

From the Mic - Tony Parkes Bonus Clips

#1: Dick Kraus, Boston, And, NEFFA

Tony Parkes You know, I just want to mention before we go on, I just want to mention Dick Kraus again because I came home from camp back to my parents in New York, all excited and I wanted to find whatever square dances there were in New York. And as I've said, that was the tail end of the square dance boom and there weren't that many dances going on, but I discovered that there was the one at the Teacher's College in Columbia that Dick Kraus was calling every Friday night, folk and half square. I knew the name Dick Kraus because I had read his book, which is one of the best books for general recreational squares. He also made five albums for RCA so he was he was one of the authorities. And so I was excited to meet him, too and so I went up to him, I went to the dance and I went up to him during the break and said, "Hi, my name is Tony and I did some calling during the summer." And he said, well, next week, bring a record and let's see what you can do. This was a this was all records. So the next week I did, I brought Just Because, which was one of the most popular singing squares at the camps. And then every Friday night, for several years, I brought a different record and called a different dance, and that's where I got a lot of my early practice. And so this is one of the people that I always give a nod to when I think about the people I want to thank in my acceptance speech.

Mary Wesley That's so great. And you were still living in New York at the time?

Tony Parkes Yeah, I was still in my mid-teens. Somewhere along the line, it was a few years after that I started visiting the Boston area. A lot of the staff at Farm & Wilderness were associated with the Boston area. A lot of them went to Harvard or had been to Harvard or wanted people to think they went to Harvard. So I would go up, and I discovered fairly quickly that there was a bigger American dance scene in the Boston area than there was in New York at the time. In New York, Dick Kraus' dance was just about the only traditional square dance that was there, that was running. There were a couple of square dance clubs and I, as I said, I did go to one of them and danced for a while without having to take lessons. There was a lot of international folk dancing, but the only live music dance that I knew of was the CDS New York Tuesday Night Dance, where they did mostly English. And then Phil Merrill, who was the pianist, would call one contra from the piano during the evening. But they also had one or two Saturday dances a month and some of those were all American. They would they would get a caller in from usually the tri state New York area and have them do a whole evening. But in the Boston area, there were several dances, and I think most of them had live music, although not all of them. Anyway, I would start going up, would take the train, or more often I would take the Greyhound or Trailways bus because it was cheaper, even though I'm not not overly fond of bus travel, but for about probably ten or fifteen dollars, I could I could take the bus, I could crash somewhere and I could take the bus home after a couple of days and I danced with some of the local callers there. And of course, the NEFFA Festival, New England Folk Festival started going in 69 and for several years until I moved to Boston I would take the bus or the train up from New York, and then I would get as far as Natick Center, and then I would walk the several miles to the high school where the festival was was held. Actually I called at NEFFA for every year except my second year, 1970. I wasn't scheduled to to call in 69. I was the festival pianist for at least three years, maybe four anyway. In those days it was it

was harder to find dance musicians than it is now. People thought it was a dying art. Dudley had inspired a lot of young people to take up playing the music, but mostly they weren't coming to NEFFA. The NEFFA musicians were somewhat older, and there were fewer and fewer of them every year. And in those days, as I say, it was harder to find musicians, so there were no name bands. At the festival it was always the festival orchestra playing for the general dancing. In those days, they hired a lead and a pianist just to make sure that there would always be melody and rhythm on the stage and they actually paid them. You know, some people have tried to deny that in subsequent years. But there was a time when NEFFA paid some core musicians. I got \$12 a session for three sessions. And then I remember my last year they raised it to \$15 a session and that paid for my bus fare.

Mary Wesley That's not bad, break even.

