

Contra Dancing

So What Is It About This Contra Dancing Anyway?

by Warren Argo

Contra dancing has been popular in the Northwest since the late 1970s. Despite the normal tidal variations in community commitment, if you live near Seattle, here in late March of 2002, you can attend contra dances on nearly half of the nights of the week. A little exploration shows that this is not just a local aberration, but that the majority of urban areas in the United States harbor a number of opportunities for regular contra dancing. What follows is one person's view of this phenomenon, a series of recollections and philosophical ramblings.

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I first learned of called dancing in grammar school, where we were herded into an auditorium to try to follow recorded demands that we, "allemande left, do si do our partner and promenade home," to a recording of attempted hillbilly music. I liked it. I already knew that if I felt like listening, I was a great listener, so I found I could actually do these dances. In a college PE course I danced more to recorded orders and music, and I liked it again. I felt secure when I was being told just what to do.

I fell in love with old-time music in the Great Folk Scare, and I learned to play banjo and guitar in the late '50s and fiddle in the '70s, and bands of every size and description came and went. I first saw a live dance caller working with a live band in the early '70s. It was really exciting. Everybody loved it. Dances popped up at parties and festivals. I played banjo with the Gypsy Gyppo String Band from roughly 1973, and dancers and dance callers were attracted to our solid rhythm and cheery musical sound. At EXPO '74 in Spokane we met a really experienced square dance caller, Duane "Wild Bill" Regan, who informed and inspired many callers, including our band members Sandy Bradley and Jack Link, both of whom called numerous dances to the music of our band. In Seattle we began to play for weekly dances, and it did not fail our notice when ten times as many paying customers attended our dances as had sat through our concert sets.

In the summers of 1976 and 1977 Sandy Bradley traveled to some of those big eastern festivals to show them what we were doing with square dancing up west out here. She returned with tales of contra dancing, called dances with couples in long lines where people gazed deeply into one another's eyes while executing vigorous moves to zesty jigs and reels. Soon the weekly dances at our venerable G Note tavern were fully infected with this "new" form. (Not really new, even to the Seattle area where a Boeing dance club had been doing contras in the 1950s. Little did we know.)

Instead of assuming the well-known quadrille square set of four couples, where the team is small (eight people), and an inexperienced dancer can ground the whole set, contra dances are composed of long lines of couples. One stays with one's chosen partner for the six or eight minutes required to bring most all the couples together in fours or sixes for the shared project of completing the cyclic dance moves chosen by the caller. Thousands of dances, specific sequences, have been written, and thousands more remain to be created and presented to the dancers for testing and acceptance or rejection in the years to come. The callers develop the ability to operate from their own tradition and then evaluate the dancers' response to the chosen dance pattern and the music. The role of tradition in contra dancing is a throbbing arena of contention.

Contra dancing seems to have been born in New England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of sources drawn mostly from the British Isles, France, Germany, and Scandinavia. It grew as a village diversion, a regular gathering of largely fixed personnel, where one danced with one's spouse to a program that was largely invariant. The same dances were called week after week, month after month by the same dance master to the same music played by the same musicians. Occasionally, a visiting band or caller or both would be touring through the area (not easy in those days), and some of the new dances and tunes would stick if they were reflective of the lifestyle of the local population. For example, since one already spent nearly all of every day with one's spouse, working to stay alive, there was little call for moves in the dance to engage the

partners in intimate contact. Instead, in the old dances, the couples seemed more to work as teams to execute cleverly and gracefully the interactions with neighboring couples. Neighbors in more ways than one. Strangers were rare at these dances and probably not welcome unless brought and introduced by a “regular” couple.

