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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.

## Will Intro

**Mary Wesley** Hi From the Mic listeners! I'm back from a little winter break from the podcast and I've got a delightful conversation to share with you today. Since the pun is unavoidable I'll just embrace it: you're about to hear from one of my dear friends and most important mentors...you guessed it...it's the man behind the orange glasses, the one and only Will Mentor!

Will started calling contra and square dances at the Jefferson county fairgrounds, in Fairfield, Iowa at 8:00pm on January 7, 1995. Since then he has called dances, dance weekends, and weeklong dance camps all over the United States. Canada, and Europe. Now from Northern Vermont, Will is known for his clear teaching, upbeat wit, and relaxed stage presence. He loves to choreograph evenings with a variety of dances and tempos that at times surprise and always delight. All this while keeping intact his guiding principle as a caller: "It's about the dancers!"

Since we live close by I interviewed Will in his studio at the school where he's an associate professor of fine art. We dove into his formative experiences calling English country dance, contra, and squares for his small community in Iowa and looked at his trajectory from neighborhood caller to the national dance weekend circuit. He shared his thoughts on dance leadership, his excitement about patterns and choreography, his advice on working with bands, and more! Here's Will.

**Mary Wesley** Will Mentor, welcome to From the Mic!

**Will Mentor** Hi, Mary.

**Mary Wesley** It's great to be here with you. You were someone that I talked to a lot when I was getting ready to start this podcast and imagining what kind of things we could learn from from talking to callers across the country. And so I'm really happy to be here with you today. Thanks for making time.

**Will Mentor** Thank you for having me.

**Mary Wesley** Do you want to start by just telling me how you found your way to the caller's mic?

**Will Mentor** Yeah. Very briefly, in high school, when I was 16, I happened on a banjo contest at a fair in Blandford, Massachusetts. And for 2 hours, I was mesmerized—then completely forgot about it. Bunch of years later, I'm in my early twenties, and a friend said there's a barn dance at the Greenwich Pottery House, which had an upstairs meeting room. Mesmerized for 2 hours. Loved it. Loved everything about it—forgot about it. 1993, I was living in Fairfield, Iowa, but I was spending some time in Japan and I was away from my then wife and daughter who were back in Fairfield for three and a half months. And when I got back, Laura said that she had been going to this social dance every Friday night. And so I was going. And so I went. And, um, it was really fun, but there were some changes that happened over the next few weeks that I don't need to get into. But anyway, what ended up happening was six weeks later we ended up in Toba's parlor and we're all in our thirties, and we decided that we were going to do English country dancing. And Jennifer was our leader and our caller. And she opened up the book and we had CDs and cassettes and we danced to her calling. And when we couldn't figure it out, we literally put our heads together and looked at the Playford book and then thought about the music and started to figure it out.

So I did that for about a year. Jennifer was the caller. Sometimes a guy named John Stimpson would call. Again, this is in Fairfield, Iowa, but I was going back and forth to New York City and I started going to the English country dances in New York City and got to...my first dance was with Fried de Metz Herman, and she was kind of imperial and would sort of get cranky with the dancers and kind of scared me a little bit. But I worked up the nerve to go up after the dance and tell her that I lived in Iowa, but I was in New York a lot and we were doing English country dancing back in Fairfield, Iowa. And I thought several of the dances were really fun and could I collect them?

Well, she went from being imperial to being my grandmother, and she just took me in like a long lost grandson and not only gave me her dances in her book, but helped me...described to me how I might want to call them. I wasn't thinking about being a caller. I was just collecting dances for Jennifer. And when I went back to Fairfield, Jennifer said, "Well, if you're going to collect them, you might as well call them." And in that spirit of putting our heads together...in a way, the group of dancers...I studied those dances a lot, but the group of dancers put their heads together to help me call. So I started calling English like somewhere in '94.

**Mary Wesley** And so you had this sort of collective that was helping bring you along into that role?

**Will Mentor** Well, we were all friends. Yeah, no one named it anything. It didn't have any kind of structure that was spoken about. But it was...we started the dance, with a leader, with Jennifer. But Jennifer was so friendly and knew that we all, yeah, we'd all put our heads together sometimes and figure it out. And that informs my calling.

**Mary Wesley** How so?

**Will Mentor** Well, you know, I often say from the microphone that "it takes a village," usually when I screw up a walk through. But I actually use humor a lot. You know when Mary Poppins says "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down?" Well, I don't know if I'm delivering medicine, but saying things that are slightly intimate from the microphone, or kind of personal—but if it's couched in humor or couched in like, "it takes a village," you know, that sort of delivery—it's easier, but it's also profound. So I think humor is something

I use a lot. And when I go back and think about when I first started calling, I was pretty comfortable at the microphone and I would sort of self-critique, as I call.

**Mary Wesley** Which can be very disarming for people.

**Will Mentor** And it was such a safe place to learn how to call. We were all friends. So it was like 30 of us in Toba's house.

**Mary Wesley** And so how did you continue your path outside your circle of friends?

**Will Mentor** Yeah, so for a while and I just did that. You know, I was busy outside of social dance, and I was going back and forth to New York City a lot. And so I would always be there. And so when I was in Fairfield, I started to help with the calling. I never called the full night. Again, that sort of collective friendly, relaxed feeling in our group. And then new people started coming into it and it started to grow a little bit. We had Bare Necessities come and Jacqueline Schwab called. And, at some...it's hard to remember. It was either '95 or '96 Jennifer said, "Well, there's a guy named Ted Sannella and Don Armstrong. They're two callers and they call contras and squares and they're going to be in Kentucky, and my family is going to go. Why don't you, Laura, and Madeleine go? So we all went and I joined the contra caller's workshop.

**Mary Wesley** Had you been aware of contras and squares?

**Will Mentor** I knew what square dancing was. I had been to a single evening of contra dancing in a barn. Like, it was really funky. And when I think back to it, I'm surprised that we didn't bring the barn down. We were on the second floor and the thing was shaking. So I knew that. And then I went to the workshop and Jennifer said, before I went, she said, "Why don't you go do the caller's workshop? And then you'll be the American caller." And you have to know Jennifer, she's kind of enlightened and amazing. And so I don't ever want that to come across like she was bossy or dictatorial, but she was beautiful and wonderful and I just said, "Of course."

And so I went and came back. So it was one of those deals where it's the day after Christmas through New Year's Day. And I think the weekend after that, we rented the fairgrounds hall in Fairfield, Iowa, and I had Ted Sannella's book. I had no cards, but I had called English, and I'm kind of fearless, and it was all friends, right? So there was nothing to lose. And we had a contra dance with an old time band and I called half squares and half contras and I was brand new at it. And we just sort of went from there and it was probably like a few months that we had this crazy contra schedule where we couldn't...it was almost like—me as a caller—but it was also the dancers just couldn't get enough of it. So I called to live music every other Saturday night. But then I called to CDs every Wednesday night for two hours. And that's a lot of calling! And there's no one else calling contra. So I just got...and squares. So I just got, I just did it and did it and did it and did it, and got better fast. So that was for about 6 to 8 months.

**Mary Wesley** I'm curious that you had this friend group and at least one person who was already a dance leader, but that you became the one who stepped into that role out of the group. Did you feel a pull to it or was it just kind of by default that you had you would collect these dances and you seemed like someone who could do it? And what kept you doing it?

