

Folk Dancing

Erica M. Nielsen

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Manufactured in the United States of America

*For my husband, Nicholas Okamura, who makes my
heart dance with joy.*

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Series Foreword

From the Lindy Hop to hip hop, dance has helped define American life and culture. In good times and bad, people have turned to dance to escape their troubles, get out, and have a good time. From high school proms to weddings and other occasions, dance creates some of our most memorable personal moments. It is also big business, with schools, competitions, and dance halls bringing in people and their dollars each year. And as America has changed, so, too, has dance. The story of dance is very much the story of America. Dance routines are featured in movies, television, and videos; dance styles and techniques reflect shifting values and attitudes toward relationships; and dance performers and their costumes reveal changing thoughts about race, class, gender, and other topics. Written for students and general readers, The American Dance Floor series covers the history of social dancing in America.

Each volume in the series looks at a particular type of dance such as swing, disco, Latin, folk dancing, hip hop, ballroom, and country & western. Written in an engaging manner, each book tells the story of a particular dance form and places it in its historical, social, and cultural context. Thus each title helps the reader learn not only about a particular dance form, but also about social change. The volumes are fully documented, and each contains a bibliography of print and electronic resources for further reading.

Preface

The United States is home to a large array of dance forms representative of the many types of people who have populated the land. Some dance forms are affiliated with different nationalities or ethnicities and were either created abroad or by immigrants living in the United States. Other dance forms such as Square Dance, in all its variations, are considered American because they developed on American soil and have unique characteristics that distinguish them from other nations' dance forms. Dance forms such as the Waltz and the Polka are so well known that Americans embrace them as their own dances even though these dances originated elsewhere. The term "folk dance" commonly describes any dance form tied to a specific cultural group or nationality.

In the early 20th century, social reformers and professional educators in England and the United States introduced European folk dances to children and immigrants in settlements, schools, playgrounds, and after-school programs. Around the time of World War I, the folk dance movement grew to include rural American dance forms. Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, a surge in fairs and festivals introduced countless people to folk dancing. Soon after, folk dance clubs, weekend dance events, and weeklong dance camps brought people together and facilitated the development of nationwide networks of enthusiasts. The folk dance movement flourished after World War II with increased record production and a folk music revival, and it peaked when the baby boomers reached adulthood in the 1960s and 1970s.

This book begins with a discussion about classifying dance forms and different interpretations of “folk dance.” Chapters 1 and 2 provide an overview of Native American dances and African American dances to help contextualize the relationship of these forms to the folk dance movement. Chapter 3 summarizes European immigration to the New World and describes European dance forms that were popular through the end of the 19th century. European dance forms make up the bulk of early folk dance repertoire, and European ballroom dances heavily influenced American rural dance forms, or American folk dance.

Chapter 4 situates the folk dance movement within the context of Progressive era urban social reform initiatives. It delves into the history of gymnastics and gymnastics dancing in education, and it discusses folk dancing as a means to assimilate immigrants, improve children’s well-being, and reinforce the Anglo national spirit. Chapter 5 explores American folk dance activities and shows how Square Dance spread from rural areas to cities as a type of recreation. Chapters 6 through 8 provide an overview of International Folk Dance, Modern Western Square Dance, and Contra Dance. An examination of these dance communities sheds light on related dance forms, including Balkan Dance, Clogging, English Country Dance, Israeli Dance, Line Dance, Round Dance, and Scottish Country Dance. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the folk dance movement and examines its contemporary state.

My first experience with International Folk Dance was in 2003 at age 22. I had never encountered Square Dance or Contra Dance prior to conducting fieldwork for this book in 2008–2010. During my journey, I interacted with hundreds of dancers and attended numerous regularly scheduled dances, dance weekends, and dance camps. As a dance anthropologist, I attempted to write objectively from the cultural insiders’ point of view, while addressing questions that were intriguing to me as a cultural outsider, such as the following:

What makes a dance a “folk dance”?

Does the United States have original folk dances?

Where and how have people experienced folk dance?

Why is the label “folk dance” tied strongly to European dance forms?

What type of person is attracted to folk dance?

A timeline at the beginning of the book outlines important events that led up to and shaped the folk dance movement. A glossary provides

definitions of dance forms and related concepts. A reference section shows readers where to seek further information. Finally, an index enables readers to quickly locate information on dance forms, events, key players, and major themes.

