

Celebrate Dance!

By Kaye West

How popular is dancing? According to an article on Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_national_dances) over one hundred-thirty countries have named a national dance. Out of 195 countries, that represents two-thirds of the world's countries consider dance important. And perhaps because it is so popular, and there are so many variations of dance, arts groups have created the **International Dance Day**, to be celebrated annually on April 29!

The United States does not have a national dance (yet), but we do have a **National Dance Day** which is celebrated on the third Saturday in September. It was created in 2010 by the co-creator of *So You Think You Can Dance* ([Nigel Lythgoe](#)) in partnership with [Eleanor Holmes Norton](#) (U.S. Congressional Representative of the District of Columbia). The purpose of this day is to “express support for dance as a form of valuable exercise and of artistic expression.”

There has been a concerted effort for fifty years to create **square dancing** as the **national folk dance**, and Public Law 97-188 (passed on June 1, 1982) designated square dance as the national folk dance of the United States for 1982 and 1983. The rationale included that it is deserving of this honor because “it...

- ... has been a popular tradition in America since early colonial days,
- ... has attained a revered status as part of the folklore of this country,
- ... is a joyful expression of the vibrant spirit of the people of the United States,
- ... display[s]... etiquette among men and women,
- ... is a traditional form of family recreation which symbolizes ... the unity of the family, [and]
- ... epitomizes democracy because it dissolves arbitrary social distinctions.”

Some objected to a more permanent designation because “square dancing” was “not sufficiently representative” of United States citizens since much of square dance history and legacy originates in European countries. Thus, advocates expanded the definition to include “**squares, rounds, contras, clogging, line, and heritage dances.**” With the expanded definition, H. J. Resolution 180 was passed by Congress in 1990 (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/house-joint-resolution/180/text>).

The advocating organization, United Square Dancers of America (USDA), by their Resolution 25 in 2002, added yet another element of rationalization, that “it ...

- is a healthful activity for all ages to enjoy dance and fellowship and where disabled persons become skilled, happy and ‘Handicap able’ dancers.”

Next USDA, with its expanded definition and rationale, turned its efforts to work with each state to establish square dancing as their **state folk dance**. According to their website, <https://www.usda.org/FolkDance.php>, to date thirty-one states have done exactly that (though occasionally also having a second designation). Ten states (Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Wisconsin, Wyoming) are working on a bill, and the remaining nine (Alaska, Hawaii, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, and Rhode Island) are inactive at this time.

As further evidence of the rich and diverse heritage of dance in this country (and around the world!), “**round dancing**” included in the definition of “**square dancing**” is also known as **choreographed** or **cued ballroom dance**. To date we include over twenty different rhythms in both International and American ballroom styles as well as other dance forms with their roots not only from Europe but also from three other continents, including half of them from the United States! While around the world **ballroom dance** is known as a competitive dance form (engaged in predominantly by those with sufficient funds to support private/expensive lessons), **round dancing** is noncompetitive and is enjoyed by “ordinary” folk, so including it as part of America’s folk dance is highly appropriate.

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Rhythm	Int'l	Amer	Other	Origins	Notes
Argentine Tango			x	Argentina	Influenced by African, European, & indigenous music & dance styles
Bolero		x		Spain & Cuba	Late 18 th century Spanish influence with Afro-Cuban rhythms
Cha Cha	x	x		Cuba	African & Hispanic influence; evolved from Mambo
East Coast Swing		x		USA	Evolved from Lindy Hop created by Black Americans
Foxtrot	x	x		USA	Jazz influences (from One-Step & Two-Step) popularized by Harry Fox (Vaudeville -1914)
Hesitation Canter Waltz			x	USA	Introduced by Vernon & Irene Castle (1910 Vaudeville)
Hustle			x	USA	Puerto Rican teenagers - NY 1970s
Jive	x			USA	Stylized by British from swing GIs brought to Europe in WWII
Mambo		x		Cuba	1930s (African & Jazz influence)
Merengue			x	Dominican Republic	Influenced by African and European rhythms
Paso Doble	x			Europe	French King commissioned to imitate a Spanish bullfight
Quickstep	x			USA	1920s – combined Charleston, shag Peabody, and one-step; standardized by British in 1927
Rumba	x	x		Cuba	African & Hispanic influence
Salsa			x	USA	1960s – NY using salsa music & influences from mambo, swing, hustle, and tap
Samba	x	x		Brazil	Influenced by African rhythms & dances brought by enslaved people
Single Swing			x	USA	1920s-30s in Harlem influenced by African Americans & Jazz music
Slow (Nightclub) Two Step			x	USA	Originated by Buddy Schwinmer in mid 1960s
Tango	x	x		Argentina-Uruguay	Also influences from Cuba; migrated to Europe in early 20 th century; codified by British in 1922
Two-Step			x	USA	Collected by Lloyd Shaw from folks around the U.S.in mid-1900s
Viennese Waltz	x	x		Austria	Popularized in late 1700s
Waltz	x	x		Europe	Evolved from Austrian/Bavarian peasant dances by mid-1700s
West Coast Swing			x	USA	Evolved in 1940s from Lindy Hop, created by Black Americans to Jazz music

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WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Knowing that dancing is important, especially as an activity which is healthy for those who do it as well as beneficial for society as a whole to bring people together in community, everyone can advocate for dance and engage in it themselves. It promotes physical, mental, emotional, and social health! It is good for you and good for our nation as a whole!

The International Dance Day proponents suggest the following activities for everyone to celebrate April 29 as an important day:

- Participate in local dance events or workshops to engage with the community.
- Share your favorite dance videos on social media using the hashtag #InternationalDanceDay.
- Organize a flash mob or group dance in a public space to spread joy.
- Explore different dance styles by taking online classes or tutorials.
- Support local dance companies or schools by attending performances or donating.
- Reflect on the cultural significance of dance and its role in bringing people together.

Everyone can be marvelous influencers. Besides becoming involved yourself, do what you can to influence family members, neighbors, dance leaders, and politicians to likewise become involved to stress the importance of this activity, and especially by celebrating these two special days: April 29 and the third Saturday in September (or activities near those special days). We especially need to get young people involved. You can introduce those you know to simple social dances via the lessons at <https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/dance.html>.