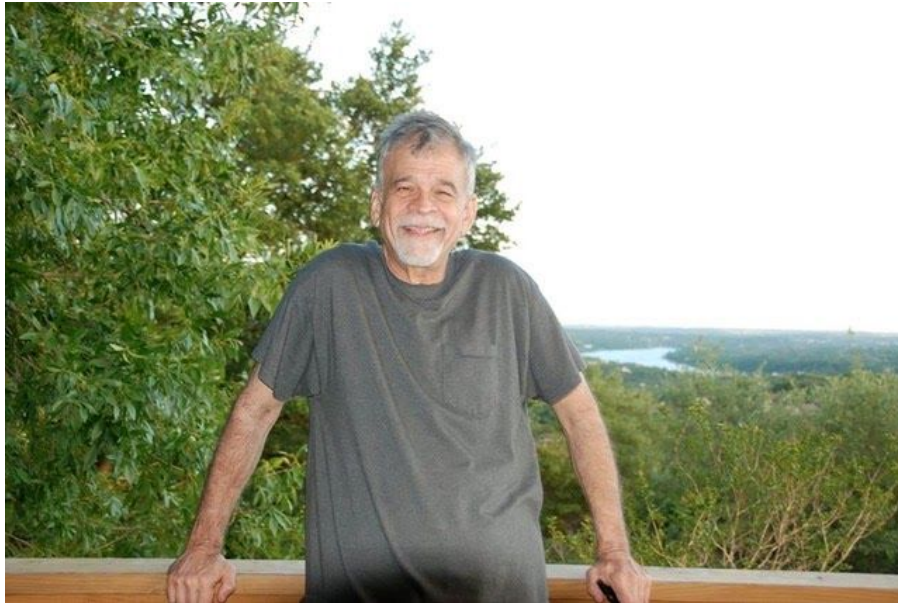


# Preserving Our Heritage Award 2020: Robert H. Leibman

Jo Crawford  
NFO Awards Committee

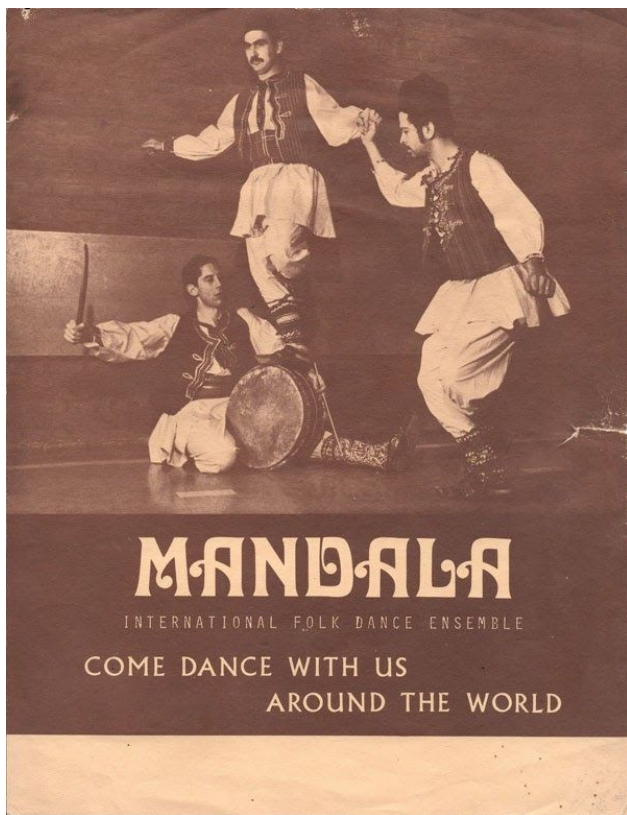


**I want to express my thanks to Dick Oakes and the master teacher biographies on line at California Federation of Folk Dance, South; Ron Houston at the Society of Folk Dance Historians; Paul Collins at Ethnic Dance, Chicago; Larry Weiner in Maryland; and various former members of the Mandala Folk Ensemble in Massachusetts.**

**Born and raised in Chicago, Bob Leibman began dancing as a junior at the University of Chicago in the early 1960's.**

**He writes that he quickly became so involved with the international folk dance movement that he almost ruined his college career. But he**

persevered, and received his Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics from U of C in 1963. He moved on to Washington University in St. Louis for his Masters in Math, and kept dancing there. He took a Teaching assistantship at Boston University after that and helped lead folk dancing at MIT and Northeastern University. He was one of the founders and the first director of the Mandala Folk Ensemble based in Cambridge MA 1966-1968. Here are some publicity photos from that time, with Bob on the right in both. Notice the fancy socks!



With his summers off, he journeyed to the Balkans from 1965 - 1971 doing his own research: filming weddings, and name day festivals, recording music and collecting costumes. At times, Larry Weiner and later Steve Kotansky joined him there. Larry writes:

*Bob and I were attending Pece Atanasovski's Macedonian Folk dance program in Oteshevo (near lake Ohrid) in the summer, 1971, and both of us were also interested in Macedonian folk costumes. One day we decided to drive into Struga (a coastal village just north of Ohrid) on "market day", because Bob (who was familiar with that village) knew that sometimes women villagers would bring in costume pieces to sell. When we got there the market was quite full and Bob parked his car a distance away. He then reached in the back seat and pulled out a pair of "Shareni Chorapi" (colorful socks) from that village and threw them over his shoulder. I asked him why he did that, was he going to try and sell the socks back to the villagers? He replied "No, just watch...." ..... and when entered the market, village women started coming up to him and asking (in Macedonian) "Oh, you are interested in "Shareni Chorapi", I have some ..... are you interested?"*

