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FESTIVAL GUIDE 2000



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Dance Beat

Footnotin' With Ira: A Fiddler's Dancer

by Linda Gunderson

I was interested in learning about clog dancing, and Ira Bernstein's name kept showing up on the internet searches. Our correspondence started when I ordered one of his videotapes, which showed the distinctive accuracy and musicality of his percussive footwork, and the extraordinary energy of a disciplined athlete. I talked with Ira on October 5 and 6, 1999, at his home in Asheville, NC. After two days of talking on and off the record, I had discovered that Ira is not just a dancer's dancer, but is a musician's dancer—and, of the essential instruments associated with his work, the fiddle is always present.—L.G.

The youngest of three brothers growing up on Long Island, NY, Ira was highly active—into movement, sports and physical fitness.

"I was always so serious, and maybe that had a lot to do with my way of overcoming being small and light. In an athletic endeavor, I had to be good, the talent part had to get me through. I was always running the hardest and the fastest and the longest—because I had to. That's how I got by."

With a great interest in nature, and strong aptitudes in math and science, Ira wanted to be a veterinarian ever since the fourth grade. He geared up for the challenge of getting into vet school. An appreciation for dance came in high school. Ira's tenth grade English teacher, Charles Messenger, was a ballet fan. He talked about and had pictures of great ballet performers, and the physical parallel to sports made an impression. Ira was admitted to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. It was in 1978 at Penn that he was introduced to traditional dance.

"It was a community: old-time style square dance, live band, caller, teach it/do it. And when I went, just once in the second part of my freshman year, it made a profound

impact. The following year I went on my own, religiously. Every Tuesday night I'd be there. People would be clogging up in the corner, or clogging even in the square, waiting for their turn. And so I got turned on to that. I really started getting into clogging, my last year in college. The Mill Creek Cloggers in Philadelphia asked me to join them. At the same time, I also started finding out about other step dance forms, such as Irish step dancing and English clogging. I found out about Morris dancing—which looked really neat."

Seeing Philadelphia tap dancer LaVaughn Robinson was Ira's introduction to tap dancing. Karen Vorkapitch, a fellow member of The Mill Creek Cloggers, had encouraged the great hoofer out of retirement. LaVaughn's high technical level set a standard for Ira. "Seeing LaVaughn, I flipped... his technique was so clean, and so fast. It was inspiring."

During the same time, Ira was learning about traditional music. "There was the Cherry Tree Folk Club in [Philadelphia], and I'd just go every Sunday night, regardless who was playing. And I heard a lot of folk singers, I heard traditional musicians—that's when I first heard bands like The Backwoods Band, Silly Wizard, and musicians such as Jay Ungar, Mick Moloney, and Eugene O'Donnell. Irish Bands, Scottish bands, old-time bands, bluegrass bands, singer/songwriters—just all these people! So that was my whole introduction to acoustic music and folk music and traditional music."

Ira took a year off before entering vet school. His advisor suggested that he get away, before facing seven or eight years of veterinary school and ecology graduate school combined. So Ira moved to Marlboro, VT, where he danced with Tony Barrand's Marlboro Morris and Sword team. Tony

was also an English clogger, and one evening Ira was invited over for dinner and a dancing session. After seeing how quickly Ira picked up instruction, Tony offered to work with him every week.

Following a year in Vermont, Ira deferred veterinary school for a final time. He traveled around for eight months, in search of traditional dance. Derailed from the veterinarian track, Ira headed into a career as a professional dancer. He became a member of The Fiddle Puppets, one of only two full-time, professional clogging groups, the other being The Green Grass Cloggers. After a year and a half he went solo, although he continued to dance with other companies later on, most notably Brenda Bufalino's American Tap Dance Orchestra. Ira's tap and step dance background is all about individual people with personalities he treasures. One of the most animated conversations we had, revealed Ira's passion.

"The dance forms themselves—I dig these dance forms. I love different techniques for making rhythms with your feet. And specifically because they go to different forms of traditional music. I love traditional music. When you look here [at his CD and tape collection], this is half jazz and half traditional. When I say traditional, it could be Irish, it could be old-time, it could be bluegrass, it could be French-Canadian, it could be Cape Breton. You'll find African, which really is a lot of different traditions. It's just—I love traditional music. There's just something about traditional, ethnic music that I love. And these dances express that music."

