



DANCE STAR

Volume 12 Number 4

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The Perfect Caller

by Keith Connes

As someone who has been contra dancing for the past eight years or so, I have formed some definite ideas about what I would look for in a perfect caller. I say "would" look for because nobody's perfect, although we certainly are blessed in this area with some very excellent callers. Anyway, for what it's worth, here are my views on what makes for perfection in a caller:

Having good teaching skills. The perfect caller has a good eye for the ratio of inexperienced to experienced dancers and knows just how much time to spend teaching a dance. When there's a somewhat complicated figure done by, say, the number one couples – such as a half figure eight or contra corners – the perfect caller will take a moment to allow the number two couples to walk it through. Also, for those dances where the couples that are out will have to do something unusual to get back in, the caller should make sure that the process is understood.

Making the sets (reasonably) even. I feel that the perfect caller takes a firm hand in modifying lines that are vastly uneven in length. Often the call to "Line up for another contra dance" triggers our famed Center Set Syndrome, with an ever-evolving line that threatens to engulf Barry and spill out onto Carrillo Street. Meanwhile, a neighboring nucleus of eight lonely souls looks forlornly for companionship. Some callers mildly suggest that an equalization would be nice. My perfect caller takes a firmer hand to ensure a well-balanced dance. Jonathan Southard likes the personal touch: "Steve, would you please take all the dancers below you to the set on your left? Perfect!" Gary Shapiro invokes the Busby Berkeley high-choreography approach: "To start this dance, number twos in this set slide to your right." Before the dancers realize it, the Center Set has mutated into two

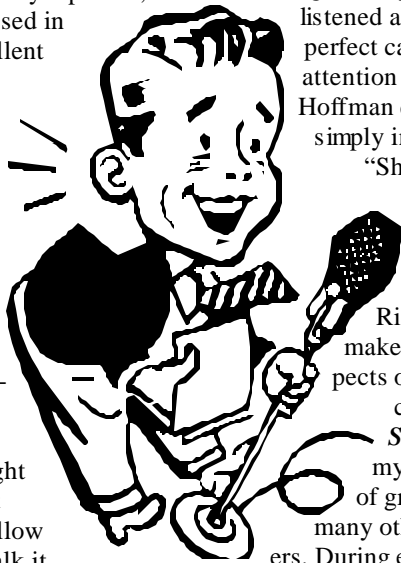
manageable lines. *Magical!* Well, I don't care how the caller does it, as long as the result is fairly symmetrical, so the dance can flow nicely.

Getting the dancers' attention. At the start of a walk-through, some dancers are still talking when it would be a good time to be listening. That leaves them staring blankly when those who *have* listened are on the move. The perfect caller will demand the attention that is his due. Erik Hoffman quashes the babble by simply intoning

"Shhhhhh." (Jeff Spero tried this on a recent evening and then exclaimed, in surprise, "Hey – that worked!")

Right, Jeff! If the caller makes it clear what he expects of the dancers, most will cooperate.

Scanning for trouble. In my view, this is the area of greatest weakness among many otherwise-excellent callers. During each dance, I think it's imperative that the caller keeps a constant scan of all of the sets until she is absolutely convinced that everybody's got it. Many times I've seen a caller stop calling too early in the dance and then gaze at the ceiling or start checking out her card for the next dance. I remember one caller who, early in a dance, actually left the



stage to become a dancer – totally oblivious to the fact that another set, composed primarily of neophytes, had deteriorated into a cattle stampede. Other callers, such as Drew Tronvig and Erik Hoffman, will descend to the floor for the more worthwhile purpose of homing in on a trouble spot and directing traffic.

Anticipating the next figure. During any dance, it's basic that the caller should announce a figure during the measure that precedes it, so the dancers will have adequate notice as to what to do next. Inexperienced callers will often wait until the start of the figure, which is, of course, too late. When I see an *experienced* caller likewise fall behind, my guess is that he did not practice calling that dance.

