



SHINDIGS, JAMBOREES, & JUBILEES

Traveling along the Blue Ridge Parkway for some fast dancing, sweet music, and old-fashioned fun.

By Melanie D.G. Kaplan

Photos by Gaston Lacombe

On Friday nights in southwest Virginia, as the gospel hour draws to a close at the Floyd Country Store, you may hear a stir in the audience. Walk past the racks of Carhartt overalls and bins of candy, and you'll find people quietly replacing their sneakers with leather-soled shoes. One man crouches in the corner with a bar of paraffin, waxing the bottoms of his loafers. A parade of locals stream in the front door, some just off their Harleys, others just off their farms. Previously restrained children grow fidgety. Grown-ups rise out of chairs in anticipation.

This is the Friday Night Jamboree. It's time to dance.

KAY GORDON shows off her outfit and dancing shoes at the Floyd Country Store's Friday Night Jamboree in Floyd, Virginia.



NORM AND GINNY SPURLEY are regulars on the dance floor at the Orchard at Altapass near Spruce Pine, North Carolina.

Years ago, I'd fallen hard for the old-time music of this region. The sweet tunes that seem to seep out of the mountains and foothills have drawn me back to the Appalachians time and again. With music comes dancing—but that had always been an afterthought on my previous visits here. Last summer, I decided to embark on a different journey. I had been a dedicated ballerina through my childhood and adolescence, and for a couple years, I'd also performed with an Irish dance troupe. I wanted to return to my roots, and I suspected the rhythm and footwork of Irish dance had prepared me well for the step dancing of Appalachia. Armed with a list of dance venues along the Blue Ridge Parkway and a longing to revive my inner dancer, I hit the road.

In Floyd, my first of numerous stops on a ten-day road trip, the dress code was “come as you're comfortable”: Folks danced in footwear from socks to Crocs

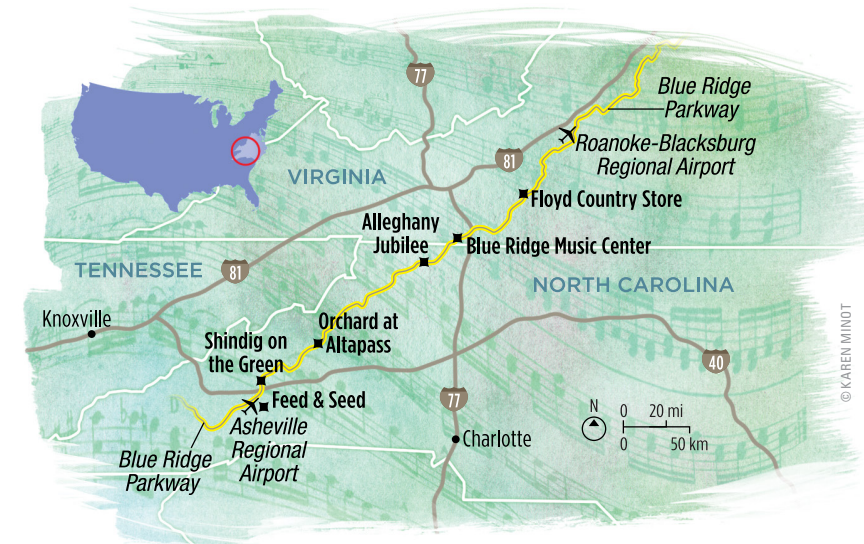
to snakeskin boots. They showed up in capri pants or Wrangler jeans and sometimes, they donned cowboy hats. A few measures into each song, the floor was packed with people showing off a range of dancing styles. I'd fretted about learning the steps and finding a partner, but I needn't have worried about either.

“Hit your foot to the floor with each beat,” one man coached. “Just don't jump up and down, or you'll look like Buddy Ebsen”— of “Beverly Hillbillies” fame. “That's what some people think we dance like,” he said, scrunching his shoulders and poking out his elbows.

“Southern step dancing” is a broad term for one of the ways people in this region connect to music. The style, in which the feet stay close to the floor with a consistent downbeat, has several names including flatfooting and buckdancing, and it's typically done without a partner. This mountain dance grew from

the Appalachian tradition of playing music on back porches: Some sat and listened, while invariably, others would stand up and tap out a rhythm with their feet. The custom hasn't changed much since.

