

What is Balfolk?

www.balfolk.co.nz

Imagine Balfolk as a vibrant fusion of centuries-old European dance traditions and modern sensibilities. Emerging in France in the late 20th century, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, Balfolk found itself at the convergence of two seemingly contrary trends: a revivalist movement in dance and music that sought to preserve threatened traditions and a broader youth-driven movement that wished to make these dances accessible to a wider audience. The democratic ideals of that era aimed to break down barriers and make cultural experiences available to all members of society. As a result, Balfolk took on a more inclusive and democratic character, welcoming people of all ages and backgrounds to participate.

While initially inspired by historical traditions, the Balfolk movement has evolved over the years to embrace innovation, improvisation, and cross-cultural influences. The genre has seen some modern reinterpretations and blends with other musical and dance styles, contributing to its continued evolution while maintaining its ties to traditional folk roots.

What sets Balfolk apart, is its profound commitment to inclusivity and the living, experiential dimension of dance. Unlike previous folk-dance traditions, with a focus on preservation and performance, Balfolk places a strong emphasis on the dance experience itself. Rather than freezing these dances in the past, Balfolk treats them as living, evolving entities.

At its core, Balfolk encompasses a variety of partner and group dances each with its own unique charm and rhythm. The Balfolk repertoire mostly draws from the traditional European folk dances but also includes some recent creations. In a Balfolk event, the elegance of waltzes, mazurkas, and bourrées intertwines with the calm or vibrant energy of ancient circles dances and the energetic foot stomping quality of some contredanses.

Live music remains a centrepiece of Balfolk, with versatile bands weaving together traditional instruments like fiddles, bagpipes, hurdy-gurdy, accordions, and modern sounds to form a unique soundscape that reflects the dance's diverse influences. Over time, Balfolk has gained popularity beyond its original regions and has been embraced by dancers from all ages and backgrounds in various parts of Europe and beyond. Initially a youth movement, Balfolk diversified as senior dancers discovered that dances they were familiar with were being danced by their children and grandchildren. The new multigenerational aspect of Balfolk fostered important conversations about the balance between upholding traditions and embracing freedom and innovation.

One of the distinctive aspects of Balfolk is its fluidity in partner roles. While in some traditional dances, one partner consistently leads and the other follows, these roles are

traditionally determined by gender. Balfolk allows dancers to switch roles during the same dance or from one dance to another. Openness to role-switching provides individuals with the freedom to explore their dance preferences irrespective of gender and within a supportive community environment.

This general adaptability, inclusiveness and overall community-oriented ethos has allowed Balfolk to remain relevant and engaging for a wide audience, including younger generations. Balfolk thus finds its constantly on the threshold of the scene of societal change from which it emerged: not merely reflecting an inherited social structure, but becoming a means by which we can imagine a world in which we wish to live.