

Transcript - From the Mic Episode 14 - Steve Zakon-Anderson

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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.

Steve Intro

Mary Wesley Hello From the Mic friends. I'm glad you're joining me to spend the next hour and a half listening to the soothing voice and genial humor of Steve Zakon-Anderson.

In 1980, Steve walked into his first contra dance not knowing how it would change his life! He started calling three years after that and has now danced, called, taught and organized contra dances for over 40 years. In that time he's traveled to dance events in 43 states, and a number of other countries.

Steve is appreciated by dancers for his skill at programming, for his clear and efficient teaching, and his sense of humor. He's also appreciated by dance bands for his considerate weaving of his calling with their music.

Steve began dancing and calling in New Hampshire and has been influenced by and influential to the New England dancing tradition. He's written over 30 contemporary contra dances, many of which are used by callers around the country. In our conversation he shares stories about the people and places that have shaped him as a caller and as a person, as well as some pretty deep thoughts about what this calling thing is all about. Here's Steve:

Mary Wesley Steve Zakon-Anderson, Hello!

Steve ZA Hi Mary!

Welcome! I'm so glad to have you here on From the Mic.

Steve ZA I'm so glad to be here.

Mary Wesley Where are you calling in from today?

Steve ZA So I'm in Hancock, New Hampshire, where we moved back to two years ago after being in...we left New Hampshire 2004 and just came back.

Mary Wesley Wow. A homecoming of sorts.

Steve ZA Yeah. No, back to the house we left, actually. And I worked this morning, and then I went out and fed the black flies and picked a few ticks off. And now I'm hopefully ready.

Mary Wesley Wow. Way to do your part or for nature. Well, it's so nice to see you and I'm excited to sit down and talk a little bit about calling. You know, we obviously have seen each other at dance events. You have attempted to email me to book things and had to resort to unusual measures to get a hold of me. Which I say, with chagrin and also deep appreciation. The battle of the inbox is real. But anyway, you know, when I sat down to get ready for this interview, I was like, you know, Steve is, for me, is someone I've danced to and participated in events that you've organized in Peterborough—Snow Balls and Play Balls and things. We've seen each other at the Ralph Page Dance Legacy weekend. But I don't know that I've ever really had the caller talk with you and gotten the story. So I'm excited and yeah, I wonder if you want to just start out by giving us a little bit of your caller biography. How did you start dancing and then how did you start calling?

Steve ZA Great. Glad to. As you know, callers love to talk! Well, I have to take us back to right out of college, working for Nature's Classroom, which some folks know what that is, especially if you've had kids in elementary school. And at this program, we had a night we called "Hoedown," which I knew would make you laugh. A couple of people strummed guitars and we did the Virginia Reel and we did Duck for the Oysters and Heel and Toe Polka, I believe. So I had no idea what this was, and I wouldn't say we had a caller per se. It was, any staff member could just teach it. And fast forward a year later, I was teaching elementary school in rural New Hampshire, and I made a comment to a friend from Nature's Classroom that I wasn't really meeting people. I spent my day with third graders and I spent my evenings thinking about third graders, not in a bad way. And I was like, "I'm not meeting anyone." And she said, "Go to a contra dance. It's like Hoedown." So I walked into a dance in Frankestown, New Hampshire, and that was the beginning. Mary DesRosiers, a fellow caller, remembers my first dance. Remembers saying to her friend Jennifer, "He's kind of cute. Too bad he can't dance." So that was the beginning. But boy, like so many other stories of people who started contra, it just took off. Then I was going to Dublin and then I was going to Peterborough and then I was going to Nelson and then I was getting in cars and going to Greenfield. Well, then it was Northfield...and Boston. And so, that's how the dancing started and took off. Three years later, I was in Nelson and the two people who were calling somewhat regularly said, "We really need more people to call. You know, no one's hired and we're volunteers and we can't always make it. Would anyone like to do some calling?" And so I thought about it. A little addition in there is that I had seen the people on stage and thought, "They're having a really good time." Like, ooh I would like to do something like that. So my first attempt was taking fiddle lessons, which wasn't going very well, let's just say. I was taking lessons and the school where I was teaching, there was someone who came to give violin lessons. So she had me trying it and as my roommate used to say, when I practiced it, it was the sound of someone ironing a cat.

Mary Wesley Oh, that's so...

Steve ZA So ultimately, I'll mention that I eventually switched to the mandolin and actually had chops there for a while where I was playing on stage at Nelson with the mandolin. But this idea of calling intrigued me. I wasn't really sure where to go with it, but I thought, you know, "I could do that." I spent a summer at Farm and Wilderness Camp. I was in the string band with my mandolin actually, the old F&W String Band that many of your listeners will know. And on the last night, do you remember Dan O'Connell, the caller?

Mary Wesley I don't think so.

Steve ZA I don't know where he's gone. Dan was not the regular caller. I think it was Christy Keevil. But I just know the last night the regular caller had to go away. So Christy was gone and Dan took it on. But he said, "Does anyone want to call?" So I said, "I'd like to try it," you know, if not at F&W, where else could you take risks? So I got up and he handed me [the contra dance] Broken Sixpence on a piece of paper. And I, you know, I called it for 6 minutes or whatever. And the funny thing is that gave me the confidence to go back to Nelson and say, you know, "Oh yeah, I did some calling this summer." I just...somehow I had to start it somewhere else. And then Nelson's a great place to learn. You've got a built-in lab. I started calling there and everyone was very willing to give feedback, and grew from there. The only little detail about Nelson is one of the caller skills you don't get so much is actually teaching, because they knew all the dances! So I'm doing like Rory O'More and "Hey, I'm doing a great job!" And then I go to another gig and say, "Let's do Rory O'More." And they're like, "Teach it." I was like, "Oh yeah, it's hard. It's the hard dance to teach." So that was, yeah, in 1980, I started dancing. In 1983, I started calling.

The Nelson Dance

Mary Wesley Amazing. Can you kind of frame the Nelson dance a little bit more? It's such a centerpiece of dancing, especially in the New Hampshire contra dance scene. It was definitely, like a huge, I feel like Nelson is a clear like, point in my dance constellation as well, you know. And that would be, I don't know, like 2010 or 2011, you know. So Nelson in the 80s, can you fill in that picture a little bit?

Steve ZA Sure, well I will say this last summer I did a speech or a talk, I guess a talk at something called the Amos Fortune Forum here in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. And it's kind of intellectual stuff. You know, like Carl Bernstein was on the schedule this summer and, you know, people you've heard of and people doing education, you know, intellectual kind of stuff. But they asked me to talk about the history of contra dancing relative to the Monadnock region. So I got to do all sorts of research. And it was really interesting. Of course, Nelson was mentioned prominently and the fact that I would go to the West Coast and say, "I dance in Nelson" and people would say, "You dance in Nelson? That's where contra dancing survived and thrived in the old days." And I got to learn that, sure there was contra dancing and Nelson. There was contra dancing a lot of other places. It really....a lot of that myth, as you were, was perpetuated on purpose by characters like Ralph Page and Newt Tolman and people who were playing in the 30s and 40s. And somehow it just sprang from there that Nelson was the *only* place that kept contra dancing alive. So that was fascinating. But by the 80s, this Monday night dance, which actually started it was actually dancing in Harrisville, New Hampshire, when I went. And when that hall was lost, it moved to Nelson then. And what's great about it: anyone can play, anyone can call. I think to this day, it's still throw \$3 in a hat by the door.