Tony Parkes There were three sessions, Friday night, Saturday afternoon and Saturday evening. Saturday morning was children's groups putting on exhibitions and Sunday afternoon was a workshop. There were blue laws. You couldn't have a public event on Sunday, it had to be membership so they would have a workshop on the Sunday afternoon of NEFFA weekend, but you could become a member. It was a members only, but you could become a member at the door for a dollar and they would have one square dance caller and one folk dance teacher. I think my first year there it was the great Dick Leger on squares and the equally great Mariann Taylor on international. But that's why I say three sessions of festival orchestra, one on Friday, two on Saturday. I wasn't scheduled to call at the '69 festival but one of the callers didn't show up and they put me on. Somewhere I have the program, not the big program book, but the the purple ink dittoed program that was given only to the leaders so you could see who was doing what when. There would be a set of three squares with each square done by a different caller although the dancers were supposed to stay with the same set and the same partner and then there'd be one contra dance, there'd be some folk dancing, couple dancing, whatever, and then they would go around again. Three squares in the contra and I got to call one of the three squares in one of the sets, and I forget which one it was. But it was really, really exciting on a gut level to get up in front of three or 400 people and be able to do this, you know, as to what amounted to a kid. And then they didn't program me for 1970, but 71 and every festival since I've done something in the calling line. It's the one place where I don't mind calling for free because they gave me my start and I like what they're doing and they showcase a lot of people. I'd like to think that younger people are getting their start the way I got mine. If somebody asks me to do a freebie, I think long and hard about what are the circumstances? I have certain criteria, but NEFFA, I don't think twice. It's like tithing my time. It's giving back in whatever way I can.

Mary Wesley Absolutely. There's so much connection and cultivation that happens, and I certainly feel that myself as a caller and I've danced to your calling on the NEFFA dance floor.

#2: Don Armstrong

Tony Parkes Don Armstrong, for most of his career was in Florida in the 1950s. He had a huge public dance in the Tampa area with a band and this was in the days when recreational square dancing was huge nationwide. I would guess that most of the people who went to his dance had had lessons. You know this was not a one nighter level or even

a regular contra level. This was, you know, fairly sophisticated squares, but new folks were allowed in. And so he had to really sharpen his teaching and walk throughs, anyway, he was well known. He did tours, he did goodwill tours in this country and in other countries too. He made several popular singing call recordings. And by the time I got to know him, he was a force in the Lloyd Shaw Foundation. There's another name that not everybody will be familiar with, but Lloyd Shaw is generally given credit for putting in motion what became the great square dance revival of the late 40s into the 50s. He was a school superintendent in Colorado who got disillusioned with the competitiveness of things like football. He replaced sports to a great extent in his school system with various forms of dance, competitive sports, varsity football and so forth. I think he disbanded the football team at his high school, and so he would start with very elementary circle dances for the grade school students. And by the time they got to high school, the kids were competing not to be on the the first football team, but on the performing square dance team that went around the country and turned a lot of audiences onto to cowboy style square dance. Just before World War Two, he started running week long workshops for teachers, and they would come from all over the country. He had to stop for a couple of years because of the war, because of the travel restrictions and so forth. But after the war for for about 10 or 12 years he ran these these workshops, I think most of the or many of the leading square dance callers of that period went to the Lloyd Shaw workshops and got some really good training there. He died in 1958, but they set up a foundation to keep this work going. Don Armstrong was was a driving force there. He took over supervising the recordings. He started making a series of contra recordings with calls. I got some of my practice using them and used them like training wheels. They were 45s, they had the calls on one side, same music on the other with no calls. So I would call along with him and then I would flip the record over and try to do the same thing without his voice. But the way I met him was, as I said, I was going to the The Herman's Folk Dance House in Greenwich Village in New York, and they had a teenage group that met late Saturday afternoons. I started going there and Marianne Herman was the teacher there. Among the dance fliers on the table, there was an announcement that Marianne was going to be doing a teaching techniques course like once a week for four or six or eight or 10 weeks, I forget exactly. So I was interested, I had done some calling by that time so I signed up for the course. One of the other people taking the course was a lady named Betty MacDermid, who was from the Tampa area and had been a good friend of Don Armstrong when he was calling down there and she had done some calling and some couple of dance teaching as well. She was pretty much retired by then, but she saw something in me as Ted Sanella did and as Ralph Page did, and she got really excited because again, she was thinking that square dancing was on the way down. Not necessarily because fewer people were doing it, but because the callers were in love with complexity for its own sake and in love with the sound of their own voices. She was hoping I could be the next Ed Gilmore who was at the at the top of the more conservative faction of modern square dance callers. His calling had something to do with the music and he used a limited number of calls and not just taking everything that came along. His motto was comfortable dancing in the proper spirit rather than go hog wild. And you know, how many calls do you know and so forth? So Betty kind of took me under her wing. I would spend evenings in her apartment calling to the Don Armstrong recordings, and she would make me start over if I made a mistake and she actually lent me her little portable P.A. system with turntable until I saved up the \$100 to buy my own, that was what I used. I'm not sure I ever took it to a gig but I I used it sitting in my room. I was the shy skinny kid in the corner when when it came to social events, I would spend a lot of time in my room playing music, but where other kids might be playing rock I was playing square dance records both with and without calls and just kind of drilling them into my memory.

