

From the Mic Episode 2 - Lisa Greenleaf

Intro

Ben Williams: This podcast is produced by CDSS, the Country Dance and Song Society. CDSS provides programs and resources, like this podcast, that support people in building and sustaining vibrant communities through participatory dance, music, and song. Want to support this podcast and our other work? Visit cdss.org to donate or become a member today.

Mary Wesley: Hey there - I'm Mary Wesley and this is From the Mic - a podcast about North American social dance calling.

Through conversations with callers across the continent we'll explore the world of square, contra, and community dance callers. Why do they do it? How did they learn? What is their role, on stage and off, in shaping our dance communities? What can they tell us about the corner of the dance world that they know, and love, the best?

Each episode we'll talk to a different caller, but they all have something in common - a spark, a desire to lead, to share joy, to invite movement, to stand in that special place between the band and a room full of dancers (or people who don't yet know that they're dancers), and from the mic say "find a partner, let's dance"

Lisa Intro

[Clip of Lisa [calling the square dance "Contra Corners Canon"](#) written by Ron Buchanan to the music of Dave Langford, Lise Brown, and Kate Barnes]

Mary Wesley: That is the voice of Boston area dance calling legend Lisa Greenleaf!

Lisa has been calling for many years throughout the USA and internationally for dances, weekends, and weeklong camps. Her specialties include traditional and contemporary contras, fun squares, challenging dances of all shapes and sizes, and callers' training. Fun fact: I took Lisa's contra callers course at Pinewoods when I was first learning to call.

Lisa likes to emphasize community and communication in her workshops, guiding participants to get the most out of their dancing or calling experience. She has a keen interest in understanding group dynamics as well as the power of positive leadership.

In our conversation we talk about Lisa's journey from the dance floor to the caller's mic and the mentors she had along the way, in particular the prolific dance choreographer

Larry Jennings. We explore the driving factors behind her deep love for and commitment to leading social dance and get into the nuts and bolts of how she thinks about her role as a caller. She also shares her insights on building strong dance communities. There's much to learn about there, and plenty of laughs along the way, so let's get to it! Here's Lisa.

Intro/Origins

Mary Wesley Welcome to From the Mic. This is Mary Wesley, and I'm here with Lisa Greenleaf. Hello, Lisa.

Lisa Greenleaf Hey, Mary, happy to be here.

Mary Wesley I'm so glad you're here. So excited to talk with you today. And we're going to talk all about calling. And I thought to start out, would you mind just introducing yourself as a caller and telling us a little bit about maybe even how you started dancing or getting into this dance world and then how you found your way to the mic from there?

Lisa Greenleaf Sure. I live right now in Bolton, Massachusetts, so I'm a New England caller. And I started in New England, but I was at a girls camp as a staff member and we had a square dance. And now, of course, I know it was a basic community dance and I loved it. I was eating it up. And there were two young men on our staff who were very cute, who said to my friend and me, "Would you like to learn how to swing?" They were contra dancers and they were dying. We were doing elbow swings and hopping up and down and having a great time. But they were just dying for a good old New England buzz up swing. So they taught us, and I tell you, that did it. And I said, "What is this?" And they said "It's called contra dancing. And there's one Saturday night, do you want to come with us?" so I think for most people, that personal invitation can be really, really powerful. And so I was hooked. And when I went to graduate school in Chicago, I did everything. I did contra, traditional squares, clogging—because old time music was really big in Chicago—and English dancing, international dancing, Scottish dancing, you name it. If it had dancing...Morris dancing, I did it all. I just loved it so much, and I was very attracted to what the caller was doing. I like that because I liked being a teacher. And so it wasn't long after that I'd moved to New England and I was so lucky. This is one of those gifts from the universe, and I knew it when it happened. I was teaching Morris dancing on the Morris team. I was teaching the beginners and we had a big band. We had an accordion and a mandolin and a drum and a fiddle. And back in those days, so this would have been the early 1980s, a caller would get \$100 for calling an evening, but the band would have to share \$100. And this band said, "We want to start our own series and have it be equal, equal opportunity so that we will share it equally," which means we probably have to have a brand new caller who doesn't know any better. And so they asked me, "Would you be our caller?" They'd never heard me call a contra. Now I'd been going to every callers course I could at any dance weekend, but maybe that was three or four at that point. But the first dance I called was at my own series with a band called Four on the Floor, and I would go down to Kingston, Rhode Island, where they were, and I would listen to them

play so I could understand their music. And that was their idea. And boy, was that great. They said, you know, we're going to have to work with you to figure out what tunes to play, so that was my introduction to listen to how these tunes feel and match them up. And the other really fortunate thing I had was a lot of friends on the floor who really wanted my success. And, you know, I had to get out of my own way to understand that because they did give me feedback. And when I latched onto that feedback and realized, "Oh my gosh, this is gold." This is like having your spies out on the floor that really helped me become a better caller. So I was really lucky. I was really lucky. And then being in New England, then I started to call up in the Boston area, which was really scary and frightening. But I did it. And then from there I was able to have Larry Jennings be my mentor. And that's a whole other story.

Mary Wesley Yeah, wonderful. OK. Yeah. I feel like I have a few follow up questions. I'd love to wander around a little bit more in this kind of origin story and part of this will just depend on maybe what stood out to you in those sort of formative moments. I'm wondering if you can remember anything about your...maybe your first few times at the mic calling. You know, what was it like to...Because it sounds like you...something drew you to that caller role. You were intrigued. Do you remember what it was like when you got on stage and started seeing what it was actually like to do it? Not teaching a Morris team, just at a practice, but being on a microphone in front of a roomful of people being the voice in charge.

Lisa Greenleaf Well, I suppose the first impressions were made when I went to these callers workshops because what I learned was, "Holy cow, I know how to dance these dances, but I don't know how to teach them." And so that was alarming, but also a big opportunity to start learning how you actually teach these dances. The stagecraft came really easily to me, you know, at this girl's camp what I was doing, I was teaching music and drama. So that kind of performance aspect and being on stage was not a problem. I do remember that for this Kingston, Rhode Island, series, my very first dance, I had to buy a microphone for it. A wired mic—that was an investment and that made me feel very powerful. I have my own microphone and I'm making a commitment to this. So I think also just working with the band was really, really exciting to me because they were sitting right next to me. And to feel that energy that they had was, that's still one of my favorite things about calling me is that I get to stand next to this and be the first...the first thing there that's absorbing all this, this cool energy that they're providing.

Mary Wesley And then what else...what kept you on the path of being a caller because, you know, you've kind of done a lot of it in a lot of different places and beyond contras, lots of different styles. So, you know, do you think of it as your vocation? How do you think of calling in your life?

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah, actually, it is. It's my career. It's what I love to do. Even though you only make tens of dollars, people laugh when they hear you say it's your career, but it really is. And I think the hallmark is that I still love learning about it. You know, that's one of the things I love to talk about when I do a caller's workshop is I'm not here to present everything that I know. I'm here to learn from you as well, and I'm going to learn. And what

I love it I can remember where I learned certain things, where I first heard somebody say on a box-the-gnat, "Hey, look, what happens - you both raise your arm!" And this light bulb went off. "Oh, it's not the gent twirling the ladies. You're both doing it." You know, that kind of thing. I can remember where I learned certain phrases in teaching, and I'm just so grateful about that. And I always learn every time I work with a new band. Or even when I work with an old band and they have new tunes, so it's about, are you still interested in learning, I think, and I sure, I sure as heck am.

Larry Jennings: Mentor

Mary Wesley Yeah, it sounds like you've kind of learned how to learn from working with your friends and you mentioned Larry Jennings as a mentor.

