

Musicians Column—Back Row Bands

by Sue Songer

A new column for dance musicians, coordinated by David Firestine. This month's guest author is Sue Songer.

“That’s how I learned to play.” *David Kaynor, fiddler and caller, Montague, MA*

“It was a great thing to witness the big rush the dancers got out of the band’s music and to be a small part of that.” *Jennifer Publicover, flautist, Halifax, NS (referring to occasions during the CDSS Centennial Tour)*

“In addition to furthering the sense of community amongst musicians of all levels, the best thing is being up close to the ‘action’ onstage that makes the magic.” *Sherry Butler Lowe, fiddler, Bradenton, FL*

“It’s an opportunity to learn new music and learn new interpretations of that music, with folks whom I might not get to play with as often otherwise—a tremendous inspiration!” *Anne Duston, fiddler, Portland, OR.*

The above comments from musicians of diverse skills and backgrounds all refer to the same experience—sitting behind the hired band at a contra dance and playing as a member of what this article refers to as a Back Row Band. Participants in the Back Row are usually small in number. They are not miked and might not know the repertoire of the hired band. They probably won’t receive any coaching from the Front Row. They are not expected to play the tunes well (or even at all) but rather to grab onto whatever notes they can, likely by ear (although sometimes the hired band might have sheet music or a set list available). The purpose of playing in a Back Row Band is not really to learn tunes or to play them fluently. It is to observe, participate in, and experience dance music in a way that can never be learned from a tune book or recording

There is a distinct difference between sometimes large open bands that play from time to time in many venues and the Back Row Band setting. Open (all comers) bands typically are directed by leaders who are responsible to the open band members for choosing or teaching tunes that are commonly known and imparting information and instruction about

how the music will be played. Open bands can involve considerable up-front organization. Extra mics might be set up on stage for willing musicians.

Playing in a Back Row Band is different from playing in an open band because the Back Row will be carried by the sound of the hired band rather than the large-group sound of the open band. Back Rowers could be complete beginners or accomplished musicians. The Back Row Band will feel the lift and drive, the ebb and surge of the music and the responses these variations bring from dancers. It is a terrific

method of learning by ear, whether trying to discern a key signature or emulate a style of playing. It is an excellent exercise in fitting in with other musicians. Back Row members may not come away from the evening with new tunes nailed

down, but they may bring home some tune titles they want to pursue further and some techniques and arrangements (a.k.a. “tricks”) they would like to try in their own settings.

Years ago many places, including my own dance community in Portland, OR, actively encouraged Back Row Bands. I was able to learn dance musicianship by sitting and noodling behind a variety of bands. During the 20+ years I have been hired to play for dances, my bands have welcomed numerous Back Rows on our stages. Today this practice doesn’t appear quite as widespread as it once was, so I am writing to encourage others to give it a try. Besides the benefits to the Back Row musicians, this setting fosters the development of local musicianship, creates bonds between experienced and newer musicians, and delights dancers, who often enjoy the community spirit and energy coming from a stage that holds more than three or four musicians.

By now, some of you are likely thinking, “Yes, but what if...” What if there isn’t room on the stage? What if the Back Row Band is too loud? What if it is too distracting? What if a member is overly demanding? What if it prevents me from enjoying my bandmates? What if someone brings a bagpipe? These valid concerns can all be managed through thought

“Today this practice doesn’t appear quite as widespread as it once was, so I am writing to encourage others to give it a try.”

and attention beforehand. The guidelines and role clarifications below will help make a Back Row Band experience successful for all involved. Communities will of course need to adapt these suggestions to fit their own circumstances.

Basic Requirements

- *Willingness and Suitability of the Hired Band.* If a band member, the band as a whole, or the caller will not be able to focus adequately on their own performance while others are on stage with them, if they are not comfortable being observed at close range, they are not good candidates for hosting a Back Row Band. At least one person in the band will need some ability and enough mental space to address probably minor issues that might arise from Back Row players.
- *Sufficient Room on the Stage.* The stage or playing area must be large enough to accommodate both the hired band and the Back Row with enough separation between the two groups that the Back Row will not interfere with anything band members need to accomplish among themselves. The amount of stage space needed depends on the number and types of instruments involved and the needs of the hired band. If the stage is not suitable, a Back Row might not be possible.
- *Adequate monitors and hall amplification.* With adequate monitors, the hired band members will hear each other well and will hardly hear the Back Row Band at all. Without adequate monitors, a Back Row might not be possible. There also must be adequate amplification of the hired band in the hall. Otherwise the Back Row might overpower the band on the dance floor. With good amplification, the Back Row will probably not be heard on the floor.
- *Appropriate Instruments in the Back Row.* Some instruments such as bagpipes, a drum kit, a bombarde will overpower the hired band no matter what. Someone must be able to politely tell these musicians that the Back Row is not appropriate for their instrument.