But one particular instrument is an inseparable part of Ira's portrait.

"I love bands. But I also love listening to solo fiddlers. A lot of people say, 'Ah! I have to hear a whole band.' For me, if the

(continued on next page)

fiddler is good enough, there's nothing like it! Just somebody who's so good, that the power comes from their excellence, as opposed to the power of the wall of sound."

Ira developed his first full-length formal concerts with Pete Sutherland playing fiddle and banjo. As he included more jazz material, he added Paul Arslanian on piano. When Pete's family and other professional commitments prevented him from touring, Ira invited Ruthie Dornfeld to play fiddle, and John Herrmann, banjo and bass. Ira felt the banjo was a significant part of the sound he was after, to show people

guitar player who's behind, I don't want to have to split the difference. I want us all to be in agreement. And that's what makes it a groove—that everybody relates to the beat in the same way, all the players hear the beat in the same place."

With everybody's musical energy synchronized and pushing ahead in the same direction, Ira doesn't waste any energy keeping time for the musicians.

"I can't afford to—'cause I'm workin' hard, you know? That's the whole thing—if the music is there, I don't feel like it's taking energy. If the music is there, the

...and then in the doing of it, hearing what I want to hear. I can't control someone else's sounds. I want to hear it the way I want it to be heard. And usually that means being a solo dancer. And my dance is part of the music. I don't like, for the most part, two percussionists when there's melodic music. If it's two dancers and no music, and that's the entire interaction, I love it. But that's a whole different thing. Then it's a purely percussive interaction, and you've got a 'percussion discussion' going on, whether it's two-way or three-way. But if I'm accompanying melodic music, I don't

like dancing when there are other percussionists. For example, in old-time music, without a drum in the band, the feet are the percussion. And if there's another dancer, frequently I'll stop. If a spoons-player joins in an old-time session, it shuts me right down.

"The most joyous aspect

[of dancing for me] is just when it's pure music. It's just pure rhythm. When I'm on a floor that gives me the tone I'm looking for, when I'm doing what I want to be doing, and the music is there—and it's just happening. It could be anywhere—a social situation, a jam session—and the sound is good. When it's working on that level, and I don't have to think about the visual or performance aspect of it. When it's pure music. It usually is not on the performance stage, because I do have to open it up, and I have to do too many things for other people. Performing is a whole other source of satisfaction."

As a solo dancer, Ira performs a breathtaking spectrum of tap, clog, and step dances he's developed from intensive study of traditional ethnic forms. He is especially identified with the spontaneous style of Appalachian flatfooting that he's brought to stages around the world. I asked him why, in concert performances, people especially notice and like his Appalachian clogging and flatfooting.

*In rehearsal at
Sanibel, FL.*

about Appalachian old-time music and clogging. Other formal concert players have included jazz pianists Alki Steriopolous, Conal Fowkes, and Aaron Price, traditional banjo players Joe Fallon, Travis Stuart, and Ephraim

McDowell, and fiddlers John Kirk, Trevor Stuart, and Rayna Gellert. In different settings he has worked with many other musicians and bands. Ira confirmed how important it is for him to have musicians who are able to play old-time and Celtic styles well, and to hear the beat the same way he does.

"What I look for in a musician is the groove, the pocket. Everything I do is about timing, and even the way I do jazz tap, my tap is different from the way most people would tap, as well. There is a consistency of timing. There is a groove that I'm very much into. A lot of people hate old-time music for the exact reason that I love it—its groove. Different tunes will have different grooves, but once you start something, you stay there until it's done."

It is characteristic of Ira's footwork, that it's right in there, and right there all the time.

"That's how I hear it. I want to sit right, dead, smack in the middle. I want everybody there as well—all the musicians. If I have a fiddler who's leaning ahead, and a

motivation is not coming from me. It's coming from the music. I'm surfing. If it's there, I ride it. If it's not happening in the music, it has to come from me, and it wipes me out."

We discussed what always gets applause (the "wagon wheel" in flatfooting, and "wings" and "toe stands" in tap), and what goes by without any.