Lisa Greenleaf Oh boy, that was tough. Oh boy, it was that tough. Anybody who knows Larry, who wrote "Give and Take" and some other books. You know, he was a hard core engineer, and he approached his thinking about dancing that way. Although I will say many people don't know this about Larry, on the New England Folk Festival board—we thought of him as Mr. NEFFA, because Larry always reminded us to be human. Because it's so easy to go down the rabbit hole of, well these people didn't do this right. And he says, "Look, it's NEFFA. We oil the squeaky wheel. We try to think the best of people." And I learned...I think that's a great lesson. And I also learned from him, for example, with hall management...back when I was calling in the Cambridge area, the Thursday dance was at the VFW and it's a wide hall. So we'd have five or six lines and you tried to spread those lines out. And back in the day, the 80s and 90s, the center sets were theoretically the place to be, and sometimes they just got too crowded. And he taught me how to move people around to make the whole hall viable. But when those center sets got really crowded and the rest of the hall was OK, he'd say to me, "So they want to be crowded, let them." I thought, Oh, OK. He's like, if you think the whole hall is fine and they're just crowded, then you're fine, then you're good. But if there's a line that's too short, yeah, then I need to pay attention to that. That's part of my role. But otherwise, Larry was so tough, he was really tough, but I'll tell you one of the things I learned from him that I appreciate the most is I learned how to diagram dances from him.

Mary Wesley Wow.

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah. And now I can do it with just dots on a piece of paper and understand the flow of a dance. And I'll tell you a story. This came in really handy because I was at NEFFA and they needed an emergency caller for one of the contra medleys. One of these half-an-hour, no-walk-through, six dances in a row. And I was told you're dance number four and I looked at it and I got out my pen and something was flagging in my brain. I got out my pen and was doing my little dots, and I said, this dance doesn't progress. I was so proud of myself, I told Larry later. And we quickly substituted another dance. So I know lots of people have their little salt and pepper shaker things, but the nice

thing about diagramming is you can actually save it. Like math, homework, like math, homework.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Did that come from Larry's engineering background, I assume?

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah. I mean, he taught me things about, you know, when things happen on a diagonal then therefore, this has to happen. You know, when you go forward and back, that's really a zero. Well, what's a zero? A zero means nothing's happened. You're still where you are. Oh!

Lisa Greenleaf You can see more complicated or more filled out diagrams in some of the old square dance books, or even in some of the old international and contra dance books where they might actually have line drawings of in the old days men and women. And for me, it was just arrows. And either a caret, just a two-line arrow for the woman's role back in those days and an arrow with a line down the middle for the men's role. And you move those around, you figure out where the top of your hall is and you write down the name of the figure, balance and swing, and you number them, one and two because you have the first couple and the second couple. And so then you draw what happens after the balance and swing and which way you have to be facing. So the arrows might be facing each other for a balance of swing because you're starting from duple and proper. But if then the next figure's forward and back, those arrows are now facing across to their partner. And that's really key because it tells you, where's your partner in all of this? Because for me, when I'm teaching other callers, I like to remind them, your partner is your anchor. If you can get your dancers focused on where their partner is, that really helps those visual dancers figure out how to end figures.

Mary Wesley Mm hmm. And what are those, what does that diagramming process give you in your...when you're at the mic?

Lisa Greenleaf Oh, sure, Mary that's a great question, because, you know, hey, these days there's some really cool looking dances on the internet and I may think I'm prepared, and then I'm about to call it dance, and I suddenly have this flash of adrenaline, of uncertainty. And I will quickly diagram it. Does this really work? Oh yes, it does.

Mary Wesley Onstage, you'll do that.

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah, I mean, the dancers are dancing, but I'm just having my own little fit of insecurity, and I'm up there with my little dots and my little arrows going...does it progress...oh yeah, phew. OK. And what it shows me usually is, oh, this dance, you always do this on this dance, there's this weird thing right here. And sure enough, it's written down. I just didn't read it. So, yeah, diagramming. I love diagramming. It's great.

Mary Wesley And what's an example of a storyline in a dance for you?

Lisa Greenleaf It's body flow, basically, and body flow and is there, I think Larry would probably use the word "gimmick." So if there's a Rory 'o More above everybody in a way of

balancing right and left and sliding over, that's the big gimmick of the dance. And so does that fit in and does it flow? And is it satisfying? Because, you know, in an evening's program, I want to have a lot of variety as a dancer. I don't want to have every dance, have a wave in it just because the caller likes a lot of waves. I want variety. So that's the whole storyline thing. And that's why callers should dance. Boy, I tell you, callers should dance. And if you can't dance, cultivate some good dance friends on the floor to tell you when you've called a real clunker.

Mary Wesley Your spies as you've called them.

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah, you know, one of my tricks, which I love to do, is if I have a new dance that I'm not quite sure about, I will tell the dancers before I call it, this is a brand new dance. Let me know if you like it. That does two things, it sets up this expectation that they're going to help me a little bit. And it also buys me some goodwill because if it's really terrible, they're going to forgive me. But you know, one of the things I'll do is I can tell if they're bad. And so if it's bad, I'll cut it off quickly and then I don't say anything about it, I go on to the next. But if it's good, I will say, "Did you like it?" Yeah, OK, great, give me feedback. And people do. You know, they give you teaching feedback. So it's great. Use your resources. Dancers are great resources.

Mary Wesley Yes. Let's see. There's so many little breadcrumbs you're leaving me that I want to follow up on. But maybe you want to spend just a little bit more time learning about, you know, how you developed your career, your career as a caller. You know, so you talked about getting the start at your own dance series, getting into the Boston scene. I certainly have known you as a traveling, a touring caller, also a teaching caller. Lisa, I took my first caller's workshop with you at Pinewoods.

Lisa Greenleaf I know it was great.

Growing a Calling Career

Mary Wesley So can you maybe just fill that out a little bit more? You know, how did you explore all the different work you could do as a caller?

Lisa Greenleaf Well, the dance series in Kingston gave me a once a month dance, which was great, with a known crowd, which was really great because you know that I could feel a bit more sure about myself. And then I started to get hired for other local dances and again calling in the Boston area was nerve wracking. When you have Larry and Ted Sannella in the back of the hall with their arms crossed over their chests watching you the whole evening. But you know what I did? You know what I did? I was intimidated by that, but I felt really good. But I had a bunch of friends there, and I said to them, like after the second dance, I called them up and I said, would you guys whoop and yell after every dance? And they did. It was great.

Mary Wesley That's so smart.

Lisa Greenleaf Just made me feel better. And then I think, you know, especially in New England, we have so many opportunities for little dances that you can do and still be in your own bed at night. So I got hired to do more and more dances in the broader New England area and then at a certain point, I realized I was still going to dance camps a lot. Just, you know, as a dancer taking classes, observing... You know, the other role models I've had or any caller who calls that I and that I get to dance to is a role model for me. If you keep your mind open you learn a lot. And I was really lucky again because I've been working a lot with Amy Larkin, who at that point was Amy Richardson, the Fiddler and Larry Unger, and they had a great band called Uncle Gizmo. And they said, "Hey, we want to go on tour in the Midwest. Will you be our caller?" So that's how that started.

Mary Wesley That was your first tour.

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah.

Mary Wesley How was it?

Lisa Greenleaf It was great! It was great. And it included a dance weekend and some, some one night dances. And what was tough, I think on the learning curve was the one night dances.

Mary Wesley Where you're just dropping in somewhere.

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah, because you have no idea what this community is like. And you're relying on what the organizer says. And yet they're very different from the dances we have back home maybe. So you have to learn to be flexible. I figured out, well, that's part of the fun. You know, where are these people, where are they coming from? What do they want?

Mary Wesley Yeah. And what you know, so what have you observed in your travels? Do you feel like you notice regional differences and how do you adapt on the fly when you come into a new setting or a new community?

