

DANCE STAR

Issue Number 55, Spring 2003 • News, Articles & Calendar of Events

Becoming a Good Dancer

by Erik Hoffman

A question that comes up time and again is: what makes a good dancer? How many people are sure they know that answer and think they are it? How many of our absolute favorite dance partners never think they are good enough? I have now written two articles on the subject. The first divides the concept into stages. The second takes a look at how certain types of dancing becomes the de facto style. Here's the first:

The Growth Stages of a Dancer

There are three stages in the development of good dancing. Phase one is beginning; phase two, hot shot; phase three, community dancer.

Phase 1: Beginner

During phase one, dancers are working on vocabulary and timing. It is this period where a dancer is learning what movements go with which calls and how to time it with the music. Figures such as the woman's chain, hey, and contra corners take time to become part of the repertoire. Also, during the beginning stage a dancer is learning how one figure flows into another. As a dancer gains confidence with transitions and figures, a dancer begins to develop style. It is when a dancer experiments with dance styles that he or she might transmute into the hot shot stage.

Phase 2: Hot Shot

Hot shot dancers think a good dancer is one who can perform lots of fancy footwork and extra twirls, and still be close to on time in a contra. With this thought in mind, these people rush for others of similar ilk and jump in the center set, hopefully excluding all beginners so that as one progresses up and down the line everyone will be there with an extra pirouette after each allemande in a contra corners. Or one who finds a rising excitement in trying for seven or eight twirls during a courtesy turn. For many this constitutes "good dancing."

Many will insist on this kind of activity, forcing twirls or other flourishes, often being insensitive to the other person's desire or ability. At times these dancers will leave a wake of dancers spinning off in the wrong direction.

Many people get stuck here, never growing up out of this selfish phase. It's too bad, because the sense of joy that comes from the third phase is lost to those who get stuck in "hot shot."

Phase 3: Community Dancer

So what is stage three? Stage three is community dancing. It is here where a dancer finds that good dancing is the kind of dancing that welcomes everyone. A good community dancer may find enjoyment in the interaction with the extra twirls of a fellow experienced dancer, but will also find tremendous fun in engaging with a lost newcomer while executing a simple courtesy turn. A good dancer will spread a sense of enjoyment to all he or she dances with. A good dancer is concerned that all the dancers in the hall dance well. It is here where the sense of community that surrounds and pervades the contra dance flourishes and grows. More than anything else, it is this sense of community that keeps people coming for more.

Although challenging and tricky dances are lots of fun, for the community dancer, it is the interaction with people in the set dances that become the height of enjoyment. In this spirit, even the simplest of dances are lots of fun.

A San Franciscan Example

I'd like to share an illustrative case. One time, when I was at a San Francisco dance, I asked a woman to dance who I had never met before. She said, "I've only danced one dance before." "I don't care," I told her, as I whisked her into a contra line.

The dance was a tricky one, with a hey to a half woman's chain followed by women do si do and return to partner. Although my partner had to keep her wits about her, with a little help from me, she managed to get it right about half the time. Throughout the dance, though, we were in high spirits. We'd laugh out loud at the little mistakes and big successes we had. That dance was one of the most enjoyable I had all night!

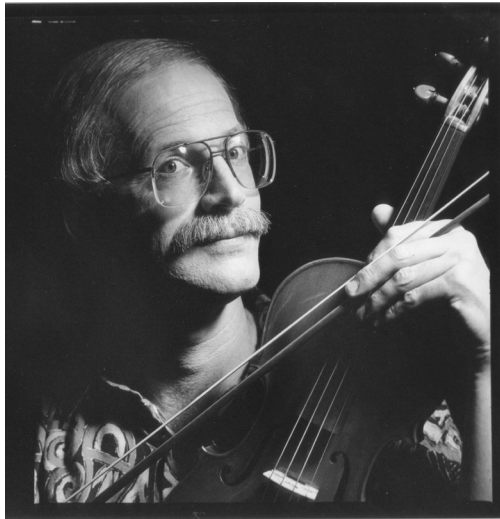
So the next time you're at a dance, don't limit yourself. Find out what fun it can be to dance with everyone at every level of ability. Go for an outside line. Then bring a beginner into the center set. Let loose and laugh while enjoying the simplicity and flirtation of a straight courtesy turn with no extra twirls, just a long look into someone's eyes before you're off into the next figure. Let the sense of community develop in you. Jump into phase three and become a good dancer.

The preceding was excerpted from Erik Hoffman's book "Contra Comments" and was used with the author's permission. Erik's Website is www.erikhoffman.com.



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Profiles



Michael Mendelson

This is the first of a series of Profiles we'll be doing of interesting people in the contra dance community.

Q: Michael, I understand that your first musical instruments were trumpet and French horn.

