

# Been Rich All My Life

**A Documentary Film by  
Heather Lynn MacDonald**

81 minutes, color & b/w, 2005, USA



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# BEEN RICH ALL MY LIFE

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**A Toots Crackin Production**

Featuring the Silver Belles, sassy as they ever were.

## **Synopsis**

Five former 1930s showgirls, now aged 84-96, form an unlikely tap troupe, and perform to standing ovations from the Apollo Theatre to Carnegie Hall. They may get pacemakers and break their bones, but they heal and keep on dancing.

"I'm going to dance, dance, dance 'til I can't dance no more,  
and I'm going to live, live, live 'til I die!" (Bertye Lou Wood, age 96)

## **Major Credits**

Director/Producer:	Heather Lyn MacDonald
Editors:	BB Jorissen; Heather Lyn MacDonald
Cinematography:	Heather Lyn MacDonald; Jon Miller;
Sound & Add'l Camera	Orlando Richards
Music:	Pete Whitman

## The Story

Directed by Sundance Audience Award winning filmmaker Heather Lyn MacDonald, *Been Rich All My Life* follows the most unlikely troupe of tap dancers. They are the "Silver Belles," five women aged 84-96. In their heyday they worked at some of Harlem's most prestigious haunts, performing with legendary band leaders like Cab Calloway, Jimmie Lunceford and Duke Ellington. They met in the 1930's as chorus dancers at the Apollo and the Cotton Club. When the big band era ended, and with it the need for show dancers, they all went into other work. They regrouped in 1985, put their shoes back on – and sassy as they ever were, are still performing regularly. They may not kick as high, but they are hip-swaying and show-biz savvy. These women will disrupt any notions you have of old age.

Each of the Silver Belles has a distinctive, idiosyncratic personality and dance style. They share a love of dance, and the ability to flirt with their audience. "We mug more now than we used to," explains Marion Coles. "I light up like a Christmas tree when I go out there, the right music will just push you," adds Fay Ray. "I may be old, but I'm not cold!" exclaims Bertye Lou Wood, the eldest.

The film is lively and humor-filled, sparkling with the verve and candor of these inspiring women. We follow them from their rehearsals at the Cotton Club, to their shows -- and over the bumps in between. They perform to standing ovations at concert halls around the city, working with dancers some 60 years younger than they. We enjoy their weekly rehearsals, their love of their craft, the music, and the laughter and arguments of a friendship that has continued for over 70 years.

What they know can't be found in books, and they have rich stories to tell about the history they made during the Harlem Renaissance. At the Apollo Theater, where they worked 15 hour days, rehearsing and performing a new show each week, these chorus girls led the historic strike that established the American Guild of Variety Artists, for black and white performers nationwide. Archival film and photos from the 1920's-50s, often from their own closets, blend into the narrative (e.g., film footage of Bertye dancing with Bill Bojangles Robinson, Cleo in *Stormy Weather*, or Marion lindy-hopping at the Savoy). The music ranges over eight decades of jazz styles, the honky tonk sounds of the 20's, the big bands of the 30's and 40's (some of it written especially for these dancers), the bebop of the 50's – to the rhythms of contemporary jazz as the ladies travel the streets of their neighborhoods today.

Despite their vitality, all is not easy, and the story becomes more complicated. In one week, Cleo tumbles down the subway stairs and breaks her knee and arm, Marion gets a pacemaker, and Bertye is taken to the hospital. Is this the end of the Silver Belles? "It's only a speed bump," insists their manager, but we are not likely to believe her. Cleo is in casts from toe to hip, confined to the hospital for intensive therapy. Will she dance again? Meanwhile, Bertye falls and breaks her hip, putting her fiercely guarded independence into serious question. In the end, Cleo returns victorious to perform again with the troupe, and Bertye dies. Bertye's memorial ends with everyone on their feet -- legendary hoofers side by side with younger tap prodigies – all dancing the still traditional show-closer, the "Shim Sham Shimmy."

## The Characters

**Bertye Lou Wood:** At 96 ("I'm striving for 100"), the wry and witty Bertye Lou Wood is the sage and mentor. Bertye Lou was the dance captain at the Apollo in the 1930's, where they all first met, and in 1985 she gathered the women together to form the Silver Belles. She is one they all continue to look up to. "She taught me how to dance, everything I know I owe to Bertye" says Marion Coles. "You feel like laughing when you're with Bertye, she's more fun than anyone I know," adds Cleo Hayes. Bertye Lou is still a party girl, and the type to tease a rise out of anyone, just to get the action going.

