

A Musician's Viewpoint on Contra Dancing

Chuck Weber, *Kaleidoscope*

I would like to say a few words about contra dancing as viewed from the front of the hall.

Musicians would disagree about the specifics, but there are things we like and things we dislike when we are playing for a dance. Here are my thoughts.

Interact with the band. I recall, before I started playing for dances, being in awe of the musicians. But having become a musician, and knowing other musicians, I know that we are very human. Tell us when you like a particular tune, and maybe what you like about it. It's really nice when

other musicians come up and ask tune names. I suppose that could mean that the tune was unrecognizable; but when I ask another band, it means I liked what I heard, and I'd like to learn it. The best time for comments is right after a dance. But do remember that as soon as we finish one set, we have to get ready for the next one – pick tunes to match the caller's next dance, confirm the order of tunes in a medley, identify little traps we need to watch for and avoid, and check the tuning of our instruments.

It really encourages musicians when people notice things. A few weeks ago, someone said, "I love it when you guys 'ramp up' at the end of a tune, to go back to the start, or into another tune." We work on those little "lifts," and when they work for other people, they work for us, too. During a dance, a thumbs-up is always welcome. But remember that most musicians can hardly even communicate with each other while playing, much less converse, or appreciate a buck-dancing exhibition by those standing out at the top.



If you sit out a dance, and even walk up to watch the band and listen close-up, that's okay, but be respectful and quiet. I recall one recent dance where two people stood right behind the band and talked loudly so they could hear over the music.

Listen to the music, at least after the dance settles in and becomes more or less automatic. Cultivate a recognition of the different musical forms we use in contra dance. The basic ones are reels and jigs. Reels can be march-like "4/4", "2/4" or "cut-time" tunes. Jigs are 6/8 tunes (bumpity-bumpity-bumpity). People think of them as "bouncy," but they can be smooth as silk, as our "slinky-jig" set proves. There are many types of tunes – American old time tradition, New England style, Scottish, Irish, French Canadian, and tunes written by contemporary musicians.

Criticism is also helpful for the band, though it works best when it's constructive. Recently someone suggested we slow down the waltz, so we made an effort not to let the final waltz build up too much steam. Other helpful hints could be about the sound system. We cannot hear what you hear on the floor, so I find it comforting to know that the instrument balance is good (or at least useful to know if it's not). Other suggestions that would help to produce the best sound can be shared with us or the sound person.

We should all remember that the real point of the evening is for dancers to have fun dancing. I suppose it would be possible to keep everyone in step with a drum, but we musicians like to think that our music adds something extra. We work better when we know it's coming through.

Getting To Know You

Jerry and Carol Mebane

Jerry and Carol Mebane have been dancing for about twelve years. They have also done Cajun/Zydeco, swing dance, and, of course, waltz, but contra is their favorite because of the way it welcomes everyone into the dance and builds a community. They go to half a dozen dance weekends a year to do research on bands and callers that we might entice to Huntsville!

Jerry and Carol have three children -- David, Alan, and Hannah-- a daughter-in-law, Becky, and a granddaughter, Scarlet, who is almost four years old. The children have danced only rarely, but Scarlet loves it. Some months ago, Jerry and Carol tried carrying Scarlet while dancing, but Scarlet soon announced, "I want to dance with my own feet!" Soon afterwards, while watching the dance floor in Atlanta, Scarlet said, "Dancing makes me happy!"

Their son Alan kindly left Jerry and Carol a cat, Cuchulain, and a live-in granddog, Coltrane.

Carol is a Senior Analyst for Defense Programs at the U. S. Government Accountability Office, and her work enables her to visit such exotic locations as Lawton, Oklahoma,

and Point Magu, California as well as the Pentagon. Jerry teaches English and directs the Honors Program at UAH, and he is delighted that a number of his students are now contra dancers. Jerry also works on the UAH / Huntsville Literary Association committee that brings performances of Shakespearean plays to Huntsville each spring.

Jerry and Carol attend Faith Presbyterian Church, and they are pleased that the church welcomes contra dancing.

Carol is a runner, and Jerry is a swimmer.

Both try to keep up their exercise during the week so that they don't have to sit out when it's time to dance.

"We especially appreciate the fact that dancing helps us to make friends of all ages, from pre-school children to great-grandparents. We love it."

Carol and Jerry have been worker bees with the local NACDS for years. They have served as

officers, lined up bands and callers, opened the church, mopped the gym after dances, set up the refreshment tables, and often furnished most of the refreshments. So from all of us we say a hearty "thank you!"



Upcoming Holiday Dance

Saturday, December 17
Caller - Charlie Harvey from Asheville, NC
Band - Plaidgrass from Nashville
Bring a friend and some holiday goodies for a fun evening at Faith Presbyterian Church.

Ninth Blue Moon Weekend

May 19-21, 2006
Featuring Latter Day Lizards & Evil Twins with Becky Hill & Barbara Groh as callers
Mark your calendars now for a great weekend of dancing in Huntsville – again!

Huntsville dances are the 1st & 3rd Saturdays of each month in the gym at Faith Presbyterian Church, 5003 Whitesburg Dr., South, (corner of Whitesburg & Airport Rd.). Beginners Workshop is at 7:00 PM then the regular dance is from 7:30 – 10:30 PM.

