

## **SQUARE DANCE CALLING: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CONNECTION**

BY PHILIP A. JAMISON

At an Appalachian square dance there is always a caller on hand to call out the dance figures. At large dances, the caller is typically on stage beside the band, behind a microphone. At house dances and other small gatherings, the caller may prompt the dancers from the floor, shouting out the calls while at the same time dancing. The caller acts as master of ceremonies, choosing the dances, teaching the figures where necessary, coordinating with the musicians, and finally calling out the figures during the dance. The practice of calling is unique to American folk dance, and though common nowadays, at one time it was not a part of the Appalachian dance tradition. Calling did not arrive with the early European settlers, but it originated and developed in this country and came into the Appalachian region sometime during the nineteenth century. Early accounts of dancing in Appalachia from the late 1700s and early 1800s pre-date the practice of calling, and refer only to contra dances, reels, and jigs, dances which were performed without the aid of a caller. Written evidence from the nineteenth century suggests that the first callers were African-American musicians and that dance calling was common in the black culture throughout the country before it was adopted by whites, and became an integral part of the Appalachian dance tradition.

When Europeans first colonized America, their dances were not unlike those popular in Europe at the time, and by the end of the seventeenth century itinerant dancing masters were teaching minuets and English "country dances" (later called contra dances) at dancing schools in towns and settlements throughout the colonies. As in Europe, once dancers had learned the steps and figures of the country dance, as well as proper etiquette for the ballroom (which was equally important), they could attend a public ball. A less formal type of figure dance that was also popular throughout the colonies was the reel, which included the Scotch Reel, the Six Handed Reel, and the Virginia Reel. The Scotch Reel, also referred to as the "Foursome Reel," a "four-handed reel," or "a straight four," was danced with four dancers. It consisted of "setting steps" in place (similar to a balance), alternating with a traveling figure in the shape of a figure

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eight (similar to a Hey for Four). The Six Handed Reel, of which there were several different versions, was danced with three men and three women in facing lines. The Virginia Reel, also known as the English dance "Sir Roger De Coverly," was likewise danced with men and women in separate lines as in a contra dance. These reels, like the minuets and contra dances, once learned, did not require a caller to perform.<sup>1</sup>

At inns and taverns and at informal social gatherings in towns and in the countryside, less structured dancing took place, which in addition to reels, included step-dancing to jigs and hornpipes. As a young man, John Adams described in his diary such a "frolic" with black fiddlers at a Boston area tavern in 1760: "Every Room, kitchen, Chamber was crowded with People. Negroes with a fiddle. Young fellows and Girls dancing in the Chamber as if they would kick the floor thro . . . caught a Girl and danced a Gigg [jig] with her. . . ." (Adams 1961, 172)

As early as 1690, slave fiddlers played for dances on plantations in Virginia (Virginia Writers' Project 1940), and by the mid-eighteenth century, slave musicians were common at white social functions, both urban and rural, throughout the American colonies. Slave owners saw extra value in slaves who could perform music, and being able to play music was a salvation for many who were condemned to slavery. Solomon Northup, a free black who was sold into slavery in 1841 wrote, "I was indebted to my violin, my constant companion, the source of profit, and soother of my sorrows during years of servitude" (Northup 1968, 149). Respected by their own culture as well, slave fiddlers kept alive the tradition of the professional itinerant "griot" musicians of West Africa (Stuckey 1987, 21).

Shortly before the American Revolution, a new type of dance called the cotillion was introduced to America. This dance for four couples in square formation was imported from France, where it had developed in the 1700s (Keller 1991). Robert Hunter, Jr., a young merchant from London, travelling in the United States in 1785 wrote of "practicing cotillions" in Baltimore before attending a wedding in eastern Virginia at which, "After dinner we danced cotillions, minuets, Virginia and Scotch reels, country dances, jigs, etc., till ten o'clock" (Hunter 1943, 207).

