# Talking Feet

*Talking Feet* is the first documentary of flatfoot, buck, hoedown, and rural tap dancing, the styles of solo Southern dancing which are a companion to traditional old-time music and on which modern clog dancing is based. Dances are done to hand-patting, talking blues, and singing, as well as old-time, bluegrass, and western swing-style music. Dancers range in age from 20 to 82.

## Here is inspiration for dancers and entertainment for everyone!

Talking Feet *is a film about a forgotten side of American dance culture: solo mountain dancing. Mike Seeger and Ruth Pershing take us to the southeastern mountains of the U. S., the source of this genre, and to a range of individuals old, young, black, white, female, and male who grew up with the idea of talking with their feet. The film captures the deep sense of tradition and the value of freedom of expression these dancers share.* Talking Feet *is an exploration of a dance form rich in American do-it-yourself pride.*—Frank Hall, dancer, dance anthropologist

*…A wonderful and enlightening illustration of the breadth of Southern-style dancers, including their humor, playfulness, technical abilities, soul, and sheer joy.*
—Ira Bernstein, clog, tap, and step dancer/researcher

*…For anyone with a passion for Southern traditional dance this DVD is a must.*
—Daniel Patterson, Professor Emeritus of English and Folklore, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Project funded by the Smithsonian Institution Office of Folklife Programs and the National Endowment for the Arts, Folk Arts Program.

87 minutes, color
Produced 1984–1991 by Mike Seeger & Ruth Pershing
Smithsonian Folkways, Washington, DC, 20560-0953
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Smithsonian Folkways

Talking Feet Solo Southern Dance: Flatfoot, Buck and Tap

Featuring 24 traditional dancers filmed on location in West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia, and North Carolina

# Talking Feet

## Solo Southern Dance: Flatfoot, Buck and Tap

Produced by
Mike Seeger and
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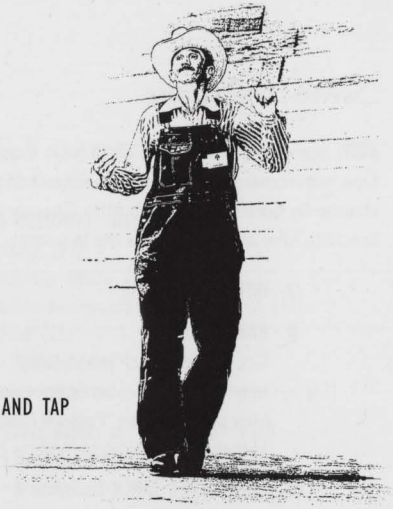


# *Talking Feet*

## SOLO SOUTHERN DANCE: FLATFOOT, BUCK, AND TAP

Southern solo dance goes under many names—buck dancing, flatfooting, clogging, step dancing—and it takes many styles. Mike Seeger describes it as the "natural outgrowth of and companion to" the music he has for decades loved, performed in concerts, recorded, and documented in more than 25 albums edited from his field recordings. In October 1984, concerned that no one had yet filmed the dancing, he and dancer Ruth Pershing took two crew members to videotape twenty-some traditional performers in the mountains of Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, and North Carolina. For comparison they added African-American solo dancers from the North Carolina Piedmont and a revival dance team from the coastal plains. In editing their footage they interwove whole-body performances and close-up shots of footwork with the dancers' comments on their styles and motivations. The result is not a film with a "story" but an anthology from which people can learn how to do the dances, where to join in doing them, and what place the dancing has in people's lives. The 87-minute color videotape captured dancing at the Carter Family Fold and Mabry Mill in Virginia and at the Stompin' Ground in Maggie Valley, North Carolina. It includes much-admired dancers such as Stanley Hicks from Watauga County, North Carolina; Kyle and Burton Edwards from Maggie Valley; John Reeves and Fred Moody from the Soco Gap Dance Team; John Dee Holeman, Fris Holloway, and Algia Mae Hinton from the Carolina Piedmont; and Rodney Sutton and his fellow Fiddle Puppets. For anyone with a passion for Southern traditional dance this DVD is a "must."

—Daniel Patterson, *Professor Emeritus of English and Folklore, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

# *Scene Selections*

**NOTE:** Scene selections in the DVD main menu are shown below in upper-case type with roman numerals. Within each scene selection, you may go to the next chapter by pressing the skip button. Chapter point numbers are shown here in brackets. Tune and dance titles are in quotes.