In those days, it was a little famous because the hall was slanted. So no matter where you lined up, you all ended up bunched on one side. And Rich Blazej wrote a dance called "Dancing out of the Hole in Nelson," [Actual title: "Getting out of the Hole..."], which had a sashay one way and no sashay back. My understanding is they've renovated the hall and tried to improve that. But there still might be a little bit of a slant. So it's a...and the series takes pride, rain, shine, snow it just about never cancels. Some of those snowy nights we had the best damn time because we worked so hard to get here, we're going to have a good time! And for some people who call and play there, that's all they aspire to. They just

love being there. And yet other people have gotten their start there and had careers playing and calling elsewhere nationally. So it's really, it's been a great place for that. People can take a risk and again, no one's being paid. So you just say, "I want to try." It's a fun scene that's been going for for a long time now. My own personal interaction is, there was probably a decade of my life I might have missed it once or twice. You know, it was *what I did* on Monday nights. And now I'm in a different place and I don't go very often at all. It's just funny how that...it's just nice to know it's still there. So of course, it stopped for COVID. They picked up again last fall and I think they're back to, I think they started every other Monday and now I think they're every Monday again with the same thing. You never know what you'll get. You never know who will be there, who's calling, who's playing. Put your three bucks in it at the door and have a good time.

Mary Wesley There you go. Which musicians would be coming through in Nelson, when you started?

Steve ZA Well, of course, Bob McQuillen would definitely be there. A staple was Harvey Tolman, who was a wonderful Cape Breton fiddler and a real character. I mean, Harvey was a great guy and a great fiddler. I remember a few times people came and said they came just to hear Harvey Tolman. Unfortunately, Harvey isn't really able to play anymore. For me personally, my most personal connection is with Gordon Peery. Still comes to play piano and I met Gordon and then we were in a traveling band together called Fresh Fish. Short lived unfortunately, but a few really good years with those guys. So you know, Gordon's been...well I met the Fiddler for Fresh Fish on the Green Mountain Volunteer's trip. And that's where he met Gordon. And just a little funny story is Gordon, because of the nature of our trip, Gordon brought an accordion. Gordon will be the first to tell you, but I'll be the second that he's not a very good accordion player! But he's an *amazing* piano player. And Kerry and Gordon were together for three weeks with Gordon playing accordion. And we got to Vienna and we had some downtime and there was a grand piano in a hall and they sat down and it was magic. It was like Kerry discovered what Gordon could do on a piano, and that led to the band Fresh Fish. And as I said, we had some really good years traveling and doing stuff together. Those are probably the names most people know. Bill Thomas, piper, flutist. But you might get a Randy Miller or a Rodney Miller to pop in, that's that's the whole, you know, box of chocolates thing. You never quite knew what you were going to get.

Traveling to call

Mary Wesley I love it. So you're going to Nelson pretty much every Monday. You're teaching third grade. You know, how does it evolve from there and what's the role of calling as you, you know, keep going through life?

Steve ZA So I feel really lucky, as to how that happened. I've taught a variety of caller workshops, mostly back in the 90s. I love doing them and I haven't been doing them for years. But either weekend things or some week long ones, like at Augusta Camp in West Virginia. And one of the questions is, "Where do I practice? Where do I start calling?" And some people actually have had to, like, start a dance series so they could learn to call. Probably not the recommended method, but they didn't have any other way. And I thought, "How lucky I am. I have this Nelson laboratory," and I felt lucky that I never had to say to anyone, "Hey, I'm a good caller, please hire me." Someone came up to me at Nelson and said, "Would you like to come do our Christmas dance here in Newmarket, New

Hampshire?" Well, it was a two hour drive. I think I got \$10. But someone had told me I was good enough to do their dance. And it was just really exciting. And then it kind of just went from there. Someone saw me at Newmarket and said, "Hey, would you come to..." You know, wherever, somewhere in Maine or would you come? So I appreciate the opportunity to do it and have it build itself organically. And actually, to be honest, I don't know how sure I was there was contra dancing anywhere besides New Hampshire. I definitely didn't have this big goal of, "I would like to be a traveling caller and go to..." I've lost count but 40-some odd states at this point. And, you know, I don't think I was as aware. Definitely wasn't aware of the national nature of contra dancing. Like I like to say, it's like a small town that just is spread around the country.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA So I also you know, I wasn't thinking about it as a major part of my life that it would eventually become. But this desire to go to new places, you know, and new communities, it was just as infectious as just going to dances. I mentioned Farm and Wilderness. I got my so-called start there. Well, next summer they said, "Are you coming back?" And I was like, "Oh, I can't. I have dance gigs." And I thought, that's ironic that what Farm and Wilderness helped me get started, took me somewhere else. I never...

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA ...go back there. Yeah. And then around 1985. The band New England Tradition with Bob McQuillen and Pete Colby in April Limber asked me to be their regular caller, and around here that was a pretty big deal to be their caller. So that allowed me to call some new places and they brought me down to Boston and said, "There's this thing called the NEFFA Contra night where they have multiple callers. Why don't you come with us? We're the band and we'll get you a slot." And that's when I met Larry Jennings.

Meeting Larry Jennings

Mary Wesley Okay. I was curious who your...Yeah, so...Well, then what happened? I mean, I was curious, who were some other callers that were kind of influencing your development?

Steve ZA Sure, up in Nelson definitely Mary DesRosier and a guy called Ken Wilson, who were the two callers that said, "Hey, we want more people to call." They were very helpful. You have to know, Larry, and I hope some of you do, to appreciate the two things you said to me that night, because they're such Larry-isms. Compliments, but, you know, not quite. Bob introduced us: "This is Steve. He's been calling with us. He'd like to have a slot." And Larry said, "Well, I usually want to really know the person before they call. But my new philosophy is if anyone wants to get up and make a fool of themselves, go for it." So that set the stage. And then at the end of the night, or at least when I was done calling, he approached me and said, "That was better than I thought it would be."

Mary Wesley Pat yourself on the back there pal!

Steve ZA God bless him. He was great. So I did start, you know, coming down to the Thursday series and calling in Boston. And Larry was really something. I wouldn't say, you know, I'm not sure that he was a mentor in that, you know, he really specifically helped with

my calling, but he always had comments. And he did some things that were really unusual. Like he was timing things. He was just paying attention. And he had his idea, you know, his first book is called *Zesty Contras*. So he had an idea of "What is this zesty contra?" And he thought that I, you know, understood what a zesty contra was. And I was kind of embodying what he thought dancing should be like. But he would comment like, "Well, I see it took you 35 seconds to do such-and-such, or the dance lasted this long." And he actually once came up to me and he said, "Your average teaching tonight was about 40 seconds longer than usual. And I'm curious why that was." And I commented on some beginners that were in the room and he said, "Yes, that's what I thought it probably was." You know, he was noticing...I noticed something and reacted and he totally noticed. Who else would have noticed that my teaching was 40 seconds longer than usual? So we always had great conversations and I appreciate all of his contributions.

