



## NEBRASKA BY HEART

Folk Arts • Traditional Arts • Folklife  
Curriculum Unit • Grades 6–8  
nebraskafolklife.org



# A Sampling of Nebraska Traditional Music and Dance Forms

## African and African American Traditional Music and Dance

### African Music and Dance

Nebraska has gained a substantial number of immigrants from several African countries in the past few years. Sizeable communities of Sudanese live in Omaha and Lincoln, for example. Below are just two examples of African music and dance forms present in the state.

*Charles Ahovissi* of Lincoln, Nebraska is originally from Benin. He performs traditional African dances from his homeland

*Michael Opoku and Ashanti* – Michael Opoku of Lincoln Nebraska is a native of Accra, Ghana in West Africa. He is a multi-instrumentalist and band leader and his group Ashanti plays both traditional Ghanaian music and more contemporary numbers. Ashanti also features traditional dances from Ghana and other areas of Africa. Michael is an artist in schools for the Nebraska Arts Council, and teaches classes on African drumming and cultural traditions.

### African American Blues

The blues is a distinctive traditional style of music that uses “blue notes” (sung or played at a lower pitch than those of the major scale) to emphasize the sadness of its subject matter. The most classic form of the blues has three lines of lyrics and is and played with a 12 bar chord progression. Eight bar blues songs are also common. The blues was created by African American musicians in the rural south in the latter half of the 19th century. Many of Nebraska’s African Americans moved to the state from southern states and larger northern cities such as Chicago and Kansas City to find jobs in meat packing and other industries between the turn of the 20th century and the 1940s. They brought many kinds of music, including the blues, with them.

Examples of Nebraska African American blues artists:

*Wynonie “Mr. Blues” Harris* (1915-1969) Born in Omaha Nebraska, Wynonie Harris was an American blues “shouter” and rhythm and blues singer. He was popular in Omaha during the 1930s and moved to California in the 1940s.

*Magic Slim and the Teardrops* – Chicago bandleader, guitarist and vocalist Magic Slim (Morris Holt) and his family have made Nebraska their home base. He and his son and their bands both frequently play at Lincoln’s Zoo Bar, a famous spot for blues music.

## **African American Sacred Music**

Omaha has some outstanding gospel choirs, such as that of the Salem Baptist church. The city has an active chapter of the Gospel Music Workshop of America and for many years was a center for African American gospel quartet singing as well. The *Hub of Harmony II* quartet of the Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church is one recent Omaha-based example of the quartet style. In Lincoln, the Lincoln Community Gospel Choir directed by Oscar Harriott, the Allon Chapel Choir, and the Union College Choir bring gospel to numerous religious and other community events.

## **Jazz**

Omaha Nebraska has been a center for jazz music since the early part of the 20 th century and at one time there was a specific style of playing known as “Omaha jazz” that was an outgrowth of the Kansas City jazz style. Some well-known African American jazz musicians who are or were Nebraskans are:

*Preston Love* – Omaha saxophonist and bandleader (1921-2004).

*Nat Towles* – A bassist and bandleader who had one of the most successful of the Omaha-based, traveling “territory bands” during the 1930s.

*Luigi Waites* – Omaha vibraphonist, percussionist, and music educator.

*Anna Mae Winburn* – A one-time Omaha band leader, vocalist and trumpet player, who later was the leader of the popular 1940s all-female jazz band, *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*. This band was racially integrated at a time when integration was not common in U.S. musical groups.

## **Asian Traditional Music and Dance**

### **Indian Bhajan singing**

Bhajans are devotional songs from throughout India, characterized by lively, lilting melodies and repetitive choruses that make them easy to learn and sing. The word “bhajan” means “singing to glorify God.” and the songs each have a devotional message, focusing on the names and attributes of one or more Indian gods or goddesses, all of whom represent different aspects or manifestations of God. Unlike classical Indian music, which is the province of musical masters, bhajans are a part of village and community life and appeal to people on many levels.

Example: The Lincoln bhajan nights, held every week or two, include people from India or of Indian heritage from throughout the Lincoln area. The get-togethers have been taking place for 15 years and often include thirty to forty participants, said Ram Bishu, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln engineering professor, who often serves as one of the informal song leaders for the group.