"What I pride myself on the most, is the consistency, tone, and staying in the pocket. Those things, when they're there—it just seems like they should be there—so they don't stand out. So I don't get applause for my clarity. I don't get applause for my tonality. But that's where I exist, you know? And that's what I put my energy into and that's what I groove on. If I'm liking it—if it's working for me, it's because I'm on a floor that is giving me the tone that I'm asking for. It's all music, even though I'm a dancer. And that doesn't get applause."

We discussed some of the reasons Ira has chosen the solo route, over ensemble dancing.

"I'm not restricted in what I can do. I can do anything I choose to do with footwork



Linda Gaudreault

"It definitely is one of the things people single out. I think there's something about the simplicity and the emotional aspect of flatfooting. It is easy to comprehend rhythmically and it really drives. It's usually fast, it's just fun—the posture, the physicality of it is very relaxed. And I think people relate to that, because it really looks like your average Joe out there just dancing to this music—which is great music. It's a gut reaction, an emotional response very similar to why drumming has very mass appeal. I think flatfooting, out of all the forms that I do, is the closest to somebody just playing a drum."

There are differences between the American clogging and the flatfooting Ira does on the concert stage, and what he does at a festival of old-time music and dance.

"When I'm performing on a concert stage or festival stage, I make a lot of concessions for an audience. I add a lot of movement. I use space on the stage. When I'm dancing at Mt. Airy [NC Fiddlers Convention], especially in the field or campground just for myself, there's no performance. I don't go anywhere, I stand on the spot. The contest stage is also different from a parking lot jam session. I don't run around the stage. I stand on the spot, because that is part of traditional dancing. There's a conscious selection of steps going on. When I'm on a competition stage, and it's a flatfooting contest, I'll choose only steps that I've seen old-timers do. I try to think about some of the older traditional dancers that I've seen and studied—both in the footwork and the aesthetic. I won't get into innovative steps, and I take out any of the larger movements. I tone down the visual. I'm not broadcasting to the last row of the audience, but I am doing certain things because there are judges there."

Ira has won dance awards at Galax and the Clifftop Appalachian String Band Music Festival, and several first place ribbons at Mt. Airy (1989, 1991, 1994, and 1997). Other than at contests, he notes that flatfooting is not a competition-oriented form. It's a social and musical form, distinct from modern precision-based competition clogging forms. The primary interest is in being around and dancing to the old-time music, and having a good time.

Ira commented on the difference between the source (traditional rural, recreational forms), and the old-time traditional dance scene today:

"The people who are dancing today have many more sources to choose from—input

that crosses regional and family styles. Usually, a traditional dancer carries a tradition that is fairly specific and limited in its scope. The step repertoire will really represent or illustrate that, as well as the stylistic approach.

"Because of the traveling I do, and my interest in it, I actively seek out dancers. I use steps taken from old-timers from West Virginia, the mountains here around western North Carolina, from the Piedmont area, and I will mix all those different styles. Separately, they are all traditional steps. I have a large repertoire of steps and vocabulary based on a lot of traveling, research and active collecting. That, in itself, is not traditional, even though a lot of people I learned from were traditional dancers, and not performers or competitors."

Ira talked about defining the terms "clogging," "flatfoot," etc.

"There are so many opinions about what the different styles are, and what the definitions of clogging vs. buckdancing vs. jigging vs. flatfooting are. Because of their personal history and set of experiences, people are going to have their own take on all those definitions. Some people have a really objective and hard set of criteria for what flatfooting is, versus clogging. They

say, 'If your foot comes off the ground more than five inches, it's not flatfooting,' or, 'If I can see the soles of your feet, it's not flatfooting,' or 'If you do this step, that's it. It's not flatfooting.' Then you have somebody like me—because of their experience, all the people they've seen, and all the exceptions to the hard and fast rules they've seen—who is much more into softer definitions. It's not that black and white. If anything, knowing what the exceptions are really strengthens what I call 'general observations,' as opposed to rules. There are basic ways of going about things, that make something flatfooting or clogging. And then, within clogging, is it precision clogging, traditional mountain clogging, or what the modern dancers call buckdancing?"