Before the end of the eighteenth century, a number of the French cotillion figures were combined into what became known as the quadrilles.<sup>2</sup> Originally composed of five distinct parts, these new dances were longer, more complicated, and harder to learn than the simpler cotillions. French quadrilles were danced in New Orleans as early as 1803, just prior to the Louisiana Purchase (Costonis 1986); and, before long, American, as well as newly arrived French dancing masters were teaching these "latest and fashionable dances" at "subscription balls" in cities and towns throughout the country. There are numerous accounts of African-American fiddlers,

“operators on catgut,” providing the music at these formal balls (Johnson 1937, 159). The new dances soon began to replace the old contra dances, reels, and jigs; and following the War of 1812, with the exception of New England, which remained pro-English, Americans completely abandoned the tradition of English contra dances in favor of the French cotillions and quadrilles (Damon 1957). Originally these dances were not called, but like the earlier minuets and country dances, the figures and steps were taught at dancing schools and memorized, using French dance terminology still in use today, such as Taught by American, as well as newly arrived French dancing masters, the cotillions introduced many of the figures and French dance terminology still in use today, such as “Allemande,” Balance,” “Chassé” [Sashay], “Dos à Dos,” “Grande Chaîne” [Grand Right and Left], and “Promenade.”

While dancing is mentioned in some of the early written accounts of the Appalachian region, detailed descriptions of the dance figures are rare. The first settlers, as well as the many Scotch-Irish and Germans who came to the Appalachians following the American Revolution, arrived prior to the advent of dance calling, and therefore, the earliest narratives include only contra dances, jigs, and reels. A.W. Putnam’s *History of Middle Tennessee* mentions dances on puncheon floors at weddings and at Christmastime at settlements on the Cumberland Plateau in the 1780s: “The contra-dance and the jig were the very common evening’s exercise and entertainment at these stations.’ [on the Cumberland in 1787] It was regarded as a healthful exercise and pleasant recreation. It was much practiced at all the early settlements west of the mountains” (1971, 273).

Another account, from central West Virginia in 1800, refers to the “regular Old Virginia hoe-down” (Milnes 1999, 108). This was likely the Virginia Reel, which, based on numerous written references, appears to have been popular across the Appalachian region throughout the nineteenth century. David Crockett, in his autobiography, mentions dancing a “reel” in 1805 with his bride-to-be at an all-night “frolic” in Tennessee, but it is not clear which type of reel he is referring to (Crockett 1834, 59).<sup>3</sup>

There have been African-Americans in Appalachia since the 1700s, and a number of early fiction writers include black musicians playing for white dancers. *The Valley of Shenandoah*, written in 1824, describes a dance at a “barbacue” in northern Virginia set in 1796:

In the adjoining house, which had once been a tavern, was a long room, where the young people were exercising their limbs in dancing reels, consisting of four, five, and even six couples, in which no regard was paid to suiting the

figures to the tune, though, it must be admitted, they kept admirable time with their feet. Two fiddlers and one fifer, all black, rent the air with their enlivening sounds; and when they first struck up a favourite Scotch air, they set the whole room capering. (Tucker 1970, 121)

In *Georgia Scenes*, written in the 1830s by Augustus Longstreet, the narrator attends a "frolic" at a one room log house in one of the frontier counties in Georgia. All the furniture is removed, a black fiddler arrives, and they dance "a good ole republican six reel" with "setting steps" (1969, 12 - 22).

A more fanciful account of David Crockett's 1805 dance frolics appears in an unauthorized "autobiography," written by an anonymous author and published in 1833. In this account Crockett attends a "frolic" at a house with "the less refined portion of society;" the music is provided by an African-American banjo player and a nondescript fiddler: "The house was tolerably large, with a dirt floor, which had been swept, ready for a dance. . . . old Ben, the banjo player . . . was seated in a corner upon a stool. . . ." (1974, 37). The dances mentioned in this account include "country dances," and "old fashioned plays" [play parties], and the dancers "set to," as in the Scotch Reel. They also danced "jigs" while "old Ben thrummed his banjo, beat time with his feet, and sung . . . occasionally calling for particular steps." Though not calling out dance figures per se, he "cries out . . . back step an' heel an' toe . . . weed corn, kiver taters, an' double shuffle" (1974, 39-41).<sup>4</sup>

Even though these works of fiction were no doubt influenced by the contemporary notions of the Appalachian frontier, they and others like them, do shed some light on the music and dance traditions of the day, or at least the public's perception of them. They suggest that African-Americans performed as musical servants to whites, at social events both public and private, in the Appalachians as elsewhere in the country.