Balancing the program. It's fairly standard practice to start with some easy dances and then move seamlessly into dances that are progressively more complicated. Then toward the end of the first or second half, the caller will wind things down with another easy dance or two on the assumption that the dancers may be getting tired and/or brain-dead. The perfect caller will continually gauge the level of attentiveness throughout the evening and will adjust her program as necessary.

Putting pizzaz into it. The perfect caller infuses the dance with his vitality, which becomes contagious. The caller is, after all, the leader – the father (or mother) figure – and his or her high spirits can pick up the entire hall. This doesn't require nonstop hyper-exertion – in fact, the energy can ebb and flow for the sake of variety and pacing. Some callers are more laid back than others; regardless, all the good ones create a following via their own brand of charisma.

Well, those are some of my personal standards for defining the perfect caller. What do *you* look for in a caller? Feel free to chime in with your opinion!

Harvest Moon Goes All-Carrillo

That's right, after 15 years at Oak Park, Harvest Moon is moving (lock stock and barrel) to the Carrillo Ballroom. We had a good run at Oak Park and we all have some fond memories. But with the deterioration of the Pavilion floor, unpredictable weather and the tremendous amount of volunteer work needed to put up the tent and make the weekend happen, many of you have asked: "Why can't we simply move the whole weekend to the Carrillo Ballroom?". The biggest problem was not being able to use the Ballroom on Saturday evening (the Ballroom Dancers have

been there every Saturday for many years) Well, thanks to the persistent negotiations of Elliott Karpeles, an arrangement has been made for us to share the use of the Rec Center on Saturday night with the Ballroom dancers.

This is going to be an exciting change and we are presently in negotiations to get the services of a truly special band and caller to reflect our enthusiasm. So mark your calendar for Sept. 27-29 and watch for more detail and an in-depth look at the history of Harvest Moon in the next edition of the Dance Star.

CONTRA WABI-SABI

by Marcia Michael

I went to my first contra, alone. For ten minutes, I sat in the car, telling myself to get out and just walk into the dance. Because I had danced on stage in my days of youth, and was comfortable with the medium, I had always avoided social dancing in any form. This was new territory and I had concerns. I didn't want to walk into a cocktail party/meat market ambience. I just wanted to dance. Also, coming out of a "bad" relationship, men were not exactly on my favorite species list. I didn't want to be "come on" to, or asked out. Neither did I want to sit wallflower-style on the sidelines all evening. I just wanted to dance. I girded my loins, (gird: to prepare oneself for action; to attack with sarcasm) I was ready for anything.

I walked into Brentwood (R.I.P.), assuring myself that nothing could stop me from walking right back out again if my considerations proved accurate. I wanted to dance, to move, to free up, yes. But I also needed community. I needed to once again experience men as humans, rather than pustular nematodes. I needed to connect with other women and celebrate through dance, our strength in the feminine. I needed to reclaim my life. I wasn't asking much! From the moment I walked in, I was made welcome. Leda Shapiro was womaning the cash box and was the first Contra dancer I met. Recognizing my "deer in headlights" look, she metaphorically took me in hand, and lovingly shoved me onto the dance floor. From there, almost the entire community helped me feel a part of, not apart. My mistakes were overlooked (by most). My partners were encouraging (almost always). My female counter partners treated me as friend, not as competition (again, almost always). What a wonderful world! The community pulled me in, and thank you, has never let go.

Coming from the world of ballet, I understand the lure of technical perfection. (Since I work in pain management and structural rehabilitation these days, I see the price many of us have paid to the Goddess Technique, in painful backs, knees, hips, etc.). For years, I was enveloped in dancing to perform, in striving for the 'performance perfection'. Yet, even as a professional, dance was a personal and intimate expression of self. My dance matrix, my knowledge of what dance is for, and my energetic wellspring, has matured into a self-expression that now puts tech-

