

From the Mic Episode 3 - Sarah VanNorstrand

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 particular 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"

[Clip of Sarah [calling Dennis' 50 Years of Entrancement](#)" written by Seth Tepfer to the music of Riptide (Glen Loper, Owen Marshall, Alden Robinson) at the Epicenter dance weekend in Mill Valley, CA]

Doing the interview for this third episode of From the Mic was an extra special treat because I got to do it IN PERSON!

My guest today, Sarah VanNorstrand, originally hails from the Syracuse, New York area but in the past year she moved to Vermont, which is where I live! We were able to sit together in a little upstairs room in a farmhouse...

[tape of Mary and Sarah settling in for an interview and their chairs are squeaking]

...on some very squeaky chairs and talk about all things calling.

[more chair squeaks!]

(You'll hear the squeaks throughout, so hopefully you'll just feel like you're really in the room with us).

Sarah has been calling, organizing and teaching contra, square, and family/community dances for over 15 years. Since her first dance as a teenager, she fell in love with the community aspect of social dancing, and has been hooked ever since. She currently lives on a farm in southern Vermont with her husband, cats, and ever-expanding garden.

In our conversation Sarah and I trace the roots of her connection to traditional music and dance back to her teenage years in Syracuse where she had her first fiddle lesson, started a Contra Club at her high school, and found friends and mentors who would deeply influence her approach as a dance leader. She shares her thoughts about matching dance choreography to music, including what she learned working alongside contra dance super-band Great Bear. And she speaks so thoughtfully to the many ways she works as a caller to facilitate a welcoming and fulfilling experience for everyone on the dance floor.

This episode is being released in April 2022 when social dancing is slowly making a return. Across the country dance halls are opening up and joyous reunions are happening. My conversation with Sarah was a wonderful reminder of the many gifts of social dancing and I'm excited to share it with you. So get ready to join us in our squeaky chairs for a good chat.

Mary Wesley: Sarah VanNorstrand, welcome to From the Mic!

Sarah VanNorstrand: It's great to be here, thanks for having me, Mary.

Mary Wesley: I am so glad you're here and we're actually here in the same room, which is really special. I haven't done any of these interviews yet in person, but we're lucky that we don't live too far apart now. It's very fun to have to add another caller to the Vermont collective. We have a lot of us around here, so welcome.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Thank you. Good to be here.

Mary Wesley: Yeah. Well, I wonder if you could just start off by telling me a little bit about how you got into calling and dancing and sort of that whole scene. Where did that start for you?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah. So for me, it...I kind of came in a little bit through a back door. I played violin in school and did classical orchestra but I always really liked fiddle music, folk music. I didn't even really know what that was, but my mom had a book of Irish fiddle tunes that we would try to play at home. And, you know, not with great success. But some friends of mine took me to a concert at our little library up in Phoenix, New York, in February in the middle of a snowstorm and to hear a young fiddler play that was very popular in the area. So I went and met Andrew VanNorstrand, my now husband and was really struck not only just by him, but also by fiddle music in general. And I really got the bug, so I was able to start taking lessons from him once a month or once a once a week, actually to start with. And then as I was learning a lot of the music, he was insistent that I really needed to experience that the dancing element of a lot of the music that he played. So he took me to the Syracuse Country Dancers contra dance, which...they had contra dances and English dances and got me into that and I was really bitten by that bug hard. We went pretty much every weekend at that point. On Saturdays, we would go to the dance and there were some lovely people there that got me into dancing and very quickly wanted, you know, we're encouraging people to start calling, too. So it was a super welcoming open community and actually started a contra dance club at school, which in hindsight, was rather ridiculous, but, was a way to just get some other young people that I thought might be interested in learning how to do it. And so in this contra club, we realized we didn't know what we would actually do when we met. So I started just calling dance moves and. And from there, it kind of kind of went along. I had a great mentor, two mentors, David Smuckler and Bob Nicholson, who were incredibly encouraging and

shared material and shared patten and shared stories and were comforting when it didn't go well. And were really encouraging when it did. And I owe a lot to them.

Mary Wesley: Yes. So tell me more about your contra dance club or contra club?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Contra club, yes. Well, I went to a very large public high school. My graduating class was about a thousand people and it was very hard to feel like you had a niche there or a group. And so I think I just felt like this might be a way to have this little group of some of the other people that didn't fit in with some of the more classic cliques in the school. So I went to the German teacher because I was friends with her and asked if she would sponsor her club because you had to have a sponsor. And she let us use her classroom so we would clear the desks and I got a CD of Great Bear Trio because that was my pretty much my contra music repertoire at the time. And we would play, you know, push play, and we just practice all the figures that we could. You know, we practice heys and we practice balance and swings. And we'd, you know...the club I think, went on in person at the school a couple of times. But then we quickly realized that there wasn't that much to actually do in the club. So we just started all going to the dances together, and that was great.

Mary Wesley: Were there other people who were calling in the club or were you kind of did you end up stepping into that role?

Sarah VanNorstrand: The most...I definitely seemed to step in the most. Maybe it was just because I felt like I was started the club and was leading the club. It sort of felt natural to instruct as well, even though I didn't know that much more than anyone else there. But once we were going to the actual dances, the Syracuse Country Dancers would have open mic nights and things, and they would encourage people to get up in and give it a go. And I think David and Bob both were like, "Well, you've shown some initiative, why don't you get up there? And here's a dance, call your first dance." And it was great. It just, you know, before you even knew to be afraid of it, they had you up there.

Mary Wesley: So that's an important moment. Do you remember the first dance you called?

Sarah VanNorstrand: What was it? Well, it wasn't it wasn't Small Potatoes, but it was like something like that. Yeah, I can't remember which one, exactly. Maybe The Big Easy might have been it...

Mary Wesley: Becky Hill!

Sarah VanNorstrand: Becky Hill, yup.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, yeah. Small Potatoes is my first one.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Was it? Yeah.

Mary Wesley: It's trickier than you realize. It is that full circle left into the chain. And what high school were you at?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Fayetteville Manlius, outside of Syracuse.

Home dance community

Mary Wesley: Nice. Will you talk a little bit more about your home dance? Because it seems like you were like...That was very influential. The place where you happened to get started with all this?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah. Looking back, I realize how lucky I was to start dancing and calling in Syracuse of all places. It was a...it's a very unique community in that it's quite small. It's not big and flashy, like some of the larger urban contra scenes are, but it's very enthusiastic and very friendly and very welcoming...all the things that I really treasure about a community dance. And it had an extreme amount of variety, and really, the goal was always having fun together because we didn't have the best bands. We didn't have the best callers, we didn't have the best dancers. But none of that really mattered because we were all there for other reasons. We were there to have fun with each other and people were so appreciative, enthusiastic when things went well. But also very, very patient and kind when they didn't. Which is a rare mix, I think in the community itself was really again focused on variety. Partly, that was the leadership of David Smuckler and Bob Nicholson and other people that were kind of running things. That's what they enjoy is a mix. So every evening, if you didn't have at least one chestnut in two squares and a circle mixer, you were calling a proper program so that I didn't realize how different that was until I started getting out into the wider scene where circle mixers or things like that were not seen as quite so great. I got to see firsthand how they...that kind of mixed program really got people engaged in every way they could be. It wasn't just a one track version of dancing, it was community engagement, community dancing across the board. And it was really great.

