

The Youth Dance Weekend

*by the Organizers of the Event**

September 12, 2008 marked the culmination of four years of dreaming, planning and organizing as a hall full of dancers kicked off the first annual Youth Dance Weekend (soon to be renamed something much hipper, we promise). There was contra, there were squares, there was English country dance, there was swing and that was all just in the first hour of the Friday evening dance. The rest of the weekend held much, much more in store for the eager participants. YDW was a blast for everyone involved, and also an organizational and logistical success, and we (the organizers) want to give you a taste of the highlights of the weekend from both perspectives.

YDW took place at Farm and Wilderness, a cluster of residential camp facilities nestled beside a lake in the rolling hills of central Vermont. Farm and Wilderness has a long history of connection to traditional music and dance, and with lots of cabins, a beautiful lakefront, a great dance hall with a nice floor and a well-equipped kitchen, it served as an ideal setting for our weekend. Somewhat to our surprise, YDW turned out to be something of an international gathering, with plenty of participants attending from the Northeast and mid-Atlantic states, several from the Midwest, a van-load from North Carolina, a contingent from Canada, and a few dedicated folks from California, Hawaii, Arizona, Montana and Texas. Of the 170 or so people in attendance (including staff and organizers) forty-two percent were age 18-22, forty-three percent 23-28, nine percent 29-35, and six percent 36 and over. We didn't accept campers under 18 for reasons of liability and insurance, and we were grateful for the participants of all ages who added a lot to the weekend.

We enjoyed the brassy sound of Elixir

playing for contras, squares, English and swing dancing throughout the weekend, with stellar calling by Nils Fredland. We were fortunate to have Elixir—one of a handful of hot young bands becoming popular with dancers of all ages—headlining YDW this year. They were joined by fiddler and singer Naomi Morse, who sat in on contras, English and swing, as well as leading shape note singing and playing for couple dancing. Sam Weiler made the trip all the way from California to call for English dances, and a plethora of talented campers helped out with music and calling for other events. The job of making the band and callers audible fell to Brian Gallagher who did a phenomenal job with the help of equipment that was generously loaned to us by Bob Mills.

A tremendous amount of camper talent allowed us to augment the hired staff and have dancing continue late into the night. We had camper photographers and videographers, a huge group of camper callers who helped make the caller workshop a tremendous success, lots of musicians jamming all over the place at all hours, some massive singing sessions (scheduled and unscheduled), an awesome morris performance by a handful of Maple Morris attendees during the Saturday night dance, campers and staff playing for Kerry sets at 1:30 in the morning on Saturday...the list goes on and on. We asked each camper to do one hour of volunteer work during the weekend, and some

did much more than that. The weekend was not without its logistical glitches, but things got done, problems got solved, and people figured things out. We're totally grateful for that participatory spirit.

One of the unique aspects of YDW compared to other camps we've attended is that we deliberately tried not to over-schedule



Logo drawing by Jordy Williams. Photos courtesy the organizers.

ourselves. Throughout most of the weekend we planned only one concurrent event, which helped build a sense of a shared experience and encouraged people to try things they might not otherwise have tried. We also had only one main hall, where we danced and ate meals, which was directly adjacent to the kitchen. Although this meant a bit of work moving tables and benches on and off the floor, the proximity of everything gave the weekend a cohesive feeling, allowed the kitchen crew to enjoy the music as they cooked, and gave us the chance to overlap meals with dance sessions. During the early morning waltz and Scandi sessions we moved some of the tables away, giving folks the option to eat, listen, dance, sip tea, or hang out.

On Saturday morning we woke up for a 10:00 am English dance session, where Sam Weiler led a selection of English dances to music by Elixir. Many of the dancers at the weekend had never tried English dancing, and it was important to us to create a setting where they could have fun trying it for the first time. After a sampling of English during the Friday dance, we were excited to see three full sets, perhaps around a hundred people, waking up to give it another try. We had another cluster of four English dances during the Saturday evening dance, where Softly Good Tummas and Barbarini's Tambourine were particularly big hits.

We also made swing and blues dancing a part of the weekend, with an hour long set before the Saturday evening dance, and selections sprinkled in to the other dances. We knew that a good number of our participants were great swing dancers, and that both Elixir and Husetop (the vocal trio of Naomi and Erica Morse and Anna Patton, with Owen Morrison) could offer great swing dance music. This was a nice compliment to the contra and English dancing, but turned out to be something that a good number of people didn't know how to do. Next year we plan to offer a swing dance workshop at some point, so people can pick up some basic skills and enjoy this part of the program.

The Saturday afternoon advanced contra dance session featured an energetic rendition of Money Musk, introduced by an original poem by Nils extolling the virtues of the dance, to a kickin' version of the tune with three fiddles and horns playing an arrangement by Owen Morrison. The packed hall of youngsters whooping their way through this classic dance (with no swinging!) was quite a sight.

On Saturday afternoon we held the Bread and Butter discussion session, so named because it was central to our sense of the purpose of the weekend. We estimate that eighty percent of the weekend participants attended the session, and we spent about an hour together considering the challenges that our various dance and music communities face. We posed questions together (such as "How do you get contra dancers interested in other styles of dance?" or "How can we help others dance under control?"), which we wrote up on large pieces of paper taped around the room. We passed out markers for people to write down their ideas, and set everyone free to brainstorm. (You can find the results, which include a lot of great ideas, at www.youthdanceweekend.org/bnb).

