

THE PROBLEM WITH LABELS!

Extract from talk by Michael Barraclough at
the 2010 Sidmouth Folk Festival entitled
“What the **** is English Country Dancing?”

And finally, why do they call melodeons accordions in the USA?

This last question is more serious than may appear at first. Why do we call things what we do?

You may know that 'pants' are 'trousers' in the USA and that a 'rubber' is an 'eraser' (a rubber is something completely different - try going into a chemist in the USA and asking for a packet of condoms - you might as well be speaking Martian). But did you know that in America, 'folk' dance means 'international' dance; and 'contra' and 'ECD' (that's what they call English Country Dance over there), are two completely different dance forms, never to be performed at the same time and place.

So for example, what is historic dance? A tango is 'historic'. And when did history start or end.

Can one only do a country dance in the country? What do you call a folk dance done in a ballroom - is that a ballroom dance?

How old is the oldest modern dance?

Is old time dance only done by old timers?

Despite its name, I am sure that most of you would claim that **La Russe** is a folk dance, or an English Country Dance.

Did you know that the Old Time Dance world considers that it is an old time dance and that the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society considers it to be a Scottish Country Dance.

For that matter, most English dancers in the USA would consider it a ceilidh or traditional dance and very rarely dance it.

There are many examples of the unhelpful nature of 'labels' which we use to describe dance forms. These labels have usually been created to distinguish a particular dancing development from other forms of dance at that time and the labels then remain, although as time passes, they lose their relevance. Eg, the current ISTD syllabus contains Jive, but in the 1950/60s, this was considered 'pop' and certainly not 'ballroom'. No doubt, in time, folk dance will include 'break dancing', 'hip hop' and the ballroom world will embrace 'punk' and 'reggae'.

FOLK DANCE = DANCE OF THE FOLK?

Gay Gordons

Hokey Cokey (Hokey Pokey in the USA)

Birdie Dance (Chicken Dance in the USA)

YMCA

These are the dances that the 'folk' know.
Play the music and they will get up and do
it.

The 'Framework'

After many attempts to devise a framework within which to discuss dances and dance types I have finally settled on one which seems to stand the test of time. It is based on the reason for dancing, rather than the nature of the dance itself.

In this model dancing is divided into four fundamental types.

SOCIAL

emphasis is on enjoyment
through performance

ENTERTAINMENT emphasis is on enjoyment
through the visual sense

FORMAL

emphasis is on external
inspection of the quality
of performance

RITUAL

emphasis is on calendar
aspects and the need for
continuity

This model works very well for English, British, Western European dancing. However, it needs amending if it is to be extended to Eastern European and other cultures where cogniscense has to be given to the ceremonial, religious and magical aspects of dance in those cultures.

By looking at the reasons for dancing as opposed to the dance itself we find a congruence of semiotic relationships. Ie, for any particular aspect, the same rules tend to apply within a section whereas they will differ across sections.

SOCIAL

**Historic Old Time
Country Reels
Ballroom Disco**

FORMAL

**Minuet
Clog championship
Queen Charlotte's Ball**

ENTERTAINMENT

**Ballet London Folk
Tumbling Come Dancing
Morris Clog**

RITUAL

**Abbots Bromley
Bacup
Helston Furry
Chinese Dragon**