### **Indian Traditional Dance**

Performers and teachers of Indian classical dance can be found in both Lincoln and Omaha Nebraska. Classical dance is difficult and many dancers start training as young as age four to learn

the complex movements involved. There are a lot of hand gestures (“mudras”) used. Many of the gestures represent animals such as various birds and serpents. There is also a lot of facial and eye movement to learn. It takes two to three years to study the basics. Classical dance has become so popular in India that for at least the last twenty years it has been offered in the schools. There are festivals that hold competitions. The best dancers receive titles and awards, which sometimes enable them to find careers in movie acting.

Example: *Jaya Keeleri* of Lincoln, Nebraska comes from Kerala, one of the southern states of India. She performs and occasionally teaches a type of Indian classical dance called Mohiniattam that comes from southern India. Originally, this type of dance was performed only in Hindu temples. but in the 1800s it began to be performed on the stage. Whether it is performed on a stage or temple it maintains its original sacred meanings.

## **Japanese Traditional Music and Dance**

A few of the many aspects of Japanese music and dance are represented in Nebraska. The following are two local examples from the Lincoln Nebraska community.

*Kimiko Kitigawa* is well known in the Lincoln community as a koto player. The koto is a thirteen stringed instrument that is played by plucking and strumming the strings with the fingers. It has a quiet, harp-like sound. Kimiko has played the koto for many years. She also plays the Japanese bamboo flute and has been a traditional dancer since she was six years old. The form of dance she has studied is called Nihon Buyo, which has four hundred years of history and consists of two types of movement; Mai, calm and filled with spirit and Odori, active and involving more active movement. Kimiko carries on other Japanese traditions as well by demonstrating the Japanese tea ceremony and engaging in Japanese archery (kyu-do.) Kyu-do is complicated and it requires rigorous discipline and very specific movements, breathing, and timing.

*The Taiko Drummers* are affiliated with the Asian Community and Cultural Center of Lincoln Nebraska. The group started in October of 2004 and was organized by Maureen Brase-Houchin, who has experience from performing with various other groups over the years. Maureen grew up in Nebraska, but didn't learn taiko drumming until she went to college. She lived for two years in Japan and learned more about her heritage and culture while there. She also played with a taiko group when she lived in Japan and wanted to continue when she returned to Nebraska. When she came back she recruited others to form a group in Lincoln.

Taiko drum groups are a relatively recent tradition but their roots and some of their rhythms go back to the drumming that was an important part of warfare in feudal Japan. Taiko is also related to the use of drums in traditional Japanese ceremonies and celebrations. The specific drums used in taiko are large, deep sounding wooden ones with skin heads on each end. They are played with wooden sticks (bachi) using complicated rhythms in a very athletic, energetic fashion. The performances are very powerful and mesmerizing to watch. To be a drummer requires a lot of stamina. Maureen encourages drummers in the group to work out and stay fit in order to give a good performance each time the group plays.

## **Lion Dancing, Chinese and Southeast Asian**

*The Asian Center Lion Dancers* – The group leader, Gary Yuen, is of Chinese heritage and he came to Lincoln from San Francisco in 1989. Gary was involved in lion dancing while growing up and it has always been a part of his life and culture. Within his first year of living in Lincoln he met students from China who were interested in the lion dance. Dancers got together informally until 1993 when the Asian Community and Cultural Center was established. Then the Lion Dancers became a more formal performance group.

The lion dance started in ancient China as a quasi-religious ritual between two and three thousand years ago. It was used to invoke the spirits of nature and it focused on other animals than the lion. When Indian Buddhism began to influence China, the lion was introduced to the dance, as the lion was common in India then. There were two styles of lion dancing; the northern which was more true to its original form and the southern which was more stylized and formal. This southern style became a part of Buddhist rituals. Nowadays it is not used as a religious ritual very much. The southern style involved martial arts. The dance was used to show martial skills. The type of lion dancing seen in Lincoln is the southern style. In Asian countries as many as 100 people may participate together in a lion dance. In Lincoln the largest number is usually 20 or so.

The lion heads are made in China or Malaysia. A new lion head will go through a consecration ceremony called “the dotting of the eyes” which is what brings its spirit to life and this ceremony is often a public event. The basic materials are bamboo, wood, papier mache, paint and varnish. The Asian center also has a dragon head made by some of the youth of Lincoln’s Asian community.

