

Fakelore to Folklore, Part 4, Step Dance

Peter Ellis

Apart from some of the myths relating to the African American side of step dancing relating to the jig as well as whether American performers in Colonial Australia where genuine African Americans or 'black faced' imitators, it is obvious step-dancing in its various forms including clogging and highland flings were very strong in Australia. Unfortunately except for handed-on step--dance tunes and the very rare occasion of it surviving, such as with the Dawson's in Tasmania, step dance has basically been lost. I've gone to great lengths to profile the musical side with the aurally transmitted tunes in the hope that a revival of the dance might be possible.

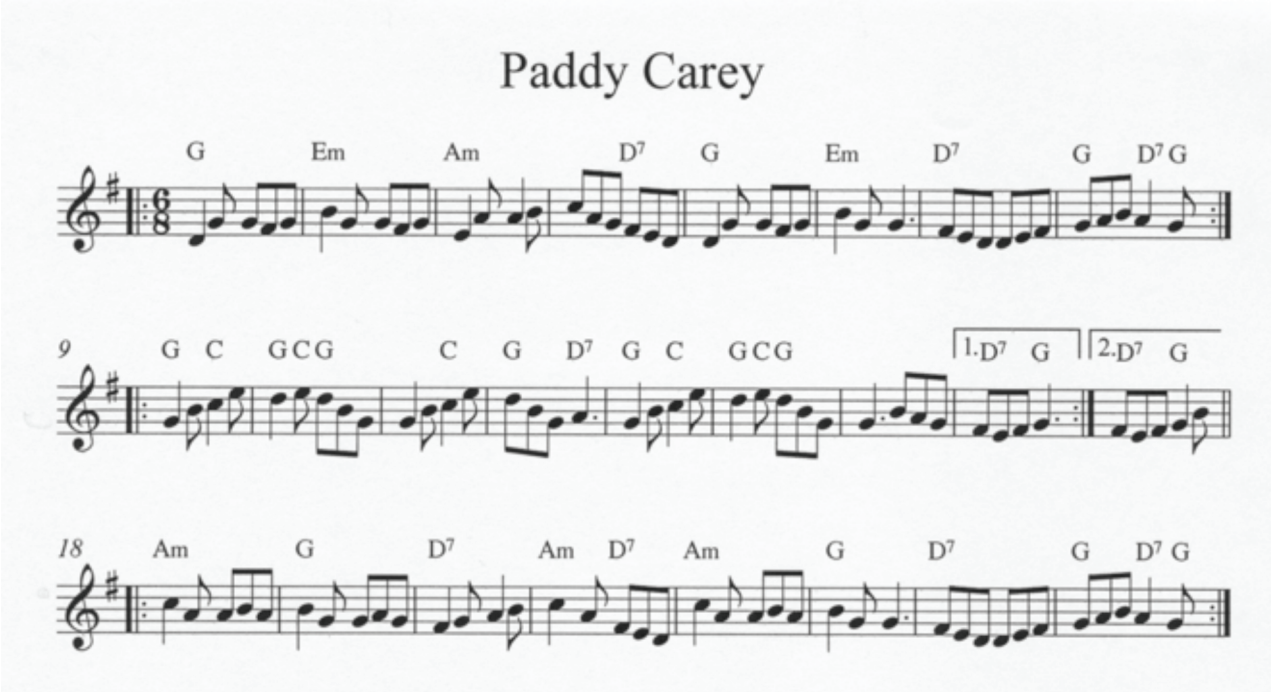
If you search the web for step-dance in Britain and Ireland, you'll find it's still extremely popular and with tremendous interest and exponents among young people, so let's hope we can get it going.