nique into a healthier perspective, or perhaps transcends technique. How we look dancing doesn't matter, especially not compared to how we feel dancing. What is happening inside of us intensely matters. And how we add to the feelings of those we are dancing with is equally impelling. The often paraphrased, 'dance as if no one is watching' rings with such clarity. This is one of the greatest aspects of contra. The design allows you to dance with one person after another. The beauty of this is the appreciation for each dancer as being peerless. Beyond following directions and staying on beat, it doesn't matter much if you are the finest dance technician, or if you dance like a flat tire. Each person is unique. As often as not, the most pleasant turn on the dance floor, is with someone who is not 'the Grande danseur' but the one who has rid themselves of the need for technical excellence, the need to look a certain way, to look better than', or to be perfect. The person who is unashamedly, unabashedly dancing their authentic self, in them, you see the acceptance shine through; see the joy, the spontaneity. It's a moment of just being in the moment, in time, on the beat, together, in love in a very clear sense of the word.

It's wabi-sabi. The centuries-old Japanese art of finding beauty in what is not perfect, the reverence toward authenticity. This can be appreciated for example, in a chipped porcelain teacup, or the tiniest wildflower. Contra Wabi-Sabi is the woman who stands wide-eyed on the contra floor for the first time, wondering if the risk is worth it. It's the flat-tire dancer who, no matter how many years go by, will never be a 'great' dancer; but is having one heck of a great time with you, and you with them, just dancing. This is a greater, higher, and humbler perfection.

The reason I keep coming back to Contra? I just want to dance.

RIGHT SENTIMENT, WRONG GUY

Soon after the previous edition of the *Dance Star* came out, a number of people complimented the new editor, Keith Connes, on the newsletter's nifty new look. Keith was pleased to hear those kind words, but told those folks — as he is telling you now — that all compliments on the appearance of the *Dance Star* belong to Shane Butler. Shane does the layout and production of the *Dance Star* and puts together the Calendar as well. Keith handles the editorial material, such as articles and letters.

Everything You Wanted to Know About English Country Dancing

by Gary Shapiro

With respect to English Country Dancing (ECD), there are two kinds of people: those who love it, and those who don't love it ... yet. One problem with ECD for some contra dancers is that in some ways the two forms are very much alike, so part of the brain says "this is contra dancing," but then discovers it's not. It's a little like the problem I have with carob. My brain wants it to be chocolate, but it's not. If I could just accept carob for what it is, I could then judge it on its own merits rather than on what it's not. (On their respective merits, I'd say that ECD fares much better than carob.)

ECD is like contra in that we dance with a partner and we dance in sets. Often the sets are longways "for as many as will," just as in a contra dance, but sometimes the dances are in sets of various shapes for two, three, four, or five couples. The "for as many as will" dances are usually duple minor ("hands four") but we are more likely to dance a triple minor ("hands six") in ECD than in contra, at least nowadays and hereabouts. (In general, I'm referring to nowadays and hereabouts in this article.)

The biggest difference may be the music. In contra, it's almost always a medley of 32-bar reels and/or jigs. The band picks the music. Any tune will work with any dance. The tempo is almost always at about 120. In ECD, each dance has a specific tune to go with it. The music fits the dance. The tune might be in 4/4, 2/4, 2/2 or 6/8 (jig) but might also be in 3/2, 3/4 (waltz), or 9/8. The tunes (and the dances) are not necessarily 32 bars and the tempos vary from stately to quite lively. The music is from folk tunes, from ballads and political satire, and from classical works.

Some of the figures are the same as contra: circle, star, lines, half figure-8, cast, gypsy, hey, square through (aka rights and lefts), hand cast, hand turn ("allemande" in contra), diagonals cross, balance, even an occasional swing. As a little aside, heys and gypsies did not exist in contras until they were borrowed from ECD about 30 years ago. Other ECD figures not usually found in contras: set, side (two kinds), arm, poussette, full figure 8 (as opposed to half), hey for 3, crossover heys, two-hand turn, turn single, and various instructions for getting from point A to B in various ways.

Footwork is generally a simple walking/running step, but sometimes a skip or skip-change is called for, as well as slipping. Although we haven't done this locally in

(Continued on page 4)



DANCE SCHEDULE SPRING 2002

CONTRA & ENGLISH COUNTRY DANCE

*Enjoy dancing a thriving tradition of flowing New England contras, plus other delights, to the irresistible rhythms of a live string band.

