

= Howard Sims =

Howard " Sandman " Sims (January 24 , 1917 ? May 20 , 2003) was an African @-@ American tap dancer who began his career in vaudeville . He was skilled in a style of dancing that he performed in a wooden sandbox of his own construction , and acquired his nickname from the sand he sprinkled to alter and amplify the sound of his dance steps . " They called the board my Stradivarius , " Sims said of his sandbox .

From the 1950s to the year 2000 , Sims was a regular attraction ? a " fixture " ? at Harlem 's noted Apollo Theater , comedically ushering failed acts offstage with a hook , broom or other prop . He was also involved in New York City 's Hoofers Club , a venue primarily for Black tap dancers .

As part of the resurgence of interest in tap dancing in the 1980s , Sandman Sims served as a cultural ambassador , representing the United States with dance performances around the world . He was featured in the 1989 dance film Tap , along with Sammy Davis Jr . , Gregory Hines and Savion Glover , demonstrating classic challenge dancing . Sims also appeared in a 1990 episode of The Cosby Show as Rudy 's tap dancing teacher , facing off against Cliff (Bill Cosby) in a good @-@ natured tap challenge .

In her review of the play based on his life , New York Times critic Anna Kisselgoff wrote , " Sims is a virtuoso among virtuosos ? in a class by himself . To say Mr. Sims dances on sand is like saying Philippe Petit is a tightrope walker . "

= = Early life = =

Born in Fort Smith , Arkansas on January 24 , 1917 , Sims was one of 12 children . The family soon relocated to Los Angeles , California , where he was raised . Describing his childhood , Sims said , " It was just a whole big dancing family . " He learned to dance from his father , and said he was dancing as soon as he could walk . He began tap @-@ dancing at the age of 3 . He attributed some of his early love for tap dancing in particular to his mother , exasperated that he kept wearing out the toes of his shoes , putting steel taps on the shoes . Along with his brothers , Sims was dancing on the sidewalks of Los Angeles from a young age . At the age of 14 , peeping in the windows of a dance school got Sims arrested for loitering , but he was able to dance his way to freedom , convincing a judge that his reason for being on that street was legitimate .

As a young man , despite his dance talent , Sims aspired to be not a professional dancer , but a professional boxer . After twice breaking his hand , he decided he needed a different means of making a living . Sims had noticed that boxing audiences reacted positively to the way he would dance in the rosin box before getting into the ring , and especially to the distinctive sound his dancing made moving the rosin granules around the wooden box . He began to consider dancing as a career alternative . Sims experimented with several different methods of reproducing the rosin box effect , gluing sandpaper to either his shoes or his dancing mat , but the sandpaper created too much wear on the other surface . Finally he found the solution : loose sand in a low @-@ lipped box . " People went for the scraping sound ... So I made a sound board by sprinkling sand on a flat platform . That was in 1935 . " His sandbox remained his trademark throughout his career , with some venues even telling Sims , " If you don 't bring your sandbox , don 't come at all . "

During this period , it was common for dancers to carry tap shoes with them and , when they encountered another dancer on the street , throw down their shoes by way of challenge . The culture of street dancing in the 1920s has been compared to the rise of break dancing six decades later . As the journal Jump Cut described it , " ' challenge dancing , ' in which each performer tries to outdo the other , is part of tap dancing 's heritage , something like the jazz solos in which musicians try to outshine one another . " Sims later described how the atmosphere of these dance challenges was at least as much collegial as combative , and how dancers learned from one another in what became essentially " open air dance schools " . Despite performing at various vaudeville venues , Sims found neither fame nor success as a dancer in Los Angeles . In 1947 , he tagged along on one of his professional @-@ boxer friend Archie Moore 's cross @-@ country drives , and settled in New York City .

= = Harlem = =

After arriving in Harlem , Sims began performing on the street as he had done in California , but faced stiff competition from other innovative dancers : " I knew people who danced on dinner plates ... There was a man who could dance on newspapers without tearing them . And another who constructed a gigantic xylophone to tap on . " He performed on corners in between working whatever jobs he could find , and then discovered the " Amateur Night " stage on Wednesdays at the Apollo Theater , where he soon gained local notoriety . He eventually won the Amateur Night competition a record @-@ breaking 25 times , after which a rule was instituted that performers could no longer compete once they had earned four first prizes .

