Danceability

Roger Wilkins of The Falconers – a band on the dance scene for well over forty years – gives some thoughts on what makes bands danceable, and harkens back to some musicians of the (recent) past.

The idea for this paper came about as a result of a request from Liz Hope, of Stafford, to do some work on the subject as an addition to a series of callers' workshops, which she had organised at Walton-on-the Hill, Stafford. I had provided the music for a couple of sessions taken by Joe Hodgson, and had demonstrated what I thought were the basics needed in playing for patter calls, and some other dances. She thought that I had put forward some very valid points, in a way she had never seen demonstrated before. I was not very happy about holding a session where I was asked to demonstrate, and teach, musicians who may be far more talented than me, and so turned her request down. However, talking to various people over a period of time made me realise that some of the principles are being lost, and that there are now virtually no opportunities for aspiring – and existing – dance musicians to study the basic elements of playing for dance; and, in particular, for playing in such a way as to make people want to dance. They are subtle, but very important skills.

I address the subject with some humility. I have run my band, The Falconers – once a four piece band, but now mainly two piece with accordion and flute – for well over forty years. I am acutely conscious of the fact that I am somewhat limited in my musical ability. However, we do seem to be consistently booked because I am told that we play in a manner which makes people want to dance, so I think it would be right to try and convey those principles as given to me, together with sources of audio samples which demonstrate what I believe to be good practice.

Many of my mentors have stopped playing, or indeed have passed away, but they have left a good legacy in their recordings, and in what they taught at various workshops. Whilst there are some workshops available at festivals etc., the question of danceability is rarely raised.

I have picked up a vast number of CDs and LPs of bands, both British and American. A good many get played once, but rarely again, simply because the music, however clever, does not move me. Some have been played to death, simply because they are good, danceable music. Likewise, attending live dances, bands fall into two camps. I have sometimes despaired over flat music which simply does not make my feet tap. This can be for various reasons; just flat playing, too complicated and fiddly that the danceability is lost, or so syncopated that I lose my sense of rhythm. It could be a mash of clever musicians showing off to everyone, resulting in a mash of sound. I thought I might be alone; but in talking to people, it is clear that the vast majority think the same, and yet for some reason matters do not get resolved; and yet, at other times, one can experience music which makes one never to want to miss a single dance.

The ageing folk dance scene may suggest that danceability is not so important, as stepping dances are so infrequently done, and many are simply plodding around in patterns; not necessarily through choice or bad practice, but often due to reduced mobility. In fact, it is more important than ever; dancers who, like me, are getting older NEED more uplifting dance music to make them more active. And younger dancers, for sure, need it for the sense of excitement it brings.

Dancing is MUSIC MADE VISIBLE. It therefore follows that dull music makes for dull dancing.

For any band, I believe that it is vital for band members also to get used to dancing, to listen to what makes THEM want to dance, and then to take those principles on to their playing. It is also important to ask those for whom they play for comment, as to what works and what does not.

Finally, recording playing for dancing – easily done – gives an uncompromising ear on what is being played. Band members need to be self-critical.

Let us first consider the principles of dancing.

You step down on the down beat; you lift your foot on the up beat. That is the general principle for reels, jigs, hornpipes, and even waltzes. It follows that, if the emphasis is on the down beat, people will not lift their feet, but will stomp down on the on beat, akin to driving nails into railway sleepers, as one friend once likened it. It follows that an off-beat emphasis will lift the feet and, by connection, the body; it frees up the person for movement.

I once recall standing in for David White and his band at Bromyard Folk Festival, for the North East Evening. Seeing the Monkseaton rapper men and their friends and relatives sailing by a foot off the ground was amazing; even more so when I had been asked to speed up the music as it was too slow for them! But it was not only their energy that was needed; they were used to uplifting, highly rhythmical music with their usual bands which propelled them up, and along.

Now there are various illustrations of how this is achieved.

