

CHOREOGRAPHY INTERVIEW WITH JIM GOLD

Florida Folk Dancer. November-December 2017

Complete and unabridged



(Editor: Since I know Jim does a lot of choreography, I interviewed him to get some insight into his feelings about choreographing international folk dances.)

How long have you been folk dancing?

When I was 24 yrs old, I worked as a waiter in Crystal Lake Lodge, a hotel in New York's Adirondack mountains. At that

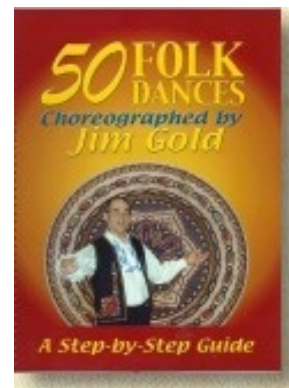
time, I never danced, and knew nothing about folk dancing. Fritzi Gerber was my first teacher. She taught folk dancing at the lodge. One night I peeked in to a folk dance evening she was leading. She was dressed in a folk dance outfit and made quite a picture. There were about 100 people in the room, noisily milling about. Suddenly, this woman in a folk dance outfit moved to the middle of the room, raised her hand, and in about 5 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, why not give it a try. After I finished waiting table 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 of dancing everywhere, so I started going classes everywhere. Coming from a formal classical music background (I played violin), I just loved the informality of the folk dance scene, 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 wrong direction in a Hambo, knocked off people and couples as we moving in the opposite direction around the room! The teacher, Marianne Herman stopped the music and threwe me off the dance floor. I remember thinking, 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. Taht was my first public attempt at improvising.

Several years before (At the time), I had given up violin, and learned how to play guitar and sing folk songs. I also started taking classical and flamencan 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.) It's 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 Herman's 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 amd moved from Greenwich Village in Manhattan to Teaneck, NJ. The only class I knew 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 it so happened that tht 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 glot some records at home. Why not go get them, 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 plance. 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 which 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 straight. He's 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's put back 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 (this) 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 Kalma (Al Matyo and I went drove into the city every week to attend his classes) there was still no folk dance classes in Teaneck. So I started a group with 3 other teachers. We each taught one week a month. But the 3 others soon quit. 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 (lead) 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! But already had experience making a living out of another "impossible business," namely playing classical and folk guitar. So I thought, why not? I'm ready for a new career anyway. Why not give folk dancing try. And at least for now, I could simple add it to not my guitar concerts. And the rest is history.

Part 2

Choreography

Part 2

When did you realize you wanted to choreograph?

How Jim Gold Folk Tours Began

(Choreographies are fixed (frozen in place) improvisations.)

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 hand, 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 country 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 Hasapico! 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!