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Old Time Dancing in the Appalachian Mountains

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Source: *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Autumn, 1989), pp. 40-41

Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of Congress on Research in Dance

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1478637>

Accessed: 30/06/2010 13:17

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# Reports

## OLD TIME DANCING IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS

*(Center for Appalachian Studies and Services, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee/CORD Regional-Special Conference, 27-29 April 1989)*

This is the first conference devoted exclusively to the dance traditions of the Appalachian region. Certainly other groups have come together to discuss old time dancing, but they have usually focused on the performance of dances (teaching steps, figures, etc.) rather than on an examination of these regional dance forms as representations of Appalachian culture (or cultures).

During the conference weekend there were really two mini-conferences. The first consisted of the usual paper-sessions presented to paid registrants. The second was open to the public and was organized around sessions in which presenters from the first mini-conference were joined by traditional performers, who shared with the scholars and public their unique insights into traditional Appalachian dance.

One of the most hotly discussed topics of the conference was the terminology used to describe all the various dance genres and styles present in Appalachia. The conference planners carefully chose the term "old time dancing" as the conference title in order to include *all* the variously used terms that have been associated with the dances of the Appalachian region. The most familiar of these terms are buck dancing, flat-foot, clogging, hoe-down, square dance, round dance, and circle dance.

"Square" and "circle" dance both refer to the group couple dances traditionally performed in Appalachia. These dances include sets of four (two couples, not four as in Western square dance), incorporate figures, and use a caller.

"Clogging" refers to more recent innovations in regional dance styles that can be done solo or can be developed into a group partner dance by adding

figures from the square dance repertoire.

"Buck dancing," "flat-foot," and "hoe-down" all refer to a traditional solo "step dance" that can be performed with or without taps on the shoes. These solo "step dances" (even clogging) can all be incorporated into the square dances as individual improvisations while moving through the figures of square dances.

The registered conference began on Thursday afternoon with three presentations that explored history and cultural change as related to old time Appalachian dance. Gail Matthews, of the McKissick Museum, discussed the culture change process, including movement style evolution, adoption of steps from outside the immediate area, and participants' feelings about these changes. For example, Ms. Matthews stated that the "free-style" (i.e., flat-foot or buck) dancers and "old-style" (traditional square) dancers do not like the new precision-style clogging. She further suggested that this dislike is based on the feeling that the tightly structured steps and figures violate the community's sense of balance between individual creativity and the individual's place in the group (community). Also, the precision clogging is felt to be created for "viewing/watching" rather than "doing," which seems to go against the tradition of the community.

Phil Jamison, of the *Old Time Herald* and a member of Green Grass Cloggers (a very well-known clogging group), presented a personal history of the Green Grass Cloggers and his view of the group's values and philosophy. Joan Moser, of Warren Wilson College, also gave an historical presentation of a clogging group. She introduced a film, *Our House to the White House*, which documents the history of the Soco Gap Clogging Team. Dr. Moser also shared an audio interview with Bascom Lamar Lunsford that recounts the origins of the Asheville Mountain Dance and Folk Festival.

Thursday evening's session was de-

voted to the discussion and viewing of the video, *Talking Feet*. This video documents individual performances of traditional Appalachian solo dance (the previously referred-to flat-foot, buck dance, and hoe-down), and is part of an ambitious project directed by Mike Seeger with the assistance of Ruth Pershing. The original intent of the project was to identify and catalog a repertoire of "steps," and although the project is still attempting to identify individual steps (and notate them using a system developed by Ms. Pershing), the video goes far beyond a dry presentation of steps. Each performer is encouraged to recount where, when, and how he learned "his" dance steps, and this oral history adds a good deal of richness to the video. Several of the traditional performers featured in *Talking Feet* were guest artists during the public portion of the conference on Saturday.

On Friday morning, after the welcoming speech by Richard Blaustein, Director of the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services (CASS), several presentations dealt with collecting data from communities in various parts of the region. Bob Dalsemer shared insights he has gained through years of collecting square dances from West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Susan Spaulding (conference coordinator) gave a report on her in-progress research. She is studying stylistic differences among three communities in southwest Virginia. Katherine Strobel, of Middle Tennessee State University, gave a summary of her dissertation work in the Cumberland Plateau region of Tennessee.

Studies of dance traditions other than Appalachian were also presented, as ways of hypothesizing about the origins of dances still extant in Appalachia. Merry Feyock, of Colonial Williamsburg, discussed the English roots of Appalachian dance and Colin Quigley, of University of California, Los Angeles, presented very intriguing visual material from his research in Newfoundland on a dance called "The Goat."

