

From the Mic Episode 9 - Sue Rosen

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

Sue Intro

Today we're taking a little trip to Boston! Well, Newton, MA to be more precise. Back in September I went down to the Boston area to call the BIDA dance (that's the Boston Intergenerational Dance Advocates if you don't know!) and I paid a visit to the Rosen household!

A leading caller of contras, squares, English country dance and family dance programs, Sue Rosen has been actively calling for 30 years in the Boston area, across the country, and overseas. She has built a collection of great dances and has written contras that have become part of the standard repertoire of dance callers across the contradance world.

Sue and her husband Bruce, (who you may know as one of Boston's most treasured country dance musicians) were so kind to welcome me into their dining room for this interview. Sue and I talked about the central role of the traditional dance community in her and her family's life. She filled me in on the landscape of the Boston dance scene as she has experienced it over the years, including stories about two of her most significant mentors, Ted Sannella and Larry Jennings. She shared her personal thoughts and philosophy on calling, choreography, and working with musicians, and we also looked to the future, considering what lies ahead as we continue to navigate the interruption of the pandemic.

Again, we recorded this conversation in-person at Sue's dining room table and you may hear some background noises form time to time.

I'm delighted to share our conversation with you!

[*Musical transition*]

Dance beginnings

Mary Wesley Sue Rosen, welcome to From the Mic, and thank you so much for welcoming me into your home, you're one of the few people that I have gotten to visit in person. I'm in town to call the BIDA dance later today and I asked if I could drop by and chat, so thank you.

Sue Rosen Thanks. Thanks, Mary. This was very short notice and I'm glad that I had some time this weekend and that I actually got to see you in person, face to face, what a novelty these days.

Mary Wesley Absolutely. It's wonderful. Thanks for making the time, it was definitely a bit whimsical. Oh, I wonder if I could sit in an interview and then, miracle, you were free. So do you want to just start off by telling me a little bit about how you found your way into the world of social dance and how you eventually got up on stage with a mic telling people what to do?

Sue Rosen Well, I've always been a dancer. I've always been interested in dance, from ballet lessons as a little kid to Israeli folk dance in college. I'll leave out all the in-between stuff that went on but constantly interested in dance. In 1974, Bruce and I were gardening, we had a plot at a community farm in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and it was our first garden, which has been a happy history for us. And at the end of the summer, there was a harvest fair with a dance in the barn, and some friends convinced us to join them for this dance. We had no idea what the whole thing was about. Ted Sannella was the caller, and he had a band, probably the Cambridge Country Dance...whatever they were called. And there was a barn full of people who didn't know what we were doing. We had a blast. Our faces were sore from grinning at the end of the evening and at the end of the evening, Ted made an announcement that he calls a regular monthly dance in Concord at the Scout House. It would be the second Saturdays, so starting up in October would be the first dance. So it was a few weeks away and we said, "We're putting it on the calendar."

So we showed up at the Scout House and that was it. We were hooked and we followed Ted around to his dances and pretty soon he kind of adopted us. He saw us in the back of that hall the first night, got us into a different square because there were all the beginners in the back of the hall, and he identified us as suckers. So we were very shortly involved with folding NEFFA newsletters at his house or at Larry Jennings house, and he would call us up and say, "I have a gig down on the south coast of Massachusetts and I don't want to drive home by myself late at night, would you come with me? Keep me company in the car?" So we spent time with him and I would always

go home with the calls in my head. I had no intention of being a caller. It would just buzz through my brain. We didn't have any kids at the time and I think I had toyed after a couple of years, I toyed with the idea of maybe learning how to be a caller, but in the 1970s, there really were no female callers in this area, maybe other parts of the country. Louise Winston was about the only woman that we knew who called dances. But she was not part of that tight knit male group of callers. So I talked to a few people, didn't get any encouragement on becoming a caller in the 1970s and just let it ride and then had a couple of kids and thought, you know, who has time for that anyway?

So we found ourselves in the late 1980s going to our first full week of camp at Pinewoods, it was Camper's Week, and there was a caller's workshop. I thought, "Well, I'm not doing anything this hour, I'll take this caller's workshop." It wasn't that successful in that it was very hands off. We basically sat in chairs and listened to the staff caller lecture. So a year later we were back at Camper's Week and there was a different caller on staff doing a caller's workshop. And I took that and we got up and we tried calling dances, but I still was not ready to get anywhere close to a mic. The third year we were at Camper's Week, these were all consecutive years with nothing that I was calling in between. I took another caller's workshop with another caller, and at camper's night I said to whoever was putting together the program, put me on, put me on the last dance of the evening, I'm calling Chorus Jig. I knew that even if I called it in Mandarin, that crowd would know what to do and it would be fine.

So I came back, Camper's Week used to always be the last week of the summer. I came back and I went to a dance at the Scout House. It was one of Ted's second Saturday dances. And at the break, I was talking to Larry Jennings. And, you know, at this point, I had known Larry for like 15 years and Ted, also. I was talking to Larry and I said, "I called one dance at Pinewoods," and he said, "Great, my annual 50th birthday party is coming up in November, and I want you to call a dance." At this point, Ted had walked off the stage, he joins the conversation and he says, "Great, you'll call Scout House Reel, it's easy and everybody loves it, you'll be fine." So I had my first dance in public, considering that Camper's Week was more like family than public, and I called Scout House Reel. I have no recollection of how it went, but it must have been okay enough because both Ted and Larry were now full time pushing behind me, and they would find opportunities for me to get up at the mic.

So I could call one dance for a slot at a multicaller night. Some local callers were very gracious and said, "Well, if you come to my dance, I'll give you one spot." So I was getting little bits of experience and I was terrified each time. Terrified. I decided that I needed to have another way to get experience that wouldn't terrify me. So my kids were going to the local elementary school, and I knew that I couldn't ask a classroom teacher to give me any time with a class. The gym teacher was wonderful and so beloved that I didn't want to take away the kids' time with him by asking if I could use any gym time. But the music teacher, who was lovely but uninspired, often would ask parents to come into the class and show their oboe and play it for them or whatever. So I approached her and asked if I could have fourth graders for a number of sessions, and I chose fourth graders because one of my kids was currently in the third grade and I didn't want to

have that happen. And I wanted kids who knew their rights from their lefts. So I went in and I had two fourth grade classes back to back each for a half hour. And we did Galopede and Haste to the Wedding and Heel and Toe Polka. I thought that if I could teach nine year olds how to dance, you have to be pretty clear with what you want with nine year olds, then I would be able to address a roomful of adults, and I think I had them for six weeks, once a week, for six weeks. And that was such a valuable experience. I learned so much, and I think it really helped take the edge off of my terror. So from there, I was pretty much off and running and started to get gigs.