**Will Mentor** Well, you know, um, I think I do...when I get interested in something, I want to know everything about it. And one of the things to know about it is how to call it and how to teach it. It was around then that my town didn't have a recycling center. This was back in the 90s, and it was in Fairfield, Iowa, a small town in Iowa. And it's not like I suggested to people that there should be...I *started* one. So I think it's that kind of...you know, and I got three or four people and we had a committee, but I was the person and I'd done it. I drove all over and I met with several people who had these recycling centers that we could bring our stuff. You know, I just organized the whole thing. And I think some of us are just drawn to do that.

So was it in me? Probably was it aided by the welcoming atmosphere that I found myself in? Yeah, it was. But once I start on something, I'm relentless. And you know, when you live in Fairfield, Iowa, just to go into town for us, it was eight miles round trip. No, it was eight miles each way. So I was in a car a lot and I had a cassette player and I put on Tony Parkes', I think it was like "Heating up..." something or other. It was a cassette that he called to and I just mimicked his calling and I counted out music, both old time and then with Yankee Ingenuity, and I counted and I counted... And you get good fast when you get obsessive. And that's who I am. I'm pretty obsessive about it.

## Meeting Ted

**Mary Wesley** How much were you aware of the larger scene? So, like, Ted Sannella's coming through, you got ahold of a Tony Parkes tape... Did you situate what you were doing in a larger picture at all?

**Will Mentor** Yeah, again, so the other person in that group was John Stimson. John Stimson grew up with a stepfather who was, I don't remember his name, but he would go to Pinewoods every summer and his stepfather led, I want to say he led morris dancing? And he was a name: Bob something or other, I can't remember. John was also in a performance dance group and so John could flatfoot. He could clog, he could do English step dancing. He did English, Scottish, contra, squares. I mean, he was incredible.

So he was another big resource. And when I got to Winter in the Woods, which was that six day event with Don Armstrong and Ted Sannella that was in Kentucky, I actually asked Ted if I could call him from Iowa. And he said yes. And so the week after we all got back, I called him with a list of questions about calling. And so I got a lot of the bigger picture from Jennifer because she had been around a little bit, from John, and then I got a little bit of calling history from Ted, even as we were talking about just how to call, the mechanics of calling. And then I was going to New York, so then I started going to the contra dances and it started to build from there.

**Mary Wesley** Do you remember anything specific about that phone call with Ted?

**Will Mentor** Oh gosh...

**Mary Wesley** What a great opportunity.

**Will Mentor** Yeah, several things I remember very specifically. One was how precise he was with words. When I was at Winter in the Woods, he would walk and without...he

probably wouldn't do it now with all of our concerns about consent. But he'd just walk up to someone and swing them, like, vigorously. Big smile on his face. So what I remember was that was that. That underneath efficiency was fun. And so you know, I was talking to him about things like—because I was calling squares too—you know, the timing in contra dancing and that kind of agreement that dancers and callers have around contra dancing: right and left through is eight beats, even if you're early. The chain is 8 beats even if you're early, and you sort of...wait if you're early. And so the difference between that and square dancing... right? But things like that.

But the memory is that it's all *service*. Why you get good at language, why you learn about patter calling, and when not to patter, and all these things is that you're serving the dancers. That you are responsible for what gets heard and what gets heard has an influence on what happens on the floor. And what happens on the floor should be fun. So that's what I remember.

**Mary Wesley** What a gift.

**Will Mentor** Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** And did you stay connected with Ted?

**Will Mentor** Unfortunately, we had four or five hour long conversations, and then he told me that he wasn't feeling well. And then later that year, he died. So it's kind of one of those things where, you know, I'm still mostly in the Midwest and then he was in Maine. And I didn't know him that well, but we got to know each other in a weird version of intimacy, like caller talk. But I didn't know him as a person really. It was sad.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, great that you got what you got.

**Will Mentor** It was really amazing. Yeah. It informs my calling.

## A Memorable Gig

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. Okay, so you have this amazing, nurturing, sort of foundational community that you're learning in, and then your world is also opening up a little bit. You start dancing in New York.

**Will Mentor** Yeah, I'm dancing in New York...so I would have to find out, actually when Ted died to know the years that I'm talking about. But I think it was that summer that Laura and I and Madeleine went to Pinewoods Family Week. And Susan Kevra was one of the callers. And I really love her calling and oh my god, I mean, English, American [dance], musician, singer. I mean, and then also just a really brilliant person.

**Mary Wesley** Yes.

**Will Mentor** Oh, my god. And so I was, you know, it's camp and you're having a good time and I'm also co-parenting, you know, and so I spent as much time as I could sort of observing. And I remember her and I remember in the afternoon she had a square dance

session. Only eight of us came, so it was eight of us every afternoon. And that was...I learned so much about square dance calling, by dancing and listening to her call.

So then I got back and then I started to call in the Midwest and the very, very first time I ever called away from Fairfield was in Valparaiso, Indiana. And it was dramatic. It was in a horse barn outside of Valparaiso, Indiana and I was driving from Fairfield. No internet back then, no nothing. And I don't even, to be perfectly honest, I can't remember how I would even get weather. It's kind of funny sitting here with you right now, like, "How did I...?" But I knew, somehow I knew—maybe I called a couple of people—that it was going to be inclement weather that night. So I got there really early because it was like a 6 to 8 hour drive. It was a commitment. It was going to be a New Year's Eve and I was going, I went alone and I was told that there's a list and that when you get there, you put your name on the list of callers. And so there was this list of callers and my name was first because I got there so early because I was worried about the weather. And sure enough, you know, by the time 8:00 rolls around, it's been sleeting and it's not nice out. It's slick, it's slippery, it's really bad weather.

But we're all in this beautiful, great barn. There's tons of food, we know we're in it for the night, it wasn't going to go to 8 to 11. It was going to be more like "til we drop," is essentially what it was. So I'm first to call, but the guy who owned the bar and was a doctor, is a doctor, I don't even know if he's still around anymore, but he was going to call the first two, so I was second.

So the doctor gets up and just like the callers there's no "band band," there's bands and they get hour slots or something like that. And he's calling a very moderate, very smart choice it was a moderate tempo circle dance. Not hard, possibly a mixer, I can't remember. And a woman went down. And she was down for a long time. Now the doctor went over and a couple of nurses went over and we all went into the back room. She didn't live. Now she was alive when she left the hall, barely. But remember, it's very inclement weather. It's in the country outside Valparaiso. It took the ambulance 45 minutes to an hour just to get there. Now she was in good hands because, but...I think, so...I had never seen a person die. But I walked past her and she looked white as a sheet.

And a couple of the nurses, I knew, one of the nurses and she said, "I don't know. We did our best." So we're all in the back, there's probably 120 of us. And we're like, I think we're going to continue because she was a friend of a friend kind of thing. Like no one really knew her. I don't know what we would have done if it was someone that was really integral, but we just decided it's bad weather, we're here, we're going to continue. Okay. So the doctor walks up to me, goes, "Well, you're next."

**Mary Wesley** Oh, my gosh.

**Will Mentor** And and I looked I said, "Oh, I thought you were going to do two." He goes, "Nah, I don't want to do the second one." So I'm walking up to the microphone and a friend came up from Fairfield who came in a different car and whispered in my ear, "Do you want a suggestion?" And I said, "Sure." And she said, "When you get up to the mic to take hands four...I mean, I knew that, of course...but maybe say something like, "Hug your neighbor, hug your partner." And and I said that and it was received really well and it kind of changed the mood a little bit. And so that was my first dance that I called not in Fairfield. Isn't that funny?

