

PAUL SHELDON'S DANCE JOURNEY

Editor's Note: Paul Sheldon's name came across my desk because he wrote a note to Membership Chair Marcia Rosenblatt when he became a new Federation member. His note included: "I live in Ashland, Oregon... I would like to keep track of what the Federation is doing to support the national resurgence." I was intrigued. I wrote to ask him about his interest and history in folk dance, and this article is a result of my curiosity. More than a personal history, it shares a side of folk dancing in Los Angeles that few people remember. You can read more about Paul Sheldon by doing an internet search for "Paul Sheldon dancer."]

by Paul Sheldon

Pasadena, California, once held an annual art fair on the streets around City Hall every year on a weekend in the fall. Hundreds of local artists displayed their work, while performers and musicians gathered audiences on the street corners. In the 1950s, my parents knew that, from the time I could walk, they did not have to worry that I would become bored or lost at the fair. They found they could park my three-year-old body by the folk dancers, and I would sit happily for hours under a tree, alone or with my sister, watching the colorfully costumed dancers celebrate the folk traditions of Bulgaria, Greece, Japan, Russia, Sweden, Brazil, Appalachia, and other cultures from around the world.

When I was 6 years old, one of these dancers, Mary Zondler, invited me to join in a traditional Bulgarian line dance known as Eleno Mome. I eagerly clasped her outstretched fingers with my little hand, and jumped into the syncopated 7/8 rhythm with all the dancers. It seemed to me that I recognized both the traditional brass band music and the steps.

Throughout the next 55 years, traditional dances of central Europe and the Mediterranean basin would provide a touchstone for me in every community. The United Nations promoted the International Folk Dance Movement as a precursor to world peace. If people shared each other's dance traditions, they proposed, we would be more appreciative of each other and less likely to wage war. In the 1950s and '60s, folk dance was a common curriculum unit, especially in girls' middle school physical education classes. Weekly recreational folk dance groups formed in school gymnasiums, churches, and synagogue recreation halls throughout North America, Europe, and Israel.

The Pasadena Folk Dance Cooperative, a legacy of the communist organizing influences of the International Workers of the World, was founded in 1935. A life membership cost \$2, and members were asked to contribute 50¢ on Friday nights to enjoy an evening of traditional dances. Non-members paid \$1, and first time visitors were free.

It was the members of Pasadena Co-op who danced at the Art Fair every year. From that first dance at the Pasadena Art Fair, for a solid decade, every Friday night, until I finally got a driver's license, our



(L to R) John Hertz, Paul Sheldon, David Katz, Steve Murillo (4th from the right) and others enjoy a Macedonian dance at The Intersection, circa 1976.

father took my older sister and me to Pasadena Folk Dance Co-op, in the auditorium and common room of Lincoln Avenue Elementary School in the heart of Pasadena. Our college professor father sat in the back of the auditorium grading term papers while we learned dances from Israel, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Japan, Sweden, Denmark, England, Scotland, Lebanon, Syria, the United States, and a host of other cultures from all over the world. Because my sister and I were the only kids, we enjoyed semi-celebrity status among the several dozen attendees at the weekly festivities. For three and a half hours, from the one-hour dance lessons at the beginning of the evening until the music stopped at 11 pm, we never sat down. Most of the other dancers assumed the old guy sitting in the back of the auditorium was the school janitor.

When I was 15, my friend Steve and I were invited to join Sobranie Macedonian Dancers. With two years of performing experience under our belts, we were invited to join the AMAN International Music and Dance Ensemble, at UCLA. Both because of our youth and our talent, as well as our dedication, Steve and I rose to soloist status within a few years, guided and inspired by great cultural treasures from among the amazing talent of the Aman ensemble. Steve went on to perform with the nationally recognized Duquesne University Tamburitzans.

Following the lead of the folk music coffee houses of Greenwich Village, Los Angeles also boasted several such folk music venues, such as Pasadena's Ice House (which actually was in the former ice house), the Troubadour, the Ash Grove, McCabe's Back Room, and several others. Five different folk dance coffee houses also sprang up, all over the Los Angeles Area. The first was The Intersection.