When big name dancers played The Apollo , there was nothing in the audience but dancers with their shoes , " said Sandman Sims . " Up in the balcony dancers , and the first six rows , you saw nothing but tap @-@ dancers , want @-@ to @-@ be tap @-@ dancers , gonna @-@ be tap @-@ dancers , tried @-@ to @-@ be tap @-@ dancers . That 's the reason a guy would want to dance at The Apollo .

By the mid @-@ 1950s , he had been hired as the Apollo 's stage manager , and soon began his role as the Apollo 's famed " executioner " , chasing Amateur Night contestants the crowd disapproved of off the stage with a shepherd 's crook (known since vaudeville times as " the hook ") a broom , or other props , while dressed in a variety of wacky costumes , whether long underwear , a clown suit , or even a diaper . Backstage , however , he would console defeated contestants with the story of his having been booed off ten times before he finally got to finish his own act . Sims would play " executioner " until shortly after Time Warner took over the Apollo in 1999 .

Having found work dancing did not stop him from dancing on the street , however . " If I saw a dancer , I 'd challenge him . I didn 't care who it was . The way to get known in New York was to be the best . That 's what I strived to be . " Part of the culture of street challenges , as in Los Angeles , was that competing dancers would also learn from one another .

A significant change to Sims 's dancing style came about as a result of his interaction with Harlem 's hoofers , practitioners of a variation on the tap he had learned on the west coast . Sims would later define the main difference between tap and hoofing as being that tap focuses on the heel and toe whereas hoofers " use the whole foot " . As a result of the synergy between hoofing technique and his unique use of a sandbox , his routines were described as being " as rich in sounds and textures as they were in steps . " Sims himself put it , " The feet are a set of drums . "

Constance Valis Hill , in her 2009 survey Tap Dancing America : A Cultural History , described the hoofers ' mecca thusly :

At the Hoofers Club , rookie and veteran , mostly [B] lack male tap dancers assembled to share with , steal from , and challenge each other ; there , new standards were set for competition . These were nothing like the formalized buck @-@ dancing competitions of Tammany Hall , where judges sat beside , before , and beneath the stage to evaluate the [dancers '] clarity , speed , and presentation . The Hoofers Club comprised a more informal panel of peers , whose judgments could be cruel and mocking and were driven by an insistence on innovation . " Survive or die " was the credo . In an eccentric fusion of imitation and innovation , young dancers were forced to find their style and rhythmic voice . It was said that on the wall of the Hoofers Club was written : " Thou shalt not copy each other 's steps ? Exactly . "

Though he frequently took opportunities to explain the difference between tap and hoofing to the press in later years , and tended to refer to himself as a hooper rather than a tap dancer , Sims did practice both forms of dance . In 1949 , motivated by the death of Bill " Bojangles " Robinson , Sims became a founding member of the Original Copasetics , another fellowship of tap dancers that became a source of mentor @-@ student relationships and would help bring about the revival of tap in the 1970s and 1980s .

= = Decline and revival of tap = =

Tap dancing lost popularity with audiences beginning in the late 1940s . A number of causes factored into this decline , among them the going out of style of vaudeville @-@ style variety shows ; a new tax that forced many ballrooms to close and thus closed venues to the big bands with whom tap dancers had used to perform ; trends in music that favored smaller , more intimate groups of performers ; and concomitant increases in interest among audiences in watching formal modern dance and ballet performances . Sims was quoted as having said of the period that " [t] ap didn 't die ... It was just neglected . "

With paying gigs harder to find and paying less , Sims turned to other sources of income . Despite not having had any formal instruction himself , he taught dance , including to such later stars as Gregory Hines and Ben Vereen . He also taught footwork to boxing greats Sugar Ray Robinson and Muhammad Ali . Less glamorously , he ran a café , and even worked as a carpenter and a mechanic . Despite the lean times for hoofers , Sims was always able to put food on the table for his family , having married in 1959 .