I asked Ira how he would define buckdancing.

"From my experience, I've come to think that there are three basic, different definitions for buckdancing. One is more part of the modern precision world of clogging: really fancy clogging that goes way beyond the basics in traditional clogging. But, that's totally different from the early blues style of step dancing—a black form of stepping that

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goes along with traditional and rural blues. And then you have another definition of buck, where what I do would be called buckdancing. That is, basically, any southern traditional form of step dancing that's solo and improvised. So, by that definition, I'd be a buckdancer—and any flatfoot would be a buckdancer. There are some people who use buck to mean flatfooting."

I asked Ira what made him decide to write his instruction book, *Appalachian Clogging and Flatfooting Steps*.

"The instruction manual is an expansion of a very small booklet I put out originally, to introduce a system of notation applicable to American style cloggers and flatfooters. I wanted to put out something that really was a presentation of steps so that people could learn new steps, and it would document a lot of the steps that I did which represent my circle of experience. Also, as a lot of people [taking dance] workshops scramble to write things down and remember steps, it saved them from having to do that, and they could concentrate on the workshop."

"Once people understand the aesthetic, the physicality of it, the movement characteristics and the quality of the movement, they can learn new steps from a book,

because they know how to interpret written notation. The notations are rhythmically exact. Every sound is represented in the notation by a movement, so there's no question as to what movement makes a sound. It's basically a presentation of a notation system, so people have a way of writing steps. It's a presentation of a body of material, and a memory device, for people who have had workshops."

"What I [teach] at Augusta [workshops in Elkins, WV] is a single full-time class, as opposed to a dance week where the schedule includes four or five class periods a day, and it's more of a sampling type of event. With instruments and crafts, there have been more intensive residencies, and I wondered, 'Why hasn't anybody applied that concept to step dance?' That's how I go about it personally—why not offer that to other people? If you're going to get somewhere, and you want to get the most out of an instructor in a limited period of time, you make it full-time while you're there."

"I would say that most of the people I teach appreciate [that] focus. The people who will take my intensive week usually know who I am. They've seen me perform or they've been in other workshops of mine, and they have a sense of how I go about it."

In particular, a lot of people are interested in the style that I dance, because it's very percussive. Most people know that it's very focused, and I do think they appreciate the intensity."

"I always start the week by saying, 'I'm going to teach what I do, but I don't assume or expect that you will want to do it this way once you leave.' Once the class is over, people take from it what they will. They'll throw out what they don't want—they might change things tremendously, and that's fine. I really try to get people to be able to do it the way that I do it, so that they can have the choice to do it that way or not."

Ira has taught workshops at week-long camps (Augusta, WV; Ashokan, NY; Pinewoods, NY; Swannanoa, NC; Brasstown, NC; Mendocino, CA; and Port Townsend, WA), as well as numerous weekend and one-day folk or dance camps. His "Steps Around the World" lecture/demo is an assembly program he performs in schools. I wondered what kind of thing was hard to teach in a master class or workshop.

"Flow, improvisation. I talk about improvisation a lot. I talk about relaxation. I talk about trying to be fluid. Musicality. There are a lot of things that are very conceptual. A lot of things that most traditional dancers don't even think about—I try to put it in someone's consciousness, and then teach them how to do it. I call it the gestalt—the big picture—it involves everything. Sometimes it's difficult for me to separate things—it's not there unless you do all of it, you know. But to make it look like water flowing, that's the most difficult thing to teach. And that's how it should look. There should be no extra tension whatsoever, between this [sitting] and getting up and dancing."

"I don't think of it as dance. I think of it as music. My concern, what's going on in my mind, is the music. I'm not doing steps, I'm making rhythms. I'm trying to achieve a percussive goal. By relaxing and being completely at ease with the physical part of it, the sounds will create nice movement. So, that's a big part too, the physical flow, as well as the musical flow."

I asked Ira if he thought of himself as a risk-taker, or how else he saw himself in regard to making the world he believes in come to pass.