Lisa Greenleaf Well, yeah, through experience, I've learned for me, it's really important for me to understand the intention of the group who's hired me. I mean, intention is such a big, big word for me. What's my intention as a caller? What's the intention of this group? And adjust my presentation and expectations accordingly. I mean, I'm sure many callers can relate to this. I remember going to a dance actually nearby to me here, where I had prepared an intermediate program with lots of new dances. I was very excited. And of course, most of the dancers that night turned out to be beginners, and I felt this tension in myself because I wanted to do something else. But I gave myself a talking to like, "These people are here, they paid their money, you better get your head in the game and show them a good time." And in doing that, I eventually myself had a good time. Because they were about having, you know, and I've also had another one which was really great, which I thought was just a regular kind of community dance and I get there, it's really tiny, but I

love the hall. The band was a hoot. They weren't great, but they were having a good time and the dancers...they weren't really interested in being told what to do. And again, that presents an interesting tension. And when I realized, oh my gosh, they're here just to have a good old time and, you know, then I could adjust it. And I did a lot of silly stuff, a lot of fun stuff. I figured out what the band liked to play. The band was into show tunes. OK, we're going to do squares to show tunes, folks. You know what a hoot. The best part is, I had a great time because I was able to adjust my expectations. But if you go into those thinking, darn it, I'm going to teach them how to dance. Well, that may not be why they hired you.

Mary Wesley Yeah. I definitely want to talk more about intention. I want to ask you one more thing about kind of history and background, just because it's a time and place that I wasn't, but that has affected me a lot as a dancer and a caller. I hear you describing this, "the Boston contra scene," that it was, it was, you know, it was intimidating. And you have Larry Jennings. You have Ted Sannella. I mostly know these names on my dance cards of, you know, iconic classic contra dances and square dances that are...or triplets that I call, you know. But I wonder if you can kind of take us, take us inside what that scene was like a little bit more. And also what was it like as a newcomer, and I don't know if this came into play, but what was it like as a woman? I'm aware that, you know, we're hearing a lot of names of male callers at that time.

Lisa Greenleaf So I didn't appreciate it till much later, but when I was in Chicago, the callers there were women callers. Masha Goodman was calling at the Chicago Barn Dance. So that was important to me much later, I realized, just that she was a role model there because when I got to New England, there weren't very many female callers at all. Were there any that I really remember? Susan Elberger was calling? And otherwise it would have been traveling callers, but we didn't have a series that really featured traveling callers until much later. So it was, and this would have been back in the 80s, I didn't feel it so much as sexism. I didn't feel it as being a woman was a problem. I just felt that being new was the challenge. That I had to prove myself. And I think that's pretty normal, that you feel that you have to prove yourself because I'll tell you that once I started conversing with Larry and especially with Ted Sannella. As a young caller, oh my gosh, Ted was so generous to me. And, you know, back in the day, you would write him a letter. I had added a question, I think about his wonderful dance Fiddleheads, and he answered, and it was so generous and he basically taught me how to teach it.

Mary Wesley Hmm. In a letter?

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah. Well, Mary, this was back in letter days. Email wasn't invented yet! In a letter. Well, you know what Larry would do. Larry would write critiques in letters, which sounds heavy, but it was the best thing I learned how to do know because another great thing I learned from Larry, I finally learned how to set boundaries. This is when you know that your relationship with your mentor is starting to change because he used to come up to me after each dance and say, "Well, you know, you didn't do as well on that do si do as you..." And I finally said, "Larry, tell me at the end of the dance." And he would he would have made notes. And then I said, Larry, write it in a letter because I wanted to enjoy what I had just done.

Mary Wesley Yes.

Lisa Greenleaf And that it was fine. He would write it in a letter, and I could approach it very intellectually.

Lisa Greenleaf You know, the other thing Larry did for me with teaching, I give him so much credit for for my ability to teach well. I was really fortunate because once I was established in Massachusetts, another band called Unstrung Heroes, wanted to have a series, and they said, "Hey, would you be our caller?" And I said, Sure, but we have to make our dance different because there were a lot of dances. And I said, let's have an advanced dance. Well, that was interesting because there was no "advanced" contra dance. But I learned really quickly that first year you couldn't call it an "advanced dance" because the material was advanced, but the dancers weren't. And so I changed it to "Challenging." And what I love is I see other groups now calling challenging contras, because that puts the onus on the dancer. I'm going to the challenging contra, which means, OK, you're going to be challenged. And Larry supplied a lot of my material. I have to say most of which I don't even call anymore, but it was a laboratory. And he and I would talk as peers. You know, secretly he wanted to be a caller, and he just didn't have the stage presence for it. So he and I had this great relationship because of that. So I could call the dance and then he and I would talk about these dances. And the dancers would help. I mean, having dancers who were not advanced was actually a great thing for my teaching because I had to learn how to do it. And from there I created something called "Lab Rats," which was, I rented a tiny little hall and I brought recorded music and I invited 24 hand-picked dancers and I said, "Your job is to tell me if you like this dance. And then to inform me how to teach it." And I tried out all kinds of new dances, and what I loved about that was it also created 24 more spies for me on the floor.

Mary Wesley Yes!

Lisa Greenleaf Because they got used to hearing how I needed to get the feedback and they would, they knew that it was safe to approach me at a regular dance and say, "Hey, that new dance, you called, did you know it was really terrible if you're dancing the larks role?" "Oh no, thank you." So I encourage callers to do that. It's like having a kitchen junket. And for me, it was all about choreography and helped me teach it.

[Clip of Lisa [calling the square dance Chinese Fan](#) to the music of Karen Axelrod, Daron Douglas, and Anna Patton.]

The Love of Calling

Mary Wesley It's so cool to hear kind of the origin stories of some of these things, which you know you definitely imparted in the callers course. That first caller's course I took with you I remember talking about, you know, giving and receiving feedback and how can we

do that in a kind and helpful way. And yeah, sort of forming your team of peers. Such important things. Well, so maybe we'll get more into into the abstract, but I just hear so much...such a spark, and so much love in your voice when you talk about all the different parts of calling: the teaching, the working with the band, the kinesthetic, you know, finding the flow, finding the story. What is it that you love about this?

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah another thing that I try to get across in my callers workshops, because I do appreciate how difficult it is to be in these workshops that are intense, these intensives, because you get up to call and you're about to get feedback. And of course, as you said, we try to establish a safe, supportive feedback loop. But, I love learning about the language of calling. I mean, that's kind of a hidden sociologist in me. I might say something, and the dancers do something unexpected. To me, that is wonderful because I think, "Wow, look what they just did!" You know, it might be really tempting to blame them, but instead look at it as an opportunity. "Wow, that was fascinating." And then that's the kind of conversation you can have with your peers. I love that kind of conversation. "Has anybody had this happen on this dance?" You know, that's another regional difference I've noticed that I may have the language down perfectly for an intermediate dance that has a little twist in it. And then I go one state over and these people look at me with blank stares, and I think, "Wow, that didn't work." And if you can train yourself to do that, that to me is the joy of this dynamic thing that is always changing is, how do I make this work? You know, the other thing I really love, as I said, is I'm so lucky that I've had these great musicians to work with. I rarely have had a bad band. I always learn from the bands. I either learn things that I need to do to deal with bands that aren't as skilled, but I always learn something and I think one of the best stories I have about that is how I got interested in that...Besides that very first band saying, you need to come to our rehearsal. I was calling a weekend in Santa Barbara, California, and the band was Nightingale, which at the time was one of the top northern style bands, and they were writing a lot of their own tunes, and they had very unique arrangements, and I remember asking for a smooth tune. And I got French-Canadian, which to me wasn't smooth because French-Canadian is very punctuated. It was a very downbeat. And I looked over and I realized that Keith Murphy was playing the piano very smoothly. It didn't sound smooth, but that's how he was playing it. And I thought, Oh my gosh, this is a disconnect. So for that entire weekend I would ask for a tune and then I would take notes on what I was hearing, and afterwards I would ask Becky Tracy, the fiddler, "What's the name of that tune?" And by the end of that weekend, I had a database. And that's what I do now for bands that I work with a lot, who have their own tunes, I have a database of their tunes.

Working with Bands

Mary Wesley Yeah. Can you talk more about working with bands and how you think about matching music and movement?

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah. You know, one of my favorite things to do in that caller's class that you are in is, do you remember this? One of the assignments is that you have to go with your buddies and interview a rhythm player and a melody player?

Mary Wesley Yes.

