



an interview with

JERRY HELT

by Jovana

Jerry Helt, one of the foremost and certainly one of the most popular Square Dance Callers in the country, has been calling squares since 1943, and full time for the past 20 years. He has a mechanical engineering background, but prefers calling squares as a vocation. He has traveled extensively throughout the United States and Europe calling squares. He has recorded on the Blue Star, Kentucky, MacGregor, and Scope labels. Jerry lives in Cincinnati with his wife and family.

The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the subject only, and not those of the Folk Dance Federation as a whole.



HOW DID SQUARE DANCE DEVELOP?

Well, American Square Dancing developed from many countries, like England, Scotland, Germany. In fact, it sort of represents our nationalities in this country, and we have taken all the pieces of their dances and put them together, & we have an American Square Dance or an American Folk Dance. Also, from Contra Dance, which is basically English, Irish, we have developed our own figures. And we've taken some strictly American music & developed certain tunes that go along with the dances. This is really where our contemporary form is right now.

Now if we go back and trace it out, it started in the East and moved into the South, where they had a certain form of dance. Then into the Mid-west, where they had a traditional form but a different interpretation of the original dancing from England. Through Minnesota and the North they had a polka-type of Square Dance. Then it all sort of worked its way West. Back in the 1940's several people, Dr. Lloyd Shaw from Colorado, Henry Ford, Sr., developed "American Square Dancing." In fact, Henry Ford was first in making any records and publishing literature on American Square Dancing.

Really, the West Coast kind of put this all together and came up with a contemporary Western-style of American Square Dancing. Then it worked its way back across the country; now the East Coast is doing Western-style Contemporary Squares.

DON'T THESE AREAS MAINTAIN THEIR INDIVIDUAL FLAVOR?

There are some, and it's fading fast, regional type dances still being danced. You go into the South, you still find a little bit of Clogging danced; you go into the North, Minnesota, Wisconsin, you find a polka-type Square being danced; you go into the Mid-west, you'll find a certain traditional form danced there. In fact, here in California I'm sure there are some old style Early California Western Dances being danced. But it's fading, & we as a society, being a moving society, are breaking down this regional type thing. So with the contemporary form, if you go from California to New England, you'll find a standard style of Square Dancing going on.

ARE NEW SQUARE DANCE PATTERNS CURRENTLY DEVELOPING, OR IS THE REPERTOIRE FAIRLY SET?

Americans are very creative and very inventive. I receive across my desk every month a two or three inch stack of material, newly written movements. We look them over and say, Well here's something that might be used. This goes back to the way we live; our society encourages new things. Get something new, do something new; What's new? And Square Dancing, being an American Folk Dance, expresses the way we live. We are expressing our economy. If your toaster doesn't work, you don't have it repaired, you buy a new one! This is happening in Square Dancing, it's happening in Folk Dancing, it's happening in Round Dancing. You learn a new

dance, you discard it, and you learn another new one. I think too much of this might be detrimental to the activity, but this is going on. Also the complexity of figures expresses a very complex life; and we are doing this in dance form.

WHAT ARE THE MOST ACTIVE AREAS IN THE UNITED STATES FOR SQUARE DANCING?

Where the mass population is. California has a heavy Square Dance activity, New England, the Mid-west. Country people like Square Dancing, but city people like it just as much. And it's more beneficial in the cities than it is in the country. Because country people have a certain philosophy of getting along with each other, communicating with each other. But city people, no; you live in an apartment building, and you don't know who the neighbor is. Now this is a problem that we're confronted with in the Square Dance activity, and I think you're confronted with it in Folk Dancing: there is too little emphasis on the social aspects of the dance. We're like machines; we're out there dum, dum, dum, doing a dance; we go sit in a corner; we get out there dum, dum, dum; we go sit in a corner. So what we have to do, as leaders, is to redevelop the idea of communicating with the people, socializing the people.

So when people come to a Square Dance, I feel obligated to induce communication. To me, this is more important than some of the dancing. The dancing will come along; the communication part is difficult, but it's necessary for the enjoyment of the dance. One reason why we don't socialize is the home; people sit & watch television--they're being entertained. In some cases they don't even communicate with their kids or their spouse, let alone with someone else. Another reason is that frequent company transfers make people reluctant to make friends they may have to leave behind.