**Mary Wesley** Oh, my gosh. Unbelievable. Of all the things to sort of anticipate...that would not be on my list.

**Will Mentor** Yeah. Yeah. And it was a really fun night. I remember I had written a dance, and Al Olson was there, who was...Al Olson wrote a million contra dances. And he was contemporary with Ted Sannella and a bunch of you might be listening to this podcast will know who he is, who was. And I met him and then got into a 30-minute conversation with him because he's just, he's so obsessive and wonderful. And it was a really interesting night to say the least, and I enjoyed it, other than the obvious.

It was kind of interesting to go from not only like, knowing everybody, but being pretty close friends with everybody, to not knowing anyone. And having the language be really similar and having the whole point of the gathering being about fun, and to live music and dancing and eating and, you know, the whole thing was just great.

## Going Farther Afield

So yeah, and then I started to...Fairfield, Iowa was a four hour drive to St. Louis. I'm guessing it was a six hour drive to Valparaiso. I think was about a four hour drive to Champaign-Urbana, and about a five hour drive to Chicago. So it was kind of equidistant and I started calling in those...I think I met people at Valparaiso and they said, "Oh, you should contact so and so." And what I was being told without being told was, you should contact so-and-so is, we think you're a good enough caller that you might want to try these other places. And I did. And I started going around to these different dances and it was a blast. It was all up-tempo old time. Everyone.

**Mary Wesley** Right, that's what you've got in that part of the country.

**Will Mentor** Yeah, I remember one night, so it was like couple of years later and I was at Breaking up Thanksgiving. I can't remember, I think the Chirps Smith have been in the first band and the first dance I was dancing with someone who I won't name because I don't think she would appreciate it, but she was from another place that had mostly New England style music. And I asked her to dance and she said yes so we lined up...walk through, and then pedal-to-the metal old time. And her eyes got really wide halfway through the dance. And she said, "Is it going to be like this all weekend?" And I'm like, "I think they're warming up."

**Mary Wesley** Oh, my gosh.

**Will Mentor** And that's what I was used to.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. Did you...so at what point did you recall..you started out talking about these moments of sort of being captivated by banjo music. Did you have a full circle moment at some point, you know, that you recalled those earlier moments? Like you didn't know that that was going to become something that was so present in your life?

**Will Mentor** I did remember the banjo contest when I was in Valparaiso. I might have remembered it. The old time band in Fairfield was, they were a good band. The other band that I called with was Tim Britton on the uilleann pipes. And that was...he would lift

everybody off the floor, in a good way. We had Yankee Ingenuity and Tony Parks come out for our dance weekend, and I had asked Tony, like, let's give Yankee Ingenuity a break, and maybe you'll call a session in the afternoon with this guy named Tim Britton, who plays the uilleann pipes. And I think Tony said, "Well, I'll try it." And I'll never forget this: and at the end of that session, Tony came up to me and he said, "Tim Britton, any time, any place, sign me up." It's probably my language more than Tony's. But because we all knew how good he was and he was great for playing for dancing. And what I wasn't completely aware of until I was, was that I was getting trained in hearing two really different kinds of music. And so that was amazing to hear. But I counted I would drive to places and count.

One funny story: I met Sam Bartlett at some point, I can't remember when and where. And you know how Sam is so up. And he goes, "Oh, Will Mentor, the old time bands love you." And then he pauses and he goes, "They love you because you'll do squares to crooked tunes." And I sort of paused and said, "Sam?" "What?" he goes, "What's a crooked tune?" And so sometimes naivete can be a great thing. I didn't even know what I was doing in that regard. But I knew that I was calling, like I don't remember them ever playing a crooked tune for early Western or a New England square, but for the Appalachian stuff, Southern stuff, they would do that. So much to learn so quickly, right?

But I think it did come full circle to that. And I remember the barn dance. But you know, Mary, what the real full circle is, is that we're drawn to this because we find pleasure in it. And there's no rhyme or reason why I was mesmerized by that banjo contest. It just was. No one, I didn't grow up in the tradition. I didn't grow up around musicians. I didn't grow up around anyone who played the banjo. Isn't that wild?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Will Mentor** You can just, out of the blue, you're mesmerized.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. A moment where you just, you forget yourself.

**Will Mentor** You know what's a real full circle moment? I might get a little emotional here. Um, is. Pete.

**Mary Wesley** Oh, yeah. Pete Sutherland, our dear...

**Will Mentor** You know, I...the second "quiet contra" that I called, which is: I asked the dancers not to make any noise—it was Pete, solo on the banjo. And I remember I was in Toronto. And this is, I don't know, time is so hard. Let's say it was five years ago, six years ago. And I asked the Posse, you know, "Would you be upset if Pete played solo banjo for this one contra dance?" And they said no. So I talked to Pete about it. And so if people don't know it's something that I've done like four or five times where I ask the dancers not to make any sound verbally. And so all we hear is the shuffle of feet, and the rustle of clothes, and quiet music.

And so I asked Pete, I was in Toronto at a dance weekend and I asked Pete, would you do this. And he said, Sure. And he played the banjo, it was really quiet. It was really quiet, quiet banjo. And that was a full circle moment. Because back, way back as a high school kid not knowing anything, and now go all of those years, you know, it's probably like, well, it's...75 is 25 plus another 15 is like, 40 years later. I'm with this preeminent musician kind of experimenting with the form, which is something we should get to. Yeah.

[ *Musical excerpt:* [Will calling the dance Mad Slice](#) by Rick Mohr at the Atlanta Contra Dance Weekend in 2017 with music by [Nova](#). ]

**Mary Wesley** So, I mean, it's so great to hear about your formative things, moments and stories, especially because you are such a big part of mine.

## Mary and Will

**Will Mentor** Oh, I remember that night?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, well, because you were kind of like, you were kind of like my...one of my Teds Sannellas. So you were someone that I just went up to when I was just first kind of figuring it all out and curious and you just said, "Well, why don't you just come call a contra dance? I'm calling in Montpelier, come call one." And as you know, it didn't go great, to start...

**Will Mentor** It was totally all my fault.

**Mary Wesley** You always say that, which is very kind.

**Will Mentor** Yeah, well no, it was an old...so for those folks who are listening to this, I'm calling a contra dance in Montpelier with an old time band and I had called with a lot of old time, and I think I was just taking that for granted. And so, had you ever called a dance before?

**Mary Wesley** That was the first time I had called with real...yeah, that was the first time I called with real dancers. I had just been learning. I had been listening to some recordings. I had been calling, practicing, calling to recording.

**Will Mentor** Yeah. And so I, you know, Montpelier is a perfect place for you. I mean, you're a Vermonter and it's friendly, and so Mary wants to call a dance, so she gets up there. And what I should have done is said to the band, because again, sometimes, especially at that particular old time band wasn't always so clearly phrased. I just should have said, pick something like, you know, Arkansas Traveler and phrase the heck out of it. Well, they were playing a tune with barely any phrasing at all, and it was just rolling, rolling, rolling. And I was dancing, and Mary was...you were doing your best. And it was slowly kind of getting away. And that's why it was on me. Because I think you would have, it would have been perfect with a well phrased tune. Come on.

**Mary Wesley** And four potatoes.

**Will Mentor** Yeah. They didn't even do that...

**Mary Wesley** They just took off. Yeah, I'm pretty sure that the Montpelier Contra dance changed their guest calling policy after that.

