

Thirty Years of Dancin'

Flash Beaver has danced with everyone from Billie Holiday to Ben Vereen. He's even danced on crutches — for six months.

by Mark Lipson

Cramp Roll...

Shuffle Hop...

Buffalo...

Chug!

Time Step...

Side Essence...

Nerve Tap...

Scuff!

FLASH BEAVER IS RUNNING through one of his tap routines. It is only 8:30 a.m., but he is dressed to the nines. His dark-brown three-piece suit, just a shade lighter than his skin, is set off by a white silk kerchief, a white silk necktie with a silver stickpin, and a white Stetson. Pointy brown suede spats complete his dandy's image.

Virgil West, a.k.a. Flash Beaver, is a master tap dancer who, after more than thirty years on the road, still performs in nightclubs and theaters across the country — Georgia, California, New York.

Born in 1931, West grew up on St. Antoine, two blocks from Hastings Street, in the notorious and celebrated Paradise Valley, an area ripe with cabarets and nightspots. And it was on Hastings Street that Virgil West began the metamorphosis into Flash Beaver.

Sportree Jackson's Seafood Restaurant, the Cozy Corner, Sunnie Wilson's Cocktail Lounge, the Club Plantation and Rozer's Ace High Bar were just some of the clubs in Paradise Valley which regularly featured tap dancers, and from the time he was a small child, Virgil West watched them perform.

"Hastings Street was a *paradise* for hoofers," West says now. "All the great dancers hung out at Hymie's barbershop between Alexandrine and Leland. You could see hundreds of great dancers on the corner.

"That's how I got my first pair of dancin' shoes," he adds. "I was fourteen, sitting on the curb at the corner of Hastings and Alexandrine, right outside the Cozy Corner, watching Baby Lawrence challenge the Patterson and Jackson dance team, who must've weighed 500 pounds between them. When they were all finished, I asked Baby Lawrence for some tap shoes so I could learn to dance like him. He gave me the shoes off his

feet. He had his street shoes in his valise."

West knew he wanted to be a tap dancer from the time he was eight years old. Sitting in the cool dark of the Roxy Theater on Woodward and Temple, he'd watch musicals like *Forty-Second Street*, *Broadway Rhythm*, *Flying Down to Rio* and *Top Hat*.



"I loved all those musicals, and when I saw Bill Robinson dancing with Shirley Temple, I knew I wanted to be a dancer. My mother used to help me write letters to him, but we never got an answer."

Though other dancers have provided Flash with his main stylistic resources, he attributes much of his early rhythmic influence to his first job.

"My early rhythm came from when I was shinin' shoes at the Greyhound bus station on Washington Boulevard," he says. "I couldn't have been over twelve years old. You know, I'd be poppin' the rags and workin' them brushes. The more rhythm you gave the customers, the more jive — in other words, the better they'd tip you."

A tap dancer named George E. Brown lived below the West family's upper flat. Flash picked up some basic steps by watching Brown, steps he later learned to embellish and expand upon.

"We called him Georgie Taps," says West. "Every time Georgie Taps came back to town, I'd come downstairs and watch him dance in his tails and top hat. During the weekend he'd be rehearsing, so I'd put my head to the floor and *listen* to what he was doing, and then I'd go out on my back porch and practice."

The summer he was sixteen, West entered himself in a talent show at the

Frolic Show Bar on John R. near Canfield. Armed with fake I.D. and eight years of experience dancing on street corners, the Dancing Beaver made his stage debut. "My friends called me 'beaver' because of my buck teeth," he says. He added the "Flash" later, because of his flashy wardrobe.

"They had all kinds of acts in those talent shows," he says. "Magicians, singers, jugglers, shake dancers. I won the talent show at the Frolic three or four times, and then went on to win the show at the Paradise Theater. First time I danced there, Louis Jordan's big band was backin' me up and Teddy Hill was on the live show. Thirty years later, I danced there with Cab Calloway and the Jimmy Wilkins Orchestra."

ALTHOUGH WEST'S MOTHER signed him up for dancing lessons at Peter Ford's dancing school on Forest at Warren, West was soon expelled for demonstrating the correct execution of a "paddle and roll" — to his instructor. His choreographic education continued, however, in the taverns and theaters along Hastings Street and Woodward Avenue.

"I went to all those clubs with my fake I.D.," West remembers. "I got to duke dance acts like Pete, Peaches and Duke, Hortense Allen the Body Beautiful, Jesse James and Carnel, the Bombusters, Nicky and Sidecar, Butterbean and Susie, and Heckle and Jive. I learned by observation, and I danced for fun at ballrooms like the Aragon and the Graystone."

In 1953, with a \$100 bankroll, two suits, a one-way ticket, and a lot of encouragement from a fellow hooper called Little Willie, the twenty-two-year-old Flash Beaver — "on pure nerve," he says now — moved to New York City. Working as a hairdresser and bellhop, he managed to hustle up a ten-week dancing engagement at Harlem's famous Baby Grand.

