

All Join Hands

Dispatches from the world of community dancing

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by *Marian Rose*

Amongst the members of CDSS and in the wider world of participatory dance, there exists a talented, intelligent, energetic and growing army of dance leaders with a deep love of and commitment to community dancing. More than being simply a step on the road to 'real' dancing, community dancing is a joyful, complex, and powerful phenomenon that deserves respect in equal measure with other forms of participatory dance.

Initiated by Paul Rosenberg, this column aims to explore the world of community dance and to raise its profile among the general CDSS membership. Over the period of several newsletters, we will present real life experiences of those of us who swim in the 'community' waters, along with anecdotes, techniques, tips, and repertoire.

But what is this thing called community dancing? A slippery question, for sure. In a recent thread on the Pourparler discussion group, the general consensus was that there is no one-size-fits-all definition. Most people felt that 'community' was a good word, but that it has a wide variety of meanings and is not particularly dynamic. Some people suggested 'barn dance', 'traditional', or 'old-time', but these, too can have varied meanings and connotations that may be deemed undesirable. In the end, we opted for the more descriptive title that you see at the top of this column and have added graphically some of the many terms that dance leaders have used to describe their events.

Perhaps it is easier to say what community dancing is not. It is not high level contra, square, English or ritual dancing, although it may include elements of all of those. Dancers at a community event are unlikely to be highly skilled, may never attend a dance weekend or summer camp, and in fact may have never danced in public in their lives. Consequently, the dance repertoire tends to be simple,

varied, playful, and tailored to the style of event and the needs of the people attending.

It has been said that a **dance community** is a group of people who come together to share their love for a certain kind of dance such as contra, square, swing, cajun, or salsa.

On the other hand, a **community dance** is a group of people linked by geography or common interest who come together in a celebration that includes dancing. Some examples of such pre-existing groups are schools, neighbourhoods, seniors' centers, scouts, church youth groups, farmers' collectives and political groups. The prime goal is to celebrate and create connection, facilitated by the joy of inclusive dancing.

Many community dances are occasional or one-time events such as weddings, birthdays, fundraisers, harvest dances, and bar/bat mitzvahs. Others tend to be more regular, such as dances in seniors' centers and for people with disabilities or medical conditions. Some communities have regularly-scheduled come-one-come-all dance events, but this is a less common scenario than we are familiar with in other CDSS-supported genres. School events may fall anywhere on this continuum and will be dealt with more thoroughly in another column.

Being a community dance leader in no way precludes also being an active participant in other disciplines under the CDSS umbrella of anglo-american song and dance



Paul Rosenberg

Photo: Howie Eskin

traditions. It does, however, suggest a wider vision and a different set of skills and repertoire. It is worth noting that numbers of people are making their living at it without the traveling required of a contra caller.

For instance, consider the path taken by Paul Rosenberg, the founder and long-time director of the Dance Flurry Festival, who has been making a living as both a contra dance caller and community dance leader for the past three decades. "In the contra and English dance community, some people perceive community barn dancing as low status, mainly valuable as a point of entry to the 'real' dances. I know, because I was one of those folks! My contra calling career included many nights of challenging dances, and I loved that repertoire. I was very upset when one caller ended a fun contra evening with the Virginia Reel instead of a zesty contra; boy did I complain to my dancing friends!"

However, during that time Paul was calling both contras and community dances, and his loyalties began to shift. "In my last few years as a contra caller, I often felt anxiety about satisfying the dancers' desire for nothing but contras all night long, while I wanted to lead a mix of formations. It felt like I was back at my 'day job.' However, my appreciation of community dancing had grown immensely and when I found the contra community did not want to do circle dance mixers, squares, or easy contras I decided to retire as a contra caller and call only community barn and family dances."

Since that time, Paul has been doing up to 250 dance gigs a year in schools, community centres and grange halls and has produced two CD's entitled "Peel the Banana" and "Dance the World Around" with a book and DVD of these dances in the works. He says that calling for community dancing requires a different skill set than for contras. "... it requires a repertoire of dances that can be done by people



Paul Rosenberg (center) calls a community dance at Harmony Hall

Photo: Howie Eskin

from ages 3 to 103... circles, longways, squares, scattered and other formations, partner and non-partner dances. I almost always start with the Spiral Dance and finish with the Virginia Reel, both big crowd pleasers. I love the Spiral because it draws people in immediately without needing to find a partner; all they need to do is to follow me. The Virginia Reel is the ultimate longways dance with all the classic ingredients."

"One of my delights is the joy these dancers show at anything I throw at them. They just enjoy being together in a community dancing to live music and with other friendly community-minded people. One of my favorite parts of a community dance evening is the show of appreciation for the musicians and me at the end of the evening."

Paul points out that he still occasionally shows up at a contra dance and usually has a great time dancing. You can find out more about Paul's work at homespun.biz.

Throughout these columns, you will find references to Pourparler, an annual gathering of community dance leaders that CDSS has been supporting for a decade. It was started by Sanna Longden, a multicultural dance educator who was bemoaning the fact that she had little contact with other like-minded dance leaders. So, in 1997, she invited all of them to her home in Evanston, Illinois to share their expertise, and the tradition has been continuing ever since. It has developed into a vibrant group of dance leaders that meet in a different location each year, usually in the fall months to share the work that we all do. In the group, there are experts in anglo-american traditions as well as international folk dancing, working with school children, pre-schoolers, language learners, seniors and people with disabilities. If you are at all interested in diving into the community dance pool, I highly recommend that that you make the time to go to Pourparler. Among other things, you will be invited to join the Pourparler listserve, an invaluable resource which is open only to people who have attended Pourparler at least once. The next Pourparler takes place in San Antonio, TX on Nov 1-4, 2018. For more info: nfo-usa.org/pourparler/.

All the dances mentioned in this column are available in resources for sale in the CDSS online store, in the section entitled **Children and Community Dance**.

Marian Rose is a musician, dance leader, linguist and former CDSS board member. Find out more at marianrose.com.