A winding path to the caller's mic

Mary Wesley Nice. Just to fill in a few spots, I'm a little interested in the false start or I don't know if that's the right way to say it, but you had something of an interest in calling before you had kids. Who did you talk to when you were kind of asking around, were you asking other dancers? Were you asking other callers?

Sue Rosen Right. So the interesting bit is that I talked to Ted and he did share some dances with me. He gave me his cards to copy. But when I said I was interested in calling, he kind of said, "Uh huh." I didn't get any encouragement and I didn't quite know what to do with that. I was just not motivated to pursue it. I had at the time approached the adult education programs in the area and asked if I could teach intro to contra dancing to a small group of adults and I said, but I need ten people to sign up, and we didn't get ten, so that never happened. So that was really all that happened in the 1970s before I just decided, who has time? I have got kids.

Mary Wesley Right. You didn't get like an infusion of enthusiasm that would have pushed you to the next phase. I think it's significant too what you're saying about not seeing other women. And you know just when you're going towards something new I think it helps to be able to see someone like yourself. You know, have that representation.

Sue Rosen Right. And you know, I guess you could call it the glass ceiling. I mean, you know, or even the foot in the door, the foot into the glass door. It just seemed like an impossible thing. So by 1990- 1991 when I was feeling like, well, maybe I want to do this, there were other women callers getting gigs in the Boston area. So it just seemed like, well, I let somebody else do the hard work.

Mary Wesley Yeah, yeah, maybe have a good time for you to try it.

Sue Rosen And it was the right time.

Mary Wesley So, what do you think was different when you went back to Larry and Ted? In some ways it just seems like various things were aligning but this time their response was quick.

Sue Rosen Oh yeah. Well, they had known me for a long time, they had known me also as a dance organizer because they had gotten me into it. They're the ones who got me on the NEFFA board and I was Arrangements Chair for NEFFA in the late seventies. I was Program Chair for NEFFA in the early eighties. They had worked with me a lot and they had confidence that I could do this so they gave me the opportunities. And Larry, he was really my mentor, he worked with me a lot. I'm sure you've heard this from other people. He would let me know on the spot the things that I had done. He would say, "You didn't do your homework." I mean, he'd come right up to the stage. "You didn't do your homework." And it was hard, I'd go home sometimes in tears. Ted called me up one time and said "There's this dance weekend up in New Hampshire, the Ralph Page [Dance Legacy] Weekend. If you apply, we'll give you a scholarship to come." And I got off the phone with him and about 10 minutes later, the phone rings, and it's Larry, he doesn't even say hello. He says, "Are you coming?"

So they were in cahoots. The two of them were working behind the scenes. And it was very interesting because what I think Ted's motive was for getting me to the dance weekend, at that time...the callers for that particular Ralph Page weekend were Ted, Tony Parkes, Bob Dalsamer; all callers of squares. I had been calling out for a while. I was calling contras, no squares. And I think Ted mostly wanted me exposed to fabulous square dance calling and a roomful of dancers enjoying it. It was around the time when squares were really slipping in favor, and if a caller said, "Square your sets," there were people who were saying, "No, thanks, I'll sit out this dance." So about that time I got a call from Dan Pearl asking if I wanted to be the staff caller for Labor Day weekend at Pinewoods the following year. And I said "Yes, but, you know, I don't call squares." And he said, "Yeah, well, you've got 18 months to work on it." So people had their agendas and I was influenced in a good way by all of it. And I had to figure out where I was in the world of what I was going to choose to put on for a dance.

Mary Wesley Right, and so what was your personal thread that was kind of leading you through all this? Because especially hearing you describe the first couple of times getting up to call and every time it's like, Oh! But you kept getting back up and you looked for the way in where you could get more comfortable. So what was keeping you on the track?

Sue Rosen Well, I think that terror is a good thing to have. You know, the adrenaline is pumping and it really keeps you alive. I remember walking into a dance and seeing another caller as I walked through the hall to get to the stage. And I said, "Does this terror ever go away?" And now I think, you know, oh, calling a night of contras, I could do it blindfolded. I couldn't, but it doesn't have that adrenaline rush except now because of COVID and I haven't called in a long time, there's a little bit of that anxiety that comes with walking back up on stage after being out of practice for a while. What kept me going? The dancers, always, a new experience wherever you call, even if it's the same dance once a month for ten years, you never know who's going to show up and you hope people do show up. It's the dancers. It's doing a party dance, it's doing a wedding dance and thinking, "Are people going to get up when I say 'find a partner?'" There's

that little adrenaline rush that you go into each of those gigs, even if you're not terrified anymore, just the uncertainty keeps you going.

In my early days of calling when I was scared about going up to the mic, my husband Bruce said, "Just talk to them like you're talking to people in your living room." And the fact was that I had been dancing for 15 years with all of these same people and they were all friends. And I didn't have to think about them as being...do you know the cover of Tony Parkes' book, where it's taken from the position on stage with all of these dancers looking up like, what? I just felt like they were my friends out there and I could just talk to them. So it kind of relaxed me to think I've got a lot of friends out on the dance floor and now pretty much wherever I go, even overseas, I know these people and I can just feel like they're my buddies.

Mary Wesley Something you're doing together.