The late 1960s brought the beginning of a wave of nostalgia for tap , and Sims found his dance skills in demand again . In 1969 , he was part of the all @-@ star cast of Tap Happening , a revue that played Off @-@ Broadway . Tap Happening was popular enough to run for several years .

The crescendo of interest in tap dancing continued , and in 1972 , Sims danced in the production Best of the Hoofers at the Orpheum Theatre . " Hoofing is not a dying art form , " he asserted in 1977 , and subsequent events would prove him right .

1979 saw the release of No Maps on My Taps , which featured Sims facing off against fellow tap stars Chuck Green ? who had served as Sims 's mentor during his early years in New York ? and Bunny Briggs , in a three @-@ way dance challenge . The documentary also reunited him with bandleader Lionel Hampton , whom he had toured with in years past .

In 1980 , a far cry from the tiny venues he had been lucky to play just a few years earlier , Sims performed before a crowd of 2 @, @ 600 fans at the Lincoln Center during the Newport Jazz Festival . Later that year , Sims was one of the instructor @-@ performers of the By Word of Foot " teach @-@ in " series , spending a week demonstrating his hoofing techniques for a new generation of tap enthusiasts .

As part of New York 's leg of the 1981 Newport Jazz Festival (which spanned both NYC and its home city of Newport , Rhode Island , that year) , he performed with former Cotton Club bandleader Cab Calloway in a production called Stompin ' at the Savoy . A few weeks later , Sims was on stage at the American Dance Festival , dancing both with and without his sandbox .

By 1982 , Sims was part of a promotional tour reviving interest in No Maps on My Taps with co @-@ stars Bunny Briggs and Chuck Green , their pre @-@ screening performances backed by Cab Calloway . Even as booked performances were coming more regularly , Sims never stopped participating in street @-@ corner challenges , encouraging younger generations of dancers and inviting them to learn his moves .

The National Endowment for the Arts granted Sims a \$ 5 @, @ 000 National Heritage Fellowship in 1984 . " I thought I was making noise all these years , " Sims said of the award . " Now they 're calling it culture . " He used the funds to teach dance to children in Harlem , using a parking lot in lieu of a formal dance studio , drawing on his own youth learning dance on the street . Sims would later explain , " most people wait [to study dance] until after they 've grown up ? and then it 's too late . " That same year , clogger Ira Bernstein received an NEA Folk Arts Apprenticeship grant " [t] o study traditional [B] lack tap dance with master dancer Howard ' Sandman ' Sims . " Sims loved to teach ; his son recounted how Sandman would " stop every kid he saw and show them a step and get them to copy a step . He enjoyed that more than performing in front of an audience . "

= = = The Apollo reopens = = =

Meanwhile , Harlem 's Apollo Theater , where Sims had served for years as Amateur Night 's " executioner " , had been closed for most of a decade . Then , following an extensive renovation , the venue reopened in 1985 , bringing increased attention to both the Apollo and his role there . " I 'm their protector , not the executioner , " he explained to The Washington Post . " Because that

audience can get really hostile . " Sims described seeing displeased audiences throw bottles and even horseshoes at performers who he did not hustle off stage fast enough . When The New York Times interviewed him about his " executioner " role , he said of the acts that got booed off , " I tell them to work on their act and come back , " encouraging them to try again .

In 1986 , Sims starred in The Tap Tradition at Symphony Space New York (which also hosted a showing of No Maps on My Taps) , earning a rave review from The New York Times . He also made a brief appearance in a play based on his life , The Sand Dancer , which was written by poet Sandra Hochman and starred LeLand Gantt , and which received another rave review : " Sims is a virtuoso among virtuosos ? in a class by himself . To say Mr. Sims dances on sand is like saying Philippe Petit is a tightrope walker . " And he traveled to Los Angeles to perform in a production called Essence of Rhythm with fellow tap stars including Charles " Honi " Coles and Jimmy Slyde .