## **Thai Traditional Dance**

*Angela Pochanasomburana* has been in Lincoln about four years. She grew up in Bangkok Thailand. Angela does traditional dance from her homeland. In her dances she uses a number of accessories depending on the nature of the dance. Some of these objects are long gold nails that are worn on the end of the fingers, flower garlands, a candle, a fan and hair ornaments. Each of the dances tell a story and graceful, expressive hand movements are used for expression. Some of the formal dances are ones intended to be performed for royalty and for special occasions such as weddings. These dancers often wear a larger more elaborate head piece. There are also less formal dances performed for community events.

Angela learned the dances as a young child. She likes to share her culture by going to schools, showing the dance and hand movements, and explaining their meaning to kids. She also performs in events sponsored by the Thai Student Association.

One dance is called Ram Chern-Pra-Kwan. “Kwan” in Thailand is an important part of a person’s soul and consciousness. If a person is frightened or panicked it can be driven away. This dance is a ceremony to welcome the kwan back. Angela performs this dance as a wish to those watching that their kwan will stay with them forever.

## **Vietnamese Traditional Dance**

For the Vietnamese, music is considered to be an essential need; therefore, numerous musical instruments and genres intended for various purposes developed over the country's long history. Lullabies, children's songs, ritual songs, festival songs, various work songs, courtship songs, and riddle songs are some of the specific kinds of traditional music that can be found in Viet Nam.

Vietnamese traditional music is also diverse due to the many different ethnic minority groups who live in the country. Some genres of traditional music are still very much alive in rural areas although they may have disappeared in the cities.

Vietnamese folk dances can be divided into line dances and circle dances. Line dances, with one line of men and one line of women, are most typical of planting and harvest celebrations. The dance is a musical interpretation of the young men and women teasing each other as the farm community works together.

Circle dances are performed by women or girls who form various patterns as they move gracefully around the stage, often holding fans, colorful umbrellas, decorated conical hats, or candles. None of these dances have prescribed steps; instead the choreographer forms the music and designs of the new dance from combinations of steps and patterns. The Asian Community and Cultural Center in Lincoln has a group of young dancers who perform traditional folk dances to recorded Vietnamese folk music.

## **Latino Traditional Music and Dance**

### **Corridos**

One of the most common types of songs sung by individuals in Mexico are corridos. They are folk songs that tell a story. Corridos tell of heroes, heroines, outlaws, and legends. They are comparable to the traditional ballads that have also been sung in English for centuries. Both corridos and ballads are still being composed today. Some of the older Mexican corridos are about people and events during and after the Mexican Revolution. Newer corridos may describe events along the border between Texas and Mexico or they could even be about people or places in Nebraska. Usually, someone plays the guitar while singing corridos although other instruments are often added. Corridos used to be only sung by men but today women, such as Rosa Cobos a singer and songwriter from Scottsbluff, are also composing and singing them.

### **Folklorico Dance**

Every Mexican state and region has different traditional dances. In earlier times these were danced at festivals, weddings, and other local celebrations. Nowadays most of these traditional dances are performed by community-based, semi-professional, and professional "folklorico" groups. These groups exist in Mexico, and in other countries such as the U.S. as well. As more Mexican people have been settling in Nebraska, more traditional dance groups are being formed in communities around the state. Below are a few examples of groups active in Nebraska. Some examples are:

*Ballet Folklorico Sabor Mexicano* of Lincoln, a youth dance group that performs folk dances from various regions. They can be contacted through the Hispanic Community Center.

*“CHOMARI” Ballet Folklorico Mexicano* of Omaha is associated with El Museo Latino. It is an adult dance troupe that performs regional dances from many areas.

*Grupo Sangre Azteca* of Lincoln is a nonprofit organization started in March of 2002. Dana and Juan Rodriguez are the directors. Sangre Azteca has both junior and adult dance groups.

*Orgullo Latino 4-H Club* of Lexington is a youth dance group that performs at many community and regional events. Patricia Sanchez-Stewart is the group’s coordinator.

## **Mariachi Music**

Mariachi music is believed to have originated in the Mexican state of Jalisco in the mid 1800s, although nowadays it can be found in many parts of Mexico and in the U.S. as well. It is characterized by a) the types of songs played (one example is the *ranchero*, a usually upbeat song with a Western theme), b) the instrumentation, which consists of one or more violins, a least one trumpet, a *vihuela* (a type of Mexican guitar) and a *guitarron* (acoustic bass guitar), and c) the costumes of the musicians, which are based on those of early Mexican cowboys, called “*charros*”. Some of the mariachi groups in Nebraska are:

*Mariachi Zapata*, of Omaha. Leader, J. Ramon Hernandez. *Mariachi Zapata* is a well-respected group that has been performing the music around Nebraska for more than seventeen years.