"I guess I would consider myself a risk-taker on some levels, though I don't look at it that way. I'm willing to work really hard. I've seen so many great musicians, especially,

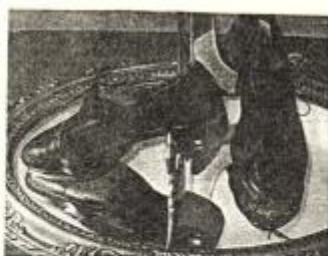
just not do anything. And if you'd ask them, they'd say, 'Yeah, I wish I were out there. I'd love to make my living doing music.' But they don't know what it's like to actually do it. They don't know how much work it takes, beyond artistic merit. And for whatever reason, I have been willing to do all those things... all the drudge work and the nuts and bolts. Even on the artistic side of it—the material itself—it's still got all those nuts and bolts, too. To make the material as good as you can, you have to pay attention to all those little things and nuances. And I don't mind taking five hours to work on the same little things over and over and over again... when it gets to the point of going on that stage—which, to me, is one of the most important things in my life—that's the motivation. It's got to be right! I'll do whatever I have to do to make it right. And so that's where the energy comes from."

The role models who have inspired Ira, from tap dancers to corporeal mimes, share a level of excellence. Ira not only admires the quality, but the subtlety and surprises in their performance.

"Most of the technique I do, when I'm performing flatfooting, is traditional technique—but my attitude about it is completely because of seeing tap dancers, and seeing buskers—jugglers and clowns on the street—people who work their technique beyond the ordinary. That's where all these other influences come in. I mean, people will look at me clogging and say, 'How does Bill Irwin have an influence on you? How does Michael Moschen have an influence on you?' Michael Moschen's ability has a great impact on me. I'm not an object manipulator, but for somebody to take juggling and do what he does, that's what I'm trying to do with flatfooting."

Ira agreed that sometimes people forget that the traditional forms, like language, are living. He added that invention had to be based on knowledge, from extensive experience with the forms, and from understanding their core. We spent time discussing Ira's working style, choreography, and the way he shapes a concert.

"My idea of working on things is really from a very functional point of view: What's the point? What are you trying to do? I think that a lot of people who work from that perspective have similar working methods. Because if that's your choice, then it shows you the path. Let me get into the material, play with it, work with it, try different things—without really forcing



Top to bottom: Irish hard shoes in fiber tips, wooden-soled clogs, tap shoes.

Linda Goodman

anything right off the top—and find out what it tells me, or what the interaction uncovers.

"Basically my own material includes improvisation and choreography. My flatfooting is, by definition, always improvised—beat by beat. A lot of the other material I do, the steps are basically set steps. For example, once you start a step, you go for sixteen bars of a waltz, or eight bars of a reel or a hornpipe. I can change the arrangement of steps, but the steps are set. So, the real choreographs that I've done, are my rhythm tap pieces."

"I put a lot of thought into concerts. I put a lot of thought into set lists, even if it's not a full concert. Even if I'm only doing two numbers it's critical what two numbers they are. I think about a lot of different variables—dynamic energy—hard, soft, fast, slow—tempo, and instrumentation, which is such a big part of it, and I try to

balance the flow of the whole set. And I think of lighting changes."

"The music is such a big part of each number, too. Is it minor or major? The rhythms have so much to do with it, the shoes, the tone of the dance. Is it going to be an Irish hard shoe in fiber tips—which are like a machine gun, just a fairly monotonic, very clean and clear sound, or my taps, which have the most tonal and dynamic range? Then there are the wooden-soled clogs, which fall in between. There's a greater range with the clogs than the fiber tips, but a smaller range than the taps. But then again, they have a very different tone, because it's wood on wood, instead of fiberglass on wood—or metal on wood. Then there are the rubber boots, which have a muted stomping sound, but there are bells on them. And that particular dance [the South African boot dance: *Isicatula*] has a lot of clapping. So you've got a very bright pop. And, it's done a cappella. So, all of these different changes and dynamic variables are thrown into the mix, when I make a set list. And I try not to have several passages in a row, where the impact would be too similar. Sometimes a big contrast is what I'm after. Sometimes a stepped progression is what I'm after, in either direction."

I asked Ira to describe how he promotes the forms and kind of dancing he does.