A year later, unhappy with his sporadic career in New York, West moved to Chicago, even though he had no family or friends there. Chicago became his home for the next ten years, a decade during which Flash was featured at the Cotton Club, Club DeLisa, the Crown Propeller Lounge and the Brass Rail, as well as at a number of Chicago theaters.

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In 1965, West got a round-trip ticket to Alaska from the owner of the Idle Hour Supper Club in Anchorage.

"The lady who owned the club was a Jamaican dancer named Miss Wiggles," he says. "She was an exotic contortionist and a fire dancer. She could twist herself in knots and play with torches at the same time.

"That's when Ray Bolger was in Alaska. I was dancin' at the Idle Hour and Bolger came up onstage and danced with me. When we finished, he picked me up in his arms. He'd never seen me before, and I was doing a little bit of his stuff. I wish now I had a picture of that." Flash's three-month engagement at the Idle Hour lasted a year.

West's choreographic style is a composite of all the tap dancers he has seen over the past thirty years. He has watched everyone from Donald O'Connor and Fred Astaire to Sandman Sims and Earl "Groundhog" Basie, as well as a slew of lesser-known dancers like Lloyd Storrey, the late Paul Leonard, Jimmy Sly, Warsaw Bivans ("He had one short leg . . . invented the cramp roll"), and Sammy Johnson from the Gruesome Twosome dance team.

West describes his own style as ". . . a combination of rhythm, flash, finesse and acrobatics, with some ice-skating thrown in."

FLASH HAS, OVER THE YEARS, injected some breathtaking gymnastics into his act, including a neat little trick in which he throws a handkerchief in the air, then catches it in his teeth in the middle of a forward no-hands somersault. He learned the hard way that these pyrotechnics are not always without their price: In 1960, an aborted somersault at Detroit's Parisian Club on Linwood at Davison dislocated his right hip and put him on crutches for a year. Doctors told him that he would probably never dance again, but Flash danced for six months — on crutches. By 1963, West was dancing at the Rockhead Paradise Club in Montreal, where, as part of his act, he regularly jumped from a third-floor balcony into a full split on the ground-floor stage.

It was twelve years later, in 1975, that Flash had his last accident. One evening, at a performance at the Eastwood Country Club in San Antonio, Texas, he planned to open with a somersault off the stage and over the heads of the customers at the first two tables . . . no problem, under normal circumstances. But this time, things went awry.

"It's easy," he claims. "You just get up your momentum and jump. There was a new light man, though, and I think he'd had a few too many beers. I asked him to make sure not to shine the spotlight in my eyes when I did this spontaneous flip. The Four Tops are comin' on, and everyone's waitin' on Flash Beaver. The drum roll

now we are **TWO**...



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comes, I run and leap, and the light man puts the spotlight right in my eyes. I tripped on the mike cord. All I could see was concrete and tables. I turned my face away a second before I bounced off the people's table. Then I hit the floor and passed out. That's all I remember. The Four Tops told me later that I flipped back onto the stage and finished my act, then went to my dressing room and collapsed."

Flash emerged from his San Antonio accident in relatively good shape — four stitches over his right eye and one tooth knocked out. To this day, he insists on including acrobatics in his show, because, he says, "You have to keep your act as exciting as possible."

The years between 1966 and 1975 were spent touring with the Harlem Globetrotters as their half-time dancer, and with Brook Benton, Luther Ingram, and Larry Steele's Smart Affairs. During the past five years, Flash has gradually moved from nightclubs into radio, television, and movies. He took Chuck Barris' *Gong Show* by storm in 1979, when the normally acerbic Rex Reed jubilantly rated Flash a ten and declared him "... a reincarnation of the Nicholas Brothers." West also danced on Barris' short-lived *Rah! Rah! Variety Special*. In Detroit, he has appeared on Channel Two's *P.M. Magazine*, on Channel 62, and he has broadcast a live tap performance on WTWR radio. Through William Murray, a Detroit comedian known as Winehead Willy who had a bit part in the show, Flash made an appearance in *The Buddy Holly Story* in 1979.

The move to television and movies was natural for Flash, who has, over the past thirty-five years, entertained with the likes of Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, Tony Bennett, Phyllis Diller, Kim Weston, Junior Walker and the All Stars, Arthur Prysock, Ben Vereen and the Spinners.

Despite the fact that tap dancing is no longer as popular as it was twenty or thirty years ago, Flash Beaver, a.k.a. "Virgil West, swears that it is not a dying art.

"There's still a lot of tap in Broadway shows and musicals, you know," he says. "Tap just needs to be pushed a little. I used to own a dance studio in L.A., and I'm lookin' for people to teach. I taught my nephew my whole routine. It took me nine months. Anybody who wants lessons can call me up."

Flash Beaver can be seen in action every Sunday in October from 9 p.m. 'til 2 a.m. at Andre's Restaurant and Bar, on Livernois at Curtis; on October 15, at 9 p.m., he'll present his own variety show at Watts Club Mozambique, 8406 Fenkell.

Mark Lipson is a Detroit-area freelance writer and musician.