The band which most excited me in my early playing days was The Ranchers. Their rhythm section consisted of Dick Hobbs on bass, and John Barber on guitar, and I believe it has never been beaten. The driving bass, coupled with a crisp and sharp off-beat chord on the guitar, produces a great sense of lift. Their playing is perhaps best illustrated on their Dances from CDM 5 record, which can be heard on the EFDSS compilation CDs. You cannot fail to be moved along by their foot-tapping music, but I contend that they would not have been anything like so highly regarded as they were, were it not for those two anchor musicians. The band were also known for their showmanship, not to mention edgy harmonies, but the core of their music was that drive.

There is an irony, however. The fiddles here have a technique of long bowings, playing strictly according to the written score. It is right for multiple fiddles. It is (certainly on the later records) immaculate, but does not demonstrate a style which would necessarily be very danceable in solo. What really counts is that the melody sits *on* the rhythm. This is difficult to explain, but it goes to the heart of what makes a memorably danceable sound, and the unique coupling of these factors makes for a really exciting sound.

If you go back and listen to the great Jimmy Shand (and he indeed did a record of English dance tunes) you can sense this "sitting on the rhythm" feeling. It is almost as if the rhythm section is ahead – and yet it is not, quite. However, in listening, you can tell. It is a subtlety, and, without it, a band can sound flat and lifeless. It would be invidious to give examples of bad technique in this respect, but I have many recordings, many of which I have never finished, where this is true. The so-called rhythm guitar is hanging back, timidly, and not giving the drive. Or it could be the piano which is tinkling about and, frankly, getting in the way and flattening the sound. It may be clever, and/or technically accomplished, but it does nothing for danceability. Coupled with flat fiddle playing, this can be the kiss of death for any form of drive and excitement.

Incidentally, one of my great idols was Brian Willcocks in the Ranchers. Their Playford record in the EFDSS series drew quite some comment when it was made, but I believe it is a masterpiece, and his playing of a solo of "Mock Hobby Horse" should be prescribed listening for any aspiring accordionist in this genre.

There were other bands in the old CDM series which demonstrated seamless, but in fact very well put-together, music. Richard Smith from Blue Mountain probably did more than any other in compiling and sharing music, and was a huge force; Maggie Fletcher's piano playing is a pure delight. I also learned a huge amount in two days with Ian Graham of Woodley Yeoman at Halsway Manor, and we still use a couple of his superb countermelodies.

So what The Ranchers demonstrated was a driving rhythm, in one style; but it is not the only style. However, even a simple, solo accordionist can benefit from this, and one can spend many hours studying what made them so danceable, and the trick here is, I believe, realising that the bass side technique is the FIRST thing to worry about – not how to play fancy notes, but just the basics of the left hand.

There are two parts to the accordion bass; bass, and chords. The way I believe it works, if a band does not have its own rhythm section, is to have a definite, driving bass, coupled with a crisp, accentuated staccato chord. It is, if you like, a pneumatic representation of the bass and guitar sound from The Ranchers. In dancing, it gives the essential lift; you can dance to it with the simplest of melodies (indeed, getting over-complicated can be a hindrance if technique is limited). Bellows pressure variation is also important.

So what of the piano? The same principles apply. One can do no better than to listen to the playing of Peter Barnes in various recordings (not, I stress, Bare Necessities in this regard, which is "posh tinkly stuff" where other factors drive through and make it special) and, especially, studying his seminal book, "Interview with a Vamper". It says it all. The instrument again reflects the bass/chord sequence, with a good staccato off-beat. If the off-beat is *not* staccato, the drive is lost.

I now turn to the melody instruments. Here, in a more exposed setting, in solo or duet work, for example, it is down to pure lift in playing; the gaps between the notes, the pressure in the bellows, the pressure on the bow, the tonguing on the flute.

The principles of lift can also be demonstrated on something so simple as the concertina, in the manner in which it is played. I refer to the playing of William Kimber, amply illustrated in the playing for La Russe on the Vaughan Williams Library CD. Here there is no bass, no guitar; it is the manner in which it is played which makes the difference. How does he do it? Well, listening may show, but he is almost dancing with the instrument. His emphases are on lift. There are nuances in the notes themselves; and the gaps, the minute silences, are important, in giving the lifting emphasis. It is the ever-awareness of movement, and lifting the foot off the floor. Indeed, you can always tell a musician who dances; he or she has an instinctive feel. The lift is given by rhythm in the bellows control.

