

Modern Western Square Dance and Contra

Mary Wesley: Do you see dance communities of square dancers?

Phil Jamison: Well, I mean, the most obvious is modern western square dancing, which is definitely a dance community. You know, you wouldn't you wouldn't go to it unless you're part of the club and taking lessons and know what to do. It's not...

Mary Wesley: It wouldn't be allowed. Isn't that right?

Phil Jamison: Right, you wouldn't be allowed. You might be invited to sign up for lessons, but that's definitely a square dance community. As far as old times squares, no, I don't, I don't see that. And I think the parallels between modern contra dancing and modern Western square dancing are remarkable. How the two forms have kind of evolved the way they have.

So modern western square dancing evolved after the Second World War, and it was...there were groups in California who were getting together and do square dances, but they wanted to do more complicated choreography. And a lot of the choreography came from a dance educator, Lloyd Shaw, who was in Colorado and taught summer classes for dance callers. And he was devising fancier choreography that...he had a performance dance group of high school kids who would go out and perform fancy choreography, for show, on stages. Anyway, there were dance groups who wanted to learn this beautiful new choreography, and it was more complex. But that became the direction that this whole modern movement of square dancing in the '50s picked up on.

At the time you started getting traveling callers, which you didn't really have before that, and rather...it wasn't affordable to travel with a band, so they started dancing to records. And so you have a professional dance caller with a record player and a pile of records going from community to community doing this and the dances got more and more complicated, whereas the traditional dances were relatively simple. Anybody could join in. These you actually had to take lessons to learn how to do. So people started signing up for square dance classes to learn how to do this. And the dancers imitating Lloyd Shaw's group started wearing Western outfits, and the women had big, huge puffy skirts with lots of crinolines underneath. And the guys had, you know, Western shirts and maybe a little kerchiefs and, you know, just developed this whole costume of these dancers. And so when you go to a modern western square dance, it would be very noticeable that people are dressing for the occasion and they're part of the club. They join...would form clubs where they get together every week, say, and they'd have visiting callers come through with the records. And it just evolved in this whole other form of square dancing and a lot of the records where...they kind of did away with the old fiddle tunes. The records evolved into more pop tunes and realizing that dancers enjoyed the pop music of the day, whatever the day was. And so they would devise calls to go with the latest pop songs. And that's when a lot of singing calls came in, because we had microphones and, and it just went from there. And it was a huge boom. You know, in the '60s and '70s and a lot...and it's declined in numbers now. So the number of clubs that are out there has definitely gone down. And I think

there's not as much emphasis on the fancy costumes and stuff, but it's still a very popular thing across the country.

Mary Wesley: And how about the sort of parallels to contra dancing, as you see?

Phil Jamison: One thing that the modern western square dancers did was they wanted to get away from the old visiting couple squares where one couple at a time works their way around the set and they wanted to come up with choreography where everybody's active. And, when I started calling contra dances most of the dances I was calling, or that we were doing back then, you'd have an "active" and "inactive" dancer. And they...the lines were not as long and that you'd work your way up the line and when you get to the top of the set, you become active. You and your partner are active all the way down the line. And those dances worked until the lines in bigger halls in the 80s, they got much longer. And at that point, people want to do choreography where everybody's active. So now, it used to be when I was calling a contra dance, I'd say, "You're the active couple, you're the inactive couple." We don't use those words anymore because the new choreography, by and large, everybody's active all the time and basically doing the same thing. So there's a parallel where in the modern western square dance world, they didn't want to be standing there waiting for their turn to come around and they devised choreography where everybody's active all the time.

I could, I could say something about contra dancers apparel, but I don't really need to go there. But the contra dancers will know what I'm talking about. But, there's a definite...people wear something specific for the dance. When you go to a contra dance weekend, you see people dressing up, if you will. It's not a...I don't know how it'd be for somebody just walking in off the street to a hardcore contra dance to be able to jump right in and know what to do. It can be intimidating. And I, here at Warren Wilson, where I teach, we had the Farmers Ball here, I've spoken to many students who said, "Yeah, I tried going to the contra dance, but they were all professional dancers and I didn't know what to do and I didn't feel welcome." And, and it's kind of a similar kind of a thing. So rather than, "Hey, it's a community dance, everybody's welcome, regardless of your dancing ability." It felt a little bit like that.

