

# Transcript - From the Mic Episode 15 - Luke Donforth

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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.

## Luke Intro

**Mary Wesley** Hi From the Mic listeners. Today's episode is special to me because I'm joined by my longtime friend, collaborator, and fellow Vermont caller Luke Donforth. As a caller, Luke brings a warm and inviting playfulness to the stage. He calls new compositions and traditional contras at weekly dances, barn dances, weddings, and festivals all over the country. On the local front, he currently runs a monthly family dance here in Burlington and he is also a published author! If you don't already own a copy of his book *The ABCs of Contra Dancing*, I highly recommend picking one up for the young dancers in your life.

Luke and I began calling around the same time and together with other dance friends in the Burlington area we founded the Mad Robin Callers Collective in 2009. Our goal was to provide a supportive space for people interested in learning to call. We started out with living room dance parties where we practiced walkthroughs and gave each other feedback and eventually started a monthly dance series led by Mad Robin callers that ran from January, 2010-October 2019.

In our chat we revisited memories and stories from that time and I got to hear Luke's full caller biography, which has taken him coast to coast and many places in between. As a prolific, you could even say compulsive dance choreographer we also spend some time in his dance writing brain. Luke is a thoughtful and passionate dance leader and it was so fun to have him in my living room!

**Mary Wesley** Hi, Luke Donforth.

**Luke Donforth** Hello, Mary.

**Mary Wesley** Welcome to my living room. And welcome to From the Mic.

**Luke Donforth** Happy to be here.

**Mary Wesley** I'm so happy to have you here. You're my only interviewee who has arrived by bicycle.

**Luke Donforth** I'm going to have to learn not to talk with my hands for this interview, aren't I?

**Mary Wesley** You can talk with your hands. People at home...If you do anything especially exciting I will make sure to convey that to the listeners.

**Luke Donforth** Thank you.

**Mary Wesley** We have known each other for a little while.

**Luke Donforth** It has been many, many years. Many joyous years.

**Mary Wesley** Agree, yes. You are someone who I really associate with sort of the early years for myself of learning how to call and figuring out how to how to do this thing. And so it's, you know, in as much as a scholar is who are kind of a solo act can have colleagues. Yeah.

**Luke Donforth** The Mad Robins and all that cohort and being around each other and just living in New England, this corner that has so many such a, a plethora of just exceptional callers that to get to kick it around with us is so much fun.

**Mary Wesley** We're super lucky. Yeah. An embarrassment of riches and it's really nice to, you know, if I can't do a gig. Here's Luke, here's you know.

**Luke Donforth** Here's Adina, here's yeah...

**Mary Wesley** Here's Will, yeah...

**Luke Donforth** To feel supported in that way in what is often a solo gig is is really lovely.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. And you mentioned the Mad Robin Callers Collective, which I am...

**Luke Donforth** We are doing a little hand tweet thing that will remain secret because it's on the radio.

**Mary Wesley** It's true. It's our secret sort of handshake greeting for the Mad Robins, and I... It's been a while since I've gone back and really thought about how we started that enterprise. So definitely want to talk about that today. But I was thinking that as much as we are in each other's lives as friends and dancers and callers and know each other pretty well, I haven't, you know, well, I haven't sat down with and pulled microphones out with most of my friends, but I certainly haven't sort of asked you to

start from the beginning and tell me about how you, you know, started dancing, how you found social dance or contra dance, and then and then got to the caller stage. So I'd love to hear about that.

**Luke Donforth** Yeah. So I did not grow up in New England. I did not grow up in this embarrassment of riches. I grew up mostly in California and did various forms of social dancing there. So did swing dancing, some other ballroom styles, and then was involved in Renaissance Fair Dancing. It was not really English in the sense that the English that happens around New England is, but that kind of mix of social and performative dancing like you would go to a run fair and have a thing and you would do it and then also try and get other people involved in it. And so there was a mix there. And so when I came out East in early 2000 for graduate school, I was on the lookout for social dancing in various forms. And I actually ended up in the Society of Creative Anachronisms while I was at Cornell and the Merry, the group there, Merk Thelan had a very active dance scene. Doing SCA level dancing, which, similar to Ren fair, similar to English country. But its own traditions and ways and not very much live music. But I was at that and a friend of mine said, "Hey if you like this, this SCA stuff there's a contra dance right up the road. We should try that." And so I went to contra dancing and it was great. It was intergenerational. The dance was a lot of fun, but it was very much based around the college and the kind of surrounding circles. And this pulled more of the community into the local country dancing. And it had live music and it was vibrant and friendly and it was just amazing. And I was hooked.