But I think through Square Dancing, we can change that; we are changing it. I know of people who travel all over the country, & the minute they walk into a group, they have instant friends. This to me is vitally important. Because if dance turns into an activity where you walk in, you do your thing, and then go sit down, it can't survive. It's going to be a little minority thing. And I want this to appeal to the masses.

IS AMERICAN SQUARE DANCE DONE IN ANY OTHER COUNTRY?

It's done all over the world. Very big in Japan; very big. They're very strict about calls; they use the Square Dance language. It's done in English. Because some of this you couldn't translate, you know. How you going to say, 'Square Through' in Japanese? 'Square Through Four Hands.' That's a very long sentence in Japanese.

Square Dancing abroad really developed in Europe and Asia through our Armed Services people over there. Now many groups know how to Square Dance in English, even if they don't speak any English. I'm told it's being done a little bit in Africa. Aus-

tralia--it's very popular there. I think the Americans have made an impression on everybody around the world. Some of our customs, some of our food and dance; all these have mixed.

WHAT SEPARATES THE SQUARE & FOLK DANCE MOVEMENTS?

At one time Folk, Square, and the whole business were all together as one. Then Square Dancing broke away and developed into an American type dance. I think Square Dancing is the beginning of dancing for the average person; it's a little more palatable to the average American than Folk Dancing. The American male is the guy who is very reluctant to dance. And he's the guy that you have to sell. Now, because we start Square Dancing as very elementary, he can do it. If you take him into a Folk Dance group and say, "OK, you do a *pas de basque*," he's confused. But at a Square Dance he can almost walk. So that's part of the separation.

And you have, I feel, in the Folk Dance field, people who are 'folklorists', who like to collect and do things from different nationalities. The average American may feel toward Folk Dancing, "Let the foreigners do it."

I feel that Folk Dance music is foreign to most people. They're not used to hearing that type of music, and this, I think, turns them off. Even in a Square Dance class, I don't start people with traditional music. I start out with something modern, that's familiar to their ear. We sort of bait the trap there, and then we get into traditional things.

I think another separation is that Folk Dancing is always sold as an inexpensive activity, moreso than Square Dancing. Some people thought maybe we should pay a little more and go first class, hire a caller. Where sometimes in the Folk Dance field, I don't know how it is currently, but in many groups everybody takes a turn, & you don't really have a paid leader or a paid instructor.

Also, in a Folk Dance group you do maybe two squares in the course of the evening. You've exposed people to the figure and the pattern, but you really haven't exposed them to Square Dancing. When somebody says *Square Dancing* to me, I don't think of just a bunch of patterns; I think of the whole emotional thing, of developing the group, the personality. All this is Square Dancing. Not just one little call. It's very difficult to capture a group in one call. Very difficult. You're lost in the confusion of the other dances. And I think this might be some of the reason for the separation of Folk and Square: people like to do a full evening of one kind of dancing. I would like to do a full evening of Romanian dancing. I don't like to mix dancing. It confuses me. It's like taking four books; you start a chapter in one, you take another chapter in the other, and another chapter in the third. Then you go back and take Chapters 2, and you're so confused when that's over, you might as well forget it. You won't know anything you read. And I feel this way about Folk Dancing; people are jumping around; they don't absorb it; they're not in it. And I think you have to really get in it to really feel it.

ARE THERE ANY SIMILARITIES BETWEEN FOLK AND SQUARE DANCING?

Well, we have separations within each activity which are similar. We have a gung-ho group, a minority group, who want to do very complicated dances. Bless 'em, I think it's great that they want to do this, but it's a battle. We say, "Hey, let's slow down a minute. This is good for everybody. If it gets too complicated, it won't appeal to the masses, and then we're in trouble." We went through this stage in early New England dancing. At one time in early American dancing, you had to go to a dance master, learn the steps, and then go to a dance and do them. And they were in trouble. The thing faded out. It was appealing to a minority.

Another similarity is that it's a do-it-yourself project. You don't walk in and say, "Here I am; entertain me." (This is typical American.) Square Dancing and Folk Dancing is not that. You walk in, you pay your money, and you say, "Here I am; what will we do? Let's do something." So you help each other. This goes back to the days of the 'barn-raising' when our pioneers got together. They had very little activity; they were isolated in most cases. But they got together as a group; they built a barn together, they worked together, and they danced and socialized together. And we still are hanging on to that tradition. If you eliminate the social part of it, then there's no sense doing it.

NOTE: This interview will be concluded in the November Issue of
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