

Basil cooks

NANCY GOLDNER

Toni Basil

Street Dance N.Y. to L.A.
The Kitchen, October 22-24

VIDEO, says one school of prophets, is the medium of the future. A few of our distinguished choreographers, such as Cunningham and Tharp, are already taking the itsy-bitsy image seriously. But even when their dances are conceived for video filming, their methods are essentially adaptation and reorganization. Toni Basil's rock 'n' roll dancing — a style she has synthesized from many individual sources and packaged for commercial enterprise — doesn't make sense until you see it on television.

It took me a while to figure that out, however. The program Basil put together and emceed was a lecture-demonstration about the origins of a style one assumes to have been collectively invented because it is seen in public places — at parties, in discos, and in other contexts best described as in the air or on the street. A cultural anthropologist of sorts, Basil has as her point that before the style surfaces on the street, it's invented by a choreographer. But how to find these kitchen choreographers? A superb storyteller, Basil relayed her odyssey from L.A.'s clubs to the founts of invention so that we could grasp the mystery and thrill of being on the track, and hence the triumph of finally zeroing in on the quarry. But when she showed a film she had made of her quarry, one Don Campbell, it



Toni Basil and Fred Barry and how they do it in L. A.

was impossible to share her triumph because the dancing is pretty much obliterated by fancy camera work. Dance images flicker before us and are zapped before they can register. Only by hindsight can I describe this film not as an arty documentary but as an attempted embodiment of rhythm.

Toni Basil had three live dancers with her, at the Kitchen, and although the sheer in-the-fleshness of their exhibits carries a vividness no television screen can match, their dancing felt incomplete compared to what I had not seen on film. Not seeing is the essence, I think, of what these dances are about; put more exactly, they fragment motion so severely that fragmentation becomes the subject of the dance. Seen live, this rock 'n' roll stuff (called locking, bugalooing, etc.) is spastic. Two of Basil's companions, Andrew Frank and Pete Solomon, are such virtuoso spastics that they create the illusion of moving under strobe lighting. Their virtuosity is a substitute, however, for what the camera can do more effectively. Seen live,

they have to overcome (and do they ever!) the absence of cuts and sharp camera angles. On video, the strobe effect isn't a magic act; it's so inherent to the medium that it's absorbed by it. Strobe rhythm becomes a natural rhythm expressing moods ranging from zaniness to nervousness, qualities that, not incidentally, are enhanced by the smallness of the video image. The film featuring Campbell as the chief object is an atmosphere piece, and its main problem isn't that it destroys the dancers but that it is uncertain about what kind of atmosphere it wants to project.

A far superior film — maybe one of the best dance films I've seen — is of a dance Basil was commissioned to choreograph to a recording of "Cross-Eyed and Painless" by David Byrne and the Talking Heads. About Los Angeles life, "Cross-Eyed and Painless" careens by in an imagistic montage of money rolls, cars, smog gear, and knives, all of which are anchored, as it were, by fleeting images of aggressive, punchy, edgy gestures — otherwise known as rock 'n' roll dancing.

Stripped of alliances with television, the dancing presented by Basil and friends is no more and no less than a continuation of the black-dance tradition in this country. I know little of this tradition and so am ill-equipped to compare the latest manifestation with its ancestors. I only recognize the same trademarks — a totally openhearted enthusiasm for the tricky stuff, like splits and rubber-leg contortions and high kicks and fast turns; burlesque (in Basil's version an informed and funny takeoff on *Swan Lake's* "dance of the little swans"); and the cult of the personality. As in older forms of vaudeville, the mixture of the performers' ingenuousness and sophistication forms ironies within ironies. It all hangs together by charm — and, oh boy, by what charm did the audience lose its pants at Basil's show.

JOHAN ELLBERS

Basil herself is a Barrie character, able to convince us that the ideological and aesthetic conflicts of the rock world, between, say, dancing solo and dancing unison (one doesn't say "in unison"), are ineluctable, cosmic, and shall be overcome: Oh yes, Basil of the wide eyes and snub nose, feathered headdress, and rouge-painted eyelids, we believe. We believe. Fred Barry, aka Penguin, is too fat to dance. That's why we love to see him dance. Pete Solomon is a wonderful dancer and knows it in a demurring kind of way. He can't fool us with his shyness though, and doesn't intend to anyway. The gentle smile is just part of his style, and we love him for it. Andrew Frank filled the unlovable slot. Working in a style he calls "the vogue," Frank impersonates the insolence and confrontative spirit of the high-fashion model and the hard-graphic techniques by which photographers shoot them. I confess to having a hard time with the hard-gay line Frank represents while recognizing the function he fulfills in the lineup. It's also true that, via self-mockery, Frank lets a little nice-guy spirit seep through his nasty persona. So in the end, a wonderful time was had by all.