# *Notes on Dancers and Their Communities*

**A glossary of dance terms appears at the end of these notes.**

### II. MABRY MILL: Hoy Haden, Alan Spence, Luther Boyd

Each Sunday afternoon from late spring to early fall, a bluegrass or old-time band comes to play outside Mabry Mill, a picturesque restored grist mill just off the Blue Ridge Parkway at Meadows of Dan, Virginia. A few boards are put out for anyone who would like to do some steps. Old-time dancing at the mill is a quirky mixture of one-step cloggers, tourists, and toddlers, along with traditional flatfoot dancers. These older dancers generally have a repertoire of perhaps four or five steps, done with feet low to the ground, creating gently percussive sounds.

In the first sequence, we see Hoy Haden of Stuart, Virginia, a regular dancer at the Mt. Airy and Galax fiddlers' conventions, and Alan Spence. Hoy's flatfooting includes a limited step repertoire, but with many subtle variations. He holds his back erect; his legs and knees have a quick spring to them; and his steps have a clean, clear sound. Hoy uses crisp chugs as the basis of his dancing, with no shuffles and little or no syncopation. His step sequences are sometimes "square" (in multiples of 4 beats) like the tune; they also occur in patterns of 3 beats or in odd lengths.

Alan Spence uses a more forward-leaning posture as he dances one principal step sequence, moving in a small circular pattern on the floor. Distinctive elements in this basic pattern include rocking from a flat foot up onto the heel; also tapping the ball of one foot while beating the ball of the other. His basic rhythm pattern is not "square" but 2½ or 3 bars long. He dances with great concentration, engrossed in the music and steps.

Next, a pair of modern cloggers, dancing their "basic" step, are joined by William Hall, a traditional flatfooter who uses flat steps, back chugs, and forward digs. Willie Hooker joins in, adding his relaxed step-chug-back and step-ball-step pattern.

After a bit of convincing, Hoy demonstrates an "animal dance" from his childhood. The dance he does on all fours goes by many names; Hoy calls it the possum dance. He alternates hands and feet tapping the floor and slapping his hips. This playful moment represents an aspect of solo dancing that includes teasing, cutting up, mimicking animals, and just plain fun.



Luther Boyd, born in Patrick County, Virginia, in 1915, exhibits an easy grace to his "plumb ol' country flatfoot." He holds his body comfortably erect with the sounds of his feet clean and light rather than sharply percussive. He makes much use of the "sh" sound of heel and toe brushes on the free foot combined with gentle side-moving chugs on the weighted foot. Luther demonstrates for us a repertoire of perhaps five or six steps, though he may have more—he gave us a hint of a few more, fooling around when the camera was put away.

### III. CATALOOCHEE RANCH Discussion A

In this, the first of our conversations hosted by Cataloochee Ranch in the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, a group of selected dancers gathered to tell stories, share experiences, and discover common ground. Rodney Sutton, Eula Rogers, John Reeves, Burton Edwards, Fris Holloway, and John Dee Holeman touched on what moves people to dance, on individual style, and on the freeing, celebratory nature of dance. As Fris Holloway offers so poetically, "I think it's the same goal; if you're going downtown, a lot people take this street, take that street, take the other street, but your destination is the same. It's the expression of your personality. When you dance,...it's the expression of your being."

### IV. JAY BURRIS

The area surrounding Galax, Virginia, has long been known as rich in traditional music; dancing is vibrant in this region as well. Jay Burris, a long-haul tractor trailer driver living in West Jefferson, North Carolina, comes from Grayson County, Virginia, just a few miles northwest of Galax. Born in 1928, he started dancing to the music of his dad and his brother, both of whom played the fiddle. Jay dances vigorously and purposefully, with a style that has won him many ribbons at the local fiddlers' conventions.

Jay dances in a clean, percussive manner with strong presence and precise rhythm. To describe his own dancing, Jay explains, "I go from flatfoot to clog and just a little bit of 'cutting the pigeon wing'—that's the first steps I do when I go into my dance." His pigeon wing steps consist of continuous patter-like steps that are done from a flat-footed stance using chugs and heel digs, along with an occasional toe-heel shuffle, a less common version of the shuffle. Once he has settled into a particular tune, Jay mixes it up with a less busy rhythm that includes sideways chugs, heel-toe taps, leg swings, and full chugs typical of more recent clogging style, along with other moves that are evidence of broader, more popular influences. Jay dances in a relaxed upright position with very

limber legs. He uses square rhythm patterns with few if any syncopations. To Jay Burris, good dancing is more than keeping time to the music: "It will sound like you're putting the notes in with your feet as you dance to it!"