Sandman Sims was the guest star of Late Night with David Letterman on May 14 , 1987 . It 's Showtime at the Apollo , a TV broadcast of the Apollo Theater 's Amateur Night performances , began broadcasting in September 1987 on NBC stations , bringing awareness of Sims 's " executioner " role to a wider audience .

A particularly busy year , 1988 saw Sims tour the world as a cultural ambassador on behalf of the U.S. State Department , traveling to over 50 countries in a span of 11 months .

By 1989 , Sims 's popularity was at an all @-@ time high , and he told the Associated Press , " I can 't fulfill all the work they give me . [?] I can 't walk out on the street without somebody showing me a time step . " Tap dancing 's popularity was nearing a new peak as well , with three major American cities (Houston , Texas ; Portland , Oregon ; Washington , D.C.) hosting tap @-@ dance festivals . In movie theaters , the dance drama Tap was introducing Sims 's footwork (and that of his former student Gregory Hines) to audiences who had never had the opportunity to see him perform before .

Playing a thinly @-@ fictionalized version of himself named " Mr. Sims " , Sims made a 1990 appearance on The Cosby Show , then one of the most popular programs on television . " Mr. Sims " was the dance instructor the Huxtables signed their young daughter Rudy up with in order to help her prepare for a class assignment about the Harlem Renaissance . During the episode , Cliff Huxtable (Bill Cosby) challenged " Mr. Sims " to a dance @-@ off , part tribute to and part parody of Sims 's real @-@ life tap challenges , which Sims won handily . Later that same year , the Apollo Theater played host to Rat @-@ a @-@ Tat @-@ Tap , another tap @-@ dance festival , and the Sandman , " always a deserved audience favorite at tap festivals , " was a featured performer there alongside his Tap co @-@ stars Savion Glover and Gregory Hines .

Sims was a featured performer at the third annual celebration of National Tap Dance Day on May 30 , 1993 .

In 1998 , the New York Committee to Celebrate National Tap Dance Day and the Young People 's Tap Conference honored Sandman Sims for his contributions to the art of hoofing .

= = In popular culture = =

Sandman Sims , particularly in his role as Apollo Theater executioner , has been referenced frequently in African @-@ American culture .

On April 5 , 2000 , he was invoked by Huey Freeman in the long @-@ running comic strip The Boondocks , who responded to an ineptly @-@ told joke by saying , " Where is Sandman Sims when you need him ... "

Performance artist Holly Bass , along with other dancers , put on another play about Sims 's life at the Smithsonian Institution 's American History Museum (which was then hosting an exhibit on the Apollo Theater) on July 10 , 2010 .

President Barack Obama , referring to his own performance singing on the Apollo Theater stage (albeit not on Amateur Night) the evening before his 2012 State of the Union address , said , " Sandman did not come out ! "

= = Personal life = =

While Sims had a first marriage which produced his first child Diane Sims , he later married his second wife , Solange . They would have 1 son together , Howard Sims Jr . , as well as 5 grandchildren and 1 great @-@ grandchild .

Particularly in later years , Sims sometimes claimed not to be certain of his birth year , at times saying it was " a matter of opinion . " Asked by a fan how old he was , Sims once replied , " Any number can play . "

= = Death = =

Sims died on May 20 , 2003 in New York City . He had suffered from Alzheimer 's disease . A memorial service for Sims was held May 28 , 2003 at the Apollo Theater .

= = Filmography = =

No Maps on My Taps (1979) ? Himself

Uptown : A Tribute to the Apollo Theatre (1980) ? Himself

The Cotton Club (1984) ? Hooper

Motown Returns to the Apollo (1985) ? Himself

The Kennedy Center Honors : A Celebration of the Performing Arts (1987) ? Himself

It 's Showtime at the Apollo (1987 ? 2000) ? Himself / the " executioner "

Harlem Nights (1989) ? Crapshooter

Tap (1989) ? Sandman

Tap Dance in America (1989) ? Himself

The Cosby Show (1990) ? season 6 , episode 19 , " Mr. Sandman " ? Mr. Sims