Likewise, the fiddle. The *feeling* of rhythm and lift is so important in a solo or small-band setting. Another of my very great favourites was John Patrick in Arden Folk; his playing was full of life, as if it was directly connected to the soul, an extension of the man himself. Their "Arden Folk Augmented" record, later re-issued on CD, demonstrates this (despite the fact that it is faster playing than most of today's dancers would consider normal). Three musicians here working as one, with Mike Hare on box arranging things to perfection.

Moving on to a more modern example, the playing of that doyen of contra fiddlers, Rodney Miller, is a delight. A note is not a note; it is an experience in itself. Given a long note, you can hear the dancing within it. Lifting, flowing. It also demonstrates another maxim; that the gaps between the notes are as important as the notes themselves. In some ways, this is best demonstrated in an early

couple of records, the “New England Chestnuts”; similarly, the first record of the Portland collection (different people, but a similar style) shows this.

I now turn to some items which can be controversial; ornamentation, variation and counter-melodies; in other words, variation within the music to give extra interest.

Here again, the trick is not to do anything which can get in the way of dancing. “Twiddles” can be very interesting, but in a large band setting, just make matters muddy. These ornamentations can really only be demonstrated by example. A twiddle on a down-beat can sound quite flattening – in “lead-in” notes they can sound really good. But, in my view, they only work happily where they are done by the lead instrument, and mainly in the up-beat part.

A counter-melody can bring a new life to a tune which has to be played time and again, especially in Playford. It is essentially a melody which sits alongside the main tune to produce a tonal variation. If played continually, the dancers lose the tune itself, and, where our folk melodies are usually so strong, this is a mistake. A counter-melody needs to *complement* the tune; sometimes to be so striking as to make people sit up and listen, as well. Rarely do they work well floating both above and below the tune. Normally, they sound best only above or below, in any eight bar phrase. They do not want to continually directly mimic the tune note values either. The best recordings I know which demonstrate good use of these were the PLA series which were recorded by Orange and Blue. Roger Nicholls (sadly recently passed away) was a brilliant arranger and the recordings are worthy of careful study. It is, however, a technique best used occasionally, as a contrast; as a relief, say once every three, four or five turns.

Improvisation is another matter. Some people are good at it; others not. I am not. But hear Chris Dewhurst on the recordings he made with John Patrick, where you have two free-playing musicians in total connection with each other, and you can see what can be achieved. This is a jazz style; it may be unwise to try to do it unless you are gifted in that direction, as, again, bad ornamentation is much worse than none at all. But the “Four Leaf Clover” CDM record is, in my opinion, very fine playing.

I found the countermelodies and arrangements on the Ranchers PLA record very interesting. When it was published, it received very “Marmite” reviews. But there is no doubt that it is both almost unique, and has stood the test of time. The flowing, three or four part harmonies are full of texture; different instruments taking the lead, and others dropping out, make for fine listening, even of very repetitive tunes. Again, well worth hearing.

There has been a move to syncopation, especially in some piano playing for contras. There is a rather “love or hate” view on this. Personally, in the dance setting, I can find it quite interesting, but not if used continually; in recordings, I get highly irritated by it, if it is used to excess, and it often spoils the flow. Again, I strongly believe it needs doing in strict moderation, as a change, and *not* as the norm. Indeed, I have heard many more adverse comments about syncopation than praise, and one or two callers I know actively avoid bands where this is excessively practised. Mind you, it is very clever, and I am blowed if I can do it! Interestingly, very little of the really good quality contra dance music recordings from the USA include much of it. It seems mainly to be a British thing. But these are, as I say, my personal views.

I strongly believe that tonal variation can extend the life of a tune almost indefinitely. It is a fact that Scottish bands practice very little in this regard; you get the tune a couple of times, and then switch to another, and so on. English bands cannot always do that; witness the “Play 17 times” note on one Playford tune; “Play 21 times” on another! But instruments can go up an octave, or even down an

octave. The accordion has a wealth of tonal variation with couplers on both treble *and* bass sides. They need to be used. Sometimes a drone, as a change, can work for a turn or two; so too can block chords (which we used a lot when we had two accordions); a tambourine; a change of key; a pizzicato fiddle; there is a long list of options. There is no excuse to play the same way every time. But I firmly believe that it is important to never lose the tune, never to let cleverness destroy the dance, or depress it. It is perfectly possible to maintain great interest in a Playford tune by tonal variation without a countermelody; indeed, there are many tunes, especially "notey" ones, where a countermelody would be too much.