Bertye Lou started dancing in the 1920's while raising three sons. She led the Apollo chorus line in a strike for higher salaries and a week's vacation. It was the first strike for black performers, and the first for the fledgling American Guild of Variety Artists, and established that union for black and white performers nationwide. There seems to be no one, band leader nor dancer, that Bertye didn't work with, and when she dies in the end of the film, it seems her life is celebrated by a good portion of Harlem.

**Cleo Hayes:** Ms. Hayes, at 89, is a stunning woman. When you pass her, wearing her blue jeans, shades and a Yankees cap, you'd never suspect her age. This great grandmother continues to work as a bartender (she prefers to be called, a "mixologist") at the Flash Inn in Harlem. There she has regulars she's served since 1956, with whom she can indulge in discussions about current events and sports.

Cleo escaped to Chicago from Mississippi, and got her first job dancing at the Grand Terrace with Earl Hines. In 1934, she took a bus to New York and was hired as an "Apollo Rockette" at the new Apollo Theatre. When the Cotton Club moved downtown to Times Square, Cleo joined the new company. Cleo and Bertye Lou traveled together dancing in the 1930's-40's, throughout South America, and with the first black USO unit during WWII. Cleo recounts that USO tour: how they had to receive their meals out the back door of the mess halls in the south, and her own personal insurrection – taking "For Colored Only" signs off the trains they rode.

Cleo admits to having been a "lazy" chorus dancer, but yet she is the one who takes the tumble down a flight of subway stairs during the film and perseveres through months of rehab til she rejoins the troupe and continues her dancing career.

**Marion Coles:** Marion Coles is the dance director of the Silver Belles, and at 88 has seemingly boundless energy. During the filming, Marion had to get a pacemaker, and the first question she asked her doctor was, "When can I dance again?" She hardly skipped a week before she was back on the floor. "I don't like to sit around." She teaches tap to younger dance teachers so they can pass on traditional steps that would otherwise be lost to a new generation. Marion also continues to take tap classes herself, to learn new techniques. "She always used to hang out with guys between shows, eating up any tap moves they could teach her. "Dance, dance, dance, she'd dance all day if she could," say the ladies of Marion. She is the widow of the legendary hoofer Honi Coles.

**Fay Ray:** At 84, Fay considers herself lucky to have at last found "true love" with an older man. When she was 12, Fay hopped a freight train and left her home in Louisiana. She joined a show on the vaudeville circuit and never looked back. There she learned how to tap dance with some of the best dancers of the day, then went out on her own and performed as a solo. In the 1940's, she came to New York and joined the chorus lines. During WWII she detoured briefly to become a certified welder, building ships for the Navy. When the chorus dancing work finally slowed in the 1950's, she traveled the world with USO tours through the 1960's, "wherever we had troops, I was there, Beirut, Egypt, Viet Nam, you name it." After her dancing years, she drove a taxi in New York City, and worked on the pipeline in Alaska.

**Elaine Ellis:** They lovingly call Elaine "Calamity Jane" -- if a train stalls, she'll be on it. At 86, with buoyant good cheer, she spreads her love, and anything else she has to give. She dances with a smooth grace, despite an almost debilitating asthma, high blood pressure, and some small strokes. When she suffered a bout with cancer (one of two), she continued to take the bus (transferring twice) to get to the Silver Belles' rehearsals after her radiation treatments. Elaine started her dancing career at the Cotton Club, and moved on to Café Zanzibar, Club Mimo and the Apollo.

**Geri Kennedy:** Geri Kennedy is manager of the Silver Belles and their fierce protector. She and Bertye Lou organized the Silver Belles because Geri hated to see the legendary chorus girls forgotten. "None of the great women dancers of their era have been given the same notice as the males, and they need to have their history known."

**Others Featured:** BEEN RICH ALL MY LIFE also features appearances by:  
Mercedes Ellington, dance director and choreographer;  
Karen Callaway Williams, tap dancer;  
John Beatty, owner of Harlem's famed Cotton Club;  
Joseph Merenda, owner of the Flash Inn, a New York City landmark.

### Major Production Credits

#### **Heather Lyn MacDonald**

Director/Producer, Cinematographer/Co-Editor

MacDonald is the maker of the Sundance Audience Award-winning documentary feature *Ballot Measure 9*. Called a political thriller, the film won such other awards as a Teddy Bear at Berlin, Best of the Fest at Edinburgh, People's Choice at Denver, Grand Jury Prize at Los Angeles Outfest, and a GLAAD Media Award for best documentary. It was released theatrically by Zeitgeist Films prior to broadcast on Cinemax, the Sundance Channel, then PBS affiliates. It aired throughout Europe, Asia, Australia and Canada and continues to be distributed in the home video and educational markets.