And it was a weekly dance in Ithaca, New York. Pamela and Ted ran the Bethel Grove dance, and it was a tradition that predated me and continued after me of college students just kind of, "All right, who's got a car?" How many people can we cram in there and take a carload of folks out to the dance? And then, yeah, it was 15, 20 minute drive kind of thing. And then coming back afterwards and having ice cream and socializing and singing songs. And so just kind of being thrown into that, you know, instant community was, was really, really rewarding and answering and connecting. And I immediately both enjoyed dancing and enjoyed thinking about the dancing and how the pieces came together and the puzzle-like aspect of the dancing. And so it wasn't long before I started writing dances. I think a lot of people get into calling, you know, their various reasons, like "Oh, somebody was sick and I tried," or I really like to be... But for me it was very much the impetus was I wanted to write fun dances and I put together things and I was carpooling out there with two students, two other graduate students at Cornell who were both math majors. And we would geek out like, you know, they're talking about the set theory of contra dancing like, I don't need to go that deep, but like, yeah, it was a pressure cooker of sorts in a good way. And so I wrote what I thought were interesting puzzle dances. And then I came to the realization nobody's going to call mine dances first. I have to be the one to call my dances. And Pam, Pamela and Ted would do regular Friday night dances where they would hire bands and hire callers. And then they also in the summers, to kind of build up community engagement. They would do a public dance down on the Commons, which is kind of like Church Street here in Burlington. It's, you know, a pedestrian mall. And they would take over the pavilion and it was an all comers band and open mic callers.

And so I got a chance to start calling and you know, called one. And after I started calling, I realized that the dances that were really, really fun to think about and right were not actually the best dances to be calling, especially an open bike, open band. Random people walking a pedestrian mall trying to jump in and so getting into thinking about, "Oh what actually makes a good dance for dancing?" Then informed how I wrote dances but having cause. I discovered that I also enjoyed the calling aspect of helping people connect with the music and dance. And so my calling has informed my choreography, my choreography has informed my calling, and both of those have kind of built off of each other. And in a way that I think has helped me understand both aspects and made me better at both. I certainly enjoy both of them. At this point. I've written 400 plus dances and I have called maybe 200 of them. So I write a lot of stuff that I'm like, yeah, that was fun to write, but there's no need to kind of put that one out there. And so it's been like, you know, you scratch the choreographer's brain a bit and you don't need to do it. You know, I was looking over my notes before this interview. The dance that I have called the most over a hundred times is La Bastringue.

**Mary Wesley** I love that dance!!

**Luke Donforth** It's such a great dance. I was at a bar mitzvah. Yesterday where I was a caller, and I did La Bastringue and I did Galopede and I did a hora and one other dance...like, when you're doing those community engagement dances. You don't need modern hot, urban contra you need things that have been battle tested for, you know, decades, centuries. And they're really, really great, "Yeah, got them." dances, you know, exist. And you don't have to reinvent the wheel but much like calling takes a bit of ego, I'll be honest, I would say that, you know, I have over 1000 dances at my dance box and I continue to write dances. I have dances that I have never called, and I continue to write dances and partly that's ego. And I will admit to that. And partly it keeps me engaged in the process. It keeps me thinking it keeps it fresh for me to not go like I will continue to call up La Bastringue probably as long as I'm calling. But I also want to bring new things to the people who have also danced La Bastringue a hundred times. So I started with the open mic gigs in Ithaca that informed my choreography. I started writing better dances. I started collecting a lot more dances and not just relying on my own dances and having that back and forth. And I called my first full evening, March 20th of 2009 in Ithaca. And then I moved. I finished up graduate school. And I moved to Burlington, Vermont, up to a hotbed, like right down the road from. Montpelier. Burlington had a monthly dance, Montpelier had an every other week dance. And that Montpelier dance was super hot. There were so many awesome people coming through and so many awesome dancers and organizers giving themselves to make it happen. And it was such a lovely dance and they were really protective of it, understandably. And they did not want people who had just called their first ever dance, you know, a couple months ago up on their stage. And I think I think it was Will. Mentor gave you a guest slot and they they were like, "We would like to have a policy about guest slots," after that. And yeah, you want to say anything about that?

