

The Nicholas Brothers

by Imogen Sara Smith

The Nicholas Brothers were the quintessential hard act to follow. Over the course of careers spanning more than six decades, Fayard (1914-2006) and Harold (1921-2000) Nicholas astounded audiences with their unique and virtuosic blend of tap, acrobatics, and jazz dance, developing a signature style that was simultaneously explosive and elegant. Starting out as child performers in vaudeville and nightclubs, they went on to star in Broadway musicals and Hollywood movies, where they were among the first African American performers to be featured in integrated films. Their exceptional talent, delightfully engaging personalities, and impeccable professionalism brought them success and popularity despite the entrenched racism and segregation of the entertainment business, which prevented them from achieving the level of recognition and opportunity that they deserved. While no one has been able to match their staggering athletic feats—many of which, though captured on film, look humanly impossible—the style they pioneered has influenced generations of dancers with its rhythmic intricacy, full-bodied expressiveness, and dazzling panache.

Fayard Nicholas was born October 28, 1914, in Mobile, Alabama, and his brother Harold (named for Fayard's favorite movie comic, Harold Lloyd) followed on March 17, 1921, by which time the family was living in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Their parents, Ulysses and Viola Nicholas, were musicians who performed in pit bands for black vaudeville theaters and silent film orchestras. Viola was an accomplished pianist, and Ulysses was a drummer with a style of flamboyant showmanship. Both came from educated and cultured backgrounds and also had a deep familiarity with jazz. The Nicholas children were sent to good schools, but Fayard spent his free time in the theaters where his parents

performed, and from the earliest age his desire to dance was all-consuming. Learning his craft by watching and imitating professionals, he enlisted his sister Dorothy, who was one year younger, as his dance partner in an act called The Nicholas Kids. Dorothy was not enthusiastic about the venture, but Harold was a precocious dancer who idolized his older brother and readily learned to copy his moves and his distinctive style.

In 1926, the Nicholas family moved to Philadelphia, where Ulysses and Viola organized the pit band at the Standard Theater, the city's pre-eminent showcase for black variety performers. Around 1929 (the exact date is not known), Fayard and Harold gave their first performance at the Standard and soon began appearing in other theaters in Philadelphia and nearby cities. In 1932, they made their triumphant New York debut and the family settled in Harlem, where Ulysses and Viola began devoting themselves to their sons' careers. From the beginning, the Nicholas Brothers were a strictly professional "class act." The combination of their youth, élan, and brotherly rapport with their elegant appearance in tailored suits and their phenomenal dancing made them an immediate sensation with audiences. In 1932, they made their first film appearance in the Vitaphone short *Pie, Pie, Blackbird*, with Eubie Blake's jazz orchestra and Nina Mae McKinney. The same year, they began performing at the Cotton Club, the Harlem nightclub where elite white audiences came to watch the best black artists, including Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ethel Waters, Lena Horne—and the Nicholas Brothers, who because of their age were the only performers allowed to mingle with audiences.

In 1934, Fayard and Harold went to Hollywood to appear in their first feature

film, the Eddie Cantor vehicle *Kid Millions*. They made their Broadway debut in *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1936*, in which they accompanied Josephine Baker. Throughout the remainder of the thirties and forties, the Nicholas Brothers appeared in annual shows at the Cotton Club and at other theaters like the Apollo; in Broadway productions (including *Babes in Arms*, choreographed by [George Balanchine](#), who created the “Egyptian Ballet” for them); and in movies. In feature films, their roles were usually restricted to performing one or two “specialty” numbers unconnected to the plot, and they were rarely given dramatic roles or female partners. Sometimes, as in *Down Argentine Way* (1940), their single scenes overshadowed the movies that contained them, and audiences would arrive at theaters just to watch their dance numbers.

Most of their movies are forgotten and forgettable apart from the Nicholas Brothers’ specialty numbers, which include the glorious show-stopper “I Got a Gal in Kalamazoo” in *Orchestra Wives* (1942). One exception is *Stormy Weather* (1942), which, while weak on plot, features a peerless array of talent, including [Bill Robinson](#), Lena Horne, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, the [Katherine Dunham](#) Dancers, and the Nicholas Brothers, whose famous number “The Jim Jam Jump,” in which they leap-frog down a staircase into splits, was praised by [Fred Astaire](#) as the greatest dance ever put on film. If not for the racial prejudices of the time, which limited blacks on screen to minor roles as servants, Pullman porters, and shoeshine boys, the Nicholas Brothers would likely have had films constructed around them and become major dancing film stars like Astaire or [Gene Kelly](#).

