

APRIL 16, 2006

SECTION I

## THE ART OF DANCE



Amherst artist Nancy Haver, right, recently visited tap dancing legend Jeni LeGon in Vancouver, B.C.



Illustration, top, from the book, below, "What Tap Dancing's All About" by Nancy Haver.

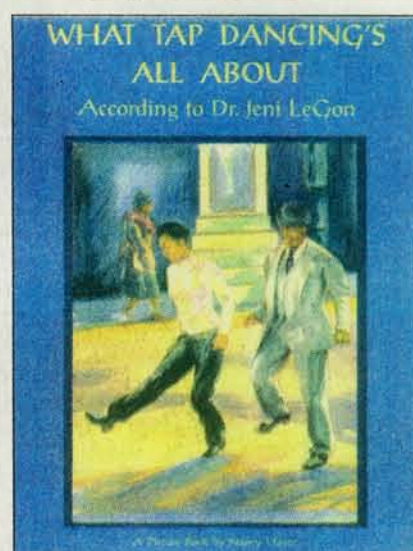


Illustration of  
Baby Laurence  
(1921-1974) by  
Amherst artist  
Nancy Haver.



# TAP ART

She shared the screen with Fred Astaire in "Easter Parade," and now a great tap dancer stars in a book by an Amherst artist.

By **PAT CAHILL**  
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Six years ago, artist Nancy Haver of Amherst decided to take a tap dance class with two friends. Like just about everything that touches her imagination, the experience found its way into her art.

It led to a correspondence with a fabled Black tap dancer now living in British Columbia, then to a visit to the former star's home, and eventually to a children's book titled "What Tap Dancing's All About (According to Dr. Jeni LeGon)."

The illustrations for that book, which Haver also wrote, will be among the art on display in the Western Massachusetts Illustrator's Guild Show, May 6-31 at R. Michelson Gallery in downtown Amherst.

Admission to the show, which features 30 artists, is free. The public is invited to the opening on May 6 from 5 to 7 p.m.

Jeni LeGon, now 89, says she is thrilled with Haver's book and illustrations. "This is one of the most wonderful things that has happened in my lifetime!" she said in a phone interview from Vancouver, B.C.

High praise, considering that LeGon has appeared in movies and on Broadway with some very famous folks.

LeGon is equally enthusiastic about

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### IF YOU GO

**Event:** Western Massachusetts Illustrators Guild Exhibit

**Opening:** May 6, 5-7 p.m. Show runs through May 31, Wed.-Sat. 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

**Where:** R. Michelson Gallery, 25 South Pleasant St., Amherst

**Admission:** Free

**More information:** 586-3964



# Dance: Illustrator highlights tap

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Haver: "I adore her madly!" she says, adding that she and the 50-year-old artist laugh a lot on the phone.

Haver earned her master of fine arts degree in printmaking from the University of Massachusetts. Her illustrations have appeared in books and periodicals.

"My mother says I was drawing grass on the carpet when I was 2," says Haver. "I feel like I almost have a physical need to draw. It's very compelling."

After her first taste of tap dancing, Haver took another class at Greenfield Community College, where instructor Sharon Arslanian showed her students film of some classic tap dancers. Haver was especially fascinated by the Nicholas Brothers.

"After hearing about their experiences, I wanted to read all the other life stories of dancers," she says. "I was really struck by their determination."

"All the patrons at the big clubs were white. So African Americans weren't able to watch any of the shows they were performing in. I was struck by the injustice of it."

Haver began making woodcuts for cards and posters commemorating such tap greats as John Bubbles, Honi Coles, Baby Laurence, Cholly Atkins and the Whitman Sisters.

She wrote to those who were still living to ask their permission to sell her cards at some of

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the tap dance festivals around the country. Lexington, for example, celebrates National Tap Dance Day with a festival on May 25, the birthday of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.

"Wherever I've gone, I've gotten a lot of interest," says Haver, "because there's not a lot of tap dance art available."

LeGon was one of the people Haver contacted for permission.

The dancer was born in Chicago in 1917 and was performing with Count Basie at age 13. She and her foster sister took their routine to Los Angeles, where LeGon bowled over movie execs with her talent.

At 17, she traveled to London as part of a Broadway show. She was elated to find that in England she did not experience the prejudice she felt at home. The British press raved about the "Sepia Cinderella," comparing her to the color of vintage photos.

LeGon appeared in 25 movies, including "Hi-De-Ho" with

Cab Calloway and "Easter Parade" with Fred Astaire and Judy Garland.

She started her own dance school in Los Angeles in the 1950s, and moved to Vancouver in 1969. She is married to a Canadian.

LeGon has been honored by the Smithsonian Institution and the Tap Dance Hall of Fame in Los Angeles. She received an honorary doctorate from Oklahoma City University in 2002.

In 1999 she was the subject of an award-winning Canadian documentary called "Living in a Great Big Way."

When Haver wrote to the illustrious dancer in 2004, she enclosed three woodcuts she had made from photographs.

To Haver's joy, LeGon responded by phoning her in Amherst one night. "She was thrilled and excited and very appreciative," says Haver.

The two women talked about getting together and, soon after, Haver noticed that a tap festival was scheduled in Vancouver that September. That's where she met LeGon in person for the first time.

"She's very positive, very generous and very warm," says Haver. "She has a fantastic sense of humor. She's a great teacher."

During that visit, Haver said to her new friend, "There really should be a children's book about you!"

LeGon replied that she was too busy working on her memoirs to think about that. But

when Haver got home, she went to work on a series of watercolors and pastels that illustrated the dancer's life. She sent them to LeGon as a surprise.

"I thought they were fabulous!" says LeGon.

"She said she cried and cried," says Haver. "I told her they were hers, and she could do what she wanted with them."

She also told LeGon that, as a co-owner of Collective Copies in Amherst, she had the capabilities to print the book herself. She had done this earlier with her illustrated book "Rufy," about a hummingbird.

So the two women decided to produce a book together. The text flew back and forth across the continent as it took shape. By Christmas, LeGon was taking the first run of the "What Tap Dancing's All About" to speaking engagements.

Haver, who had been selling her cards at tap festivals from Austin, Texas, to Portsmouth, N.H., now takes the books along, too. To order the book, people can contact her at 549-1337 or e-mail [nha-ver@crocker.com](mailto:nha-ver@crocker.com).

Haver returned to Vancouver recently for a book-signing. She also keeps on dancing. Though she plays down her talent, she has performed in recitals and aspires to dance for nursing home residents.

She says the legacy of the black tap dancers of LeGon's generation still inspires her.

"It makes me not want to be discouraged about anything," says Haver.