### V. CARCASSONNE: Willis Fields

In many areas of southeastern Kentucky, "hoedowning" matters a lot more than baseball. In the community of Carcassonne in Letcher County, a group of folks wanted to revive old-time dancing for old and young alike, and did so beginning in the mid-1960s. They started a regular Saturday night dance, calling figures that are likely a combination of long-time traditions in the area and dances brought in by settlement school teachers in the early 1900s. One of the favorite callers and hoedowners there is Willis Fields.

Willis was raised in the area of Kingdom Come Creek, and he learned to hoedown mainly from his mother, who was still dancing at the age of 83. Both Willis and his wife, Janell, said everybody used to do it—they square danced at bean-stringings, pie suppers, and even on bridges and big flat rocks along the creek.

In "Give Old Tucker a Chance," which we see here, the one extra person without a partner gets a chance to show their solo steps each time through, providing an example of how figure dancing can be combined with stepping. When his turn comes, Willis creates a strong and athletic feeling in his hoedowning. His body is bent slightly forward with his attention directed downward. He bends deeply at the knee with each step he takes, and swings his free leg out to the side whenever possible. His spare and even rhythms come in groups of three beats: step, step-back-step. With his arms pumping up and down, the overall effect is energetic and purposeful.

Willis Fields offered these striking words about how he feels about dancing and the music that goes with it: "You don't learn hoedown...it's got to be in you. You got to have a little touch of it in you. If it's in you and you hear good music, you can hoedown. You'll learn a little, a step or two different, but you've got to have that beat in that foot to start before you learn. That music tells me everything I need to know."

### VI. ALGIA MAE HINTON

The Southern Piedmont has been just as rich an area for traditional music and dance as the mountains, though the traditions there are perhaps less well known. On Sunday afternoons at Algia Mae Hinton's place in Johnston County, North Carolina (east of Raleigh), a whole host of extended family members of all ages gather to visit, play music, and buck dance. Algia Mae Hinton is the matriarch of this family, and grew up around blues music, bottle-blowing, hand-slapping, and buck dancing as the youngest of 13 children. Born on August 29, 1929, she learned to dance from her mother, father, uncle, and a cousin, and has fostered a love of dancing in all seven of her own children as well.

"That old-time buck dancing," as Algia Mae interprets it, is both subtle and complex. Her style is alternately percussive and quiet, busy and sparse, complicated yet accessible. She can slap, stamp, brush, scuff, tap heel or toe, drag or slide; and each sound has a different pitch, loudness, timbre, and sharpness. When dancing percussively, she creates syncopation not so much by when she makes sounds as by which sounds are accented. She has quite a few names for some of her steps, including "wring the chicken's neck," "shoveling coal," "snake hip," "mess around," "Charleston," "camel walk," and "slap the rabbit" (on all fours). Algia Mae has also picked up some clogging steps at festival and school performances. Quite a while ago, an interest in a gentleman led her to create her flashy guitar dance, her performance trademark.

### VII. GUSSIE LANE

Driving up to the Carter Family Fold in Scott County, far western Virginia, in the mid-1980s, the person you might have met first was Gussie Lane, who would have told you in a welcoming manner where to park your car. Once inside, as the program got started, that very same gentleman would have gotten right out onto the dance floor to warm up the crowd.

Born on February 6, 1921, Gussie Lane "was raised up hard" in Ft. Blackmore, Virginia, as one of seven children. In the afternoons, they would all dance on their hardwood floor, getting splinters in their bare feet. Particularly in the winter, they would walk long distances over the mountains to gather at someone's house to dance, often cutting wood for the hosting household. As a young boy, he called his dancing hoedowning (the same name used in nearby Kentucky), and also did a squatting dance he called the grasshopper, Indian, or rabbit.

Though Gussie says that most of the older people he knew danced strictly with their feet, he does broader moves as well when he has an audience. The basis of his dancing is flatfoot, "feet on the floor, a-patting," with elements of the other styles thrown in as accents and variations. Perhaps the most singular feature of Gussie's dancing is the teasing quality of his performance. This playfulness comes from his hands patting and gesturing, his expression, and his

posture, which accentuate and exaggerate his foot motions. This is especially clear in the final dance piece of the segment, in which he really hams it up for the audience and camera at the Carter Family Fold.