Lisa Greenleaf And ask them about their pet peeves because secretly what I'm getting is intel for myself. I remember learning from that class because of what the class had found out. For example, Larry Unger said, "Please don't call a no walk through medley as the last dance of the evening, because that is our last chance to shine and we'd really rather not have the caller talking over it the whole time." And I remember my eyes were as big as saucers. "Oh, I didn't know that. Thank you. I'm glad I learned that." As far as the music, I feel it. I mean, I'm a kinesthetic visual person with a really good ear, so I feel their tunes and I can feel where the balance needs to be or I can feel that it's really smooth. And, you know, again, dancing. That informs, and it's good, the thing is, even though I might have this database, I don't insist that they play these tunes. I might say, "Could you play something like this? That has that thing on the A1, could you play something like that?" Although there are some bands that I program because they like that, they're like, "Oh, you have your database, just tell us what to play." But that's very rare, folks. That's very, very rare. The Latter Day Lizards like it when I do that, and it's always up to negotiation, so if they don't feel like playing something. But that's another one of my favorite workshops to do is play tunes and have callers walk around. What figure do you want to do with this? And again, don't be totally tied to it. That's why it's good to dance, because I know I've been surprised. I've danced a dance I've called, usually to a smooth tune, and the band isn't playing anything smooth. And I realize, "Hey, this works really well with this chunky tune. Who knew?" So stay open. But to me, it really is about how does my body react to this tune?

Mary Wesley Yes. Yeah. I mean, it sounds like you are really energized by, something being new or different or unexpected. Or seeing kind of a possibility for change. Is there, are there times when change doesn't feel good? You know, have been moments when it's like, "Actually, I like the other way," or you know...where do you, how do you navigate that when, when you know... Or do you, do your tastes come up against change, change going in the direction that you're like, "I don't know about that."

Lisa Greenleaf Oh, sure. Well, musically, if I felt a tune hasn't worked well for dance, I figure out if I can tell the band right then and there, or if I need to wait until the break. In which case I'll go to somebody and say, "Hey, can I talk to you about that one tune? That didn't really fit for me." And it's a conversation. "How do you experience that tune?" What a great question. And, you know, usually the band is aware of it. "Oh yeah, oh yeah, we kind of felt that, x sorry, we didn't know what we were doing. We were arguing." And it's like, "OK, no worries. No worries." Or they're surprised, and then I'm like, "Well, give me the name of the tune" and I make a note, "Do not ask for this tune."

Mary Wesley There you go.

Lisa Greenleaf And not musically speaking, of course, there have been so many changes recently, which I think is great. And I have come up against some interesting things, I guess kind of like against my value system, which surprised the heck out of me. And so I was actually kind of grateful for it. And that's when we were having the big discussion in modern contra dancing about changing the role terms to gender free. And I was there at the beginning of it. I was there when the lesbian and gay community was using "bands" and "bare-arms." We had arm bands around to designate the traditional gents role kind of thing. And then in New England we tried jets and rubies, and now it's larks and robins and larks and ravens. But at one point, people wanted lead and follow, and I was stunned at my reaction because I said, absolutely not. Because contra is an equal opportunity dance form. There is no lead and follow, the caller has already told you what you're going to do, and there are plenty of times when the person on the right is actually leading the figure. And words matter. And if you have this lead/follow, the followers may not be really paying attention, whereas there's a really crucial move right here where the person on the right does actually have to initiate a little bit of the action. And luckily, there were some other callers who were vociferous about that as well. And I don't think it's really an issue now, it was when groups were trying to decide and a group wanted to hire me, and I said, sure, but I'm not going to use, lead and follow. I'm going to use larks and robins. And they said, OK, no problem.

Mary Wesley Yeah, yeah. How do you kind of navigate those, those choices that you might have to make as a caller, especially in terms of, if a community or organizers are asking you to deliver a certain, you know, a certain thing, whether it's it's the dance role terms that you're using or the styles of dances that you're calling, you know, how much do you respond to what you're...kind of what you're being hired to do? And then how when do you, you mentioned your value system, you know, like where, where and when do you tap into that sort of that personal compass and decide, you know, decide to maybe make a different choice?

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah, well, you know, choice is a great word, Mary, because you can always say, "No, I'm busy that weekend." And you don't have to tell them why you really don't want to do it. And I will say that that whole lead/follow saying I never had to turn down a gig because of it. But I was prepared to. That was so important to me that I was prepared to say, "No, I can only do it if it's this or this." That's a really good question, because I remember I did come up against this once when a west coast group was having a weekend and they said, we're trying to get squares into our dance weekend, and that's why we hired you. But what I figured out was they hadn't done the groundwork. And so my just calling a square, didn't quite go over well. And I had a really good talk with them later, and I said, "You guys have to promote this before I come. You can't put this on a caller. This is your community decision." So, and it can be as simple as when that caller says, "Find three other couples for a square," that four of you immediately are going to squeal and yell with delight. It could be as stupid and silly as that, but it creates excitement. Don't ask the caller to do that. And I've had that same issue, for example, and I think other callers have to, for a while, and who knows, it may come back, there's been a controversy about doing lifts and aerials while dancing. Swing dance moves. And I've always said, please don't burden the caller with that. That has to come from the organizer. I'm happy to

support what your policy is. But then I'm going to say, "Please talk to so-and-so about this policy." I'll be happy to read the policy, but please talk to so-and-so if you have any questions about it because I can't police it. You know, and that probably just came from having good discussions with my buddies. How do we handle this?

Mary Wesley Yeah. You know, you're mentioning a couple of different things, things that you've done or communicated as a caller, I guess I'm wondering more broadly how, what would you describe as kind of the job of the caller? What's a caller's job description? What entailed?

The Caller's Role

Lisa Greenleaf Wow. Well...

Mary Wesley You know because yeah, it's like, do people know that you're...you're just describing sort of some very particular sort of conversations and negotiations with some organizers, and that's, that is very different from standing at the mic and teaching a do si do.

Lisa Greenleaf Oh, I see. Yes, this is the sausage question. How is the sausage made for an entire evening? So those of you who don't know, so I'm approached and I get hired. I may or may not have any say in who the band is, and that's fine. Some callers like to get in touch with the band ahead of time, depends who the band is. It depends on also what this organization wants. If they say "We always do Money Musk after the break, then you bet I'm going to write that band and say, "You guys know about this, right?" I've actually had that happen before. They were not ready for it. And then I have to spend a lot of time personally programming, which is putting the dances in an order that makes sense. And that can take a long time, or it can be really quick, it just kind of depends. And that's a whole other discussion about how you build a good program, but of course, for me, it's about variety and building skill. Do I have to appear early to do the beginner's/welcome workshop? Whole other set of philosophy there.

Lisa Greenleaf You know, you touch base with the organizer, the announcements, all of that, you manage the time. And I suppose the hardest part really is gauging what's happening while you're doing it. For me, I'm a guide and I am the linchpin in the evening. I'm not responsible for everything, but I'm the linchpin. I'm the one they're going to go to if they've got complaints. I'm the one who has to manage kind of what's the atmosphere in the hall? It's a big responsibility and I love doing it. It's fun. It's a lot of fun. And I also want to make sure the band is having a good time. Is there anything you particularly want to play? That kind of thing?

Mary Wesley That a strong, you know, image or feeling, being the linchpin of...

Lisa Greenleaf ...of a good time.

Mary Wesley Yeah! Phew!!

Lisa Greenleaf The linchpin of a good time, right? That's what it is. That's what it is. But it's also knowing when to shut up. I mean, my golden time is when I do the walk through or when I'm organizing the hall or whatever. But once those musicians play, boy, I don't want to be in people's faces too much. I want them really to enjoy the band.

Mary Wesley Do you think about influencing the dance community kind of off the dance floor? You know, especially as someone who kind of travels and has connections kind of across the country? Do you see yourself kind of influencing especially some of these broader conversations, conversations happening about dance roles, language kind of, inclusivity as a sort of pretty, pretty visible, active caller, do you feel like you have a particular role or how do you approach those larger conversations?

