

Jim Gold

Folk Dance Choreography

An Interview with Abrahams

Jim when did you realize you wanted to choreograph?

When I started teaching folk dancing, and creating my own interpretations of the music, making up my own steps, people told me the steps were wrong!

I wondered how they knew?

Was there a “correct” Bulgarian step? A “correct” Polish, French, Hungarian, Greek, Albanian, Croatian, Serbian, Turkish, Israeli, etc step? Did people in these countries only dance one way?

During those years, I belonged to a Hungarian dance troupe led by the Hungarian folk dance teacher Kalman Magyar. Kalman’s teaching “method” was to improvise as he taught, making up steps to

Hungarian folk music as he went along. I called it the “Hungarian method.” Very exciting and inspiring. I loved it. I wanted to teach that way also, but didn’t know exactly how to go about it.

But my main question remained: Did people in these countries really dance? In villages, weddings, parties, social gathering, wherever people danced, did they actually do the steps we learned in folk dance classes?

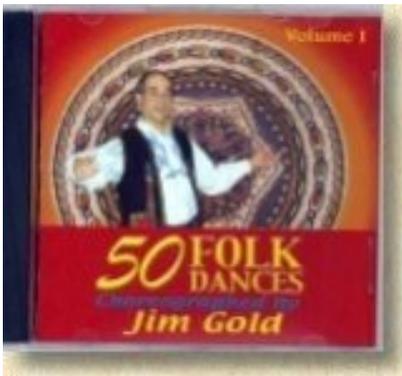
If yes, how?

The best way to find out was to go to these countries and see for myself.

Although I knew I could visit villages and dance groups in these countries by myself, I knew most folk dance groups in these countries would much rather meet me if I came along with a group of Americans.

So in 1984, with the help of Kalman, I decided to organize my first folk dance tour to Hungary. (And that was the beginning of my folk tours.)

Five years before, in 1979, Karl Finger, along with Yves Moreau, had organized a tour to Bulgaria, the first dance tour of its kind. I was good friends with Karl, so my wife Bernice and I decided to go. On Karl’s tour, we visited the town of Dospat located high in the Rhodope mountains. We had learned Dospatsko Horo in America, and wanted to show the villagers that we could dance it. When we arrived in Dospat, our group got out of the bus, entered the village square, and, as all the local Bulgarians stood around watching in amazement, we danced Dospatsko horo. To my surprise, although the



Bulgarians knew the music, they didn't know and had never seen this dance!

This was a powerful opening, my first knowing that international folk dancers do things "differently." Most important: I realized that there were no "right" steps!

Slowly a purpose formed in my mind. I decided to travel to countries whose dances I loved. I would find out first hands, or first foot, how the "folks" there actually folk danced. My plan soon grew to include all the countries of Europe and the Middle East. By adding one new county a year I would eventually reach my goal.

Before each tour, I spent a year studying its language, culture, history, and traditions.

My first year was my "Hungarian year." Before organizing and leading the trip, I spent the year taking Hungarian language lessons, and studying every history, geography, and traditions book (in English) that I could find.

The second year is was Russian. I followed the same method, then ran a trip to (what was then) the Soviet Union. I was determined to educate myself, and immerse myself in the styles and traditions of those countries in order to know and feel comfortable (with the technique of) improvising and choreographing dances. Every year I added a new country.

When did you realize other teachers were choreographing

I had been a "closet choreographer" for years. When I taught a dance I had choreographed, I never told anyone. I was afraid if they knew, they would (immediately) reject it as "inauthentic."

In 2004 Lee Otterholt and I were invited to teach at Florida Folk Dance Camp. Lee is not only a Norwegian and Balkan dance expert, but a choreographer! That's when I "admitted" (to him) that I had choreographed many dances. Lee, to my happy surprise, said "That's great!" He gave me the confidence to start admitting it and going public.

Then I started asking other teachers if they choreographed, too. Turns out almost all of them did. But they too hesitated, were afraid to say so, fearing the international folk dance community, the folk dance public would think their dances "inauthentic."

What is folk dancing but "folks dancing." The teachers all wanted to teach "authentic dances. (what "folks" in these foreign countries danced.) But when villagers from other countries dance at special events, they usually dance only one step. And they might dance the same step for hours! At a wedding, party, or festival, with food, lots of friends, and live music, some might do a variation or two, others might dance a few minutes, drop out, chat, then rejoin the circle to dance some more. How exciting were (are) these "simple" events. For the (villagers and) locals, one step was often enough.

International folk dance classes lack this atmosphere. Since there is no food, wedding, party, festival or whatever, folk dance teachers add new steps (improvise and choreograph) to make it (the dances) more interesting. Without them, the public (dancers) might get bored and go home. And since teachers want to make a living they

want to please their customers (dancers) so they make up step, add steps, to hold their audience. Very normal and natural in order to survive.

Leading tours, seeing how people in these countries really dance, has taught me how to simplify dances down to their basic elements. I make them so simple anyone can do them! (Simplicity, accessibility) that is what I consider to be the true folk style

But by leading tours, my travelers and I see real folks from real countries (actually) dancing real folk dances! And yes, the locals may add a variation or two. This helps remind me that it's okay to improvise, (to choreograph) to create "on the spot", and thus to choreograph.

Why do you feel choreography is necessary/important

Creating is part of being human. Thus choreography is part of being human. It can't be stopped. Nor should it be. Choreography is an inner necessity. It allows freedom, breaks the boundaries, and depending on how daring we are, takes you places and on adventures (can take you places) you never imagined existed.

(You can't stop creativity.)

Also, of course, I don't want the audience (dancers) to be bored. As you know, Stage performances are always choreographed to make them interesting for the audience, but the original steps somewhere in there. I use the traditional forms, but change some things.

There is no one grand and unified folk dance community, only small ones. Each one has its own life. These different "villages" (can) do the steps they want (to make themselves, and their audience happy. Period.)

You don't feel you are "changing" "folk" dances?

Absolutely (I am. To an extent, everyone does.)

I use the traditional forms, but change some things. (There are many traditions people love and want to keep.)

As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "The ancient philosopher Heraclitus believed that fire is the origin of all things and that permanence is an illusion, everything being in a process of constant change."

They say Heraclitus did a great Hasapiko! He said, "You can't put your foot in the same dance twice" (Or was it the same stream twice?)

In any case, change in folk dancing and choreography and everywhere else is the nature of life.

What reactions are you receiving?

To my surprise, most people, if they like it, say "Wow!" Then maybe later, they might ask, "How do you do it?"

Perhaps the word "choreograph" has too many syllables, and is too fancy a word.. Maybe "create" would be better."

How many dances have you choreographed?

About 200 or so.

Thanks Florida Folk Dancer!