
Michael Herman, 1910 - 1996

Reprinted from Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine, Vol. 41, No. 2

"You can't hate people when you're doing their dances."

"A lot of people engage in empty talk about the 'gifts' the immigrants brought to our American culture. Well, folk dances are a concrete example of those gifts, and I want to make them a real part of every American's heritage."

— Michael Herman

Michael Herman died on May 3, 1996, 66 years after his arrival in New York to study violin at the Julliard School, and 56 years after he stood on a platform at the American Common of the New York World's Fair, microphone and violin in hand, coaxing different passersby to come and try a fun thing called *folk dancing*.

The son of Ukrainian working-class immigrants in Cleveland, Ohio, Michael excelled in Ukrainian dancing from early childhood, and became acquainted with the dances and music of other nationality groups as well. In New York, he haunted the many ethnic enclaves of the city, dancing with the people and in some cases, even playing their music with them.

Michael's 1940 World's Fair "gig" is often cited as the birth of the uniquely American recreational folk dance movement. A superb, charismatic teacher, Michael Herman was an admitted romantic idealist, and self-doubt was unknown to him. He firmly believed that the folk dances brought by immigrants to the US were an ideal medium for achieving interethnic respect and social harmony in American life. He further be-

lieved these "gifts" should be available to everyone. The World's Fair was his opportunity to implement his vision.

The experiment was a success, and many of the participants urged Michael to find some way to continue the experience after the Fair was over. He took the challenge, and in a series of venues in Lower Manhattan, he taught, staged festivals, published a small monthly magazine and energetically promoted his concept of folk dancing in every way possible for more than a decade. By that time, the movement had grown to a point where need for a permanent center became urgent. In 1951, Michael and his wife, Mary Ann, leased a building on West 16th Street and called it "Folk Dance House."

Full schedules of packed classes, teachers' courses, exciting weekend festivals and workshops, Michael's own Folk Dancer records, and summer-long Maine Folk Dance Camp, special teenage programs – all conveyed the Herman's message to a nationwide community of thousands of folk dancers and teachers. Their influence even spread to the Midwest and the West Coast, where folk dancing had already been developing independently. Folk Dance House hosted many of the dance world's celebrities, and dance critics hailed this colorful new "form." Mary Ann began to play a more important role during this time, and eventually fully shared responsibilities, particularly in the realms of teachers' classes and operation of the camp in Maine.

Michael Herman (continued)

The Hermans viewed a session of folk dancing as an integral social *event*, sensitively and spontaneously programmed as a function of the momentary needs of the crowd. Everyone present must leave happier than when they came in, everyone must have made at least one new friend. Michael especially knew how to "work the room" in pursuit of these goals. His eye was forever on the sparrow. The moment he spotted some patron sitting out a dance for example, Michael would instantly choose as his next dance one sure to motivate the sideler to get up and participate. To dance at Folk Dance House meant leaving your self-centeredness at the door; your reward could be as high as joyous as dancing with the world.

Folk Dance House abruptly closed its doors in 1968 (the landlord sold the building). The sacred place suddenly vanished. It was a severe blow to the New York folk dance scene, which became decentralized practically overnight, and the beginning of a decline in the Herman's influence. Some say it was an early adumbration of the imminent nationwide decline of the recreational folk dance movement in general.

Michael remained steadfast in his philosophy while the movement he had done so much to build, but no longer controlled, took off in many directions. Unfortunately, like so many cultural giants, Michael never learned to delegate. Hence, with age beginning to take its toll, his record business (a one-Michael job, from concept to wrapping and shipping) began to lag, and he never moved up from records to tapes, thus assuring obsolescence. He often expressed disappointment in the contemporary folk dance scene, which he claimed was addicted to quantities of

dances rather than quality of dancing. Even before the passing of Mary Ann in 1992, Michael had become increasingly vulnerable, physically and mentally. Near the end, he continued to teach a small but devoted group of dancers on Long Island.

In near-original form, Michael's vision lives on in a diminishing number of aging folk dance groups around the country; few young dancers recognize his name. However, alumni of Folk Dance House and Maine Camp are doing great things in the fields of recreation and education, and many young people whom Michael inspired with an elementary world-consciousness moved on the successful academic careers in political science, geography, anthropology, ethnic studies and the arts.

I am grateful to Michael Herman for many things, on of which is the *Folk Dancer* series of recordings of the Banat Tamburitza Orchestra whose priceless musicianship would have disappeared forever had it not been for Michael's enterprise.

– Dick Crum

