

SALT SPRING ISLAND FOLK DANCE FESTIVAL

Rosemarie Keough, Salt Spring Island, B.C., Canada

Below is an article by Rosemarie Keough, who originally started the Salt Spring Island Festival and ran it for 10 years before turning it over to Burnaby International Folk Dancers (BIFD). BIFD has run the Lyrids Festival since then, and as 2026 will be our final festival, I asked Rosemarie to write about the origins of the festival. She has contributed a wonderful article, and I hope you all enjoy it.—Kathy Sandstrom

In 2004, on a bucolic island in British Columbia, I founded the Salt Spring Island Folk Dance Festival—a vibrant celebration of ethnic dance, live music, authentic costumes, great cuisine, and supportive community. What began as a southern B.C. gathering very quickly grew into an international event, annually drawing 120 dancers, teachers, and musicians from as far away as New Zealand, Japan, Bulgaria, England, Italy, and across North America, with surprisingly few local dancers from Salt Spring itself. During the week ahead of the festival, we reached out to the younger generation. Our dance instructors taught folk dances at each of our island's schools. Throughout the festival, there was so much joy and laughter, such that the smiles lingered long after the music stopped—for a full decade, 2004 through 2013, on the weekend closest to May Day and the UNESCO International Day of Dance.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Mihai David, the catalyst for my founding of our festival. While my family and I were attending Mainewoods Dance Camp, Mihai generously offered to teach on Salt Spring, should I ever decide to hold an event. A year earlier, I had met John Campbell, leader of Portland, Oregon's Scandinavian dance ensemble, during a performance in Portland's airport. He, too, promised to come if I ever organized a festival. With the full support of my family and the encouragement of Mihai and John, I issued invitations broadly and began myriad preparations for the very first folk dance festival on Salt Spring Island.

Then, just four days before the inaugural event, Rebecca Nielson, John's partner, called with shocking news: John had suffered a heart attack and was in the hospital! Thankfully, he recovered, and we welcomed him in later years. However, at the literal 11th hour, we had to find his replacement, as many registered dancers were expecting Scandinavian instruction. With only 72-hours' notice, Roo Lester and Larry Harding (bless them) flew to Victoria—our nearest airport—caught the ferry to Salt Spring, and delivered a wonderful program, together with Mihai. All three teachers have been dear friends ever since.

One lesson I learned was to always have two teachers on hand. If one canceled at the last minute, the festival could

still go on. I often paired very different dance styles—Armenian with Portuguese, Bulgarian with Cajun, Romanian with Hawaiian—so that for one weekend, participants could spend half their time dancing familiar traditions and the other half exploring something entirely new, perhaps even beyond their comfort zone.

From the very beginning, the festival relied on the full support of my family, given that there was no folk dance club on the island then or ever before. At the outset, we filled every role: organizing, hosting, decorating, menu planning, grocery shopping, cooking, and writing what seemed like a gazillion emails. Our son Glen, from age 11 through his teen years, served as master dishwasher and sous chef, assisting with festival lunches and dinners. The beginning was admittedly a bit rough, but everyone had fun, and we learned a great deal about hosting a festival.

Driven by a dedication to perfection, each year improved upon the last. Before long, several non-dancing friends from Salt Spring pitched in, drawn by the festival's positive energy; and dancers from off-island clubs extended invaluable assistance. In this way, everyone took ownership of the festival. Colorful banners decorated the dance hall from recreational folk dance clubs in Saanich, Sidney, Cowichan, Langley, Quadra Island, Vancouver, Squamish, Burnaby, Surrey, and Gabriola. The energy was incredible: so many dancers that, despite the generous size of Fulford Hall, we often had two circles—one inside the other—dancing on a genuine wooden floor and just beyond, farmland and sheep!

A-level teachers enthusiastically spread the word about their wonderful experiences on Salt Spring, which made it easy to engage top talent. France Bourque-Moreau and Yves Moreau, along with Pat (my husband) and myself, formed a “phantom board” that, amusingly, never actually met, although we chatted on the phone. What was also funny is that they had known me as being bald, having battled an aggressive breast cancer for six years. When I later joined them in Istanbul for Yves's 60th birthday Trakya folk dance tour, at first, they didn't recognize me with hair!