Beginnings and endings can be quite a subject. There was a time where two strong lead-in notes were normal; indeed, what I usually do to this day. Those two notes need to be strong; they should get instant attention, mark the beginning of the dance, and the speed as well. I am also an advocate of playing the first time through very clearly, so that the dancers know precisely where they are.

There was a fad in ceilidh bands to start with one instrument and then work up the sound. I have lost count of the number of times I have been on the floor where a fair proportion of the dancers do not even know the dance has started. In complex dances, this would be the kiss of death.

American technique has favoured the "four bar intro" which sets the pace. As long as there is consistency, that is clearly fine; everyone knows what to expect; but a variation in beginnings is not helpful! Personally, I see no reason to depart from the established English way of doing things. Everyone understands what to expect (and they would expect another way in the USA) and, given that we tend to play for many different genres, it avoids starting a different way each time. I am also proud of the fact that my background is in English traditional dance, so I will stick to what I do.

Likewise, endings. In this country, we have tended to end with a chord, as a "thank you for dancing" move. It is crisp and clean – or should be. Falling to pieces at the end, with band members playing short or long notes, always sounds tatty to me, and the last impression is always important. I believe well-defined beginnings and endings are crucial; I am not ashamed of the English tradition of two strong notes to start (unless something else special is required, say for waltzes, singing calls, or special tunes) and a strong chorded ending.

Talking of singing calls makes me think also of patter calls. This is a subject upon which I have often been quizzed. Playing alongside someone singing is not as easy as it seems; if you are not careful, the tune being played can remove the clarity of the voice. Variation is needed; the best exponents were people like Arden Folk who could jazzily support the singer, and even drop out everything except the rhythm as a variation, provided you know the caller can take it! Patters are fascinating, because not every caller is the same. Here a "flat" reel need not be "notey". It is crucial that there are simple harmonies, as the caller will tend to call on one note, which will be common to most of the chords being played. If he or she tends to follow the tune it can throw things completely. The caller is only interested in knowing eight-bar phrases; the simple harmony pattern will be his clue. The tune – and it need only be one tune, as changing it can be dangerous unless the caller is aware beforehand, *and* it coincides with say the start of the third figure – needs to be played around with *discreetly* whilst the rhythm NEVER lets up. Recordings are few and far between; John Chapman and Bernard Chalk came together on that old Arden Folk recording, and there was never better (although my dear friend Joe Hodgson really is right up there with them, as is, I think, Ivan Aitken). The last track of "Heating up the Hall" with Yankee Ingenuity and Tony Parkes also shows more complex stuff by people at the top of their game.

I have always believed that a good relationship with both caller and dancers is crucial. A caller may call for, say, jigs; watching the call-through has often made me change tune, simply because you can

sense the sort of tune that will work best with the dance. There may be emphases in a tune one knows which best reflect the dance. It may be very flowing, where notey contra reels would really drive things along, or even song melodies. A band leader needs to ask a caller questions to find out exactly what they need. Just a request for "jigs please" is not enough. Watch, listen, and learn. This is where being a dancer helps out of all recognition. You need to try and be "as one" to create the "music made visible".

It also helps if the band – especially the leader – is in touch with dancers on the floor. They are the ones who can signal if there are any sound problems, and friendships within the folk world are very important. Ask them if it sounds right; smile and laugh with them – be part of it. Musicians who do this can respond in the way they are playing. A glum band, which interacts with no-one does not get a good reputation. Almost as bad as a glum caller! I never forget that, doing a beginners' barn dance with John Chapman, how he became everyone's friend during the evening. A consummate skill, and musicians need to respond to that sort of atmosphere.

I do hope that these fairly random thoughts are some help to aspiring musicians, and do not cause any offence! The most important thing is to encourage good dance music for the future, and all the joy that can bring. This is the ultimate hobby, where, as musicians, we get thanked profusely for doing what we love doing. How good is that?