Mary Wesley: Yeah. What do you think that variety in dance forms offers to the dance experience? Like what is it about that...what does it add, I guess?

Sarah VanNorstrand: I think it kept dancers from assuming or expecting too much of a prescribed experience. They...the idea was that you never really knew exactly what was going to happen next, and that was part of the fun that you, you know. You understood how circle mixers worked or you understood how squares worked, but we were there to just try the next thing together and that you trusted the caller to lead you through it more or less. And it was, yeah, lots of ways of of engaging with each other where it really felt like a party where you were. There was a lot of goofing around. There was a lot of stuff. We did a lot of sort of silly squares you might call them, you know, where you're doing chase figures and acting out different roles. It was very, very goofy, but also really fun. And it kept it from being too monotone as far as like, this is what we do at a dance where we are serious and we dance this way and we show off our special flourishes. And you know, the music has to be amazing and the calling has to be amazing. And that's great. And I've been in that scenario where it's really exhilarating to be in that sort of experience. But it's also really fun to goof around with people and having a repertoire, a dance program that sort of encourages that is is cool. It's pretty unique.

Mary Wesley: Yeah. So then, where did you go from from Syracuse Country Dancers? Kind of, how did your horizons broaden?

Growing a calling career

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah. Well, partly was that I was connected with Andrew and Great Bear, and I called with them some and got hired at a couple of dance weekends. I think my first dance weekend out of the Syracuse area was actually the Hands Four in Berea, Kentucky, which was definitely jumping in at the deep end. And in hindsight, you know, it was very nice of them to hire me, but I wasn't really there yet. I wasn't that level of a caller. But, you know, other people have talked about how if you have a really great band, you can sometimes be OK. If the goal is not as great or if you have really good dancers, they can compensate for other things. So it was one of those where we all had a great time. But I probably wasn't the most amazing caller in that experience. But it was good. It was a way to learn how a dance weekend flow goes and how programming for that is vastly different than programming for a single night or even a tour. And after that, yeah, started just getting hired at dances all around upstate New York and Pennsylvania and did a fair bit of stuff in Canada, Ottawa and Toronto, Montreal, which was a really wonderful circuit to do. I always look forward to the Canadian circuit when I got to do it about once a year. And then getting into New England, which was actually a bit scarier, a bit more of a closed book. I felt like coming from western New York sort of the Midwest, you know learning what the expectations were and the history was like a bit of a steep climb for me. But then the dance weekends kind of took off from there and started traveling all around the country and got to see a lot of really beautiful places and meet a lot of wonderful people. And also just kind of learned that the, you know, the contra dance weekend circuit had its own community, its own flavor that was pretty separate from even the local dances that would put them on. So that was sort of an interesting transition to understand that other world that was there.

Mary Wesley: Yeah. Do you have a sense of like what was motivating you as you were exploring, you know, kind of busting out of your your home, your wonderful, formative home dance scene and you have this factor of, you know, your family is a, you know, a contra dance band who is out there a lot. And maybe it was a way to be able to spend time together, but also it's fun to collaborate with family. And then, of course, enjoying yourself or kind of growing as a caller. I don't know. How did you...do all those different elements kind of come into play as you were charting your path?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Well, I really enjoy calling in of itself kind of regardless of the situation. I love being in that vortex center point between the band and the dancers, and you're sort of a conduit or a facilitator for those two parties to interact in the very best way possible. And that was kind of intoxicating in of itself working with fantastic musicians. I mean, Great Bear, of course, was burning up the scene at the time and was a real thrill to call with them when I did. And actually, I didn't call within that much after the first couple. I was mostly calling with other bands for a while, which was good. It was a way to train up and then after a certain point, yes, it was really wonderful to travel with my husband so that we weren't always separate. We often would be going to dance weekends in different parts of the country, you know, and it was kind of like, "Well, I'll see you when you get back, but it'd be cool, if we could do this together." And being, you know, calling with bands of that caliber is really a thrill. The music is just so incredible and. To be able to help channel that music so that the dancers can fully, you know, sink their teeth into it and really have a full experience of it is very exciting for me. I love doing that. And yeah, I love choreography. I think the flow and the pictures that you can make with moving bodies out on the floor is really beautiful and mesmerizing. And just the idea of helping people move to music in a synchronized, satisfying ways is pretty cool because I'm not a natural like, abstract dancer to myself. I don't just like hear music and automatically know how to move my body. I really

appreciate someone giving me some choreographic instructions to make it feel good. And then and then using that as like the starting point and then fully engaging your body and your spirit, you know, if you really want to go that far, to just experience that music in a really true way. So being a caller just felt like you could sort of somehow perch in the middle of all that and get a little taste of all the things that were going on around you. So that was...it was great. I loved it.

Calling Philosophy

Mary Wesley: Yeah. How did that...well, yeah. So many, so many great breadcrumbs you're leaving me here. Do you think you can describe a little bit your approach or philosophy, like when you're when you're in that vortex, how are you thinking about creating that experience for the dancers and and like, what do you do both practically and then and then also sort of philosophically to create create the the dance experience that you're describing here—this beautiful connective experience.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Well, I guess I always tried to think of being a caller as being a facilitator and facilitators do lots of things. Sometimes you teach, sometimes you crowd manage, sometimes you cover time while sound things go wrong. You're just there to kind of help it happen. But there's so many ways in which you can do that. I think what I tried to always keep in mind was that it wasn't about the flashiest dance and it wasn't about the most extreme show-off caller moment, but it was really about like...what is the exact right choreography to go with what the band's going to play next? That will help the dancers just fully let loose. So with a band that I knew a lot of the repertoire, I could really customize what I thought would be the right fuel for that particular bit of music. Certainly with Great Bear, I was able to do that in a pretty deep dive sort of way. But even with other bands, I would try to, you know, get a sense of what's the mood of this band? You know, what's there? How do they make people naturally want to move with the way they use rhythm, the way they use melody? And then finding dances that I felt like accentuated that or brought it to the forefront even more while still providing contrast as well. But...and my biggest thing was wanting the dancers and the musicians to be connected. And that felt like especially what I could facilitate from the microphone. Because as a caller, you're a timekeeper, you're keeping the dancers in sync with the band as much as possible with your prompting. And hopefully at some point you can remove yourself from that and let, you know...and it will happen organically without you. But you always need to be there to nudge it if it needs to go one way or another. Because I really feel like a big part of what makes contra, dancing contra dancing, and a lot of folk dancing is the idea of being synched up with the people around you and with the music where everybody is literally on the same page on the same beat in the same moment experiencing it together, all at the same time. And that's that's pretty unique to contra dancing and other forms of sort of group folk dancing like that. I always would try to accentuate that moment of when we all balance at the same time and when it's long lines forward and back when you are ending the hey at exactly the right moment. And that just feels so satisfying to me as a dancer and also as a caller when I would watch it. And I know the bands always loved it when they could really see the dancers just right there with them and right in the moment.