“These step dances have roots in the dance traditions of Europe, Africa, and Native America,” said Phil Jamison, a renowned flatfoot dancer and old-time musician who recently wrote *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance*. “They evolved over time as generations of dancers shared steps and styles across racial and ethnic lines, and they were once part of the common rural Southern culture.” Jamison told me clogging—which is similar to flatfooting but performed by a group on stage—began in North Carolina and came into its own as a dance form in the 1940s and '50s, an era when local schools displayed dancing and basketball trophies side by side.



Arthur Grimes, a well-known flatfooter in Boone, North Carolina, says his traditional dancing draws on the dances of his ancestors, who were once slaves in the region. He calls himself a percussionist—sometimes he plays the spoons, sometimes he makes music with the taps on his feet. Grimes has performed with Old Crow Medicine Show and the Carolina Chocolate Drops and is known for putting a microphone down by his taps. “You feed off the banjo and fiddle,” he told me. “Just make sure you keep up with the music. If you're off-beat, you'll mess up the band.”

Some traditionalists frown at wearing taps in small venues because they drown out the sound of other steps. That was true in Floyd, where the clickety-clack of metal on the boards was loud and unrelenting. But taps or no, the energy on the floor was powerful, and even if I wasn't quite in step, I felt a deep connection with the music and dancers around me. When the tune changed and it was time for a two-step or waltz, I'd take the hand of a stranger. The town's mustachioed deputy sheriff told me during one dance that he'd learned the steps only recently.

“I decided I didn't want to die not knowin' how to dance,” he said. We collided with other couples like bumper cars on the crowded floor.

Many dances later, I left the warm fold of the jamboree and walked outside, where musicians gathered in clusters up and down the street for impromptu, old-time music jams. A teenage girl in cutoffs kicked

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THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY, a 469-mile, two-lane highway that winds through Virginia and North Carolina, links Shenandoah National Park in the north to Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the south.



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to the jamboree, but instead, I turned back to the hotel and gave in to sleep.

The Blue Ridge Parkway, which celebrated its 80th

birthday in 2015, is a two-lane highway that winds through Virginia and North Carolina for 469 miles. It links Shenandoah National Park in the north to Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the south.

After escaping the interstate, it takes but a moment to adjust to the change in landscape—rather than billboards and 18-wheelers in your periphery, you find scenic overlooks, a tiny cemetery, and wildlife.

When I hit the road Saturday morning, the Parkway was quiet, a ribbon of asphalt bisecting the green countryside. Leaning into one curve after another, I found shady forests leading to open meadows and watched the sun rise over yellow wildflowers. On a short hike to stretch our legs, Hamilton and I came upon a snow pea-sized newt that was such a brilliant orange I thought it was plastic.

That night, after crossing the North Carolina bor-

der, I was tempted to return to the jamboree, but instead, I turned back to the hotel and gave in to sleep.

The Blue Ridge Parkway, which celebrated its 80th



TOM GILLIE puts on his tap shoes at the Floyd Country Store's Friday Night Jamboree. Above: When the Floyd Country Store gets too full, the crowd spills out onto the street to dance and socialize.



THE WRITER'S BEAGLE, Hamilton, catches some wind at an overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia. Right: On the streets of Floyd, Virginia, musicians frequently gather for old-time music jams.





NINA CARICO,
86, flatfoots with
relatives at the
Alleghany Jubilee
in Sparta, North
Carolina.

der, I went to the Alleghany Jubilee, a twice-weekly dance in the three-traffic light town of Sparta. The dance was held in an old movie theater with green walls, twinkly lights, and American flags. Sitting next to other spectators along the wall, I marveled as couples who looked like they'd been dancing together for decades moved easily around the dance floor. One man wore an Army Veteran hat and struggled to walk, but he looked so pleased shuffling around the floor that I could barely take my eyes from him.

A middle-aged woman approached and introduced herself as Doris. "I saw you in Floyd last night," she exclaimed. She drew me up to accompany her, and we joined a procession of two-steppers moving around the perimeter of the floor.

