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gotta dance!

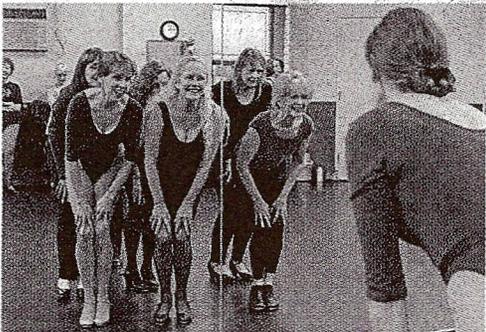
RANGING IN AGE FROM 54 TO 82,
THE RED HOT MAMAS
STILL GET A KICK
OUT OF PERFORMING G4

PHOTO BY DANIEL BRENNAN

coverstory



Helen Alexander, center, rehearses a routine with The Red Hot Mamas, a pro troupe, at a studio in Plainview.



A group checks a pose in the mirrors. They all get together to dance — up to four hours — on Tuesdays.



Dolly Carr, the oldest at 82, is one of the original members. Their routines are Rockette-style, kicks and all.



Kicking up their heels

BY CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN
Special to Newsday

Behind the closed studio door, the rhythmic, pulsating tapping to the big-band standard “Sing, Sing, Sing” reverberates from the main entrance throughout the Plainview rehearsal space. Midway through, the music halts abruptly and instructions are heard: “It’s kick, kick, back step. Now, from the top, girls!”

tappers aren’t girls at all. The very names of some of these dancers — clad in black leggings, tights, leotards, T-shirts and the requisite tap shoes — betray a senior generation: Chi Chi, Betty, Marion, Dolly. There are even two Helenes. They share not only an advanced age bracket, but a deeply rooted passion for dance. They are The Red Hot Mamas, a professional troupe of 17 women aged 54 to 82. And they meet every Tuesday at a Plainview studio for seri-



PHOTOS BY DANIEL BRENNAN



Anne Tillchock, left, and Dolly Carr take a break. The Mamas group was one of three winning adult acts at the Patchogue Pizzazz Talent Search in January, earning a \$500 prize.

ing homes and festivals across Long Island. Though The Red Hot Mamas dance for charity, many of their appearances are paid performances.

Steps above the rest
The group's hard work was rewarded Jan. 14, when The Red Hot Mamas were one of three

winning adult acts out of 23 competing at The Patchogue Pizzazz Talent Search. The Mamas took home a \$500 prize. In October 2010, the troupe auditioned for the short-lived CBS competition show "Live to Dance," starring judge Paula Abdul. The group, which got through the second round of auditions but not the finals, was featured in TV commercials and online promotions for the show. "The girls were disappointed" when they didn't make the final round, says the troupe's co-artistic director, Louise Rastu, "but I'm not really one for competition. I just want to promote dance and inspire people."

That spirit has been the backbone of The Red Hot Mamas since the group was founded in 1990 by Sandi Bloomberg, of Melville. Its original members were 10 of her best adult students, who ranged from 46 to 77. Bloomberg, a former Rockette, danced at Radio City Music Hall as a summer replacement from 1958 to 1962. In 1974, the wife and mother of three opened The North Shore Studio of Dance, in Huntington Station, teaching children and adults until 2000, when she retired and sold the studio. "We were one of the few studios on Long Island that did

not have recitals," Bloomberg said. Typically, studios are centered around recitals, with instructors concentrating on teaching the steps of a particular routine, which is then performed at a year-end show, Bloomberg added. In contrast, her studio focused on perfecting technique. "I wanted my studio to be more professional, with really well-trained dancers," she said, adding that she also only hired teachers who were professionally trained and met her standards. Besides Rastu, 49, there was Toni Wortman, 68. Both

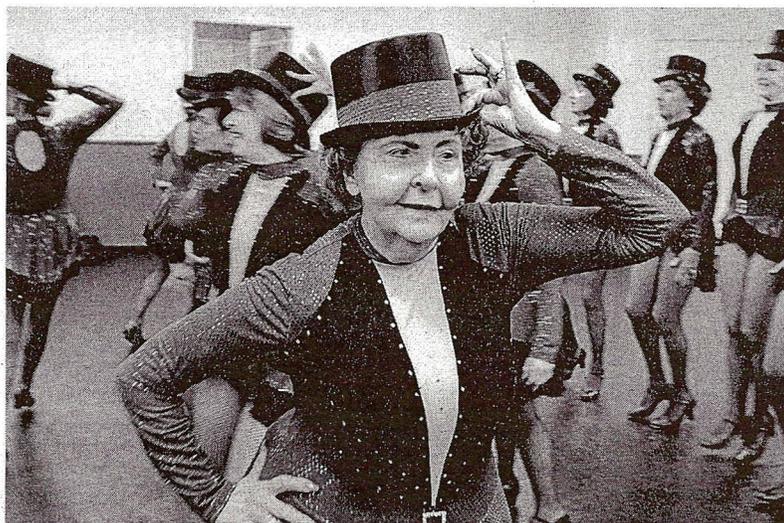
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The 17 in the troupe — that's Joanne Fried at center — suit up in costume for dress rehearsals. They perform at libraries, senior centers and festivals.