Mendelson: Yes, I was a brass player from early grade school through high school. Then the big folk wave of the mid-60s hit – Peter, Paul and Mary, the Kingston Trio and all that stuff. But actually, the way I got into it, my best friend in high school wanted to play an instrument and was taken to the Dana Morgan music store in Palo Alto. Sitting on the sidewalk was this strange guy with one finger missing from his right hand and he was playing bluegrass banjo, and that was Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead. So my friend Derek started taking banjo lessons and he turned me on to bluegrass.

Q: How old were you at the time?

Mendelson: That would have been my junior year in high school. I took up guitar and my first influences were folk music guitarists. I did my undergraduate work at UC Berkeley and worked with some bluegrass bands up there as lead guitarist.

Q: Did you major in music?

Mendelson: Actually, I have a degree in Physics. When I got out, there was no work to be had, so after a year of miscellaneous work, I was accepted into the Masters degree program at UCLA in comparative folklore in mythology; it really is cultural anthropology. I studied under D.K. Wilgus, who is probably the foremost scholar of Anglo-American folk song and balladry.

About that time I started playing fiddle because it was louder and easier to carry around than a big old guitar, and I did mostly

old-timey music and some bluegrass. During that time I was also a “fiddle scholar.” I wrote academic articles for various publications. And I worked with musicians who had an approach of taking traditional tunes and elaborating on them – not just playing a tune through the same way every time but adding to it. Some of it was pre-determined, some of it was improvised. That heavily influenced my approach to the fiddle. I’ve listened to a lot of violin jazz – Stephane Grappelli, Joe Venuti, Stuff Smith – and probably my all-time favorite, a Danish violinist named Svend Asmusen. I also listened to a lot of Western swing.

Q: I imagine you’ve played at one or two music festivals.

Mendelson: Over the years I’ve played at the Solstice Music Festival in Calabassas, San Diego Folk Heritage Festival, Long Beach Folk Festival, Topanga Banjo and Fiddle Contest, Western Regional Folk Life Festival in San Francisco, UCLA Folk Festival, Grass Valley Bluegrass Festival.

Q: Let’s not forget the Old-Time fiddler’s Convention here in Goleta.

Mendelson: Oh, yes. I entered the Beginner’s Contest the first year it was held (30 years ago) and won first place. I was the only one who played a waltz.

Q: Let’s talk about contra dancing.

Mendelson: I was introduced to contra dance music probably in 1986 or so. We had a very small contra dance community here in Santa Barbara and they were looking for a fiddle player and I got recruited. It just sort of evolved. We had a number of bands with different people in town. We started out just playing whatever we knew and then as we played more we became more familiar with the traditional contra repertoire – including jigs, which you don’t have in old timey or bluegrass music.

Q: Give us a sense of what contra dancing was like in those days.

Mendelson: It was a very small, tight-knit community. We did a lot of them in Oak Park, and I think others in Carrillo. The only one I can think of who was there at the very beginning was Carl Magagnosc. I don’t remember for sure but I think the dances were once a month. Erik Hoffman came along a little bit later. The Board meetings were very informal, and then it became more formal, with written rules and mailing lists and financial reporting. Bettine Wallin has put in a huge amount of work – Lawrence, too. Carl and Autumn, particularly since they adopted their daughter, have kind of dropped out from that. Erik moved to the Bay area, where he had more opportunities. Gary Atkins did the sound for, I believe, twenty years – starting out with little equipment. Harvest Moon had maybe 60 people.

Q: At some point you began forming your own bands.

Mendelson: I think the name of the first one was called the Plain Vanilla String Band. There was also the Tecalote Tune Twisters, Immortal Lemmings, Sliding Scale, AM/PM, and finally, Chopped Liver. The hard part is always coming up with a band name – we spend a lot of energy on that.

Q: When was Chopped Liver formed?

Mendelson: We’ve been together for something like three or four years now. The way we approach tunes is not like your typical traditional contra dance band – although we usually start out playing it straight and then go off into strange things.

Q: A saxophone is a little strange.

Mendelson: Yes, it is for a traditional band, but if you were to get a collection of music from contemporary contra dance bands, you’d hear all kinds of stuff going on.

Q: Well, you have a tradition of ending your dances with a tune that has a sax solo.

Mendelson: That’s the “Rattlesnake Rag.” I wrote the music and Jeff wrote a dance to go with it and it seems to have gone over really well. It’s fun and you want to send people out of the hall wanting more.

Q: You certainly do that, Michael. Thanks!

You can learn more about Michael Mendelson’s activities by visiting his Website: www.SlidingScaleMusic.com

Santa Barbara contra dances are co-sponsored by SBCDS and

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SBCDS is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation

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Board of Directors: Moira Butler, Sammy Ellis, Rob Gardner, Elliott Karpeles, Bob Leonard, Gary Shapiro, Vicki Tracy, and Bettine Wallin

The *Dance Star* is produced quarterly.