Mary Wesley: That's beautifully described. How much of like the...you know, the Syracuse Country Dancers variety show are you able to like, bring into your other calling, especially as you've traveled and moved around?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Well, I've had to be more delicate about that, but I have tried to be an ambassador for other country...you know, other forms of social dance than just duple improper contras. You know, there's so much out there. And I've used a lot of other figures at different points, especially in one single night dances to try and accomplish different goals. So I do often include a mixture of some sort in the first half of the evening, especially if you've got a crowd with a lot of new people or even just a mix of people that not are not all locals because it's a way to mix people up and get them dancing with people they wouldn't automatically have chosen. And it's a way to just break that ice down and will make the rest of the evening feel much more relaxed, in my opinion. And sometimes there would be pushback. Of course, not everybody likes mixers; fair enough. That's why we only did one in an evening, you know? And the thing I tried to encourage people that...is that...maybe every single dance isn't going to be your favorite. That's OK. You know, and it's understanding that the whole idea of this evening is not that you get every single thing that you want, every single dance, but that the whole room experiences the cohesion and the connection that comes with a social dance experience. So, you know, using different formations to accomplish different goals. I would often throw in a square dance sometime in the second half because I felt like it was a way to just change it up. Just just throw it out. And if people have been dancing contras all evening, if they really didn't want to dance the square, then they could totally take a break. And that would be fine. And nobody had to, you know...was going to get arm wrestled into doing it, but it was a way to just like, "Oh, and there's this other thing that we also do and informs so much of our tradition. And I feel that contras and squares and English dancing as well, we share so many things and cross-pollinate in so many ways, and it only makes the genres more interesting to me when they've borrowed from other elements. So I tried to really keep the idea that variety's good without stuffing it down people's throats too much, hopefully.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, no. I can't imagine you ever being too pushy in those matters, but I wonder what, like, what is your inner landscape when you are experiencing a little bit of pushback? How do you...because I feel like, you know, when we're at the mic, you're the loudest voice in the room. You are shaping people's night on the dance floor in a really significant way. But you're also like a person up there. You're also your own person. So yeah, how do you balance out maybe what your tastes and hopes are with, you know, what you're getting back from the crowd?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Well, I will say I'm more fragile inside than I wish I was when it comes to that sort of stuff. It's really hard to not take it really personally when you get pushback, especially vocal pushback from a crowd. It's another thing if someone later on comes up and says, "Hey, I didn't like that," and then you can have a conversation with them and explaining, you know your reason. But when you're on the mic and you're asking people to find a partner for a mixer and you've got people, you know, booing that request... the thing I've tried to always do is just be like cheerful and deliberate and move past that because it's not really about having a big conversation in that moment about whatever it is that I'm trying to initiate. So trying to, yeah, present a firm but cheerful exterior, even if you're crumbling a bit on the inside. And just remember that made this choice for a reason. This is what I told myself. You made this choice for a reason. Not everyone's going to love it, you know that. And you know you're doing it on purpose with intention, and they may not understand all of that right now. But also, it's going to be an eight minute part of the evening. And so I would hope that most people would be able to roll with that or excuse themselves if they really chose not to do that and go get a drink or go talk to a friend and have a great evening and another way for eight minutes. But yeah, I would definitely have a lot of after dances or where you have to do a lot of self-talk to kind of right the ship

because it's very easy to never want to have to get up behind the microphone again and put yourself in a position where people express themselves in a kind of a forceful way.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, it's a tricky thing. I mean, you're talking about this dynamic of...like the group dynamic, we're all doing something together. There's this very unifying experience and there's this interesting interplay between like, a group of dancers and the caller and the band. And then, you know, that can also sort of go the different way that the group, you know, expresses something different. And you know, it's a little more challenging when it sort of all bounces back to like this sort of the one person at the mic. It's a tricky...I totally relate to all that

Sarah VanNorstrand: I would say one other thing about that...

Mary Wesley: Yeah!

Sarah VanNorstrand: Is that certainly in some communities, they would specifically in their invitation to for you to call request that you not do certain things, not do squares or not do circle mixers or only call contras or only call contras that have both partner and neighbor swings, or they would stipulate what was expected. And so I would, you know, honor those agreements to the best of my ability. I occasionally forgot a neighbor swing or something here or there. But when that was the case, I did try to find contra figures that would accomplish some of the same goals. There are those out there that just change the mood enough that change the expectations enough that. That are not exactly the same as all the modern contras that still kind of help people break out of their mold a little bit.

Mary Wesley: So yeah, can you think of any any examples? What you would reach for if you are feeling that need to shake it up, but wanted to keep it in the in the contra format?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah, I would like to, I called one a fair bit that has, you know, ones and twos swinging at separate times. Everyone got to swing. There were lots of swings and it was, you know, everyone accomplished what they want, but it's still had this a little bit of this feeling of...and the ones and then the twos, the sort of alternating back and forth. A little bit of a square dance feel to it or a chestnut feel to it while still checking all the boxes that modern contra dancers really wanted or just picking something that was a little bit goofy. There are a couple of contras that have a chase figure in them, and I wouldn't know you want to use this judiciously and not not overdo it, but every now and then it felt like you could pick something that would just kind of help people snap out of their rut a little bit and enjoy the music and dancing in a way that was a little unexpected to them. And that was always exciting to see.

[Sarah [calling "Celebrating 60" written by Linda Leslie](#) to the music of the combined Notorious and Seaglass Band at the Echo Summit dance weekend in Sacramento, CA]

Mary Wesley: Nice. Yeah. How do you self-identify? Would you call yourself a "dance caller?" A "contra caller?" You know, it's like, what are the styles or categories that you connect with or feel part of?

Sarah VanNorstrand: I guess I would I would always just call myself a dance caller because I love contras and certainly did the most of that traveling the country, calling specifically contra dances. So I got, I feel like plenty of mic time doing that. I personally love squares so much. I love dancing squares. I love watching other people dance

squares. I love listening to people call squares. I love the music that goes with it so often of the time. So I definitely call squares. I'm not sure I'm brave enough to call myself a square dance caller yet because I feel like there's just a level up that I haven't quite made. You know where I would love to be able to patter call and really do it the way the masters do, but not there yet. But I do love it so much. I call a lot of community dances. I called a lot for schools, weddings, various parties. So I enjoy that repertoire of, you know, it's more of the party style dances or mixers or things like that, there's a lot out there and it's a great way to help people interact that that don't actually come from a contra dancing background. So I did a fair bit of that, and I did start doing some English calling before the pandemic started and I danced some English and really enjoy...the choreography is lovely. And some of the old, some of the new. It's a really interesting mix, but I was really just getting started in that in that scene as a caller. So, yeah, I call folk dances.

