

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Voter Registration in NC, Courtesy of Harper's Weekly

## The Whitewashing of Appalachian Music & Dance

by Darcy Grabenstein

As someone who dabbled in square dance in my teens and contra dance as an adult, I can't think of many dance genres less diverse than these two. The irony is, as dance scholar [Phil Jamison](#) noted in his online presentation, on Jan. 17th, 2022 called *Recognizing African-American Contributions to Southern Appalachian Music and Dance*, is that these distinctive folk dances are not the purebred product of early British settlers as most would think. They are hybrid forms that trace back to European, African American, and Native American roots, reflecting the cultural and ethnic diversity of America. Jamison's book [Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance](#) explores this topic in more detail. I found it quite fitting that his presentation was given on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Jamison started off by distinguishing between cultural assimilation and cultural appropriation. He also discussed cultural syncretism, a phrase new to me, that describes when components of different cultures create something new. He divided his presentation into three sections: dance music, song traditions, and square dance. While I had expected to be drawn most to the square dance segment, it was the history of dance music that I found truly fascinating.

Those who think fiddle playing morphed from the violinists of Europe to Southern Appalachia may be surprised to know that in West Africa, a tradition of fiddling dates back to the 12th century. Jamison explained that those who were enslaved adopted the violin, as it positioned them for a better place in life. As early as 1690, enslaved Blacks played the fiddle at plantation balls in Virginia. Black fiddlers left a lasting legacy, one that influenced Southern music styles, with syncopated bowing, rhythms, slides, and tunes. Several of these Black musicians are known to have mentored white fiddlers and other musicians from 1755 up through 1996.

Of no surprise, is that the banjo is another instrument associated with Southern Appalachian music. Early banjos were primitive by today's standards, basically a gourd with strings. The article [So You Think You Know the Banjo?](#) in *The Bitter Southerner* (One of my

favorite publications.— I'm originally from the South) pulls no punches about the banjo's origins: "In short, we owe the banjo's modern presence in America to Africans who were brought here against their will."

Among Blacks, there was a decline in fiddle and banjo playing for several reasons. One was the negative images associated with Black-faced minstrels. Another was the introduction of new types of music — ragtime, blues, jazz — where the guitar replaced the banjo. In the early 1900s, the recording industry also segregated The Old-time Band music into two genres: Race (Black music) & Hillbilly (white) music. More recent years have seen a sort of revival of the genre. Legendary old-time fiddler [Joe Thompson](#) (1918-2012) passed on his tradition to the [Carolina Chocolate Drops](#).

As in music, Black influence can also be found in traditional American square dance. In a slide titled *Square Roots*, Jamison traced the origins of two common formations: the single-file (counterclockwise) circle, based on African and Native American rings, and "bird in the cage" — a West African dance where one person imitates a bird in a circle of dancers. One distinction, however, is that male-female couple dancing was a European, not African, tradition. Despite segregation throughout the decades, Jamison said that for the most part there was a shared Southern culture: "Blacks played the same music and danced the same dances as the white folks."

Prompting (verbal step reminders, used in contra dancing) and calling (same, but in square dancing) are phenomena unique to this genre of dance. Calling is differentiated by improvisation, reflecting the African tradition of call and response, and is chanted in pitch with the music.

In global contemporary culture, dance is credited with bringing together diverse groups of people. In square dance however, it appears to be a missed opportunity. Jamison said he'd like to see "a more diverse crowd on the dance floor."

Referencing Jacqueline Cogdell Djedje's [The \(Mis\)Representation of African American Music: The Role of the Fiddle](#), Jamison emphasized that recognizing the contributions of Blacks to American music and dance acknowledges the fusion of culture between Blacks and whites, and challenges common stereotypes and misconceptions.

I cannot agree more with Jamison. I've participated in various types of social dance — Israeli, salsa, international, contra, square dance — and have found contra dance groups especially welcoming. So I suggest dancers in all genres follow suit and extend a hand to the strangers in their midst.

[Country Dance & Song Society \(CDSS\) Common Time series](#), the 3rd Monday of the month, 7:30 p.m. ET.

By Darcy Grabenstein  
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