He called me out once. You know at NEFFA he would always lead an interesting session. And he called me out once. I didn't see this coming, but by the time I started dancing, you know how dancing had evolved to where this idea of being "active" and "inactive" wasn't so much fun. When you go to Brattleboro and the lines are 30 couples long, I don't want to be inactive. So I was part of a group of people, not that we were doing it together but Tom Hinds and Gene Hubert and, you know, Tony Parkes and myself, we started writing dances. And even Ted Sannella started writing dances that were equal. And eventually we stopped saying "active" and "inactive" and said "ones" and "twos" because it was more equal stuff. But I had said something to Larry I had long since forgotten. Ted Sannella wrote a dance called "The Newlyweds Reel" for someone's wedding. And my comment was, "How could you write a dance for someone's wedding when you don't even swing your partner?" I was like, "They just got married. They wanna swing!" And sure enough, he called me out at a workshop about what makes a good dance. And he pulled that quote, that ten year old quote out and said, "Some people think it can't be a good dance without a partner swing."

Mary Wesley Amazing.

Steve ZA Yeah, because there are, I mean, I can dig into my old box and see a lot of dances that, you know, I'd probably get tar and feathered and run out of town if I called the whole evening program of those dances. But of course, in those days, those were good dances.

Mary Wesley Yeah. And so you said, Larry thought that you understood this zesty contra thing that he was going for. So what do you think he was seeing in you? Was it your dance choices? Were you writing dances then?

Steve ZA I was just starting to write dances. I think it really was the choices, the connectedness of the figures. That mostly everyone is moving and there's a lot of good...I think he appreciated a lot of dances with moments where you really connected not only to each other, but to the music. And for me, that often means like, when we get into a wavy line and we're all holding on and we're all balancing at the same time, and there's 150 people in the room. I can't see them all, but I know they're all doing what I'm doing and there's this great feeling. There are other dances and they're certainly fine dances, and I will use them and other people use them that are, to me, a little squishier in terms of timing. Like, you know, let's do a hey into a right shoulder round into a swing and we may be swinging and, you know, you and your partner, maybe you're not swinging yet. And there's a little bit of looseness in the timing, and that's fine. It's all fine. But I really like those moments when with...and as I said, often with a line and a balance where you really

know that you're all together. So I think those are things he appreciated as well. I know we talked about programming and how you get an evening to ebb and flow in energy, in complexity, in the type of figures you do. You know, you don't do the same figure over and over. You let one go and come back. A few weeks ago, I pulled up, I was really excited. I dug for some dances I hadn't done in a while and some new ones. And I didn't look carefully enough when I got there and there was my program, I think every single dance had a larks allemande left once and a half, and I was mortified. I was like, "What have I done? I can't use all these dances because they're too..." It's that figure that keeps coming up.

Yeah, I'm not, you know, I wish Larry was here for him to answer that question more fully than I am. Obviously, the music I think he appreciated. I told you, I tried to play music for contra dancing. And I did for a little while and I still mess around a little bit, but not in public. The truth is, if I could play music for contra dancing, I probably wouldn't call anymore because I think that's...so that's my instrument. My instrument that I bring to the band is my calling and I've been gratified when some musicians who I think a lot of have complimented me on how my voice works with the music, and also that I know when to stop calling and give the music the room that it deserves. I mean, step back and say "They're good, go for it." And the music and the dancers do their thing. So I think he might have also appreciated that aspect that I came with good bands and I let the good bands do their thing. And while I said I didn't learn a lot of teaching skills at Nelson... Well, number one, I've been a teacher in life for many years...but it's a real separate skill. I mean, at the workshops we would often talk about, there's calling and there's teaching and they really are two separate skills. And if you're really good at teaching people maybe don't notice. If you're really bad at teaching, they will notice that. So I think especially when he's out there saying, "Oh, your it took you 45 seconds to..." You know, he's timing me, I think he appreciated the skill I could bring to the teaching aspect. I can name some mentors who didn't know they were mentors, but listen to Tony Parkes sometime. Every word matters. Every word. I would really listen to how he would teach and think, "That was perfect."

Now there are callers I won't mention that I learned teaching from in a different way. And I don't mean...I used to go to some dances, this is early on when I was just starting to get gigs, I went to a few dances and I intentionally danced with the beginners, especially when there was a pack of them at the end of the farthest set because that's where they end up. And I listened and I watched and I observed what the dancers were doing to the words from the caller. And I was thinking to myself, "Oh, a couple of more words would have made such a difference," you know. "Circle left three quarters." Well, that doesn't mean anything to a lot of people. I mean, I teach math. I can deal with the fractions, but circle left three quarters *until* you're back where you started from at the beginning of the walkthrough. Or *until* you're across from your partner. Basically, landmarks are a few extra words that are well worth saying because they give people what they need. But the flip side was I was standing there with the beginners and thinking, "Wow, there was a lot of extra words that didn't help and made us not hear the key words." So I feel like I learned a lot about calling by, in my head critiquing teaching that I was listening to and dancing with the beginners and thinking: a few more words here that would have really helped. Some of those extra words, you know, really distracted us. So yeah, I didn't do that a lot. I wasn't spying too much, but I know people will often, who lead workshops will often say if you get permission, tape record callers. And mostly they mean tape record callers you want to be like. But you could also be listening to callers where you're critiquing a little and it's helping you in the process of what you want to be like.

[Steve calling at the Concord Scout House - 2023 (recording provided by Steve)]

Math and Calling

Mary Wesley It's interesting to me that you're a math teacher, but that you also tune in so much to the language part of calling, which is especially...like you pointed out, the teaching, it's so essential. Are there parts of your math brain that are also activated by calling and dancing?

Steve ZA I've wondered about that because I hear it said that a lot of callers are math types who are really fascinated with the mathematics of it. I don't think I've ever really felt that way about it. You know, I was intrigued by the geometry of what's going on. But something I find I'm able to do, I know some people, well now I think some people have programs on their computer where they can say, "Here's a dance, now everyone ladies chain, let's see where those people are now. And let's do a circle and let's see where they are now." In the old days, it was pennies and nickels on the table and you'd move them around. I have always found, and I was aware of that and I used it on occasion, but mostly I can picture in my head a dance as I'm writing it and I can just think, "Okay, where is everyone at the beginning? All right, here's the first figure. Now where is everyone?" And then we can do this. Or I might pick one person, if I really want to be sure a dance works, I'll actually follow each person individually. Where is the number one Robin going to be after all these figures. Where's...you know, just to make sure it's not accidentally a mixer or a different progression than you expect. So I would say, maybe I have that kind of a spatial mind that can do that. Like, I really don't usually write stuff out when I write a dance, I just picture it in my head. And so maybe that's a mathy thing.

Mary Wesley Yeah, yeah. It's just interesting. I mean, not to pigeonhole that a math teacher can't think about words, but it's just, I think it's interesting how other parts of people's lives come into their calling in different ways. And so remind me, Fresh Fish, were you also their regular caller?

