

Book Review: *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics*

reviewed by Tony Parkes

Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance. By Phil Jamison. A volume in the series Music in American Life. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015. xx + 276 pages. Companion website: www.philjamison.com.

Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics is a masterpiece of a book and a milestone in dance historiography. Phil Jamison has done what many would have thought impossible not so long ago: documented the development of dance forms whose history is chiefly oral. He has laid century-old myths to rest and produced persuasive evidence of the southern dance's multicultural origins. And he has assembled his findings in a book that is both scholarly and readable.

Jamison is perhaps the ideal person for the task: he is at home in both academia (he teaches at Warren Wilson College) and the living world of traditional music and dance. He is a caller, a dance musician, and a percussive dancer; his long and varied experience includes thirty years of performing with the Green Grass Cloggers. His love of the dance has led him to seek and find hundreds of primary documents, most of which appear to have been overlooked until now (as he points out, when he began his research "there were no scholarly books devoted to Appalachian dance"). He has also attended dance events, conducted interviews, and catalogued and analyzed nearly a hundred commercial recordings of the 1920s and 1930s. The calls on these recordings were intended to entertain the listener and are not necessarily danceable, but they provide an important window into the southern dance tradition before square dancing began to be standardized.

Jamison's most important conclusion is that the southern dance is not, as Cecil Sharp claimed to believe, an ancient English dance form preserved nearly intact for centuries due to the isolation of mountain settlements. Rather, it draws on Scottish, Irish, French, Native American, and African traditions as well as English. Dance historians since at least the 1960s have dismissed Sharp's theory as the product of extreme Anglophilia (and racism), but Jamison has assembled enough evidence to convince anyone. He points out that Appalachia was never as isolated as romantic writers led their readers to believe; the region enjoyed considerable trade with the rest of the world, and its settlers belonged to many ethnic groups.

Perhaps the most fascinating revelation is that the practice of calling the figures, which sets

American group dancing apart from its ancestors and its cognates elsewhere, is an African-American invention. From the earliest days of non-Native settlement through the nineteenth century, most dance musicians in what is now the United States were people of color. As early as 1819, there are written accounts of black musicians calling. Jamison theorizes that the practice originated in the West Indies, the first stop in the New World for many slaves, as references to calling appear nearly simultaneously in many areas.

The bulk of the book is devoted to what can conveniently be called "square dancing," whether done in four-couple squares, large circles, or longways sets. There are also chapters on step dancing, couple dances, and the cakewalk, as well as on the relations between dance and religion. Appendices include an analysis of the commercial recordings, a three-part glossary, copious notes and twenty-four pages of bibliography. A companion website, www.philjamison.com, contains audio files of the recordings, along with a generous selection of paintings, photographs and videos depicting square dancing and step dancing through the years.

The book is handsomely presented. Even the paperback edition is printed on heavy acid-free paper; most of the sixty-two illustrations reproduce well, though occasionally a detail mentioned in the caption is hard for the eye to pick out. (The images on the website are more attractive; many are in color.) There is a smattering of typographical errors, as is usual these days, but none that I noticed appears to obscure the meaning of the text.

No praise is too high for this book. For over half a century I have been hoping someone would write it, though I feared there might not be enough provable information on the subject. It is a joy to see the task accomplished by a writer who is eminently qualified and a publisher who has served him well. The book is essential for anyone interested in American dance history or southern Appalachian culture.

*Tony Parkes is the author of *Contra Dance Calling: A Basic Text*, (Hands Four Productions, 2010), available at <https://store.cdss.org/>.*