In their early years, youth granted them special status, but as adults Harold and Fayard suffered more from Hollywood’s inability to offer them appropriate mature

roles. In 1948, Gene Kelly had to fight with producers when he wanted to dance with the brothers; in the end he was able to include the number (“Be a Clown,” in *The Pirate*), but it was excised from prints circulated in Southern states.¹ After this film they made no more movies for two decades, and during the 1950s, changes in the entertainment world and the decline of tap offered them fewer chances to perform. They found greater opportunities abroad, and spent seven years performing separately—Harold in Europe, Fayard in North and South America—before reuniting on television in 1964. Benefiting from an upswing of interest in jazz and tap dancing, they became busy once again with performances on television, in clubs and Broadway shows, and in movies, where they were finally cast in dramatic roles. They continued performing throughout the 1970s and 1980s, helping to pass on dance traditions to younger generations, teaching master classes and receiving many awards and tributes, including Kennedy Center Honors in 1991.

Because of their trademark acrobatic moves, such as the leap into a split with a no-hands recovery, the Nicholas Brothers were sometimes called “flash” dancers, but this label does not do justice to their artistry. Nor were they strictly tap dancers, though they used tap as a basis for most of their routines. They combined tap and pyrotechnics with many other influences, all dominated by musicality, rhythm, and style. They had no formal training, but picked up tap steps, buck dancing, [Charleston](#), and other vernacular forms, to which they added their own innovations. When Balanchine worked with the brothers, he asked Fayard whether they had ballet training, since he thought they displayed classical form and line (Valis Hill, 124). In fact they had no background in ballet, though they later incorporated some balletic styling suggested by Nick Castle, the

dance director at Twentieth-Century Fox. They used their entire bodies in arching lunges, angular poses, aerial moves, spins, toe balances, leg extensions, and free arm movements—all of which departed from traditional tap style, with its upright posture, minimal upper body movement and ground-hugging footwork. Their dances devoured space, using slides, glides, leaps, flips, turns, and runs. Their performances generated maximum excitement, while also demonstrating precision, wit, and delicacy.

In her book *Brotherhood of Rhythm* Constance Valis Hill explores the connection between the Nicholas Brothers' dancing and the evolution of jazz music. Growing up in an intensely musical household, they went on to perform with the best jazz bands of the 1930s and 1940s, including the orchestras of Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Dizzy Gillespie. Fayard told interviewers that he never counted beats when devising choreography, but vocalized them through scat singing. Valis Hill persuasively argues that the Nicholas Brothers were themselves jazz musicians. Beating out complex, shifting rhythms with their feet, singing and scatting, they also captured the spirit of jazz with their mix of speed and ease, wild kinetic freedom and exacting control.

As a team, the Nicholas Brothers had harmonious chemistry, mixing synchronized steps with solo variations that exhibited their different talents. Taller and longer-limbed, Fayard was notable for his lithe, loose-jointed grace and distinctive use of his hands, which complimented his footwork with swirling, expressive flourishes. In the early years of the partnership, Fayard was responsible for all of the duo's choreography. Harold, whose small size and impish, charismatic personality won over audiences, performed solo from an early age; in addition to dancing, he was a gifted jazz singer (he performed and recorded in multiple

languages) and developed a talent for spot-on impersonations of other performers, which he often offered as encores.

When they performed together, the brothers' habit of trading off sections of music reflected the tradition of challenge dances in tap. There was an aspect of competition in their escalating displays—Harold would do a triple air turn into a split; Fayard would jump over his handkerchief into a split-and-recover; Harold would run up against a wall and push off into a back flip—but they always conveyed appreciation and pride in each other's feats. They were avid producers of home movies, which capture their playful, affectionate family life, as well as their ceaseless joy at seeing their names in lights.² Dance most often expresses either romantic union or solitary achievement, but Fayard and Harold Nicholas used it to express brotherly love.

NOTES:

1. Other partners with whom they performed include Josephine Baker; Dorothy Dandridge (Harold's first wife) in the film *Sun Valley Serenade* (1941); Carmen Miranda in a live tour in 1940; and Donald O'Connor in a television special tracing the history of tap in 1966.
2. Bruce Goldstein, repertory programmer for Film Forum in New York and a long-time friend of the Nicholas Brothers, has campaigned to have their home movies added to the Library of Congress's National Film Registry. One of the films records Fayard and Harold doing an impromptu dance with Fred Astaire at RKO Studio during the filming of *Top Hat* (1934).

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