Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance

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Review

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Jamison, Phil *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance*. University of Illinois Press, \$28.00 ISBN 9780252080814

Cultures Intersect in Appalachian Traditions

With the publication of Phil Jamison's *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics* coming on the heels of Susan Spalding's *Appalachian Dance*, (2014), the University of Illinois Press has filled a significant gap in our understanding of southern mountain dance traditions and their varied origins and evolution.

On any Friday night of the year dancing to live old time music is the order of the evening at the Floyd, Virginia Country Store. In addition to this well-known venue, in a sixty-mile radius of Radford, Virginia, where I live, there are weekly opportunities to hear old time dance music and to participate in clogging and square dancing. Mabry Mill, on the Blue Ridge Parkway, on any Sunday afternoon in the fall and spring, The Blue Ridge Music Center, also on the parkway, outside of Galax, Virginia, and several regular jam sessions add credence to the assertion that Appalachia remains the epicenter of traditional music and dance in this country. All of the varied forms of folk dance that Jamison documents and analyzes in this fine book are living, breathing traditions still in the heart of these mountains. The extraordinary nature of this work by Phil Jamison is not that he documents the continuation of tradition, though he does that admirably, it is that he fully analyzes for the first time the many streams of dance that flowed together to create the mighty river that is Appalachian dance today.

As Jamison journeys through time and throughout many cultures he assimilates a vast and diverse American dance tradition into a solid presentation and interpretation of southern Appalachian dance. Like everything in Appalachian culture the dance traditions present here have no straight lines tethering them to England, or Northern Ireland, or Scotland, or Africa for that matter. They are, at the same time, linked to those cultures and others. Jameson

documents connections between Appalachian dance and Native American traditions and also speculates about possible West Indian and Caribbean origins for certain aspects of American dance that eventually became associated with Appalachia.

Along with books about many other traditions from music to quilting Jamison adds dance to the list of Appalachian cultural characteristics that were not the sole descendants of that pure and unadulterated Anglo-Saxon heritage claimed by nearly every observer from Teddy Roosevelt to Robert Byrd.

Filled with personal anecdotes and reminiscences as well as with deep scholarly research, this book is a joy to read. The book is amply illustrated with many photographs and prints that reveal a complex world of dance in early and 19th century America. That this world is both rich and varied testifies to the broad expanse of culture that twentieth century Appalachian dance has to draw from.

The theme of the book is simple but it took someone like Jamison who is both a scholar and long-time practitioner of Appalachian dance to thoroughly explain all of the roots and branches of the hoedowns, reels, and frolics that he so carefully and lovingly writes about.

While the bulk of Jamison's efforts are designed to explain, through the use of solid evidence, the origins and meaning of what is usually referred to as square dancing he also devotes chapters to Appalachian step dance, the cakewalk, barn dances with leaders calling the dance steps or shapes, couples dances, the Virginia Reel, and clogging. He explains in excellent detail the complex relationship between religion and dance as well as the special role that dance has and continues to play in the life of many Appalachian communities.

Jameson's chapters on cultural diversity, cultural preservation, and cultural transmission in Appalachia show a deep understanding of this complex and evolving subject. He, like many writers before him, most notably, Jane Becker in her *Selling Tradition*, put to rest myths about Anglo-Saxon purity in surviving elements of folk or traditional Appalachian culture. Jameson devotes nearly three chapters to the work and legacy of English folklorist Cecil Sharp in Appalachia in 1917. Even though Sharp spent only five days at the Pine Mountain Settlement School, in Pine Mountain, Kentucky, in 1917 his impact on the ideas associated with Appalachian dance have endured for decades.

What we know now from the work of many Appalachian scholars is that very few British, Scottish or Scotch-Irish traditions were transplanted *unaltered* into the Appalachian frontier. Jameson shows us here that Appalachian dance traditions are a complex and sometimes subtle combination of forms and styles clearly sourced from the British Isles but showing heavy influences from other European, African, Afro-Caribbean, and Native American styles. Other Appalachian scholars have speculated on these varied origins for what today we call Appalachian dance but no one before Jameson has revealed the complexity of the mix through the careful and meticulous presentation of documentary evidence, much of it revealed and discussed here for the first time. Jameson is not only an extraordinarily gifted dancer whom I had the pleasure of watching many times when he was a member of the Green Grass Cloggers, but also a first-rate scholar who has, as the result of impressive and memorable research, produced a work that will prevail for many, many years as the standard text on the subject. His work in *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics* is a valuable contribution to our deeper understanding of the rich, intricate and elaborate culture of the Appalachian mountain region of America.

Dr. Richard Straw is Professor of History at Radford University in southwestern Virginia where he teaches courses on Appalachia and the American South. His primary research interests have been in coal mining, music, and photography. He is the co-editor of High Mountains Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place.