Sue Rosen And it's good to have that feeling, and a feeling of their trust in you. Because if you are standing there with confidence and a smile, then you can do all kinds of terrible things. When I was starting to call and I was listening to every word out of all the other callers who ever called on a Thursday night thinking, "That person is making so many mistakes, how are they out there on the dance circuit getting hired everywhere?" They make so many mistakes and I was thinking, they do it with such confidence and with a smile. And that was, you know, to know that people on the dance floor are your allies. You can even try out a brand new dance and say, I'm going to go out on a limb here but, you know, tell me what you think and if they trust you because every other dance you're calling that evening is a good one, then you're okay.

The Boston dance scene

Mary Wesley This is the point where there's so many directions I could go, but using myself as a stand in for someone who has heard a lot about the Boston dance scene, there's so much that this region and the dancers and callers and musicians who have made up the dance scene in this part of the world for a long time...There are a lot of important foundations here and so I'm curious to hear from your perspective to hear a little bit more about that scene at that time. Especially as you were coming up and really forming close ties to people like Larry Jennings and Ted Sannella. I wonder if you can kind of take us back... You were mostly dancing at the Scout House? Was that the central...

Sue Rosen In our earliest days of dancing, we were dancing to Ted at the Scout House. We would go any place, I mean, Roger Whynot had a dance in Belmont, I think. The Tuesday night dances in Cambridge were the hot dance. This was before the VFW, these were at the Cambridge YWCA in Central Square, and it was a joint effort of NEFFA and CDS Boston, I believe. It may have just been CDS Boston when they still had an American dance part of their program. Tuesdays were Ted Sannella and Tony Parkes on alternating weeks with the very, very beginnings of Yankee Ingenuity playing.

I believe this is correct. It was the hot dance, people came in from out of state every week, it was packed, it was multi-generational. I was in my twenties. Ernie Spence was there. I don't know if you know Ernie, the most beloved of dancers in the Boston area. Everybody wanted to dance with Ernie. He was an old guy. He must have been in his forties at the time. There were people there, probably in their sixties and seventies. Everybody danced, we met everybody and that was a regular thing. The dance got too big for the hall and moved to the Brimmer and May gym which was a huge...my recollection is it was vast and it was in Chestnut Hill. Ted and Tony, I think, were still calling there and somewhere along the line, Tony Saletan took over a night of that also, so that was a big dance.

Mary Wesley That was weekly?

Sue Rosen That was weekly. And somewhere along the line, Tod Whittemore started the Thursday night dances at the VFW. Those were very popular and so crowded that I feared for my safety. I remember thinking I should be going in like football outfits with padding and helmets because the dancing was enthusiastic and probably a little crazy. But that was a super successful evening. And then, of course, when Tod moved away out of state NEFFA took that over and had an incredible dance. We, I say 'we' because I came on to the committee some time after that, we would average 220 dancers a week and it was the dance to be at. Other dancers in the area: Roaring Jelly, which is a large band and always had a dance in the area. It was in Lincoln, it was in Lexington. The Saturday nights at the Scout House, second Saturdays were Ted, third Saturdays were Beth Parkes, fourth Saturdays were Walter Lenk and Debby Knight, so there was always lots of dancing. I used to tell people, you could do this stuff and if you were an English country dancer and did international or Scottish, you could dance every night of the week.

Mary Wesley It sounds like it was especially regional, like a lot of the callers and bands were from the Boston or greater Boston area. Do you think it's different, you know, if there's maybe a bit more traveling from different areas happening now?

Sue Rosen Callers and musicians back then had day jobs. Bob McQuillen was a teacher, a high school teacher. Everybody we knew who was on the circuit around here had day jobs. Nobody was a professional musician or a professional caller. And we didn't have traveling bands; maybe a band came up from the New York area. It was much later, it was into the 1990s, I would say well into the 1990s, before bands were really on the road and making a circuit up through New England and that meant that local bands had a lot more opportunities and local callers.

Mary Wesley A lot of really significant ones. What was the sort of generational spread? So at that time, did you feel like you were with the younger crowd? Was there a sense of, as happens over and over in these sort of traditional art forms, did you have a sense of discovery and then "making it your own?" Did you feel like that was happening in your age cohort? And what was your perspective on older dancers?

Sue Rosen I think we had a true appreciation for the older dancers. I felt like there were plenty of people in our age group... So we never felt shunned because we were the "young whippersnappers" who didn't know what we were doing. I felt like we were well incorporated. Older people asked us to dance and we didn't feel like they were creepy, which is something I think about now. We didn't feel like we had to start our own camps or dance series. Everybody really was dancing together. Now, we probably had our preferred partners, but, you know, everybody wanted to dance with Ernie. I can think of a number of other older gentlemen who, like, if they asked me to dance, it was just, oh my god, it's like, yes. They were great dancers and I think that it's very different now.

Mary Wesley I wonder if your second time around when when Ted and Larry kind of said "Okay, Sue, let's get you on the road to being a caller," do you think any of that had to do with just either you, as you said, you really were very clearly invested in the whole scene. But also, I wonder if Ted and Larry were starting to feel like, "Who is going to keep this going?" Do you think there was any of that?

Sue Rosen I think there was a lot of that. I remember saying to them, "You know, I'm not sure about this. I'd really just rather be dancing," and they said, "No, we need you." I was 40 or so and they were probably in their sixties, seventies. I'm not sure how much older they were, but they were probably feeling like we need to get younger people up and now forty is not so young anymore. Get the next generation of callers up there! And callers that they felt they had a hand in grooming so that there was a continuity and that it wouldn't just die off. There was a period of time when at the VFW, it seemed like we had lost the young ones. Through my forties and fifties looking at the dance floor, everybody seemed to be my age group: forties and fifties. We wondered if we were ever going to have a dance population when we got too old to dance because the young people weren't coming in. And then we had a marvelous influx of young people thanks to Tom Kruskal and his morris dancing teams, the kid's teams. They would all come and see each other. Some other times when they weren't practicing for their morris teams, they would come and dance together. Cambridge Revels had brought in a number of young people who wanted to see each other outside of the Revels scene and were showing up and they brought their friends and those kids are now all in their forties. So it was a wonderful influx of new energy.

Mary Wesley Yeah, really nice. It takes some of those ringleaders sometimes. It sounds like for you as well: did the dance community...did that spill over into your social scene?