**Mary Wesley** The legendary...you know and this is not at all to speak down about our beloved, what is really our home...

**Luke Donforth** They were protecting an awesome dance and wanted to make sure that it was exceptional.

**Mary Wesley** Exactly. But yes it is true that the first time I got on stage with a live band and live dancers to try and call my first contra dance...

**Luke Donforth** I didn't realize that was your first...

**Mary Wesley** That was my very first contra.

**Luke Donforth** You started at Montpelier, where do you go from there?

**Mary Wesley** Well, I think I from there went to a much more appropriate-scaled setting to cut my teeth. But it was nonetheless a very formative experience both in, you know, just feeling what it's like to stand at a mic and say, you know, "Circle to the left".

**Luke Donforth** And watch them all do it.

**Mary Wesley** And the whole room does it, you know. And then also to experience...in my defense, an old time band just launch in a rip-roaring tune, no four potatoes, no chunky New England boom chuck piano to latch on to. And yeah, the dance fell apart pretty quickly. But I always say, those Montpelier contra dancers just cheered and persevered and, you know, were so supportive, even though it was like really, truly a train wreck of a calling experience.

**Luke Donforth** There's so much there to unpack. So often, I think callers end up starting with open bands and, you know, the the equivalent of dancing on the commons with the public and your teaching has to be so good and your prompting has to be so good and the ability to hold the band and the dance together is a skill. And all the callers that that go through that and then get to the point where you're on Montpelier and you say, "Do a hey for four," and they just do the hey, like it's looking back at it, it almost doesn't seem fair that now I get gigs where I don't have to teach. After a dozen plus years of figuring out exactly what to say to get it across, and these are the different categories of gigs. Not categories, but the the skill sets that you need to call for Montpelier versus the skill sets that you need to call for a bunch of, you know, grade schoolers at their school dance or a Harvest Festival or a wedding or a weekly dance or a monthly dance where they, you know, they know that they want to do Chorus Jig and they've just kind of got their, you know, 20 dances and you pick ten of them any given evening and it's, there's all these different things. And that's one of the great things about contra dancing is that we say "contra dancing" and it means so much and it can be so much but you and I were in this place, in this awesome place with all this awesome dancing with wonderful friends. And we decided that we wanted to be calling more. And so you and Peter and I and Kylie and Cassondra started the Mad Robin Callers Collective with the explicit purpose of workshopping and house partying, calling and getting better as callers. And then deciding, well, I guess we have to run a dance,

too. And so we started the dance in Burlington just so that we would have a dance. That was amiable to, and facilitated new callers getting to work in a supportive atmosphere with excellent bands. And I love open bands. I think they're a great way of building the community and nurturing the next generation. And they're great and I work with them when I can. But to have an open band and a brand new caller at the same time is another level of difficulty. I think that we sometimes stack. And so I think part of what Mad Robin really did was take brand new callers and give them really good bands to work with because we didn't have to pay, we didn't pay the callers, we just paid the bands. And so all the money went into that. It's an unfortunate reality of contra dances. It seems to be if you want a successful dance series, you either have to find a way to not pay for the band, the hall or the caller.

**Mary Wesley** Pick one.

**Luke Donforth** Pick one. And if you can x that out of the equation maybe you can make it pay for itself. You know, I'm running a family dance now in Burlington. Decade, more than a decade later, and it's yo, pay the band, pay the hall, don't pay the collar and and that's how that plus the support of CDSS to kind of get that series started with one of their grants. That was how that dance series is viable is just all right well I will donate that back now. But going back to the Mad Robin Callers Collective, we got that going and you came through that I came through that. And I think usefully we also gave people a chance to call and then discover that they weren't really excited about doing it but they didn't have a, you know, "Oh, I wonder," anymore. They're like "I got to try that. And that was a fun thing," and kind of going through and being like, "Yeah, I know that I can at this level," and, you know, much like picking up an instrument. That was fun. I enjoy at this level. I don't enjoy at the level of being performative about it. And going back to the ego piece, I think there has to be some desire to be in front of people. Some desire to. To be on stage, to be "On the mic," as you so aptly named for this series. And for me that desire is to facilitate a group of people interacting with music. That is, for me, what calling is, is a group of people who've come together and said, We want to have fun and we want to have fun with live music and democracy is awesome, but it can be a messy labor as process. And so having somebody say, "Hey, let's do this thing." And doing it in a way that everybody comes along and helps build it into a successful evening. And I see that as what calling is. And and I love the tension of, you have to have enough ego to get up there in front of people and say, "This is what we're doing, let's have fun together." And then getting out of their way once they've got it. Like not not saying, but saying to yourself, "I get to step back. The dancers have the dance. The music is excellent. And my job is to not be in that mix anymore and letting them have that interaction." I think the most beautiful time for me ever was at Dandelion Romp with Mavish. And it was Sunday and it'd been a glorious weekend and they went into something and I got the dancers going and I got to drop out and I stepped back and I cried. It was that beautiful. It was that amazing to see that many people just blissed out and dancing and having gotten to help them get there as a collective, as a group of people. And then giving them to the music, and the music and them, and being like, "I helped this." I didn't play an instrument. I'm not that good of a musician, but I helped

