

Spreading Our Wings to Fly

by Mary Wesley

Many things may come to mind when you hear the words “Mad Robin,” especially if you are a dancer. Recently though, should you find yourself in Burlington, Vermont on a fourth Friday, you might find a lot of people at the local contra dance wearing buttons that say, “I’m a Mad Robin!” These are members of the Mad Robin Callers Collective (MRCC), a group formed in 2009 to foster and support new contra dance callers. I was among the founding members.

The MRCC started with a handful of people in our dance community with interest in calling dances that outpaced the ready opportunities. I was fresh out of a weeklong CDSS callers course offered at American Dance & Music Week, and taught by Lisa Greenleaf. I learned a lot and I wanted to continue the momentum, but I missed the camaraderie of a cohort of people trying to learn something together.

The group started informally. Our goal was to provide one another with helpful feedback and improve our calling. Initially this involved a lot of potlucks, pouring over dance cards, long discussions about how to teach a ladies chain and, especially, practicing dances in people’s living rooms. We also worked as a group to find opportunities to get ourselves out of living rooms and into real dance halls. This is where our “Collective” nature was developed, because the Mad Robins have always presented themselves as a *group* of callers for hire. Taking on gigs as a group allowed each of us to get valuable mic time without being responsible for the whole dance before we were ready to fly solo, as well as allowing us to enjoy dancing and calling at the same event.

Over time these dance parties and potlucks gave way to regular meetings so we could manage and develop our calling schedule. We also started organizing workshops, bringing in experienced callers to meet with us. In January 2010 we started our monthly dance series to provide a regular opportunity for new callers to get on stage. We hire different bands each month, but the Collective always takes care of the calling, with anywhere from two to six callers leading dances over the course of the evening. It’s hard to believe that the Robins have been going for over four years now! Our series is going strong and we continue to have a mix of callers involved, some very experienced now (thanks in part to the support of the Collective) and some just getting started.

It has proved challenging to run a dance series *and* focus on our original goal of caller development, but over all we think something valuable has been

created. Here are a few things we’ve learned along the way that might be of interest to new callers, to dance organizers and to dancers alike:

Informal practice is good; involve your community.

We love our practice parties. Gathering in someone’s home provides a comfortable, safe space. We do our best to invite friends and community members to participate as dancers, making sure they understand that the nature of the party is for callers to test the waters and not worry about being perfect. We also strongly encourage dancers to provide constructive feedback to callers. This experimental and interactive environment really takes the pressure off. It ensures against both the new caller(s) or the participating dancers undergoing any kind of discouraging, traumatic experience. The people invited to the parties are resources for the caller and the invitees should know this and be thusly honored. They are there to help the caller learn to be a better leader. If the caller presents him/herself as someone who would like feedback on how to better meet the needs of the assembled crowd then every mistake becomes an opportunity for lively discussion. Finally, these gatherings are also a great way to help dancers in your community “buy in” to the idea of developing new callers. This way, when your community sees you on stage, they are even more eager to be supportive because they have been brought into the process. If you falter, they know you’ve been practicing and that you’ll be learning from the experience.

Calling by committee can be tricky.

During our first year calling together we learned a lot about the intricacies of “calling by committee.” Just because you have a greater number of less-experienced callers doesn’t mean you balance out all the possible variables that might fluster one new caller. Our first gigs tended to be small, community events with lots of beginner dancers and often less-experienced musicians as well. However, I found it incredibly valuable to be able to share the weight with fellow callers in such situations. New callers can get easily flustered if a dance goes awry; if someone else is there to call the next one it can be a great

relief. Also, if you bring a group of callers to a small community event you automatically have more help on the floor. Only one person calls at a time. The rest of us dance and learn what works and doesn't work for an inexperienced crowd, as well as providing a few experienced plants in the audience.

So from our perspective as budding callers, these gigs are rich learning opportunities, but you also need to consider the experience of the dancers. You just never know what kind of a crowd you'll have at a dance event. Callers need to be flexible and accommodating with their programming, which is more difficult when you are operating as a group. Starting our own dance series was one way to address this challenge because it allowed us to control a few of the variables, namely, the music. As a general rule it's good to pair new callers with more experienced musicians, and visa versa, and that has been our approach in booking bands for our fourth Friday dance, and we also do our best to plan thoughtfully, as a group, to put on the best dance possible.

Create the right time and place to spread your wings.

I believe a large part of the success of the Mad Robins is due to our very supportive dance community and, as I mentioned above, we took steps to build that support. We started by building cohesion as a group. Cultivating a group of peers who provide mutual support is invaluable and such a spirit of cooperation will be attractive to organizers who want to foster community members seeking to make a contribution. Whatever role you play, if you become visible in your community in this way, as an

active participant both supported by and supportive of that community, then you are helping to create a good environment for new callers, new dancers and new musicians. You are also building the trust of your community and creating better odds for success when the time comes for you to try something more daring, like taking to the stage.

Of course we are still learning as we go! As our local community has supported us, we have always wanted to support the broader community of callers and organizers that we feel ourselves a part of. We think the callers collective model is great and could be adapted and adopted almost anywhere. If you have questions or want to learn more, and especially if you're doing something similar in your community and you want to talk shop, please get in touch! We were inspired by the Hatchlings in St. Louis and I know many other people put on calling parties of various kinds. We'd love to compare notes. To reach us, visit our website at <http://www.madrobincallers.org> or give us a shout on our Facebook page.

Happy Calling!

Current members of the Mad Robin Callers Collective include: Mary Wesley, Peter Johnson (founding members), Luke Donforth, Sophia Donforth, Don Perley, Darren Schibler, Guillaume Sparrow-Pepin, and our wonderful music booker and sound guy Brian Perkins.



Mary Wesley is a dance caller, leader and organizer working both in her local Vermont community and farther afield to bring a little dancing into everyones lives. Beyond calling, she works on projects with CDSS, the Vermont Folklife Center and Burlington-based nonprofit

Young Tradition Vermont. Check out her website to find when she's headed to a dance community near you, <http://www.marywesley.com>.

Web extra: see the "Criteria for Good Callers" checklist as developed by the Mad Robins when this issue is posted online in early September, <http://www.cdss.org/cdss-news.html>.

Peter Johnson presents a new Mad Robin caller with a personalized pin after a calling debut at the group's fourth Friday series; photo by Mary Wesley.

