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BY LISA LAKE

"They were considered very much musicians," says Shelley Oliver, center, of tap dancers of old. Her Shelley Oliver Tap Dancers troupe is at Dance Place this weekend.

## Rhythm and Roots

By LISA TRAIGER  
Special to *The Washington Post*

**T**AP DANCERS are unique among terpsichoreans. They don't just interpret music, they make it. They don't merely keep the beat with their feet, they break it down, syncopate it, rework it and (especially in the presence of live instrumental accompaniment) deliver that beat back to their fellow musicians — changed, refined, explored.

Tap and its close sibling jazz were born on city streets and in urban nightclubs, two indigenous American art forms sharing riffs. Both matured together, reaching their heydays in that early 20th-century period we now call the Jazz Age, and both continued to evolve during the swing and bebop eras.

Tapper Shelley Oliver explains: "Jazz was becoming popular at the same time as tap. When tappers were being innovative with the form, they would [perform] with Count Basie or Duke Ellington as part of the band's percussion section. And at a certain point in their concert, the tap dancers would do their dancing, often in front of the drummers. There's no question, they were considered very much musicians."

Oliver founded and directs her own five-member dance troupe, based in Easton, Pa., which performs with the David Leonhardt Jazz Group, a trio that has gigged

with legends such as Jon Hendricks, Art Blakey, Benny Carter, Dave Liebman and Dianne Reeves. Saturday and Sunday, the two groups make their Washington debuts at Dance Place's intimate studio theater.

For Oliver, a native of Canada who co-founded the ensemble Manhattan Tap in 1986, it's no mystery why tap pairs so well with live music: "The most dynamic element is the spontaneous relationship that happens when the music is on stage and we're on stage," she says. "That allows for a lot of improvisation that keeps it fresh. For us, that's fundamental; everything else is gravy."

Ever since the early 1980s, Oliver has been drawn to rhythm tap, which, as the name implies, focuses mainly on the sound and rhythm dancers create, as opposed to the showier, more stylized Broadway form. Her own style grew out of studies and collaborations with noted old-timers, including late greats Steve Condos, James "Buster" Brown, Gregory Hines and Charles "Cookie" Cook, plus still greats such as Jimmy Slyde and the young Turk Savion Glover. Within the insular tap world, Oliver is loved for her crisp, sassy rhythms, her action-packed footwork, and her deference to the placement and position of the upper body without ignoring the rhythm of the feet.

The Dance Place program includes "Metal on Wood," an a cappella piece for three dancers who

pound and shuffle, crimp and dig, all the while perched atop hollow wooden boxes — the better to hear the dancers' music echo through the space. "Ode to Bo," meanwhile, is Oliver's tribute to one of tap's founding fathers, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. While the company's repertory includes some of Robinson's old routines, "Ode" is broader and more contemplative. It's Oliver's choreography, but the piece incorporates some classic Robinson moves: a two-bar break that syncopates a chain of rhythmic time steps, as well as the light stepping style Robinson contributed to the form.

"It's something I did to evoke his style, which was very upright, on the toes. He was known for taking tap from the flat-footed, shuffling era. . . . He stood very straight, and he swung his rhythms . . . revolutionizing what you could do with the form at that point."

Oliver's new "Funk Monk," meanwhile, has a contemporary feel. Choreographed to Thelonious Monk's "Bemsha Swing," it calls for all five dancers and shows some of the new directions tap has been heading in recent years.

For Oliver, with the Leonhardt trio playing at her side, tap's not just a shuffle down memory lane.

**SHELLEY OLIVER TAP DANCERS AND THE DAVID LEONHARDT JAZZ GROUP** — Saturday at 8 and Sunday at 4. Dance Place, 3225 Eighth St. NE. 202-269-1600.

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