

Fancy footwork - the South Carolina **SHAG DANCE**

By Leslie Westlake

You have to love a state that has an official state dance. Ranked right up there with the Carolina Wren as state bird and the Carolina Jessamine as the state flower is the Carolina “shag,” a rock and roll eight-step that’s the legend of the beach. Visit the Grand Strand, a 60-mile stretch of wide, wonderful beach towns with Myrtle Beach at its center, and you’ll find people reveling in the stylish Southern dance, often described as “the jitterbug meets rhythm and blues.”

*How do
you teach
a Yankee
to dance
the shag?*

Transplanted from the frozen North, my first experience with this dance was just a little bit embarrassing. I fancied myself to be a pretty good dancer. I loved to jitterbug and wanted nothing more than to be twirled and hurled over the back of my partner. So when I moved South and was invited to go out and dance to

beach music, I was thrilled. After all, beach music to me meant the Beach Boys and Jan and Dean singing about the California surf.

To my surprise, I didn’t recognize very much of the music, and my attempts to dance were thrown off kilter by my partner. Surely he was the bad dancer, not me. It took us a little while to realize that being raised in different parts of the nation meant we marched to the beat of different dance.

Drifters, the Embers, Billy Ward and the Dominoes, and the Catalinas. There are so many favorites, like “Ms. Grace” by The Tymes, and “Carolina Girls” by General Johnson & The Chairman of the Board.

It all began on the beaches of the Carolina coast. In fact, the reason the footwork is so smooth and understated is to prevent kicking sand in your partner’s face. Some say it was designed to be performed with a beer in one hand and a lady in the other. Most of the movement is in the footwork with very little motion in the upper body. This is to accommodate the crowded dance floors in the small bars that line the beach. A good shag dancer is never flat-footed. The basic foot movement is close to the floor. The basic step evolves into more advanced steps with expressive names such as Belly Roll, Boogie Walk, Kickback with Lean, Prissy and Sugarfoot.

The attire for shag dancing is always casual, and women should never wear high heels. In shag dance competitions, of which there are many, participants dress as simply as if they just came off the boardwalk.

When you visit South Carolina, pack your dancing shoes. (No heels, please.) The natives would love to teach you and are polite enough to overlook a few missed steps.



Today, the shag dance is one of my favorite old traditions of the South—that is, if you can call something that came into style in the 1950s an old Southern tradition. It’s danced to old Jukebox rhythm and blues tunes by the