

Cape Breton Social Dance

Field Research and Notes by Jerry Duke
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Cape Breton Social (or Square) Dance—Cape Breton residents are ancestors of the Scottish settlers of the 18th Century. These dances are believed to be that old and do not appear to exist in Scotland or Ireland now.

Jig

This is the first of two dances that are done throughout western Cape Breton. Dances are held nightly in one community or another during the summer. Some call it a social dance, some call it a square dance. The first (and sometimes second) dance has no name except “Jig.”

There is no usual number of measures that each figure takes. A leader (the person who called the set together) simply starts each figure.

Music: 6/8 meter

Formation: Square of cpls. Both M and W use the same ft for the stepping and dance movements except for the “One-Step” section (Figure 3) for which the W hold for a ct at the beginning and again at the end to be on the opp ft from the M for that movement.

Meas

Pattern

I. THE STEPPING

1 Stamp in place (usually with the left) (ct 1); swing the free ft fwd hitting either the toe or heel (ct 2); tap the toe of the same ft as it comes back to original place, or take wt (ct 3); repeat the above (cts 4,5,6).

2 + Repeat meas 1 as many times as you wish. Then, reverse or repeat the above action.

II. CIRCLE CLOCKWISE

Circle CW, stepping on cts 1 and 4 of each meas.

III. ONE-STEP

M takes the W on his L for a “One-Step.” In relaxed Ballroom dance pos, M begins with the L, W with the R. (Note that she has to cheat to get on the correct ft. She usually has plenty of time as it takes the M a ct or two to turn twd her.) Stepping almost in place on counts 1 and 4, the cpl turns slowly or travels slightly fwd and bkwd. They stay close enough to end in their place in the circle at which time the W gets to the M’s R to start the dance over on the next meas next to a new partner. *(See note below).

IV. COUPLE PROMENADE

Dance CCW around the circle in Varsouvienne or skater’s pos and face in to begin the dance again.

THE END

When the leader decides the dance has repeated enough times he will start clapping with the music. The other dancers stop dancing and clap with him to signal the musicians to stop.

Note: This dance was done first and second in a three-dance cycle throughout the evening when we first observed it in 1992. The first time through this dance the last figure (promenade) was left out. The second time through this dance there was no partner change. The man simply turned to his right each time to do the One-Step with his corner. In 2000 and ‘01, however, only the last version of the jig was done once.

Cape Breton Reel

This dance is named here for its 4/4 rhythm. In 1992 it was the third dance of each three-dance cycle after which one or two “Strathspey” tunes (4/4 with graduated tempo) were played for solo step dancing, or just listening.

Music: 4/4 meter

Formation: The dance begins in a circle of 4 or more cpls, W to her ptr’s R. Ptrs do not change. The lead cpl of each set begin facing stage R (or on the east side of a square in a north-south hall). In 2000 and '01 the lead would often have his back to the music. The figures of this dance are also led by the set leader.

Steps: Strathspey Clog - This step sequence is not always performed during the Grand R and L. Some dancers never do it. (This is the basic step used by dancers in the solo “Strathspey.” There are many variations, but during the “Reel” set dancers keep the steps simple.

Step on L (ct 1); brush ball of R ft fwd (ct &); brush ball of R ft bkwd, hopping on L (ct 2); touch R beside L, hopping on L (ct 3); touch R beside L or step on both (ct 4).

There are many variations within this basic rhythm, but none interfere with the dance figures.

Meas

Pattern

I. GRAND R AND L

Begin right foot *(performing the “Strathspey Clog” described below), grand right and left until you return to your partner. (Man goes CCW, woman goes CW.)

II. ONE STEP OR SWING PARTNER

In Ballroom pos, take one step on each beat moving slightly fwd and bkwd, or turning, as in the “Judique Jig.” M begins L, W cheats to begin R. Or you can buzz turn.

III. REVERSE GRAND R AND L

Reverse the direction of the Grand R and L until you return to your ptr.

IV. PROMENADE

All promenade CCW in Varsouvienne pos following the leader as he goes down the hall (away from the music the first time through the dance, and up the hall the second, then alternate). Turn away and separate from partner and return up the hall to form two facing lines up and down the hall, one line with men the other with women.

V. STRATHSPEY CLOG IN PLACE

Perform the “Strathspey Clog” while standing in place.

VI. FORWARD, CLOG, REFORM CIRCLE

Continuing the clog step, the leader and his ptr move twd each other. The other dancers do the same in order down the line. As the ptrs get together in loose Ballroom dance pos they dance the clog while mingling and slowly moving back to the circle to begin the dance again.

THE END

When the leader decides the dance has repeated enough times he will start clapping with the music. The other dancers stop dancing and clap with him to signal the musicians to stop.

Note: The dance is repeated from the beginning. Some do the “Strathspey Clog” during the Grand R and L and the One-Step, but not during the promenade. The promenade goes in the opposite direction each time (i.e., up the hall the second time, down the hall the third.)

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