Editor: Keith Connes

Our special thanks to all the many volunteers who give their time and efforts to make the dances fun and contribute to the content of this publication.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in the articles, news, and letters do not necessarily reflect the views of SBCDS.



A Dancer's Viewpoint

Let's Add to the Enjoyment

by Steve Davis

Sunday night contra dances certainly have their dynamics. Just look at the range of articles in the last few issues of the *Dance Star*. The frustration with dancers who book ahead or who are booked ahead, the pros and cons of the center set, what makes a good caller, what to do about bad callers, etc. To which I would add the noticeable absence recently of some of the better dancers, who are not finding enough enjoyment in the current format for a Sunday night dance.

Before I get further into this article, I want to acknowledge those dancers in our community who enjoy what I call "traditional contra dancing," which is dancing to prescribed patterns, avoiding extraneous turns and flourishes, etc. These dancers enjoy the original form of the dance, dance it well, and are happy to continue to do so.

This article addresses those dancers in our community who see contra dancing as an evolving dance form, and who want to add to their enjoyment by extending their experiences and expanding their technique. At the core of these issues, I see a few common threads: Everyone wants to have a good time. Experienced dancers want to dance with experienced dancers. Beginners would like to dance with the better dancers. Regulars would like to know they have partners and not sit out. So how do these seemingly conflicting requirements get addressed? I have a few suggestions.

Easier Dances the First Half

(1) The first half of a contra dance should focus on easier dances for all levels of dancers, perhaps at a slower tempo. The second half of the dance should present more challenging dances, no walkthroughs, faster tempos, etc. This arrangement has several advantages: a) All levels of dance ability are recognized. Some newer dancers leave after the first half anyway. b) Booking ahead might be reduced. Personally, if I knew the second half of the dance would have more challenging dances, I would be inclined to book ahead my favorite partners for the second half of the dance, and leave myself more open to dancing with

different levels of dancers in the first half. c) Less experienced callers would be challenged to call more difficult dances in the second half. This would give them more experience at this level of calling, and reduce boredom among the more experienced dancers. Asking every caller to do at least one no-walkthrough dance in an evening (even a simple pattern) is another way to add to the caller's experience and the dancers' enjoyment.

More Workshops

(2) There should be teaching workshops on "how to dance," "how to count," and "how to lead" for all dancers. These workshops could be held once a month in place of the usual indoctrination workshop (which could still be held in the small studio) and led by the more experienced dancers (who might get free admission for their efforts). To teach only at the beginning level and never at a higher level only serves to perpetuate the differences between a good dancer and a so-so dancer.

The workshops would provide better training and result in better dancers (both men and women). Some of the men dancers who have been coming for years do not know how to count the measures in a pattern, or how to end on time when adding a flourish, or how to provide a strong lead so his partner feels secure. Some of the women dancers have never been taught the techniques of "turning on the spot" (like you get in ballet training) or shifting their weight in a simple "lean." I do not fault these dancers, they have just never been taught. Without these additional workshops, we will never see better dancers in our community.

Men who know how to lead and how to count well will attract more of the women dancers. For women, this will increase the number of available men when booking ahead, leading to a more pleasant experience. The reverse is also true. Women who know how to dance well will be more attractive to men who book ahead.

Dancers who have been to workshops will be more comfortable dancing the more challenging dances, and callers will not have to worry as much about "losing" dancers later in the evening.

With more experienced dancers dancing the harder dances, the center set issues might be reduced as dancers find more equal levels of enjoyment in all of the lines and not feel they have to gravitate to the center set to maximize their dancing experience.

I think that these two suggestions of (1) offering more challenging dances in the second half of a dance and (2) offering workshops for all levels of dance background would go a long way toward resolving some of the problems in our dance community. I think we would see better dancers, better callers, less booking ahead issues, less focus on the center set and more attendance by the experienced dancers.

Make Your Voice Heard!

Do you have ideas about making our dances better? Or any other dance-related thoughts, feelings, or experiences that you'd like to share with others through the pages of the *Dance Star*? Well, don't be shy – this is *your* newsletter, and your contributions are most welcome!

The best way to become a writing (Dance) Star is to email your priceless words to dancestar@sbcids.org. If you don't have email capability, snail-mail to Keith Connes, 283 Carlo Dr., Goleta, CA 93117. If you do not want your comments published, please say so; otherwise, we will assume that you have submitted your material for publication. Incidentally, we also welcome dance-related photos.

We reserve the right to edit all submissions. Deadline for the next issue is May 1.