Mary Wesley: Yeah. What's it like when you are going into those into a situation where you have people who have maybe never done a kind of folk dancer or social dance group social dance before? What do you observe and what's your approach?

Sarah VanNorstrand: People have, without even knowing it, they have preconceived notions of what those dances look like and are, and so often they will try to model that behavior, what they saw in a movie or maybe what they did once in grade school, 30 years ago or something. And I think what I always tried to do is not dissuade them from that so much, but just be like, you know, we can all hold hands in a circle and circle left and circle right and go in and out. We can all do that and we can do si do and we can fold our arms if we want to or we can... But just keeping it very playful and very much focused on this is a way for you to interact with all these people in this room without knowing what you're doing. You don't have to know what you're doing, and that's OK because so many people think they need to know how to do the foxtrot or something before they can dance. And you don't. You just need to, especially with the kind of stuff you do at weddings or at parties...it's really all just about being willing to stand up and take hands with the people next to you is all that it takes. And if people are willing to do that much, then I can make sure they have a great time with the dance figures and the music because so many people don't know what it's like to dance to live music, and that's just a thrill in of itself.

Working with music

Mary Wesley: Yeah, let's talk more about music. So you obviously had the opportunity to work really closely with Great Bear, maybe other other bands as well. But what's...can you say more about how you work with bands? What conversations are you going to have with the band when maybe...if you're just rolling up, "Hey, let's do a dance together. We've never worked together!"

Sarah VanNorstrand: Well, it does help if I've heard their music at all. I do try to, if possible, if there's any recordings that exist for a band. If I know I'm going to interact with them, I try to listen just because I want to know what's what stamp of music are they putting out into the world and what's the sound they want people to know is them because I want my dance choices to try and support that as much as possible, not asking a band that does super smooth trance music or to do a choppy square dance or something like that. You know, trying to figure out what one of the things they love to do, and try to bolster that wherever possible. But if it is really just showing up and not knowing them at all, I try to talk with each person there, figure out who's the point person in the band if they have

one. Sometimes everybody just sort of is there chiming in, figuring things out together, and sometimes one person's calling the shots and then usually just talking through what my signals are. I start off the first two dances. I usually have one that I know I want to be a very bright, welcoming, reel. And you know, any band that plays for contra dancing has one of those typically...

Mary Wesley: Happy opening tunes.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah, and usually everybody, they have one already in mind that they want to play, and I have a dance that's going to work great with it. I often would call something like The Big Easy. The structure of it was great for beginner dancers, and they could really learn how progression worked, and it worked so well with happy reels. And it was just a great way to kind of learn how the dancers were going to be and learn how the band was going to be, and everybody could get their bearings on that first one. And then for the second one, I would often ask for something that was a bit more marchy and bands would interpret that in really different ways, which I liked because it gave me a really good clue as to what they gravitate towards. You know, if marching for them was like, a smooth trance march or it was a jig or, you know, it would really...or if it was like a rag, it would give you some big clues as far as where this band likes to go. But yeah, I try to just really listen as much as possible, make sure that my calling fit the music. Sometimes I would try to pitch my voice with the melody. Playing fiddle helped a lot because I knew a lot of the tunes. I could even sometimes request specific tunes from the band if they, you know, if I was asking for something...a certain mood and they weren't sure what I meant, I'd be like, "Well, do you play this tune and...kind of like this one?" Or, you know, "it doesn't need to be that tune specifically, but something in that realm?" And that would sort of be a way to help make sure we were talking the same language.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, that's an interesting craft, the, you know, matching choreography to music, and I wonder if you can articulate in any way what's happening when you get a tune or you know, or a set of music that's like, really clicking with with the dance that you've chosen. You know, what's really happening there? What...how do you understand that match?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Well, I feel like a lot of the music will inspire your body to move in certain ways. There's like things that make you want to move forward and there's things that make you want to stop. Are the two things I kind of think about and with certain figures, there's these these, you know, certainly like a hey for four is a forward motion. You're moving forward for a full 16-beats and the only stop is going to happen at the end. If that even happens, maybe it's just a smooth transition. So a melody that doesn't have a stopping point and it doesn't have an accentuated beat or a even a break in the sound. That's the kind of thing that just keeps going forward, just keeps moving, and there's no particular stopping point. So I try to think about what are the moves that do that and then thinking about other kind of punchier tunes or things that have a real rhythmic message in them. And how do they make your body want to move? Do you want to, you know, when you balance a wave versus balancing with one person versus long lines forward and back and they're all forward and back to some extent, your weight goes forward, your weight goes back, but they you accentuate the beat in different ways. So with a balance and swing, it's very much two forces coming together face to face, colliding in some graceful way and then using that weight to kind of pull themselves into the next move. Whatever that momentum is going to be a swing or something like that circle versus like a wavy line where you're moving forward and back, but you're also kind of moving side to side and you've just got this more three dimensional aspect of balance and movement. It's hard to

explain this stuff or talk about this stuff exactly, but it's trying to think about what musical phrases make you want to do certain things with your body versus other things. I'm trying to match those up as much as possible.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, No, I think it...I find it's a fascinating alchemy. I feel like also when I'm talking to people who are first learning about calling, that's always a huge, huge question. And then there are lots of specific, you know, direct things you can do or try and accomplish when communicating with the band. And then there's always just like a slight element of like, magic. Surprise, not sure how it's going to happen, and sometimes it's going to be amazing. And sometimes you're going to be like, "Huh, OK, that's different."

Sarah VanNorstrand: I remember one time I was at the Rain Dance out in Oregon, and it was kind of, I think the first time I'd called out there was a big deal for me to be at that dance, and I was pretty nervous and I was calling with Tidal Wave, Raz de Marée, and they're fantastic musicians and there was a little bit of a language barrier. And I was asking for something that I thought was going to be really upbeat, intense driving all the things, you know, just throw everything at this dance. It was a dance that had lots of balances in it, lots of moments of punctuation that I wanted the music to support, and it seemed like we were all on the same page. But then once they got going, they played something that was just this most luscious, smoothest, silky tune you could imagine. And I was panicking because it just felt like there's no way this is going to work with this dance. It's going to be terrible, but it wasn't. People adjust. People change their way they're moving and then it was like a totally new experience, a way to try this dance. And it was magical. You know, I love that too, because I would try and tell new callers that...do your best, pick good matches, try hard, but then also be totally willing for the universe to just throw something else at you. And you may be totally surprised with how great it is.

Changes in dance music

Mary Wesley: Yeah, yeah. Another source of variety in the evening. Great Bear has, you know...Great Bear has pushed boundaries a lot as a dance band. And I wonder what changes you've seen in music coming from Syracuse Country Dancers scene, you know, touring with Great Bear. What, what shifts are you seeing out in the world when it comes to dance music and how is that connected with the dancing itself?