Tony Parkes And so, as I said, Betty was it was a friend and colleague of Don Armstrong. I forget actually when was the first time I met him in perso but I did at some point because he invited me to go to this Lloyd Shaw fellowship. That was a continuation of of the workshops from Lloyd Shaw himself and so I went in 73 and again in 78. That was one of the groups. And, you know, going off on a tangent here, but there have been a handful of groups over the years that I really admired for their philosophy that dance is a medium, a vehicle for bringing people together and they were more focused on the human aspects of it than on the dance for its own sake. So Lloyd Shaw Fellowship was one whenever I go to John C. Campbell Folk School Brass Town, North Carolina, I've been on the staff several times at their events and I feel like they've got it right. It's about the people more than it is about the dance form or about perfection. I think the Stockton folk dance camp people by and large have it right, too, and that's how they've managed to stay healthy all these years. They're still getting 100/150 people in the summer.

Mary Wesley Yeah, that's great to hear more about about Don Armstrong, it's a familiar name to me, but it's great to learn a little more.

#3 More About Ralph Page and the Durlachers

Mary Wesley You may not have more to say on this, but I'm just curious, you know, because of

Tony Parkes Callers always have more to say on anything you can name.

Mary Wesley I just love hearing this story of the letter you got from Ralph Page and and he is clearly such a significant influence on you. So I was wondering if there is just any more to hear about how you interacted. You saw him at camps, but would you would you exchange letters? Did you get to have conversations with him or can you share a little bit more about Ralph.

Tony Parkes With Ralph Page we actually didn't talk that much one on one. He always liked having me around. Oh, I should mention I went back in the 70s I went not just to his camps, but to the Maine folk dance camp that the Hermans ran because Ralph was always the American caller there. So I got to know him more because most of them were weeklong camps, the ones that the Hermans ran. So, yeah, looking back, I didn't get to dance to him in the city, either New York or Boston that often. But I did go to several of his camps and of course, camps are where you really get to know people. You're with them, not just for three hours in the evening and you can't really talk except during the break. At a camp you can you can talk at meals, you can relax between sessions. I'm repeating myself here. You know, you get to know people on a deeper level than you can at a single evening dance. I think most of my significant others I've met at dance camps because, just because.

Mary Wesley Make it twice!

Tony Parkes Yeah, if we're talking about mentors, I do want to mention one more, a father and son duo, Ed Durlacher of Long Island, New York and his son, Don Durlacher. Ed Durlacher was unquestionably the greatest popularizer of square dancing that we've ever had. He called in the New York City park system and at Jones Beach on Long Island and in Central Park, he called to hundreds and even thousands of people at once. I've seen