Research for this project was funded in part by the New Leaders, Good Leaders Fund of the Country Dance and Song Society, the Arizona Commission on the Arts, and the Stockton Folk Dance Camp. Hundreds of people contributed through formal interviews, informal conversations, emails, surveys, resource donations, carpools, and home-stays. Mentioning everyone would be an impossible task, but I deeply value all the contributors. Some interviewees are quoted, but even interviewees who are not quoted helped shape the scope of this book by drawing my attention to important themes. The people who participated demonstrated heartwarming generosity and passion. I am honored to be able to represent them to the best of my ability in this work.

Abundant thanks goes to Ron Houston of the Society of Folk Dance Historians for his overall mentorship throughout the writing process. Both he and Anthony Shay assisted with the organization of the International Folk Dance content. Furthermore, I am indebted to several other International Folk Dance (and Balkan dance, Scandinavian dance, etc.) enthusiasts for taking time to teach me about their activities, particularly Carolyn Allenby, Ed Austin, Sunni Bloland, JoAnne Clemens, LeJeune Decker, Susan Droz, Nelda Drury, Jerry Duke, Kristina Efimenko, Ann Eskayo, Oscar Faoro, Bill and Karen Faust (and their group in Tucson, Arizona), John Filcich, Connie Jahrmarkt, Eden Kaiser, Athan Karras, Craig Kurumada, Jaap Leegwater, Roo Lester, Michael Levinsky, Lynn Maners, Larry Miller, Bruce Mitchell, Yves Moreau, Sean and Una O'Farrell, Lee Otterholt, Lois Postel, and Nancy Lee Ruyter, and Richard E. Watt.

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Levine, Gordon Macaw, Tom Miller, William Napier, Tony Parkes, Bette and Ray Saltzmann, Betty and Ted Vaile, and Bernie and Evelyn Weber. Additionally, Phil Jamison and Alan Winston helped me grasp and articulate the complicated evolution of European and American Square Dance forms.

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Timeline

1100 BC–146 BC	Ancient Greece; dancing is part of education and life
509 BC–AD 476	Ancient Rome; dancing is essential to festivities
1st–4th century	Christian worship incorporates dancing
5th–15th century	European Middle Ages; dancing for worship gradually is secularized
15th–16th century	European Renaissance; dancing is popularized by royal courts
17th century	North American colonists imitate English and French court dances
18th century	Contradanse Française and Cotillon, ancestors of American Square Dance, sweep across European and American ballrooms
19th century	The Quadrille and closed-position couple dances enter ballrooms A variety of Square Dance styles develop in rural American communities
1890s–1920s	Progressive era; folk dancing is taught mainly to children and immigrants
1920s–1930s	Folk dancing is recognized as wholesome recreation for everyone
1940s–1950s	Recreational folk dance clubs spread across North America

- 1960s–1970s** Rural community dances decline
Modern Western Square Dance begins
International Folk Dance focuses on Balkan dance
Contra Dance gains a large following
- 1980s–1990s** School folk dance programs and recreational folk dance clubs decline
- 1990s–2010s** Modern technologies facilitate communication among vast networks of folk dance enthusiasts

Introduction

In most parts of the world, dance is meaningfully incorporated into life events. Cultural beliefs and values influence how dance happens in terms of physical setting, who participates, musical accompaniment, attire, and accessories. For instance, many Christian societies celebrate the pre-Lent period of Carnival, but in different ways. In Brazil, neighborhood Samba schools or dance groups spend up to a year constructing costumes and floats to compete in a grand parade. Yaqui *pascola*, or dancers, from northern Mexico and the southwestern United States adorn themselves with deer hides and antlers for a ritual known as Danza del Venado. For Mardi Gras in New Orleans, a variety of dance forms, including Two-Step and Zydeco, happen alongside feasting and bead exchange in taverns and clubs and on the street. Dance is always tied to culture, and specifically how people choose to express themselves through dance comes from longstanding tradition as well as their life experiences in a given time and place.

Dance is labeled as “social dance” when the primary purpose is to interact with people in a fun recreational setting, with or without formal instruction. Throughout history, social dance has been a way to show off status, meet potential spouses or partners, or simply relax after a long day. Social dance may be preferred by people who yearn for a fun, visceral mind-body experience, or by people who feel awkward in other types of recreational activities that entail more verbal conversation. Many school, college, and community fitness programs have social dance classes for health and fitness as well. For over a century, philosophers and dance educators have stated that dance can