them get there together with the music and then I didn't have to do anything. I just got to enjoy that moment and that still sticks with me.

## The Caller's Role

**Mary Wesley** Mmm. I'm so curious about that. I mean, it's sort of one of the central sort of questions or areas of inquiry in this podcast is like, "What is the caller's job and what is the caller's role?" And what is it like for the caller? What's it like to be a caller? And this is partly my own selfish motivation to like share in exploring those big questions together because I'm just...I'm sort of an existentially oriented person, kind of always wanting to get into those abstract areas. But yeah, I do think it's such an interesting space that we occupy. It is sort of by nature a position of leadership, you know, of direction in a certain way. But then, like you say, there's this really pivotal moment where, in a way you're not needed anymore. But, but you can't...the dancers won't get to that place on their own.

**Luke Donforth** And you have a responsibility to monitor, too, to keep an eye to to watch what's going on and what's happening. And, "They had it! Oh, they lost it, " Right? I thought they had it. I've been wrong. I've certainly been in that. They've got it. Oh, they don't have it!

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Luke Donforth** Or finding the one word out of all of your prompts that gets them to the next step like, can I provide, "La," just the start of long lines. Can I, you know, can I find just a phoneme to cue where they are so that they don't even notice they're being cued? It's a fundamental challenge but it's something that is very different. Coming back to this idea of of categories of of dances, the you know, when you have more than 60% of the dance hall is experienced dancers where you're at a dance weekend. What you can do is very, very different than when you're at a harvest festival where maybe you've got a couple of ringers, but you're, you know, you've got little kids and their parents and their grandparents and it's great. And everyone everybody wants to dance and. I think the caller is more important in those situations than they are at the Montpelier dance. You know, the Montpelier dancers are going to succeed most of the time given an opportunity. But to reach new dancers or people who don't know that they're dancers and convince them "Oh, I'm moving to music with people is fun. And we have this." This spiritus mundi idea that "Dancing is hard." That "I'm not a dancer." Like, people will say that I'm like, "I am confident you can do this dance. I have had four year olds do this contra dance. I've had drunk people do this dance." And I'm not going to call, you know, the hardest contra dance in my box because I can't do the hardest contra dance in my box. But I can find if I'm doing my job as a caller, I can find something that will let them succeed and have that community moment. And it is more at that point about the caller working with the community and the band being a substrate as opposed to, you know, a regular weekly dance where the band and the community is having a communion and the caller is a guide.

And I like doing all of the different aspects. You know, some callers like their weekly dances. Some callers like their harvest festivals. Some callers want the weekends where you, you know, fly across the country. And I love all of them. I've gotten to travel to just over 20 states, I think at 21 or 22 right now. But, you know, from Alaska to Florida, and it is so amazing to meet contra dancers in the Contra dance community everywhere and be like, we're all people. We're all doing this thing and it connects us. And so those festival gigs are great fun and the local school gigs are great fun.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Luke Donforth** After the Mad Robins, I was here for a year and then I left.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, I remember!