The large colorful pieces of newsprint remained up on the walls all weekend for folks to add to, comment on and discuss. At the end of the session we had a brief presentation from three representatives of CDSS: Chris Levey (Board member and chair of the Youth Task Group), Linda Henry (Outreach Manager**) and Ethan Hazzard-Watkins (Youth Projects Intern and YDW Committee member) to let people know about the resources available from CDSS as they go out into the world and try to put some of these ideas into action.

Bread and Butter was followed by concurrent callers' and musicians' workshops, giving aspiring performers a chance to discuss, share ideas, and learn from the staff and committee members. Rebecca Lay ran the calling discussion, while Ethan facilitated the musicians' group. The calling discussion was attended by about thirty-five aspiring and/or current callers of



Photos courtesy the organizers.

contras, squares and ECD. Much of the discussion focused on how to get started in calling. Topics included How to Get Hired, What/How to Practice, Where to Find Material, How to Find Calling Buddies, and much more. Everyone left the group with new connections and new ideas about all of the various aspects of leading traditional dance. About twelve people attended the musicians' session, where they learned a tune together by ear, discussed band interactions and how to arrange music for dancing, and talked about ways for young musicians to get gigs and find mentors. A group of musicians from the Boston area discovered each other and started brainstorming about putting together new events in their area.

One of the absolute highlights of YDW was the food. The food was incredible. Rebecca Lay took on the task of sourcing and purchasing ingredients, and managed to feed one hundred seventy or so people mostly organic meals with almost entirely local produce at a cost of around seventeen dollars per person for the entire weekend. Sarah Pilzer was the amazing kitchen manager, who designed the menus, developed the recipes, wrote detailed instructions for every piece of every meal, and oversaw the army of volunteers who were in and out of the kitchen throughout the weekend for their hour or so of work duty. Sarah took what would seem like a recipe for disaster (one full time cook in an unfamiliar kitchen, dozens of volunteers, a hundred seventy hungry growing people anxiously awaiting their meals) and turned it into a culinary triumph. Kudos to both of them.

Some downsides to the weekend:

- ❖ It rained. Oh well. We dealt with it, and next year we promise perfect sunny autumnal weather.
- ❖ It was dusty. Really dusty in the main hall. We don't know exactly where the dust came from, but it hung in the air and coated everything. Next year we'll have a more comprehensive sweeping plan and have a better indoor/outdoor shoe policy.
- ❖ The logistics of housing were tricky. We thought "Why do other camps make so much work for themselves assigning housing ahead of time? Our campers are smart enough to figure it out on their own." We discovered, at the last minute, that our map of the facility didn't match the list of cabins. A good number of people wandered around looking for

nonexistent cabins and finding others that weren't on the map. People sorted it out but we might want to join the trend and assign housing ahead of time next year.

- We told our participants the facility was rustic ahead of time, but some of them were a bit surprised by the outdoor KYBOs (composting toilets) and open-air showers. We don't know if anyone was mortally (or morally) offended by these arrangements, but we think it turned out okay.

We organized the Youth Dance Weekend (YDW) with three goals in mind, and we were successful in meeting each of them. First, we organized an event that young people attended in droves, and where folks had a great time dancing, singing, playing music, and hanging out together. The camp was more than full, over eighty percent of our one hundred seventy participants were 28 or younger, our price structure was accessible to young dancers, and we still ended with a surplus. Plus, the weekend felt like a continuous, vibrant, smile-all-the-time kind of party. Second, we encouraged networking, leadership development and discussion of important issues in the broader dance community to be big parts of our event, and we know of many young people who went home excited about getting involved and organizing things in their local dance communities. Finally, we documented the steps we took over the past year putting together YDW, and we plan to compile a manual that will help other folks to organize similar events.

One of the things we found most exciting about the weekend was the sense of an evolving network of young dance and music leaders meeting each other, exchanging stories and experiences, and forging connections. People went home feeling like an important part of a national movement—a movement to promote music and dance traditions, to make sure young people everywhere get excited about this scene, and to ensure that our intergenerational communities thrive and grow. We look forward to another great weekend next year, and to continuing these conversations and connections. For more info on next year's weekend, keep an eye on our web site: www.youthdanceweekend.org.

P.S. We are very grateful to the New Leaders, Good Leaders fund and the staff of CDSS, as well

as countless other wise leaders in our community, for their generous support and assistance. We couldn't have done it without you!

* The organizers: Ethan Hazzard-Watkins, Brattleboro, VT; Sarah Pilzer, New York, NY; Brian Gallagher, Northfield, MA; Julia Nickles, Northfield, MA; Rebecca Lay, Brattleboro, VT; Maggie Zander, Ashfield, MA.

** Linda oversees grant applications for individuals and organizations seeking support for events, publications and other projects. If you are interested in applying for a grant contact her at linda@cdss.org.

The next Youth Dance Weekend will be September 25-27, 2009. See their webpage for information on performers — www.youthdanceweekend.org/. This article appeared in the CDSS News, issue 206, January/February 2009.