**Will Mentor** I don't know about that. But what I do remember saying was, I said to Pete, that Mary Wesley went up there and it was pretty clear to me that she could call. I should

have set up the music better. She did it. It got away, you know, the music and the calling started to separate. The dance ended. She walked off like nothing had happened. And I thought, "Oh, she's going to be an awesome caller."

Because you had presence. And, you know, I've always...I think I've said this to you before, I've always thought of you as an old soul. And that was old soul behavior, which was like, what I call it is in the immediate moment, you have a long view. So I'm sure that there was some feeling inside you, but you also always carry that long view with you. And I thought, "Oh, she's awesome."

**Mary Wesley** Well, you know, I think it also helped having you there on the floor, knowing you were there and also calling in a community where I was known, where I knew people. There was that support, the crowd cheered when I walked away. So yeah.

**Will Mentor** But then the next dance, you called, I'm sure it was perfect.

**Mary Wesley** I think the next one I called was in the Monkton, Vermont Volunteer Fire Department with Pete Sutherland and at the time, Karen Billings, now Rose Diamond playing. Yeah, it was...

**Will Mentor** It was, just your phrasing was there and it was all perfect. But I think back to it, you know, it's a little bit like extracting one of those little lessons. And like, if you're going to invite someone to come to the stage, talk to the band, you know what I mean? Like, actually, so you know, I remember inviting...I was out in the Midwest and I was with Dugan Murphy, and Dugan's a really good caller. And I heard him call a little bit in the Midwest. I was living on the East Coast but I was doing a weekend out there. We were hanging out and he was mentioning to me that he might move to the East Coast. I said, "Well, you should, you know, if you need anything, call me and I mean it. I'm not just saying that. So he called me and I just said, "Great, I will be calling in Concord, on a Monday night in Concord, and I'll ask if you can come and call two, because as soon as people hear you call they're going to want to invite you because you're so good."

And that night, I can't remember who was playing, it was not Yankee Ingenuity, but I just said, "He's a really good caller, but let's make the tune super phrased." Because of that time with you. And so that's the great thing about this, is that there's space in folk to make mistakes and to get better. It's not like thousands of dollars are on the line and people are just going to go, you know, just get all upset about it. And I think it's part of it. I think that, you know, it's trying it out, participating. That's what we do.

**Mary Wesley** Absolutely. And these people who end up being, you know, a phone call away. It's really so accessible.

**Will Mentor** That's a really good point that Ted was not only "The Dean of Callers," but you know, he was in this whole other stratosphere and he was a call away.

## A Travelling Caller

**Mary Wesley** Well, we've kind of started at that at the beginning. So maybe now let's come at it from the other end. So, right now when I think of you, I really think of you as a

traveling caller, you know, in a really big way. And especially in this moment coming out of pandemic time as we are slowly, slowly doing that, I've seen you on the road a lot. So what's that like for you and how did you get there?

**Will Mentor** Yeah, I mean...that all began somewhere around 2010 where the allure of calling weekends and starting to see myself as a person that might want to travel to do it like, seriously travel. That I, you know, I had a daughter and I was traveling to be with Wendy and Alice, who's my partner and daughter in Cambridge, and I was teaching in Vermont. And I was busy, you know, it's like teach up here, and then go down there, and making art and calling were the big four. And I kind of decided that I wanted to give one up and I wasn't going to give up my family. So I gave up art. The allure of it, the pleasure of it was ebbing and calling was getting ever more interesting to me. So I remember quitting painting. I just quit. So all that energy that I had towards painting went into thinking about calling and coming up with programming and all that kind of stuff. And I let everybody know that I was kind of interested in doing weekends, and to be perfectly honest, I don't...2010 I just, it's a number I just pulled out of a hat. I have no idea about. If you said "No, it was 2008 or it was 2006" or...whatever. I don't remember.

**Mary Wesley** Early 2000s let's say.

**Will Mentor** At some point, at some point, you know, I had been to some dance weekends and that was also something that was growing. And, you know, you and I could talk about the effects of dance weekends on local dances and, you know, there's a whole other conversation to have. Anyway, I just put all this energy into having the repertoire to do it. And, you know, years later, I was teaching calling at Camp Cavell. It was a weeklong session and we had a meal where we talked about calling weekends. And the first thing I brought up was, you know, I was teaching the course. So I kind of started it off by saying, "Well, there's repertoire and there's this and that, but can you get time off from work? Do you hate flying? Do you operate well, tired? There's other things to calling weekends, and then eventually weeks, that you don't quite think about. And are you comfortable sleeping in someone else's house, you know, all sorts of things that you may not think about until you do it. But I guess, you know, if I think about it, maybe it's just in me. You know, like, just after a little while of English dancing, I was calling. And just a week after getting introduced to contra and squares, I was calling them. And so it was just kind of the next step to do that. And to, not just choreograph an evening but to choreograph a weekend. And I really am attracted to choreography, you know, figures and designs and geometries with people and weekends really allow you to do a whole range of dances that you can't normally do at a regular dance. So I think that was part of it.

Now with Covid like, there's people who have all sorts of opinions about masks and vaccinations and stuff. And I just don't have strong opinions about all this. I tend to be somewhat of an anarchist about it. And if a group wants to use gents and ladies and no masks somewhere, I don't feel the need to say anything about it on Facebook. And if people think that the only way you should dance is through all these, the proof of vaccination and then masking I don't have much to say about it. I just want to call. And so there have been some gigs that I haven't done because of Covid. There's been...plenty of gigs were canceled, but there were some gigs that were going to happen that I decided I didn't feel like I felt...I didn't feel ready for a while to call. And so it's, I'm kind of...I don't mean I might be sounding evasive, I'm just all mixed about it.

**Mary Wesley** Mhm.

**Will Mentor** You know, and what pains me is some of the ways that social media frames discussions around what we're doing, you know, with either masking or not, or larks and robins, versus gents and ladies, versus positional and all this stuff. So being a caller now, it's like, "may you live in interesting times."

**Mary Wesley** Yes. Where is that quote from again?

**Will Mentor** I can't remember. Probably something from Dickens. I mean, I'm so bad at...

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. It's so...it is bestowed upon us. We are doing it.

**Will Mentor** Yeah, and I find it fascinating, and I find it...I'm making my way through it. And I don't have any answers. I really don't. One of the things that I do take, if I take any pride at all, it's that I'm flexible and I do go into all these somewhat new situations...they're not completely new to me anymore because I've done weekends for so long now that I go out to California, I know a lot of the people; I've called in the halls. But especially when I was brand new, it's not up to me to tell you what your community should want in terms of role terms and then your mask policy. I mean, there's that whole thing with epidemiology and Covid concentration rates and masking. I'm a little dizzy with it all. I mask a lot, and I teach at a school in which I'm the only person in my building that's masking right now. But I take my mask off as a caller...I don't know, I'm all over the place. Yeah, it's hard to navigate it.

## Dance Leadership

**Mary Wesley** It's very hard. There's so many factors to weigh and, you know, this is on top of just some of the regular decisions and sort of cultural things that various dance communities put in place or choose to uphold. And I mean, it all kind of gets to this question of what is the role as a caller? What is your role as a caller?

**Will Mentor** Right.

**Mary Wesley** And especially a traveling caller who's kind of stepping into all these different communities that you...you're both part of and also not part of. I mean I feel like these days there's this larger identity of "the dance community," you know, this unity we feel from all loving the same thing. But then there is so much variety and you must see a lot of it as you're going back and forth. And so it sounds like it's a constant renegotiation of, sort of your personal line and then also trying to tune into the landscape of wherever you are at the moment.