### VIII. PHOEBE PARSONS

You might not guess it upon first meeting this petite, 76-year-old lady, but Phoebe Parsons manages quite well living up a rutted road on a remote mountain farm near Orma in Calhoun County, West Virginia. She has long been an active musician, dancer, and storyteller and even has the CB radio handle "Banjo Player." Phoebe first learned to dance by copying her mother's "two-step" and "side step." Her childhood home was always open to guests, and many who danced and played music would come through. From a neighbor she picked up the "cross dance" and from her limber uncle, William Cottrell, the "back step." "He could dance just about any way. He could jump up and crack his feet three times before he hit the floor!"

Phoebe's flatfooting is very close to the floor, making it difficult to discern the details of her steps. Her principal way of keeping time consists of a series of flat-footed steps, alternating feet with the beat or in double time, using heel-toe shuffles interspersed between the flat steps. Heel scuffs, back chugs, and steps forward and taps behind her create the variety in rhythm and sound to mirror the tune. She creates changes in the intensity of her dancing (and undoubtedly did so more energetically when she was younger) by keeping some of her steps calm and low, then giving others more of an accent and a lift. Always, she ends her phrases with finality, as though to remind the musician exactly where they are!

### IX. MAGGIE VALLEY: Jim Hyatt, John Reeves, Burton Edwards, Kyle Edwards

Maggie Valley, North Carolina, located in the Great Smoky Mountains southwest of Asheville, has long been a thriving, vital home to traditional dance. People of every generation have danced informally in homes, barns, and country stores all over Haywood County. More formally, the legendary local Soco Gap Square Dance Team initiated performance square dancing (with freestyle stepping) in the 1920s, becoming known in particular for a performance at the White House in 1939 before the king and queen of England. One of the families that carries on both tradition and innovation in the area, the Edwards family, built a major show place for clogging, called the Stompin' Grounds, where this segment was recorded.



Jim Hyatt, a caller of mountain figures who dances while he calls, was once a member of the Soco Gap team. This energetic caller is quintessentially light on his feet. His buck dancing is representative of the regional style, with a nearly still upper body, steps done mostly on the balls of the feet, and lively, varied footwork.

John Reeves, a classic buck dancer born on October 11, 1918, learned to dance from his uncle, Sam Queen, who was a caller and leader of the Soco Gap team. John himself danced with the team from the mid-'30s through the mid-'50s. John's style combines two distinct ways of moving, each with its own variations. Much of the time, he maintains a constant rhythm with a gentle bounce that parallels the quick timing of his feet. He breaks it up with his "broken wing" steps, bending one knee deeply while crossing and dragging the other foot along. His style, while precisely rhythmic, is not percussive. Engrossed in what he is doing, John is relaxed and clearly enjoys each moment.

Kyle Edwards, enthusiastic promoter of dance and the force behind the Stompin' Grounds, dances at least as regularly as anyone who visits his place. Born on August 25, 1939, he and his twin brother first learned to dance from their mother, who had been a member of the Soco Gap dancers. He would listen to the jukebox and watch people buck dance at his mother's country store. His movements are still from the waist up and busy from the waist down. He blends local buck-dance style (on the balls of his feet) with clogging (more flat-footed), using forward slides, digs, and toe taps to keep up a constant rhythm.

Kyle's son, Burton Edwards (born April 1, 1964), is a natural dancer and virtuoso performer with enormous respect for the local traditions, having learned to dance from his dad and at his grandmother's country store, along with his sister Becky. He has made a conscious decision to master, analyze, expand upon, and teach buck dancing and clogging. Burton's overall way of moving mirrors his dad's, but he has added numerous new steps and variations, based on innovations of his own along with influences from French-Canadian and Irish step dance. He executes every step seemingly effortlessly, his exacting precision sprinkled with a bit of humor.

John Reeves expresses clearly the aesthetic of Southern solo step dance in Maggie, saying, "There's no two dancers that would be identical in this type of dance. There couldn't be, because you're going to do your own thing, regardless."

### X. CATALOOCHEE RANCH Discussion B

The gathering of dancers at the Cataloochee Ranch continued with conversations about community gatherings. Every one of the dancers remembered experiences that came after a day's or week's hard work, when folks gathered together to help each other or just to have a good time. Wood-cuttings, corn-shuckings, frolics, and house parties brought people together out in the country, while friendly competition at tobacco warehouses took place in town. Each of these gatherings was a time to show off a special step of your own or to pick up a new one.