Lisa Greenleaf If I'm at a dance weekend, I do have a role to remember that I was hired to be there, so even when I'm not calling, if I'm on the dance floor, especially, then I'm still responsible for my behavior. And that's more of a personal choice that I want to be having fun, but I also want to be taking it, I want to be respectful. Basically, that's it. I want to be respectful of what's happening, and I want to be respectful of the community and learn about the community. That, to me, is the beauty of doing weekends and weeks is, boy, I get to know these communities better. That's just fascinating to me. So I'm interested in talking with them. By the same token, I also have to know how to take care of myself, and that usually means getting the heck out of there and having quiet time, either with some friends or by myself. So that's important. As far as these larger conversations go, I have a role? Part of the problem with that is the online conversations have been difficult at times, and I've chosen not to say much, except for lead/follow. I did, I did preach a little bit about that pretty hard. But other than that, I think my role is actually to listen to my community and figure out what do they want. You know, and when the role term thing started happening in the Boston area, it was confusing to people. Especially the people who'd been dancing a long time. And of course, I understand that change is hard. And what I found for myself that worked was, well, go talk to these younger dancers and find out what's important to them. And I may not agree with them, but I get to know them as people, and that's what was happening, was there was a big split in the community. And I think if you go talk to people and learn their names, learning people's names is a really powerful tool.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Lisa Greenleaf Because it means that you see them. I certainly know this as a caller so, I remember going up to one young man, there were a bunch of new, younger women, really young women in their teens, and I went up to one young man and I called him by his name. And boy, did he look surprised, and he looked as though the teacher had just found him. This was off mic, I went up to him personally. But I said, Mike, I need your help. He kind of gulped and I said, "There are these two, three, three young women over there, and they need some good help. Can you and your friends help them out?" And the look of

relief on his face! And he did it. He did it. You know, and so that's the power of knowing your community and working with them. I mean, I think, you know how I think about leadership, to me, a lot of it is about empowerment, empowerment, for example, of the musicians. I want to make you look good, let's make sure the sound is right, how can I help? And empowerment of the dancers; help each other out. Wave your hand if you have a problem. One of my favorite things to say, for example in squares, people often feel as though they're not doing the right thing in squares. I say, just keep moving. You'll have more fun. I empower you to keep moving. You know? And then of the organizers, how can we work together as a team? Like that community that wanted to get more squares? Sure, I'll help you, but let me give you some suggestions too.

Mary Wesley are there other things that you think people don't realize that the caller is, is doing or thinking about? When they're up there calling a dance? You know, because I think a lot of what...I mean, the visible part of calling is you're at the mic, you're teaching the dance, you're prompting the figures, and you're asking people to find a new partner telling them when the dance stops and starts. Telling the band when, when to stop and start. But you're, you know, you're the loudest voice in the room. You're affecting, you're affecting a whole, a whole hall full of people. Are there, you know, besides teaching the moves, stopping and starting the music, are there other ways that you're thinking about people's experience on the dance floor at a dance?

Lisa Greenleaf Absolutely. And I think this is the, you know, one of the second or third steps that a caller gets to, and usually they start to ask the question "How do you keep your eye on everybody?" And that shows me, oh good, they are ready to move away from looking at the foursome and looking at the set, which is what you have to do when you first start calling. You know when I've called at festivals, people say, how the heck do you do that? And I said, you open your vision. It's really great. Everybody's swinging at the same time and then you see this little ripple over there and they're rapids and you realize somebody is having trouble. And you zoom in and you figure out, do I need to offer help or are they just going to get it? So that's often a thing is, is one side having trouble. And can I help? And how can I help minimally? Which is one of my favorite things to do.

Lisa Greenleaf So being able to see the whole hall, I think, is a, is a more advanced skill.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Lisa Greenleaf You know, and I think for anybody who wonders about calling, just ask a caller sometime, "Can I come up on stage and stand by you for one dance?" And then you can negotiate which dance it is. And I love it because then they get this different view. They see what I'm doing. They see I have notes that I have a microphone. They see me communicating with the band. And then they go, "Whoa, this is more complicated." Yeah, I said it's more than just counting to eight.

Mary Wesley Right, yeah, a lot more.

Lisa Greenleaf Yes, if you can count to eight, you can get started. But then beyond that... It's really fun just, you know, get up there and see what it looks like.

[Clip of Lisa [calling the contra dance "Summer of '94"](#) by Mike Richardson to the music of the Stringrays]

Handling Mistakes From the Mic

Mary Wesley Yeah. What, how do you handle it when something goes wrong and you're not able to, you know, despite your minimal or even maximum effort or input, you know, it doesn't get fixed. How do you handle that?

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah, that's experience. Oh my gosh, that's experience. And then debriefing immediately with your peer buddies...and what would you have done? I mean, I've certainly had those adrenaline moments, oh my gosh, and moments when you don't even understand what's going on and you're trying to figure it out. And I had a moment actually not too long ago where I completely missed a key direction in a dance and I was flummoxed. And I remember at one point going, well, this has never happened with this dance. Look at it again, start over. And luckily somebody came up and said, I think it's a diagonal, and I went, "Oh, that's it." Huge relief. So yeah, it's really hard not to shut down. I think that just comes from experience. And maybe, you know, say anybody got any suggestions?

Mary Wesley Right. Although that's a terrifying...sometimes that's a terrifying moment for me, and I can remember having moments where I'm like, "What do you think we should do?" And then you realize you've asked two hundred people...

Lisa Greenleaf Right.

Mary Wesley "What do you think we should do?" And I'm supposed to be the one voice.

Lisa Greenleaf Exactly, exactly. Oh, well, you know, Mary, there are more crafty ways out of that. And again, that comes from experience, where you say things like, "You know, we're actually having a sound problem up here." You're not. You're just having a personal sound...programming problem in your head. So we're actually going to stop and play a waltz.

Mary Wesley Ooh, I like that. That's good.

Lisa Greenleaf Oh yeah. You can create a false problem that takes it off everybody. Because part of it is, as a dancer, I can feel the stress. Which is why I love to experience callers making what I know are mistakes. And then watching them smooth themselves out of it, I mean, my first role model for that was Tony Parkes, hands down. On a Monday night just, you know, Mr. Smooth. And there was a mistake, and I was a new caller and I thought, "Oh no!" And then he just said something like, "Well, actually, let's make that go to

the left." And then and then everybody just moved and I looked and I said, nobody...it didn't bother anybody. And it was all in how he handled it.

Teaching

Mary Wesley So when you're teaching...I also think of you as a traveling caller, but I especially think of you as a teaching caller and someone who's mentored a lot of callers, myself included. And so what's your sort of approach or philosophy when you are teaching people to call? How do you get people to that level where they have enough experience that they can bounce back from a mistake? How do you start from point zero and take them along?

Lisa Greenleaf Well, usually the intensive workshops I do are for intermediate or advanced-beginner so that they already know the basic structure and they've already gotten to practice the nuts and bolts. You know what an A and a B are and how to cue the band. Because that takes a lot of time. And I love doing that at weekends, like an Introduction to Calling—that's fine. But at a weeklong workshop, I want to hit the ground running and the first thing I think I have to do is establish this supportive feedback loop. And I credit Linda Henry in the CDSS office for helping me understand how to do that. It's all based on "I" statements. I, as in the letter "I." And boy, is it powerful to learn this method because then of course, you can apply it in your whole...your own life. But before we do anything, I let them know that we will give you feedback, but it's always going to be in the form of an "I" statement. So instead of "You weren't loud enough," it's "I couldn't hear you." Big difference with that. And, "I got confused when I heard circle left." That kind of thing, as opposed to "You, said circle left and nobody else did it." And so learning how to say an "I" statement, it just relaxes everybody. And of course, you know, you were there, I also do a bunch of theater exercises to get people loose and to let them know that we've got to be a group together. One of my favorite things is to get people to be excited about the fact that they made a mistake, and it's goofy. But we walk around the first day going, looking each other in the eye saying "I just made a mistake!" "Excellent! Excellent!" "I didn't know what I was doing!" "Yeah, that was great!" So that you take it as a learning opportunity. That it's exciting. What can you learn from it? But then when I get into teaching about the walk through my biggest thing, and I think it makes me a much better caller, think like a dancer. That is my phrase. I need that on a T-shirt. "Think like a dancer." Callers get in their head and they think about all the mechanics and this and that. But think like a dancer. Does a dancer really need to know all that extra stuff? If you think like a dancer, then you can pare down your words. You know, the other thing that's important to me is learning styles, so that you have two or three different ways of saying the same thing. Circle left three places until you face your neighbor up or down. So the three places is for the engineers. The three places to somebody who's just kinesthetic, they're not going to get that until you say until you face your neighbor up or down. Oh, got it. Think like a dancer.

