

OF BAD BOYS IN THE LAND OF SHAG

The shag is a bad dance, in the way a good thing is bad to the bone. The music, the rhythm and blues, and the basic step of the shag become part of your molecular structure. The people you dance with seem to remain friends through the years. The atomic weight of the shag is negligible, so that over space and time, it's no trouble at all to carry the memories.

About twelve years ago, I went in partners with a bad boy named Wendy Gill, whose idea it was to compile and publish a definitive history of the shag. Wendy grew up in Florence, South Carolina, a lifelong friend of Billy Jeffers, a legendary dancer, whom some people say invented the shag. Wendy was a dancer when he had to be. On occasion, he would dance around the truth, when he told pretty girls what they wanted to hear. As a kid, he spent a lot of time in the woods, learning to track and stalk small animals. He eventually imagined himself as a professional hunter in Central America, who would slay jaguars and sell the skins for his livelihood.

Instead, for a while, during the Vietnam era, he became a professional soldier, a captain in the U.S. military. He wound up at the School of Jungle Warfare in Panama, as an instructor. As far as I know, he still holds the record for crossing the Isthmus of Panama on foot, faster and to greater operational effect than all the troopers of his day. As a patriot, and as a warrior, he was an absolutely dedicated and lethal individual.

Before Panama, he was a lifeguard in Myrtle Beach, by definition a bad boy, a shag dancer sometimes, but always Wendy was cool, and effective, when he was sober, at leading other men. He led me to write a book about Billy Jeffers and Chicken Hicks, Harry Driver and Big George Lineberry, Shad Alberty and others, who were bad boys once upon a time, all passed away now, including Wendy.

Shag dancing was something Wendy and I learned as kids, because the girls demanded it as an element of coolness.

Wendy's cool never depended on dancing. His gravity ran at a deeper remove than dancing indicated, like the gravity of Billy Jeffers, Chicken Hicks, Harry Driver and Shad Alberty. The dancing was a manifestation of something unique that did not depend on anything but heart.

Shad Alberty had it. A dancer named Bunk Leach carried the scars that all of them carried in spirit. Jo Jo Putnam and Maurice Treadaway gave the same sort of scars to boot camp soldiers who misbehaved around local girls after four o'clock in the morning at Spivey's Pavilion.

The old time dancers were beer joint warriors. They would deal with you harshly if you were not a gentleman and laugh about it later, but quietly. There was

nothing special about the fighting; it was just something that happened in the midst of youth.

Nothing lasted but the music. And, miraculously, the dance.

When Wendy brought me the idea to write a book about the shag, I said, "Naw, man, we left all of that back in high school."

As a writer, I thought I'd moved on to more imposing themes than purple Jesus, lifeguards and the pursuit of girls with heart-shaped rear-ends, but I was wrong. It turned out that the shag dance had a story behind it more compelling than all of my literary pretensions. It turned out that Wendy Gill and Chicken Hicks, Harry Driver, Shad and all the rest were more about the truth in me than all the lies I danced with, determined to get famous in New York City.

I wrote a book, called, "Shag, The Legendary Dance of the South." In the process, I learned the value of legends.

I got to know Harry Driver. I watched him burn as bright in middle age, in all his love of microphones and center-stage, as ever he blazed in youth, as a lifeguard with a new pair of shoes. I watched him dance in the glow of his own myth, partnered with Dottie, his wife, her still slightly amazed at herself, as if she were still a girl climbing a hurricane fence in a prom dress, running away with a bad boy.

Driver caught me dancing with her once, with Dottie, me stone drunk and barefooted, her dressed to the casual nines, in all white, with a backside still as pert as early September.

When the song ended, Harry looked at me with glittering eyes, as if to say, "Take your best shot, hoss, she's mine." And I believed him.

They were bad boys all right. Shad Alberty might have been the baddest of the bunch.

Shad was the one I witnessed at the Barrel, next door to The Pad, in 1967, when I was nineteen years old, and Shad was maybe thirty or thirty-two. He walked into the joint out of the fog of the late Fifties, mythical and all but forgotten, in so far as the only person in the crowd, who recognized him, was Bumps Hammond. Bumps said hello, as though to do that were a potentially dangerous act.

Shad said nothing.

And then he danced with Brenda, his wife, or maybe she was not his wife yet. The romance of the moment was undiluted by legal niceties.

The speed of Shad's feet negated reality almost. I knew that I was watching

something that would never be repeated, like catching a glimpse of a meteor as it streaked into earthly atmosphere.

Several decades later, it was an illumination of some magnitude to observe that Shad Alberty was barely six feet tall. He was, however, no less imposing, in 1993, when I watched him stroll into Fat Harold's one afternoon, followed by Norfleet Jones, who was then perhaps fifty and still looked like an awed teenager, trailing his hero into a crowd as thick as pharaoh's army, which parted like the Red Sea, allowing Shad, thus Norfleet, to pass like the Moses twins, without saying, "Excuse me."