Working with bands

Steve ZA We tried to travel together. Technically, the band, I was not a member of the band, I was the caller that called the most with them. And we definitely did tours together, but they would work with other callers for sure and I totally would work with other bands. After Fresh Fish, I toured a bit with a Band Named Bob from the Princeton area.

Mary Wesley I've never heard of that one.

Steve ZA Oh, A Band Named Bob? Barbara Greenberg, Bob Stein, Bob Pasquarello. Oh, yeah.

Mary Wesley That's fantastic.

Steve ZA We couldn't tour for too long because Bob Stein and I had sense of humors that would drive everyone else crazy. So maybe a couple of weeks and then we gotta get

home because we're stuck in a van with these two. Just think kind of like the Marx Brothers in a van on tour.

Mary Wesley Oh, my. So it's sort of the ups and downs of having that long relationship with the band.

Steve ZA And that and that's the perfect word. You test a relationship. The best way to test a relationship is to go on a tour. I shouldn't say test, but to learn about your relationship is to spend that kind of time together. And I enjoyed with Fresh Fish, Kerry Elkin on fiddle, Gordon [Peery] on piano. And we did have some various people playing the third. The beauty was the two of them could fill a hall with music, and that was the classic line. People would come up, "I can't believe it was just two of you!" So they provided all you could ask for, for dancing. Kerry was the most rhythmic, to this day, just about the most driving dance fiddler I can think of. There's other fiddlers, you know, you've got Rodney Miller with this...he's kind of swingy. There's totally other fiddlers that I would love to dance to, but Kerry's was as danceable as it gets, and he was voracious about collecting tunes, too. Yeah, they were two special musicians. And I could list you some of the people who played guitar, you'd be surprised. Ann Percival played guitar. Dave Langford had a stint playing guitar. The first one was Tom Hodgson from northern New York, and then Danny Novak, Sam Bartlett played with them at times. I think my favorite combination was Kerry, Gordon, Keith Murphy and Jeremiah McLane. That was a version that only lasted well...oh, and David Surette for a while too. So the Fish was basically those two but there were a lot of...kind of like what Eloise and Company does now. So you got the basic two and then there's this stable of rhythm players that can come in. So yeah, those were great, great, fun days working with great musicians. And that is one of the things I would say a caller workshops. Rule number one: stand next to the best band you could find. And a lot of your job is taken care of.

Mary Wesley Absolutely. So, I mean, I'm hearing that you have multiple instances of working closely with with one band. So Fresh Fish or, Band Named Bob or Old New England.

Steve ZA Yeah.

Mary Wesley What did you gain from getting to work with the same musicians consistently over time versus, you know, a gig here, a gig there?

Steve ZA Yeah. Well, as I said before, I appreciated my chance to play my instrument, so it helped to know the tunes. It was really good to know a band's repertoire really well. If you are on tour, you are driving three, four or five hours between gigs, so you might repeat some stuff you did the night before. So you start to get used to some combinations that really work well. So instead of turning to a band and saying, "This would be good with something kind of smooth," you know, I could turn to them and say, "Let's do the Tour of Scotland medley." You know, I would do something that I already knew that they played. So I think getting familiar with tunes. You know, we say almost any tune can work with almost any dance and that's true for the most part with contra dancing. But sometimes the flavor of a tune and the flavor of a dance just mesh. And I would write that on the card. I might say, this works really well with a certain tune, which you don't necessarily ask...if it's a band you don't work with often you wouldn't necessarily say, "Hey, I really want St. Anne's Reel." You might say, "I know this works really well with a tune like St. Anne's Reel," and then if it's in their repertoire, they'll often play it or they'll play something like it.

And Kerry was comfortable as a musician giving me advice. You know, I was still somewhat new as a caller in those days, so there was plenty to learn still. And he was not shy about, you know, "Time to stop calling." I once went out, so I would run around the floor some time. I had a wireless mic early, early on, and it helped me, I think, in a lot of ways to be a better teacher and to be able to help people, like maybe to pick a dance a little bit beyond the ability of the crowd. But because I knew I could go out and help some people who I was keeping my eye on, I might have pushed the dance a little, like, "I'm going to try this because I can get out there." And I do remember on two occasions over the years when I was out on the floor doing my thing and Kerry had decided that they played long enough. So normally, if you're out if you're out on the floor, you get the band's eye contact and you raise the two fingers and you say, okay, two more, and you get this eye contact and you know they saw you. But as I said, it happened twice that I can remember where the music just stopped. And I was as surprised or unaware as anyone on the floor. But we had that kind of trust that it was fine, you know?

Mary Wesley Yeah. They were doing their thing.

Steve ZA Yeah. If I had been on stage, he would have been, you know, looking at the back of my head in a way that I would have known he wanted to stop. But since I was out of range, he felt comfortable just stopping the tune. I don't think that's happened with any other musician.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA And if you're enjoying each other I mean, it starts from the stage. We had a great time. If we're having a great time, it helps the dancers have a great time of course.

Touring and Dance Weekends

Mary Wesley Um, so you started...you're touring, you're going to weekends...did your relationship to calling and dancing change as you started doing it more and as you started adding on travel? You know, it's not just like your neighborhood dance. You're going farther afield. What were those dynamics?

Steve ZA Well, it was it was really exciting. And I I have to say it it feels like it just happened organically. I wasn't like, "I want to be a traveling caller," you know, it just...I'm going to go to.... Well I was saying earlier, it was nice that people were choosing me as opposed to me saying...the one exception I'll make is the first tour we did I had to say, you know, we would... Someone was bringing us to Princeton. So then I called Baltimore and said, "Well, we're playing Princeton, so could we do your dance?" And then I'd call D.C.: "Well, we're going to Baltimore. Could we do your dance?" So it was a little bit of selling ourselves based on...and that was a wonderful tour. We did the northern belt and then we went down south and did the Winston-Salem, Chapel Hill, Asheville, Knoxville, all those "villes" down there. So that was like a first, I booked the first tour. I did make some mistakes...too many days off. Anything you earn on a tour, if you suddenly have four days off in some other city, that's a bad idea.

Mary Wesley There it goes.

Steve ZA And of course, the fact that in contra dance, touring and even weekends, you don't stay at hotels, you stay at people's houses. So you make great...you meet some people and if you do it long enough, you see them again. You know you do it again. I guess this part is really special to me is when my son Sam started touring with his band Polaris, people would come up to him and of course, you know, how many Zakon-Andersons are there? They said, "Oh, I know your dad." And he'd say, "I do too." But seriously, he wrote...he was on tour once and he was gone...it included my birthday and it included Father's Day. But he sent me a a note on Father's Day that was so sweet. It just was thanking me for exposing him to this world. And I'm not going to remember the words, but the gist was, being who I was when I traveled to make these people happy to see him too. Like that I wasn't out there being a bad guy. So they were like, "Wow, I really like your dad." And he stayed at some of the same host houses that I had stayed at. So I love that part of it that it's...what a nice community it is and...so I think I veered off from the actual question with that story.