printed sources that say he would call to as many as a thousand squares, not a thousand people, a thousand squares. That's 8000 people all at once. And I questioned that in my mind and I looked on Google Earth and zoomed in on the Central Park Mall. And I think there really is enough space, enough open space there that you could fit a thousand squares. But, you know, he would do this on a regular basis. It wouldn't always be that many, but that it would be hundreds, if not thousands. You know, at his peak he would call several nights a week, once in Central Park, once in Brooklyn, once on the Upper West Side and so forth. And in the summer, he would call every Thursday night at Jones Beach. And he died in, I think, 61 before I got seriously into dancing, except in grade school. But his son, Don Jr. Durlacher, carried on the tradition, calling at Jones Beach until he died in 78. But when I was going to school on Long Island and living on my own, also in Queens I got in the habit of going to the Jones Beach dances for several summers in the late 60s, early 70s. I learned more from Don Durlacher just from listening to him than from any other single caller about crowd psychology and working with totally new people. Because every week he would have some new people and he was able week by week through the summer to get to start using slightly trickier material. But he would start out at the beginning of each summer with people who were totally new just in off the boardwalk and people who had danced the year before, but who hadn't danced all winter. So he kept it really, really simple. And I got to know him a little bit, and he did talk to me a little bit about about his calling philosophy. For instance, he said one traditional dance is heads pass through separate around one. He said, I don't use that because if people are new, if they pass through it and then they're not holding on to each other and they're supposed to go in different directions he says the woman will go to her right and the man wants to follow a mother, so he'll go to the right and stay behind her. So he substituted things like heads go forward in the back, heads promenade across inside the set and then promenade outside the set to get back home but you're always holding on to your partner. I took that seriously and I use dances that have a separate in them so it wasn't so much specifically that piece of advice, as you know, think like a dancer, think like a non dancer, think like a newbie and make everything as as elementary as you can. I learned from another source I knew of the hard way over the years. Don't describe do-si-do as back to back, because then people will just stand back to back with their partner, tell them where to go and then say, OK, that's a do-si-do, it's fractured French for back to back.

#4 Shadrack's Delight, Composing Dances

Tony Parkes Oh, incidentally, speaking of Shadrack's Delight, I've got to sneak this in. I realized a day or two ago that on the 28th of this month, April, it will be the 50th anniversary of my writing Shadrack's Delight, which was my first original contra. And it's been my most popular, I think, through the years. I call it beginner's luck because I think it does hold together well. And of course, in those days, hundreds and hundreds of modern contras hadn't been written. And so I had a clear field if I wanted to do something new with traditional moves I could do pretty much what I wanted. But it's scary sometimes how fast the time goes these days.

Mary Wesley That's wonderful. So when did you say? April.....

Tony Parkes April 28th, 1972.

Mary Wesley How do you happen to remember the day?

Tony Parkes I copied Ted Sannella in this. He wrote the date down on each dance that he wrote. I started doing that right from the start. I think I started writing squares in 1969, although not all of them are good enough that I still call them. But then my first handful of contras were in 72.

Mary Wesley Nice. Oh, that's exciting. I'll have to make sure, I am actually calling my first sort of in person back to the mic with real dancers in the room this coming weekend. So, I'll have to throw it in the mix. It'll be a little early. But that is a great milestone to mark. How did you start writing dances? Was that just a natural step in your exploration?

Tony Parkes Well, it was part of the norm. The callers I got to know and the callers whose books and recordings I collected just about all of them tried their hand at writing their own at some point. And some of them stuck with it and were prolific. And some of them either they only wrote a few or or they self-censored. You know, they had written quite a few but only published a handful. But it was a normal part of of being a caller.

Mary Wesley Do you still write them? Do they come to you?

Tony Parkes They don't come to me as much as they used to. And of course, any kind of writing, you can't just wait till it comes to you. You know, you have to apply pants to seat of chair and you've got to face that blank piece of paper or that like word document and put a little effort into it. But I certainly don't feel as inspired as I used to. I feel like all the good ideas have been used already and of course, that's that's silly. People keep coming up with new ones. Every so often there's somebody who says the patent office ought to be abolished because of all the inventions have been thought of, and they started saying that almost immediately after the patent office was established.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Although there are a lot of dances out there now. I have always felt like I think I have enough to work with what other minds are coming up with.