### XI. JOHN DEE HOLEMAN & FRIS HOLLOWAY

The Durham and Orange county areas of central North Carolina have been home to Piedmont blues and buck dancing for many years, particularly in African-American communities. This buck-dance form, however, is only barely a living tradition. John Dee Holeman was born on April 4, 1929, and grew up in rural Orange County, spending most of his adult life operating heavy equipment to help build the fast-growing city of Durham. When he was young, his brother played some guitar, and within his extended family, he had an uncle who buck danced and a cousin who could do both buck and tap. At family gatherings when he was a child, they were strict and wouldn't let him touch their instruments, giving him little opportunity to learn their music. Watching closely, and trying it out when he could, John Dee taught himself to play an upbeat style of Piedmont blues as well as to do both buck and tap. Of course, if there was no instrumental music available, hand-slapping rhythms could always set a steady beat.

John distinguishes between the two Piedmont dance styles, showing that buck is done flat-footed using the heels and balls of your feet to make the sounds, while tap is done with your weight forward on the balls of your feet. He flows freely from one style into the other, using them to vary the pace and intensity of the dance.

Quentin Holloway, known as "Fris" (short for "frisky"), was born on December 29, 1918, in rural Durham County. He first picked up some buck steps as a youth at local frolics and neighbors' house parties. Durham was a center of tobacco trading, and the big warehouse sales provided places for guitar players, harmonica players, and buck dancers to congregate. As he got older and as a way to earn some change when times were hard, Fris picked up more buck moves, some Charleston, and what he calls tap Charleston (a combination of the two) in the context of those informal downtown competitions. As an adult, Fris has teamed up to play the blues on piano with John Dee on guitar.



While the two men have markedly different ways of moving as they dance, their rhythms are similarly syncopated and intricate. John Dee's style is looser and more spare, while Fris's scoots, and his stamps and quick cross-steps are more vigorous. They both tease a bit—with a laugh and a twinkle in his eye, Fris will copy the sounds of his dad's old car with his feet, while John Dee will toss off a steam train imitation. Even each person's hand-slapping patterns are idiosyncratic, especially clear in the final segment, when Fris and John Dee trade off patting and dancing with Algia Mae Hinton.

### XII. WAMY SENIOR CENTER: Biddie Reece, Eula Rogers

Born respectively in 1902 and 1904, Eula Rogers and Biddie Reece could inspire anyone by their resilience, dancing well into their eighties. Both from the area around Deep Gap, Watauga County, in far northwestern North Carolina, they came from families and communities steeped in traditional music and dance.

Eula, one of five children in her family, describes going to many local gatherings where her father, fiddler Ben Miller, her brother, and she would provide the music for old-time square dances, especially around Christmastime. Her father could also play the banjo and do the double shuffle, and her oldest brother would flatfoot. Her mother danced too, though not in public. Weddings, corn-shuckings, bean-stringings, and even apron-hemmings provided many opportunities for music and dance. In her words, though, "As quick as I could get rid of my music [instrument], I was on the floor [dancing]." Eula herself played guitar and a little banjo and fiddle. She also played a homemade cat-hide drum to the "flute" playing of her uncle, Tom Miller.

Biddie grew up near Triplett, not too far from Deep Gap. She describes learning to dance by picking up the steps of an uncle who buck danced and trying to imitate the sound of the banjo playing of another of her uncles. When she was a youngster, her family would go from house to house dancing, and have big square dances on Saturday nights. It was there that she would buck dance for people because she was too small to be able to manage the square dances.

Both Eula and Biddie remember first calling their stepping "buck dance." Eula tells of switching to calling it flatfoot later on, but explains that the two are really just names for the same thing. Biddie's hands-on-hips style directs attention to her feet, which are remarkably agile. Her steps are clear and distinct, keeping very low to the floor, with an economy of movement in her heel drops, digs, and chugs. Some of her names for her patterns include

"snake in the grass," "slipping and a-sliding," and "double shuffle." She even plays "Jimmy Sutton" on the harmonica, buck dancing at the same time.