Mary Wesley No. Yeah...no you didn't. I was just wondering, you know, our relationships with things change over time. And so I was just sort of contemplating what develops as this thing that you start to do because you're just drawn into it...becomes like really woven into your life, which it sounds like it, you know, that story just really illustrates it. That it's something that that you passed on in your family, and it sounds like it's really part of who you are as a person at this point.

Steve ZA The dance weekend is an interesting thing because I didn't know what they were. Again, I started dancing in Nelson in New Hampshire, and, you know, I didn't know what a dance weekend was. And it's interesting New Hampshire, well, New England, I won't go off on this tangent, but I can name you a number of weekends here in New England that have been attempted...

Mary Wesley Right.

Steve ZA ...that haven't survived. And I think the reason is we have such good music every night at these dances in Greenfield, in New Hampshire, in Boston, that people don't need to go to weekends to hear an amazing band.

Mary Wesley And a higher frequency of dances, I think probably too. Just more dance series.

Steve ZA Right.

Mary Wesley With more regularity.

Steve ZA Yeah, but out there, you know elsewhere there are wonderful dance weekends. And maybe if you're a band or a caller from New England, they're a little more excited to have you because you're a little bit from the breeding ground of contra dancing. So the first dance weekend I did was Chesapeake Dance Weekend in near D.C., well, Maryland. Chesapeake Bay, I don't think they do it anymore. And I remember I got hired. I was very excited. I didn't really know what it was. I think I'd gone to Ashokan, maybe at that point I'd gone to some camps. But anyway, Friday night there was a caller meeting and there was this discussion about some stuff...not a caller meeting, but all staff meeting. And this question came to me and they said, "Well, what have you done at other dance weekends?" And I said, "Oh, this is my first one." And they said, "Why didn't you tell us?" I was like, "Why do you think?" You know when they called I wasn't going to say, "I'd love to

do your dance week, and I've never done one before." So that was just a funny moment. And yeah, that's another animal. You have to be available to travel a little bit. You know, you start taking plane flights and at that time in my life, I was...you said how it affects your life. Well, I was in charge of a kitchen at a private school in New Hampshire, and I was able to make a schedule for myself. When I hired people, I said, "Oh, yeah, you'll be working this shift that includes Saturdays, and you're working this shift that includes Sundays." And I was able to create a schedule for myself that allowed for the traveling.

And there was a few good years. You know how that sort of works when you're...first you're new, they think you're pretty good, then you're kind of the hot caller for a few years, and then they've seen you for a while and it ebbs and flows. And, you know, the only exception I'll say is like the contra callers were sort of, you know, ebbing and flowing. But Kathy Anderson was always the square caller. She had that niche locked up. So it was often, you know, me with Kathy Anderson, Tom Hinds with Kathy Anderson, Gene Hubert with Kathy Anderson. And she had quite the niche with the squares and there were a few of us traveling around. So that for me was late eighties, early nineties...into the mid-nineties. But then as my life shifted in other ways, having a family and teaching school, suddenly the calendar shifted. So maybe I couldn't get away for weekends, but maybe I had summers. I could do some, you know, our family did Ogontz family camp for CDSS. We directed it for many years because that was that place in our life. We had children. We wanted them exposed to it. So yeah, there's an ebb and flow of that. Honestly, if anyone's listening out there, I'd like to do more weekends again. Give me a call.

Mary Wesley Hey hey! Yes!

Steve ZA So it's, you know, it's coming back. I'm...I don't know what to call it. I'm semi-retired, I'm still working. But, you know, got some flexibility. And I've got two things coming up this fall that I'm excited to be back at a dance weekend, because it's a whole different mindset. You've got to dig deep into your program. You know all of this. You just really...it inspires and challenges you in a way that a single night of dancing does not. And you get to spend concentrated time with people you enjoy. You know if you work, if you get together with a band who are all friends of yours and you do one night, you chat a little bit, but mostly it's business and you move on. But when you have a whole weekend together, you can really connect with some friends. And especially with the way the pandemic put us on hold, I look forward to trying to get out there and seeing some of those friends again.

Mary Wesley Yeah, yeah, no kidding. That's going to take a long time to catch up from from that time lost

Steve ZA No kidding. Yeah.

Changes over time

Mary Wesley And do you feel that your interest level and engagement with calling and dancing...is it kind of steady? Has that ebbed and flowed as well? It's...just the fact is it get repetitious after...you know if you're doing it that much. And I think everybody relates to that differently. So how is it for you?

Steve ZA Yeah. I mean, it's it's repetitious and yet it's kind of like teaching middle school. Every day was different. Even if I was teaching the same lesson, you know, on a given day there's a different dynamic in the room for one reason or another. Something I brought with me, something that kids brought with them. Just, you know, in our attitude. So I definitely said that about teaching you know, no two days are the same. And there's, sure, there's similar things about each evening of dance. And yet, as you know, it's unpredictable who comes, what they bring, what the band brings. I'd say it's felt fresh in that I still like to do it. I would say the reasons I did last for a long time were more logistical and priorities. And during the pandemic I questioned too, how much do I miss it? Will I still want to do it? And, you know, it's entirely possible that coming out of that, I could have said, you know, I think I'm done. But I started to do it. Well, we did a few online...I will say where I drew a line was after a few online events. While some aspects were very cool, the little boxes on the Zoom screen and knowing that that person in Australia, and that person's in Denmark, and that person's in California, that was very cool. I enjoyed that aspect. But there were other parts of Zoom contra dancing that left me a little unfulfilled.

Mary Wesley Yes.

Steve ZA So I did that for a while, and then I decided I would wait till we got back and it's certainly a different stage of my life. Like I said jokingly, you know, "I'd like to come to your weekend." I'm not looking to travel anything like I was doing back in the nineties when I had the time and I had the drive and the youthful energy. I was doing, you know, two or three weekends a month for a while. So nothing like that. But the chance to go off a few times a year and challenge myself, dig into the program, make a good program, you know, learn about a community and try to deliver the goods that they're expecting. I still feel energized by that for sure.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Nice. So do you still...does your comment about Ted's Newlywed dance still hold? Because I think now we're just even farther away from, you know, dance choreography that would still include "actives" or "inactives," you know? And those older styles of dances are kind of relegated to novelty sessions mostly is what I see at a dance weekend it's like a chestnut session or something like that, you know? And that's speaking broadly. I think there there are series around that maybe.... Oh, my gosh, Steve, I said...Siri just came on! I said "series..."

Steve ZA Because you said "series?"

Mary Wesley And Siri's, like, "Hello?" That's so weird. Wow. That threw me. Right. So what am I trying to say? Yeah. What's been your perspective on sort of just changing styles and choreographies and people's tastes for those different kinds of dances?

