

🕒 This article was published more than **23 years ago**

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Clogging Helps Widowed Dancer Get Back on His Feet



By Michael Leahy

October 11, 2000 at 1:00 a.m. EDT

Talk about your curses. You wanna clog? Is that any kind of name for anything? Is that the way to woo somebody on a dance floor, to make your passion appealing? You hear clog, you picture slogging through mud; you imagine unflattering shoes, you think Roto-Rooter.

Northern Virginia dance instructor Jim Maxwell will tell you that, as names go, "clogging" holds people back. "HUH?" is a frequent reaction. The many strangers unfamiliar with the term will occasionally venture a guess about its meaning, but they're bad guesses, which leave Maxwell smiling wanly, his thick white Santa-like eyebrows arched with bemusement.

No, it is not a plumbing problem, okay?

"It sounds obvious to me, but they just have no idea," he said, "because the name doesn't sound . . . well, appealing to a lot of them."

Clogging, the volunteer teacher tells the curious, is the cousin of square-dancing in hardscrabble lands. The highlight of Saturday-night shindigs in 19th-century barns. A mainstay of the modern folk festival. All that speaks to evolution, but how 57-year-old Jim Maxwell got to this small, windowless room at Wakefield Recreation Center in Annandale is a story of happenstance--of tragedy buffeted by discovery, of sorrow taking refuge in a dance.

In the mid-'80s, he was simply a trumpet player in his spare time, a sedentary hobby that left him badly in need of an exercise regimen. A PhD researcher in vocational rehabilitation for the U.S. Department of Education, Maxwell loathed running, happily taking up Irish step-dancing instead with his wife and steady partner, Miriam, and later Contra-dancing, which had nothing to do with Oliver L. North but was just another country dance of sorts that he and Mim could enjoy when they weren't looking after their two sons.

But in 1988, at only 45, Mim died suddenly from a virus. And all the dancing stopped.

"I didn't have a partner anymore," Maxwell said.

His younger boy, Nathan, was just 10, and whatever Maxwell did with his free time, he needed to keep an eye on Nathan. One day he poked his head in on a class of cloggers at Haycock Elementary School, able to comfortably look out a big window and see Nathan running around on the playground.

Clogging offered the widower what he most needed from dance at that moment, a chance to move his body without having to hold another's. "It was perfect for me," he remembered, "because I wasn't going to be coming with a partner."

He began teaching clogging in 1996. Today, in addition to his classes at Wakefield and Providence recreation centers in Fairfax County, he directs a clogging troupe called the Patchwork Dancers. They perform at retirement homes and community events throughout Northern Virginia.

"It's mostly a way to bring dance to people who wouldn't be able to see a live dance show without it. . . . We're not professionals. It's just fun," he said. "We only charge enough to cover our expenses, about \$100."

The eight-member troupe, which includes one dancer from Prince William County, also performs Irish step, tap, jazz and swing--some of which they did at the Arlington County Fair recently.

"We try to do a lot of things," Maxwell said. "I don't have any preference. I like a lot of dances. Clogging is very big in the South, where there are a lot of teams. Up here, it's a little different, but once people see it, they usually like it. It's just that they don't know it."

Clogging has a rich history, Maxwell noted, though no one is sure of the name's origin. "Some say it came from English [royalty], but there are references to clogging in Irish texts long before that. . . . So who really knows?" he said.

Scottish and Irish immigrants brought the dance to the wooded hamlets of the atavistic Appalachians three centuries ago, their steps soon to be embedded in southern culture along with the fiddles that accompanied them.

And yet . . . there's still that ungainly name. Some dance names have it easy. Tap, for instance. Tap sounds so much more alluring--doesn't it?--reverberating with grace, suggestive of feet light and quick-silvery. Tap has cache. Did Gregory Hines or Bob Fosse ever clog on the big screen? Has a clogging musical ever made it to Broadway?

No, and no. Clogging is the Yanni of dance.

Maxwell, whose Sunday clogging class at Wakefield follow his tap session, knows it--and doesn't care.

"Clog dancing is much quicker and more physically demanding than tap," he said gently, looking out at his nine students, who, to songs titled "Mountain Medley" and "Arkansas Traveler," were performing elementary clogging steps, similar in moments to square-dancing. The students kicked a leg forward to make a light brush sound against the floor, then brought it backward and brushed the floor again.

"Let's do it right," Maxwell encouraged. "Do it slowly if you have to."

But at its heart, clogging is foot-stomping music, happy and raucous, with no pretensions toward elegance. Heads bob, chests heave with exertion.

In the next second, on Maxwell's command, the students--seven adults and two fifth-grade girls--have dropped their feet in rhythmic stomps made louder and metallic-sounding by the silvery taps on the soles of their shoes. The effect is akin to a team of freshly shod Clydesdales pounding clackety-clack along a cobblestone lane.

Stomp, stomp, stomp, clack, clack, clack.

The stomping is its own kind of percussion, which must have been valuable in tight times when rural people necessarily relied on themselves for sounds and entertainment. His students are still thumping that floor, some more agilely than others.

"It is difficult to look graceful while stomping," writes Maxwell in "Basic Clogging," his instructional sheet for the class, "though hopefully this can be done with some grace."

About half of his students are in clogging shoes, which look pretty much as you'd guess--black and kind of blocky with unflashy thick heels, calling to mind those austere clogs that actress Kelly McGillis wore as that arrestingly Amish woman in "Witness"--the ones in which she was never able to boogie down very well with Harrison Ford.

More than half of Maxwell's students are panting now. He's asking for more complicated movements: double-steps and brush turns.

"Jim, it's getting harder to smile anymore," gasped a beginner, a sweaty woman in fogged-up glasses and a damp Levi's shirt.

Maxwell smiled, urged everybody to relax, have fun, just concentrate on form. "You have to exercise caution just to make sure everybody is okay," he explained later. "I teach Irish dance, too, and especially there, because it's so high-aerobic, you've got to be careful with students. . . . Clogging doesn't have the fancy steps like tap but, physically, it's much more demanding.

"I don't have a favorite dance. I like the variety. It's just that I'd like more people to know clogging."

The woman in fogged glasses, a 59-year-old tap devotee and public school counselor named Susan Lawrence, said: "The dance fools you, with that name. The movements are fast and complicated; there's a lot of pounding. But Jim isn't so much pushing us to excel at clogging as he is just trying to get us to enjoy it. You get the feeling he's really happy doing it, you know?"

The clogger who took up the dance because he'd lost his life's partner has a girlfriend now. But he can still remember that day when he looked out the big school window at his son and found, in his first awkward stomps, reason to smile.

"I'd just like people to get whatever a dance can give them," he said. "Whatever they might need."