When the above conditions are met, the setting is conducive to a Back Row Band. Clarification of roles is the next order of business. Band concerns about the Back Row demands and potential for distraction, auditory and otherwise, can be greatly alleviated by making sure the roles of each group are clear. The guidelines that follow are usually implicitly understood in communities with a long-standing

Back Row friendliness. They may need to be spelled out in places that are trying it for the first few times.

The hosting musicians are responsible for:

- Producing their very best possible music for the caller and the dancers. This is their first responsibility and where their primary attention must be directed.
- Making all of the musical decisions and choices.
- Informing the Back Row Band (or one member) if they are too loud or distracting to the band in any other way.
- Arranging the seating on the stage.
- Saying no to the bagpiper or to any other Back Row musician who is making the evening challenging. (This degree of difficulty rarely occurs.)
- Informing the Back Rowers about upcoming music only as time allows. This might mean little or no information for them. That's OK.
- Projecting a welcoming attitude even if there isn't time for much else.

The Back Row Band members, no matter what their level of accomplishment and experience, are responsible for:

- Following any directions or requests of the hosting band and caller with the understanding that they may not have time to explain or to be as congenial as the situation deserves.
- Blending in and following along musically. Staying out of the way of the band.
- Not asking the band for special favors such as a mic or a solo or a particular seat
- Being musically alert—falling in with whatever the band is doing, whether or not the band has provided advance information. For instance:
- If the fiddles in the band have dropped out, the Back Row fiddles should also drop out.
- If the band is playing quietly, the Back Row should follow suit.
- If the band has a lot of fancy arrangements, it is probably best for the Back Row to drop out during switches and endings so as not to interfere with whatever the band has planned.
- Being watchful for upcoming switches and endings. Band members might not have time to give cues to the Back Row (although many will do so).
- Being OK with not knowing the music, perhaps not playing unfamiliar tunes as well as one would like to (or at all), and minimal attention from the band.

continued on page 13

the Philadelphia area—much wider outreach than usual. To provide an easy-to-remember link, we established the website, DanceWithJaneAusten.com. Two Wednesdays featured the Jane Austen theme. Our regular dancers were excited about welcoming newcomers and making the events special (many dressed-up, or brought refreshments). These events enjoyed a huge surge in attendance, averaging over 80 dancers per night. Despite this success, we did not pick-up any new longterm dancers.

Some thoughts:

- 1) Piggybacking on TV/movie publicity gave us a priceless boost in visibility.
- 2) Many non-dancers are willing to try dancing, given a special opportunity.
- 3) Next time, we might put less effort into PR, and more into thoughtful, systematic follow-up of new prospects.

Our next Hive Mind topic: MILESTONE CELEBRATIONS. People celebrate birthdays, weddings, memorials, anniversaries, and more with music and dance. Please share your story of such a celebration. What elements made it special and memorable? Were there any lasting effects for the community?

Please submit your brief story (200 word limit) at <http://www.cdss.org/hive>.

(Back Row Bands, continued from page 11)

Some Back Row musicians will advance to Front Row playing, while others will be forever content with participation in the Back Row. No matter what the goals of a Back Row player, this setting provides a hands-on, ears-on, in-the-moment, on-the-fly experience with advantages laid out above. The hired band has the pleasure of two kinds of participation in its music—that of the dancers on the floor along with the energy and enthusiasm coming from the Back Row behind. Encouraging a Back Row is the essence of “Welcome” for musicians—a strongly held value throughout our entire community. I hope those of you not already doing so will add this possibility to your dances.

Discuss Back Row Bands further on the List-Serv musicians@lists.sharedweight.net and on Facebook at Contra/ECD/traditional dance musicians.

*Sue Songer has been playing for contra dances in Back Row and Front Row bands since the early 1990s. She directs the 75-member Portland Megaband and, along with Clyde Curley, is the editor of The Portland Collection tune books.**

*available from the CDSS Store, <http://store.cdss.org>

Dancing Lad

by Marge Bruchac

She's thinking of a dancing lad
who caught her eye with soulful glance
when she was young, and wild, and free
and nothing loved more than to dance.

Perhaps it was his steady gaze
that caught her heart and held it fast
perhaps it was his artful steps
or was it when he made her laugh?

While all around them swirled the crowd
in that small space, the world stood still
apart from cares of work and time,
no anger, sorrow, love or loss
in that old wooden dancing hall
the music paused, they held their breath.

Two strangers met, and danced, and then
the music called them off again
to other lives.

It matters not, the name, the time,
the places where we solace find
betwixt where we would like to be
and where we are.

Outside the bounds of dancing halls
none can predict the steps we'll take
or mark what notes will sound the tune,
what voice will rise to call the dance
how to progress.

The music moves her, slower now
she ponders all that life has dealt.
And though her memory fades at times,
she still can spot that dancing lad,
she sees him now, across the hall.

His eyes meet hers.
She laughs.

© Marge Bruchac 2007

