

Clogging and Tap



Southern Appalachian dancing: clogging, flatfooting and buckdancing, is an amalgamation of a variety of older percussive dance styles marked by complex footwork. They are really dialects of the same form. American step dancing, and the old-time string band music that accompanies it, arose from the combination of cultures that lived in the Southern Appalachian mountains as this country was born. The community arts of those English settlers, Scotch-Irish farmers and African slaves created what we now call clogging, and other forms of American social dancing, such as square and contra dancing. Clogging and old-time music were born of the hybrid culture that shaped the United States

In the British Isles, from the 1720's through the turn of the century, various forms of step dancing were practiced. But it was from the onset of the Industrial Revolution, in the latter part of the 18th century, that clog dancing took firm hold. Workers in the wool factories in Lancashire, Northern England, wore clogs, thick soled

wooden shoes, to keep them above the mud of the factory floor. It is said that the rhythmic workings of the machines, coupled with the sound of the hard soled shoes on the floor inspired the creation of the dance.

Both the quadrilles (predecessor of square dancing) as they originated with the upper classes, and the clog dancing of the lower classes were accompanied by various types of fiddle music, and followed immigrants to the New World starting in the 1600's. Fiddle music remained at the center of the later development of American old-time music in the Southern Appalachian mountains into the 20th-century.

As Northern Europe gained its foothold in North America and other regions throughout the world in the 18th century, there was a massive increase in world trade, including the peak of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Africans were brought from their lands in Africa, and from the Caribbean, to work as slaves on plantations in the South, subjecting them to restrictions and conditions that inadvertently spawned new dance and music expressions.

The fusion of European and African styles on plantations and on the minstrel stage influenced American clogging practiced in both white and black communities. Stylistically, the common posture of African dancing (wide stance, bent knees) influenced the more rigid and elevated clogging practiced in the British Isles, making American clogging more relaxed and looser than its European predecessors, while maintaining many similar steps.

Throughout the 20th-century, there were enormous population shifts of both black and white people from South to North, East to West and rural to urban. The instruments, music and dances of the Southeast melded with the melodies of the British Isles and with the rhythms of Africa and the Caribbean, influencing new styles by fusing regional styles. Those new styles were carried by radio, recordings, and live performance throughout the U.S.

In the 1920's and 30's, nightclubs opened in major cities, and the minstrelsy era gave way to vaudeville. Metal taps on leather shoes instead of the clogs worn in clog dancing spawned clogging's more theatrical cousin, tap dancing. Dance halls began opening in cities in the 1930's and 40's and the syncopated rhythms of tap were reproduced in big band or swing music.

Then, in the 1970's, Southern square dancing spread, and precision clogging teams developed; cloggers choreographed their steps into square dance patterns and competed for prizes. Tap was revived as performance dance on Broadway, and continues to enjoy a resurgence of creativity and popularity. Tap is notable for its flexibility as it is mixed and performed in combination with other contemporary styles of dance. Clogging is now performed not only in social dance scenes and competition, but on stages in music festivals nationwide, and is considered one of North America's traditional dance treasures.