Now fast forward to the mid twentieth century where people were looking for most any excuse to get together with people they may or may not know, in order to check out the possibilities of more or less serious liaisons in a relatively wholesome setting spiced with zesty music made by musical peers. In this setting dancers rightly demand dances in which interaction with the partner is the big deal, where flirtation with the steady flow of opposite couples is spicy and exhilarating, but where getting to do your best work with the one you dared to ask to dance must be the dance’s focus. So the dances have changed utterly. They are all new. Also the music has changed. Few of the tunes heard during a current evening’s dance are older than 20 years. It is easy to argue that from traditional sources a popular form has emerged. Modern contra dancing is a living, changing form that simply must conform to the expectations of those who pay the bills, the dancers.

What are these expectations? There are as many answers as there are questions, but after speaking with many dancers chosen from many diverse locations, one is likely to see some categories coalesce from the fog. Everyone wants a good experience with the chosen partner. Most want plenty of opportunity to flirt, at levels determined by the hundreds of instantaneous contracts that are formed by the individuals during the “eight minute marriage” each dance provides. A high level of physical activity, the potential to out-spin or out-swing the others is sought by many. In this supercharged age of disenfranchisement, many seek an otherwise-missing sense of community in these dances. For some people, the simple opportunity to meet a steady stream of new delighted people is all; people seem never to look better than when they are dancing. But what about experience? How can one possibly learn to do this complicated thing without embarrassing oneself hopelessly or seeking a costly, probably boring and time-consuming series of dance lessons?

Most modern contra dances are remarkably friendly to newcomers. As I learned in square dancing in grammar school, if one will only listen carefully and really try, the rest is easy. Once one has learned what is meant by “left hand star,” or “ladies chain,” for example, hearing these words will bring a prompt and consistent response. It becomes reflex after just a few trials. Many community dances include a short program before the dance proper where newcomers can learn a handful of basic moves and practice them in a setting where an error does not wreck everything for everyone. Soon the new dancer learns that listening carefully, moving boldly, skittering late but gracefully into the one available position nearby, and adopting a friendly confidence will serve to make one welcome.

Everyone really does want the best for everybody. It works best when everyone wins, and wins for all is always available.

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So if you want to give contra dancing a try, go to lots of dances nearby, get there plenty early, meet the caller and the musicians while they are setting up (they are friendly people, by and large) and ask for advice. Participate in newcomers’ sessions, if offered. Boldly get a partner and line up for the first five dances, and that will be your indoctrination. Be ready to be friendly and confident in asking for dances, and don’t be dismayed if you are turned down. If you have failed to secure a partner for the current dance, take notice of the band’s signals with the caller and be ready to walk into the thick of the just-ended dance as the music dies away. Wear a friendly smile and ask in all directions and you will not fail. As in most twenty-first century activities, sitting on the sidelines will condemn you to an evening of sitting on the sidelines.

To find a steady supply of scheduled dances, peruse the calendars of this fine publication, and join the Seattle Folklore Society whose monthly flyer contains scheduled events and articles and discussions about dances. Check out www.seattledance.org for an eloquent overview of dance in the northwest. Join the New England based Country Dance and Song Society and connect with many lifetimes of dance events and music workshops. Try several of the local dances until you find the spirit and style that pleases you. Many dancers can not stay away and so attend most of the local offerings. Soon you will detect local customs and styles, and travel to nearby communities will bring fresh experience and insights.

It is fiendishly likely that before long many dancers will wonder how to play this lovely and diverse music. Some will crave the happy madness of dance calling. The music is learned by listening, copying, and sitting in. After some home practice, begging a one-dance trial from the scheduled evening dance caller is a time-tested way to cut your teeth as a new caller. You will find workshops and dance weekends that will teach you the skills you seek. You will be drawn ever closer to the styles you love and soon you will be playing and calling for old friends and new friends too as you take your place in this endless joyous fabric woven of love, art, and human ingenuity.

Warren Argo has danced, played, and called all over the USA. He is active in the production of the Northwest Folklife Festival, the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, and many dance weeks and weekends. He actually enjoys helping to provide sound reinforcement services for dances and has contributed somewhat to that art.