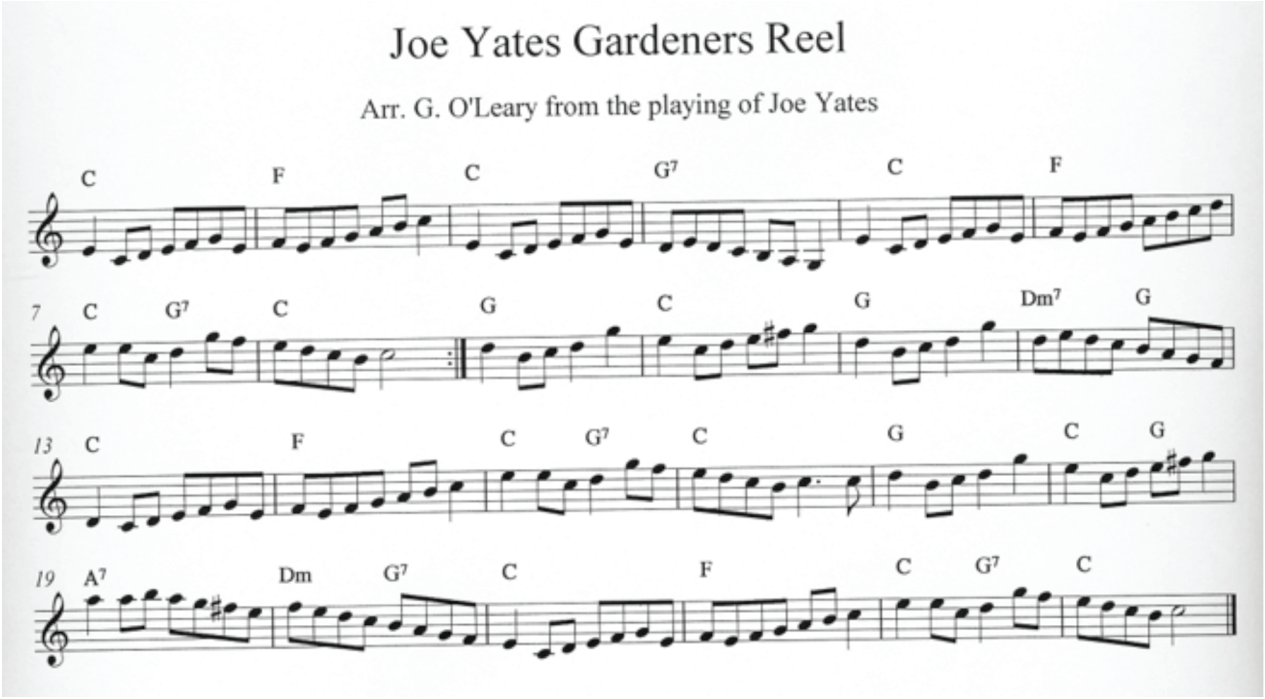
Heather Clarke has a workshop and demonstration of step-dancing in place (and accepted) at the National Folk Festival in 2015.

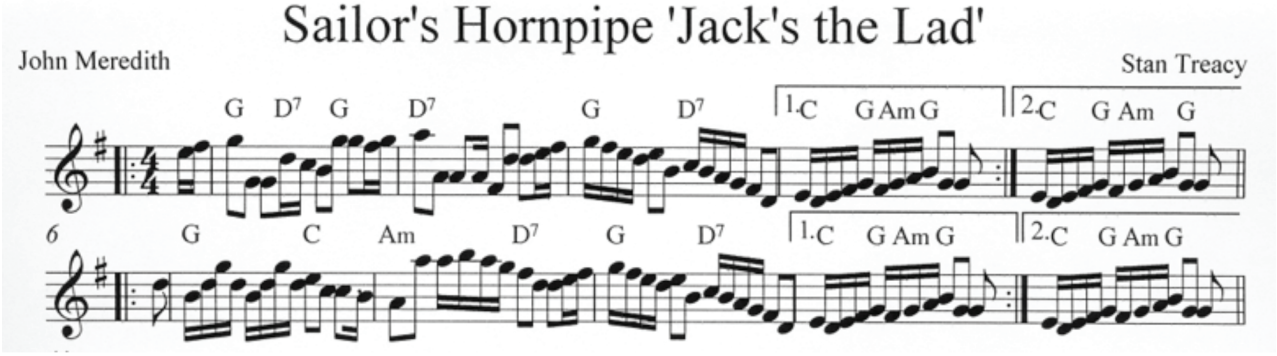
There are just the few tunes below, including two that are Irish described by John Shearer[1], "Here is an Irish tent. Look how Paddy revels amidst the glories of gold and potteen; no, not potteen, but rum, which in his estimation is not half so good as his own native beverage. ...as you hear Crowder screwing up the pegs of his old smoke-dries instrument in a corner, and tuning it to the beautiful melody of "Erin go Bragh." Hold a moment. He is resining his bow. Now he begins; and as the charming strain falls upon the ears of his sensitive countrymen, they here and there chime in with a part of the song, and dissolve in tears from the warmth of their emotions. Of what a complication of joys and sorrows is the human heart made up! Listen. He now plays "Paddy Carey"; and see every face, that was this minute suffused with tears, is radiant with joy, and the tent, as a matter of course, being now no longer capable of holding its inmates, throws them forth to the open air to have a trip on the gravel, which here serves as a substitute for the bright green sod of their own native "isle of the ocean". Now they go it. Jerry leaps as if he were set on steel more elastic than the main-spring of a watch, and Mary shuffles like a fish out of water. "Hu!" cries Barny at every turn; and "Go it, ye cripples!" echoes from the arrested beholders. "Ould Ireland for ever!" shouts Jerry, in the firmintin' state of his blood, when,

fortunately, one of the strings of the instrument snaps, and, in all probability, saves a general row amongst the spectators of all nations, whom the hilarity of the scene has drawn to the spot. “









References

1. The Gold-finder of Australia by John Shearer ,originally published in London in 1853 p76; see Penguin Colonial Facsimiles. Penguin Books Australia Ltd., Ringwood, Victoria.

2. Paddy Carey by courtesy Joan and Ray Mundy

3. Joy Yates step dance tune courtesy Greg O'Leary.

4. From Stan Treacy as recorded by John Meredith, which is basically the well known Sailor's Hornpipe or College Hornpipe.