Sue Rosen Oh, the dance community WAS our social scene. I would say to people, this is my congregation. Everybody that I hang out with, people I have Christmas Eve dinner, Thanksgiving Day, everybody that was in our social group were people that we knew from dancing. Our dance community grew because Bruce and I both became involved in morris dancing in different aspects. I was on a Northwest side, I was on a rapper team. He was playing for a Ha'Penny Morris women's Boston team. He joined Pinewood Morris Men. We expanded and during this whole time we were also doing English Country Dance. We had started to do that in the 1970s also. So, you know, just the whole Boston area dance scene was our community. And, you know, we had had

friends from work, we had had friends from grad school. But the dance community was the constant in our lives. It still is, absolutely.

[[Clip of Sue calling the dance "Beneficial Tradition" by Dan Pearl at a 2011 dance at the Scout House in Concord, MA with music by the Free Raisins - Amy Englesberg, Audrey Knuth, Jeff Kaufman](#)]

More about Ted and Larry

Mary Wesley Can you say any more about Ted and Larry? I know it sounds like you had different relationship with them. But can you just say a little bit more about who they were and how they influenced you?

Sue Rosen Sure. Ted was the magician on stage. He could get a room full of people who didn't know what they were doing and having a great time. That was my role model for going out and doing party dances. At his second Saturday dance, he would come off the stage and he would instruct on good dance style. He would show people how to swing. I mean, he'd take somebody from the crowd and demonstrate in the middle of the hall. Callers aren't really allowed to do that anymore. Maybe it's coming back a little bit. The committees that I'm on talk about, "Let's take a few minutes and do what the dancers have time for: 30 seconds of a swing demonstration or one minute of style tips." But back in my early days of dancing, he would take time and make sure people were dancing beautifully. So he was my model for that. I heard him tell a group one time, a group of callers, "Your job when you come to a dance as a dancer is to be a good role model on the floor," and I always remember that. So if the caller is teaching and I'm on the floor and somebody is chatting with me, I'll say, "Let's continue this later. Let's let the caller teach the dance." It was a really good thing to hear and to get out there and share with other people. Ted didn't mentor me directly so much. He also moved away from the Boston area about the time that I actually started calling. He and Jeanne moved to Maine, and whenever I'm in North Whitefield, I walk down the street and visit their grave sites. But I didn't see him that much and then he became ill. I believe he died in 1995 and that was only a few years into my calling at that point. Larry was the mentor, he was just going to whip me into shape.

Mary Wesley Can you situate him a little bit? Who was Larry Jennings? Because I know him as a choreographer, but he didn't call so much.

Sue Rosen He wanted to call, but he had an abrasive quality at the mic that didn't put him in great favor with the dancers. So he was an organizer and he thought about contra dance all the time in a super analytical way. If you look at the books he published, you will see his lengthy articles. The books have hundreds and hundreds of dances, but they also have all of his articles. I have notebooks upstairs with printouts of things that he would send me. He sat at a typewriter and then he sat at the computer and he had a dot matrix printer and he would stuff things in envelopes and put them in the mail. So Larry would have been happy to be calling. He had very rigid ideas about

what made a good caller. Terminology was first and foremost, and he proudly claimed that he came up with "long lines forward and back." What did people used to say, "forward and back?" I don't know what people said, but this was a way for everybody to know which direction they were facing. He claimed to have invented that. He had some really bad ideas. He thought that California Twirl, Box the Gnat, Swat the Flea could all be encompassed by "Twirl to Swap." So all he had to do was say, "Twirl to Swap" but of course you had to teach what hands were involved, which direction did you end up facing? He loved to argue. He didn't want to argue so that you were mad at him. But he liked to argue his points. I was very intimidated by him in my early days. So he would say something like "It has to be 'twirl to swap,'" and I'd say, "Okay." But after a while, I realized people know what a California twirl is. Why wouldn't I just use that? I wrote my very first contra dance in 1996. It just came to me, I was out for a walk and it had bits of English country dance moves in it, and it had a turn single, it had a cloverleaf turn single.

Mary Wesley Was it Handsome Young Maids?

Sue Rosen It was Handsome Young Maids. I came up to Larry and I said, "I wrote a contra dance." He said, "What's it got?" I described it, and first of all, he said, "What makes that a contra dance and not an English dance?" I said, "Well, you balance and swing." He said, "Okay." And then he said, "What are you going to call that cloverleaf turn single?" And I thought, I don't know. So I put it out there to a bunch of callers and said, what would you call this? I got some recommendations. Scott Higgs suggested that I call it "Flirt and Go." So when the dance was first published, I think in the CDSS newsletter, maybe, it was published that way. And you know, shortly after that I looked and thought, "Oh, god, that's terrible. Why don't we just call it a cloverleaf turn single?" People who know what a cloverleaf... same way with Box the Gnat, people who know what that term means will know what it means. I still to this day demonstrate what it's going to look like because it's a really easy dance, but it has some unusual bits to it.

So Larry was always on my case about terminology. He also thought that one walk through was your goal, two walkthroughs if absolutely necessary, and if you had to do a third walkthrough, you were a disaster. It was totally the caller's fault for teaching poorly and I adopted that mindset. For years and years, for decades I thought, if I can't do this in one walkthrough, then I'm doing something wrong. I've since walked that back a whole lot and realized that sometimes, a lot of times, people will just feel more comfortable if they get that second walkthrough. But that was another one of Larry's things. Larry had a thing for transitions and certain dance moves and he did not like right and left through. This was in the context of contras, and he thought promenade across was better. So because he was on my case every week, all the time about everything and I was still intimidated I would take my dance cards and scratch out right and left throughs and call everybody else's dances. And, you know, Tony Parkes would show up and say, "Yeah, that's my dance but I didn't put a promenade in there."

