

## **Lester Miller and the Hoedown Stage – a Kutztown Festival Tradition**

The Lester Miller family, whose name is synonymous with hoe down dancing, has delighted audiences at the Kutztown Festival for decades. “I just started jigging when I was about 5 years old and I have been calling at hoedowns since about the age of 15 or 16. My father was doing this long before I was born,” says Lester who is now 70.

And more or less continuously over a period of 40 years, the Miller family has gotten its children, nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends involved in the fun. Lester introduces them by name to the audience at every performance. Indeed, the hoedown stage at the Kutztown Festival is like a Miller family reunion.

“Hoe down dancing is Pennsylvania Dutch aerobics. It is fun and it is also work. After all, we do 36 shows (4 performances daily) during the Festival,” Lester said. Most remarkable is how the dancers are always polished, poised, full of energy, and always seem to thoroughly enjoy what they are doing. “The audience appreciates us and that is what makes it so satisfying,” Lester explained.

The hoe down stage is one of the most popular venues at the Festival. Visitors never seem to tire of the dancing, and many persons make a point of attending all four daily performances when they come to the Festival.

Pennsylvania Dutch jigging is derived from eastern square dancing, a folk dance form practiced from Maine to Texas. It evolved from a combination of French Court dancing, Scottish country dancing, and, especially, Irish jigging.

There are always hundreds of people gathered around the stage to see this special blend of country dancing originally performed by the Pennsylvania Dutch at least a century ago. “It is definitely a long standing tradition and there was a time when the hoedown was always the most popular entertainment on a Saturday night and was always included in a wedding reception,” Lester said.

Many years ago groups competed to be on the hoedown stage at the Festival. Very often the Miller family won in the competition, and since about 1975 Lester Miller and his family have been at the Festival every year.

In 2004 there were 31 Miller family members and relatives on the stage at various times. The age range was 6 years to 46 years. Adults and kids now in their teens have

been part of the group since they were 5 or 6 years old. In fact, after a year or two, most of the dancers know their routines so well that they do not need any special preparation to perform. It just comes naturally. However, the youngest members learn to dance when they are 3 or 4 years old, and they receive special attention and rehearsals for several weeks before they go on stage.

The youngest boys and girls whom Lester jokingly refers to as the “Nixnutzers” (troublemakers) first learn the figure 8 routine and then advance to the popular “boom de yada”. Crowds at the festival seem to enjoy the small children most of all – the kids compensate for their dancing ability limitations with a zest and charm all of their own that keeps the audience applauding.

Lester is the master of ceremonies and calls the dances with humorous patter and an enjoyable singsong style throughout each performance. His strong voice never wavers as it provides direction to the dancers and an explanation of the dancing to the audience.

Accompanying the dancers and providing foot stomping, country fiddling music is the instrumental group, “The Country Folk.” The band includes Dave Kline, guitar; Phil Sheetz, drums, Sylvia Keller, accordion, and Joanne Zuber, bass, and Dave Wetzell, fiddle.

So, what tunes does the audience like best? Lester says that the Festival visitors really come to enjoy the dancing, but he says that the musical accompaniment is also very important. “Music that can be tapped to is the most popular,” he says. “Marching through Georgia” which Lester has adapted into “Marching through Kutztown” is a crowd favorite.

The Kutztown Festival is held everyday from July 2 through July 10, rain or shine. The hours are 9AM until 6PM. For a free brochure you can call our toll-free number – 1-888-674-6136. You can visit us on the web at: [www.kutztownfestival.com](http://www.kutztownfestival.com)