Admission is \$7 (\$6 for members), \$4 for teens, free for ages 12 & under. Remember to bring comfortable, non-scuffing shoes for dancing. Bring someone new to a dance this month!

Contact Bryan Walls (256) 837-0656 or email: bwalls@pobox.com or visit <http://secontra.com/NACDS.html> for more info.

Date	Caller	Band
Nov 5	Jane Ewing Special waltz instruction during the break	Maple Hill
Nov 19	Harry Delugach	Kaleidoscope – Chuck & Katrina Weber, Mike Bush
Dec 3	Janet Shepard	Ed Baggott & Elsie Peterson
Dec 17	CharlieHarvey (Big holiday dance)	Plaidgrass – Tim May, Al Goll & Brian Christianson



Area Dance Gypsy Calendar

Date	Location	Caller	Band
Nov 4	Nashville	Kendal Broadie	FAB 3 – Frances Cunningham, Al Goll & Brian Christianson
Nov 11	Nashville	Susan Kevra	Russ Barenberg, Fred Carpenter & Brian Christianson
Nov 18	Nashville	Eddie Doss	Ed Baggott & Elsie Peterson
Nov 18	Sewanee	Vickie Herndon	Nashville Weather
Nov 12	Chattanooga	Chrissy Davis-Camp	Fiddlin' Bob & Banjer Jim
Nov 26	Chattanooga	Bob Dalsemer	Free Range Turkeys

FoOTMaD (Birmingham) dances 2nd Saturdays at the YMCA, 3rd Ave & 23rd St, 7:30 PM <http://www.bamalong.com/bed.him>

CTDS (Chattanooga) dances 2nd & 4th Saturdays at All Saints Academy, 310 E. 8th St., downtown, 8:00 PM.

Contact Steve at (706) 937-4991, Claire & Bryant at (423)876-7359 or <http://contranoooga.org>

Misty Mountain Dancers (Sewanee, TN) dances at the Legion Hall in Sewanee, TN. For details, call (931) 598-0814 or check <http://www.mistycontra.zoomshare.com/>.html

NCD (Nashville) dances almost every Friday at 8:00 PM at University School.

For directions, contact Chrissy at (615) 210-6808 John, email: DanceFools@aol.com or <http://dancenashville.org/>

A Bit Farther Away, But Well Worth The Travel

CCD (Atlanta) dances on Fridays & alternate Tuesdays. <http://contradance.org>

KCD (Knoxville) dances every Monday. <http://www.kornet.org/kcd/>

MCD (Memphis) dances on the 1st & 3rd Fridays. <http://hometown.aol.com/horselovers/index.html>

Sautee Community Dances (N. GA) once a month from Sept – May. <http://sauteecontra.home.mindspring.com/>

Upcoming Dance Weekends – for all Gypsies

Dance Tapestry – Atlanta's 29th annual dance, Nov 11-13 - Robert Cromartie, Cis Hinkle, Airdance, Elftones & Smoke & Mirrors

NACDS

North Alabama Country Dance Society
4304 Holmes Ave., NW, Huntsville, AL 35816
Address correction requested



Send just \$10 for one, or
\$15 per family, to the address above.

Make checks payable to NACDS.
(mailing label shows renewal date)

Members receive monthly newsletter,
2 guest passes, and a \$1 DISCOUNT to
each regular dance!

More Hints For Dancers: *Catch 'em Doing it Right*

Adapted from Erna-Lynne Bogue

Every now and then, I get caught up in a conversation about those not-so-beloved dancers. You know who I mean: the beginners and the eternal beginners. The talk is inappropriate, but always the same. “They don’t dance on time; they’re limp; they crush my hands; they get lost; they don’t listen to the caller’s instructions; they skip the walk through altogether; they giggle and goof off.”

Well, have you ever thought about how many skills any dancer and especially a first time dancer has to master? I listed the things I try to teach in a typical beginners’ session and I had twenty-four items on the list. Wow! So, how can we all help each other become better dancers?

First, criticism rarely helps. Most folks are not even aware they did anything wrong and now they’re embarrassed. So, engaging in criticism causes the fun atmosphere to be lost for the evening.

So, what about showing them how? That’s a little better, but it usually means they will miss some other part of the walkthrough and then goof up somewhere else. The caller may be addressing something special for these folks, and they miss it if you’re giving instructions. If help is solicited, you may “show them how” after a dance. It’s also beneficial to sit out a dance with a new dancer and point out particular formations and smooth moves you observe on the dance floor. It may be helpful to hear these constructive comments about the dance while not feeling the pressure of performing.

The thing we must remember to do is let them know what they’re doing right. It may feel hokey at first but it can be sincere. Even experienced dancers like compliments and encouragement. You can appreciate someone’s eye contact, the way they arrived on time for a particular move, their good humor about their mistakes and their improvement during the evening. You can also make positive comments about other dancers to convey the notion that good dancing is appreciated and help newcomers understand what constitutes good dancing. Maybe even point to the areas you are working on to improve your own dancing.

Why this approach? It’s obvious. The more positive comments are made, the more new and old dancers are encouraged to improve their dance skills. And we all will benefit!