First Ever Annual Contra Caper FUNdraiser

May 10 – \$10.00 – SLO Vet's Hall
7:30 to 11:30 (No workshop)

Help keep the San Luis Obispo dances going strong!

Bring Silent Auction Items!

Bring Baked Goods and Beverages!

Gary Shapiro calling with two great bands:
Growling Old Geezers &
Paddy O'Furniture

DANCE SCHEDULE · SPRING 2003

Westside Community Center

423 W. Victoria, Santa Barbara – 7:30 to 9:30

English Country Dances

Callers: Gary Shapiro and Alice Williams

For dances with live music there is a suggested donation of \$5.00, recorded music \$2.00

Note: See also the adjoining column for the English Country Dances at the Carrillo Ballroom

- March 4 Recordings
- March 18 Recordings – Note location for this dance only: Karpeles Museum, 21 W. Anapamu, Santa Barbara - Free Dance
- March 25 Thruppence
- April 1 Recordings
- April 8 Recordings
- April 22 Recordings
- April 29 Thruppence & Kristina Eriksen
- May 6 Recordings
- May 20 Recordings
- May 27 Thruppence & Friends

SLO Veteran's Hall

801 Grand Ave., San Luis Obispo

Contra Dances on the second Saturday of the month
8:00 to 11:00 (7:30 Workshop) \$7.00

- March 8 Elliott & Donna Karpeles/Squirrel Heads
5:30-7:00 Free Polka Party
- April 12 Greg McKenzie/Chuck Aronson's Band
- May 10 Gary Shapiro/Growling Old Geezers & Paddy O'Furniture (\$10.00)
FUNdraiser – See box on Page 3 for details

Ojai Art Center

113 S. Montgomery, Ojai

Contra Dances

7:30 to 10:30 (7:00 Workshop) \$7.00

- March 15 Donna & Elliott Karpeles/Michael Mendelson, Suzie Richmond & Mike Mullins
- May 10 Jeff Spero/One Night Stan

Dances appearing in this Calendar are sponsored by the following organizations, listed by location:

Carrillo Ballroom and Westside Community Center:

Santa Barbara Country Dance Society 805-969-1511
www.sbcds.org

San Luis Obispo Vet's Hall:

Central Coast Dance Society 805-541-0201 www.cccds.org

Ojai Art Center:

Ojai Contra Dances 805-933-0660
www.geocities.com/CirclesAndRows/oac/

Carrillo Ballroom

100 E. Carrillo St., Santa Barbara

Contra Dances Every Sunday

7:00 to 10:00 (6:30 Workshop)

English Country Dances

Second Sundays 2:30 to 5:30

\$7.00 each, unless otherwise noted.

- March 2 Gary Shapiro/Chopped Liver
- March 9 2:30-5:30 English Country Dance
James Hutson/Thruppence & Friends
5:30-6:30 Potluck
7:00-10:00 Contra Dance
Gary Shapiro/Squirrel Heads
- March 16 Jeff Spero/Kitchen Junket
St. Patrick's Dance, Irish music, wear green
- March 23 Leda Shapiro/The Blue Ghillies
- March 30 Lynn Ackerson/Chopped Liver
- April 6 Warren Blier/Kristina & Her RH Stars
- April 13 2:30-5:30 English Country Dance
Giovanni De Amici/Linelle Glass,
Robert Winokur, Kristina Eriksen
5:30-6:30 Annual Spring Potluck
\$1.00 – Turkey provided
7:00-10:00 Contra Dance
Chuck Galt/Michael's Mixed Nuts
- April 20 Gary Shapiro/Porch Dogs
- April 27 Caller's Jubilee/Growling Old Geezers.
Blossoming callers contact Don Ward:
dward7@earthlink.net or 818-353-8052
- May 4 Donna Karpeles/Michael's Mixed Nuts
- May 11 2:30-5:30 English Country Dance
Gary Shapiro/Linelle Glass, Kristina Eriksen,
Robert Winokur, plus TBD
5:30-6:30 Potluck
7:00-10:00 Contra Dance
Susan Michaels/Southern Exposure
- May 18 John Rogers/Kitchen Junket

Sprung Floor Dance Festival

May 24 - Oak Park

2:30 to 5:30

English Country Dance - FREE!

(Open Mike – Callers contact Giovanni De Amici via sbecd@yahoo.com or 310-793-7499 before May 4.)

7:00 to 10:00 Contra Dance - \$8

Erik Hoffman/Southern Exposure

May 25 - Carrillo Ballroom - \$25

1:30 to 3:45 Don Ward/Squirrel Heads

3:45 to 6:00 Chuck Galt/Growling Old Geezers

6:00 to 7:30 Potluck Dinner

7:30 to 10:05 Susan Michaels/Chopped Liver

10:25 to 1:00 Warren Blier/Cruel Willies

Plus various workshops during Sunday