As early as the eighteenth century, in addition to playing for white dances, slaves began to dance the European dances themselves. For close to a century they had provided music for whites at balls and at dancing schools. In doing so, they were exposed to the figures of the European dances as dancing masters taught their students.<sup>5</sup> One account from a South Carolina newspaper in 1772, mentions a "cabel" of about sixty slaves gathered near Charleston to dance "Country Dances" (Epstein 1977, 82). Dances from both the African and European traditions co-existed at plantation "frolics" during the first half of the nineteenth century. Slaves danced French cotillions and quadrilles and the Virginia Reel along with their own African dances. Robert Anderson, a slave born in 1843 in Green

County, Kentucky, recalled a dance with slaves from neighboring plantations: "We had a regular jubilee which lasted the greater part of the night. We danced the dances like the white folks danced them, and then danced our own kind of dances" (Leonard 1967, 32).

A number of slave narratives also refer to slave musicians calling out the figures of the cotillions and quadrilles. Former slave Isaac Stier described plantation dances in Mississippi:

Us danced plenty, too. Some o' de men clogged and pigeoned, but when us had dances dey was real cotillions, lak de white folks had . . . I use to call out de figgers: 'Ladies, sasshay, Gents to de lef', now all swing.' Ever 'body lak my calls an' de dancers sho' moved smooth an' pretty. Long after de war was over de white folks would 'gage me to come 'roun' wid de band an' call de figgers at all de big dances. Dey always paid me well. (Federal Writers' Project 1936 - 38, 143)

The earliest references to dance callers, all of whom were African-American, date from shortly after the introduction of the French cotillions and quadrilles in America. This suggests that calling might have evolved in the black culture as an alternative to the formal instruction that white dancers received at dancing schools. In the call and response tradition of African music and dance, calling may have evolved as slaves called out the figures of the European dances at their own plantation frolics. John Szwed and Morton Marks have suggested that square dance calling is "at least partly rooted in the older tradition in which African master drummers signal and direct dancers. . . ." (Szwed and Marks 1988, 32).

With the invention of calling it was no longer necessary to attend dancing school to learn the figures of the dance, and while calling may have been a necessity at slave frolics, at some point black musicians began to call out the figures for white dancers as well. The earliest reference that I have found to anyone calling a dance comes from Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the English-born architect who oversaw the completion of the south wing of the United States Capitol. In his journal he describes a ball in New Orleans in 1819: "Altogether the impression was highly favorable. The only nuisance was a tall, ill-dressed black in the music gallery, who played the tambourine standing up, and in a forced and vile voice called the figures as they changed" (Latrobe 1905, 172).

A few years later, another European visitor, Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach, from Ghent (at that time a part of the Netherlands), wrote of dances he encountered while traveling in America in 1825 and

1826. He encircled the Appalachians, travelling from Canada down the east coast, west to New Orleans, and then up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to Pittsburgh, and back east again. In his travels, he observed contra-dances, cotillions, and "French quadrilles" as well as reels and waltzes, but it was only at a plantation ball near Columbia, South Carolina, in December 1825, that he heard dances being called, by a slave fiddler:

I spent one evening at a ball given by Mr. Taylor, a rich proprietor, at one of his plantations. I found there a numerous and splendid society. But the music was of a singular kind . . . the whole music consisted of two violins and a tamborine. This tamborine was struck with a terrible energy. The two others scraped the violin, in the truest significance of the word; one of them cried out the figures, imitating with his body all the motions of the dance. (Bernhard 1828, 212)

In the early nineteenth century, African-American musicians, both slaves and free blacks, played for public dances at resort hotels situated at natural springs throughout the country. Natural springs are found throughout the entire Appalachian chain, with a large number located along the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and the Allegheny front in West Virginia (Cohen 1981). One such resort hotel, the Sulphur Springs Hotel, built near Asheville, North Carolina, about 1831, had a large ballroom and featured music played by a string band composed of free blacks from Charleston and Columbia, South Carolina (Arthur 1914). It is likely that these musicians, and those playing in the ballrooms at other Appalachian resorts, were familiar with the practice of calling out the figures of the cotillions and quadrilles, and this may have played a role in the dissemination of dance calling into the Appalachian region.<sup>6</sup>

Early accounts of black callers are not limited to the southern United States. An English traveler described a dance at a resort hotel in Lebanon Springs, New York (near Troy), in July 1832: "The evenings were usually passed in dancing. . . . The band consisted of two negroes playing on violins, and a third upon a bass. The leader . . . acted as a kind of maitre du ballet, crying out 'Balanciey!'—'tan your patners!'—'La's shen!' and other jargon, utterly unintelligible even to those who were acquainted with the figure of every quadrille" (Coke 1833, 204). From his description it appears that he, like fellow Europeans Latrobe and Bernhard, was unfamiliar with the new American practice of dance calling, and he considered it unnecessary and annoying, but also a peculiar and amusing novelty.