**Will Mentor** Yeah. I think one thing that just popped in my head while you were talking is, where are you serving the dancers and where are you "a dance leader." And I...going back to when we were talking earlier, I do my dance "leadership," if you will—encouraging good behavior, stuff like that—I do it through humor. So, like, for example I'll go down on the floor and do a demo and, you know, in a perfect world, I choose different kinds of people for the demo. To sort of quietly signal diversity without telling the dancers that they should embrace diversity. Or I'll just, you know, the other night we had so many new dancers, and I was simply showing what a pull by was, and a big smile on my face. And I go something to the effect of, "Well, you all know that 'Yank' is the bad word and 'Tug' is the good word," right? And so that's dance leadership, but it's couched in up energy. And that...the whole

point of that suggestion is pleasure. It all goes back to pleasure. To connection. So I was also like, you know, dance leadership is finding that moment in an evening, and I was at a dance where there was like, 70% new dancers. And so I jumped down at a certain point to remind people how to do a ballroom swing or whatever you call that. And you know, I just talked about, again—this was a larks and robins dance—so the lark's right hand just kind of tug the back instead of yanked it. But there was a kind of a little bit of a tug. And then we did a little funny thing, but then I just stopped and said, "The reason we want connection isn't some abstract idea. It's that beautiful balance, of I may not know you, but in this weird way we're connected. And if you kind of tug a little bit rather than yank, you feel that connection and it feels good." It all goes back to pleasure.

The thing that I love about the times that we're in is consent. And I think that consent is genderless and it's all about people treating people well, but also just this habit now where it's like technique. Like, "Which side do you want to dance on? Do you twirl," you know? Do you like this.... I love that. I love that communication that's in our present dance. And, you know the tension around role terms, it's a challenge to solve. It's like, it's a really interesting time when I think there's a bunch of people who didn't feel like they had much of a voice, feel like they have more of a voice.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. I always think of the introduction to David Kaynor's little *Calling for Beginners by Beginners* booklet, which is sort of one of my foundational texts. And his first little introductory essay is just really about the importance of debate for the health and success of our society and world. And then sort of connecting that to our dance communities as a space for safe and healthy debate.

**Will Mentor** Yeah. And I think you know, in days of yore, the idiosyncratic nature of local dances didn't talk to other people a lot because there was no internet. And now there's a new "local," if you will, and it's Facebook or Instagram or whatever, you know, social media platform people are using. And so people are in each other's business more. So it's a little bumpy and I think we're in a period—it all seems so much to us sometimes—but I think looking back on it, in the future, when we look back on it, we'll say, "Oh, we were just figuring out how to do it." That's essentially what we're doing.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. And we still are.

**Will Mentor** We are totally...no, we're...this is baby steps.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Will Mentor** Yeah.

[ *Musical excerpt* - [Will calling the dance Gypsy Everyone](#) by Seth Tepher at Contrastock 2 in Glen Echo, MD in 2012 with music by Perpetual e-Motion. ]

## Choreography

**Mary Wesley** So talk to me a little bit about choreography. You mentioned being drawn to patterns and, I think you said geometry. I have to say I'm in your art studio, and I'm surrounded by some patterns and geometry. So I'm curious how that interest plays out for

you as a dancer and caller? And does it connect to your painting or the rest of your creative life...I just sort of asked two different questions. So you can pick one to start.

**Will Mentor** I think in terms of, you know, I write dances. And simply put: dance both roles; Does it feel good in your body to dance? It again goes back to pleasure.

**Mary Wesley** This is when you're writing...

**Will Mentor** Well, yeah, I write it and then I walk it out and then you test it.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. Does it feel good?

**Will Mentor** Does it feel good? It's like, kind of that simple. And I'm fascinated by evolving a form. Like, being a visual artist, one of the dramatic demands of artists, and this is the way I've been an artist is, are you responding to the times you live in? And you know, choreography and contra dancing is like getting water out of stone. Like you don't, there's not that much you can do. But there's these little things that you can do. And I'm always curious about, again, contra dancers who dance all the time. It's, what is...I don't remember the wedding thing. It's something old, something new, something blue, whatever it was. But to me, it's doing things that are super familiar, doing one or two things that are brand new, and then somewhere in between.

**Mary Wesley** And that's your sort of recipe for a satisfying dance program?

**Will Mentor** Yeah. Like I think like as a contra dance weekend caller, I always try to bring two or three new things. A new dance or two. I think what I don't do is to try impress...when I make a mistake in my life and when I make a mistake as a caller, it's...there's some energy in there that I was trying to impress somebody. And so for example: there's two or three figures, I've gotten two or three brand new figures from Michael Fuerst in the Midwest. He's written some really great dances. And what I'll do is I'll present some of these new figures or transitions surrounded by glossary moves, and so everybody gets it. You know, I can do this, and this...and so it's just like, how much do you tax the mind versus not? And so, yeah, my recipe is a little bit like, dancers will remain interested if it's pleasurable for their bodies to move in space, if they get a little something new, and then they're reassured by something that they know.

One of the things about choreography...so let's talk about me teaching art. When you teach art, and I teach painting and drawing, there's nowhere to hide. There's no secret test that you take and then hand in. There's no paper that you write that nobody sees. When you're in a room there's just easels or drawing horses. Everybody sees what you're doing, always. It's exactly like social dance. When you go out onto the floor there's nowhere to hide. And one of the things that I'm fond of saying, I probably say it too much, but I'm fond of saying is, through the microphone or when I'm down doing a demo, "We've got a lot of new folks here tonight. I do not see people who can't dance. I only see people who are awesome, who are brave to do something new in public space."

And so, again, dance leadership, but kind of...that's almost like preacher version rather than comedian, you know, or humor? But that is absolutely fundamental: dancers, humans do not want to be embarrassed. And none of us, none of us are beyond, completely beyond being 15, right?

**Mary Wesley** Darn!

**Will Mentor** Right? I'm certainly not. And so all of my choices, are informed by that. And so I write choreography and some of the dances are challenging, but a lot of them aren't. Like, I write dances for problems that I need to solve. Like, I wanted a lark's chain or a gents chain dance that had revolving doors in it. And how could I do that so it was accessible? That's a little challenge because I had been to a bunch of dances, a bunch of weekends, I hadn't seen revolving doors in a long time. And I think that, you know, chaining from both sides is fun. So all of that goes into me thinking....I love pattern. I love, love, love it. And I love the idea that, you know, a star left 7/8<sup>ths</sup> is where you need to go but you never say that to the dancers, right? I love that tension between exact choreography and then translating it into, translating it as a caller to dancers. It's fascinating to me.

**Mary Wesley** Um hum. So how much time do you spend crafting language to enable that translation of, you know, describing physical movement with words?

## Deconstructing the authority of the caller

**Will Mentor** Sure. Let me couple that with deconstructing the authority of the caller. I'm going to couple the two. So before Covid, I was calling Epicenter and there was a dance that Seth wrote, Seth Tepher, I forget the name of it. It's like something-Pam...maybe it's for his wife or it's...so it's one and a half times through a tune. And I'd never called it. And at Balance the Bay I just said through the microphone, "You know, I've always been too insecure to call this." And I'm not like crying or anything. It's like, normal voice, you know, I'm like, up. I mean, me, you know, I'm and, you know, "And I'm really insecure and I'm going to call it now. And I'm really hoping that you could all help me." Right? And in a weird way I think of that as sort of dance leadership. It's like I'm modeling being a 15 year old. Like, I'm just a little insecure here right now.