Steve ZA No 100%. That's a great question. Great point. It was, like I said, around the eighties or so when we were starting to say, I want to, you know...why are people dancing? Well, you know, in the thirties and forties in Nelson maybe it was a community that knew each other really well. They worked together, they raised houses together. You know, they had a barn raising and then they danced. And the dancing was a community that existed, enjoying each other. And they could enjoy a Ralph Page dance that had no swing in it or had, you know, just a neighbor swing or whatever. I feel like as we fast forward when people could then drive to dances and, you know, suddenly the community was a bunch of people who didn't know each other, who became a community in the dance hall. And they wanted to experience each other in a certain way and it happened to include swinging. So there was that move to get more swinging, both partner and neighbor. Now, as a

choreographer, if I give you a balance and swing with your neighbor and a balance and swing with your partner, I've given you half of the choreography of the dance. That's fine. I can be creative with the rest. But I often look at some of my dances and think, this is a really cool dance. There's some neat choreography here and I realized that it only has a partner swing. And that neat choreography is partly because there's a whole extra phrase to play with. So there's dances I will definitely still use because they're just so interesting. But I'll use them cautiously. I can tell you that I once had someone come up and point out, you know, in the middle of calling someone came up and said, "You just did two dances in a row without a neighbor swing." It's like, "Okay, you're right. I did." So definitely my dances will have a partner swing. And most will have a neighbor swing. There is a dance series I call for that in their material for caller it says, "Our dancers prefer dances with the two swings in it. If you're if you're going to do a dance with only a partner swing, please do one in each half and no more." So, you know, they've given some guideline to it. That's, you know, that is what it is. They know what their dancers want. And I don't see any reason to get up on stage and say, "I've got this cool stuff. You don't want it, but I want to do it for you." I mean, I obviously want to do what the community wants. So it has affected choreography a little bit because of that desire. But I will say there's a couple of beautiful dances. The dance Fiddleheads by Ted Sannella?

Mary Wesley Oh, yeah.

Steve ZA That is like not only a seminal contra dance in the way it used the petronella balance that everyone just thinks that's been there forever. That is one of the best dances I know, but only the ones swing their partner. So I will pull those out sometimes and just say you know, this may not match and maybe I'm not even saying it, I'm thinking it. This may not match what you think a contra dance should be, but this is such a damn good dance that I'd like to do it right now. And I've got a great tune to go with it and you know. But it is the exception to be saying proper formation and one's only swing is not very common anymore.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Yeah.

Steve ZA Am I sounding like Ralph Page? Am I like...

Mary Wesley I don't know. Are you?

Steve ZA Because when I started dancing, we'd come down from New Hampshire. We'd come down to Boston, and they'd be like, "Here's those New Hampshire dancers. They're barefoot and they're doing this, and they're doing that." And we were the "Black and Decker" dancers, because you're going to drill yourselves into the floor with all that twirling. I mean, that's...

Mary Wesley I've never heard that!

Steve ZA That's oh, yeah. I think Marianne Taylor is the first one to coin that.

Mary Wesley Black and Decker dancers.

Steve ZA Yeah. Because we were twirling and I saw Ralph Page twice. I danced to him twice. He stopped the dance each time. One of them to say, "You look damn foolish doing all that twirling," because we were twirling on lady's chains. The other time he stopped the dance and said, "I don't want to hear you when you balance."

Mary Wesley Wow.

Steve ZA Because, you know, a balance was a little variation on an English set you know? How different it is today.

Mary Wesley I know, I know. How many times do I say a balance is...you can *hear* that the whole room is together. Because I want to hear it.

Steve ZA Yeah.

[*Steve calling the dance Hillsboro Jig by Bill Thomas at the 2019 Memorial Day Dawn Dance in Brattleboro, VT with music by Polaris.*]

The Role of the Caller

Steve ZA So I don't...I'm not really becoming Ralph Page, except it's interesting for me to look out and see things on the dance floor that I'm not thrilled with. I will honestly say I would never miss it if nobody ever dipped their partner again. Something that I look out and say, "Well we didn't do that in our day." But yeah, I would never...I don't think I have the capital that Ralph Page had where you could actually stop a dance and scold dancers. I don't think that would fly...

Mary Wesley Yeah. And I wonder. I wonder how much that was really capital. I don't know. Yeah, that's. It's such an...yeah, I wonder how you walk that line between your sensibilities and the things that are important to you as a caller, as a dancer, and then sort of the choices you make at the mic or in positions of leadership. Because, you know, lots of things shape how a dance is. But the caller is is a pretty big one. You know, we have a big a big role in a lot of ways. So I wonder how you think about that. Kind of navigating those...

Steve ZA I wonder a little bit, though, what you're saying. When you said "leadership," what popped into my head is seeing Ralph as a leader. I wonder if we're...if callers of today are seen the same way? I think he was, well, this may not be the same thing, but if you listen to an old recording of the Canterbury...or it wasn't Canterbury with Dudley, but an old recording with Ralph Page calling. The music was almost background and the calling was front and center and constant. And I wonder, you know, nowadays we are blessed with amazing musicians playing this music and they don't play the same tune the whole time through. They do medleys and they think about key changes and rhythms and they do so much that I do think the role of the caller's voice is different than it used to be. And I wonder if, along with that, the role of the caller as...I'm trying to think of a different word than "leader." Sort of like the wise, you know, mover and shaker of things up there that Ralph Page was seen as. Compared to the certainly many, many more callers. You know, in the old days, I think there were fewer and they might have been seen in a different role than than we are today.

Mary Wesley That's really interesting to think about. I've never thought about that. And of course, you know, my experience of those super influential callers like Ralph are pretty removed. You know I come to the Legacy weekend. It's also another question for me with callers is how much does sort of personality matter? Because I feel like in some ways we've been describing the caller's role in some way is to kind of get out of the way right? Get out of the way in the music. Do teaching in such a smooth way that people just can

flow into the dance without having to stop and think. And so it is I think, a kind of leadership. But it is...It's hard to put into words, but in some ways, you might not notice good calling if it's done in this really sort of seamless, graceful way where people...you're just giving them just enough, and it's still really needed. I mean, I remember David Millstone was one of the people who I first talked to a lot about calling, and he said something like, you know, "The dancers have sort of elected you, as the caller to be in charge." I mean, not that they've literally elected you, but there's a group agreement that having a caller is the quickest way to get to the dancing." For this particular dance form, where we're at with it, people don't know, it's not like doing this, you know, the same 12 dances that you would do every week, you know? The caller is bringing in this repertoire. But really, the point is just to get to the dancing. So, anyway, I feel like I've wandered in a million directions.

A caller's "presence"