*All dances are taught and prompted, with no experience or partner necessary. Generally, the simpler dances are taught earlier in the evening.

*Enjoy an introductory workshop 30 minutes before each contra dance.

English Country Dances are also taught and prompted, no experience or partner necessary. Music is said to be like "folk-chamber music" and the dances are varied in tempo, formation, and spirit.

Wear comfortable clothes and shoes.

San Luis Obispo Veteran's Hall

801 Grand Ave.
(East of 101, Cal Poly SLO exit)

Time: (7:30 Lesson) **8:00 -11:00 Cost: \$7**

- March 9 **Greg McKenzie/Paddy O'Furniture**
- April 13 **Gary Shapiro/Free Fall**
- May 11 **Jonathan Southard/Growling Old Geezers**

Sponsored by
Central Coast Country Dance Society
Phone: (805) 541-0201

English Country Dances

Time: **7:30 - 9:30 Cost: \$2** (CD's) **or \$5** (live music)

Westside Community Center

423 W. Victoria
(where Victoria dead-ends at the 101, downtown side)

- March 5 **Gary Shapiro/Linelle Glass, Robert Winokur, Jean Olson**
- March 12 **Gary Shapiro/TBA**
- March 18 (Monday!) **Gary Shapiro/ Linelle Glass, Kristina Eriksen, Robert Winokur and John Sonquist**
- March 26 **Gary Shapiro/TBA**
- April 2 **Gary Shapiro/Robert Winokur, Jean Olson and friends**
- April 21 See Carrillo Ballroom schedule

Oak Park

(on Junipero at Calle Real. North 101 at Pueblo)

- May 21 **Gary Shapiro/TBA**
 - May 28 **Gary Shapiro/TBA**
- Sponsored by
Santa Barbara Country Dance Society
Phone: (805) 969-1511

Carrillo Ballroom

100 E. Carrillo St.
(Take the Carrillo exit off the 101, go east to Anacapa)

Time: (6:30 Lesson) **7:00-10:00 Cost: \$7** unless noted

- March 3 **Bob Stein/Squirrel Heads**
Bob Stein is a visiting caller from Michigan
- March 10 **Caller's Jubilee/Michaels Mixed Nuts**
(to Call, contact Gary Shapiro at: 682-5523)
- March 17 **Drew Tronvig/Kristina and Her Right Hand Stars**
- March 24 **Jeff Spero/Jump Fingers**
Spring potluck from **5:30 to 6:30** come early and enjoy!
- March 31 **Andy Wilson/White Noise**
Andy Wilson is an energetic caller from the Bay Area and **White Noise** is a new local band featuring Michael Mendelson, Jeff Spero and friends
- April 7 **Gary Shapiro/Southern Exposure**
- April 14 **Chuck Galt/Chameleons**
- April 21 **Beth Molaro/Growling Old Geezers (\$8 dance)**
Don't miss Beth Molaro, dance camp caller extraordinaire!
English Country Dance from **2:30 to 5:30** with **James Hutson/Linelle Glass, John Sonquist, Rick Drake, Kristina Eriksen, and Robert Winokur.**
potluck from **5:30 to 6:30**
- April 28 **Gary Shapiro/One Night Stan**
- May 5 **Barbara Stewart/Chopped Liver**
- May 12 **Leda Shapiro/Steve Shapiro and Friends**
- May 19 **Gary Shapiro/Kitchen Junket**

Sprung Floor Dance Festival

- May 25 (Oak Park) 2:30-5:30 Swing, Cajun or English Country dancing (to be decided) then, after a dinner break, enjoy contra dancing under the stars from 7:00-10:00
- May 26 1:30 PM-1:00 AM Enjoy a full day of Contra dancing with 4 different bands and callers and don't miss the Potluck dinner from 6:00-7:00
*** Watch for flyer with more info.***

