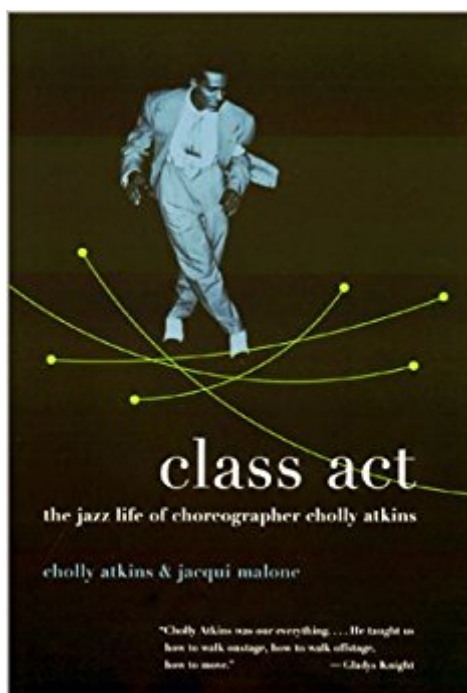


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# Class Act



## Synopsis

Cholly Atkins's career has spanned an extraordinary era of American dance. He began performing during Prohibition and continued his apprenticeship in vaudeville, in nightclubs, and in the army during World War II. With his partner, Honi Coles, Cholly toured the country, performing with such jazz masters as Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, and Count Basie. As tap reached a nadir in the fifties, Cholly created the new specialization of "vocal choreography," teaching rhythm-and-blues singers how to perform their music by adding rhythmical dance steps drawn from twentieth-century American dance, from the Charleston to rhythm tap. For the burgeoning Motown record label, Cholly taught such artists as the Supremes, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Temptations, Gladys Knight and the Pips, and Marvin Gaye to command the stage in ways that would enhance their performances and "sell" their songs. *Class Act* tells of Cholly's boyhood and coming of age, his entry into the dance world of New York City, his performing triumphs and personal tragedies, and the career transformations that won him gold records and a Tony for choreographing *Black and Blue* on Broadway. Chronicling the rise, near demise, and rediscovery of tap dancing, the book is both an engaging biography and a rich cultural history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is more than a factual biography of a great artist; it is a personal encounter with an exceptional man whose winning personality shines through on every page. The story of Cholly Atkins is that of 20th-century American jazz and tap dance. As a dancer, he teamed with Honi Coles and appeared with Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, and others across the country; his anecdotes about these

experiences offer a keen perspective on the performing life. A versatile artist, Atkins developed "vocal choreography" specially tailored rhythmic dance routines based upon steps used by African American chorus lines of the Twenties, Thirties, and Forties. It resulted in a successful Motown career and in his role choreographing the signature moves of such groups as the Pips and the Supremes. Later, he earned a Tony award for his choreography for the Broadway show *Black and Blue*. His personal heartaches and struggles are addressed honestly, and his triumphs over them are inspiring. Written by the 87-year-old Atkins and Malone (drama, theater, and dance, Queens Coll.), this book resonates with charm and provides solid information about the history of American jazz dance. For entertainment collections. Carol J. Binkowski, Bloomfield, NJ Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Cholly is one of the true icons of American culture--an original hoofer. He took social and street dances of the time and combined them with style and class, introducing a new dance genre, vocal choreography. Weaving rhythm and groove seamlessly, he created dance with flair while allowing several generations of young people to stand on his shoulders. Pops put a little dip in their hip and a little slide in their glide. He is a serious legend and one of the finest human beings I've even known. The legacy of Cholly Atkins is one that will be with us forever. We are blessed to have been touched by his magic. (Quincy Jones)He's the wellspring from whence we flow.... [He] understands the way that the human body moves, he understands the grace of dance. (Melvin Franklin, original member of the Temptations)His choreography is so unique, it's just like a Rolls Royce among a whole lot of Yugos. He's classic, man. (Otis Williams, member of the Temptations)Cholly Atkins was our everything.... He taught us how to walk onstage, how to walk offstage, how to move. (Gladys Knight)As *Class Act* makes clear, professional tappers formed an elite brotherhood, a society of proud, resolute strivers with no shortage of dignity, talent or wisdom. We should be grateful to Cholly Atkins for generously sharing his with us. (International Herald Tribune)To have Atkins' memories preserved is to have an immense contribution to nearly a century of American popular song and dance acknowledged, and in his own lifetime. Motown may have been just a stopover in this storied life, but we, and the company, were lucky to have him. (Terry Lawson Detroit Free Press)A personal encounter with an exceptional man whose winning personality shines through on every page...provides solid information about the history of American jazz dance. (Carol J. Binkowski Library Journal (starred review))Without having first read *Class Act*... you may be half-informed at best about the evolution over the past century of black dance rhythms and the importance of vernacular choreography. (Billboard.com)*Class Act* chronicles Atkins' amazing

career, from his entry into New York City's dance world to his performing triumphs and personal tragedies to the career transformations that won him gold records and a Tony award. Anyone interested in tap dancing and/or the history of rock and roll will enjoy this book. (Dance International)

I loved this book on Mr. Atkins. Here is one of my favorite excerpts from him: "I had an authentic jazz background. What I mean by 'authentic jazz' is what they basically now call street dancing - things that black neighborhoods came up with. We've been doing those moves for thousands of years. Tap dancers basically use portions of authentic jazz dance so they'll look good as well as sound good. I am talking about dances like the Suzie Q, Charleston, and the Black Bottom; things that created excitement as soon as we came up with them. Now, right away there were adaptations of these dances and they were claimed by other people and presented in places where we weren't permitted to go. But we all know where they came from. A lot of the moves that the young kids are doing now are very familiar. They have a different beat and all that, but you look closely and you see steps there from African traditional dances." I was prompted to read more about Cholly Atkins after reading Jacqui Malone's *Steppin' on the Blues*, in which she dedicates a chapter to him. The book was an enjoyable read, and I learned more about Mr. Atkins and people that touched his life, especially his tap partner and life long friend, Honi Coles. I was also touched by his revelations of some very painful events in his life. I had always been vaguely aware of how important Mr. Atkins was to the development of Motown artist. But I knew nothing of his life before Motown. He was at least 50 when he became a part of their team. But most of his life he was a rhythm tap dancer. What struck me is when he said the best and most innovative tap dancer since his time is Savion Glover. Now when the master says something like that, I must take note. He says Savion is an innovator. He added a branch to an ancient tree. He has taken tap further alone and has created some complex taps. I just love those old school artists. I just have a thing for classy, well dressed men and women. The Motown machine continued the tradition of class with their performers. Thank goodness my knowledge of him is no longer vague. I want to thank Ms. Malone for introducing me to Cholly Atkins properly.

This is a great read from start to finish. The life of Cholly Atkins, a surprisingly unsung pioneer who should be a legend in his own time. It relieves readers of their ignorance about the many ways his influence has been in their lives all along, and how much they have to thank him for regarding many features of American popular dance culture that are traced right back to his doorstep. Great inside stories about many American music and dance icons. The only thing missing in having the entire

book written in his (very colorful and endearing) voice is hearing more quotes and tales others might have to tell about what it was/is like to work under him, with him, and to be taught by him. Room for a sequel? Well and thoroughly researched by the co-author. Warm and genuine. There is something here for anyone with a pulse.

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