

From the Mic Episode Bonus Episode - A tour of Tony Parkes' audio archive

Mary Wesley: Hello From the Mic listeners! Mary here just to briefly introduce this BONUS mini-episode that's a follow up to our recent interview with Tony Parkes. In addition to being an amazing dance caller, Tony is also a dance historian and avid collector of archival recordings of dance callers through time. During our interview he walked me through a small sample of his collection. It was SO much fun to take this "audio tour" of callers with Tony and so we're sharing it with you here as its own episode. To hear the rest of my interview with Tony visit cdss.org/podcasts

Musical transition

Mary Wesley: Well, should we listen to some dance recordings? Can you introduce a little bit, how you've come to have this collection of recordings and where they come from?

Tony Parkes: Well, I've made a very few field recordings of other callers when I had a regular dance at the Scout House for 20 years, we would record ourselves, partly to critique ourselves later and partly, I think, as an archive so future generations would know what sort of thing was being done. I want to do a little more with that and digitize some of them, they're mostly on cassette. At some point down the road, it's not my top priority at the moment, but most of the recordings that I have amassed over the years are commercial recordings starting in the 1940s. Every major record company put out square dance albums and also a lot of small independent companies were formed specifically to make square dance recordings. At any given time, there would be about 30 companies that made nothing but square dance and round dance records. I've been collecting them over the years and I haven't counted them lately but I think I must have at least five or six hundred 78s, singles and some of them in albums. I have probably at least 100 LPs, mostly with calls and 100 or 200 or 300 45 RPMs, which started being made for square dancing in the 50s and right up until, you know, 20 years ago. They were what callers used until, you know, briefly, I think they used CDs. And now, of course, they use laptops and MP3 files. I've always been fascinated by dance history, by the incredible variety of calling styles and choreography that could be done and was done through the years. And of course, it's been a major part of the way I learned both repertoire and delivery. So I've got half a dozen little clips here, mostly just a minute and a half and I'll say something about each caller.

So I think most contra dancers, at least in the Northeast and anybody who has been in for a while or is history minded has heard the name Ralph Page. But most people who are active now never danced to him. He died in 84 or 85 and they may never have heard him, even the recordings. So this is Ralph Page, a commercial recording he made for Michael and Mary Ann Herman around 1950. He's calling a breakdown. A breakdown was traditionally the third and last in a set of squares. It had a partner change, and typically all four couples were active. Texas star is probably the best known breakdown. So this is just doing things with your partner and your corner so everybody's active. You can hear a little bit of how Ralph used to harmonize with the music. Here we go.

Audio clip of Ralph Page calling a square dance

Mary Wesley: Oh, it's great.

Tony Parkes: It's what you might call a semi-singing call, because it's not a song that everybody knows, but that he's pitching his voice on one of the notes of the scale and coming up with little counter melodies and so forth. He did the same thing with contras. Some people think that a contra has to be prompted and not pattered. You know, you just say, ladies chain and then they do it and you say promenade across and they do it. But Ralph was quite the improviser in the contra. Here's a contra recording, a commercial recording that he made for the Hermans at about the same time, early fifties.

Audio clip of Ralph Page calling a contra dance

Sometimes I find myself channeling Ralph and in fact, I think and Ted Sanella may have told me that I sounded a bit like Ralph and other people who knew Ralph had danced to him. I think he was quite an influence on my calling, especially in keeping it musical and not just talking over the music. Ralph had a contemporary named Rod Linnell who ought to be better known. Unfortunately, he died before he was 60 but for a short period in the nineteen fifties and sixties, he was a very active caller in the Northeast and Ralph would have Rod do the squares at Ralph's camps, and Ralph would stick to the contras because he thought Rod did such a great job with the squares. Rod didn't record very much, but the ones he did were very inspiring. So here he is. It's a traditional square dance called Arkansas Traveler, which is usually done to fiddle music, [Tony sings a 2/4 pattern] in 2/4. Here he does it to a jig in 6/8 and it gives it a whole different feel.

Audio clip of Rod Linell calling the square dance Arkansas Traveler

Mary Wesley: Oh, that's great.

Tony Parkes: A couple of notes, most of the callers of that era did a lot of..."That pretty little thing..." And of course, addressing most of the calls to the men, and the women have to figure out whether they were supposed to do the same thing, the opposite thing or nothing at all. And you know, it's easy to criticize callers, older callers now for sexism. But there are so many things that they did right that I think it's worth listening to them and filtering out what we don't want to use and using what we believe in. The other thing I wanted to say is you noticed how marvelous the band was in that clip. That's Don Messer and his Islanders. I'll have a little more to say about them in a couple of minutes because I'm going to play another cut where they were the music. I mentioned the Durlacher earlier and Ed Durlacher being the greatest popularizer of square dancing that I know of, who called to thousands of people at a time. He also produced a series of records with spoken walkthroughs, spoken instructions on the record. He called it his talk through, walk through method, and his records were probably used in more school systems than in any other and they also have the distinction of having been continuously in print since 1949. I don't know of very many records of any genre, any style of music or entertainment that have been in print that long with never going out of print. They started as 78s. Then they reissued them on LPs and on cassettes and CDs. And now I think the company was taken over by the Smithsonian Folkways, but I think they still offer them as CDs rather than downloads, or maybe both. But that's just an incredible track record. So here is Ed Durlacher doing a singing square to an old Stephen Foster song. Another impressive orchestra was the top hands. That was a totally union band, anywhere from four to 10 pieces, and they played for all of Ed's dances in the parks as well as on the recordings.