And maybe a third point I'd make is is that the modern western square dancing really divorced itself from the music and in contra dancing I see the music has evolved into music for the contra dance. Rather than just traditional fiddle tunes it's all kinds of other stuff now. And, and so the music, I feel, has evolved along with the dances as a way to kind of spice things up and appeal to the dancers. So rather than just somebody playing a traditional, you know, playing a traditional fiddle tune with a funky piano accompaniment, there's all kinds of other things involved now. And medleys and solos and just different things that liven up the dances and the dancers whoop, and you know, they hear the changes and the medleys, you know, the dynamics of medleys and all that. I feel that that's a change too.

Mary Wesley: That's really interesting, I hadn't thought about that, that parallel or made that comparison

Dare To Be Square

Phil Jamison: Yes, I see myself as an advocate for old times squares, certainly. You know, I felt like for years I was being kind of battered down any time I wanted to call a square people would boo me and, you know, just say, "Hey, we prefer contras around here" and OK, well... and this goes back to the 1980s. Contra dances were done in New England and a few other parts of the country. But a lot of dances that kind of grew out of the old time music community were square dances. And I could go down the East Coast and I could call the, you know, whatever the Tuesday night dance square dance in Philly, the Wednesday night square dance in Baltimore, and maybe there's a Thursday one somewhere...there was a square dance in D.C. and all these dances, during the 80s, were turning into contra dances. And this was happening across the country. And I know that because in '87, I drove out to the West Coast and I did a number of dances along the way and everywhere I went, people were telling me that. This is the story. This is what's happening.

So I wrote an article for the Old Time Herald magazine in 1988 called "Dare to be Square." And it was...it was quite controversial. I interviewed a lot of people that previous summer before I wrote it and so I had a lot of ideas from people, and I said some things in that article that were probably a little, little too strong. As far as...about the growing contra scene, and I might have called it "contra-mania," I don't know. And I got a huge pushback. I felt like I was blacklisted from a lot of dancers for what I had written about the growing contra dance scene, and I was basically saying that...I don't know if I said this in that article, but it's like, you know, like contra dancing is like the kudzu of the dance world. It's this invasive species that comes in, and once it gets into your community, it chokes out the local indigenous forms and takes over. And kudzu is beautiful. But that was kind of what I was seeing with dances. And it was true that dancers were loving contra dances. And part of that, I have to say, is because squares are much harder to call. And there were a lot of...contras are so easy to call, that almost anybody can get up and do it. And so I think that, you know, dancers said, well this person calls a contra really well and doesn't do so well with the square, I prefer the contra. So I think that was happening.

But anyway, so I did get a lot of pushback from writing that. It's still available for reading online. It's out there. And that was in 1988. And then like whatever, like...16 years later, I wrote a follow up sort of to assess where the scene was. And I did some research and found that, you know, squares had been...squares and contras there's been this pendulum throughout our nation's history, and back in colonial times, contras were the thing. And then when the French quadrilles came in and in the early 1800s, there were fights on the dance floor about French quadrilles or English contras. You know, so this, you know, back and forth between contras and squares for a couple of hundred years. So I wrote a second article in 2004 and interviewed a lot of contra dancers for their opinions about it. And around that time, I started dance weekends called Dare to be Square. A caller, Nancy Mamlin, and I started this here, here at Swannanoa in 2004 and it was a square dance weekend. No contras, just squares. For callers, dancers, musicians, it was a lot of fun. It was a chance to actually explore squares and take the deep dive. And we had workshops for callers and we did it here for three years and then people in Portland wanted to do it. So they borrowed the idea and did a Dare to be Square west. And since, since 2004, by

my count, there have been 26 Dare to be Square weekends all over the country. Actually not in the middle of the country, on either coast, I should say. It's time for one in New England, I think. A weekend just to take the deep dive and do all kinds of squares and, it was, these were very liberating. And there's a lot of younger callers who've learned at these weekends and now are growing up calling squares, which really makes me happy that...I was afraid, you know, I was going to be a dinosaur and the last one and squares were going to die out. But I think, I think people are doing them again now.

