

All Join Hands

Dispatches from the world of community dancing

Organizing a Family/Community Dance Series, Part 2

by Marian Rose

Introduction

This is the second of two articles looking at the challenging and rewarding work of organizing a community dance series. The first article which appeared in the June 2019 issue of the CDSS news presented some examples of the kinds of dance series currently happening across North America and talked about the organizers' guiding vision, strategies for promotion and the difficult but essential topic of finances. This second article will focus on repertoire, music, and "extras" that contribute to the sense of community that we are hoping to nurture.

Both articles are based on contributions from the participants in a recent CDSS-sponsored Web Chat entitled 'Family and Community Dance Organizers Unite!' as well as valuable input from members of the Pourparler online chat group. They represent dance series held in large cities and rural towns in both Canada and the U.S.

Music

Music is the beating heart of any dance evening and is often the defining feature of a dance series. Most organizers would love to have access to competent, energetic musicians who play a wide variety of styles, can easily pick up new material, and who contribute to the dynamic energy in the room. However, the availability and skill level of musicians varies widely from place to place, a reality which directly affects other decisions for both the organizers and the caller. Here are some examples from Pourparler participants:



Village Dance, Dummerston VT (Andy Davis):

"Live music is essential. It is a main draw. One of our favorite roles in the community is providing a venue for young musicians to play for dancers. Over the years we have had many musicians play for the Village Dance who have gone on to be in actual touring bands. It is a well-known phenomenon around here that when a youth band is playing, we will have a bigger crowd."

Family Dance, Sebastopol, CA: "Rodney Miller has a young musician program – he emails them a tune list and encourages them to join the band."

Albany NY (Paul Rosenberg): "I hire a variety of local musicians and callers. Our musicians play very danceable tunes, without bells and whistles. I love that they make eye contact with the dancers, and that they feed off the dancers' energy. The musicians may not know the tunes that I want, but they are willing to learn them."

Calgary Old-Time Experience (Leslie Gotfrit): "This series is a shared vision between me and one musician, a bass/guitar player who also owns good sound equipment and is a professional sound tech. He and I do the work and we hire a fiddler and a guitar or banjo player. We pay very well, another part of our vision. Hired musicians help set up and take down but the musicians are not invested like my colleague and myself."

Belfast ME (Chrissy Fowler): "Open all-comers band is critical -- all ages, all skill levels, all instruments. Belfast has a vibrant traditional music scene, Irish jam, weekly jams with a standard local repertoire. Lots of high school and middle school kids come for the early dance, to play music or dance. No one is amplified. All are equally important."



Viroqua, WI (Sue Hulsether): *“Open band. One of the organizers usually makes sure there is a core of fiddle, guitar, banjo and the rest just seems to take care of itself. I remember one dance where we had only 9 people. The musicians in the crowd rotated in and out of dancing, so we had a square of dancers and one musician playing for each dance, all evening long.”*

Smithers, BC (Marian Rose): *“The large and dynamic fiddling group here (featuring fiddlers from age 6 to 75) concentrates much of their energy on producing elaborate stage productions. For them, the ‘Fiddle Dances’ are a chance to let off steam and have fun together, while at the same time getting experience playing for dances. Calling for their dances, therefore, also involves coaching them on what tunes to play, how to make them danceable and how to work with a caller. Happily, they are all fine musicians who learn well by ear and are eager to learn new styles. I have had no difficulty introducing some basic international dances to our repertoire.”*

However, not everyone has access to competent, flexible musicians. Sam Baumgarten has organized a monthly international family dance series for the past eight years in Bridgewater, MA. Because the size of his group limits his budget, he rarely uses live music, but does try to hire some musicians occasionally. The Pomeroyes in Fort St. John, BC have been holding barn dances (in their barn!) for a decade using only recorded music, an event that is bursting at the seams with young dancers and has become central to the cultural life in their rural community.

Repertoire

The vision of a dance series and the musicians that are available will inform the style of dancing that is done. For most of the groups presented in this article, the focus is on simple, fun dances that can be done by dancers of a wide range of ages. Some groups specialize in Anglo-American dances, or old-time squares and others feature more couple dancing and international folk dancing. Often there is a wide variety of skill levels and a certain level of chaos, so there is a trade-off between welcoming beginners and building skills. Some gems of wisdom from our experts:

- **Emphasize fun—this is a party.**
- **Simple dances, variety of formations.**
- **Encourage flexible partnering.**
- **Don’t be afraid of repetition; some groups do the same opening or closing dance every month.**
- **Not many mixers—kids want to stay with their parents.**
- **Not many squares or fixed size sets.**

More in-depth approaches to repertoire:

Sam Baumgarten: *“I open with a circle dance (thus allowing late comers to jump in), then follow up with mixers and Sicilians circles. Then, depending on the numbers, I may go to either contras or squares. I come prepared to go in multiple directions depending on the crowd. I always close with a calming dance in the Sacred Circle genre. I tend to vary the program week to week, but almost always re-visit dances over the course of a season, especially folk dances that may take more time to learn. I walk the fine line of challenging more experienced dancers while keeping newcomers comfortable. Mostly, I try to resist the urge to get more complicated. Everyone enjoys the basics and simple patterns and feeling successful is most important.”*

Angie Pomeroy: *“The first hour features family-friendly dances and the second hour dances to please the crowd of energetic young adults who flock to the dance. They use recorded music exclusively, which has resulted in a repertoire that mixes the ubiquitous northern-Canada standards such as two-step, polka and schottische with longways sets, square dances, singing games and jiving.”*

Andy Davis: *“Mostly Anglo-American dances. Singing games are often worked into the program. Every dance includes longways sets, circle mixers and keepers, Sicilian circles, scatter dances, squares and contras. We have had a Quebecois themed dance recently with music provided by musicians from a local Quebecois music session. We have no desire to become a mainstream contra dance. We fill a niche and enjoy doing so.”*

Emily Addison (Ottawa): *“FUN FUN FUN, accessible for all ages, not overly kid-focused dances (some singing games wouldn’t appeal to adults who are there without kids), variety in formation! Repetition is good and happy to keep at the same level of dancing over time.”*

Paul Rosenburg: *“Some of the dances are funny and/or silly! We do lots of singing games. There are certain dances that we have been doing since 1994 and we are always adding in new dances. Probably 25% of dances are the same most evenings, but I use a large variety of dances for the other 75%. We are not looking to raise the level of dancing, although I occasionally will talk about how the music relates to the dance, or I’ll teach a tiny bit about the mechanics of certain steps or figures. Generally, we just want to provide a fun time for families to do things together.”*

Sue Hulsether: *“Some old-favorites, and some new ones – our regular dancers love both ends of the spectrum. There is no clear need on anyone’s part to change the level of dancing, but some adult dancers yearn for a bit of a challenge. Combined with an ethic that children are welcome and encouraged to dance, these desires sometimes run cross-purpose. For most of*

