



IVAN “DANCER” TROTT

Born September 17, 1960, Ivan “Dancer” Trott is Bermuda’s oldest active Gombey Dancer. But you wouldn’t know it to watch him perform: his fast dance is still as intricate and energetic as it was in his youth. Ivan credits this to his disciplined upbringing, and his love and incredible passion for the Gombey art-form and culture. He began Gombey at age 8 with the Warwick Youth Gombey. In the 1970’s, he joined the Richardson’s Gombey under the watchful eye of his uncle George Richardson. In 1996, Ivan’s brother, Irwin Trott, began the Warwick Gombey Troupe, and Ivan has been dancing alongside him ever since.

He keeps up his energy by cycling, doing sit-ups, and practicing his dance steps, relentlessly. Even after 54 years of dancing, Ivan believes that Gombey can always pick up new skills or refine the ones they have, “Back in my day, when Gombey were still Gombey, dancers could really dance!” Ivan recognises, though, that culture is something that changes over time and space, “I have seen footage of guys in St. Kitt’s doing junkanoo and ours is faster and different in the footwork. I admire their beat, but the way that we do it, it’s on a different level. I credit that to fellas like Henry ‘Grother’ Wilson, Gerald ‘Beasley’ Green, and Reginald ‘Shakey’ Smith.”

Ivan recalls that in his youth, captains would use their whips if someone took their hats off, if they stopped dancing, or if the crowds got in the way of the bow man. There was far more authority in the captaincy, and the

music would be played at a higher tempo, with no young men in the drum line. Back then, nobody travelled by car but instead marched the entire way with energy, waiting for their chance for showtime!

His signature dance move is the heel-toe, a move performed on the balls of the feet and inspired by the classic tap dancers: the Nicholas Brothers, Sammy Davis Jr. and Fred Astaire. He says, “When you are light on your feet as a Gombey dancer, it looks more vibrant, more full of energy.” This light-footed charisma earned him the attention of CBS on one expedition to Mashantucket Pequot Schemitzun Pow Wow (Foxwoods), where they had him dance for the camera. Warwick Gombey Troupe has been particularly dedicated to exploring and showcasing the Native American influences in Gombey culture, and have travelled extensively through North America, the Caribbean, and Venezuela. This is a family lineage for Ivan, and the connection was fostered by St. Clair Brinkworth “Brinky” Tucker who introduced them to Everett “Tall Oak” Weeden, the activist and historian of Mashantucket Pequot and Wampanoag descent.

Ivan makes his own skirts and capes, his favourite being a red and black scorpion motif. His brother, Irwin, has made his favourite hat, a tribute to their deceased mother whose family connections got them both involved in Gombey. Ivan says he will keep dancing as long as his brother Irwin keeps beating drums, and shared how crowds go wild when he shakes the peacock feathers in his hat. Quite the peacock himself, he challenged, “I change the music when I dance. I make the drummers come up.”



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IN MEMORIAM

WILLIS “OLDMAN” STEEDE SR.

Willis “Oldman” Ondray Steede was born on June 24, 1959 with the Gombey drums humming in his heart, and took his last dance on October 4, 2019. He joined the Warner Gombey Troupe in December 1974 under Llewellyn “Termite” Warner and Allan Warner. After much training, Willis was given the approval to officially perform for the first time on Easter Monday in 1975. And it was official – he was a proud Gombey teen, and performed as a dancer for the rest of his years.

He became fascinated by Gombey history, and investigated the lineage of the Warner’s Group: before Allan Warner, Llewellyn “Termite” Warner held the group, which he inherited from Francis Llewellyn Spencer “Merry Mice” Darrell, along with a few others. Merry Mice had inherited Charles “Boxcart” Norford’s Gombey traditions from John Warner, and so Willis dug deeper before Boxcart’s Gombey to the history connecting the Bermuda Gombey to St. Kitt’s and Nevis and further beyond to West African tradition. This was a passion that he shared with Allan Warner, and the elders of the Warner Gombey were very close knit, a real family.

Over the years, “Oldman” held many positions in the Warner Gombey: scout, bowman, co-captain and eventually Captain. The Warner Gombey traveled extensively to promote Bermuda and share the Gombey culture, including across the USA, St. Kitt’s and Nevis, Germany, and Switzerland. Willis also represented Bermuda in groups created combining several troupes, showcasing his talent as one of Bermuda’s best Gombey dancers.

Willis and the elders of the Warner Gombey Troupe were adamant that even the youngest of the family tribe learn their Gombey heritage, and also how much they could share with those outside of the tradition. This enabled even the youngest to do interviews under the watchful eye of an elder. Oldman was extremely proud of his son Willis Junior (affectionately known

as baby Willis) at age 6 years old and troupe member Marcus Tucker at age 5 being interviewed during the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2001 in Washington, DC with the Department of Culture. This careful curation and preservation of history remains an indelible part of the legacy of the elders of The Warner Gombey.

Willis was instrumental during his captaincy in helping to produce new routines and choreography, but remained committed to preserving the history of the dance and its intentions. Whether in-or-out of a suit, Willis was a Gombey, he loved to perform. A veteran employee of the City of Hamilton, he was known affectionately as “Mr. Front Street” and often danced for tourists arriving or leaving by ship while donning his City uniform. His Gombey suits, however, were lovingly crafted by his wife Kathy Steede, and imbued with meaning from his research into the origins of Gombey culture, while he made his own hat and mask to match.

