

# DANCE STAR

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## Hands Four!

By Greg Rohde

*Here are excerpts from an article that appeared originally in the CDSS Newsletter and in edited form in the British newsletter "Set & Turn Single." We regret that space limitations prevent us from printing the article in its entirety. We do recommend that dancers show this lucid and entertaining description of the joys of contra dancing to their non-dancer friends in order to entice them to come see what the fun is all about – Editor*

If I'm ever in a coma, somebody announce "Hands Four!" and start shuffling your feet. If that doesn't bring a smile to my face or get my toes tapping, then you know I'm beyond hope.

"Hands Four" is the traditional call that begins every contra dance: an invitation to find a partner, join a long line of people and join hands with a neighboring couple. Small groups of four are formed all the way down the line and dancers eagerly wait for instructions. The caller announces a series of moves and the dancers walk through the dance a couple of times. When the dancers are comfortable with the sequence of moves, the band starts playing, the caller calls the figures and the dancers put it all into a fluid motion. What happens next is pure magic. For the next ten minutes, the dancers meet, separate, weave, reunite and swing. Experienced dancers will adjust to their partner or neighbor, dancing more simply with newer dancers and adding embellishments with experienced ones. At the end of it all, everyone thanks their partner, finds a new partner and lines up for another dance.

### What is contra dancing?

Contra dancing is a communal folk dance in which you and your partner dance, eventually, with everyone else in your line. Before the dance starts, you and a partner join a long line of couples and take hands with a couple that's next to you. A caller

will lead you through a series of moves. After you've gone through the series once, you and your partner have switched places with the other couple and the two of you have a new couple to dance with, and so on.

The caller's role is to guide and support you through the dances. Most callers start an evening with the easiest dances and teach every new move as it gets introduced into the night's repertoire. Think of contra as a language with about 16 main words that are combined in a variety of ways to make sentences. You start with simple sentences and build from there.

The caller's goal is to set you up for success. He or she will walk you through a sequence of moves a few times until you are comfortable and confident. Once the music starts, the caller may prompt you with cues so you can remember the next move. Since the dance is a pre-arranged set of moves, you don't need to decide what the next move will be. This simplicity is one of contra's advantages over other styles of dance, where the leader (usually the man) has to be constantly thinking about what the next move will be. In contra,

that decision is already made, so you can turn off that part of your brain and simply be present to the music, your partner and your fellow dancers. If you're an experienced dancer, you can throw in embellishments and make the dance even more challenging and more fun. Since the dance is a combination of a series of moves, the partner you're with, the other people in your line, and the band that's playing, you never do the same dance twice.

Some of the moves are similar to square dancing (swing your partner, make a star, chain the women – a move that sounds more kinky than it is) while others are unique to contra. I usually downplay the similarities because contra differs greatly from most people's mental pictures of square dancing or their grade-school experience of it. We always dance to live music and don't wear square dance costumes. Square dancing involves four couples dancing in a group while a contra line can accommodate as many couples as space allows.

Since contra is a social form of dancing, even people who come with a date change partners after each dance. This makes it an

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# Profiles



**Chuck Galt**

Interviewed by Keith Connes

After 31 years as a professor of marine biology at Cal State University Long Beach, Chuck has retired. He and his wife Denise will soon move to Petaluma, where they will join the Northern California dance community.

**Q:** Chuck, we'll miss you! Tell us what led to your originally becoming a caller.

**Galt:** I started out in International Folk Dance in about 1970 and really took a liking to that exotic music and the dancing, and kind of dropped out of that in about '79 and started playing more music – hammered dulcimer, and I'd always played guitar and banjo. Somewhere about 1980, some other musicians and I formed a band so we could play for contra dances in Orange County. It was called the Occasional String Band.

In 1985 I left the instrumental side of it and became a contra dancer in the L.A. area. I really took to it – I was dancing at every single dance that was available. In 1988, while I was up in Washington in a marine biology laboratory where I was on sabbatical for a couple of years, a few people said, "Boy, we'd sure like to contra dance." I wanted to, also, but we needed a caller, so I said, "Well, I'll try to learn a couple of dances." I got some and we started dancing in a sail maker's loft. There were probably only ten or fifteen of us.