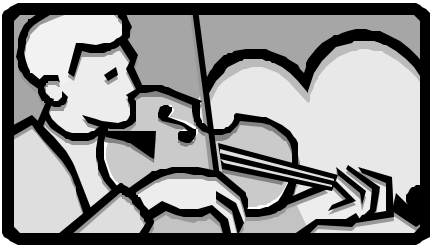
Sponsored by
Santa Barbara Country Dance Society
P.O. Box 21904, Santa Barbara CA 93109
Phone: (805) 969-1511
www.sbcds.org

Ojai Art Center

113 S. Montgomery

Time: (7:00 Lesson) **7:30 -10:30 Cost: \$7**

- April 5 (Friday) **Susan Michaels/Squirrel Heads**
- Sponsored by
Ojai Contra Dances
Phone: (805) 646-0832



We Want to Hear from You!

It's our constant goal to make the *Dance Star* reflect your wishes and needs as dancers. Therefore, we encourage you to send us your comments and articles. The best way is to email them to the Editor, Keith Connes, at dancestar@sbcds.org. If you don't have email capability, snail-mail them 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 possible publication in the *Dance Star*. We reserve the right to edit all submissions.

Hot Flashes Cool It at Carrillo

by Gary Shapiro

Sad but true: the Hot Flashes announced that the February 24 contra dance will be their final gig at the Carrillo Ballroom. Fiddler Erika Smith explained that she needs to dance more. The Carrillo Ballroom is certainly the place to do that. They are still a band and we may see them at other venues.

Other members of the group are Nance Cole (piano), Chris Lauer (mandolin and banjo), and Phil Levy (mandolin and banjo). Gary Arcemont joined the band recently, but then moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico.

The Flashes have been playing their sweet music together for about ten years, with their SBCDS debut coming on January 23, 1993, in Carpinteria. We were warned then to "Wear light clothing!"

"We're all very good friends," said Erika. She described how they share a lot of meals and how they all sing in the car on the way back from an SLO gig. "It's a good experience for everybody."

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recent years, some dances call for a rant step or polka step.

The contra dances in a typical evening have mostly been written in the last 30 years. The ECDs go back to publications of the 17th century, and were danced even before that. But new dances are being invented and danced.

That "dance trance" you've experienced or heard about can happen anywhere, not just at a dance, but I find myself more susceptible at a dance, ECD or contra. When learning ECD, if you know how to contra dance well, you have an advantage over someone who does not. You understand the longways set and progression. You understand the geography, you know who the 1s and 2s are, you know many of the figures, you understand the relationship between music and dance.

Our Tuesday dances are relatively small, we all take care of each other and there's no mad rush for partners. New dancers are always welcome and taken care of.

For more information about ECD, its music and its relationship to contra dancing, see the excellent articles at the ECD Mailing List Home Page <<http://www-ssrl.slac.stanford.edu/~winston/ECD.HTMLX>>. I've printed them out for any of the un-netted who would like to read them.

Essay Contest

Write a 400-800 word essay on "Why Contra Dancing has lasted so long in the United States" and win a weekend at *Harvest Moon*

Submit before May 6th to Keith Connes at: dancestar@sbcds.org

or mail to:

283 Carlo Dr., Goleta, CA 93117.

All entries become the property of the SBCDS and can be published (whole or in part) in the *Dance Star*

Adios, Los Olivos

The contra dances at Los Olivos have been canceled, due to lack of sufficient attendance. This unfortunate situation is "déjà vu all over again," recalling that similar attempts to sustain contra dances in Carpinteria and Goleta suffered similar fates. (Gary Shapiro wrote a dance whose brave title, *Carpinteria Forever*, proved over-optimistic.) Too bad. Among other things, the Los Olivos dances were providing the opportunity for relatively new callers, such as Donna and Elliott Karpeles, to gain valuable experience. And, of course, having another option for an evening of contra dancing is always nice. Our thanks to Sammy Ellis for her efforts to keep the Los Olivos dances going.

Santa Barbara Contra Dances are co-sponsored by SBCDS and CITY OF SANTA BARBARA

Parks & Recreation

Enriching People's Lives

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

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Opinions expressed are those of the individual authors. Express yours in the next issue.

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