*Bob had found the perfect bait!*

*PS: Bob has donated almost his entire collection of costumes to UCLA.*

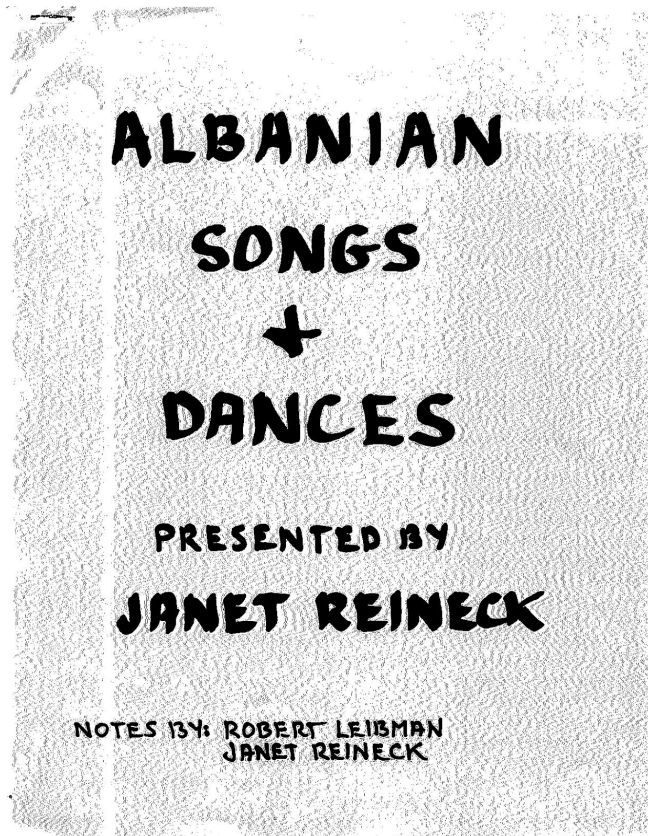
In 1975, Bob helped the Mandala Ensemble purchase some Croatian women's costumes from the region of Posavina. These are gorgeous antiques that have since been documented and conserved, shown here in action:



Finding himself in California, he finally decided to formally study Folklore at UCLA, getting a Fulbright to be in Yugoslavia for the entire year 1972-73. He completed his masters in 1974. While still teaching math, he released two LPs of recordings he had made earlier and finally published his dissertation in 1992. It is a semi-mathematical analysis on the structure of dance in the Balkans, based on the number of weight shifts in each dance measure. I interpret it this way: in a binary system you have two phases which you can think of as either on/off or right/left. An even number of weight shifts in a dance measure (the actual total doesn't matter) ultimately leaves the weight on the same foot, while an odd number will shift the weight onto the other foot. For example, what we call "Lesnoto" or "Sta Tria", a three measure dance, has the binary code 011. This thinking allowed him to group dances together in related families.

If you want to know more, I can point you to his dissertation and other articles.

In the 1980's and 90's Bob gave occasional workshops including this one in 1991 back at the University of Chicago folk dancers' International Dance & Music Festival accompanied by: Janet Reineck.



For the last number of years, Bob has been living in Austin TX where he was chair of the University of Texas Math department for a while. He recently retired from teaching at Austin Community College and managed to return to the Balkans off and on for more research until 2017, focusing on the area where Bulgaria, Greece and Macedonian come together.



Lynn Shapiro (Hodson) Kass— a dancer with Mandala, psychotherapist and counselor - sends this remembrance:

*Here's a photo of Bob and me dancing in Washington, D.C. in summer, 1964.*

*I was 18; he was a few years older.*

*I had discovered folk dancing, and every week my mother drove me from Alexandria to the DC folk dance, where one of the dance teachers was Bob*



*Leibman To a fascinated but insecure teenager, Bob was unfailingly kind and generous.*

*That DC folk dance group sustained a starkly evident social hierarchy, but Bob's behavior to me and other newcomers made it clear that he truly didn't value social status. In fact, I soon learned that Bob had thought deeply about a non-status-oriented perspective on social interactions. In my experience, Bob's values and politics were impeccably fair-minded. He walked the talk.*

*Bob helped me to learn a lot of dances that summer. He taught me how to sing Ajde Jano, so that I could fully join in the last dance. Being included in that way meant a lot to me. Bob and I became friends, and kept in touch through letters and post cards.*

*In summer 1967, I wrote Bob that a friend and I were traveling to Yugoslavia. He invited us to meet him in Rijeka (REE yay kah), Croatia, found us a room in the modest hotel where he was staying, and joined us as the perfect multilingual cultural guide. I vividly remember his ease of communication with anyone and everyone— an endearing combination of respect and charm.*

*I am convinced that Bob's ability to study, "collect," and share folk music and dance, and thus to add immeasurably to the preservation of Balkan arts and culture, has its roots in Bob's character— in his thoughtful commitment to social justice and equality. He demonstrated a warm-hearted and honest "no-ego" humility toward the human beings who created the treasures of Balkan art, dance, music, and song.*

*From my point of view, along with Bob's intelligence, curiosity, and discernment, his contribution to the preservation of Balkan Arts revealed his deep commitment to honoring our shared humanity.*

Bob regrets that he can not be here to receive this award. We will be sending him his plaque along with copies of these personal anecdotes.

