

Book Review: *Appalachian Dance*

reviewed by Susan English

Appalachian Dance: Creativity and Continuity in Six Communities, by Susan Eike Spalding (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 288 pages.

Why are African Americans largely absent from old-time dances today? Why do modern contra dance callers emphasize the musical phrase, while old-time square dance patter callers focus more on rhythm? When Cecil Sharp reported in 1917 that he had discovered pre-Playford English dancing in the mountains of Appalachia, exactly what was he witnessing?

These are three of the long-pondered questions to which I found intriguing answers by reading Susan Eike Spalding's newly released book, *Appalachian Dance*. None were simple answers that jumped off the page at me; all were deeper understandings that grew inside me as I immersed myself in the book over a number of cold winter evenings.

I cannot say which chapter is my favorite, because I would have to name at least three. Spalding takes the reader to six different dance communities in or near the geographical triangle at the intersection of Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia, where she collected data at various times over the past thirty years.

The author takes us to Pine Mountain Settlement School, now a center for environmental education; to a former company town in a once-remote coal mining area; to two very different venues consciously created to keep dance traditions alive. In 1992 she reviews dance videotapes from the 1970s with surviving African American participants. She compares her 1999 observations of another dance community to ethnographic descriptions made in 1975.

In each setting, Spalding looks back through the twentieth, nineteenth and sometimes eighteenth centuries for historical perspective. We see music and dance as interwoven into broader social changes like industrialization, urbanization and integration. In the process, the author dispels a long list of popular misconceptions about the Appalachian region.

She allows the "consultants" to speak for themselves—what they are doing, why, and what it means to them—and to use and define their own terms. We not only read the direct descriptions of a participant observer, but nearly every description is balanced with reflective analysis. The author walks with the reader every step of the way, like a friend having a conversation about what these things could mean or tell us. "I became more aware...I never imagined...I have come to believe that...I have come to wonder..." She offers an occasional metaphor, e.g. "The feeling of being on the dance floor was conversational" (p. 57) and "the circle was solid, safe, and reliable" (p. 89).

Some analyses are categorical, such as the distinction between group activities, like squares and big sets, versus individual expressions like flat footing and hamboning. Others are explanatory, such as the impact of "deliberate interventions by the government or philanthropic institutions, the focus of collectors, or the response of the media" (p. 221). Contrasting trends like jazz, the Charleston, Lindy, Rock and Roll, and hip-hop, also filter into the discussion.

Spalding uses her view across the region and decades to present hypotheses and draw conclusions such as how "dance becomes a tool to navigate and negotiate social change, and perhaps to influence it" (p. 7) and, of particular interest to me, "change over time as a result of choices...made by individuals...based on their experiences and beliefs" (p. 2).

This is one of those rare scholarly works that is both readable and fascinating to read. With a multidisciplinary Ph.D. in dance, Dr. Spalding uses her knowledge of American folk history to put her observations into broader contexts. Examples include "the folk dance recreation movement of the first third of the century" (p. 196), the "Arts and Crafts movement" (p. 125), and "the national folk revival" of the mid-twentieth century (p. 47). Each chapter is tied to an impressive list of references, including archival sources in written, audio and video formats.

By way of criticism, I would have liked more information about how the author selected the six locations and more about her method in general. I wonder if some readers might want more evidence of the national trends that are offered as established fact. Finally, Spalding's mention of people who choose not to dance, whether for religious or other reasons, makes me wish for a whole chapter on a non-dancing group or community.

For anyone interested in the history of folk dance in the twentieth century, this book is a must-read. It could help some of our dancers and dance leaders better appreciate diverse styles of music and dance. For myself, having read the book, I will step onto the dance floor and up to the microphone with a richer awareness of the breadth and depth of the heritage into which I am stepping.

Susan English writes from Wooster, Ohio, where she leads various styles of traditional dance; she is currently working on a book about Dancing Masters in the Ohio Valley.