France and Yves introduced us to Sonia Dion and Cristian Florescu, who joined us in 2009. Two years later, Cristian strongly recommended that we consider Roberto Bagnoli, whom he said was “like my brother.” What a remarkable combination that turned out to be! During the Trakya tour I invited Iliana Bozhanova and Todor Yankov to be on our staff, not quite realizing that a year's effort would be necessary to plan their cross-Canada tour and to wade through paperwork to obtain work visas from our government. We're very glad they could join us, and not just once, but twice! We so love Andy Taylor, who kindly filled in for Marianne Taylor, her mother, who was suddenly ailing. The YouTube video of Andy teaching us Malhão has been viewed 253 million times! One of my favourite comments pertains to Alexandru David's teaching of Bielolitsa Kruglolitsa. A dancer was overheard to say, “Alexandru made us feel elegant, even when we weren't.” Our festival was so much fun that teachers from previous years returned

as participants, not as instructors. Never can we forget Lee Otterholt's energetic, acrobatic Syrtos Samiotis, with leaps, spins, and high kicks supported by Cristian. And what fun to witness the culinary expertise and witty repartee of Željko Jergan and Richard Schmidt in our kitchen at home, post-festival evening. These two men are great chefs! Pat, who was principal videographer for the entire festival series, so enjoyed filling his viewfinder with Tom Bozigian, master showman, whose singing, dancing, and voice filled the hall. All of the teachers were so very special—those mentioned above, and the ever-graceful Hilde Otterholt, and the hilarious Jerry and Jill Duke.

The festival became both a reunion of old friends and a meeting of new ones. One year, an entire dance club from Japan traveled to Canada solely to participate in our festival. Another year, a Romanian performance ensemble from Alberta joined us. Immediately following dinner—allowing the delicious food to settle—a half-hour of performances in full costume showcased ethnic communities from Victoria and Vancouver, whose members traveled to Salt Spring to join us for the evening dinner and party.



*Photo credits, CW from top left:
2012 - Uri Cogan; 2012 - Rosemarie Keough;
2008 - Pat Keough; 2013 - Bruce Sharpe*

In the fall of 2004, Dale Adamson called, inquiring about the video footage she had heard was taken of the spring festival that same year—extensive coverage, filmed by Pat. This marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship and professional collaboration. Dale produced an engaging DVD package for each Salt Spring Island Folk Dance Festival, including instructional videos, evening performances, the festival party, and an accompanying dance notes booklet. These outstanding productions are archived by the UNESCO International Dance Council and by the Society of Folk Dance Historians.

Now, in 2025, Salt Spring boasts an enthusiastic folk dance club that has grown steadily since 2017. Our extensive repertoire goes beyond Balkan dances to styles from many corners of the globe, including a growing number of couple dances. Although I enjoy teaching locally and also at sea on trans-Atlantic cruises, I'm no longer hosting festivals. In fact, I have not since 2013, when I passed the baton to the Burnaby International Folk Dancers, who hosted the spring festival on the mainland the following year.

As the Lyrids Festival prepares to celebrate its 12th and final weekend of dance in April 2026, I can only imagine who might rise to accept the baton next. Whatever the future holds, one thing is certain: The legacy of these festivals, Salt Spring and Lyrids, will continue to inspire smiles, laughter, and connections for years to come.

Salt Spring Island Folk Dance Festival—Teachers by Year (2004–2013)

- 2004: Mihai David (Romanian); Roo Lester & Larry Harding (Scandinavian)
- 2005: Alexandru David (Russian & Romanian); John Campbell & Rebecca Nielsen (Scandinavian)
- 2006: France Bourque-Moreau (International); Yves Moreau (Bulgarian)
- 2007: Lee Otterholt (Greek & Balkan); Hilde Otterholt (Hawaiian); John Campbell (Irish)
- 2008: Andrea Taylor-Blenis (Portuguese & Austrian Yodeling); Tom Bozigian & Sheree King (Armenian)
- 2009: Cristian Florescu & Sonia Dion (Romanian); Hilde Otterholt (Hawaiian)
- 2010: Iliana Bozhanova & Todor Yankov (Bulgarian); Jerry & Jill Duke (Cajun & Appalachian)
- 2011: Cristian Florescu & Sonia Dion (Romanian & Latino); Roberto Bagnoli (Italian)
- 2012: Zeljko Jergan (Croatian); Richard Schmidt & Renata Jarko (Polish)
- 2013: Iliana Bozhanova & Todor Yankov (Bulgarian); Yves Moreau & France Bourque-Moreau (International)

A few links:

Andy Taylor, Malhão: youtube.com/watch?v=kJBn_DpTz3g

Alexandru David, Chastushky: youtube.com/watch?v=BF-L809fxEY

Lee Otterholt, Syrtos Samiotis: drive.google.com/file/d/16V1GW4BJB7DbCcCdHEudH6uGS5vzRJ8/view

Salt Spring Island Folk Dance Festival 2012 Montage: youtube.com/watch?v=b127VL0Sfko.

Salt Spring Island Folk Dance Festival 2013 Montage: youtube.com/watch?v=0yoMlsmBOQ

Dale Adamson's DVD sets of both Salt Spring and Lyrids are available for purchase at: singularproductions.com.