For some slaves, music was the pathway to freedom. In 1838, Milton

Clarke, a slave who played bass drum and bugle, agreed to pay his owner, a Kentucky Presbyterian minister, \$200 annually for a pass to join a group of hired-out black musicians. During the spring and summer, they played for dances and cotillions at the Harrodsburg Springs Hotel; in the fall and winter, they performed for dances in Lexington, Louisville, and Cincinnati, and on Ohio River steamboats. Realizing their financial worth, these musicians eventually ran away to the North to freedom following an engagement in Cincinnati (Lucas 1992). They and other ex-slaves no doubt helped spread dance calling well beyond the South. Other mid-nineteenth century references to black and mulatto fiddlers and callers come from Michigan (1837), Illinois (1839), Minnesota (1849), Massachusetts (1875), and even Ontario, Canada (1864), and England (1860).

At some point dance calling was adopted by white musicians as well though exactly when is hard to determine. In 1824, Thomas Wilson, a London dancing master, published a dramatic poem in which he ridiculed phony dance masters who were pretending to be French. He makes a passing reference to one such "jabbering coxcomb" who he heard "call the quadrille figures at his last grand ball," and who, he insinuates, is not a "foreigner" but English (Wilson 1824, 11). His condescending tone suggests his disapproval of calling. The earliest real account of a non-African-American caller that I am aware of comes from around 1836, seventeen years after Latrobe's report of the black caller in New Orleans. In this account, a white fiddler in Chicago was heard practicing to "call quadrille changes while fiddling" (Wentworth, 1912, 15). By the mid-1800s, many published dance manuals began to include not only descriptions of the most popular dance figures of the day, but advice to aspiring callers on how to "prompt" or "call" the dances, with tips on elocution, pitch, rhythm, and timing.

*The Ball-Room Instructor*, published in New York in 1841, one of the earliest to mention calling, states that the figures of the quadrille "are called by the leader of the orchestra" (*Ball-Room Instructor* 1841, 11).

Although it appears that dance calling was becoming a common practice by mid-century, it was not universally accepted. Charles Durang, a well-known Philadelphia dancing teacher, and the son of famed American dancer John Durang, wrote around 1856 that the quadrille figures are "with much annoyance to the dancer, called out at every eight bars, by the leader of the Orchestra. It is a vile custom, marring the melody of the airs" (Durang c.1856, 28). Durang was correct that calling was not necessary at city balls, where the dancers had attended dancing school and memorized the figures of the quadrilles. This was not the case though, in rural areas, beyond the range of the dancing masters. In the countryside and backwoods, as at plantation frolics, simpler and less formal dancing took place, and callers,

both black and white, improvised and varied the dance figures as they chose. David C. Barrow, Jr., a self-described "long-time resident of Georgia," wrote in 1882 that the role of caller had by then become a job on its own and was no longer the duty of the fiddler or one of the other musicians: "With the cotillion a new and very important office, that of 'caller-out,' has become a necessity. The 'caller-out,' though of less importance than the fiddler, is second to no other. He not only calls out the figures, but explains them at length to the ignorant, sometimes accompanying them through the performance" (Abrahams 1992, 257).

Exactly when dance calling became common in Appalachia is unclear. It is not mentioned in various fictional accounts from the mid-to-late 1800s which portray the "old-fashioned" Virginia reel as the typical Appalachian dance (Strouther 1858; Tiernan 1900; Bonner 1972; Murfree 1884). Possibly these fiction writers chose to depict the "old-fashioned" dances in order to reinforce the image of Appalachia as a backwards place. But given their inclination towards colorful writing, it is surprising that they would not have included dance calling if it were common at that time. In *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*, Jean Ritchie quotes an 1885 account from the *Louisville Commercial* that refers to a "cotillion" being danced in eastern Kentucky (Ritchie 1988, 117). While there is no mention of calling in this account, it is likely to have accompanied the cotillions, and it appears to have become widespread in the region before the end of nineteenth century. Emma B. Miles refers to a dance caller in *The Spirit of the Mountains*, a story set near Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1905 (1975), and William H. Haney describes dance calls from the mountains of Kentucky in 1906 (1906). Neither of these narratives, though, gives the detailed description of the dance figures and transcriptions of the calls found in Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles' account of dances seen in eastern Kentucky in 1917. In *The Country Dance Book, Part V*, they wrote:

