

# Northern Virginia's Jazz Dance Treasure

By Sarah Anne Sillers

As the artistic director of Dancin' Unlimited, a professional jazz dance company based in Northern Virginia, Marilyn York has been bringing first class jazz dance to the Washington Metropolitan Area for over thirty years. Her experiences as an artistic director, performer, instructor and choreographer attest to her unwavering resolve. With her keen attention to detail and no-nonsense management style, York devotes herself to improving the quality and visibility of jazz dance.

Since its beginnings in traditional African dance, jazz dance has evolved to include everything from the lively Lindy Hop and the sleek stylings of musical theater legend Bob Fosse, to today's hip-hop. Classic jazz technique borrows heavily from the fluid lines of ballet, yet features broad, grounded movements and percussive music.

York's interest in dance was first sparked by the charm of Gene Kelly films. She began taking dance classes at age eleven in a satellite studio of the Washington Ballet. Six years later by pure chance she participated in a jazz dance master class taught by choreographer Wally Saunders, and she was hooked.

York jumped at every opportunity to further her jazz dance education. In addition to Saunders, she trained with Nilo Toledo in Georgetown, as well as jazz icons Gus Giordano, Luigi, Frank Hatchett, and Phil Cole. She wanted to "take [classes] from as many people as I possibly could." She even attended the first Chicago based Jazz Dance World Congress in 1990. York's daughters Jessica and Stephanie reveal one of their mother's rare comments that, "Luigi frequently asked her to come up front when she took his class because he thought that 'she had it.'" Jessica continues, "Gus Giordano himself picked my mom out in his classes during that first Congress because he thought she had fantastic jazz layouts.



Many dance students don't realize that Gus and Luigi, these amazing jazz dance pioneers, took note of my mom whenever she was in front of them. I believe that is worth sharing. Her jazz dance company exists to promote the very philosophy that those legendary dancers invented."

York began looking for "an outlet to perform jazz professionally," she explains "so I surrounded myself with advanced jazz dancers who shared a similar passion." Eventually she became the director of the Dance Theatre Company of Northern Virginia, which has become Dancin' Unlimited.

Dancin' Unlimited originally specialized in cabaret style concerts. In 1986, with the help of a \$2,000 contribution from Stein's Theatrical and Dance Supply in Arlington, York organized the first Jazz & Tap Dance Festival. The upcoming Festival, March 5-6, 2011, at the Northern Vir-

ginia Community College Annandale Theatre will mark 25 years of crowd-pleasing performances.

York is committed to presenting the full range of what jazz and Broadway dance encompasses today. Her innovative choreography has something for everyone, ranging from the lighthearted "Who's Got the Pain?" from *Damn Yankees* to the intense tribal work "Drum." Her pieces are as timeless as they are accessible to "your average person on the street." York believes that jazz dance should be entertaining for its audiences and fulfilling for its performers. Not all dance has to be filled with cryptic messages or profound revelations of pain and suffering to be considered "artful."

One thing York is sure of, it's that jazz dance is here to stay. Our only problem, she stresses, is that recent popularity of competition dance shows



Marilyn York,  
Artistic Director,  
Dancin' Unlimited

tends to spotlight "cookie cutter dancers" whose training is geared toward tricks rather than technique, artistry and style. Jazz dance does have grassroots appeal. The commercial use of jazz dance, however, makes it look easy and has caused some arts critics to dismiss it. "My dancers can do any genre of dance," she claims with pride, "thanks to their extensive experience in ballet, modern, and jazz. They are strong and versatile."

For information about Dancin' Unlimited and tickets to the 25th Annual Jazz & Tap Dance Festival, visit [www.dujdc.org](http://www.dujdc.org). York wants people to experience the power and passion of our indigenous American dance style. She and her Dancin' Unlimited dancers always have people moving in their seats, tapping and humming, uplifted and inspired. Marilyn York is an artistic treasure of Northern Virginia.