

To Americans, it's recreation

# Balkan folk dances reflect area's culture

By KARON STIRLING  
Of the Emerald

It started as a hobby, developed as a way to pay school tuition, and ended up as a career. For Ronald Wixman, a visiting associate professor in geography, folk dance is much more than a form of recreation — it is a way of life.

In addition to teaching the geographies of the Soviet Union and eastern Europe and a class entitled "Ethnography of the Balkans," Wixman currently offers a course in "folk dancing," but he

uses the phrase carefully.

"Recreational dance should be called just that," Wixman says. "In the United States folk dancing is purely a form of recreation; people have no idea of what is behind it. Often the dances don't even have a basis in the countries they supposedly come from — sometimes only the name remains the same."

Wixman is determined to change the term "folk dance" into "ethnic dance." "Folk dancing has very strong principles, just as jazz and ballet do," says Wixman.

A choreographer and dancer

with a number of professional dance ensembles, Wixman has performed the flamenco in New York and Chicago, and has taught Macedonian, Bulgarian and Balkan folk dance — for which he is best known — in every major U.S. city. He has spent seven summers in the Balkans doing research, and speaks fluent Bulgarian, fairly good Serbo-Croatian (one of Yugoslavia's three languages) and is now learning Turkish in preparation for another trip.

"It's important that I go on these trips for several reasons," Wix-

man explains. "In the course, I teach only small village dances, so I spend a lot of my time talking and learning from the villagers. In the class I try to stress such things as forms of dances, regional styling and the roles of dances in society."

"Another very important thing I present is how the dance reflects the social structure of the country it originates in," he added. "For example, in most countries men dance only with men. Dancing is an important part of daily life for the villagers, and the men do some of the most complicated dances in the world."

"Actually, couple dancing, introduced by the Germans and the Hungarians, is relatively new."

"I certainly don't see anything strange about men dancing together," Wixman continues. "The Hungarian army used to choose its army by challenging men to do a complicated dance and then recruiting the participants if they were good. The men always had to accept the challenge — it was a matter of pride. Unfortunately, our American protestant-ethic tells us that men are not supposed to dance. It's very different from the places I study."

This summer Wixman, a nine-year member of the Armenian Folk Dance Society of New York, will instruct folk dancing in most major cities along the west coast.

"The folk dance world is one of diverse backgrounds," he explains. "In my classes, I teach everyone from hippies to doctors. The dances vary from easy to extremely difficult."

"You have to realize that we're dealing with difficult music, also," Wixman adds. "Whereas all American rock and roll is based upon 3/4 time — and that's why it gets boring after awhile — Balkan music also includes 5/16, three types of 7/16, two types of 9/16, 11/16 and 13/16 time. Of course there are combinations also. You're talking here about music that the best trained American musicians can't even begin to follow, the beat is too complex. But the villagers in Bulgaria have no problem; they've been brought up with it."

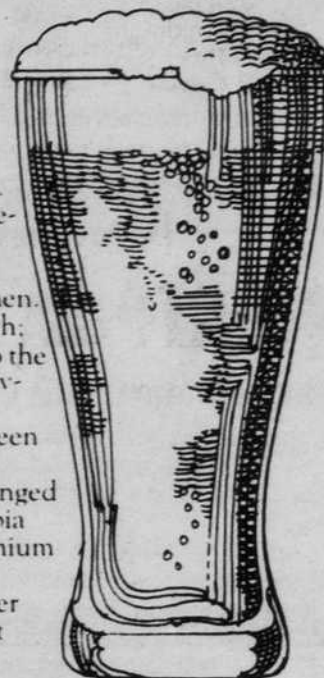
In the future, Wixman plans to open a museum and exhibit his extensive costume collection. He also plans to go back to Yugoslavia and continue teaching and dancing "as long as I can hold up."



Drawing by JoAnn Fahlgren

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