So I love right and left through. It took me a while to realize that Larry was just not right. In my view, my tastes, his tastes did not always match but I did learn transitions that

didn't work. This came in handy when I started writing my own dances and realizing you don't go from a swing into a star it's not good for anybody. I also, because I came in to the caller's job after having danced for at least 15 years, I came in with my own sensibility of what made good dances. I didn't collect every dance I danced. I pretty much had a policy at the time that I would only call dances that I had danced and that I felt were great. So my dance collection is certainly big enough, but I remember talking to a caller from far away who said, I have 1500 contras in my collection. And I said, I wouldn't know what to do with 1,500 contras. And also, I can't think of that many that would be worthy of being called. So my sensibility, along with Larry's influence, was definitely a big factor in what I was calling. I kept lists of everything. I still, at a dance, will write down every dance, and that would certainly come in handy if I had three gigs in a weekend and they were all in the same geographical location and people would come to more than one dance. I would say, I'm calling in Rehoboth tomorrow night, but you won't be doing any of these dances. So I still keep those lists and it's fun to look back and say, "Wow, I forgot about that dance, that was a good one. I could bring that back into my current pack of dances."

Mary Wesley So it sounds like Larry gave you a lot of structure and things to think about. And then as I think, hopefully, most mentors, I think eventually want their mentees to then start to rise into their own place and then you have that space to say, "Wait, who am I?" once I kind of fledge.

Sue Rosen Sure. Definitely at some point, he stopped talking to me about my calling skills. We were working together a lot on his book. I contacted every single dance composer for dances that he wanted to publish and asked for permission. I wrote to a bunch of callers at the time and said, "Can you give me your hundred top dances, dances that you think have to go into this book?" It was very interesting to see from different geographical locations what the overlap was. There were only a handful of dances that somebody from the Midwest and somebody from California and somebody from New England all felt belonged in that top 100. So I became more of his peer as far as administrative work. And yeah, he got off my case. I think probably he stopped listening so closely.

Mary Wesley I'm sure you've just showed yourself to be a highly confident, effective caller.

Sue Rosen Eventually, eventually.

Traveling and choreography

Mary Wesley So, clearly you have so many roots here in your local area but was there a time when you started traveling farther afield as a caller?

Sue Rosen Yeah, that was a total surprise. My first away gig was in California, and it was a local dance musician who was out there playing lots and said, "Why don't you have Sue come out and call this dance weekend?" And if you go far away from home, then somebody else hears you call for the first time and it just built on that. So being further afield gave me more connections to the point where I was traveling some, never as much as...I always had a day job. I was never traveling to the point where I was on the road all the time. I still had a family at home and, you know, a few good away gigs in a year where they made me happy. I think I'm kind of selective about where I want to go. How far away? For how long a period of time? I never considered this my job, and since I wasn't making my living at it, I could say, "Yeah, well, try me another time."

Mary Wesley You've touched on this a little bit, but I just want to track too, how dance composing came into this, too. And how much of that is, is part of who you are as a caller? Are you still a choreographer?

Sue Rosen The choreography kind of just came one day, I was out for a walk and Handsome Young Maids just appeared full blown, as is. The tune...I had called a dance the night before, and the band had played a tune, it was stuck in my head and I had that tune as I was taking my walk. I don't think I wrote another dance for another few years. And like any choreographers, I think there's a fascination at any given time with a particular move or a particular transition. I never sat down and said, "Today I'm going to write a dance." I was stuck on 'roll away with a half sashay' for a while, to the point where I was trying to get it into lots of things. I think callers who are also choreographers should keep a lid on how many of their own dances they call in any given program, because we all have our thumbprint, our signature on our choreography. You know, you could tell a Jim Kitch dance because it's all the heys and right shoulder rounds and mad robins. You know the feel of some dances. So I never sat down, I would just wait for some idea. I never really looked to invent new moves. I always thought one of the charms of contra dancing is that you could come in without classes, even without a beginner session, because the Boston area never had beginner sessions until about a decade ago. You could come in, you could count the number of moves back in the 1970s. You could count them on your ten fingers, and just be dancing. So I was not a proponent of inventing new moves. Some of the new moves are great, but some of the moves that I like the best are from, you know, the Rory O'More move or contra corners or things like that that are in the repertoire to begin with. So, yes, steal from what we've already got.

Mary Wesley Yeah, that fixed vocabulary. So interesting.

Learning Squares

Mary Wesley Just to follow up, so Ted and Larry conspired to bring you up to the Ralph Page dance weekend. And did you get bitten by the squares?

Sue Rosen Yes. Enough so that I now call squares happily. I never had a political agenda about it. I've always felt like I didn't want to be the caller with a political agenda because there are callers out there with, you know, I will only call X or I won't go to do a dance weekend if Y. And I thought, whatever you want, I'll do for you if this makes you and your dance community happy. So I don't try to force them on people. I try to call them the best way I can and only call squares that I would be happy dancing to music that I think is appropriate. There are some bands that I probably wouldn't call a square with because I like up tempo old time, even if it's a dance written by Ted Sanella. I think the energy is good for squares if it's got a little bit more pep to it. I love to teach the Grand Square and even if I'm in a room where only a few people know what it is, I think I've really honed my teaching on the teaching of a Grand Square. It's just something you can throw in, the dancers feel really great that they've accomplished something new and it takes up a whole break. You don't have to worry too much about what else to stick in there.

Mary Wesley Yeah. What's your "key" that you've discovered in teaching?

Sue Rosen In teaching a Grand Square there are only two people that you need to know in your Grand Square, your partner and your opposite, and that you've always got eye contact with one of them. If you are standing very close to somebody, as in "sides face," and you're nose-to-nose with your partner, the only thing you can do is back up. And if you're standing face-to-face with somebody who's far away, you should walk forward. So that's pretty much my Grand Square.

Mary Wesley Yeah. It's so clear, it's so satisfying when it all clicks. Well, I'd love to get a little bit into just the craft of calling or more what you've honed over the years in terms of teaching and how you see the role of the caller, because it's such a curious thing. What is it about calling for you that has made it so central in your life? How do you think about it?

Calling style and working with musicians

Sue Rosen Well, of course, the reason to do this is for the dancers. You know, it has just brought so much joy to me and my family and my close community and the greater community that I do it to keep it going. I developed my own repertoire, I pull the dances into my own repertoire. I think it's important to know your repertoire. Not to know it so that you can call it without cards. I think that's crazy. I only know two people, I think one of them is no longer with us, but people who could walk into a hall without any calling aids and pull off a whole evening. I'm not recommending anybody aspire to that. But I think you should know your repertoire so that if you say, "Hmm, I think what we need right now is a dance with something completely different than what we just did. Let's do X because it will be a nice juxtaposition with something that they've just finished." So that also takes me into programming.

