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[Tap extravaganza reaches back to Lawrence Welk and aims for the future](#)

- Rachel Howard, Special to The Chronicle  
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"Bet you thought I was going to be lousy," tap legend Arthur Duncan said from the Herbst Theatre stage Saturday night, straightening his '50s-style white jacket and flashing a broad showman's grin as an audience packed with avid tappers shouted approval.

Duncan, for years a regular on the "Lawrence Welk Show," had just taken them back to the old school, belting out "You're Nobody Till Somebody Loves You," tip-toeing through a move he called "slipping in after 3 a.m.," hoofing the chorus to "If It Ain't Got That Swing." His nostalgic charms had all the more appeal because they capped a show that so enthusiastically celebrated tap's present.

This was the second year in a row that Duncan, 72, headlined the Bay Area Rhythm Exchange. The banner event of the Bay Area Tap Festival, organized by local master tap teacher John Kloss, it's become the place for dedicated tap dancers to see the greats, and for tap newbies to discover there's much more to contemporary tap than Savion Glover.

Young tappers and old jam together at the Rhythm Exchange, tappers who click across the stage like butterflies alighting on flowers, and tappers who slam into the beat like a big rig hitting a brick wall. Together they proved there are as many exciting styles in tap as there are rhythmic possibilities in a bar of music. St. Louis Tap Festival director Robert L. Reed was the evening's jokester, striding on in a pink suit and matching Pepto-Bismol-colored shoes.

"If I do something up here and it looks like it hurts, it does," he said. "So I want tremendous, thunderous applause."

He got it, after sashaying through a little Charleston, slapping his thigh as though to make it cooperate and then launching into a flip that landed in the splits and seemed to surprise even the band.

Not everyone mugged so blatantly. Sam Weber, the most balletic of the bunch, let the delicacy of his tapping speak for itself as he rapped out incredibly clean and fast rhythms with the crispness of castanets. With his debonair refinement, he couldn't have been more distinct from Edward Jackson, perhaps better known as the sweat-slicked man who dances every day at the Powell Street cable car turnaround. Jackson soon had his shirt off and his feet hammering out 6/8 time, his upper body jerking in his aggressive, funk-influenced manner.

Everyone had their own particular presentational panache, from Weber's gentlemanly small bow to Jackson's toss of his hat into the crowd. The ways the performers interacted with the music were all over the map, too. Hip, sunglasses-clad Channing Cook-Holmes seemed to walk right on top of it, taking in the beat and then driving through his rhythms as though laying down a track, suddenly sliding to the lip of the stage like a car on a slick road. Whereas Kloss, a slight man with slick hair, relaxed into the give and take, skating through tricked-out turns in his stage-skimming style.

Ayodele Casel, the only woman on the program, looked happiest when halfway through a riff, when relaxation would suddenly loosen her petite frame, and pleasure brighten her fiercely concentrating face. In all cases, musical director and drummer Jerry Kalaf (of Los Angeles' famed Jazz Tap Ensemble), bassist Marcus Shelby, pianist Larry Dunlap and percussionist Scott Breadman gave these dancers a hot band to jam with.

And then there was Duncan, belting out "What a Wonderful World" as though he were Tony Bennett, leading the audience in sing-alongs of everything from "Deep in the Heart of Texas" to "I'm a Little Teapot" as he caught his breath from a difficult tap passage, raising his eyebrows shamelessly for applause as his back leg whirled like a wayward propeller.

In a day when Savion Glover rules the international tap circuit with his deep musicianship and anti-presentational, almost defiant demeanor, it was also good to see that showmanship never goes out of style.

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