Eula blends steps and styles gracefully, her arms swinging easily at her sides. She uses quick weight changes on flat feet, along with heel-toe shuffles, chugs, and ankle swings for a time, then goes up briefly on the balls of her feet to do a step remarkably like the sevens and threes of Irish dance. There were several steps that Eula realized later she hadn't danced for our session, including one of Willard Watson's steps and the "Jennie Triplett" on heels and toes.

Eula speaks for both women in these words about moving to music: "I can't be still when there's music, I don't care who's around. And if the music gets whacked, you get whacked, if you're dancing."

### XIII. STANLEY HICKS

Stanley Hicks is known for his breadth of knowledge of the old-time mountain ways as a musician, instrument builder, herbalist, and storyteller. Members of his family are known for their wealth of information and much-collected traditional knowledge. Born on October 13, 1911, he comes from mountainous, far western North Carolina in Watauga County. His parents played fiddle and banjo together, often providing the music for young Stanley to dance. Community square dances in his childhood could go on "until the rooster'd be a-crowing." When there was no fiddle or banjo, the music would be played on jew's harps or mouth harps, and when there was no music at all, the people would just lilt (sing) a tune or use hand-patting. No matter what, there was always dancing. Stanley says that his grandpa was the one who taught him to flatfoot and that he learned to buck dance from the "old people," especially Elihu Younce of Madison County.

Rather than being based on percussive, rhythmic combinations, the dances Stanley Hicks does here are more visually oriented. He keeps in time, moving to the music, but his movements are broad, and his dances are often based on one repeated step or motion for each tune. In contrast, Stanley uses the label "tap dancing" to describe the very rhythmic, racket-making dance using toes and heels that mostly women used to do, calling it "the oldest dancing that is." His mother learned it from his great-grandmother. Meanwhile, the men, he said, did the buck dancing and cross-foot dance, which he demonstrates. Stanley also describes several dances related to animals, including the frog dance (first in this segment), eagle, bear, and lizard dances, made up of expressive motions or more structured actions and figures. Some of these unusual patterns he learned from others, and some he made up himself.



### XIV. L.C. KING

Tradition-rich Madison County, North Carolina, is only about twenty miles north of Asheville, but its hollers and hills are quite rural and remote. Born on December 5, 1943, and raised in Madison County at a time when older traditions were fading in many places, L.C. King nonetheless learned to dance in the old style, along with his eleven brothers and sisters. When he was about six or seven years old, L.C. ("Little Chet") learned first from his dad, who danced the Shelton-Laurel backstep, then picked up steps elsewhere along the way. He has met and learned from others who tap dance, learning a step or two from a friend in Illinois and some tap from a friend in the military, and blending them into his subtle, low-to-the-ground flatfoot.

L.C.'s dancing is based around a key step created by a rocking, continuous rhythm pattern of right heel-left heel-left toe-right toe, which he uses to swivel backwards on the floor. The combination of this step with shuffles and stamps makes up the core of his flatfoot style. With more up-tempo tunes, L.C. adds chugs to help keep his timing quick, and occasionally breaks into a sequence of tap dance flaps done up on the balls of his feet. His smooth motions, continuous rhythms, and occasional accents give him the components he needs to play each fiddle tune with his feet.

### XV. FIDDLE PUPPETS: Rodney Sutton, Amy Sarli, Eileen Carson, Eddie Carson

The Fiddle Puppets are a professional troupe of four cloggers who began working together in 1979 after each of them individually had spent time dancing with the exuberant revival group, the Green Grass Cloggers. They sought out old-time flatfoot and buck dancers, learning steps and style from them, and molding these influences into their clogging to create a blended style they used to choreograph routines for a wide variety of public audiences. From Robert Dotson of Sugar Grove, North Carolina, they adopted what they called the Tennessee walking step; from Willard Watson of Deep Gap, they learned the "barnyard slide" and smooth flatfoot style; and from Hansel Aldridge of Charlotte, they picked up fast-paced rhythm making, including steps done up on the toes.

Born in 1950, 1958, 1953, and 1950, respectively, Rodney, Amy, Eddie, and Eileen came together from varied backgrounds and experiences in dance. Rodney is from eastern North Carolina, Amy from near Philadelphia, Eileen from Maryland, and Eddie from Washington, D.C. Though they have individual differences, all four use a groove of chugs, both forward and back, to keep a steady

beat, and spice it up with various articulated toe and heel beats and shuffles. The Fiddle Puppets dance with exuberance and precision, weaving together learned steps and styles with their own creations to provide a percussive, catchy accompaniment to old-time music.