**Q:** So you were self-taught?

**Galt:** Absolutely self-taught at that point, just following some tips in contra books I read, and then I took a one-hour workshop. Drew Tronvig was kind enough to let me do a dance or two for his Santa Monica dances back in '88 or '89. In 1991 I started the Zesty Contra Dances here in Pasadena and have been doing that three or four times a year ever since.

**Q:** Talk about your style of calling.

**Galt:** Part of my style is a rhythmic pattern, and I think that comes out of my interest in music and rhythm.

**Q:** How do you prepare for a dance evening?

**Galt:** I go through my cards and the newer things that I've just gotten out of books, and I'll go online and look for some of the main composers' most recent dances. I don't use the old chestnuts very often. I pull out 30 or 40 cards or more for an evening dance that might require 12 dances at the most. I'll sit with those and cull the dances down and then put them in a sequence and think about where I want the energy to build a little and be sure I don't have two dances with a hey right together, things like that.

I try to put a program together that has some real diversity and then try to be sure I'll know what I'm doing when I get up there.

What I don't do that a lot of callers do is pay a lot of attention to which tunes I'm going to use. I don't get together with the band ahead of time.

**Q:** Tell us the story of how you met your wife Denise.

**Galt:** As happens with so many couples, we met on the dance floor, actually in Brentwood in 1994. We hit it off, and then someone told her that I was somebody else whom she wasn't interested in getting to know, and so she stayed away from me for awhile. It was a case of mistaken identity and it took about two years before the misinformation got cleared up. We started dancing more and more, and in 1997 we got married.

**Q:** Sounds like a movie plot. I assume that after your move you'll be calling dances in the Northern California area.

**Galt:** I'm starting to get gigs in North Bay and have one now in November at a "Fall is Sprung" festival in Grass Valley.

**Q:** Do you think you'll be coming down to call some dances in our area?

**Galt:** I certainly would like to. Our system has a provision to let me teach half-time for up to five years, so my plan is to teach one semester a year back at Cal State Long Beach. During the semester of each year that I'll be teaching, I'll be closer. I'm thinking that I may even keep going with the fifth Saturday Zesty dance in Pasadena, but I'm not sure at this point.

**Q:** I know that a lot of us hope you will. And of course, we'd like to have you back in Santa Barbara as often as possible. Best wishes for the future, Chuck.

## Free Marriage Celebration Dance

Love can find you when you least expect it. That's what Rob Gardner and Vicki Villegas found out in December of 1999, where they first met at a contra dance in Santa Barbara. But it wasn't until two and a half years later that they realized that their friendship had grown into a romantic relationship. He loved her gorgeous smile and she was swept off her feet by his dances.

Then one very hot and sunny 2<sup>nd</sup> day in May of 2004, Rob and Vicki exchanged their wedding vows under a beautiful wisteria arbor in Alice Keck Park's Memorial Garden in Santa Barbara. A graceful release of fifty live Monarch butterflies completed the ceremony.

Several contra dance friends were there to help make their day very special; Suzanne Duffy coordinated the music and played her lively flute with harpist Christine Holvick. Later, Jeff Spero joined Suzanne on his keyboard at the reception, Victor Garza, who also does the sound at SBCDS' Sunday dances, provided his professional services, Alice Williams called and coordinated the dances and Linda Wise performed the ceremony.

Now Rob and Vicki would like to invite all of you to a free contra dance on Sunday, September 26, 2004 to continue celebrating their marriage, at the Carrillo Ballroom in Santa Barbara. The band will be Spontaneous Combustion with Steve Shapiro, Jeff Spero and Steve Lewis, with caller Barbara Stewart.

## Dances Lose Money (Any Ideas?)

A combination of factors has contributed to a situation where, for most dances, we are losing money. Most significant has been the reduction in the number of dancers. Other factors are: an increased cost of bands and callers, a new ballroom contract with the City of Santa Barbara, and insufficient donations for refreshments.

The Board has discussed a number of possible solutions, such as: Increasing the admission charge, reducing the number of dances to two a month, and various ways of attracting and retaining more dancers. The Board is asking you, our dance community, for your input, your ideas, and your involvement in solving this problem. In the interest of preserving our contra dance schedule, we are asking everyone to help out.

Thanks, Elliott Karpeles.

