

SPEAKING OF DANCING

What exactly is a folk dance???

Dear Folk Dance,

I met you years ago in elementary school when I learned the Hawaiian Hukilau and the Mexican Hat Dance (the official name is El Jarabe Tapatío and is the national folk dance of Mexico). I think someone made up a choreography for school kids because it's not very much like the real dance.

A little party dancing in Colombia at family weddings and anniversary parties was my next chance to meet you. We mostly danced the cumbia. I've been told that folk dancing is an expression of the culture of a particular group of people so wouldn't that make cumbia, Colombia's national dance, a folk dance?

Some people have explained to me that folk dances have to be from other countries. I think they meant anything "non-USA." (I wonder what people in non-USA countries call our folk dances. Do we have any?) Even though Brazilian samba and Cuban salsa are from other countries, they aren't considered folk dances. An aside: It's pretty silly to think that the 33 countries of Latin America don't have any folk dances. I point that out because there are hardly any in most folk dance clubs' repertoires. Perhaps someone will remind me about Chilili, ostensibly a Bolivian folk dance, but it is the invention of a choreographer and not a bit like the real thing. I'll save that for another conversation.

I keep hearing from folk dancers that folk dancing has to be really old to be authentic. I dance Argentine tango which has been around for about 130 years. Compare that to Israeli folk dance at 70+/- years. Maybe Argentine tango's association with Buenos Aires knocks it off the list since, with a population of 15 million, it's hardly a "village." I've also been told that tango is an "ethnic" dance. What in the heck is that? A way to separate "us" from "them," making exclusion the parameter?

The Argentines do actually have real folk dances. Malambo is a gaucho thing; a tap-off competition with other gauchos but never done as a social dance. As for all those "country people" dances like El Gato and La Chacarera, they have set choreographies and developed from European

dances. Matter of fact, they look a lot like American square dancing. The sticking point is that some people have told me that square dancing isn't folk dancing either! In addition, there are a few Argentine folk dances from the Spanish colonial period but since they're not danced socially anymore, they are considered "dead." They look an awful lot like contra dancing which, apparently, isn't considered by some to be a folk dance, either.

If folk dance is a tradition of a community, then why isn't Jitterbug a folk dance? It was birthed in the black American community using African movements, but when the white kids adopted it, did it change into a social dance we call swing?

There's the current love affair with all dances from the Balkans. If I had \$5 for every time someone told me that only Balkan village dances are real folk dances, I'd have enough money to take one of those folk dance tours to Hungary or Turkey. Maybe it's the challenge of those non-4/4 and 3/4 rhythms. Is it the charisma of the Balkan teachers, or are the dances popular and students go looking for teachers who know them? Are Balkan dances so popular because they are not partner dances? I hear that a lot. If that were the case, many African dances would be part of any folk dance club's repertoire. So would American rhythm tap.

My head hurts, let me tell you! I know, Folk Dance, that I'm a bit long-winded, but can you see why? Maybe, Folk Dance, you are really "Dance," and as such, are an expression of the culture and traditions of the world. Something to mull over.

The only thing I can think of to do for now is to keep dancing. Whether or not I point my toes isn't really the issue. If I dance in a circle, by myself looking at the four walls, or with a partner, it doesn't seem so important. I think I just need to do what my 3-year-old self did, and my 63-year-old self still does: dance for the joy of it.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts. (gigi@tangoandmoredance.com).