Tony Parkes I'm always impressed when somebody comes up with a new way to combine existing calls. I take a relatively dim view of inventing new calls. I mean, it's certainly been done over the years and some of them have stuck with us. But it feels to me like we're at a crossroads, we're at an inflection point. You might say where we have to decide, the urban contra scene has to decide whether we're going to expect dancers to remember all the newer calls. Or are we going to get rid of some to make room for the newer ones. The contra scene in general has been doing a lot of the same things, going through some of the same growing pains that the square dance community, the recreational square dance movement went through 50 years ago and more. Some people falling in love with complexity for his own sake. Things that naturally happen, like the gap if a group has been together any length of time, the gap between what a new person knows and what a long time member knows is going to get wider and wider. And that's part of why the number of square dance lessons kept growing. Originally, it was six with an advanced class of six weekly lessons. And then it became de rigueur to take the advanced class. So it became 12 and then it became 15, and then it became 20. And at one point they recommended something like 41 in one school year. And it was partly because they kept adding new names for things, new calls. But it was partly also, I think that the long time club members just knew how to move and and knew how to react, and that you can't get that in one or two or three sessions. So the urban contra scene, we don't have some of the serious problems that the modern square dance groups had in that our dances are so wedded to the music and any new moves that are introduced have to fit the frames of the music and they did away with that rule in the square dance scene. So that's that's kept the

choreography from going off the deep end. But I am concerned that when I started dancing in the 60s, there were 12 to 18 calls that were used in contras and only about 12 that were used with any really frequency. And now there are. I wrote them all down, and there are something like thirty six and half of them have been introduced since about 1980. I worry a little. The other thing that saves us besides the connection with the music is the custom of walking through each dance and that means that ultimately you're not going to be asked to do something that you've never heard of because it's going to be in the walk through. I did drop out of the NEFFA contra medley a few years ago because I know there were dances in the series of six that we were going to be calling, there were dances that had moves that I didn't recognize as standard contra moves, and I thought it was inappropriate to ask people to do them without a walk through. I haven't been dancing a whole lot in the last, say, 20 years. So it may be that most dancers or anybody who would line up for a medley would know these calls. But it just felt like a bridge too far to me on a gut level.

#5 Perspective on Music

Mary Wesley You mentioned the callers who are also musicians having a particular edge. I did want to hear a little bit about your perspective there in terms of working with bands and music. I don't know if that will lead into the recordings.

Tony Parkes Probably not, I think it's two different topics. Well, as a musician myself, you know, I think I certainly appreciate good dance music and I think one of your sample questions was how does music affect your job and choices as a caller? What conversation do you have with a band before a dance starts? And uppermost in my mind is I want the band to be comfortable. I mean, at one nighters I tell the dancers there's only one rule in square dancing, and that is you have to be comfortable. If you're not comfortable, there's always an easier way to do it. I want the dancers to be comfortable, but I also want the musicians to be comfortable.

Tony Parkes I want them to do what they do best and what they enjoy doing most. So if it's an old time southern band, I encourage them to play old time southern. If it's a band that plays a lot of Quebecois or a lot of Irish, I find some tunes and some genres easier to call than others. But I try to give the band as much leeway as I can. I feel like it's the caller's job to set the tempo, and it's the band's job to maintain it and some bands I have a little trouble with that their mental metronome runs a little faster or slower than mine, but we can usually compromise. Mine goes at about 116 I've discovered overall, although, for fast squares it'll be more like 124, which is slow by southern standards. But for a group that's not used to that kind of square, I find it's a good compromise. Anyway, as I say, I want the band to be comfortable when it comes to picking tunes. I love it when a band has a printed tune list because then I'll look at it and again, being a musician and knowing hundreds of tunes means that I'm likely to know quite a few tunes on their tune list and some tunes I find go well for certain dances based on a number of factors like length of phrases. If a tune has a choppy A part and a smooth B part, then I'll match it with a dance that has a lot of short moves like Alamance in the A parts and and like down the hall and back in the B. So the more information I can get from the band, the better. But if they don't have a tune list, I can usually cope. I can usually make something sound good and I think it's partly because of my musical background that I can blend in with the band, even if it's a tune that I haven't heard before, or even if it's not the tune that would have been my first choice for such a dance.

Mary Wesley And what's the difference? Music and contra dancing is different from music for squares. So can you share that landscape a little bit? What's the difference working with bands for those different formations?

