



He hung up his 90 pairs of dancing shoes after this routine



Last Dance

BY LOUIS BERG

After 40 years, the Prince of Hoofers is abdicating. Everybody is sad — except Fred Astaire...

THERE are a privileged few who had a front seat at Bikini. They witnessed the death pangs of an old world and the birth of the Atomic Age. Let them brag about it. What I shall tell my grandchildren, is that I saw Fred Astaire dance his last dance.

For the Prince of Hoofers has abdicated. He has hung up his 90 pairs of dancing shoes and quit. "Blue Skies" is the last picture he will make. I watched him dance his final routine in it, and was inexpressibly sad.

Taps for an amazing career that began, believe it or not, 40 years ago.

To be exact, there were three careers. The first was when seven-year-old Freddie Austerlitz, son of an Omaha brewery salesman, was booked by the old Keith Circuit in a dance act with his sister Adele.

That was in 1906. Barouches were rolling down Broadway then, and Teddy Roosevelt was President. The great movie industry was only a five-cent peep show.

It Was Terrific

THE second career began in the shadow of World War I. . . Fred and Adele Astaire in New Songs and Smart Dances: "Passing Show," "Lady Be Good," "Funny Face." They had a cute routine, synchronized to the new jazz music over chairs, benches, tables and other obstacles. It was terrific.

To audiences of that day they symbolized everything that was debonair and youthful in the dance. The awkward grace of adolescence. The unstudied flight of young swallows.

When Adele married Lord Cavendish there was speculation about Fred's future. He was in his middle thirties and married to socialite Phyllis Potter. The script called for his retirement.

But Fred's career was only beginning. "My mother made me promise to quit when I reached 35," confesses Fred. "Well, it has taken 12 years for the percentages

and her advice to catch up with me."

For, at what should have been the twilight of his career, the movies belatedly discovered him. Balding Fred Astaire and an obscure redhead named Ginger Rogers became the boy-and-girl team of the century.

And for more than a decade after he should have passed his prime, Fred Astaire continued to play the dancing juvenile up to the hilt, defying the efforts of younger and talented men to wrest his crown from him.

Well-Earned Rest

BUT it had to come to an end sometime. He's a tired man now and wants to rest. The steel springs in his muscles may still respond, but the vital urge is missing.

I told him millions of people would be deeply saddened by his retirement.

"I'm not sentimental about it," he said curtly. "Dancing is hard work, and 40 years is a long time."

He was very matter-of-fact, too, about his closing number in "Blue Skies," and so, I thought, was the studio. No fanfare, no ceremonies, no parting speeches.

"Wrap it up," said Director Heisler briskly. And that was that. Fred Astaire wiped his brow, and headed for his dressing room.

His last number is called *Putting on the Ritz*. In it, through the camera magic, you will see nine Astaires dancing ensemble. Not one too many, and a fitting finale.

The one and only Fred Astaire went through the routines of all nine. His face had a harassed expression. But I was told that was always the case.

I saw one example of his fierce concentration during work. An overhead light short-circuited; sparks dropped to the stage; people scattered in brief panic. Fred remained on the stage, alone, thoughtfully beating out the tentative taps of his routine.

When it was all over, I followed him to his dressing room. He stopped and engaged another aging juvenile in earnest conversation. I edged up close, determined to catch his valedictory remarks.

"Who do you like for the third at Santa Anita, Bing?" I heard him inquire.

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