Steve ZA Yeah, well no you brought up like, personality. And you know, what should a caller bring? What you made me think of, well first of all, I think what the caller brings is probably different for each person who's there. If they're an experienced dancer, they're expecting one thing from the caller. If they're brand new, you know, maybe something else. I have struggled looking for a word for many years over when I do workshops. I'll often start, especially if I have enough time and maybe if it's a week long, I might start with this conversation and then end the week with the same conversation. And I would talk about what does the caller need to have to make this work? And the best word I've come up with is "presence," but I don't like it that much as a word. But, because it's a combination of everything, it comes from being prepared you know? You've planned ahead. You know your dances well enough so when you teach them, when something goes wrong, you know what went wrong. You're not like, "Oh, shoot how did you get there?" You're like, "Oh, you just circled a little too far. Sorry, I should have stopped you sooner." You know your dance material. There's something about you when a new person walks in they...and this is maybe the personality part or just the confidence part...they get this feeling like, they love this stuff. They're going to help me learn it and I'm going to love it, too. It's just something, you know, in your approach, in your...you can tell when anyone walks in the room that they're a beginner. It's pretty easy. And how you approach them, whether through the mic or in a workshop. The confidence that everyone has, for example, when you're teaching a dance and maybe something isn't working—and I'm assuming you as a caller have the similar experience—when people start teaching on the floor, it can be really challenging. And it can happen if they don't have confidence in you. And, you know, you really want to have a handle on what's going on and be the one that's going to fix what's going on. You can't have four different conversations happening in different places. So what is all that? That's experience, it's confidence, it's preparation, it's knowing your material. But it's all packaged and presented with your personality. So again, I call it a presence.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA I think there's a better word. But now, how much of that can you learn? How much of that can you learn in a workshop? Well, a lot of it. Larry Edelman was a huge help to me getting started, especially doing some squares, but even just in general, getting started he talked about juggling balls. And if you're juggling too many balls, you're not going to be able to do your job. So if you have to read your dance off a card to really know it at all, you know, better to really know your material. Put that ball down. If you have a

really good band that you trust, you can put that ball down. You don't have to be out there saying like, "A part. No, no, no. Faster." No, you know, you get a good band, put that ball down. And so the fewer balls you're juggling, the more attention you can give to the floor. So you get all your balls in order, learn your dances, get good music, you know. And then that personality that you hopefully have can really let you deliver the goods to folks. And that, I guess, is the part you don't learn the personality. I don't know. I mean...

Mary Wesley Right. Well, yeah, I think I think that's for me anyway...I think what I've learned about myself is that I...you know, I do think there are all those kind of skills that you have to practice and some that just come from experience, from repetition, from just getting up and teaching another beginners workshop or, you know, recovering from another slip up and just sort of having that experience under your belt. But, I just have to be myself. Like any time that I try to be, you know...put on or perform something that I'm that I'm not, you know, then then I think that takes me out of "presence." You know, or whatever that...that's what takes over that actually hinders my ability to be successful as a caller. And for me, that's like I just don't...when I'm calling I usually don't have a lot of extra banter or, you know... You somehow can remember a million jokes! Or you just like, have them at the drop of a hat to kind of fill that space. And I sometimes will just not fill space because it will take...it will make me more nervous because it's not what comes naturally to me. And then even that will get me into a more comfortable space where maybe I will just like, maybe a story from my day will come into my mind and I'll just sort of stream-of-consciousness share it. And I don't know how helpful that is, but to me it's better than like, "Ooh, I have to think of something to say, right now?" Then it's not going to go well.

Steve ZA Well, yesterday. That's funny you say...yesterday one of the sessions I did was an advanced session, a challenging session. And that was what I said to the band. I said, the most important thing is that we're... I don't do this very often. I actually sent them a program ahead that's pretty unusual for me. And I said, "The goal is that like, when I'm ready, whether it's a no walkthrough or I've taught it quickly, you know, that we're ready to start." And I said, "The one thing nobody in the room wants is dead time with me holding a microphone." So, and it worked. They were awesome. They were ready to play every time. But something you just said made me think about, and I admire this in callers I could name, you know: Will Mentor, Lisa Greenleaf, George Marshall are three that come to mind, is the way their approach and their presentation makes the whole room feel like they've brought in together for the evening. You know, it's like we are having this time with friends together. And even if there's 200 people on the floor and they're in a microphone, it sounds like they're just talking to their friends. And that buys you a lot of, I could use the word "capital" again. That buys you a lot of...you can screw up a dance and it's funny and it's fun and everyone's...or you can say, I said this yesterday, "One of the things that makes the dance a challenging dance is if the caller has never done it before." And that was immediate buy-in that we were going to learn it together.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA And they would help me if I did something that didn't make sense they said, "Oh, that should have been a chain first," or you know, they would. We were all in it together. And I think that's not a skill, but a thing that some callers have that makes everyone feel part of something they're doing together for the evening. Yeah, it's good.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Good thing. Yeah, it's very it strikes me as just very respectful like a lot of mutual respect there both of the caller saying, "You're in it with me."

Steve ZA Mm hmm.

Mary Wesley And then vice versa, that sort of invites the dancers to have some respect and. And sort of feel seen by the by the caller and, you know, it takes me back to what David Millstone told me, and that we as callers should and shouldn't take that for granted, that this roomful of dancers has sort of, you know, "elected" us as the person to guide them through this evening. It's like know we actually...that's quite an honor and it's...

Steve ZA Yeah.

Mary Wesley It's, yeah, it, is a very magical thing. Yeah. That's not. You know. Yeah, I certainly don't take it lightly. And I think I think most callers don't actually. It would have been interesting to be able to ask Ralph Ralph Page, you know, what was going through his mind when he you know, you hear that story about him coming down to kind of sternly reprimand people. I'm sure that didn't feel great. I'm sure that didn't feel respectful in a lot of ways. But I also can imagine that he...you know, there was something that he cared about. Mm hmm. You know, in that interaction, too, that he cared about the dance in some way.

Steve ZA I love what you're sharing that, David said, and I 100% agree. They voted with their feet. They voted by coming to your dance. That they wanted, you know, to be at a Mary Wesley dance. They voted.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Yeah.

Steve ZA Another piece of the puzzle that we're talking about, what a caller brings that I hadn't really mentioned, of course, is programing in the evening.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA And I warn people because I learned the hard way that they're not there to see what you got. You know, you got to understand whatever gig you do, whether it's a wedding or a church dance or a kid's dance or, you know, an experienced contra, you want to understand why they're there, and what their goals are. And that's both the organizer's goals as well as the dancer's goals when you program. And I remember early on, it's like, "I got these great dances that I collected on tour. Can't wait to bring them back." And I walked into the dance ready to go, and the makeup of the crowd was completely, you know, different than I was expecting. And it wasn't appropriate. And there was that push/pull of like, "Oh, they're going to love these dances. I really want them to do them, but they're not appropriate. So I got to put them away and save them for a different night." I mean, the simple thing that I would tell people is my goal is that people in the room feel challenged but successful. And, you know where that line is could be extremely different. You know, the wedding with drunk adults compared to the challenging dance and everything in between. You need to find that place where they do feel like they did something special, they feel like there was a challenge, but they succeeded. So programming is another big part of it for sure.

Mary Wesley Yeah, it's a lot...

Steve ZA It's not as easy as people think!

Mary Wesley Oh, I know.

Steve ZA I like to, like when they say, "Would you do a caller's workshop? We have like an hour, hour and a quarter." I always call it a "Caller Discussion," and I say it's open to all levels and if there are experienced callers in the room, I let them talk as much as I do. But I really like it when people come who really don't want to be a caller. They're just curious.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA And and they'll sometimes come up afterwards and say, "Wow, I had no idea how much was going on. How much thinking and planning and was going on by the caller at our local dance. They're not just getting up and calling. There's a lot more to it." So yeah, I like when people get that appreciation of what goes into it.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Kind of see how the sausage is made. I think that's another thing...

Steve ZA The sausage is made. I don't think we want to see how the sausage is made.

Mary Wesley It's just an expression Steve!

Steve ZA It's a good expression. I like that one. That's a good one.

Mary Wesley Have you never heard that?