Mary Wesley I love the...the attention to language is definitely...was a big thing I learned from you. I remember the word "until" being really critical. What are some of your other little words that do a lot?

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah, every time you say a fraction follow it was "until."

Mary Wesley Right.

Lisa Greenleaf Circle left 3/4s until...and again, that's because you've got...or three places. And again, I learned that in my class. Somebody from the Midwest said, "I don't use the fractions. I say how many places." And I could feel the resistance in my body, and then I thought..."She's right!" She's right. Just because it says 3/4s on my card doesn't mean I have to say 3/4s. People have a phobia about fractions. So saying three places "until," tells them which way they're going to face, because in contra, it's all kind of wiggly. You know, you can circle three places and face a cross, or you can face up or down, or you can face into the middle. So that until helps the kinesthetic and visual dancers know where they're going to face. Oh yeah, well, everybody knows my real pet peeve is "going to." We have a whole feedback loop for "going to," whenever anybody says that we hum, because...just in the class, just in the class. Because "going to" to me is one of those neurological quirks. It's buying you half a second more time while you figure out what you're going to say. "Going to" implies the future. So, long lines forward and back. Ladies, you're going to chain across. Now as a dancer what that means to me is there's a but. Robins, you're going to chain across, BUT do this first. No. Robins chain across; just give the figure. Circle left three places, and now you're going to do-si-do. Ah, no! Circle left three places, do-si-do your neighbor. You can cut out that "going to," it's great. And then there are times when you do need the "going to." Larks, you're about to allemande...you're going to Allemande left, but first, look at that other gent and make sure you remember who they are...or that other lark, yeah, that kind of thing. That's really subtle. And unfortunately, I think I've inculcated every student I've ever had. So now whenever they hear somebody say "going to" it bugs them. Their ears perk up. But it's just one of those small linguistic things. I think those are the two biggest ones.

Mary Wesley Yeah, it can have so much impact, I think, you know, the economy of words

Lisa Greenleaf Well, and I think also, as I mentioned before, knowing what your anchors are. So I really understand that a lot of dancers are visual. They're taking visual cues so that if you are working with beginners, orienting them to their partner is really great. Swing your neighbor, face across the set to your partner. You can actually watch them. This is what I love. This is the sociology of it. End that swing, and you see them bobbling around, and face your partner, and you see them straighten up. Oh, my partner's over there. So that's the fun part. That's the fun part.

Lisa Greenleaf Oh, which brings me which brings me, can I tell you a pet peeve?

Mary Wesley Yes.

Lisa Greenleaf Here we are, folks. Now we're really geeking out. I don't really have that many pet peeves because I really enjoy just the people and the situations and all of that and talking about them with everybody. But an example of people not quite getting the dance. I have heard more than once somebody say, "It's just a dance." And that makes me cringe because for me, it's more than just a dance. Saying "It's just a dance" minimizes the importance of why we are all there. We're there to connect. And sometimes as a dancer, when you make a mistake or you're confused by the instructions, you feel out of sync with everybody else. So a better way to think about it is how can you get reconnected? When I hear "It's just a dance," I feel as though I'm being brushed off when really what I'm saying is "Help, I want to get reconnected here. I feel left out. I want reassurance." And you can do that from the mic. If you can tell that people are unsure of themselves. Don't dismiss them. Reestablish this nice safety net for them. If you really think it's true, like, "You know what? I'm going to help you get through it, and so are these other people. I will help you." And if you're a dancer on the floor, you can say to somebody, "Hey, we've got six more rounds to get it right. Let's do it, come on, come on, let's do it!" You know, invite them into feeling that reconnection again.

Mary Wesley Right, "It's a dance! Let's enjoy it!"

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah. And that's part of "think like a dancer." A dancer's there to have fun and to connect with the music and with the other people. And so I don't know, sometimes callers say this to each other when we're really over analyzing a situation, we might say "It's just a dance." Like, no, no, but it's important to me. And feel free to say to me, "I think you're over analyzing it." Feel free to say to me, "Well, think of what you would experience as a dancer." Oh yeah, yeah, I want that good connection. I want that good connection. So that's really only my pet peeve. It's more than a dance, folks. It's life.

Mary Wesley It is. No, I think that's a super important thing to hold on to. I love that, thinking like a dancer. And yeah, I'm thinking too of you were talking about your mentor Larry Jennings and him imparting this idea of trying to think the best of people. And a couple of other times, as we've been talking, you've described this sort of having a moment of internal tension. Like, "Oh, you came, you came to a dance and you and you created a really, you know, a great, exciting program..."

Lisa Greenleaf Expectations were different.

Mary Wesley Yes. Yeah. Or yeah, people on the floor, you have a nice big wide hall and everybody's crowding into one, you know, into one set. How do you navigate those...How do you meet those moments of tension where your expectations are being challenged by reality in some way?

Lisa Greenleaf Oh yeah, I've had a number of those. And again, it really does, it comes down again to intention. What's the intention of this group and can I align myself with that? Can I change my expectation? So that really just means taking a step back. You know, and sometimes taking that step back shows you, for example, you gave that example of a hall where people are dancing only in one part of the hall and there are a few people on the

other side of the set. That, to me, is a larger problem in that community. So understanding, OK, what can I do from the mic? I'm not going to browbeat them, but I can talk to the organizers. Now this has happened in my own community where I am a leader, and I learned this from George Marshall. I put my George Marshall Buddhist smile on and I walk off the stage and I go down to a foursome and say, "I'd like to invite you to join this other set." Now, I could not have come up with that on my own. That was George. "I'd like to invite you..." with his Buddhist dust sprinkled over them and they go and they join it. You know and that's a larger community conversation. But I've also been at places where the organizer wants me to effect some kind of big change. And, you know, at this point in my life, I learned, oh, that's a red flag. But I haven't always known that. I haven't always known exactly what I'm supposed to do there. So then again, step back and look at the bigger intention. And the dancers win. The dancers win. They get to have their intentions honored. As long as it's respectful and it's all about being connected and having good fun over what an organizer might want, I think. You know, then you just have a conversation with that organizer and say, "Let's come up with some ideas for you around this."

The Caller's Intention

Mary Wesley Yes, so can you say more about your intention as, I guess as a caller or...what is it that allows you to step back and reconnect with and realign with an intention?

Lisa Greenleaf Experience, I think. You know, and I do have a number of exercises that I teach callers. Cross crawl, if you remember cross crawl, where you're touching your right hand on your left knee and vice versa, and you're kind of marching in place. That realigns your hemispheres. So that's what you do when you're feeling nervous, but, you then have to state your intention. And I still get that. Sometimes there's a weird buzzing on the floor and I can't figure it out or there's something going on with the band and I can tell I am discombobulated. I will do cross crawl in the back and you can also do cross crawl on stage and people will think you're doing some kind of dorky dance, which is fine. You could even do it sitting down. But what it does is then I set the intention and quite often it's just, "I'm going to have a good time." Because I can tell I'm tightening up. And as I do that, I'm looking out at the crowd and I know it's done when my body feels relaxed and my whole body says, "Yep, you're going to have a good time." "I'm going to do a good job tonight." That's another one. "I'm going to do a good job. I'm going to pay attention. I'm going to do a good job." Yeah, that's the biggest one. And if something really wacky happens, I actually step out of the calling space to think about it.

Mary Wesley Physically?

Lisa Greenleaf Like actually physically like, whoa, something weird happening. I mean, so that's physically taking a step back. And that actually works for me. It's like, I am not in that calling space right now because I need to take a big look at this hall and figure out what's going on.