### XVI. D. RAY WHITE

D. Ray White was an exceptional mountain-reared dancer who devised a cohesive style all his own: a synthesis of flatfoot and buck steps learned within his family and community with other steps picked up from traveling dancers and television performers. His dancing is impeccably precise, riveting, and intense, and sprinkled throughout with elements of surprise and playfulness. He danced to entertain himself, his family, and his friends, developing a performance presence that was both distinctive and personal.

D. Ray lived with three generations of his family in a mobile home in Bandytown, near Van, West Virginia, about forty miles southwest of Charleston. Born on April 17, 1927, in Boone County, West Virginia, he had forbears of Native American and Irish heritage. He remembers learning to flatfoot by being held and jogged up and down to the rhythm of patting, and by watching his mother square dance and do a little backstep. His older brother, Joe White, remembers her being one of the best hoedown dancers around. There were musicians in his family as well: a great-uncle, Ab Workman, played fiddle while his grandpa, Benjamin Jarrell, kept time with two fiddlesticks behind the bridge. As a teenager, he saw a traveling show in which a dancer, Tiny Moten, wore taps, which gave him the idea to try them. His dad was strict, and when D. Ray wanted to accept an offer to travel as a dancer with another show, his dad would not let him go. He always wished he could have followed that dream.

D. Ray called his own steps by various names, including buck dance, flatfoot, tap, single foot, double foot, and "rabbit in the broomsage." "Deezee" (his nickname to friends) danced standing up, sitting in a chair, against a wall, and around a bottle. He had worked on his technique so that he could easily do any of his steps on either foot. His principal way to keep time was with a rolling, continuous rhythm, much like the sound of three-finger banjo picking. It was comprised of a full step on one foot followed by a quick articulation of heel-ball-heel on the other, repeated with alternating feet. He added to that various shuffles, hops, chugs, and running steps, mimicking the sound of the tune or creating accents between phrases of a song. His



inimitable ending to each dance was a sudden hop into a dramatic bow on his knees with arms outstretched. D. Ray danced in shoes to which he added taps, auto pinstriping, and bells on the laces, for a forceful, striking overall effect.

Two particularly remarkable pieces in D. Ray's repertoire were "Rhymes and Chimes," a series of rhyming couplets that he knew or made up, tapping out the rhythm of the words to accompany the verses; and "Riding Old Maud," an extended talking blues/dance/story about his adventure on an old mare. He often sang or played harmonica with his bluegrass-playing musician friends as part of his total immersion in his form.

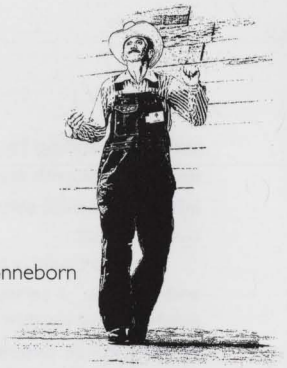
D. Ray had a particularly abiding interest in passing along this dancing to future generations and was always willing to teach anyone with a desire to learn. "After a while, I'm like the leaves on these trees—I'm going to have to come down. And then I want somebody to pick it up from where I leave off, keep it circulating. Then we'll never run out of good dancing—we'll still have it."
—Ruth Pershing, *Chapel Hill, NC 2006*

### Glossary of Dance Terms

*Brush:* Ball of foot brushes forward.
*Chug:* A single slide on the weight-bearing leg or legs.
*Dig:* Heel contacts floor and lifts up.
*Scuff:* Heel brushes forward.
*Shuffle:* Double (or even triple) contact of foot with floor without weight, usually brushing slightly forward, then back.
*Slap:* Ball of foot brushes back.
*Slide:* Move or drag in contact with floor.
*Tap:* Ball of foot contacts floor and lifts up.

### Additional Resources

A 142-page book of explanatory notes is available for sale as long as they last: *Talking Feet* by Mike Seeger, with style profiles on all of the dancers and some footlatures (dance tablature) by Ruth Pershing (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1992). The book includes essays on dancing, this project, and the dancers on the video, as well as excerpts of interviews with the dancers. The book will also be available online at **www.folkways.si.edu** where you may download the text and photos. Contact Smithsonian Folkways Mail order: 1.800.410.9815 or email: **mailorder@si.edu** for details.



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# Talking Feet

## Solo Southern Dance: Flatfoot, Buck and Tap

Produced by Mike Seeger and Ruth Pershing



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