Collecting Dances

Mary Wesley: Talk about your dance collection, I guess. What's your approach to collecting or maintaining your dance choices?

Phil Jamison: So the earliest dances I called, you know, say for the first five years were all squares that I just saw at regional dances in the Adirondacks and upstate New York. And you know, I'd write them down and then I, I discovered there are old square dance books in libraries so I would kind of mine those for interesting looking dance figures. I would often look for a dance figure and maybe if I didn't like it the way it was in the book, I'd change it up and make it my own and change the choreography a little bit to make it work. When I moved here to North Carolina, whatever it is, 42 years ago, I did seek out local dances and when I go to a dance, I sometimes would meet the caller and sometimes write down dances I saw people doing. When I would go to a contra dance, if there was a dance that I really liked, I might write it down or ask the caller the name of it and look it up afterwards. There's so much more available now with the internet. You know, the resources are incredible.

But for the southern dances, I would often look for dance figures that either I saw written about in a book that nobody was doing and find a way to come up with choreography that would make it work really well. So that's one thing I like doing is taking a traditional figure and arranging the choreographic treatment of it into a square, or whatever, in a way that that'll work. So a number of the dances that I call regularly, say squares, are ones that I have taken a traditional figure and devised the choreography. Contras, I feel there are plenty of contra dances out there. I don't need to be writing any more. And so for contra dances, I will, you know, sometimes if I'm at a dance and there's a particular dance I like, I'll jot it down and then put it on a card.

Memorable gigs

Mary Wesley: I'm curious what, sort of like a stand out gig for you. Something that was maybe a little unusual you know, where you, maybe your maybe your caller skills were put to the test a little bit or was just like unusual in some way.

Phil Jamison: Oh, boy. There've been a lot of unusual gigs over the years. Back in 1980, I was the official square dance caller of the Winter Olympics at Lake Placid and we did a square dance in the Olympic Village. You know, and I was thinking that there would be athletes from all

over the world. All the athletes were resting up. They were not square dancing. But it was the trainers and the entourage that were with the athletes that were there. But that was one of the first times that I was in a situation of, OK, here are people who don't necessarily speak English. How am I going to teach square dance squares and what squares can I do that will make it work? So I remember that. And you know, that was a challenge.

More so I've...one of the more recent experiences I had was going to China and calling dances there. This was five years ago I think, I went with my student string band from here at Warren Wilson and we had a three week tour. We traveled with some Chinese musicians and collaborated on musical pieces with them. And then after the concert, we would, we would dance some of their Chinese dances and then we would do a square dance. And it was a learning curve, first of all, you know? But you know, I thought the language, you know, having somebody having to translate to Chinese would be the hardest thing. But the hardest thing was that in China, they don't dance as couples. So the coupling, male-female coupling is a European thing. And this just went right over their heads. They just didn't understand what I meant by get a partner. What does that mean? And just, you know, little cultural things like that were really amazing. In the end, we were able to do some, you know, big big circle dances and a Virginia Real, those kinds of things. So those are my most challenging calling experiences.

Working with a band

Mary Wesley: Are you always in the band when you call or what's your approach to working with bands?

Phil Jamison: A great number of the dances that I've done have been with, I've been a member of the band, and I like that because I feel it ties the calls in with the music and sort of makes it all one. And when I work with a different band and I'm just there on the side as a caller, I feel a little left out. I'm kind of, you know...I enjoy playing music and I want to be part of the music too. But I have to say it makes it easier. So it makes it a whole lot easier to not be playing at the same time. So it's kind of a toss up. I can enjoy calling with a really good band right by my side.

Mary Wesley: And what's your interaction with that band like?