Calling Other Dance Styles

Mary Wesley I'm realizing...so we've been talking a lot about kind of contras and squares sort of not interchangeably, but I guess can you kind of outline the different styles of dance that you call and the different communities that you're part of? And how do you see that landscape?

Lisa Greenleaf Oh that's a good question. Yeah.

Mary Wesley Where do they crossover, where do they not?

Lisa Greenleaf They don't all crossover, and that's OK. And I think that's one thing that I would encourage contra dancers to understand is that contra dancing is not the be-all end-all of good social dancing. You know, as anybody who looked at David Millstone's fabulous history of square dancing can see with all the video examples he had from the Maritimes and from the South and the West. People are doing great dancing. It may not look like anything you're interested in, but if you watch them, they're having a great time. That's what's important. So I call squares for contra dancers. For the most part. So these are squares where everybody's moving, everybody's active, they're accessible. The pattern repeats. But I also love visiting couple squares and slightly more complicated western squares. And I can only do those at dance camps, and that's fine. Having a whole week to build up a program of that kind of square dancing, that's fine for me. And hopefully at some point in New England, we'll get more traditional square dance going. And I do English dancing and couple dancing and all that kind of stuff. And you do see some crossover, but again, it's just a reminder everybody has their preferences. And it feels like an honor when, for example, when I'm at a week that's mostly English, but they've asked me to call contras. What an honor that is for me to be surrounded by a whole week of that and then get to do some contra dancing. It's great. It's great with a different crowd. And you call contras to mostly English dancers, and they look different.

Mary Wesley Yeah, that's kind of interesting.

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah. They're more on their toes and they're on time.

Mary Wesley Weird.

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah.

Change in the Dance Community

Mary Wesley Yeah. Well, I wonder if we can, you know, maybe take a bit of a long view, and I'm curious what changes from your perspective you've seen in the dance community

and what changes are happening now? That's two different questions. So maybe just start with what changes have you seen?

Lisa Greenleaf Well, in the community or in the dancing itself? I think the community is pretty much remained more or less the same, I would hope. Yeah, just with that same basic desire of we want connection, we want synchronicity with the music, with each other. Yes, there have been some interesting generational things and then everybody has to work around that. Changes around the language, people have to work around that. But I think people still have the same intention when they come to a dance. But I've certainly seen the changes in the style, in the music, the choreography. Holy cow.

Mary Wesley Yeah, can you describe some of those changes?

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah. Well, as I said, because the music has gotten faster and it's more of a smooth, it can be more of a smooth style. Plus, we've got all this fun drama that we can do with a blues jig. You know, a minor jig. Or you can ask for something jazzy and actually get something that's jazz based. Or you can really create a drama in a program if you've got a band that's interested in having really lots of colors. We've got a lot of figures from modern Western. And what's interesting is that when they first came, like pass the ocean, I think Tom Hinds had one of the first past the ocean dances. People couldn't get that concept. They didn't understand past the ocean, so I remember I called it pass through to a wave. Also, because it fit rhythmically better, pass through to a wave. Passing the ocean's a funny kind of rhythm. But then I started learning modern Western Square dancing, which I love, and I would recommend anybody who likes no walk through contras go learn some modern western. Wow, you'll be thrilled. I realized, "No, it's really important. If we want crossover, the names have to be the same." So, it's pass the ocean, and it used to be, you know, I call "box circulate," whereas it used to be "rotate the set." Why not call it what it is? Like, yeah, because we do have crossover now, which is really exciting. So, you know, the only thing that I think is interesting is about making sure contras stay accessible. It's so incredible that we've got all this amazing choreography, yet, you could be a brand new dancer. You don't need a partner. That is so important, you don't need a partner, and you will be welcomed and you can learn the basic moves. But if we make things too difficult the way modern western did, we'll lose people. So I hope we really keep that accessibility. And part of that, I think, is having beginner sessions welcoming sessions.

Mary Wesley Yeah...so as you're seeing changes, you know, I feel like sometimes those changes in style or tastes can fall along generational lines, sometimes not. You know, there's different different factors involved, always in kind of what becomes popular, what gets picked up by the crowd. But as you said earlier, change is hard. It's hard. And of course, all our cliches, you know, it's the most, it's the constant. It's the thing you can count on. So, but how do you navigate, you know, if you are observing, maybe particularly in your home community, you know, fractures around changes that are happening in the dance community. You've brought up the...several multiple stages of trying to make a shift away from gendered language, for example. And I know that that's a challenge and some people have felt alienated in both directions, whether they would like that the, you know, ladies and gents terms to stay or whether they they...people find those terms really make

their dancing experience not viable or enjoyable. So, you know, those moments of tension that those changes and shifts produce, how do you especially, I guess, in your dance community where maybe you have more investment, a more significant leadership role? What do you do in the face of all that?

Lisa Greenleaf You know, I learned a lot when the Thursday night dance was going to be moving from its second home. It had started at the VFW. It had moved up to a place called Spring Step, and we needed to figure out if we were going to go to the Scout House. And so I decided to do an informal poll. The obvious questions about venue were there, but I wanted to know what's happening socially. Oh my gosh, what an eye opener. I am so glad I did it. And it basically was a question about "Tell me about your dance experience here." Holy cow. The stuff I learned. So that was right around the time that we did have an influx of teenagers. They're now in their thirties. And a lot of older dancers were saying, I love the younger dancers, but. And then there'd be a complaint. And then the younger dancers would say their experience. You know, the older dancers are always trying to tell me what to do, but. And I thought, Holy cow, that's a, that's a really interesting problem we have there. I also learned at that point we had a...we were unusual in the country. At that point, we had a big gender imbalance back when it mattered to some dancers and we had a lot of extra men, which was very, very rare. I think it's all the engineering schools here. And to hear these men say how hard it was for them to get partners and I, they put their name on the survey and I was shocked. These were fabulous dancers. So that opened my eyes to making sure I looked around to see who wasn't dancing. And to go ask them to dance. That was great. And you can do that from the mic, and I learned that from Scott Higgs, more than two or three times in the evening to say, "Please look to the sides. Invite somebody who's sitting out to dance." But also, I didn't know what to do about this generational issue, so I went to people who might know, I went to teachers. And Debbie Knight, who's a musician and teaches biology, I love it, she said, "You know, it's it's not their biological urge for kids to be dancing with people their parents age. It's their urge to be with their own age group." And I thought, "Oh my gosh, that is brilliant. Wow. Yeah. So we shouldn't be blaming them that they're not adapting to our culture." And that's what I came up with this idea of, it's up to us as the established dancers to go talk to them and meet them where they are. Don't insist that they dance with you. Just keep getting in their face by saying, "Hi so-and-so, how are you?" You know that kind of thing. And then also to make sure that the committee was visible so that when there were discomforts around particular issues that dancers of any age knew they had people they could go talk to.

Mary Wesley Mm hmm. So important. And does having those identifiable people in charge or committee members help your job as a caller? Because a lot of people think the person at the mic's in charge.

Lisa Greenleaf Oh, yeah. Oh, it does, it does, absolutely. It does. Yeah, and that's why it's important to identify them. You know, it was interesting was when BIDA, the Boston Intergenerational Dance Advocates first started, it was kind of an outgrowth of the Youth Dance Weekend that was taking place at that point, I think, in Vermont. And I think Ethan Hazzard-Watkins came up to me and said, "So I just did this workshop for musicians, but now they're trying to figure out how to get hired." And I said, "Well, the easiest thing is to

start your own dance," which is what they did. And they started BIDA and I was going to call the first dance and they gave me a list of 10 things they wanted me to say throughout the evening. And I said "This is too much. People aren't going to listen to this," but I had just been in a high school where they had all these aphorisms and affirmations like on the walls, and I said, but if you wrote them up as posters. So that's what they did and they still have them. I'm so proud of that. They may not know that that came from me, but it did. So it's things like, "Dance in different parts of the hall" or, you know, that kind of thing. Things that they wanted the community to know. You know, "Have an issue? Talk to one of our safety officers." That kind of thing so that you could read it and know it was there, but you didn't have to be pummeled with it from the mic.

