

THE 70th KOLO FESTIVAL

by Laura Douglass

Kolo Festival was different this year. First, it was renamed the “John Filcich Kolo Festival” to honor its founder. This was the festival’s 70th year. At the age of 98, John Filcich is still dancing and teaching. Second, instead of being purely online as it was in 2020, or entirely in-person, as in all previous years, the festival was hybrid. Finally, for the second time, the festival was combined with the Texas Folk Dance Camp to create Texa-Kolo.

As I didn’t participate in the online events or the in-person singing classes, this review is only of the in-person dancing.

There were three dance teachers/teacher pairs instead of the usual two. Sonia Dion and Cristian Florescu, Evren Soytopcu Kiyak and Ahmet Lüleci, and Steve Kotansky provided the core of the dance program at the Croatian American Cultural Center in San Francisco. John Filcich and John Morovich also taught kolos. Michael Ginsberg taught dances online for the Texas portion of the program. Maria Bebelekova and Michele Simon taught singing.

In-person attendance was lower than in previous years, primarily due to COVID. It’s likely that many were hesitant to attend a large, in-person event while there were still so many unknowns. The number of participants was limited, all attendees were vaccinated, and dancers wore masks except when eating or drinking, but I was among those who had to conquer my discomfort in order to attend. A (free) on-line option was available for those who didn’t attend in-person. This option allowed people who couldn’t attend to share a portion of the experience, but it probably contributed to the lower in-person attendance.

All concerns about safety fell away when I saw old friends. The hugs were intense – a little extra to make up for the months and months we had not seen each other. It was also lovely to hug new friends I had made online during the past 18 months.

One advantage of the lower attendance was the intimacy of the dance workshops. It’s usually a challenge to get a good view of the teachers and learn new steps while trying not to step on or block your neighbor. That was not a problem this year. The teachers could also see every student and address issues quickly and personally. The evening parties were also more intimate. I didn’t feel lost in a crowd. I could easily see friends across the room. The musicians were an even greater part of the dance than usual.

There were a few issues that interfered a bit with the magic. One was the hybrid nature of the event. The teachers had to make incredible efforts to address their teaching to both the in-person group and the Zoom audience. The in-person attendees tried to be sensitive to camera viewpoints as they navigated the dance space, which was one more aspect to confuse an already-exploding brain struggling with new dance material. The tech team dealt with challenges due to imperfect internet connections, duplicate/overlapping sound systems for the two audiences, and camera angles.

I’m thankful I attended in-person this year; I’m sure it will become one of my fondest memories. I hope to see more of you there next year making even more wonderful memories.



A cake to celebrate! Photo by R. Tsai



Steve Kotansky at Kolo Festival. Photo by J. Croco.

TEXA-KOLO HYBRID

By Kathy Molga

They said it could not be done. Two years ago, no one could have imagined that a festival in San Francisco could combine with one in Texas in a way that folk dancers throughout the world could enjoy in the comfort of their homes. Bill Cope had that vision!

Even in 2021, after many all-Zoom festivals were successfully broadcast, people could not believe that there could be a combined on-site and virtual experience. Naysayers were convinced there was no way Zoom could handle one person teaching in front of a large group of dancers in a noisy dance hall with poor acoustics. It would be a nightmare. Better not try it.

Then came the die-hard tech gurus of our folk dance community. The Texa-Kolo crew worked tirelessly behind the scenes to go where no tech-crew had gone before. Some flew to San Francisco to conquer tech problems on-site, while others worked in the background out of their homes.

Adony Beniares, Evan Chu, and Sherry Cochran designed the series of laptops, mixers, mics, speakers, and miles of cables to connect the on-site festival with the Zoom event. The information load was more than any one person could comprehend, let alone handle, so Directors Holly Plotner (Texas Camp) and Bill Cope (Kolo Festival) invited Cricket Raybern to put together a tech team for the hybrid festival.

As a part of the help, as the MC at the parties on the Texas side, I looked at the complexity of the program. The coordination of a smooth, four-day event was so complex, it took Cricket an entire day of tech meetings to explain it. People like Holly and Cricket must have been constantly bombarded with questions, yet they took it all in stride. All told, there were over 43 people in the tech crew.

Special thanks to Sherry Cochran and Evan Chu who took care of multiple incidents on the dance floor that could have been tragic for Zoom viewers. Each time there was a hitch in the voice quality of the teacher or in the video quality, a soothing voice came on to tell the Zoom viewing



Bill Cope (left) and Holly Plotner worked hard to bring the live festival to the world. *Photo by R. Tsai.*

audience that this is just a technical glitch. “Just be patient and the tech crew will take care of it.” What seemed to be only a few seconds later, the problem was resolved and the show went on.

Despite technical hurdles and Zoom constraints, people the world over had a front row seat to the live Kolo Festival dance floor and dance parties in Texas that were totally on Zoom. It is great to be dancing again in person, but for those of us who, for many reasons could not leave our homes, we received the gift of Texa-Kolo through Zoom. They said that it could not be done, and yet the skilled Texa-Kolo staff pulled it off to the delight of us all.