"There are different ways. One, as a guy out there doing it—and the way I try to do it. My physicality is fairly athletic, in the sense of when people see the whole show, they have seen someone physically work—much of it being pretty aerobic stuff. I think that people relate to that—and especially guys relate to that, and then say, 'Wow! It's not just this little, light, pretty thing—it's work. Yeah! Check out the physicality!'"

"I'm also trying to get people to understand that traditional stuff is also great stuff, has real power in its integrity. I find so much power and depth in different forms of traditional music, and the dance that goes with them. It's something that's very big in my mind—to show that strength to the best of my ability."

"The other thing as far as promoting dance, is that I do educational programs, too. I go into schools and show kids the forms so that they'll know these forms exist. Also, I'm a male dancing forms of dance where the performer is not in tights, and is not in some costume that is difficult for some kids to appreciate. I perform in a

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Ira Bernstein

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pair of pressed pants and a nice shirt. I don't have any far-out costumes, and that's something that, I think, especially the boys can relate to.

"What am I most proud of? That I've opened a door and been able to present the forms that I dance—and in particular, the flatfooting that I do—on professional stages. That I've been invited to do gigs with Gregory Hines, and Savion Glover, and other heroes of a form of dance that is popularly accepted [tap], because what I do [flatfooting] is considered valuable. Because what I do as a percussive form of footwork, they wanted in their show, right along with the other hoofers. And it's just another example of showing the world what the form can be. I'm just a vehicle for the form. And that form, when done at that level, can share those stages. Also, as far as soloists out there, being able to feel like, 'Yeah, I have a full-length concert with my musicians.' I don't have role models in my own scene who've done that, so I'm proud of my show and I feel like that's an accomplishment." ■

Thanks to John Hartford, Ralph Blizard, and Will Keys, Bruce Molsky, Rafe Stefanini, Jay Ungar, and Brad Leftwich for their help and encouragement.

Linda Gunderson, originally from California, is an artist and writer who lives in Clinton, TN. During the Museum of Appalachia's Tennessee Fall Homecoming, she was an MC/Stage Manager for the overhang barn stages and dance wagon. She plays 5-string banjo with Smokehouse Porch musicians for museum visitors.

FOOTNOTIN' WITH IRA

This is another story that has taken me on a wild ride. Originally, I went to interview percussive step dancer Ira Bernstein, for a feature article in the *Procrastinator's Newsletter*. Videotapes showed the distinctive accuracy and musicality of his footwork, and the extraordinary energy of a disciplined athlete. As a solo dancer, Ira performs a breathtaking spectrum of tap, clog and step dances he's developed from intensive study of traditional ethnic forms. He is especially identified with the spontaneous style of Appalachian flatfooting that he's brought to stages around the world.

Ira penciled me in on his busy calendar for an interview at his home in Asheville, North Carolina. He felt he was "in good company" with animator Nick Park's Wallace & Gromit, and with his hero, Bill Irwin (theatrical clown, dancer, director, etc.). Besides, no one else had ever done an in-depth article about him. In two days of conversation, on and off the record, we covered everything from the tonal characteristics of his footwear, to the logistics of planning a full-length concert with his musicians.

On the drive from Asheville to the Museum of Appalachia's Tennessee Fall Homecoming, I knew the story needed exposure beyond my readership. I had discovered Ira was not only a dancer's dancer, but a musician's dancer—that his percussive footwork was *part* of the music that he loves. The appropriate gallery for his word-portrait, would be in a publication for musicians who play in the old-time and Celtic styles Ira likes to accompany.

Backstage at the Museum of Appalachia, I had an hour of one-to-one discussion with respected musician, John Hartford, over lunch. John encouraged me to write up Ira's story as I'd described it to him, as a complete work, rather than a proposal. Fiddler Ralph Blizard, and banjo-player Will Keys were also enthusiastic about the article, as well as many other musicians I've talked with in the past few months. At this point the manuscript is almost ready to send to the editor. I'll keep you posted on this work-in-progress!

(This story is from my 7th Annual Procrastinator's Newsletter, which came out in early 1999. This year I especially want to acknowledge the moral support from John Hartford, who said when I thanked him this April 13th on the telephone, "It worked!")

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