

Dance Article

First Tap Dancing Star of the Silver Screen – Ruby Keeler

The Roaring Twenties, a decade of wild excitement, carefree abandon, and frenzied joy. Just like a modern symphony, this era had its own score—the new rhythm of the twentieth century set to hot jazz music. The glamorous images this time conjures up: young couples frantically dancing the Charleston; fast, shiny automobiles; flappers with bobbed hair; gangsters, gats. And New York had it all, including Prohibition.

Despite all Prohibition attempts to restrict the flow of alcohol, bootleg hooch flowed like rivers in nightclubs, or as they were then called, speakeasies. All could be had by knocking on the passage window of a side-street speakeasy door and telling the man behind it that “Joe sent me.” Once inside, nightclub revelers saw the twenties unfold before them: chorus girls, underworld characters, bathtub gin, jazz bands, and Manhattan’s most vivacious entertainment. High brows and low brows, society dames and politicians, flappers and sheiks all jammed in like sardines to take part in the hysteria of the Jazz Age.

One of the entertainers they went to see was a sweet, nondescript hooper who had the twenties right in her lap—Ruby Keeler. This thirteen-year-old girl, with all the unselfconscious charm of a puppy dog, first took New York, then Hollywood, by storm, and by 1933, was destined to become America’s premier tap dancing star.

Ruby Keeler was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on August 25, 1910. Three years later, her family packed up for New York City. She began dancing at an early age, and by the time she was thirteen, she was in the chorus of a George M. Cohan show, *The Rise of Rosie O’Reilly* (1923). From Broadway she moved into the reigning nightclubs of the 1920s, including “incendiary-blond” Texas Guinan’s infamous speak-easy, the El Fey Club, and the glamorous and sophisticated Silver Slipper. She was not much of a singer or tap dancer, but her engaging charm and fresh innocence were enormously appealing and more than compensated for any want in musical ability. In 1923, she moved back onto the Broadway stage in such shows as *Bye, Bye, Bonnie* (1927) and *The Sidewalks of New York* (1927).

In 1928, Ruby Keeler went to Los Angeles to make a Fox short about dancing and to appear in theater prologues. When her train pulled into Union Station, she was spotted by Al Jolson, who was there to meet fellow passenger Fanny Brice. He asked to be introduced to Miss Keeler, whom he had seen onstage in New York City. A whirlwind courtship ensued, with Jolson following his new sweetheart back to New York. On September 21, 1928, Ruby Keeler became the third Mrs. Al Jolson. She was eighteen, he was forty-two. He was the “World’s Greatest Entertainer,” she a demure buck and wing dancer. They moved from Broadway to Hollywood, where Jolson had become involved with Warner Bros. Studio after his smash hit, the most successful early talking motion picture, *The Jazz Singer* (1927).

Ruby Keeler was not anxious to be a movie star, unlike so many of her coworkers. She was happy to live a quiet home life. But everlasting fame was thrust upon her with the role of Peggy Sawyer, the ingenue in the upcoming “All Talking, All Singing, All Dancing” musical comedy/drama *42nd Street* (1933). Ruby Keeler played the role with all the sweetness that she herself possessed, and when she tapped in the great finale number to the title song, she won all America. With release of *42nd Street*, Ruby Keeler became the first tap dancing star of motion pictures.

Despite her tremendous popularity, Ruby Keeler was the first to admit she was not as talented a performer as so many of her contemporaries, including Ginger Rogers and Eleanor Powell. And to set the record straight, she was not primarily a tap dancer: Ruby Keeler was a Buck dancer, and quite an accomplished one at that. The shoes, as well as the style, were quite different from tap: Buck dancers’ soles were wooden, and the concern was more with the

rhythm than the look; they danced primarily in one place onstage, and always on the balls of their feet, confining dance movement to below the waist. Screen tap dancers of the same time period were then developing an all-encompassing dance style, incorporating ballet and jazz movements. These tap dancers displayed a more nimble quality, using upper-body movement with finesse and to a much greater extent than the Buck dancers. In retrospect, this earlier tap style of Buck dancing may appear "klutzy," yet it was a legitimate and popular percussive dance form of the day.

Throughout the 1930s, Ruby Keeler continued to star in a series of successful Warner Bros. musical films, dancing with some of the finest tap dancers under contract with the studio. Her films included *Gold Digger of 1933*, *Dames* (1934), *Footlight Parade* (1933, tap partner, James Cagney), *Flirtation Walk* (1934), *Go Into Your Dance* (1935, costarring with her husband, Al Jolson), *Colleen* (1935, tap partner, Paul Draper), and *Ready, Willing and Able* (1937, tap partner, Lee Dixon). It was also during her contract with Warner Bros. that she first met and worked with the legendary Busby Berkeley, the kaleidoscope mind of choreography. And though she was not really a tap dancer, and not the most accomplished actress or singer, nonetheless, Ruby Keeler will always be remembered with great warmth and affection as the first tap dancing star of the silver screen.