Gender Free Calling

Mary Wesley Yeah. I'm wanting to wrap up soon. Well, first of all, is there anything else that you want to say about the change in gendered language? Just...I didn't ask you directly about it...

Lisa Greenleaf Oh no, this is really interesting. So I was hired for English Week at Pinewoods and English Week decided to try to be as gender neutral as possible. And at this point in time, in 2022, English dancing doesn't have a standard language for neutral role terms. There is positional calling, but not every caller does that. So I had this really interesting laboratory, so most of my dancers were hard core English dancers, and in my contra class I said every day we're going to use different terminology. And you tell me how you feel about it. And so I started with men and women, which was actually really hard for me to call because it's been years. And then the next day, I think I did gents and ladies, then I had jets and rubies, larks and robins. And actually, at that point, I was using larks and ravens and somebody said, "Well, since you're having this conversation, many of us on the West Coast are using Robins." I'm like, "Ok, we'll try Robins." And then I went through every permutation of the figure formerly known as "Gypsy," now known as right shoulder round, and I, in one dance, I did that in one dance. I called a different thing and I said, "You can be vocal. Tell me what you think about it." And it was hysterical. And because by the end of the week, people came up and said, it doesn't matter. I mean, obviously to certain people, it did matter about the gendered part. But the people who are feeling resistant to that change and wanted to keep it gents and ladies, they were the ones who came up and said, "I get it. We're still dancing."

Mary Wesley Yeah!

Lisa Greenleaf I love that! And my biggest advice to any caller who's having trouble making the switch, it does make style a bit more challenging to have larks and robins, only because people aren't staying with the same role. The trick I've learned to do is if you've got a dance where the larks have an allemande left, you say, "Raise your hand if you're a lark," and it's great because you see two or three people go, Me? No, me? Yes! No, no! And then you've solved it for them. And there's no embarrassment when the music starts

because they did the walkthrough. And you can do that for absolutely every dance. Raise your hand if you're dancing the robin role.

Mary Wesley That's great.

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah, it's great, so help them out, help them out, because it's really not that hard. And if you don't want to translate all your handwritten cards, use stickies. It's fine.

Mary Wesley Mm-Hmm. And how had...I mean, that's such a great opportunity to especially, you know...dance weeks are so nice for that because you have more space. That is the challenge. And you know, our dance series, you just, you have like one night at a time. And you know, it's the challenging and interesting thing about these dance forms is we don't have, you know, exactly a governing body that's going to, you know, make a decree about what the standardized language...

Lisa Greenleaf But you know what the successful dance communities did, who who wanted to effect the change?

Mary Wesley Uh huh?

Lisa Greenleaf They took months and they worked with their communities. So I'm thinking of Montpelier and also Amherst. It took months. They said, "Ok, over the next couple of months, we are going to experiment with using gents/ladies and larks/robins." And they had some kind of mechanism for feedback. And what that did was, I mean, it was clear to me as soon as they asked the question, "Well, we know where it's going to end up, it's going to end up at larks and robins." But allowing the community to sit with it, or dance with it for a couple of months before making that decree, so it became a community decision. And then they could have those one-on-one conversations. If you want to know why we're doing this place, come talk to me and I'll tell you why it's important to me. And that I want to hear about your experience as well. Wow, that was just so wonderful to see that happen.

Mary Wesley Mm hmm. I think I hear that, you know, cultivating community, cultivating or making space for communication and input is, seems like something that is really important to you in your work as a caller and a dancer.

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah, connection. It's all about connection.

Mary Wesley I have three kind of shorter closing questions, but before we do that, is there anything else that I like, totally missed that's on the tip of your tongue that we haven't covered in our long, our wonderful long conversation. It just blows my mind how the time flies!

Lisa Greenleaf And I know, I know. Well we're geeking out Mary! We love geeking out! Oh, you know, that's actually another thing. When you asked about keeping it fresh,

keeping it interesting, it's being able to talk with my buddies, with my caller buddies. You know, that really is great.

Closing

Mary Wesley Yeah, talking shop. The things that maybe not everybody can understand or experience and then just having someone who is like, "Yes, I get it!" It feels so good. OK, so here are my three closing caller questions. The first one is how do you keep your dances? Do you have dance cards? Do you have binders with printouts? Have you gone to a full computer database? What is your filing system?

Lisa Greenleaf It's a database that I print out into a spiral book, and now I may end up just using my iPad. I'm just terrified of not having electricity, but I think I could take the spiral book along with the, with like an iPad. Because for me, it's always about making notes. I love to make notes. And I can certainly do that with an iPad.

Mary Wesley OK, and next question, do you have any pre- or post- gig rituals? Things that you do to get ready to get on stage or after a dance that, you know, to kind of transition.

Lisa Greenleaf Water, before, during, after. Water is one of the best. I'm sure I do, but it feels like it's been so long. Like personal personal rituals. Yeah, I just want to make sure my calling space feels good. So one thing I got from Kalia Kliban, who's an English, mostly an English caller in California, is she has a portable music stand that collapses and it's great. So it's great for my book, my spiral bound book with dances. So I like to carry that with me. I have my microphone. And other than that, and a chair... And yeah, so the ritual of making sure my space feels good. That's key.

Mary Wesley Yeah, and it sounds like you have those materials with you that are consistent.

Lisa Greenleaf Yeah.

Mary Wesley OK, last last question. This is my own, my own personal little curiosity, sociological inquiry about callers. And you may or may not know, but if you know, do you identify as an introvert or an extrovert?

Lisa Greenleaf I'm both! Hmm.

Mary Wesley Yeah, and not everybody has a ready answer.

Lisa Greenleaf Well, I need my quiet time. I'm sure people would think of me as an extrovert, but boy, don't forget that's a performance. So I'm right on the introvert extrovert line there.

Mary Wesley Mhmm. Yep.

Lisa Greenleaf You know, because I'm kind of paid to be an extrovert, so, yeah, I'd say I tend more towards the introvert introversion there.

Mary Wesley Yeah,

Lisa Greenleaf Right. And I'm not shy. But I do feel a bit more introverted than, extroverted, wanting to go out and experience absolutely everything, and I really do value my my personal time. And the personal time doesn't have to be being quiet. I mean, I love walking and I love walking by myself. So I think if that is more of an introverted.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Lisa Greenleaf Mary, here's a good question for people!

Mary Wesley Ooh tell me.

Lisa Greenleaf Do you have a uniform?

Mary Wesley Oh, that's a great...

Lisa Greenleaf Do you get dressed? Because I think, like I know, Will Mentor has his uniform.

Mary Wesley Oh my gosh, yes.

Lisa Greenleaf His crisp white shirt and his khakis and his vest. And I'm just curious if men think about getting dressed for the dance. I certainly do. I mean, number one is comfort. Number one is comfort. But hey, I've also got some really cool earrings I want to wear. So, I'd be curious to know from people.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Do you? What do you think about? I mean, that could be part of your...should add that to the ritual thing. But yeah, yeah. Do you have a...

Lisa Greenleaf Well, I do think about getting dressed. I do get dressed for the gig. Absolutely. And it has to be comfortable and all of that. But I enjoy getting dressed for the gig.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Mary Wesley All right, well, Lisa Greenleaf, thank you so much for coming to visit.

Lisa Greenleaf Oh, Mary Wesley, thanks for having me. I'm a big fan of this project, so I wish you all the best.

Mary Wesley Thank you.

A big thanks to Lisa for taking the time to speak with me. There's more to our conversation that we couldn't fit in the episode so be sure to check out the show notes at podcasts.cdss.org to hear more from Lisa.

And thank you for listening to From the Mic. This project is supported by CDSS, The Country Dance and Song Society and is produced by Ben Williams and me, Mary Welsey.

Thanks to Great Meadow Music for the use of tunes from the album Old New England by Bob McQuillen, Jane Orzechowski & Deanna Stiles.

Visit podcasts.cdss.org for more info.

Happy dancing!

Ben Williams: The views expressed in this podcast are of the individuals and do not necessarily reflect those of CDSS.