Steve ZA I don't think so.

Mary Wesley Oh, I thought that was like a little thing you say to describe exactly like...

Steve ZA Well, I grew up...

Mary Wesley Like looking under the hood. Or...

Steve ZA I grew up in a kosher house. We didn't eat sausage.

Closing

Mary Wesley There you go. Perfect. Well, should I do my closing questions?

Steve ZA Seems like we're there.

Mary Wesley This has been so fun. It's been. So things I've been asking everyone in these interviews. First is do you have any pre- or post- dance rituals or pre- or post- gig rituals. So things that you do to kind of get ready to get on stage and call, and things that you do to wind down afterwards.

Steve ZA Pre-dance is usually driving really fast, so I'm not late. I've only been late for two contra dances in 40 years and only one of them was my fault. The other I was in the organizer's car. I remember the first year or two of calling I got really nervous before I'd start. There was something, especially when it was a new dance, like, "Now I'm doing a Dawn Dance. Now I'm doing, you know, I'm in Boston," or whatever the milestone was I was feeling. I remember being very nervous and it was really hard to start. But once I

started talking, then there was kind of no turning back. So I remember that. I don't feel it anymore. I think the only routine that is really important is you connect with the band and make sure things that you. You don't want to run into something later and think, "I wish I had said that to them earlier." So you lay out some stuff, drink some water, you know, have your water handy. Afterwards. I don't have a lot. I try, since I do sound myself I try to be a performer who helps break down the sound.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA Wind those wires and, you know, carry a few things because I appreciate it when it's done at the other end. And I know that, you know, musicians are often visiting the people they've wanted to talk to and whatever. But yeah, post dance is usually help clean up and hit the road. General rule: if it's under two and a half hours, I'll try to drive home.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA Yeah, I like to be home.

Mary Wesley That's nice. Nice, and then, so I'm curious about the ways that different callers organize their collections of dance material and how they notate them. So are you...do you use cards? Do you have printouts? Have you gone full digital? What's your dance notation approach?

Steve ZA Yeah, I would guess I was one of the last to stop being all cards. We won't talk about it Adina's system

Mary Wesley Oh, yeah. Her's is not far from mine, so...

Steve ZA Really?

Mary Wesley Oh yeah, I'm still all cards. Yeah.

Steve ZA I posted a picture on Facebook once of just the stage in someone's feet, and it was like, "Guess the caller." I used cards a lot and someone impressed upon me, "What if you lost your cards?" It's like, "Oh, my goodness. Wow." So I had a lot of time on my hands one day around 2009, I think it was. Unfortunately, I fell and I ruptured my quadricep tendon and I had surgery and I was laid up for quite a while. And I got kind of into the "Okay, I'm putting them on a computer." So now they are all in digital form. I still have my cards, but I'm not sure where they are. So it's pretty much....But I don't like I don't really like looking at the computer when I'm teaching and calling. So if I'm planning ahead, I'll look at the computer and I will, these days anyway since coming back from the pandemic, I will choose a program, "plus." Like, I hope this is my program, but here's an extra ten dances. And I'll print them. So I will have printed material at the dance. And also, it's a lot nicer when the fiddler says, "Can I see the card?" And you don't want to hand them a laptop.

Mary Wesley Yes.

Steve ZA So I can hand them a piece of paper. And then it doesn't mean those are the only dances I can do if I think, "Boy," you know, "Beneficial Tradition would be great right now," I can find it on the computer pretty quickly. So I did kind of go digital.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA Can I tell you a quick story?

Mary Wesley Please!

Steve ZA Because I've been behind all the curves in terms of technology. Unfortunately, my dad in the mid-seventies said you should go into computers, it's the next field. Just like the movie where the guy goes, "Plastics."

Mary Wesley Yes.

Steve ZA So my dad was right. You know, I'm a math kind of guy and computers, imagine getting into computers in the seventies. So he was right. But I ran the other way. I did completely different things. Um, Lisa Greenleaf was booking for the Thursday night series back in the mid-nineties. And she used to send a letter. Here are the dates, here are the ones that are taken. Fill in the one you want and send me the letter back. And then one day she got in touch with me and said, "I never heard back from you about the next cycle." I said, "Oh, I don't remember seeing a letter." She goes, "Oh, I don't do letters anymore. I do email." And I said, "Oh, I don't have email." And she said, "Well, I do have a list of people who I'm still sending letters to if you want to be on the list." Now, I'm not sure people will know these names, but she said...I said, "Well, who's on the list?" She goes, "Well, it would be you. Bob McQuillen and Alan Block." I don't know if you know Alan, but I know you know Bob.

Mary Wesley Am I guessing that they were in...yeah I mean Bob would have been a totally different generation.

Steve ZA Yeah, we are talking much older, you know. A list that I had to say, "Okay, I'll get an email and you can write to me that way." That was a pretty funny moment.

Mary Wesley I have to say, I'm, like, strangely relieved to hear a story of you missing an email, just given our history.

Steve ZA Touché.

Mary Wesley Which is literally walking into the Ralph Page Dance Legacy weekend. Steve is on stage. Adina and I both walking in and Steve saying from the mic: "You guys owe me an email." Oh, no. Anyway, that's great. Um, ok my last question is my little sociology experiment. If you know, do you identify as an introvert or an extrovert?

Steve ZA Oh, interesting. Can I say both?

Mary Wesley Yes!

Steve ZA I mean, clearly, I'm comfortable in front of people. I've been a teacher for years, a caller for years. People say, you know, when you do a survey, what do you fear the most? And number one is speaking in front of a crowd. You know, death is like number four.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Steve ZA So that makes me want to say I'm an extrovert. But I feel like I'm shy, also. Like in a smaller setting, you know, I do okay when I get to start talking to people, but people I don't know, I do feel I'm kind of shy. So I'd give it a both.

Mary Wesley Yeah. I'm just curious how people think about that aspect of themselves, you know, as people who stand up on stage at a microphone and, you know, tell people what to do. But it really runs the gamut. You know, I think one doesn't necessarily predict the other, but it's interesting to hear about.

Steve ZA Would you say callers come in all shapes and sizes?

Mary Wesley Absolutely.

Steve ZA Yeah. Yeah.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Yeah.

Steve ZA And different reasons for why they call. I suppose everyone's got their own reason. Yeah. So you can't pigeonhole us. Sorry.

Mary Wesley That's right. No, that's what this whole project is about, is to hear from as many different people who callers as possible. So I'm just scratching the surface. But I'm so grateful to have spent this time with you, getting to know you a little bit more. We did not cover you nearly enough, but it has been really great to to chat a little bit, Steve, and catch up and I'm glad that we emailed successfully both of us.

Steve ZA We did!

Mary Wesley and I'm excited to come down and call your dance this fall. Yeah.

Steve ZA Looking forward to it.

Mary Wesley And grateful for this conversation. Thanks for doing this.

Steve ZA Oh thanks for having me. This is really delightful. As I said at the beginning, callers do like to talk about calling.

Mary Wesley Do we ever.

Thank you so much to Steve, for talking with me. Check out the show notes at podcasts.cdss.org to learn more.

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Happy dancing!

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