Phil Jamison: Well, I mean, as you know, a lot of old time bands are not used to playing for dances. And in the old time music world, there are really not dance bands, as there are in the contra dance world of musicians whose primary reason for being together is to play for dances. So in the old time world, people you know, played bar gigs or weddings or just jam. But to understand actually how to play for a dance takes a little bit of, unless they're really used to it, a little bit of guidance from the caller. And what I will do is, you know, well, first of all, I feel it and "in" with these people because I am one of them. And so I don't feel like an outsider to the band. and for squares I basically, you know, say, play as fast as you can. I like it really fast, which is faster than people sit around jamming at. So they really need to learn how to drive it. With, you know, with squares, you know, the ending is basically, I'll just give you a signal, you know, end on whatever part, it really doesn't matter because they're not phrased to the music. And for

squares, I prefer no medleys because I find that that they're a distraction, and for squares, you want it to be like a freight train coming through the living room that you're just riding on and in contra dance, you know...So the dancers are really concentrating on the calls. They're really keyed into listening. And that way, as a caller, I can change it up and I can improvise and throw surprises at them. And I know they're listening to me. If the band is doing all kinds of stuff on the side, that's a distraction. In a contra dance because the dancers are, once you get them started—and the caller can drop out—and the dances are repetitive, you do the same thing over and over and over again, and people get in this trance of doing it, that's when if a band does a medley or whatever, a rhythm-egg solo or whatever, the dancers love it because it kind of wakes them up and they hear that change in the music. And so it's kind of a different thing. So when I'm working with a band, if they're playing for contra, you know, medleys are fine, that's OK, but I prefer not for squares. And also with old-time musicians, you know, point out that the, you know, the contra dance tunes, you have to have the regular length A's and B's. For squares, they don't. I'm happy with crooked tunes, tunes with extra parts, whatever.

Dancing Masters

Mary Wesley: We talked a little bit about your book and the history of the development of the role of the caller. And I wanted to maybe clarify a little bit more about this move from the "dancing master" to a caller. And how that really changed the social nature and accessibility of social dancing.

Phil Jamison: Well, I mean, the social dances in Europe and in colonial America were just, you know, there were different classes, obviously in the upper upper class, people would be going to dancing schools and learning dances that were, that were devised by and taught by dancing masters, and other people who did not have the means to do that might be just dancing four-handed reels in, you know, Scots-Irish reels in there in the tavern or in their homes. And there's no really teaching or calling for that. It's very simple, just circle and a lot of arm turns and maybe...you know it, but it's not, it's not a lot of choreography to learn and memorize, and going to dancing school was definitely seen as a way to elevate yourselves on the social ladder. And it was a way to gain access to a higher social class. So it was very, very much part of that about learning etiquette too, learning how to behave in proper company rather than you know...basically gave you entrance to a higher class.

So there was a lot of that involved and after the French Revolution, there were lots of French dancing masters, or French people who came to this country and set up dancing schools to teach the most fashionable dances, "directly from Paris," they would say. And one of these people was John James Audubon, the guy who painted pictures of birds. And he floated down the Ohio river and settled in what is now Louisville, Kentucky, and set up a dancing school there. He taught fiddle and dances. And he was a dancing master and later on, he was in Mississippi in the 1820s, and he earned enough by teaching dancing school to finance his bird paintings. That was his hobby. His day job was a dancing master. So Audubon was a French dancing master. And there were French dancing masters all over the country. And what they were advertising was, here's the latest, most fashionable thing that everybody needs to know. And it

wasn't that they're going to be teaching some old Scots-Irish reel that everybody already knows. They keep devising new dances, so you have to kind of keep going back. You have to go to dancing school to learn these things. And so when it's time for the ball, you know what to do. You know, the latest, the latest dance and these were composed, choreographed dances that you know, would have been written down. And here's how it goes. And once people started calling dances in rural areas and realizing that, you know, you can just shout out the figures and people can follow along and do various things and this idea of call and response, it took it out of the hands of the dancing masters, and people didn't have to go to dancing school anymore if they wanted to participate. And, as I've said it, it meant that different elements from different dance forms could be combined together, and it really became a true folk form rather than a composed form. And you know, that's something...I see parallels, you know, when I look at, say, the northern dance tradition with contras and quadrilles, they're primarily composed dances that are written down and here's how it goes. First this, then this, then this, then this. And in the southern square dance tradition, it's much more freeform and you can mix it up any way you want. And generally, you know, calling it as you go and you can throw in any figure at any time and challenge the dancers with things, and that's part of the fun. So it really took it out of the hands of the dancing masters and made it a folk tradition that then could be passed from person to person within communities. And as people traveled west, they took it with them.

Mary Wesley: That's great, that's really helpful, and I had no idea about about James Audubon. That is a great cocktail party tidbit to share, if that ever happens again.