

## Appalachian Dance Traditions: A Multicultural Heritage

SUSAN EIKE SPALDING

Dance is an important part of the life of many communities throughout the Appalachian region. People do all kinds of dancing here—as in the rest of the country—from waltz to hip-hop, from line dancing to swing dancing, from salsa to belly dancing, and from stepping to contra-dancing. Many cultural groups make their home in Appalachia, as they have for at least three hundred years. They all share their dancing and learn from one another. The dancing of people in the region has influenced the development of characteristic Appalachian music, and the music has influenced the dancing.

Old-time square dancing has been popular among African-American, Native American, and European-American people since at least the middle of the 19th century. The most common form in the Southern mountains is a circle for any number of couples. Two couples join together to make the “square” and to dance figures at the direction of a caller. West Virginia and Pennsylvania dancers make a four-couple square instead of a large circle. String band music is the usual accompaniment. Some figures have colorful names like “Cage the Bird”

The Green Grass Cloggers demonstrate their innovative style of dance.

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or “Dive for the Oyster.” Each community has its own favorite figures and its own ways of doing them. For example, a figure called “Ocean Wave” in eastern Kentucky is the same as a figure called “Garden Gate” in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. In Carcassonne, Kentucky, one couple makes a square with the second couple in the circle, and then that couple visits the third, and so on around the ring. In Chilhowie, Virginia, the entire circle breaks into squares of two couples for each figure.

Footwork dancing is known in the Appalachian region by many names: clogging, buckdancing, flatfooting, hoedowning, or jigging. African-American, Native American, and European-American footwork styles blended over the centuries to produce kinds of dancing that vary from one community to the next. Quietly rhythmic old-style flatfooting

and energetically syncopated old-style buckdancing were spontaneous solo dances to the music of banjo or fiddle or the sound of clapping or patting hands. Bascom Lamar Lunsford’s Asheville Dance and Folk Festival in 1927 inaugurated performance clogging teams, who became flashier as they competed for prizes. Dancers performed square dance figures while they improvised their own special freestyle clogging rhythms. In the 1950s James Kesterson developed precision clogging, with all the dancers doing the same steps simultaneously. In the 1970s the Green Grass Cloggers of North Carolina combined precision clogging with western square dance figures, creating a brand new kind of dancing. These “wild hippie stompers” with their high-kicking style spread clogging literally all over the world; in England and Japan, clogging festivals host dozens of teams.

Cherokee traditional dance has a long history. Often based on the movements of animals such as the bear, beaver, or quail, the dances originally were performed before a hunt, to give thanks to the animal for providing food, clothing, and tools. Today the dances are performed to demonstrate our close connection with the natural environment. The drumbeat accompanying the dances represents the heartbeat, the rhythm of life.

Since the 1840s, people have come from the mainland of Europe—Switzerland, Croatia, Bulgaria, Italy, and Hungary—to live and work in the Appalachian region, bringing their own dance traditions with them. In West Virginia, Croatian and Swiss communities have kept their traditional dance alive for over one hundred and fifty years. The rich heritage of Appalachian dance continues to evolve as Hispanics, Hmong, Indians, Pakistanis, and people of other nationalities make the region their home. ■