*Mariachi Las Estrellitas* of Omaha. Directed by Marcos Eduardo Mora, the band is a nonprofit youth group that teaches and promotes the art of mariachi music to young people in the Omaha community. It has been keeping the tradition alive and delighting Nebraska audiences for more than fifteen years.

*Mariachi Luna y Sol* of Omaha is an adult mariachi group that is also led by longtime Omaha musician Marcos Eduardo Mora.

## **South American Traditional Music**

The only Nebraska group regularly performing traditional music from South America is *Kusi Taki* of Lincoln. Their specialty is music from the Andes regions of the continent. Led by Oscar Rios Poheirth and featuring both he and Sussire Hernandez Ryan from Venezuela on vocals, *Kusi Taki*’s music introduces Nebraskans to the rich musical traditions of several South American countries.

## **Middle Eastern Music**

“*Tar*” playing, one of the many varieties of Middle Eastern music, is represented in Nebraska by two Iranian musicians who live in Lincoln. The “*tar*” is a traditional, six-stringed instrument made from wood, camel bone, and sheep horn with a skin membrane. It is the national instrument of Iran.

*Mahjouri Masoud*, who is from the city of Saman in the Iranian state of Chaharmahal, started playing the *tar* in Iran about ten years ago when he was 16. His family includes aunts and uncles who are musicians and music was encouraged all through his childhood. He started his musical career at the age of six by playing a flute-like instrument called the “*nay*”. When he was in Iran he played music with a group. Musical groups with the *tar* often also include a *nay*, a violin, a drum and a vocalist. as well.

*Mahour Mellat Parast* comes from northern Iran, south of the Caspian Sea. He came to the U.S. in 2001. He started playing the tar at the age of eight, taught by his father and grandfather. Mahour gives community performances and has done collaborative presentations on world music for students in the Lincoln Public Schools with Ken Hoppman, a professor of world music at Union College.

## **Native American Music and Dance**

All four of the Native American tribes whose headquarters are in Nebraska, (the Northern Ponca, the Omaha, the Santee Sioux and the Winnebago (HoChunk)), hold annual powwows and other gatherings that feature Native American drum groups, traditional singing and Native American dancing. Contact information for the tribes can be found in the resources section of Nebraska By Heart. In addition, many educational and community groups such as the Lincoln Indian Center and the Fort Omaha campus of the Metropolitan Community College also sponsor similar events.

### **Drum Groups**

Native Americans often say that the beat of the drum is “the heartbeat of the tribe” and the drum is also the heart of a large percentage of Native American music. Drum groups usually consist of a lead singer and between four and nine others, all of whom also play a large ceremonial drum as they are singing. Whole families sometimes sing along with the drum, however, and any number of singers may stand around in a circle behind the drummers and sing with them. In some tribes women can be drummers and in others that role is limited to men. In any case, it is an honor and a responsibility to be asked to “sit at the drum” and learn the songs. For example Rufus White, a longtime traditional Omaha singer from Macy Nebraska, was asked to sit at the drum by his uncle when he was a young boy. However, he was not allowed to play until he spent a long while just sitting, observing, and listening to the drum beats and the singers. Mr. White has since brought his grandson to sit at the drum and has taught songs to many younger groups of singers.

### **Powwow Dancing**

If you attend a powwow you will see that there are many types of traditional dances performed by the participants. Most modern powwows are centered around competitive dances in which cash prizes are awarded to the best dancers according to age categories and type of dance. Some of the more common categories of dances at Great Plains area powwows are men’s and women’s traditional style, men’s and women’s fancy dance, men’s grass dance, and women’s jingle dress style. Each of these calls for different styles of dancing and different types of clothing and accessories. (By the way the colorful clothing of the dancers is always referred to as dance “regalia”. Never call it a “costume”.) Most of the above styles of dance will have several age categories of junior dancers, as well as the two adult categories, one for men and one for women. Sometimes senior age categories are added for older dancers as well. The “MC” of the powwow arena calls each group of dancers into the arena and designates which of the drum groups in attendance at the powwow will play a song for that category of dancers. In addition, there are always special honoring songs that are played at powwows and sometimes other traditional ceremonies are held there as well. When attending a powwow for the first time it is helpful (and more fun) to have a knowledgeable friend along who can explain the traditions, etiquette, and rules of the powwow.