Other award winning documentaries that Heather directed and edited include *Kiev Blue* and *Kitchen Talk USSR*, both shot in the Soviet Union just prior to its collapse. Each was broadcast on PBS and distributed by Filmmakers Library. Prior to filmmaking, Heather was for many years an actor and is a long-standing member of Actor's Equity, SAG and AFTRA. She is also a screenwriter, and her photos have been exhibited at galleries in New York City.

#### **Robert Jorissen; Co-Editor**

Bob is the winner of an Emmy Award and two BDA Gold Awards. Currently editing features and independent documentaries, Bob's background is in theatrical and television lighting and sound. He edited *The Simian Line*, Linda Yellen's feature film with Harry Connick Jr., Tyne Daly and Lynn Redgrave, and he will also edit her upcoming feature *The Hive*. Recently, Bob edited *Vis-à-vis: Native Tongues* for PBS, *Dialogue with the Dalai Lama* for Link TV, *Lives Together, Worlds Apart*, also for PBS, and a feature piece for National Geographic called *Wade Davis, A Charmed Life*. Bob was for six years a lead editor for PBS station KTCA in Minneapolis/St. Paul. With producer Robert Byrd, he created the Diary series: *Black Minnesotans* (Emmy for editing), *Asian Minnesotans* and *Native American Minnesotans*. Among others for PBS, he has edited *The*

*Dakota Conflict, Not Quite American: Bill Holm, Understanding Hate, How to Talk Minnesotan, Music in the Americas, St. Paul Past and Get Over It.*

**Jon Miller;** Cinematography

Trained on film, but embracing the advantages of digital video, Jon is a skilled cameraman, shooting shorts, documentaries, commercials, industrials, and numerous independent features. He was the DP for the feature "Calling Bobcat" (Showtime and home video), in which he executed some extraordinary hand-held sequences and provocative lighting

designs. Some of his recent credits include work for the History Channel, the digital feature "Limbo", the documentary "American Beer" and the shorts "The Christmas Party," "She Found Red" and "Raccoon." He also shot the feature "Jimmy Whispers Returns to Mulberry Street." The documentary "History of Sound Film" which Jon shot, won a NATAS Award.

**Pete Whitman;** Composer

Whitman created the original score for BEEN RICH ALL MY LIFE using the evolving styles of 70 years of jazz, including the big band sounds of Jimmy Lunceford and Ellington. He is the leader and composer for the jazz sextet Departure Point, which has released 2 CD's, both of which feature Whitman's compositions, arrangements and saxophone. He has a 3rd CD due out this fall (Artegra), featuring his compositional talents applied to a 10 piece ensemble. Often performing as a guest soloist with jazz ensembles, Whitman has been a regularly featured performer with the Jazz MN Big Band, Voice Trek, Adi Yeshaya and the Wolverines Classic Jazz Orchestra. He has performed with such distinguished musicians and ensembles as the Minnesota Orchestra, Jack McDuff, Randy Brecker, the Woody Herman Orchestra and the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra. He toured internationally with the Glenn Miller Orchestra for several years, performing on tenor sax and clarinet, and for many years was the leader of the Cedar Avenue Big Band. As a freelance musician Whitman has backed up such names as Cab Calloway, Harry Connick Jr., Aretha Franklin, the Temptations and Frank Sinatra, Jr. Since 1999 he has served as music director and arranger for Columbian songwriter Carlos Diaz, whose fusion of jazz, classical and traditional Columbian musical elements has earned him significant critical acclaim.

**Orlando Richards;** Sound and Additional Camera

A skilled and passionate documentarian, Richards has traveled widely -- producing, shooting, editing and teaching. He has produced and shot in Jamaica, for Cultural Arts Media, in Ecuador for director Tish Bravo, and in Durban, South Africa where Richards was dispatched to send back programming via streaming video during the International Conference on Racism. Currently he is a cameraman for "Yue-Sai's World" for Chinese television, as well as for "Democracy Now!"'s live web/cable broadcasts. For seven years he has been a video teacher at New York's Downtown Community Television. He often teaches video production workshops at high schools in New York City, and has produced videos with homeless youth for Envision TV, and led a summer workshop for youth to produce a documentary on teenage pregnancy. Richards was the cameraman on four political documentaries for Deep Dish TV, and was the youth outreach coordinator for public television's P.O.V. series, as well as for Paper Tiger public access television. He continues to shoot his own "Ja Live," a documentary about Rastafarianism.



The Silver Belles: manager Geri Kennedy center; clockwise from upper left, Marion Coles, Fay Ray, Elaine Ellis and Cleo Hayes.



Bertye Lou Wood, age 96. "I'm going to dance, dance, dance 'til I can't dance no more; and I'm going to live, live , live 'til I die!"

Marion Coles,  
near right, age 91.



Fay Ray, far right,  
age 86.



Cleo Hayes,  
near right, age 91.



Elaine Ellis,  
far right, age 88