I used to sit down and put together programs before I would go to a dance. And then, of course, you had to throw away most of it because three dances in a busload of students would come in, they didn't know what they were doing, and you'd have to just go back to the beginning and pull out a very basic Scout House Reel or something. I sometimes put together a list of dances, of possible dances, that I can choose from. But I very rarely, and this is, pre-COVID three years ago, will sit down and craft a program. Unlike English Country Dance, where you absolutely put together a program and, you know, musically, it's a different story. I like the band to have a good hand in crafting the evening. So if the piano player, in particular, who I happen to be living with turns to me and says, "What kind of jigs do you want for the next dance?" I'll say, "Oh, jigs, good idea," and I'll look through the list or go through my mental Rolodex and come up with a dance that I like to do with jigs. If I've already got a dance that I want to do planned for that next slot, and the band says, "Can we play Irish reels? Can we play elegant marches?" I'll either say, "Hold that for later" or "Sure, let's try it." Because I think, unlike English Country Dance, where every dance has its dedicated tune, a good contra dance is just a different experience when it's done to a different style of music. And I feel like working with the band is such an exciting element of being on stage.

I've gotten to work with such amazing musicians. I really feel so lucky and if I'm working, pretty much with any band, whether I know them or not, before the dance starts, I will ask them, "So anything in particular you want to get to tonight?" Because maybe they have some very unusual Eastern European sounding medley that they want to get to and I'll say, "Okay, I'll find something that goes with that." On the wonderful occasions when I got to work with Nightingale, or basically any band that Becky and Keith were in, they knew that they could sit down with me for 5 minutes before the dance and say, "Here's what we want to do" and I would program on the fly to match their musical program. That was a rare occasion, but also a great adrenaline rush to be able to come up with a dance that I could sort through and find just what I thought was going to work with what they had in mind.

I got a lot of good feedback on how to work with musicians from living with a musician and also just talking to a lot of musicians that I've worked with over the years. One thing that I've learned being on stage, this is a much more involved piece here. I always felt like I was in a rush. and that put the bands in a very hard place, especially if it was an established band like Yankee Ingenuity on a Monday night would always have a guest musician sit in with them and they would have to find common repertoire in between each dance. Well, if I was ready to line up the dancers and start teaching it right away, that didn't give them enough time to come up with the medleys for the next dance. So I don't tell jokes, I am really bad at forgetting punch lines. I realized that if you only did 11 dances in the course of a whole evening, nobody was going to ask for their money back. I took a step back and decided you don't have to rush. Nobody's clocking me up here. So that all ties in with working with the band, giving everybody what they need on stage, on the dance floor, and taking more time for the walkthrough.

At some point I used to do a one shot caller's workshop in aiming for that one-walk-through teach. And the first thing I would say is, "Make sure everybody's

ready." Some callers have little tricks, take hands four circle left to trick people into shutting up and doing something when the dance doesn't actually have a circle at the beginning of it. I just wait until people are ready, I don't wait forever. I'll say, Give me a hands up at the bottom of the hall, give me a thumbs up when you've got your hands four down there." And when you're teaching, is everybody doing the same part of the dance? Has everybody finished that chain and the half, hey? Are they ready to hear the tricky bit that comes next? You want everybody in the same place. Are you all still opposite your partner? Are you all still next to your partner? So taking that extra 2-seconds to make sure everybody's ready to hear what comes next. So maybe in the course of a walk through, you've used up another 15 seconds. It's no big deal and you can then go right into the dance.

Mary Wesley It's like really thinking of the dance as a whole organism it seems like.

Sue Rosen And, you know, having the musicians be happy with you is a good thing.

Mary Wesley Always, always.

Mentors and Inspiration

[[*Clip of Sue calling the square dance "Ashley's Star" by Bob Dalsemer at the 2011 Fiddling Frog dance weekend in Pasadena, CA with music by the Figments - Anna Patton, Owen Morrison, and Ethan Hazzard-Watkins.*](#)]

Mary Wesley You talk a lot about Ted and Larry, as you were learning, did you have other, either mentors or just people whose style you studied a little bit?

Sue Rosen Well, I must say the people were very generous. When I got my first gig calling at a party that was going to be more than just the handful of dances that I taught to those fourth graders. I needed more party material, and Tony and Beth Parkes invited me over to their house and did just like a brain dump. "You have to have this dance, and this dance always works, and this is no fail..." And people were very generous. As far as styling myself, I think a really good thing is to just be yourself. I thought that I had to pitch my voice lower and that didn't work for me. My vocal cords would seize up in a dance. I just had to speak my own speaking voice when I'm calling. I think vocal quality is a really important characteristic of a good caller. You get somebody like Tony who just has the velvet voice and Susan Kevra is like late night radio, she could sing you to sleep, not that she'd put me to sleep.

But just some great callers' voices and I think vocal quality, also vocal delivery. I cannot stand it when people do the up talk thing, circle left. Are you asking me or are you telling me? So there are things that I find comforting in hearing a caller give you the statement: end it with a period. I like to hear a caller who has a musical quality in their voice and it doesn't have to be singing. Singing squares are one thing, but a vocal quality that rises

and falls and isn't a dead monotone. I think, rhythmic, you know, along with the musical quality, is the rhythmic quality of a call, not just "five, six, circle left," but something that puts it into the rhythm of the dance. "Join hands four and circle left." So I don't think I actually styled myself with anybody in particular in mind. I never made recordings of other callers to work on from there. But as I say, I'd done a lot of dancing before I got in front of a mic.

Mary Wesley So lots of influences, big and small, I'm sure. You mentioned teaching workshops sometimes, but do you see yourself as a mentor?