Upcoming performances

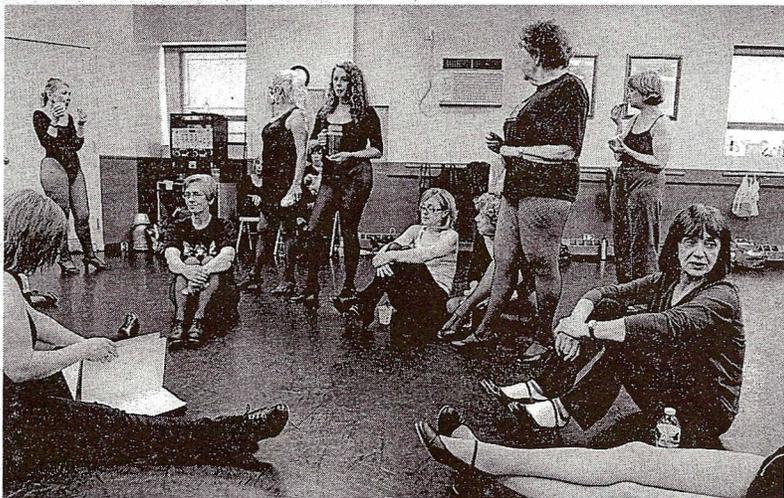
- The Red Hot Mamas perform annually at the Huntington Arts Council Summer Arts Festival at Heckscher Park. They will also perform:
- **March 14:** 2 p.m. at Meadowbrook Pointe, 1100 Corporate Dr., Westbury
 - **March 25:** 2 p.m. at Longwood Public Library, 800 Middle Country Rd., Middle Island
 - **April 20-21:** Long Island Dance Consortium, Long Island High School for the Arts, 239 Cold Spring Rd., Syosset (time not yet determined)
 - **May 10:** 2 p.m. at Garden City Library, 60 Seventh St., Garden City

See **HOT MAMAS** on G6



PHOTOS BY DANIEL BRENNAN

Dolly Carr had never taken a dance class: "I was hooked from the first day. I loved it!"



Co-artistic director Louise Rastu, far left, talks to the dancers. Half are in their 70s.



Their next act is always dancing

HOT MAMAS from G4

are now co-artistic directors and choreographers of The Red Hot Mamas under Rastu's Huntington Station studio, A Lifetime of Dance.

At just under 5 feet tall, Wortman isn't exactly the vision of a leggy hoofer, and in fact, it's her petite stature that kept her from becoming a professional chorus girl, she said. Still, she began dancing at age 4 and never stopped, performing in regional theater and dance troupes and teaching jazz, tap and creative dance for more than 30 years.

Rastu and Wortman take turns training The Red Hot Mamas, whose ranks have shrunk and expanded over the years. Two of the original 10 dancers retired in 2008, when they were 82 and 85. In 2000, four new dancers were recruited, followed by auditions in 2009, after which five more women joined the troupe. Dolly Carr, 82, is the most senior member of the group and is one of the original 10 members.

'Sisters' share strong bond

"I joined The Red Hot Mamas before we were The Red Hot Mamas!" Carr, a widow from Huntington who is also an amateur singer, said with a chuckle.

When she was 49, Carr said her daughter encouraged her to sign up for a tap dancing class at Bloomberg's studio, where Wortman was the teacher. And even though she'd never taken a dance class before, "I was hooked from the first day," Carr said. "I loved it!"

Certainly a love of dance is the bond that links the Mamas and their teachers, but arguably, it's also a devotion to each other that explains their longevity.

"I'm a newbie," said Joyce Bloom, 56, a lifelong dancer and dance teacher who jumped at the chance to audition for the Mamas in the summer of 2009. She said she wanted to join because the group would give her a steady opportunity to dance.

"What I didn't know and came to know, it was more than just dancing," she said. "This is an incredible group of women that I am fortunate to be a part of."

Bloom's father died unexpectedly 3½ months after she joined the group. In a show of unity and sup-

port, a lot of the women have gone through divorce, deaths, all different things. And you know there is this group, a sisterhood, that holds them up."

Bloom and another group member, Betty Mesard, 71, have battled breast cancer, as did Carr's daughter.

"I lost my daughter to breast cancer, and they were the best support group you can imagine," Carr said. "We're like sisters. We would do anything for each other."

That camaraderie comes to life in their performances, which require precision and discipline. And of course, stamina. Tuesday rehearsals are four hours long, a demanding length of time for even the youngest of dancers.

"Half of the group is in their 70s," Rastu said, and while they are all committed, she and Wortman are cognizant that certain issues could interfere with dancing, such as back pains or knee and hip problems. When that happens, Rastu said matter-of-factly, some of the women just have to work a little bit harder than others.

Rarely tapped out

At a recent rehearsal that ran well past the four-hour mark, one would be hard-pressed to tell whether any of the Mamas faces physical hurdles. They patiently — and seemingly happily — run through repeated steps and intricate combinations, making sure their arms and hands are positioned correctly at all times. After practicing a complex tap routine to "Sing, Sing, Sing," they launch into formations to the sounds of Judy Garland's "Get Happy," complete with glittery top hats. After a short break, they start working through "Singing in the Rain," which requires umbrellas as props.

"We usually have to have 10 dance numbers for a one-hour show," Rastu says, and each performance includes hair, makeup, props and costume changes.

On this particular day, the dancers are rehearsing for the annual Long Island Dance Consortium performance in April at the Long Island High School for the Arts, in Syosset. The consortium is a non-profit organization consisting of members of the Long Island dance community. Its event showcases 10 dance companies, providing The