"I tell everyone this is my therapy—dancing makes you feel good," Doris told me outside, after I'd bought a bottle of water and a Klondike bar to cool down. (It's also a vigorous workout; I heard more than once, "clogging beats jogging.") "My dad would come home from the farm in tall rubber boots and teach me how to dance in the kitchen." She said she follows bands rather than staying loyal to venues, a refrain I heard from others. If a band isn't known for its dance music, the floor might very well be empty.

Later, a caller led a figure-eight square dance, and I followed along, laughing through my missteps, perpetually searching for my partner. We followed that with a Virginia reel, which I remember learning in grade school. Every time I tried to rest on the edge

of the dance floor, Doris and my new acquaintances gestured me back. I found long-forgotten steps emerging from my memory, and every now and then, my feet would keep up with my brain. It was during the lively song, "How Many Biscuits Can You Eat," that I thought, "Doggone. I'm flatfooting."

Packed into my car with Hamilton were thousands of old Kodachrome slides. My plan, between weekends of dancing, was to return them to my mother, who was vacationing in western North Carolina. During the week, we looked through the slides on a backlit viewer and found countless shots of me before dance recitals, posing in tap and ballet shoes and always wearing too much of my mom's lipstick. A few slides showed my Irish dance troupe performing at the Kennedy

Center when I was 12. I wore a costume my mother had helped sew—a handmade, knee-length skirt and white, puffy-sleeved blouse.

We also discovered shots from a cross-country drive we took with our dachshund when I was 3 months old. It was like finding a puzzle piece to my life that I didn't know was missing: the first of my many long-distance road trips with hounds.

The following weekend, I headed back toward the Parkway and found myself in Fletcher, North Carolina, on a busy strip near Dickey's Barbecue Pit and LuLu's Consignment Boutique. There, a former Feed & Seed shop in a century-old building serves as a weekend dance venue and doubles as a church. I slipped into a pew, mindlessly flipping through a threadbare

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Although the Blue Ridge Parkway is open year-round, many facilities don't open until May. Plan your trip for summer, and you'll find dance opportunities nearly every night of the week. The Parkway covers about 218 miles between Floyd, Virginia, and Asheville, North Carolina. Dances are family-friendly, most admission is less than \$10 if not free, and venues often sell refreshments priced from a bygone era. Spectators and dancers alike are welcome. Blue Ridge Music Trails and The Crooked Road, tourism initiatives that offer interactive maps and suggested itineraries, are invaluable resources for trip-planning around weekly dances and annual festivals. If you're coming from the north, kick off your journey at the weekly Friday Night Jam-boree at the Floyd Country Store. At Parkway milepost 213, the Blue Ridge Music Center offers summer Mid-Day Mountain Music and weekend concerts. Alleghany Jubilee in Sparta, North Carolina hosts dances all year on Tuesday and Saturday nights, and the Orchard at Altapass, on the Parkway north of Asheville, offers free summer music and dancing Wednesday through Sunday afternoons. Feed & Seed in Fletcher, North Carolina has Friday and Saturday dances year-round. This summer, Asheville hosts its 50th annual Shindig on the Green, a free outdoor event every Saturday with traditional music and dancing on stage and jam sessions throughout the park. The closest airports are Roanoke Regional Airport, 53 miles from Floyd, and Asheville Regional Airport.





SIDETRIPS

Give your dancing feet a break with a cycle along 57-mile New River Trail outside Galax, Virginia. The trail follows an abandoned railroad and parallels the New River for 39 miles. Bike rentals are available at Foster Falls. After the last dance, treat your feet at Wake Foot Sanctuary, an Asheville spa where you can luxuriously soak your toes in baths of avocado oil, wintergreen, or locally brewed BRÖÖ beer.

A MUSICIAN plays the autoharp at an impromptu jam session.

bible while waiting for a friend to arrive.

“We don’t dance to gospel music, but you can sure sing along,” the host said, introducing the band and explaining that we’d hear gospel songs now and then throughout the evening. When they played “I’ll Fly Away,” the audience stood and clapped, as fans

whirred overhead. I looked around to find every horizontal surface covered with relics—an old guitar, a bas-relief *Last Supper*, and an ancient typewriter.