Tony Parkes OK, well, anything I say about squares is going to be a generalization because there are different regional styles of squares. Squares are not as close to being a monolith as contras are, so some squares are a lot like contras in the sense that they don't lend themselves to a lot of patter or they're traditionally not done with a lot of patter. They're just prompted, like a contra where you tell them what to do and then before the phrase of music so that the dancers can enjoy dancing and listening to the phrase. So for a square like that, I would take a tune a lot like a contra, certainly sharply phrased so that the dancers can do The Ladies Chain in exactly eight beats, for instance, eight steps, four for the cross, four for the turn, and also a tune that I call a tune that tells a story. I go into this a little in the new book. I put most tunes in one of two categories, straight ahead tunes or tunes that tell a story. A lot of old time southern tunes are straight ahead tunes where the A music and the B music aren't that different except one may be a little higher pitched, but you know they both have a lot of notes and rather than rounded phrases that build up to a climax and then die down it's bum ta bum ta da bum all the way through. And those are good for patter squares, both in terms of the caller talking or chanting a lot. You know, the caller being on a lot where the band is basically jamming, and I find that old time, bands don't mind so much if the caller is yakking because it's not like they're trying to get the dancers to hear their pretty counter melodies and changes and so forth. But also that with that kind of tune, it doesn't matter as much whether you start on the A part or the B part or somewhere in between. So old time tunes, straight ahead tunes are a good match for continuous patter squares and tunes that tell a story that have an obvious beginning, middle and end are a good match for Quadrille style or New England style or a contra style squares. I love them all, and ideally I'll do some of each in an evening. And then, of course, there are singing squares which are a little bit like quadrilles in the sense that the dance movements are closely tied to the music. But instead of prompted, they're often cadence called or called, you're telling people to do something and they're already doing it. That means they have to pretty much know what's coming, which is how old time dances worked. The caller would have a limited repertoire of maybe 10 or 20 dances in all and dancers had been dancing for years and knew all the dances. So as soon as they heard the first few notes of the singing call, they would know what the figures were and they would be dancing it right along with the caller.

Mary Wesley When I think of your calling in particular, I think of your patter squares, just beautifully rhythmic and smooth. How did you, you know, I'm sure you're going to tell me, practice, but can you say more about that learning curve and how did that become? It sounds so natural when you're doing it.

Tony Parkes OK. That's relatively easy compared to some questions. Obviously the final stage is practice, but the first stage is listen, listen to in any genre, listen to people who are doing what you want to learn and doing it well. And so it was largely recordings that got me to where I am now in terms of patter. I have a library of hundreds of records, many of them old 78s, and some of them were a caller would make an album of three or four discs, so six or eight sides each one a different figure, and they would be put out in a literal album that some people now may not know why an album is called an album. It's because it was in an album with pockets sort of like a photo album. So I have quite a few albums, but I also have a lot of singles and 45s LPs, and now quite a few of them are uploaded to the web, not mine so much. I want to do that eventually. But you know, if you look, you can find some of some of the master callers of the 50s. In fact, there's a website, it's part of the

Internet Archive, I think, called Square Dance- Live Recordings, and there are about 300 field recordings. And this is again, I call it out in the back of my book. These are field recordings made at square dance clubs from the 1950s through the 80s or 90s, and the early ones especially are good for tradition minded callers to listen to. Because at that point square dancing has done in clubs was almost identical to traditional squares, as done in New England or as done at a workshop anywhere in the country, like at a folk dance camp. So they were using very few calls that we wouldn't use today at a contra dance or a traditional dance. In the book. I mention several callers by name that I think are good role models to listen to. So it's listen, use them as training wheels, call along with them and just listen. It's like learning a song or learning an anthem in choir, you listen to it and then you do it over and over. Practice, practice, practice.

Mary Wesley Yes.

Tony Parkes And again, my musical training helped. You know, the fact that I was singing from an early age and that I had a gut feel for the phrase it meant that it was easier to call to the phrase than not to call to the phrase. So what I've tried to do with the patter squares, including the flashy ones from the 50s, is break them down into components and then reconstruct them as phrase dances so that a certain part of the dance always goes with a certain point in the tune, and then I can sound like I'm ad libbing or freewheeling when I'm actually calling a very specific set of words to a very specific tune structure. I won't always use the same tune, but I'll always be doing it at the same point in the music. So that gives you a little mnemonic, a little structure to hold on to.