# Hands Four!

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ideal dance form for people who come alone. You don't have to worry about "Who will I dance with?" Once you're on the floor, you'll dance with everyone. Asking or getting asked to dance has less pressure than in other styles of dance. In contra, asking someone to dance usually doesn't carry romantic connotations.

Remember, in any given night you might have 10 or 12 different partners. (On the other hand, others have found their lifelong partner on the dance floor.) It's also acceptable for women to take the initiative and ask men to dance. Lastly, more than in other dance styles, you and your partner can have very different skill levels and still enjoy dancing together.

Some people refer to contra as "an eye contact sport." While part of this is functional (looking into your partner's eyes prevents dizziness when spinning) part of this is a result of the friendly nature of these dances. Since part of the enjoyment is being with others, most dancers will look you in the eye and smile. Where else can you go and have people smile at you for a couple of hours? It's hard to not feel good about yourself after being showered with that kind of affirmation. One thing I love about the dance communities I've encountered across the country is that they seem to be groups filled with genuine affection.

I like the whimsical definitions of contra. My favorite is "an amusement park ride we make for ourselves." Another description is

"the only form of dance in which a member of the opposite sex is thrust in your arms every 30 seconds." One iconoclastic friend defines it as "a sinless sport in which you sweat with many partners." All of these definitions hint at a secret of contra: the magic increases as we keep a little tension in our arms. With this dynamic tension, we can gently push and pull each other along and act as one unified body.

## Why do people enjoy contra?

I enjoy contra dancing because it's a place where time stands still. I can dance for hours and it seems like a minute. It's a place where I can turn off my brain and just relax. Contra dancing, like no other activity, compels me to live in the present. When I'm dancing, I'm not regretting the past or worried about the future. I'm totally focused on the present, a discipline that leads to happiness.

I enjoy contra because it's one of the places where I feel most alive. It's impossible to be unhappy after three hours of people looking you straight in the eyes and smiling. Contra dance is playful and fun, a place where adults can be kids. I enjoy contra because it's a dance style where it's more important to have fun than to do it right; it's simple enough that beginners learn very quickly; and it allows experienced dancers and beginners to enjoy being partners together.

I love contra dance because it's a communal event. The focus is on the whole group dancing together, an entire line playing in unison. The live music is compelling, the moves are simple and the sense of moving as a group is awesome.

## What type of person would like contra?

Contra appeals to a wide variety of people. Gregarious folks love interacting with dozens of people in a few minutes. Shy people enjoy meeting others without needing to talk much. Analytical people admire the intricate patterns we effortlessly form, while more emotional folks enjoy the personal bonding. Athletic people enjoy the energetic style of dance, while sedentary people enjoy the most fun way to get in shape without really trying.

## What can I expect at my first dance?

Although the dances are easy, most first-timers appreciate a chance to learn the basic moves and gain a little confidence. Your best

bet is to arrive early and attend the workshop. If you can't attend the workshop, come for the first dances. The earliest dances are the simplest and the callers will provide even more instructions. One of the worst things you can do is say, "I'll sit out the first ones and watch." This can intimidate some if they focus on the intricate patterns of the whole group instead of the simple moves of each individual.

If two of you are newcomers, resist your urge to be partners for the first few dances. The easiest way for new people to learn is by dancing with experienced partners. Experienced dancers will gladly help you and the two of you can line up as neighbors when you take "hands four." You'll want to dress comfortably and avoid wearing long sleeves because you can get quite hot. Many people wear jeans or shorts. Some women wear skirts or light dresses because they look beautiful while twirling. Be sure to wear comfortable shoes.

If you like having fun, are willing to try new things, and have a playful spirit, join us some weekend for a contra dance. When you hear "Hands Four," introduce yourself to a new partner, smile, and hang on for the ride.

## Old-Time Fiddler's Convention

Save October 10 for the annual Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention – a day-long celebration of traditional American folk music. It's held on the grounds of historic Stow House in Goleta (304 N. Los Carneros Rd.) from 10:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The noon headline act will be the Floyd County Boys – master musicians celebrating their 40th anniversary as a group.

The Main Stage will have competitions all day long in various traditional instrument and old-time singing categories with cash prizes. The Performance Stage includes The Possum Poachers (Jim Wimmer and Tom Wolverton); Southern Exposure (Dan Slosberg, Joe Wack and Steve Lewis) and renowned folk artists Brad Leftwich, Alice Gerrard, and Tom Sauber.