As soon as the bluegrass began, a man in a bowler hat and plaid shirt, skinny as a green bean, stepped out of his pew, into the aisle, and started tapping. Within minutes, the dance floor was packed with little girls in Mary Janes, focused flatfooters, and a group of teens visiting town for a service project. The best dancers were nimble and light on the boards. The amateurs often looked like they were trying—with each step—to ram a nail into the floor.

My friend and I two-stepped around the small floor to Bill Monroe’s “Sitting Alone in the Moonlight.” Walking out into the dark night, he spun me once more on the sidewalk, past a pickup truck filled with baskets of peaches.

The next morning, I drove to meet Green Grass Cloggers dancer Suzannah Park, who lives at the end of a gravel road in Asheville and comes from a family of musicians and dancers. The more I talked to people about dancing, I told her, the less clarity I had about dance names.

“When I ask about flatfooting or buckdancing or clogging, I get a different answer from everyone,” I said.

“That’s exactly right,” she said, laughing. “Your research is over!”

Turns out the lexicon has a lot to do with the origins of the person who taught you to dance. After a bit, we shelved that discussion, and Park pulled out a small plywood platform called a step-a-tune. She put on her black tap shoes and demonstrated flatfooting’s walking step.

“Most importantly, bend your knees,” she said, shifting her weight between feet. She started with her right foot and then dragged it back, as though she were getting gum off the sole. Slowly, she added steps, and I followed her on the wood board: step right, heel left, pull right, toe left. At the end of my lesson, she sent me off with local goat cheese and fresh bread from her baker husband.

That afternoon, I traveled along the Parkway to reach the Orchard at Altapass, a historic music and dancing venue that’s perched atop the Eastern Continental Divide in Spruce Pine, North Carolina. Inside the large tin-roofed barn, people danced to a country band, and girls in floral dresses who had just finished a clogging performance stood in line for ice cream. I wandered around the shop, circling back to the fresh apple pie and homemade fudge.

Back in Asheville that evening, I headed out for my last dance. Shindig on the Green, which celebrates its 50th year in 2016, is held at Pack Square Park and is one of the region’s best-known events. Over the course of a couple of hours, two dozen acts performed on stage, from young dancers in red crinoline skirts to seasoned cloggers. My favorite was the “sit-down square dancing,” led by esteemed caller Glenn Bannerman.

“You’re not goin’ anywhere,” he announced to the



ADDITIONAL DANCE VENUES

For visitors who just can’t get enough flatfooting and square dancing, here are a few more spots along the Parkway:

Mabry Mill, Meadows of Dan, Virginia

Blue Ridge Backroads Live, Rex Theater, Galax, Virginia

Monday Night Street Dances, Hendersonville, North Carolina

Friday Night Street Dances, Waynesville, North Carolina

Contra Dances at the Grey Eagle, Asheville, North Carolina

Old Farmer’s Ball at Warren Wilson College, Swannanoa, North Carolina

Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, Asheville, North Carolina

audience of thousands, sitting in camping chairs, strollers, and wheelchairs. He called for us to join hands, lean to the right, and lean to the left.

“Everyone in the middle!” The crowd leaned forward. “Come on back!” We leaned back. “Men circle left. Ladies circle left. Now bow to your partner!” On either side of me, people grinned.

As the sun set over the park, young musicians crooned from the stage, their wistful voices floating out into the night. I walked around the park and found a jam on the steps of the Buncombe County Courthouse. A few paces away, under a tree, Phil Jamison played the banjo with a few other musicians. He stopped for a moment to share a copy of his new book with me before he picked up his banjo again.

Presently, a lanky man plopped a step-a-tune down on the grass behind the musicians. He stepped onto the board and began dancing perfectly in tempo with the music, moving his feet so quickly they seemed barely to touch the wood.

I couldn’t help but tap my feet and rehearse Park’s instruction in my mind: step right, heel left, pull right, toe left. I wanted to dance but knew my feet couldn’t keep up. Instead, I kept my eye on this man, his limbs swinging loose like a marionette’s. After one song, he picked up his board, tucked it under his long arm, and ambled out of the park.

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