Sue Rosen I've taught callers courses, not intensive but, you know, an hour a day at camps. This past summer, I was on staff with a caller, I was calling English, and this caller, who was on staff to call American said, "I did my first caller's workshop with you here at this camp 15 years ago," or whatever it was. So that's great. There was a period of time, I've lost track of time, maybe 20 years ago when I offered a caller's class at my house, and I think I had six people who came and we had a number of sessions and the front hall is kind of like an open space. We called for each other and some of those people went on to call dances and some just wanted the experience of finding out what callers talk about and think about and what it's like to call to a group, a small group of people. I was able to give a few of those people slots at the NEFFA contra nights, which are multi-caller evenings. But no mentorship in a big way.

Leadership and community care

Mary Wesley Anything else about the caller's role, we've talked about sort of teaching and language and voice. Are there other things that aren't asked specifically about how to do the moves and when to do the moves, but how else are you kind of, holding a group of dancers as a caller?

Sue Rosen Each gig is different and I think about them all differently. I think my favorite gigs are those for total non-dancers because the look on their faces when they're having such a blast, it's just so rewarding to see people get into it. So there are the "one night stands" where each of them is a total unknown and then there's the community where I know that I'm going to know everybody's name on that dance floor. There are 25 to 30 people who come to this dance every month, and we have a potluck dinner and I know what I ate that that one made and it's kind of like calling for a family. I want to pull out the stuff...I know that that dancer loves the petronella move. I'm going to make sure that for tonight's program, I have a dance...before she leaves I'm going to put in a dance that has one of those. I know that those dancers love singing squares. I'm going to make sure that we get one of those in before they leave at the break. I want everybody to go home with a smile on their face and I want people to be safe. I know that sometimes dancers come up and they say, "Oh, you know, you called a dance that had make an arch and the sides duck through and I can't make that arch, my arms don't do that," and I keep that in mind. When that dancer is on the floor, there aren't going to be any arches tonight.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Lots of little ways to care for the group.

Sue Rosen Right. And I want people who want to dance to be out there on the dance floor. As an organizer, I have heard people say, "I came to the dance and I couldn't get a partner," or "I came to this dance week and nobody asked me to dance." I want anybody who wants to dance to be up on the dance floor. I think it's gotten better since we are moving away from gendered terminology. I think more people see, "I can dance with that person, I can dance any role in this room." It bothered me to think that somebody was waiting to be asked. I am a big proponent of taking care of yourself and if you want a dance, go ask somebody and if they aren't dancing, find somebody who is standing up and ask them. If somebody's sitting out, sitting down, maybe they need to rest. But I think that people shouldn't be waiting to be asked. It sounds very 20th century to me to wait to be asked to the prom. Go ask somebody if you want to do something and ask until you find a partner.

So I want people to be up and dancing. I do direct people to the sides of the hall, ask somebody you don't know, ask somebody who you've never met before. I've gotten great partners by going someplace totally new and dancing with somebody. I thought, "Oh, let's give this a shot," and oh, heavenly partners. So I just want people to have a great time. I think that my role as a caller is more to be transparent and just to enable the dance to happen, except in a one night stand where you have to really be out there.

A great deal of the enjoyment that people have in coming out to a dance is dancing with their friends and finding new friends to dance with. And the second biggest thing is the music. That you can have a really bad caller calling bad dances and if the music is great, people are dancing with their friends, they're going to have a good time. So my role as a caller, I think, is to not be in people's faces, to teach efficiently, call a few times, step gradually out, make sure everybody's where they need to be in the dance, and just let them dance to the music and dance with their friends. That's my biggest role, I don't have shtick. I know that there are people who are known for their stage personalities, and that's great. I don't have that, along with not telling jokes. I don't wear hats, I don't clog while I'm calling, I just want the band to be happy. I want the band-dancer connection to be happening and I just step out of the way.

Mary Wesley Come as you are. You come as Sue Rosen.

Sue Rosen That's what you get.

Mary Wesley Yeah! What else would you need?

Looking to the future

Mary Wesley How's the future looking? And let's recognize that we're in this funny moment where, of course, no dancing happened for some years and now it's starting up

again. But taking all that into consideration but also with a longer view... When you look ahead, what are you excited for, for yourself and how do you feel like the dance community is faring?

Sue Rosen I am looking with great interest to see how the community is faring. I know that I can't use the words "post-pandemic" because for me we're still in it. But when some of our local dances started up again, I know that the BIDA [Boston Intergenerational Dance Advocates] dance had over 200 people at their first dance, and I called there. I wanted to push my calling off until later in the spring because I was confident that the COVID numbers were going to go down, not back up like they did. But when I was there, there were a hundred some. It was a lovely evening. But I think that initial euphoria about getting back on to the dance floor maybe has waned and people are slipping back into their pandemic comfort of not running out at night. I know I got used to having dinner and putting on my slippers and not getting in the car a bunch of nights a week.

So I'm very interested and concerned about the future of our dance communities. I'm hoping that we build back up. I'm not expecting to come back because the Thursday night dance here has not yet started. It will be starting after a false start in the spring. We will be starting in a few weeks. I'm not expecting a huge crowd. I think people are still tentative about the safety issues and a lot of us have aged, some of us have gotten our new joints and have maybe found other things to do. I'm hoping that we come back, we get another generation that will move up at some point. I don't have fears that social dancing is dying out, not like I did 25 years ago when I thought, you know, we don't have a young population. But having been at dance camps this summer, I can see that there's still great enthusiasm across the generations for what we're doing.

As far as for myself, I seem to be calling a lot more English these days, which, even though I've been calling English for 20 years now, continues to be a surprise and I love it. something that I have long, long wanted to do and who knows, I may just get to do this, is to have an evening program once a month, maybe of mixed American and ECD. Years ago, Larry Jennings said, "Why don't you just do it?" I remember asking a bunch of people, "Would you do this?" And there were all the contra dancers who said, "Oh, no, I don't do ECD, it's so boring," and a bunch of English dancers who said, "Oh, no, I don't like contra, they can't count to eight." I remember asking the late Mary Kay Friday, "Would you go to an English/American evening?" And she said, "Oh, no. I wouldn't know what to wear! Do I wear my long, elegant skirts or do I wear my short, swirly ones?" I thought that was the best answer yet. But CDS Boston used to have occasional party dances that were a mix of both and the only places where I can go do both now are at camps. So I would still love to have an evening dance and maybe within the next few years, I will make that happen in the Boston area. That's something that I would still like to do with my organizing skills and sharing the calling with other people.