I'm not falling apart. I'm not losing the room. You know, it's not one of those awkward moments where everybody's like, you know feeling...no, I'm not losing it, but I'm using language—but I'm also telling the truth. We all know as callers that sometimes we're just insecure to do something right? And so that's deconstructing the authority of the caller. And in a weird way, creating a new way to be an authority or to have confidence. It's the confidence to just, you know, like last...at Contra Carnival, just two or three weeks ago, I got up to call, I was calling the second session Saturday morning, I hadn't called yet. And I said, "Well, most of you know my calling, but some of you don't. I have learned so much from you to how to craft words. And I am all ears if you want to suggest what I should have said or I shouldn't have said."

So I just make what is oftentimes unspoken, I speak it out. I put it out in public space. It works for me. And so, you know, I just called in Florida, and I said, "I'm running this new dance out. I didn't write it. No, actually, I wrote it, but the core figure is written by Michael Fuerst and let's just think of this as a collective." Going back to when I first started.

**Mary Wesley** Iowa, yeah.

**Will Mentor** You know, let's just think of this as a collective where we all figure this out together and then everybody's in on it. It was 30 dancers, but everybody was in on it, and it was fun.

**Mary Wesley** Mm hmm.

**Will Mentor** I had worked the words out really carefully, but I'm totally up for them not being the best words.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. Yeah. It sounds like you're both managing your expectations and everyone else's expectations. You're kind of giving everyone a lot more agency.

**Will Mentor** Yes. And if I was really honest, because, you know, therapy all ends up being about the self, I'm making a safe place for myself to feel that way at the microphone.

**Mary Wesley** Which is also about trying to feel as good as possible, for yourself.

**Will Mentor** Yeah, exactly. Yeah, so choreography is what we do. It's essentially what dancers do. And was that fun? And by writing dances and dancing both roles to write them and, you know, just dancing, both roles anyway, it's really fascinating when one role isn't quite as much fun as the other, and that usually doesn't stay in a dance. It's a little bit like, so you talk about editing and, like, art, you know, like there's a painting behind you where I knew that it wasn't good enough. I sanded it down, and I knew that was going to be another three months. Right?

It's having that, forgive the pun, the willpower to get it right, you know, and if a dance is 95% good, but that 5% isn't... There's so many great contra dances, then I don't want to keep that dance. So, you know, I'm a worker, I'm a maker. I make things and I like to work. I'm not a chit chatter. And so for me, it's fascinating because I can be in my studio all alone, walk it all out, write it down, try to come up with the words, and then maybe get dancers to try it like a little private thing. But oftentimes now I'll just say over the mic, "I've never done this dance, are you up for something new?" And everybody cheers, and we do it as a group.

## Square Dance

**Mary Wesley** So do you mostly write contras? Do you write squares?

**Will Mentor** Hmm. Interesting. Um, I mostly write contras. I'm writing a bunch of squares...we're using the word problem a lot. Maybe we could shift, we could be new-agey and use the word "opportunity." But there's things that happen that I think, "Ooh, I need a dance for that." Now, have a gazillion dances, both contras and squares, been written? Absolutely. But I'll tell you, getting water out of that stone there are these moments. You know so for example, I love the traditional call, "lady round two and the gent drop through." You could do "robin round two and the lark drop through," if you want to change your language. You can also teach it super carefully and then hopefully the dances would remember and you could start doing "the active couple go around two and drop through." You could probably get away...I haven't done that yet. But here's an example. We all know that contra dancers like to be busy. So instead of ones to the twos and then ones to the

threes and ones to the fours in a square dance, I'm modifying southern squares to "heads go out to the right," right? "Circle to the left.?"

**Mary Wesley** So everybody's moving.

**Will Mentor** Everybody's moving. Circle to the left, star left, go the other way back. Now the heads go around two and drop through and then you have to configure something in between that, get them promenading and then the sides go out to the right. Why am I doing that? I think it will be pleasurable for contra dancers. And I love Southern squares and I love that figure. So it's trying to come up with something for that. One interesting note is that I have found that since Covid, and I say shouldn't say since Covid because we're still in Covid, but since we're back dancing, people don't mind standing around as much. And so I have done some traditional southern squares and there's like a roar from the group. Now I do one, you know, or two in an entire weekend, maybe. I know my audience, but, you know, I've been running triplets and I've been doing more squares. I think people are a little more open...So choreography, again, it's noticing from the mic what might be fun and what could be interesting and then going about writing it. But I haven't, I haven't figured figured out...there's like four or five squares that haven't quite got there yet, but yeah.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. And so you're trying to write squares that contra dancers will enjoy and I think of that, that's another you know, when I think of Will Mentor I think of, just passionate about squares. So how did that evolve? Did they always...were they always kind of high on the list for you?

**Will Mentor** If you go back to Ted's [Sannella's] books, the two books, they're half squares/half contra. And I was in a bubble in Iowa. No one knew us. I didn't know the world, so I just did 50% squares, 50% contras the very first night I called. And so remember I was telling you that when I first started calling it was every Wednesday night, it was crazy. It was, you know, it's like we had never eaten before. And so it was, I would do half squares...I'd do an hour squares an hour of contra. I'd mix it. You get good after a while, like you kind of know how to do it, and I love square dancing. I like doing it as much as calling it.

**Mary Wesley** And, I mean, you've put work into finding ways to grow interest and appreciation for square dancing.

**Will Mentor** Yeah. And you know, I've been part of, in addition to the contra dance, I'm a card carrying member in the old time world. Right? And so...

**Mary Wesley** And what does that look like for you? How are you in the old time world?

**Will Mentor** Sure, well as a square dance caller. And so, you know, I mean just a little bit as an organizer. If you remember it was a bunch of years ago that we had that square dance, I kind of just started one with Pete.

**Mary Wesley** Here, right here in Vermont.

**Will Mentor** In Winooski, it was in the Monkey Bar. And I encouraged all of the movers and shakers who are like 30 years younger than me to like...I remember I was down at this...um, I just know him as Joe Bass, it was Joe DeJarnette, at his house in Floyd, Virginia. And there was all these young folks and I just said, "If you want me to come down

here and teach you how to call this stuff, I'll do it for nothing. I don't need to get paid." And then Anna Roberts-Gevalt was in the room and the next year she had a Dare to be Square at Riner, Virginia and the entire weekend was how to call square dances. People were teaching, Michael Ismerio, and I did a little teaching, and Phil Jamison did some teaching. And there's been a lot of Dare to be Squares where it's like all day you're learning how to call squares. It's great. And I taught at those a lot. And right now as we speak, Becky Hill, an amazing old time...she's a great square dance caller, but also an incredible flat footer and clogger; we're creating...she's spearheading a zine and at the moment it's probably not completely accurate, but suffice it to say that at the moment, let's just call it a "gender-free square dance zine."

**Mary Wesley** Wow. And is it going to be...is it a single single zine?

**Will Mentor** A single zine, Yeah right now. She got a grant and a bunch of us are going to contribute to it. So that's how I'm involved. And so partly as an organizer but mostly as a square dance enthusiast. It's great because you can do an entire night, easy with people right off the street, and you can get them dancing within two minutes and you don't even, you don't really need role terms.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, you can just get right to it.