Audio clip of Ed Durlacher calling the singing square 'Nelly Bly'

Mary Wesley: Amazing. His rolled r's, are so wonderful.

Tony Parkes: I suspect he got that from an old time caller, it's just so idiosyncratic and I've been trying to find out who he learned from. But I'm a few years too late because his grandsons are still alive but some of the other family who probably could have told me more are gone. Let's see, Ed Gilmore. I think I mentioned him that my mentor, Betty McDermott, was hoping I would be the next Ed Gilmore. Ed Gilmore was, to reiterate a little, when modern square dancing started getting kind of over-bred like certain breeds of dog at dog shows, people getting as tricky as they could and coming up with a lot of new things for dancers to learn. Ed Gilmore was in the forefront of the ones who said, let's keep this accessible to as many people as possible. I think Ed Gilmore and the next caller I'm going to play were a couple of the main influences on my patter style, along with with Ralph Page and Ted Sannella. So this is Ed Gilmore early in his career, calling a doubled up version of a traditional visiting square, Chase the Rabbit, where he has

both head couples go out at the same time and then cross over to dance with the other side couple in a rather ingenious way, which you can hear him do.

Audio clip of Ed Gilmore calling a square dance

Mary Wesley: Great, and so that's one where, listening to that, I would have to know what those figures are, what's happening when the possum is chasing the squirrel?

Tony Parkes: That's what I call a unique figure or a dominant figure. Like there used to be a lot of dominant figure contras like Petronella and Rory O'Moore that they each had a move that appeared in no other dance. And now, of course, people say do a Petronella turn or do a roy O'Moore balance. But originally, that was the only dance that had the round to the right or had the balance and slide. It's the same with squares there are squares, especially in the New England or Quadrille tradition that are made up of moves like right and left, Lady's Chain, Promenade and so forth. There's a whole tradition, especially in the south of mostly visiting squares with funny words. You know, like bird in the cage is one well-known one, duck for the oyster is another and this one chase the rabbit. Chase the rabbit, chase the squirrel means the lady go to the right, split the next couple, go round the lady and her partner is chasing her around the lady. And then the gent steps ahead and she chases him around the inactive gent, that's chase the possum. So once you know, it's easy when you know how and there are a couple dozen, at least, actually more than that. There are several dozen visiting figures that each have special words, and I'm going to do some of them actually at this year's NEFFA Festival. My dance session is southern squares for two couples because these are things that can be done by only two couples. So one more audio, this one's a little longer because it's so distinctive that I always play the whole side when I play this one. I mentioned Don Messer and his Islanders earlier, Don Messer was kind of the Lawrence Welk of Canada, except that he played the fiddle rather than the accordion. He had the number one radio show and later the number one TV show in all of Canada. At its peak, it actually had higher ratings than Ed Sullivan or the hockey games. The format was a variety show similar to Lawrence Welk. They would have some sentimental songs, a gospel song, some demonstration dancing, a couple of fiddle tunes, maybe with somebody step dancing and just a little bit of everything old timey. He also occasionally would do coast to coast tours where they would have concerts and square dances. The caller was usually a fellow of my grandparents and age born in 1900 named Fred Townsend and his son, Graham Townsend became a very accomplished fiddler and won a lot of contests and kept old time fiddling popular across Canada, sometimes called the Vassar Clements of Canada. So this is Fred Townsend calling with Don Messer's Islanders, a combination that worked together a lot. And again, as with Ed Gilmore, I consider Fred Townsend a major influence on my patter style. He practically became an instrument in the band. With him, it was more a percussion instrument. He

didn't pitch his voice on a note of the scale so much, it was mostly chanting. But he sometimes would use words more for their sound than for their sense. Give a listen.

Audio clip of Fred Townsend calling a square dance

Mary Wesley: I love it.

Tony Parkes: You doodly doo as you did before.

Mary Wesley: Yes. So fun, and you said he's Canadian?

Tony Parkes: Yeah. The "first couple" sounded almost Irish to me.

Mary Wesley: Oh, what fun. What a great taste of your vast collection. Thank you.

Tony Parkes: I love sharing these and I wish we had time for 20 more. But as I think I mentioned in an email that I've done presentations at camps where I just play these for 45 minutes or so. Sometimes I show the photos of the callers too so people can get a better idea of their personalities. Once at Pine Woods, I did a whole week's worth of, I think I called it a walk down square dance memory lane, which is a title I've used before. But in this particular case I had a whole week and I had a regular hour or whatever, however long the class length is every day and so what we did was we listened to maybe three or four callers doing one or two minute clips and then we got up and danced. I played three or four or five callers doing dance length. I played the whole side of the record and we did our best to follow what the caller was saying.

Mary Wesley: That sounds wonderful.

Tony Parkes: So we ended up doing like two dozen of those during the week.

Musician transition

Mary Wesley: 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 Wesley.

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

Visit podcasts.cdss.org for more info.

Happy dancing!

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