## **Other Native American Music Traditions**

Many of the plains tribes also have traditional flute styles which were used to play courting tunes. The making and playing of these flutes was also handed down from one generation to the next within families, clans, or societies. Likewise many other types of music, sacred songs, family songs, warrior society songs, -even lullabies and other personal songs- are passed on in this way. In most Native American tribes it is common for certain types of traditional knowledge to be owned by a certain family, clan or other such group and only shared within that group.

## **Other Traditional Nebraska Forms**

### **Cowboy Music**

Along with the current interest in the oral recitation of cowboy poetry, has come a renewed support for cowboy music. One good example of this style was the singing and songwriting of the late, great cowboy poet and musician from Gordon, Howard Parker. Other western singer songwriters from Nebraska include Yvonne Hollenbeck, who grew up near Gordon, and Pat Boilesen of Albion.

### **Ethnic Folk Dance Groups - Other**

In addition to the aforementioned Asian, Mexican, and Native American dancers, there are other types of ethnic dance groups in Nebraska. To name just a few, the Czech communities of Clarkson and Wilber have community dance groups. The Ostry family of Brainard performs traditional Czech music, singing and dancing. Irish dances are performed by young dancers from the community in Oneill. The Swedish community of Stromsburg has a folk dance group, and Omaha has the Scandinavian Dancers.

### **Hazzanut or Chazzanut – Jewish Cantorial Singing**

Music is an integral part of Jewish worship: most of the prayers are sung or chanted. Even the Torah is read to a traditional chant. It has been customary for hundreds of years for synagogues to have a professional hazzan or chazzan (Hebrew for “cantor”), a person with musical skills to lead the song-filled prayer services. A currently revitalized style of eastern European Jewish music called “klezmer” is based on cantorial singing. It has the same basic elements, simple melodies in a minor key with extensive ornamentation, such as fast trills and sliding notes. Cantors in Nebraska synagogues receive training in this style and carry on the centuries old tradition yet today.

### **Old Time Fiddlers and Barn Dances**

Nebraska has a long history of old time music and dancing. From pioneer times through the 1940s, this music was played in the hay lofts of barns, for dances held in small farmhouses with all the furniture and other household goods removed and piled up in the yard, on open air platforms, and in town squares. Later, old time fiddlers were heard on local radio stations. On into the 1960s and 1970s old time music festivals and fiddlers’ conventions continued in towns like Ainsworth, Brownville, Crawford, and Springfield Nebraska. Some well known old time musicians from Nebraska include “Peabody” Hale who played a washtub bass and founded a music festival in Crawford that bears his name, “the fiddling farmer” Harry Hanson of Gordon, master fiddler “Uncle” Bob Walters who lived in Tekama, and Deloris “Fiddlin’ Dee” DeRyke who was from Lincoln.

The old timers have mostly passed on, but a few younger old time musicians remain. Good examples of younger musicians who grew up with and still play this music are John and Jason Shaw of Lincoln, both of whom have won national championships on various acoustic instruments. Between them, the Shaws play banjo, fiddle, mandolin, and guitar expertly.

## **Polka Music and Dance**

This is an area of music in which the Midwest and the Great Plains states are unrivaled. Nebraska boasts polka music played by descendents of Czechs, Germans, Germans from Russia, Mexicans and Poles, to name the most prominent groups. Although polka dances are no longer held every Saturday night, like they were as recently as the 1950s and 1960s in most every rural Nebraska community, there are still many well known bands and plenty of polka dancing clubs to be found across the state.

Czech polka bands are still the most numerous in Nebraska. Some of the more well known, currently playing bands are *Bob Blecha and the Bouncing Czechs* of Pawnee City, the *Jim Bochincek Orchestra* of Papillion, *Dean Hanson* of Omaha, *Adolph Nemetz* of Prague, *Math Sladky* of Wahoo, and the *Mark Vyhliadal Orchestra* of Fremont. Two famous regional Czech bands of earlier years were *Al Grebnick* of Schuyler, and *Ernie Kucera* of Abie. One of the more unique sounds in polka music is the “Dutch Hop” style of polka played by Germans from Russia. Dutch Hop is faster than Czech polka and features a hammered dulcimer trading off leads with the accordion for a sparkling, upbeat sound. Nebraska still has one band playing in this traditional style, *The River Boys*, led by accordionist Bob Schmer of Scottsbluff.