

## A Conversation With **STAN ISAACS**

By Ed Hughot

Reprinted from *The Dance Line*, November 1991.

*Stan has long been a favorite folk dance teacher in the Bay Area, not only for his knowledge and teaching skills, but also for his folksy manner and laid-back approach. People enjoy dancing with Stan because of his styling – which is something to admire and emulate. Stan more than adequately teaches Israeli, Greek, Scandinavian, English, Scottish, you name it. Today, Stan specializes in teaching vintage dances and recently taught a tango workshop.*

Stan's interest in folk dancing began in high school through the square dance connection. Apparently his dancing ability surfaced at an early age, coming so naturally it's not clear when he started doing folk dances. By the time he got to Antioch College in Ohio he was already informally teaching folk dances to fellow students at their Friday night club meetings.

Stan arrived in the Bay Area in 1964, and soon began teaching at the UC Berkeley folk dance club, but he also danced in San Francisco, Menlo Park, and Stanford. During this period he taught workshops as the opportunity arose, and taught at Kolo Festivals, which were memorable occasions in San Francisco.

In 1971 there was an opportunity to work in Israel, where he spent the next three years programming computers during the day, and teaching folk dances in the kibbutz at night. Israeli dancing was already well established, but the people were always eager to learn new dances, and to improve their styling. Stan recalls that there was a lot of enthusiasm, even under difficult circumstances.

Returning to San Francisco in 1974, Stan joined the West Wind dancers which had just moved to Berkeley from Los Angeles under the direction of Neal Sandler. He also performed with Khadra for a brief time until he found work, and opportunity for teaching on the Peninsula.

Stan prefers to teach, rather than perform – which is very fortunate for us. Over the years, Stan has taught several groups on the Peninsula, including the Foothill College club. However, his class was one of the casualties of Prop 13; colleges priced their facilities too dearly for many folk-dancers, while cutting off the supply of new dancers.

During this era Stan's work with the Kolo Festival Committee will be remembered as one of his many accomplishments. The festivals were so hectic there was little time to talk with other dancers. But it was very enjoyable to dance at the evening parties with other men who have honed their folkdance skills to a fine edge.

About 1979 Stan formed the famous Panachorean group in Palo Alto (Monday night) with the able assistance of Bob Fraley, and Stan's wife-to-be, Karen. This happy arrangement lasted for about 10 years, until Bob had to withdraw because of family pressures and the number of folkdancers declined until Stan just couldn't keep the class going.

Therefore, around 1986, Stan began to teach vintage dancing, with the help and participation of Richard Powers, who found that by using choreography, folk dancers could learn vintage dancing more easily. Teaching vintage dancing this way is something like teaching ballroom dancing from the folk (traditional) perspective. Today there

aren't that many people doing vintage dances. Stan is characteristically philosophical about it, realizing that most people in the USA don't dance, and only a tiny fraction of all dancers are folk dancers. (Give yourself a pat on the back for being part of a very special group.) This number is reduced to the specialized groups devoted to Bulgarian, Israeli, Hungarian, English Country, Greek, etc. These groups are thriving.

It may be that the broad arena of international folk dancing has lost its appeal from lack of focus. How, then, can we get more people involved with international folkdance. Exposure, through folkdance exhibitions, is not enough – the performance doesn't make all people want to dance. The social group, or community, may be a way to do it. People will generally do something if other people are doing it. People always want to join-in, to connect, to link-up and be a part of something.

Nevertheless, the future of folk dance is secure. Although styles change and dances change, people will always dance. The essence of dancing is the enjoyment of moving to music, especially when friends participate too. Everyone has his own reasons for dancing and, while we don't understand this well, we can see the results. Therefore, it is less important to preserve the "right" steps than to insure that people will enjoy the dance. The critical problem in folk dancing now is the lack of young people. When this challenge is confronted, everything else will take care of itself.

On another front, Stan feels that technology will probably have an impact on folk dance in the future, although it won't necessarily be influenced by computers. For example, we have some new electronic instruments and amplifiers, but the evolution of musical instruments has not been a major factor. We have already seen a major change simply because technology brought out LPs which replaced the 78s, which made the music – and thus the dancing – much more enjoyable to many people. Of course, recordings supplemented live bands, making music more accessible and people could dance more often. However, people's tastes do change, and there's a very complex relationship to life in every age, or period of time. So change prevails in popular music, taste, style, structure, groups, places - but this is not very important. The basic idea will be the same and will survive, as long as the foundation is sound.

Some think that changing to vintage dancing was too drastic, but Stan likes any kind of dancing with good music. The problem with teaching Balkan dance is the research, requiring many trips abroad to collect material and closely study folk customs. A key benefit of vintage dancing is the abundant literature that is readily available in the Bay Area. Stan enjoys folk dance camps where you can learn many things, and you can visit with less time pressure. Also, there's a lot of good dancing, good music, and good people to enjoy it with. Many kinds of dancing are fun. He would like to have more time to do Cajun, Texas, and country- western dances - among other things - so long as it's exciting and there are new people.

Stan will participate in the 40th Anniversary Kolo Festival (November 29 in San Jose) by teaching one of his favorite dances. So, if you don't know Stan already, this will be an excellent time to get acquainted.