Sarah VanNorstrand: It's a good question. I think what Great Bear did was not so much try to break genre boundaries, but they just...they were in the business of making people move and they would use whatever tools were at their disposal to do that, which I thought was kind of a different approach than a melody based approach or a traditional based approach. They were really just focused on like, well, if we do this with our percussion section or if we do this with an electric guitar, how are people going to respond? And a lot of it was experimentation. Let's throw this out there and just see how the dancers move, and they would really watch, Andrew and Noah especially would really watch how people reacted to it, and that informed a lot of what they did. So I feel like that's a really great thing because that's the musicians and the dancers informing each other constantly. And this feedback loop of well if we do this, you do this; and then if you do that, then we do this. And it just keeps circling around and that can totally happen with traditional music without adding electric guitars or any of those things as well, and I've seen a lot of bands that have used, you know, very different tools, but have done the same process of watching the dancers and seeing how the different rhythmic choices they make and the different melody

choices they make get the dancers to do different things. But yeah, I think I have...I hold both things very dear. I love the traditional tune where everybody knows exactly how to move to this tune, or maybe the tune and the dance are together. Or it's Levi Jackson Rag, and everybody knows how that goes and what that looks like. And the dancers just step right into that if they're familiar with the tune. I love that as well. It feels like a familiar friend. And then I love seeing bands that are just playing music for dancers, which, you know, I mean it...contra dance music, it's restrictive in some ways and that you need to have a certain beats per minute to some extent in a certain, you know, phrasing has to be a certain length. But other than that, you can do whatever you want. And if the dancers like it, great, you know.

Mary Wesley: Right. Good to pay attention to that

Sarah VanNorstrand: Pay attention to that. But it just means that it's left a very blank canvas in a lot of ways for bands to create and evolve and change. And I like that a lot, but I also like that it hasn't...it's not a one way street. It doesn't have to be only moving away from traditional tunes. That it's, you know, Great Bear itself would often do this where they would play a very traditional tune somewhere in the middle. You know, you could even call it a dorky tune, you know, somewhere in the middle, and they would do that very intentionally. And actually, Andrew particularly loves that kind of music, and he doesn't really care if other people don't like it that much because he loves it, so he's going to play it. So there was some of that push and pull as well of like, let's see how far down this road we can go as far as dancers and musicians influencing each other to make this experience, to make this moment. And also, yeah, remember how this dance goes with this tune? Remember how people used to do it? Let's all do it that way. And both are good, I think.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, yeah. Wholehearted agree there. Have you gone down the...sort of gone into the realm of of techno contra or electronic music coming into the dance scene? And what's been your what's been your experience with that?

Thoughts on techno contra

Sarah VanNorstrand: I think it's fun. I think it's another flavor. It's not something I would want to do every Saturday night, necessarily, but I think it's just another way for people to connect and have fun in a, I mean, I always feel like it's a little bit tongue in cheek. I think if we take it...we should remember that it is a bit silly, you know, contra dancing in the dark to electronic music with glow sticks. That's awesome. It's also silly. And I love it. That's what I like about it is that you can kind of have a little bit of an alter ego experience of "the club" experience that...I've never gone to a club and done club dancing before. But part of me kind of wants to, and it feels like techno contra is a very safe way to experience that (besides getting elbowed in the face by accident.) But but yeah, I've I've enjoyed calling for them, especially late at night when you've had all the regular contra dancing you can imagine, you know, at Flurry or something like that. And then there's that late night techno set that's just wild and people let loose in a different way. So I don't have any particular, you know, grudge against it. I do find that I personally like working with live musicians more than a computer playlist, but even people, even sometimes working with bands where they would do a mix of certainly samples and prerecorded stuff, but also be like manipulating it live in the moment, it just felt like another way of playing an instrument. That connection with the band is really important to me. So having someone there on

stage to coordinate with not just someone pushing play, but someone actually choosing the next piece based on what dance you were going to call or vice versa. Having that collaboration, I think, is still pretty important.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, and continuing that conversation between the dancers and the bands too.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah.

Mary Wesley: Calling at a techno contra, does it change your calling it all? Do you find there's a different, you know, different considerations?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah. Well, certainly with any band or any music, I try to alter my calling voice a little bit to suit that band. If it's a band playing a lot of really sensitive music, I'm not going to be barking out the calls. If it's a band that's playing like a rip-roaring, burn-the-barn down all time sets and I'm going to be out front really commanding it because people need to get, you know, need a little kick in the butt to get going as fast as they need to go. With techno contras I would often try to, I don't know, again, the alter ego effect, a little bit of like an emcee at a club or robot caller to some extent, but like a robot with a soul, you know? But trying to have, you know, more clipped short words that cut through the sound as much as possible without getting in the way of the feeling of the vibe because people are kind of wanting to tune out you to some extent, and just experience this sensory novelty of dark room and movement and light and sound and beat, and pulse, so trying to just be part of the pulse instead of forcing people's attention away from it. So yeah, that would be kind of my focus in a techno.

Mary Wesley: Yeah. Yeah. Two totally different way of of blending with the music. And then, you know, total shift away from like calling for squares where you kind of are the music in a different way.

Sarah VanNorstrand: And I love that too. That's that's so great when when it really works, when you're in the moment, you're in the pocket and you're just another instrument in the band and you're also like leading the way. And it's such a thrill. I love that.

Mary Wesley: So, yeah, I feel like with, you know, in calling there's...a lot of the things that we've talked about there's, you know, working with the band, telling them when to start and stop and, you know, choosing choreography. All of that is leading a group experience. But are there other ways that you think about leadership as a caller?

Leadership in calling

Sarah VanNorstrand: Well, certainly any of the choices you make on the microphone, whether it's what types of dances you pick to call or what language you use, the tone of your voice, the way you interact with the crowd, all of that really sets the mood and sets the tone, and people pay a lot of attention to that. So because I feel like I want to be a facilitator sometimes that means getting out of the way sooner rather than later to facilitate people interacting with each other and interacting with the music without you necessarily getting in the way. But sometimes I feel like you have an opportunity or a responsibility to steer things a little bit. And you have to be pretty careful about that. Certainly, when you're traveling and visiting other communities that you maybe don't know all the ins and outs of

what's going on in their group and what things they care about, what their priorities are as a dance community, but also figuring out what your own personal standards are. So certainly what language terms you use for individuals as they're dancing. Gendered language, of course, is a big one. What are some of the figures are called is another big one. The whole "gypsy" figure has gone through a big revolution, and that was one where it felt like as a caller, you really had to make a decision about where you were at with it and what you were going to do. And you couldn't really just accommodate whatever local community there was because it was a bigger issue than just a technical term. It was actually like a more moral decision. Those sorts of things I feel like have been...are ways that you lead from the stage mostly just by your choices and your example. But also I personally really dislike it when callers are scoldy from the microphone or have too much of a teacher and student relationship with their dancers because I feel like, you know, you were you were a teacher, but you were also an emcee and you are also the host of the evening. And you are, you know, you have all these other roles that really are equally important to teaching people. So you need to do...people need to be having a good time and you need to be facilitating that. So keeping that tone of happy, positive, can-do attitude and also making a decision about language you're going to use or things you're going to do or not do. And then staying firm with that, even when there's pushback from the crowd without getting it turning into a fight because that's not what you're there for. You're not there to have a fight with anybody. So navigating all that is always tricky and it's different night to night.

