

NOW & THEN

When this Seattle artist installed sidewalk dance steps, everybody was watching



CHARLES ADLER / COURTESY JACK MACKIE

◀ **THEN:** In 1982, artist Jack Mackie holds a piece of rebar as he positions his rumba dance-step structure on Broadway before a concrete pour. He impishly notes that during the eight installations, he buried items such as doughnuts and a pound of French roast coffee beneath the concrete. Remnants, he says, will be revealed in "the next ice age."

By Clay Eals / *Special to The Seattle Times*

▶ **FOR JACK MACKIE**, life is better when we're dancing. It's "a cultural imperative." He's no professional hoofer. Grinning, he insists, "I'm just a bad shower dancer."

But get the wiry artist along Broadway on Capitol Hill and ask him to follow its eight sets of embedded bronze dance steps, and the 78-year-old doesn't hesitate to cut a concrete rug. Doesn't matter whether it's the waltz, tango, lindy, mambo, rumba or fox trot weave. He can't resist.

That's because he's the one who conceived and installed the sidewalk steps 42 years ago, back when he saw Broadway as a plain, four-lane arterial, devoid of street trees and needing a boost. ▶



CLAY EALS

▶ **NOW:** His cellphone substituting for rebar, Mackie strikes the same pose 42 years later.

◀ NOW & THEN

Bolstered by the city's 1% for arts program started in 1973 and a move to bury Broadway's electrical cables, Mackie first proposed the project to the Seattle Arts Commission in January 1979. "Hopefully, the dance steps will be a catalyst," he said. "A pedestrian could find someone on Broadway and dance on the sidewalk."

"Yeah, and get arrested for insanity," spouted dissenting commissioner Norm Hoagy, who favored spending money on music.

That wasn't the only flak. When the project was nearing installation, KING 5 reporter Greg Palmer interviewed Mackie on-site, where they encountered pickets with "No Dance Steps" signs. Art McDonald of rival KOMO went further, opining against the installation. "He was saying," Mackie recalls, "that someone's going to get knocked over; someone's going to get hurt."

Of course, no reports surfaced about such injuries. In fact, the steps seem to have generated only affection — evident when KING 5's local comedy show "Almost Live!" made them a key part of a circa 1990 "Speed Walker" sketch. Chasing a Dick's Drive-In burger bandit, Bill Nye as the title character could not stride north

on Broadway without pausing to gyrate to Mackie's golden mambo.

Each dance site, roughly 12 square feet, features shoe prints, arrows and "L" and "R" letters to guide the feet of

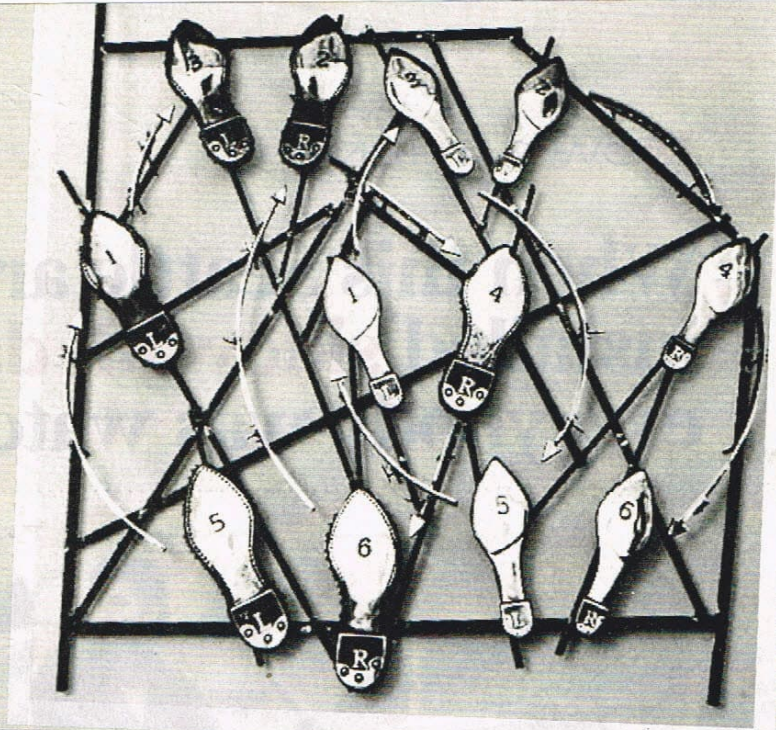
would-be light-fantastic trippers. The instructions, Mackie insists, are accurate, gleaned from an Arthur Murray studio. Two of the eight combinations, which Mackie playfully labeled "bus stop" and "obeebo," are entirely his own inventions.

For the inlays, Mackie got help from renowned bronze artist Chuck Greening, whose expertise ensured the steps would show little wear over the decades. Mackie also is proud that the inlaid concrete has never cracked.

Formerly of Capitol Hill, Mackie now lives in Edmonds. Visiting Broadway today, he likes to hang back and observe. "Ninety-nine percent of the people walk by," he says, "but then sometimes somebody will come, and there they go, dancing down them damn steps again."

Will you? 📺

Clay Eals is a contributing writer for Now & Then. Check out his and Jean Sherrard's blog at pauldorpat.com to learn how to schedule the two for presentations on local history. They share their 360-degree video at the YouTube channel Now & Then 360.



COURTESY JACK MACKIE

▲ **THEN:** The steel frame for Mackie's rumba steps in bronze, prior to their installation.



COURTESY KING 5

◀ **THEN:** In a "Speed Walker" sketch for "Almost Live!" circa 1990, crime-fighting Bill Nye cannot walk north on Broadway without stopping to dance Mackie's mambo.