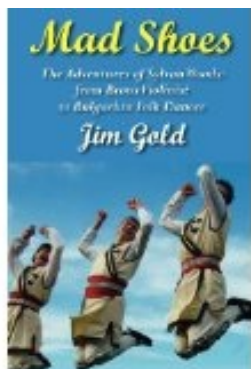


Jim Gold's Beginnings

Florida Folk Dancer. November-December 2017

Complete and unabridged



When I was 24 years old, I worked as a waiter in a hotel in New York's Adirondack Mountains. At that time, I never danced. One night, I peeked in to a folk dance evening that Fritzi Gerber was leading. She was dressed in a folk dance outfit and made quite a picture. There were about 100 people in the room, noisily milling about. Suddenly, she moved to the middle of



the room, raised her hand, and in about five seconds, the room became totally quiet and still. I was shocked and amazed. What did this woman just do? How did she have this power to so quickly silence this unruly mob? Then Fritzi told everyone to form a circle, and she began teaching her first dance (which I believe was Ersko Kolo, from Serbia). I also stepped into the circle. At the end of the class, Fritzi said she was teaching folk dancing every afternoon in the clubhouse at the edge of the lake. I decided to give it a try. After I finished waiting tables at lunch, I went down to the lake. Fritzi taught Sestorka, (also from Serbia). It was the first dance I actually ever learned. I had never heard such exciting and beautiful music before. I ended up totally thrilled. That afternoon class began a process that changed my life.

After that summer of folk dancing, I returned to my apartment in New York's Greenwich Village. I searched out folk dancing, and found all kinds everywhere. I started going to classes. Coming from a formal classical music background (I played violin), I just loved the informality of the folk dance scene, and its acceptance of almost anyone who tried to dance, no matter how bad, unskilled, or timid they were. Plus, the music was so beautiful and exciting! I couldn't resist.

So, three or four times a week I went dancing wherever I could find it—Polish, Ukrainian, Israeli, international, whatever. I loved the music, and I loved to improvise. This was also true when I improvised while dancing the Hambo at International House in

New York, and the teacher, Marianne Hermann, threw me off the dance floor, because I was going in the wrong direction, knocking off people and couples as we moving in the opposite direction around the room! I remember wondering why she would bother doing that. After all, I was just making up steps, and not bothering or hurting anyone, and careful not to bump into others as I and my partner traveled in the opposite direction around the room. But stop me she did. That was my first public attempt at improvising.

Several years before this, I had given up violin, and learned how to play guitar and sing folk songs. I also started taking classical and flamenco guitar lessons. (Teaching and giving concerts on classical and folk guitar later became my career for about 15 years.) I also played guitar for an Israeli folk dance performing group called Aviv. (Peter Yarrow later took my place.) Its lead dancer was Sonny Newman. When Aviv disbanded, Sonny decided to open a folk dance studio on 23rd Street in Manhattan. This second-floor studio soon became a Mecca for excited new folk dancers (who wanted to escape from the Hermans' stilted method of teaching). I learned many folk dances at Sonny's.

At the time, I worked as a social director in a Catskill Mountain Hotel called Chaits. One of my duties was teaching folk dancing. By then, I knew about 10 dances and taught them all. Although I didn't realize it at the time, that summer was the beginning of my teaching career. After I got married, we decided to buy a house and moved from Greenwich Village to Teaneck, NJ. The only class I knew of around Teaneck and in the north Jersey area was one given in nearby Hackensack by Ken Spear. My wife and I went to his class, but as it happened, that night Kenny was sick, and the class was cancelled. Then one of the dancers said to me, "Hey, Jim, you taught dancing this summer, you've got some records at home. Why not go get them and bring them down, so we can dance?" I agreed. I went home, got the records and ran the class. Soon after that, Ken Spear decided to give up the class. So I was elected to take it over. Thus I began my first folk dance teaching class.

After a year of teaching, I realized I didn't know very much. Then a pivotal event took place. I went dancing in New York at 14th Street. During the class, a new teacher named Kalman Magyar, from Hungary, came to the class. He told the class about the new Hungarian dance class he was starting at Hungary House uptown. Then he took one leap to demonstrate a dance. I said "Wow! I want to leap like that. And I want to dance like that!" So I attended his first classes.

Kalman had a teaching method that I just loved. Basically, he would put on the

(Hungarian) music, stand in front of the class, and improvise steps. He would do this for two hours. He'd start easy, look around the room to see if everyone was getting the steps, then he'd add a more advanced movements, always checking the room to see how people were doing. If they got it, he'd stay with the (advanced) steps; if not, he'd return to something simpler until the people got it, then slowly move back to the advanced. Back and forth, back and forth he'd go, always improvising, always watching. And during all this time he hardly said a word. I loved his teaching method, which I dubbed the "Hungarian teaching method." And it, based on improvisation, was and is the method I eventually adopted and developed to teach my own folk dance classes.

After I had given up my class in Hackensack, and after a couple of years dancing Hungarian dancing with Kalman, there were still no folk dance classes in Teaneck. I started a group with three other teachers and we each taught one week a month. The three others soon quit., but I decided to continue. Although I was still earning my living by giving concerts, that was nevertheless the beginning of my folk dance teaching "career."

In 1982, someone suggested that since I had experience in Catskill mountain hotels working as a social director, that I organize and run a folk dance weekend. I agreed, did it, and about 100 attended! I was shocked and amazed, as I realized I could potentially make a living out of this! Imagine, making a living out of folk dancing! I already had experience making a living out of another "impossible business," playing classical and folk guitar. I thought, "Why not?" I was ready for a new career anyway, so why not give folk dancing try. In the beginning, I could simply add it to my guitar concerts. And the rest is history. . .

Thanks Florida Folk Dancer!