Mary Wesley Yeah. I think it's always good to have a little something you're working towards, keeping it fresh.

Well, I have three closing questions that I've been asking everybody if you're up for it. I don't think they'll be too shocking. The first is touching back on the caller as kind of a cataloger or an archivist. How do you keep your dances? I'm guessing it's not on an iPad, but I don't know.

Sue Rosen It is not on an iPad. I started off with 3x5 index cards. I don't like when a caller holds a card up right in front of their face. It's a barrier between me and the dancers. So I put my dances into my computer and I print them out in 24-point font and punch holes and they live in three-ring binders. With that size font, I can put them on the floor and just see them and have my hands free so that I can gesture and hold the mic if I want and I don't have any barrier there. My dances are organized alphabetically. So people who have cards and they're color coded and they have dividers in their card files for dances that are becketts...I never understood the necessity to separate becketts from any other duple minor dancers. But they're alphabetical, and that's why I really need them organized in my head, so that if I say, "Oh, I need a dance that has a petronella move, I can call Princeton Petronellas." I can call "Joel's in the Kitchen." I know the dances that will fall into the slots that I need, and they're alphabetical.

It became evident about ten years ago that I was traveling more on airplanes to do gigs, and I needed a way to not be hauling my three ring binders with me. So I had all these dances in Word docs and I just sent them to a Kindle. So I don't have an iPad, which would be great, because then you can just do a search for things, a very old style Kindle, first generation Kindle has a terrible file management system, and I have 350 contras on here, 248 English country dances and 68 odd formations. So they are broken down only into very broad categories. When I want to call a dance that starts with the letter W and it's sorted alphabetically, I have to page through many, many times to get down to where..it is a terrible thing. I should just invest in an iPad but I'm not in great enough need, I guess. So when I have a local dance, it's my three ring binders and when I get on an airplane I take my little Kindle with me.

Mary Wesley Trusty, very portable.

Sue Rosen Very portable, holds a charge for a really long time.

Mary Wesley Yes, that's true. Sometimes just the systems that we establish and then work with over some time, you'd rather stay in the comfort zone.

Sue Rosen Yeah. But the book, the big book, the three ring binder made an impression on Dudley Laufman once. He insists, and every time I see him, which isn't very often recently, but he insists that I have this binder that I throw on the floor, and I'm sure I have never actually thrown my binder on the floor, but that made a big impression on him.

Mary Wesley You know, it's a sizable binder and I can see that maybe it might make a sound when you place it on the floor.

Sue Rosen And he's a good storyteller.

Mary Wesley Exactly. Do you have any pre- or post- gig rituals or things that you do to get in and out of the caller zone?

Sue Rosen Because I used to have trouble with my voice seizing up—I have a friend who is a voice teacher and I went and talked to her, this goes back 25 years ago. I said, "I'm calling a dance, especially a square, and all of a sudden nothing is coming out, it's a terrible feeling." And she told me, hydrate, hydrate, hydrate. And not just before you go to the dance and not just with a bottle of water next to me. Like for 48 hours before a gig, make sure that your vocal cords are hydrated. She also gave me some vocal exercises to do, and I would sit in the car and sing weird scales, you know, screechy scales just to exercise my vocal chords before I would show up at a dance. I don't really have rituals, I talk to the band when I get there, just give hugs around to the ones I know and try to get out of their way because they're doing a sound check. I always bring up my own windscreen and I ended up buying them in packages of eight because I often leave them on the mic at the end of the evening, mistakenly leaving them there. I think it's a good hygienic way of not having my lips on the same microphone as whoever used it last night from a different gig. And since I think I speak rather clearly and I can pop my P's, it kind of muffles that. Pro-tip, when you're wearing an N95 mask, you don't need a windscreen cause it just does the trick!

Post-gig, nothing. I try to just calm myself in the car on the way home so that I can actually fall asleep. Usually I'm kind of excited about the evening. If there were mistakes, which are not so much more recently...well nothing's recently, but try to talk myself down from anything that I feel I'm going to be beating myself up over for a long time.

Mary Wesley Yeah, don't spend too much time there! I'm familiar with that. That's definitely in my post-gig ritual too.

And then lastly, do you think of yourself as an introvert, or an extrovert? If you know.

Sue Rosen Oh, I think it's easy for me. I've never been tested but I'm an extrovert. I love being around people and you know, I always have that fear of missing something. So, I love being at camps, I get to meet new people. I think I soak up my energy...I think that's the definition of an extrovert. I think I soak up my energy from other people.

Mary Wesley Do you think in any way you were drawn to calling because it put you in a space where you could be with other people's energy? Or is that not connected to much.

Sue Rosen Maybe not so much, because I was going out to the dances all the time. There was a year when I couldn't dance. I had a foot injury and I was instructed to not dance, but I went to the Thursday night dance every week and just sat on the bar in the back and hung out. There was always somebody who was sitting out a dance for one

reason or another. And so there was always somebody to hang out and talk to. Or I would sit on the side and talk to Larry Jennings and we would talk about the people on the dance floor. "Oh, she needs to learn how to swing." Yeah, I don't think calling...I don't think I wanted to put myself out there. I just like to be with a lot of people, or be with two people, one person, anybody!

Mary Wesley Great! Well I think we'll leave it there if that's ok with you?

Sue Rosen That's fine!

Mary Wesley Well Sue, thank you so much, this was so fun!

Sue Rosen This was great fun!

Mary Wesley Great to get to visit with you and again, to see you in person. Thank you so much!

Sue Rosen Well, it was a blast!

[[Clip of Sue calling the dance "Handsome Young Maids"](#) written by herself! At the 2011 Fiddling Frog dance weekend in Pasadena, CA with music by Nightingale - Jeremiah McLane, Keith Murphy, and Becky Tracy.]

Mary Wesley A big thanks to Sue for talking with me. Check out the show notes at podcasts.cdss.org to learn more.

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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