The highlight of the afternoon session was the movement workshop during which conference participants were taught several different genres of old time dancing. Jacky Christian, of the Old Time Music and Dancing Foundation, gave us the basics of buck dancing, Bob Dalsemer taught a square dance, and Phil Jamison taught some basic Green Grass Cloggers steps as well as some of his own repertoire.

The Friday portion of the conference was capped by an evening outing at a local dance and music performance space named Beechwood. After a half-hour drive through the beautiful Tennessee hills we arrived at Beechwood. It is not a night club—absolutely no drinking is allowed; it is a dance hall in the best sense of the word: a hall where people dance. All sorts of community members come to Beechwood to *dance*. They also come to talk with neighbors, listen to music, meet a boyfriend, or just be seen in a brand new hairdo, but mostly those who arrive are there to *dance*. The more “serious” dancers arrive with tap shoes in bags under their arms to be put on after entering the hall and finding their seats. Largely due to the gracious hospitality of Veronia Miller (Beechwood’s square dance caller and one of the conference’s traditional artists) our group was made to feel welcome in what was, for many of us, a very unfamiliar environment. We were each welcomed by name by the emcee and community members seemed to go out of their way to talk with us, and *best of all*, to ask us to dance!

Saturday was the “public presentation” portion of the conference. Some of the same material presented during the registered-only portion of the conference was reintroduced for the public. However, several things happened that made Saturday a truly memorable experience. First, due to interest generated by our visit to Beechwood the previous night, quite a number of community members decided to attend the conference on Saturday; and second, the traditional artists who came to participate in the public sessions were quite extraordinary. Those of us in dance studies always talk about the ideal forum for the exchange of ideas. For me it has always been the

coming together of scholar and practitioner in a dialogue of words *and* movement when there is a true sharing of both experiences—the intellectual and the kinesthetic. That sharing happened several times on Saturday. I cannot write about how I felt as I learned a dance from Walker Calhoun, an elderly Cherokee Indian, and Beechwood dancers would probably find it difficult to express the pride and feeling of affirmation they must have felt when scholars from all over the country came to study and enjoy “their” dances; but we all felt those things. Other great moments happened when unacquainted buck dancers from different areas came together and spontaneously started a little friendly challenge on the dance floor.

Some additional historical material was presented during the Saturday session. Notable were discussions of traditional square dance and square dance calling led by caller Veronia Miller, and a history of the folk school phenomenon by David Whisnant, of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. An excellent discussion followed Dr. Whisnant’s presentation, during which questions centered around the “whys” of the folk revival movement, such as politics of the times and urbanization pressures.

The final event of the conference was a trip to Carter’s Fold, another traditional music/dance hall in the area. We once again had the opportunity to hear and see first rate old time music and dance, but the overall experience did not live up to the Beechwood experience of the night before.

Apart from emotional high points experienced by many participants the most important aspect of this conference is that it happened at all. Every area of intellectual inquiry must have a “first” something; whether that first is a book, article, or conference is not important. The discipline of dance has now had its first serious look at the rich area of traditional Appalachian dance. The conference planners should be congratulated on their efforts. It was very encouraging to see scholars, revivalist dancers, and traditional dance artists come together to enrich the experience of each other. Special recognition should go to LeeEllen Friedland, Program Chair;

Susan Spalding, Conference Coordinator; and the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services for their efforts. CASS has indicated an interest in hosting another conference next year. Those of us who attended this year certainly hope they will do so.

Vicky Risner Wulff  
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**KATHERINE DUNHAM AND HER CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMERICAN MODERN DANCE** (*Stanford University, 12 May 1989*)

More than seventy scholars and community members from around the nation convened in the Law Building at Stanford University (Palo Alto, California) for this one-day symposium. The event was partially funded by Stanford’s 100th Anniversary Organizing Committee, and was planned by the Committee on Black Performing Arts. The symposium was part of a one-month residency by Miss Dunham and her staff, and was originally funded by three departments: the Dance Division (housed in the Department of Athletics, Physical Education, and Recreation); Anthropology; and African and Afro-American Studies.

Yvonne Daniel (formerly of Mills College, currently at Smith and the Five Campus Colleges) coordinated the symposium, and stated in her opening remarks that the gathering was intended to be a celebration of Miss Dunham’s seminal work in black dance in the Americas, to utilize Dunham’s history as the focal point to examine black dance in the United States, and to deliberate the extent of growth in the discipline of dance anthropology. Daniel noted that neither Judith Hanna (*To Dance Is Human*, 1981) nor Anya Peterson Royce (*The Anthropology of Dance*, 1977) recognized the contribution of Katherine Dunham (*Dances of Haiti*, 1947) as a pioneering dance anthropologist. Daniel credited the heroic efforts of faculty member Halifu Osumare and the administrative committee (which included Stanford faculty and dedicated community members) who succeeded in garnering additional funds from pri-