There is also a Children's Stage, jam sessions galore and a finale family dance at the end of the competition.

Admission is \$12 for adults, \$10 for seniors and teens, \$5 for kids 12 and under. For more information, contact Linelle Glass, 682-1593; email [lglass@sbceo.org](mailto:lglass@sbceo.org); or visit the Web site [www.sbsunriserotary.org/fiddlers](http://www.sbsunriserotary.org/fiddlers).

Santa Barbara Contra and English Country Dances are co-sponsored by SBCDS and



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

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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.

# DANCE SCHEDULE – Fall 2004

## *English Country Dances* *Westside Community Center* 423 W. Victoria, Santa Barbara (Where Victoria dead-ends at Hwy 101)

Every Tuesday during September, October, and November  
7:30 to 9:30

Caller will be either Gary Shapiro or Alice Williams

Live music by Thruppence on the following dates:

Sept. 21, Oct. 12, and Nov. 9 – \$5.00

All other dances will have recorded music – \$3.00

Note: English Country Dance at the Carrillo Ballroom  
Nov. 21 at 2:30 – See Box at Right

## *SLO Veteran's Hall* 801 Grand Ave., San Luis Obispo (East of Hwy 101, Cal Poly exit)

Contra Dances are held once a month, either on a Friday or a Saturday

The dances listed below are all on a Friday

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

Admission: \$7.00

Sept. 10 Keith Connes/Kitchen Junket

Oct. 8 Jonathan Southard/Growling Old Geezers

Nov. 12 Donna & Elliott Karpeles/Paddy O'Furniture

## *Ojai Art Center* 113 S. Montgomery, Ojai (South of East Ojai Avenue)

The dances listed below are on Saturday evenings

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

Admission: \$7.00

Oct. 2 John Rogers/Michael Mendelson, Kurt MacInnes,  
Dan Wilson

Nov. 27 Brenda Goodwin/TBA

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

Carrillo Recreation Center and the Westside Community Center  
Santa Barbara Country Dance Society 805-969-1511  
[www.sbcds.org](http://www.sbcds.org)

Ojai Art Center:  
Ojai Country Dances 805-933-0660  
[www.geocities.com/ojaicontradances](http://www.geocities.com/ojaicontradances)

San Luis Obispo Veteran's Hall:  
Central Coast Dance Society 805-541-0201  
[www.cccds.org](http://www.cccds.org)

## *Carrillo Ballroom*

100 E. Carrillo St., Santa Barbara  
(Hwy 101, Carrillo St. exit, go north to Anacapa St.)

Contra Dances Every Sunday

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

Admission: \$7.00, except as noted

- Sept. 5 Chuck Galt/Ruby's Dream
- Sept. 12 Susan Kevra/Celtic Menace  
Post-Harvest Moon Dance (\$10.00)
- Sept. 19 Gary Shapiro/Michael's Mixed Nuts
- Sept. 26 Barbara Stewart/Spontaneous Combustion  
Celebrating the marriage of Vicki & Rob Gardner  
*Free Dance!*
- Oct. 3 Gary Shapiro/Bog an Lochan
- Oct. 10 Caller's Jubilee/Kitchen Junket  
If you want to be a caller, contact Gary Shapiro at  
(805) 682-5523 or [gary@sbcds.org](mailto:gary@sbcds.org).
- Oct. 17 Keith Connes/Kristina & Her Right Hand Stars
- Oct. 24 Donna Karpeles/Growling Old Geezers
- Oct. 31 *Zesty Contras & Halloween Costume Ball*  
Nils Fredlund/Mock Turtle Soup  
7:00 to 10:30 (\$10.00)
- Nov. 7 Warren Blier/Kitchen Junket
- Nov. 14 Donna Karpeles/Porch Dogs
- Nov. 21 2:30-5:30 English Country Dance  
Ben Rotenberg/Thruppence (\$7.00)  
5:30-6:30 Pre-Thanksgiving Potluck with  
turkey provided – Cost: \$1.00  
7:00-10:00 Contra Dance  
Gary Shapiro/Laura Light Band (\$7.00)
- Nov. 28 Brenda Goodwin/Chopped Liver