Rudy Dannes and Athan Karras, with support from Chalo Holguin and Louise Anderson Bilman, founded The Intersection Folk Dance Coffee House in a storefront in Los Angeles. Invited by one of the members of Pasadena Co-op, my sister and I first went to The Intersection the month after it opened for an evening of

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dancing. As I watched the masterful dancers spinning, squatting, and celebrating the dance traditions of so many cultures, I remember thinking, "I could never do that!" Little did I know that not only would I learn to enjoy all those dances, but I would be called upon to perform and teach them for thousands of people in hundreds of communities all over the world.

The vision of The Intersection's founders was to provide a small club where members and friends could celebrate the dance traditions of a different culture each night of the week. Thus, Sunday was Greek Night; Monday was Israeli; Tuesday, Armenian; Wednesday, Balkan; Thursday another Greek night (because Athan, as founder, insisted his rich Greek heritage deserved double credit); and Friday and Saturday were International, featuring a mix of many cultures from all over the world. A small kitchen provided Mediterranean-themed snacks and foods for the dancers.

The Intersection's constituency was largely the young-adult children of Jewish immigrants in the Boyle Heights and Fairfax neighborhoods of Los Angeles, as well as young first- and second-generation representatives of all the cultures featured on the various evenings and more, surrounded and encouraged by other well-wishers, elders, and dancing enthusiasts. A small number of "elders" were honored by being invited to lead the dancing and tell their stories to eager young

listeners, seated on apple and orange crates and cane chairs, around makeshift tables made from large telephone wire spools turned on their sides.

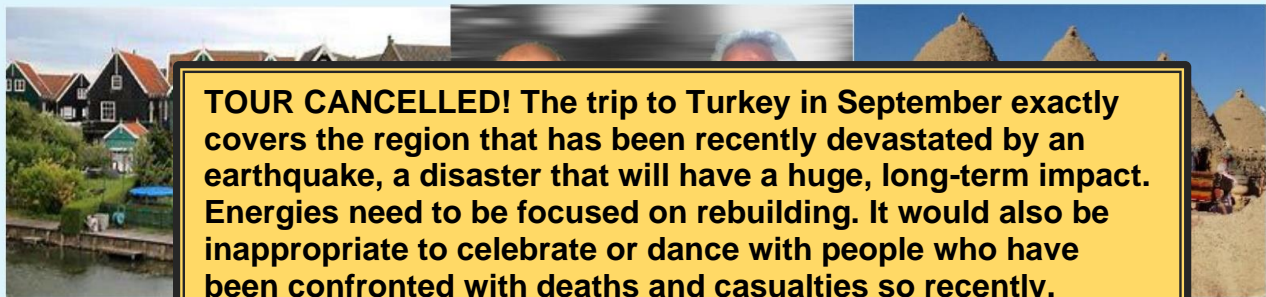
By 1974, after master teacher Dick Oakes moved to Colorado, I was invited to lead the evening of international dancing on Friday nights. Then, when Rudy Dannes retired, I took over his Saturday night class, until I also moved to Colorado in 1981.

Athan Karras, a native of the Epirus region of Greece, often spoke of "the sacred circle of the dance." This sacred circle is ancient, dating back more than 5,000 years, to the times when gods and goddesses walked the earth, and dance rituals anchored the *ekstasis* of transcending mundane states of being, to experience the divine, through dance and song.

Thanks to Rudy and Athan's inspiration and guidance, throughout a dance career spanning more than 50 years, I have been privileged to teach or lead traditional dancing for more than 150,000 people, and have performed before audiences of more than 400,000 people at celebrations, weddings, festivals, and fairs all over the world. The largest group I ever taught in a circle was about 300 people, and the largest audience I performed for was estimated at 18,000 (though most groups were much smaller). This rich dance community has provided a basis for belonging, friendships, and livelihood throughout a long, joy-filled life.

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~ Tineke and Maurits

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