aged 80, was one of the last of tap's street dancers, learning his craft by dancing competitively on Philadelphia's street corners during the American Depression.

The youngest of seven boys and seven girls, LaVaughn Robinson was born on February 9 1927 in South Philadelphia. He was taught basic steps by his mother, herself an excellent tap-dancer, and soon joined the many children who danced on the pavements day and night, ruthlessly competing with one another in rhythmic complexity, acrobatics and musical wit. Philadelphia was famous for streetfighters and tap-dancers, and out on the street, LaVaughn Robinson later recalled, "if you couldn't hold your own, they made you wish you hadn't come out on that corner".

For poor boys, tap (which had origins in African slave dances) was a form of self-expression and macho rivalry, as well as a means of earning a little money from passers-by.

If there was no audible music seeping out of a bar to dance to, they made their own with a "tramp band", which featured a washboard played with thimbles on the fingers, a tin tub with cat-gut strings plucked like a double bass, and a kazoo with cigarette paper in it. With no formal rules, the boys learned by stealing steps and ideas from each other - LaVaughn Robinson himself would later describe tap as "highly individualistic. It comes from the mind."

Philadelphia was where all the country's tap-dancers, black and white, came to test themselves against the locals. Street corners were ranked for prestige, and the crowds of youths dancing their way up the ranking streets were a daily traffic nuisance.

LaVaughn bought a shoeshine box to wear around his neck, so that when the police approached he could instantly start polishing.

Restaurants hosted Philadelphia's prodigies, such as the teenaged Nicholas Brothers, already stars in Harlem's Cotton Club; and big band jazz musicians such as Duke

already stars in Harlem's Cotton Club, and big band jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway always had a star tap-dancer with them, usually a Philadelphian.

Rapidly absorbing everything he saw, LaVaughn Robinson became a master of Philadelphia's most purist tapping, the "close floor work" without any musical accompaniment, and by his mid-teens was making up to $40 a day from busking.

On leaving school in 1945 he joined the Army. After being discharged two years later he teamed up professionally with a neighbourhood friend, Henry Meadows, and the two became renowned for their "paddling", in which they rippled out taps like the patter of rain.

For the next 15 years they toured the "chitlin' circuit", the Southern ring of theatres - safe for black performers before racial integration - on which most of the great black singers, musicians and dancers cut their performing teeth. Robinson and Meadows shared stages with Charlie Parker, Tommy Dorsey, Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holliday.

The appropriation of tap by "white" Broadway and Hollywood, however, and its masterly fusion by Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly with ballroom and ballet, spelled commercial death to black tap. By the end of the 1950s even tap's stars, spurned by the racially discriminatory studios and theatres, took menial jobs to survive. Robinson and Meadows cleaned ice rinks and washed up in restaurants.

When tap enjoyed a revival in the 1970s Philadelphia looked to LaVaughn Robinson to teach the best of its traditions, and in 1982 he was appointed tap professor at the University of the Arts. He always stressed the street origins and individualism of the form, although tap had been supplanted by hip-hop as the black street dance of the young.

In 1989 he was named "a national treasure" by the National Endowment for the Arts.

LaVaughn Robinson is survived by Edna, his wife of 55 years, and by three sons.