It is customary for one of the company, not necessarily one of the dancers, to 'call' the dance as it proceeds, that is, to name the figures and describe them, movement by movement, and thus do for the dancers what the prompter at the opera does for the singers. Normally, the 'caller' recites certain prescribed verbal phrases, a mixture of prose and doggerel rhyme that in the course of time has become stereotyped. (1976, 19)

Sharp and Karpeles mistakenly assumed that Kentucky square dancing of the twentieth century was an unaltered ancient form of English country dance. The dances they described, however, with no set order to the figures,



or phrasing to the music, could not have existed prior to the introduction of dance calling (Damon 1957). It is interesting to note that they, like the European visitors of the previous century, found dance calling to be novel and in need of explanation. The "prescribed verbal phrases" that they described as "a mixture of prose and doggerel rhyme" are of course patter calling. By the twentieth century dance calls had become more than mere directions and prompts for the dancers; they had evolved into a continuous rhyming banter, often prodding the dancers, adding humor and spirit to the dance.

Although there have been African-Americans in the Appalachians since the 1700s, Karpeles remarked that when she and Sharp visited in 1917 there were "practically no Negroes in the mountains" (Karpeles 1967, 146). Even if she herself did not see blacks on her travels in western North Carolina and eastern Kentucky (which is hard to believe), they had been there for generations, and their influence in the region's music and dance is undeniable. According to US Census figures compiled by William H. Turner, African-Americans made up twenty-one percent of the population of the Appalachian counties in Kentucky in 1830 (Turner 1985).<sup>7</sup> By the time Sharp and Karpeles visited eastern Kentucky in the early twentieth century, the percentage of blacks in the population was lower, but the African-American practice of calling had become an established part of the mountain dance tradition, giving the southern Appalachian square dances a looser structure than the highly formal quadrilles that had been taught by the dancing masters. In looking for connections to English country dance, they failed to recognize the numerous African-American elements present in the dances they witnessed. In addition to dance calling, these include the presence of the banjo, hand clapping on the up beat, patting juba, and dance calls such as "yaller girls."

During the 1920s, while many white Appalachian square dance callers were recorded on 78 rpm records, it is unfortunate that only a few black callers were ever recorded. Those that were include Andrew and Jim Baxter and the Watkins Band of Georgia, and Henry Thomas of Texas (all from outside the Appalachian region). Joe Thompson, from the North Carolina Piedmont, is perhaps the only African-American caller alive today. From Joe Thompson's calling, along with the few existing recordings of black dance callers, we can get a glimpse of this mostly forgotten African-American dance tradition that helped shape and define Appalachian square dancing.

## Notes

1. In contra dances the lead couple was sometimes said to "call" the dance, but this usage of the word, meaning to choose the dance, is similar to "calling the shots" and does not imply a continuous calling of the dance figures.

2. Many Americans continued to refer to their square dances as "cotillions," long after the quadrilles had been introduced, and even into the twentieth century.
3. The Scotch Reel, which involves as few as four dancers in a compact set, could have easily been danced in a small backwoods cabin.
4. This anonymous author's historical credibility might be questioned by the fact that the banjo player also plays and sings for the dance "Jump Jim Crow," Thomas Rice's famous song-and-dance routine, which was popular at the time the account was written, but twenty years *after* this fictional scene from Crockett's youth supposedly took place.
5. Some dancing masters owned slave fiddlers. In 1773, dancing master William Fearson, posted a notice for the return of his runaway slave, Fiddler Billy (Feyock 1995).
6. Sam Queen (b.1888), founder of the Soco Gap Square Dancers, learned some of his dancing from an African-American named John Love. Queen called square dances at resort hotels in western North Carolina well into the twentieth century.
7. While the percentage of blacks in all of Appalachia reached a high of close to twenty percent in 1850, at the time of Sharp and Karpeles' visit in 1917, the black population in the Appalachian counties of Kentucky had declined to only five percent (Turner 1985).

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