**Will Mentor** A lot of that stuff it's just ones and twos and corners and partners. You know, ones, twos, threes, and fours or heads and sides.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, you're describing sort of coming from this time when it was just a dance. It would be maybe 50/50 contras and squares. You could go to a contra dance and of course there would be squares or maybe it would be called a square dance and there would be contras there. And, you know, especially in the contra dance scene, sort of the modern contra dance scene, there's really this dichotomy that's emerged. And some people who are sort of native to to them being more interchangeable and sort of, mutually appreciated, like really experience that shift as a wound or like it's very sad. And you, I see you as taking a really active role to just find a way through that. But is it...do you have emotions that come up around it?

**Will Mentor** I don't. I was too late for that.

**Mary Wesley** What do you mean?

**Will Mentor** I think that when contra dances just typically always had squares and like, you know, there was Tony and Phil Jamison and Kathy Anderson and Lisa Greenleaf...They were all calling a lot earlier than me.

**Mary Wesley** Got it.

## Engaging with Tradition

**Will Mentor** I just cruised in in the mid-nineties and I have no...hmm, this is going to get me in trouble. But I don't have a big allegiance to tradition. I mean, I kind of do. I kind of do and I know it, and I've made it my business, you know? I mean, I called up Ted Sannella

every week, you know? And I've talked to Tony Parkes, and I'm very interested in tradition. But I want that night in front of me to be fun for those people. And I'm also an artist, you know, and I was in the New York art world, and that was like, you know, you're kind of like...kill the Buddha. You know, to move on. And so I'm not precious. And, you know, Larry Edelman said something that I found really helpful. I was at a square dance caller's workshop with him in the nineties, and he said, "Mix up the traditions, just know what you're mixing up." That's me.

So, for example, my latest signature square dance I do all the time is Uptown, Downtown," one of the simplest of all simples. But now, and it's proven to be welcomed and it's working in the contra dance milieus that I find myself in: I just put a really simple, simple, simple allemand-thar early western break on it and everybody's happy. So no, I have to say that I feel unburdened. But I'm going to repeat that: know what you're mixing. Because I am an historian also, like during Covid...I have so many of these PowerPoints that I've been looking into the history of the banjo. I have this whole thing on fine art and social dance, have all these paintings, you know, all these PowerPoints. I'm fascinated by all of that. But my job in 2023 on any given night is to make that night fun. And I do it by sometimes deconstructing the caller. It's like you know, I do things like I break some rules.

Like when I was calling in Paris and there was a language, you know, just a crazy language problem, and I didn't see it as a problem. I saw it as an opportunity. But what did I do? I did like almost the same dance, like five or six times in a row. I just built off the simple base. And it was a really successful night, you know? And I think that if you have 50% brand new dancers...and I was calling on New Year's day in Saratoga Springs and we were a stop on this thing where anybody could just come in off the street and dance. Repeating things was the right thing to do. Whereas if you're at a dance week or I'm calling in Greenfield, I don't repeat things. But if you circle left three-quarters, pass through, and do-si-do a new neighbor four times in a row to progress the dance, I think what happens is the experienced dancers realize, "Oh, wow like we're actually dancing," rather than "He's doing the progression different each time." And it's hard each time because it's new for these people who've never done it before, you know? But when I'm in another dance that's a real serious series and we get a lot of new folks, then I'm going to kind of mix it up and do a heavy teach because I'm preparing them for the next week. You see what I mean? Like, so there's no set rules for me other than that gig that I'm calling right now should be fun. This is a theme I'm hammering! You don't even know you have these themes until you do these interviews.

**Mary Wesley** Should be fun. Should feel good. Should be pleasurable.

## Working with the Band

**Will Mentor** Yeah. Including the band.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. How do you take care of the band?

**Will Mentor** Well, one of the things that I say when I teach calling is, "Don't piss off the band. Don't piss off the band. Don't piss off the band." When the band's not happy I just think...I don't think of myself as like, new-agey, but I have these new agey moments. And my new agey moment is when the band's not happy the energy in the room is probably not

as good. Do I know that? No. Do I think it? Yes. So I try to check in with bands. And you know...they're probably not going to listen to this podcast, but if they do, they know who I'm talking about. There's one band that got upset with me because I would suggest music to them.

**Mary Wesley** Oh, like specific tunes?

**Will Mentor** And so many bands want me to talk about the music. And this particular musician said, "You know about the dances, we know the music. Just tell us about the dances." I actually found that to be super helpful. But other bands are like, "Well, what should we play?" Anyway, um, and so for that band, I'll just tell them about the dance. You know, I do my best to remember. But I think it's little things. And, you know this as a caller. It's like, if you do a no-walk through, then maybe you don't want to do two in a row, or three in a row because then their fingers get really tired and it sucks for them. You know, checking in with them...right? So that kind of stuff.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Will Mentor** But also just, you know, and you know this I mean, callers and bands, oh, my gosh...we could do a whole thing. Some bands just think I'm the cat's meow because after, like, the first three or four, I just say, "Well, what do you feel like playing?" But then there's been some musicians who were like, "Aren't you in control!?" What do you mean us?" Like, you know what I mean? And then they start to worry that I'm some sort of, like, flip floppy or something.

**Mary Wesley** Who's driving this?

**Will Mentor** Who's driving this bus?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Will Mentor** But it has to be fun for them. I think one of the themes, if I was going to sort of look back at myself as a caller: just say it to the dancers. Just say it to the band. Just say it to the organizer if you're feeling insecure or you have a question or you know...and you know, one of the things that I...one word that goes a long way is "consider." Like, would you "consider" doing this? It gives everybody an out.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Will Mentor** Being a caller is a little bit like being a diplomat.

[ *Musical Excerpt* - [Will calling the square dance Willis's Route](#) at the Looking Glass Festival in Lansing, MI in 2017 with music by Pete's Posse. ]

## Closing

**Mary Wesley** So I have three questions that I usually close with. One of the things I find so interesting about callers is we are often sort of keepers of dance history, of dance notation and choreography. And so I am interested in tracking how different colors tend to

their collections of dances. So how, how do you keep or categorize or organize your dances?

**Will Mentor** I use Microsoft Word.

**Mary Wesley** Do they sponsor you?

**Will Mentor** No. No, I'm no, um, what's the word? What's Excel? What are those things?

**Mary Wesley** Spreadsheets.

**Will Mentor** I'm not a spreadsheet person. I'm not that. I saw Tony Parkes sitting in Fairfield, Iowa, during that weekend we had him. Sitting with beautiful posture with a yellow legal pad, writing out his program. And I asked him later and he said it was a way for him to prepare, you know, just the act of writing. And I love that. I'm not that person, but I really loved it. No, I have everything on a Macbook Air, and I travel. All of my dances are backed up about four times. I've even gone to the extent of like, I have two solid state hard drives, you know, that kind of stuff. And I update it a lot. I'm not lazy about backing it up. And what's great about the computer is that I can be in a really dark space and it lights up, so I can always see my cards. You know what I've found out, since I've been calling a huge amount...often I don't even think about it, but I'm not even looking at the computer when I'm calling. It's just by the wayside. But it's so great. It's so great as a tool. And everything's alphabetical to me.