Willis was a team player: he believed in the concept of the troupe as family and honoured the support and confidence that the elders placed in him. Moreover, he was humbled by the trust that families of his young Gombey had in him as a teacher and mentor. Willis, Allan Warner, and Hubby Brown would sometimes meet with people wanting to establish their own Gombey groups twice a week for a month or two to help train them in the beat and dance. While dancing Gombey is not a lucrative passion, Willis was known to help troupe members or family struggling by supporting them with his earnings from the ground. Many of today’s great Gombey came from out of Warner Gombey, and while if Oldman was with us he would not have wanted to take any of the credit, those that came from Warner Gombey that have formed their own groups nominated him for this honour.

Willis “Oldman” Steede performed with the Warner Gombey troupe until 2015. In 2015, Gombey Evolution was created in-part by his son Willis Junior, who continues to drum out the heartbeat that his father taught him, so that the dance may carry forever on.



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PHILIP “MARLO” Deshields & CHARLES “NATURE BOY” WADE

Mr. Philip “Marlo” DeShields was born on December 20, 1948. He began dancing at age 10 with Llewellyn Spence, better known as Merry Mice in Charles “Boxcart” Norford’s Gombey Troupe. Marlo quickly became well-known as an exceptional dancer and always looked incredible, with all of his suits made by Ms. Janice Warner. A favourite cape of his was decorated with a butterfly. One night, Mr. Norford noticed Marlo’s discipline, keeping his hat on all day, and his pleasant disposition despite the fact that they had performed for a long time. To reward Marlo, he took off Marlo’s hat, put his whistle around his neck, put the whip in his hand and instructed Marlo, “take us home gracefully.” This was, indeed, an honour from his Gombey idol.

Under Merry Mice’s leadership, Norford’s Gombeys performed at College Weeks, often at Fort St. Catherine. Eventually, Merry Mice moved abroad and Freddy “Blue” Lodge captained the troupe, with Marlo as his Chief. Marlo became well-known for his leadership of the troupe, and fondly recalled other members including the incredible dancer Charles “Nature Boy” Wade, Rudolph “Chocolate” Hewey, Studley “Cap” Wade, and Gary “Peter Lobby” Bascome, just to name a few.

In the 1970’s, the Gombey Fiery Act was created, with a collection of the best dancers from troupes island-wide. Bass drummer Al Wilson was in charge, while Eugene Herbert played the kettle drum. Marlo was just a youngster at the time, but recalls Gary Smith, Morris Iris, and himself dancing around a young lady Millie McCoy with fire under her arms. The act performed at many of the hotels: the Bermudiana Hotel, Belmont Hotel, Harmony Hall, and the Carlton Beach Hotel to name a few.

Marlo is humble about his contributions to the Gombey culture, maintaining that there are many others that also participated with him and kept the tradition alive. He continued dancing Gombeys until he was about 30 years old, and still loves the rhythm of the drum.

When asked about being honoured for his contributions to the Gombey culture, Marlo insisted that he could not receive the honour without co-honouring his friend Charles “Nature Boy” Wade. Likewise, Nature Boy would not accept the nomination without first ensuring that one of his dancing idols, Marlo, was also being recognized.

Dancing runs in Nature Boy’s blood: his father was an excellent tap dancer himself, and as a small child he always ran after the Gombeys. Llewellyn “Merry Mice” Spence saw him dancing behind their troupe one day and asked his mother if he could sign up for Norford’s Gombeys. Quickly, he became a tiny favourite, and was one of the youngest dancers to perform at Castle Harbour and other hotels at about age 4 or 5.

Born July 25, 1952, Nature Boy was a bit younger than Marlo and fondly recalls that he always made sure he used to get home, “I stayed on Curving Avenue and he stayed on Happy Valley. He would walk me home. In those days, we used to come out in the streets at about 8 in the morning! We would have a dress rehearsal at 7:30 AM and if anything was wrong, they would send you back home!”

Another early memory for Nature Boy came at age 7, when Boxcart Norford himself stood on his foot and he began to tear up: “He was a big fella! He took me aside and said, ‘Sonny, Gombeys do not cry!’ I haven’t cried since.”

In those days, they spent a lot of time in the streets, dancing all over the island. He fondly remembers a day they began at Tills Hill, heading to Warwick. The music was so sweet, it carried them all the way to Somerset. They came back by foot along Harbour Road. That same evening they ran into the Scraggy Place Group in Hamilton. Place’s had a dancer called Sparky and they danced against each other. Sparky shook his hand after: “Boy you are great dancer, you will be one of Bermuda’s best.”

Nature Boy and Wendell Darrell created a criss-cross fast-step that people do today, but says nobody does it how they used to; although he loves watching Shawn Caisey of HnH dance today. In his heyday, an individual dancer would perform for 20–30 minutes alone: “I didn’t used to show off, but I didn’t let myself get showed up. When I danced, I went into a zone with the music. Every beat of the drum, you should have a step for it, because the Gombey created that beat. I had a good Gombey tribe behind me.”

He recalls Rodney Wilson doing flips without ever losing his hat and Bootsy Dillas was the best spinner, with amazing splits. Nature Boy loves the Gombey drum, and hasn’t heard a better drummer since Henry “Grother” Wilson, although he loved the way Pickles Spence played, and Gerald Green used to beat the rim so hard! Other notable Norford’s drummers were Eric Charles “Shorty” Maynard and Reginald “Way-Way” Wainwright.

Janice Warner also made Nature Boy’s regalia, and when he was old enough to have a long, flowing cape, he was able to add more flare to his dance. In those days, Gombeys never revealed their identity partially-dressed.

He remained with Norford’s Gombeys until they passed the tradition along to the Warner’s Gombey Group. But in his day, the Gombey was the Gombey. The best time of Nature Boy’s life has been dancing Gombeys, even representing Bermuda internationally: “I know what I’ve done in the streets, I know what I’ve done for Gombeys. If you didn’t see me.... then you missed it.”



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