Mary Wesley: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, callers again, being the person at the microphone, it's a lot of responsibility for us as callers and then a lot of responsibility gets placed on that person, you know? And sometimes sometimes that's a correct placement....but not always, you know, some things are out of our control a little bit. And that is really challenging. I find when going into a new space...I feel like when I'm in my home scene or somewhere where I know the other, you know, dynamics and currents and relationships in that place...then it can be a little bit easier to be like, "Oh, here's how I can help you address a problem that's happening on the dance floor." Or, you know, "Here I'll talk to the sound person about that," you know?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yes.

Mary Wesley: It is a much more complicated set of circumstances when you're doing those...when you're dropping in or parachuting in.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Extremely. And I...early, I don't know who it was that maybe said this originally, but I know a lot of callers that I learned from were really fixated on this idea of the saying that "if anything goes wrong, it's the caller's fault." Just sort of like a blank like, we'll just accept all responsibility for everything tonight that happens. And I never was comfortable with that concept, and I have pushed back against that myself because no, not everything is my fault. On the mic, I mean, some things are within my control, like you said, and some things totally are not. And some things are...there's so many of us going...working together to make this evening happen, and that includes the dancers and that includes the sound person and the musicians and the person at the door and all together, we are creating this experience. So to put all that responsibility on any individual is just silly. And I have tried to in some of my workshops and things, help people feel more empowered that they can shape their own experience at any given dance. A lot of the time, not always...there are situations you can't, you can't just power through, but how...what you bring to the table is as important as what everyone else is bringing to the table. So encouraging people to take control of their dance experience and you know, if

the if the caller is a bit weak that night and the band's great and you can just, you know, really enjoy the music, even if the dance is a little ho-hum or if the band's a little shaky and that's OK because they're local people and you want to support them and your caller is calling really interesting stuff. So even if the music isn't the most exhilarating thing you've ever danced to. Maybe the other people that are dancing are not super experienced dancers, but what can you do to help them have a good time? Help yourself have a good time? You know, without just avoiding them. So just trying to like, spread out that responsibility a little bit so that it's not all on the shoulders of one person on the microphone because it's just...if you do that, then you're going to always have people be unhappy because there's no way I, as the caller can make everything work perfectly. It's just not possible. So you're just setting yourself up for disappointment.

Mary Wesley: I do try to tell myself that, yes, as a caller, because of course we want it to be great for everybody. But I love that idea of sharing the mantle of leadership.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah. You know, that's social dancing. All right. We're here at a social gathering, so we are all part of the experience.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, we're all making the recipe together.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Exactly.

[Sarah [calling "Vallimont's Steamboat" written by Chris Weiler](#) to the music of the HotPoint Stringband at the June Moon dance weekend in Morgantown, West Virginia.]

Changes in dance role terms

Mary Wesley: You mentioned adjusting to language choices as a caller and as we know, I mean, it's been a couple of years because of the pandemic, but it's a big consideration for for our callers, 21st century callers right now in this moment to think about what dance role terms are we using? And you know, we've seen a lot of different experimentation and it's another part of this, this fabulous group recipe that we're all making. There's no sort of, one governing body that's deciding what terms to use when we're calling. And I think I find it a fascinating process. You know, I love the discussions that are happening and it's complicated. Change is hard. Change is messy. I wonder how you're finding your way through that process.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah, well, it's been a bit of a road, and certainly it's been going on for kind of a while now pre-pandemic, just analyzing the language that we're using. And I think it's great because words matter. Language is important. Being intentional about that language is important. And as a caller specifically, you are already hopefully paying a lot of attention to the words that you're using and choosing. I remember, though, it was it was hard at first because sometimes you would show up in a dance community and you weren't even aware of what the discussion was there and you'd use a term that up until that point, you had no idea it was a problem and you'd use it and then you'd get, you know, very aggressive pushback from the from the dance floor in the moment. And that was a hard way to learn I would say, because nobody wants to feel shamed, first of all, and nobody really wants to feel shame for something they didn't know any better about. And a lot of it is, if you don't know, you don't know. But once you get educated, once you hear the reasoning or understand a bit more of the context, I was able to make a decision that

wasn't just reactionary, wasn't defensive. It was like, "Oh yeah, I understand the reasoning why that term is not a great term to use. It never was." But now we have more information to make a better decision. So let's think about other terms we can use. And then, yeah, then comes all the experimentation that people try. And certainly, I have my preferences about which ones I like to use versus others. And it felt like once you made a choice, you could then stand by it, but you had to constantly be supporting it, explaining it, defending it to some extent sometimes so it felt like you needed to make it...you needed to have a little time to digest it and think about what your choice was actually going to be because you were going to have to really stick to your guns about it all the way for the rest of your calling career until it changed again, you know? So I feel like that's an important thing to remember that sometimes people, sometimes the choices people are making from the microphone are just based on whatever information they have. And sometimes it's different information than what you have as a listener. So keeping a little bit of grace there is nice for people because you're really in the hot seat when you're up on the microphone. So it's very easy to be targeted if you make a mistake or are ignorant about something as far as role terms go. I've been feeling fairly neutral about the language change. The community I grew up in we used the terms, "ladies and gents," but that was always kind of a joke because we all danced whatever role we wanted. People showed up in any kind of outfit they felt like, there was a lot of gender fluidity I would say in our group. That was really, it was it was a wonderful thing to be exposed to at the age I was at. In my other factors of my world, that was not something I was experiencing. So I feel grateful to contra dancing for really exposing me to that early. So it's, to some extent I felt it in our home dance like, "Well, what's the problem we're all doing, none of us are ladies or gents. We're just people and we're dancing whatever role we feel like." But certainly with more education, I was able to understand that that's just that might be true for some people, but that's not true for everybody. And as a facilitator of good times, I want to make sure that everybody is feeling really welcome. And certainly I don't have any personal loyalty to that concept of ladies and gents. I mean, that's not something I've ever really adhered to, so using different terms is great. It felt a little tricky to have like, OK, we're all going to use these words and then you use them at an event only to find out that like two days ago, somebody decided or explained or understood to a new level that actually, that's really bad and we shouldn't do that. And you know, it felt like you were really fumbling along to some extent, and you kind of wish there was maybe a governing body of contra dance. A UN of contra dance to set forth a charter of what language was appropriate and what wasn't because, you know, everyone was just...and of course, once you take a position you feel like you need to defend it or stand by it. And then you can...people get sort of stuck in ruts that they don't necessarily even want to be in. So it's been a complicated little scene I would say. I'm very interested to see as the dancers start emerging from pandemic hibernation what people are thinking about and talking about and prioritizing when it comes to all of that. They felt like in some ways, some of the contra dance community rifts or tensions were getting pretty extreme. So I'm curious if like, a little break maybe helps people reassess where they're at with some of this stuff, and I'm really interested to see what communities choose to do going forward.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, me too. Yeah, and that's I love that point that especially for us as callers, it would be so much simpler if we, if you know, we could all decide. But then there's so much to be gained for...for like that flexibility on all of our behalf to...try this, and how does that feel? That doesn't feel right...oh these folks would like something a little different... And I think that helps make our brains stretchy, a little more stretchy. And there's a lot going on there and a lot to be learned from it. I know several communities, my home dance community in Montpelier, Vermont, did a sort of extensive survey. Had weeks and weeks of going through and trying out some of the different options...and creating this