**Mary Wesley** So when you're making a program, you're just thinking of dance titles?

**Will Mentor** Okay, it's interesting. No, I mean that would have been a perfect...that's a perfect follow up. It's not just alphabetized. Thank you for asking that. So I have this single Word document; it's like 25-26 pages long, and it's organized in categories that you would understand, but also some idiosyncratic categories. For example, one category is "Balances in the A," one's "Balances in the B." And what it is, is do you remember Zesty Contras? How it was notated? It was like almost a really...

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, Larry Jennings had this really particular shorthand.

**Will Mentor** And I have a similar initialization of all the figures. And so this 25-26 page Word document, that's ever growing, is 8-point font in Times New Roman and it's like, one dance could maybe be in like five or six different categories, but it's...imagine that. 25 or 26 pages with 8-point font. And so for example, 'Balances in the A', or it could just say "Mad Robin." I have a "right-hand chain," "left-hand chain" and stuff like that, and then things like "Latest Dances." And that's at the top. But wherever the category is, they're alphabetized. And so instead of flipping through a book, sometimes I just flick my fingers. And that document is flying by because I know I want to get down to "Weave the Line" and it's way the heck down there. And then in folders I have a Microsoft Word document for each dance, just like a dance card. And I do that for contra, squares, triplets, family dance. So I have those folders. So the folder says "Dance." And when I update in February, it'll say "February '23." Open up the folder and then there's folders. One's contra dance, one square, one's triplets, one's...you know. And then there's just a bunch of things like bio or photos, stuff like that.

**Mary Wesley** And then, so that sort of master list is like an index.

**Will Mentor** That I can quickly go to and when I make mistakes in walkthroughs, it's often with dances that I've written and I don't bother to go to the card. And the reason is, when I write dances I will do variations and sometimes it's a beckett left but maybe do this, and over here it's a beckett right. And sometimes I conflate the two in my head and you know, the dancers look at me like, "This didn't work." So it takes a little discipline to go from the index to the actual page. And sometimes I'm better at it and other times I'm not. But it's almost always my own dances that I write that I screw up the walkthrough.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, there's something poetic about that.

**Will Mentor** It's poetic, but it's also I mean, I have four variations in my head and I'm mixing them up.

**Mary Wesley** Do you have any pre or post gig rituals, things that you do before or after a gig?

**Will Mentor** Oh, should I be honest?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah!

**Will Mentor** Almost every gig. Almost every gig. I say to myself, "Why did I book this?"

**Mary Wesley** Me too.

**Will Mentor** What am I doing in the car right now? Why am I on this airplane? And, I used to think...it's making up for being nervous. It's not really making up for being nervous anymore. It's just, you have to get up and out into the world and specialty with Covid and we got kind of used to being cozy in our house. Um, and then I get to the hall and, I mean I'm not like, raging or anything, but I'm kind of kvetching, you know? It's kind of mild. But people who know me just laugh. They don't roll their eyes even it's because it's gentle. But I'm like, "Oh my god, I'm just..." And then the joke is, "Who books my schedule? I've got to get rid of my booker." Wait a minute, it's me. Um, but then I get there and it warms up, and then the music starts and the first dance happens, and I'm thrilled. I really mean this. After about 5 minutes, I can't remember a gig that I just didn't like. Because every gig has its own personality and its own set of choices that one needs to make. Yeah, I love that.

Post dance I used to—I'm off dairy now because it I just get too congested from it—I used to love chocolate milk after the gig. A lot of gigs it would be pretty awesome to have, again not just have cheese, but, like, cheeseless nachos. You know, and a beer. I'm good with that. A burger, like, something kind of substantial. Like, the idea of grapes or a salad after calling, it's not the thing.

**Mary Wesley** No.

**Will Mentor** It's kind of like, "woof" food.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, You expend some energy up there!

**Will Mentor** Yeah, yeah.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. I'm very familiar with that pre-gig sequence. Very similar to my own. And, thankfully, there's just the repetition of having so many experiences in the past where

I was like, no I remember when I got on stage and it was all okay and so, that will probably happen again.

**Will Mentor** Exactly.

**Mary Wesley** Last question: Are you an introvert or an extrovert? If, you know.

**Will Mentor** I guess I'm both. Is it an ambivert?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. This is a thing. Definitely.

**Will Mentor** I mean, I don't know how to answer that because I'm clearly extroverted in public. But if you know anything about Ayurveda, I'm vata. And vatas get stirred up by music, get stirred up by conversation, get stirred up by driving the car at 65 miles an hour. And so I think it gets exacerbated a little bit because people are talking and there's music and bop, bop bop. And the wind, veda very windy and sometimes I just get...occasionally I get too amped up and I, you know there's that voice in your head like, "You know, maybe dial it back." Um, I don't know. I'm alone a huge amount and I'm very happy to be alone, because I'm an artist and I work alone a lot. And, you know when Covid hit, I was kind of happy to be in my house alone. With all the caveats of how bad Covid was, it was kind of good for me. So I guess, I don't know if that answers your question, but I'm definitely...I know a lot of introverts on stage. I don't think I'm one of them. I get super embarrassed occasionally by what I say over the microphone, like, "Oh my god." Like something will come out of my mouth and I'm like, "Oh my god." And I've learned to not dwell on it.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, I think I ask that question because, you know, being a caller is such a particular way of being with people. And so I'm curious about individual people's sort of, propensities around being with with a group, and introvert/extrovert is sort of one set of categories that are out there in the world. It's cool to think about Ayurveda, which is like an Indian...

**Will Mentor** Yeah. It's a health system. It's like vata/pitta/kapha. Pittas are the firey, and kapha is like slower, and vata is like me, it's kind of airy and quick.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, Yeah.

**Will Mentor** And in an ideal world, we're like completely balanced between all three, but it doesn't often happen.

**Mary Wesley** Right. We're often moving between one or the other, which I think is now more how people, how "introvert" and "extrovert" are kind of more understood as like a spectrum now, I think too.

**Will Mentor** Yeah. And like, you know, just think of the difference in delivery between Lisa Greenleaf, Cis Hinkle, George Marshall, and me all of the same age. Right?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Will Mentor** I mean, you know, that's...to me when I was teaching calling and someone said, one of the students said like mid-week: "Another caller said we should adopt a personality." And I was taken aback by this because, you know, I think people associate me with my orange glasses. But I never thought about it. They had nothing to do with my

calling. And so I said, "Can I get back to you?" And by Friday, I just said, "I think a caller's personality should grow out of the person, as you do it." And one of the things that I realize is that as I've done this more, even if I haven't "prepared," I'm already prepared I know this material. I've done it so much now that it lends itself to a kind of ease at the microphone. I don't really get...I get like, manageable, nervous. Like, I was saying earlier, I could just say over the microphone, "I'm a little nervous now, because I've never called this..." but that's not like nervousness owning you. There's a difference. So yeah, but then the other part of it is, boy some callers are quieter and it's lovely. Some callers are noisy and it's great. And some callers can lift a room, other callers, like keep the room kind of quiet. But, you know one of the things that I tell my art students is it's not about good or bad it's about choices. If you choose blue, you're going to invite this kind of experience. If you choose yellow, you're going to invite this kind of experience. And I think me as a dancer for example, when other callers are calling, I just want to experience their thing. I don't want...it doesn't need to be my way.

**Mary Wesley** Thank you so much.

**Will Mentor** Thank you.

**Mary Wesley** It's been great to talk with you.

A big thanks to Sue for talking with me. Check out the show notes at [podcasts.cdss.org](http://podcasts.cdss.org) to learn more.

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Happy dancing!

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