I got to know Chicken Hicks, who was tall and rail thin, with arms as long as railroad ties, skinny as toothpicks, with sledge hammers attached to the business end.

Chicken had what boxers call "heavy hands." His fists looked about seven inches across at the knuckles. The knuckles themselves were knobby and big around as the old style light switches on a diesel transfer truck. When he slugged you on the upper arm, which he would do on occasion if he liked you well enough to tease you a little, it would hurt like a hammer swung by a girl, because he wasn't trying to hurt you, just remind you that his nickname indicated no lack of firepower.

Chicken was a street fighter. His dancing ability, as a boy in Carolina Beach, had always to be defended, along with his honor, due to that nickname. He was never shy of offering proof that he was not a chicken but the cock of the walk, a proven rooster and a veteran of the pit.

The young girls still loved him when he was logically too old to flirt. They would sidle up to him on the edge of the dance floor and wait for him to stop talking, which might take a while. They would ask him to dance, and then, as if the invitation surprised him, he allowed himself to be led onto the floor, a silver haired, silver-tongued barbarian, out of another age, when giants slept under the boardwalk and fist-fighting was done for exercise.

He danced around the girl as though she were a small goddess fresh out of cheerleader's training camp, him a renegade high school dropout who would spirit her away to Fort Lauderdale, while her mama wasn't watching.

Wendy Gill talked me into going to S.O.S. in '93. I showed up with a cynical attitude, with all of my literary pretensions in place. I was married at the time, with three young children. My marriage was on the rocks. My literary career was not so much in tatters as still waiting for a story to tell.

I could say a lot about the sentimental journey of coming back to Ocean Drive, finding faces in the crowd thirty years obscured by flight from my own roots. I

could say that I felt at home in a crowd of mostly strangers, and that the glamour of the dance seduced me all over again. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. The sap of nostalgia welled in my eyes, and I thought, "This is worth something, I could write about this. I know this story."

But it turned out that I didn't know the story at all. The research, the adventure of writing about the shag led me to the roots of dance culture in the western world. I never would have believed it, when I was fourteen, dancing with a doorknob, that I was learning steps passed down from ancient Africa and Western Europe, before the French Revolution.

After S.O.S., Wendy took me to interview Billy Jeffers.

Billy was a shy man. He lived modestly with his memories and a considerable legend. He was touted to me as the person who had invented the shag.

Billy Jeffers made no such claim. He seemed to know instinctually that something more lay behind the cultural phenomenon lately attributed to him. When I asked if he had invented the dance, he sort shrugged and laughed, "I don't know," he said, "that's what people tell me."

The atmosphere around Billy was not particularly bad, rather gentle, the décor of the living room in his house in Florence was decidedly feminine. His wife, Wanda, seemed obviously, and by agreement, to dominate the nest. While Billy sat in an easy chair, with his feet up, telling stories about the old days, him casually dressed after church, for it was a Sunday; Wanda busied herself in the kitchen, making final preparations for going back to church that evening, her immaculately turned out and coiffed, with a formal hair arrangement that reminded me of my mother's ritual visit to the beauty parlor once a week. Wanda Jeffers, however, had been Billy Jeffers dancing partner for a lot of years, thus, by extension was an aspect of Billy's legend, which was kind of unsettling for me, I guess because my mother was not a dancer, and I had not expected to meet someone so powerfully traditional as Wanda in a formal hairdo, headed back to church on Sunday night. It was impossible to imagine her in Capri slacks, boogie walking through the wooden floored saloons where the shag dance grew up

Billy told me stories, and I took notes for a book that I had decided to write. Wendy Gill and I, Will Maddox and a lot of other people, worked for sixteen months to get the story straight. We did the best we could. Perhaps we told one tiny fraction of the whole truth. Hopefully we got to the heart of it: the shag dance was not invented, it evolved, like the species of good girls and bad boys who take it up.

The dance came from sub-Saharan Africa and the Christian courts of Western Europe. It was transported on tall ships to the New World, and later rode choo-

choo trains to the ghettos of New York City. It flew south again with jitterbugs and lit upon the steel magnolias of the lost Confederacy. It grew up and almost died, then resurrected itself, because legends are worth remembering, are even necessary to hold onto for dear life, in a time when all of history is moving. The madness of the world seems farther away on a dance floor. In the close-hold position, arm in arm with a loved one, or just a friend, the madness seems to disappear altogether.

The abiding feature of the shag, it seems to me, is love, and the possibility of romance, which is the key motive, the hoped-for result, of most social dancing. The desire for love is as strong as the need of hope, without which dreams die, the music stops, the dance is over and legends descend into graves, where they do not belong.

And so we dance in order to endure, which is the duty of all survivors. The shag is a circle in space and time, the end arrives at a new beginning. We are born again with each old song and live with legends dancing in our memories.

By Bo Bryan,
Author of the Shag Book