space for dialog and input, I think is kind of one of the biggest...one of the best things we can do to help find our way through that.

Sarah VanNorstrand: I love it when it's the community that like, like in Montpelier there, where they really got buy-in from all the people involved. Not that everybody got exactly what they wanted, because that's not how community decisions work, but the fact that they put in the time and effort in the work to figure out what kind of language they wanted at their dance, which...I really admire that. Certainly as a traveling caller that can sometimes create a little bit of tension because you're going to have your own moral decisions about some of that language and role terms to use or not use, and if you have a community that stipulates something different than what you've decided, then you have to have a conversation, which is good. Conversations are good, but it definitely felt like all of a sudden, I think a lot of people, a lot of callers felt a little just overwhelmed by...on top of all the normal responsibilities we were now adding all these fairly fraught, philosophical and moral and social questions that we needed to have positions on and be able to, you know...and sometimes you didn't feel like you even fully understood it yourself, so it was hard to lead in those moments. So it was really refreshing and very supportive when a community would put in the time and effort to say, "This is what we would like, if that works for you we'd love to have you call," and then kind of that would be the starting conversation. And that was really nice.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, kind of set the terms as an invitation or a question.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah.

Mary Wesley: Are there other other changes that you've seen since you've been dancing and calling?

Changes in the contra dance community

Sarah VanNorstrand: Well, I don't know if this was more of where I was dancing and calling then that community at large, but I did feel towards the end of my previous pre-pandemic calling career that the...there was a definite trend in dance weekend scenarios and in some local dances of a bit more consumerism on the part of the dancers than I enjoyed or that I thought was great. And that may have been more that I was, I was on the dance weekend circuit, which is a different animal. It's a different thing. People go to those events with different expectations and rightly so. They're a very different kind of event than a weekly dance. But I did feel like I was concerned or nervous or felt like there was this shift away from the community focus of sharing an experience with people around you to, "How do I make sure I check all the boxes for my personal experience?" And if that became paramount and everything else was kind of a secondary thing that took some of the joy away from it for me. I had a hard time knowing how to interact with those people when I would have dancers that would complain that they had had, you know, some of their boxes weren't checked that they were counting on, you know, that they paid good money for and it was like, Oh, that's really not how I think about this at all. And sometimes I would try to come back with them like, "Well, did you have a good time?" And they were like, "Oh, yeah, I did. But, you know, there's always a "but," I didn't get this thing," and it was just kind of like, Oh, OK, so we have a very different concept of what we're here for. And that felt a little bit like I was moving in one direction, and some of the dances that I was at were kind of moving in a different direction. And that was concerning to me. I'm

very, again interested to see where things restart after such a long hiatus in that area. I know people are very excited to get back out and dancing with each other, and I hope that excitement and that reunion and that all that exhilaration is going to really feed into this. What I really want is the community focus of the dance, whatever the community is, it doesn't need to be your hometown, but whatever...the Dancers that you are there with, sharing the experience with that for those three hours or whatever it is, that's your community for that time. And how do you connect with them and engage with them? And how do you make sure, you know, how does everybody have their best experience, not just one person? So, we'll see.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, I think that's a you know, obviously not just...not just in contra dancing that we all have to navigate that push and pull. Yeah, I guess I'm thinking about what it is to, as a caller, how do you balance pleasing the dancers, pleasing the people who have hired you, you know, because there is sort of an employee role, and then pleasing yourself and it's like it's constant recalibration there, I think.

Sarah VanNorstrand: For sure. Yeah, that's very much my experience. And I find if you get too focused on any one of those elements, you're probably making mistakes or like getting off your proper path because it is all about the balance. And certainly times when I was, I would be really consumed with self-doubt or just kind of eaten up with, "Oh, I did that wrong or people aren't going to like me, or that thing's not going to happen because I messed that up." When I get too far down that path and I'm losing, I'm not able to facilitate as well as I want to the connection between dancers and musicians and the hall and you know, we're hosting a party, so if you get too tied up in knots inside, then you can't do your job. So trying to keep that balance as well.

Looking to the future

Mary Wesley: Yeah, I have a few short little closing questions, but I'm wondering if there's anything else that I haven't asked you about that's coming up. It might be a little interesting to talk about where we're at. I mean, I feel like even listening to you talk in this interview, you've kind of used the past tense a lot, obviously, which we all, you know, that's just where we are. It's...we're March 2022, we're coming up on two years of pandemic time. So I know it's hard to like, frame things in terms of time, but I guess maybe trying to place yourself in a pre-pandemic mindset, what were you seeing when you would like sort of look to the future of our dance scene and community and traditions?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Well, I have to say before the pandemic, I was kind of in a...I think I was maybe a little burned out. I had been touring really heavily plus working full time, and that combination was a lot. So I think at the time, I actually had a little bit of a dark vision of the future where I felt like the contra community was maybe going down the path of the club square community where it was going to kind of make itself obsolete by becoming too, too much in-fighting. Too complicated. Not welcoming enough to new people needing classes to be able to attend certain events. Just, I was feeling like it was getting narrower and narrower and I was worried about that. And for myself, I was also kind of feeling like I needed to take a break. I needed to find the joy again, and I'm not really sure how to do that because I'm booked out for the next 18 months, because that's how dance weekends book. So when the pandemic came along, it was actually kind of for myself, it was a good break of the cycle of calling and traveling and I'm for myself, I'm not really sure where I'm at. I've been using the past tense a lot and I've realized that, and it's maybe because I'm

not sure I'm going to jump back in the way I was before. A lot's changed in two years. We have all, you know, musicians, callers, people that were performing, you know, on a regular basis have had to do other things. And some of those other things become, you know, more permanent. But I am really hopeful that the people are going to, like I said, come back with this excitement and we missed each other. And to remember that, like that was such a key element of what contra dancing and square dancing and English dancing provided was an amazing social experience with a community. And I have been missing that certainly over the last two years, I'm sure some other people have as well. So for myself, I am excited to go to a local dance some time as a dancer and just reconnect with that experience. I don't think I'm ready to get up behind a microphone yet, and I'm not going to prescribe exactly what version of calling I will be doing in the future. But I am really hopeful that community dancing is going to come roaring back to life and be a great community to tap into for me, just as a participant and maybe eventually again as a caller or a leader. But I know other people have kind of taken on the leadership role through the pandemic and kept some of these dance experiences alive for people, even if it's a very limited experience on Zoom or whatever, it's still something that kept people connected. So I'm also kind of curious to see if those people continue to lead us out of the pandemic and into whatever the next phases of dancing. So those are my hopes.

Mary Wesley: Yeah what do you think it's going to be like to like, do a dance? To be in a dance hall?

Sarah VanNorstrand: I think I'm going to be very clumsy. I think it's going to be...but I think I'm going to be happy and I think I want to, I'm excited to pick that dance. I kind of want to go back to Syracuse, honestly, I want to go back to my community and start with them and just come back to where I found it originally. The joy and the friendships that really got me started on this path in the first place. And I know there I don't need to be self-conscious because they've seen me fall down so many times, it doesn't matter.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, I similarly hope that there's just a lot of, I don't know how there couldn't be immense gratitude in the room when we start dancing again. Just like mind blowing excitement and gratitude. So yeah, I know it's starting to happen a little bit. I haven't, I haven't been to one yet. But um, anything else? Any disparate corners that I've like, totally missed or forgotten? We didn't get super into choreography or anything, but I mean...

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah, choreography, I can talk a little bit about that. It's just if you want it.

Mary Wesley: Sure. Yeah.

Sarah VanNorstrand: I like collecting dances. I'm a collector. I'm not a writer. And that doesn't bother me. I don't know. I've never really felt the urge to write dances. But I love collecting dances, and I love collecting ones that have some sort of story behind them or interest point. And then also ones that I've danced and had some sort of personal experience with. And those are the, you know, I usually keep a notebook and when I'm out at a dance and anything that sticks out to me, I will scribble down and save for later and talk to the caller later and ask what, you know, the context behind the dance. Sometimes you'll get great stories that way about how they learned the dance or who wrote it and how they know that person. And there's, you know, you can get infinitely complicated with choreography, and that has its own attraction, but for myself, I find that there's a point where it's so complicated that you're not, you're just you're you're executing a pattern,

you're not dancing to the music. So I would try to find the sweet spot there where it was interesting and exhilarating, but also wasn't in any way impeding your ability to connect to the music. So I would often call really simple stuff with Great Bear because, honestly, the band was so overwhelming sonically to the dancers sometimes that if you tried to call anything more complicated, there was no connection. It just, I mean, people could get through the dances, but it was like you had to carry them the whole way and you never felt like you could let go and let them, let everybody just do what they naturally could do so sometimes the best thing to do would be pick a really simple dance and just let them at it, you know, just have a great time. And then other times it was, let's pick a dance. It requires a very particular subtlety on the part of the dancers that really got them to focus on what they were doing to. So it wasn't just autopilot, it was very much like an intentional dance experience. So I kind of liked pulling both of those elements in.

Closing

Mary Wesley: Yeah. Yeah, that leads right into some of my closing questions, which are just a few caller-specific questions that I'm trying to ask everyone and one is, how do you keep your dances? Do you have a box of dance cards? A binder? An app?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yes, I have a box. I have an old metal document box that I found at an antique shop that holds the my 3x5 cards or whatever the sizes, standard index card size. And yeah, I write them on index cards. I try to keep track on the back of where I collected them from to try and keep a little bit of that oral tradition going. And then I usually would just separate them by what I considered level of difficulty. And then I would have categories for other formations, of course. And then I did after a while, try to keep it on a digital database where I entered, you know, all the dances that I had and I haven't done that in a while. So I should probably redo it to not lose them. But yeah, got to have my metal box that makes all the TSA officers really freaked out whenever I go through security.

Mary Wesley: Yup, yup. What is that square shape...recipes?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yes! Always recipes.

Mary Wesley: Yes, this is 300 recipes and I can't travel without them.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Must have.

Mary Wesley: And, you know, thinking back: were there any kind of pre- or post- gig like rituals or processes you would do to kind of get in and out of the caller space?

Sarah VanNorstrand: That's a great question. Well, mostly just I would have my time of standing on the stage, setting up my microphone, getting a sense of the room, figuring out, you know, how my eye contact with the band is going to work and then trying to just keep breathing. I still get extremely nervous before calling. It's gotten better over time, of course, but there is...but I feel like in some ways that that adrenaline sort of gets me in the right place, so I don't totally try to stop it. I kind of let myself get a little bit amped up, get ready, get in that spot by the microphone, be in the spotlight. Just kind of soak up that placement in the room before you actually start talking to anybody. And then afterwards, mostly, I just needed to kind of escape. I'm fairly introverted and as great as night a calling is, it could

be...I could still feel extremely drained afterwards and often would have to just not be around people for a little while. So usually escaping out the back somewhere quiet.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, know where all the back...

Sarah VanNorstrand: ...knows the back exits. Yeah, that was really key. Of course interacting with the band was great because you formed a partnership. So sometimes it would be after dance interactions with the band that felt very safe and very, you'd already been doing it for the evening, so you knew how to interact. But diving into like a dancer party was never a good fit for me.

Mary Wesley: Well, you kind of already answered my third question, which is my little sociological experiment here, which is I was wondering if you identify as an introvert or an extrovert?

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah, I'm an introvert. I think I'm social and I like people, but I get extremely drained by being in in groups like that. I know sometimes the tiredest I've ever been was after calling for a day at dance weekend and finishing up at midnight or whatever. And even though your body was still jazzed, just being beyond exhausted, drained from all those people, as lovely as they are.

Mary Wesley: But you're still OK getting up and being at the mic.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yeah, it's a funny thing. My mom was very surprised when I first started calling. She's like, she just couldn't believe it. And I remember one time she came to a dance. She hadn't heard me call really much at all, and I'd gotten medium good, you know, and I was a little local star, I guess, at the time, and I was calling at the Contra Prom actually in Syracuse. And she was like, "Why do you never sound like that normally?" You know, she's just, I don't know, it was really funny. It was very much like, you kind of take on a role, I guess, when you get on stage. So you to some extent...it's you, but it's not you. And that provides a little bit of a buffer, I think, for those of us that are introverted and still enjoy calling.

Mary Wesley: Yes. Yeah, it's a very structured way to be with a group of people.

Sarah VanNorstrand: Yes, which is great.

Mary Wesley: Awesome. Well, thank you so much for talking, Sarah. It's so great to spend this time with you.

Sarah VanNorstrand: It's been great to be with you, Mary. Thank you.

Mary Wesley: A big thanks to Sarah for taking the time to speak with me. Be sure to check out the show notes at podcasts.cdss.org to learn more about Sarah and see pictures of her metal box full of recipes...I mean dances!

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.

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Happy dancing!

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