**Luke Donforth** You and Peter and Cass and I moved to Dallas, Texas, which does not have the wealth of tradition. It's not soaked to the roots the way New England is with contra dance. But in Dallas, there are people that love this, and were trying to make it happen. And so I got to jump into that and be in both a very different political and geographical space, Texas compared to Vermont, and also see those same connections. That this is a tradition that brings everyone who is willing to engage with it into connection. And really appreciating that and seeing different ways of how calling can be done and seeing what it can look like and realizing there were options and style choices and things that I could do or not do, and kind of looking at, oh, okay, I want my walkthroughs to never go more than twice through the dance. You know, what should I be shooting for? And how can I feel about that? And kind of piecing that together. And getting to land in a new place and immediately have community. To be in a place and be like, "Oh, there's contra dancing here. I know people. I don't know them yet, but I know them."

**Luke Donforth** And then we were in Dallas, Texas for about a year. And then Sophia, my wife, and I moved back to the northeast, to Connecticut and got to plug in into the dance scene there. One of the organizers described their dance as being in the shadow of the great Greenfield dance tradition and feeling like, yes, this is the same tradition, the same people, the same...you know, drive and motivation, but also a different local flavor and enjoying those local flavors of the different things.

**Mary Wesley** There's so much there. I'm curious, just as now someone who has both lived in a couple of different states and cities and gotten involved in the local dance scene, and as someone who is really a traveling caller at this point, what is your throughline when you're going from dance to dance and, maybe when you were still developing as a caller...

**Luke Donforth** For the record, I am still developing as a caller.

**Mary Wesley** Nice, yes. Aren't we all? Well said. Yeah, I guess I'm just thinking about, you know, approaching a new dance, a new gig, a new setting. Maybe you have heard



things about it, like the Greenfield dance or the Montpelier dance. Or maybe it's a, you know, a totally blank slate for you going in. What's your process of getting oriented and feeling ready to do your job in that new setting?

**Luke Donforth** I'm going to come back to this idea of categories again or different dances. When I'm hired in for a weekend I have a conversation with the organizers and I might look at who was the last caller that they had out and who's the last band and talk with the band that I'm going to be working with, which is probably a nationally touring band. And if I know the caller that last did their weekend, I might..."Hey, what was this one like?" And talk shop with other callers and also with the organizers and, you know, "Do you want me to do a choreography workshop? Do you want me to do non-contra?" Have those conversations. And with weekends the organizers usually have a vision because it's a lot of work to put on a weekend. And so they will be upfront, often about what they are looking for. "We want you to do a square session." Really? I mean, I will, but I'm not a square dance caller, I'm a contra dance caller. But Oberlin wanted some squares. So I put together an hour of squares for them and we all had fun. And there was definitely, I think Oberlin put together an hour of squares because there was a caller that wanted to call a different square while the caller was calling squares.

**Mary Wesley** Wow.

**Luke Donforth** In that way that they were like a rambunctious pile of puppies and they had fun with it. And part of them having fun was doing a silly thing. And it was great. I just didn't look at them.

**Mary Wesley** I love it.

**Luke Donforth** And that happens in contra dances, too we're like, this is the set that's going to do Chorus Jig no matter what you call. And, you know, I think in small doses, in appropriate circumstances, that can help build community. I watch for that becoming something that ostracize members from the community. I want anyone to always feel that they can succeed when they come into a contra dance and so coming back to your question of throughline, at a festival where they know they're square and they know that everyone there is going to be fine. It's great to do that kind of thing and have fun with it because everyone's going to succeed. But having somebody walk in off the floor, if I'm there as the caller, it's my job to make sure they succeed. And so, and Oberlin did a respectful job. They did it in a square where they knew everyone and everyone was going to be okay. But it's my job to take care of everyone who walks in the door. And so at a festival, you can have that conversation ahead of time. And with a regular dance, a Montpelier, a Burlington, a Greenfield, you know enough about the reputation of those kind of big dances that you can say, okay. And then there's the smaller dances that are maybe just getting started, maybe don't have a tradition or had something and it's kind of this ebbed and flowed over the years. And you're trying to suss it out. And I still have the throughline of, I want everyone to succeed and have fun. I think it is more fun for an experienced dancer to move to music to a simple dance than it is to spend a long time belaboring a complex dance that only some of the people succeed at.

And I can pull out the complex dances, you know, I have grid contras that progress both up and down the set and across the hall. But I do those at weekends when people say, "No, we want the advanced dances." I'm like, "Okay, let's do this. I'm going to have to teach it more than I normally do because there's a lot going on." And, you know, it's fun to push those envelopes in those situations where that's what people have signed up for and that's what they consider success. But that's not what I'm going to do at a harvest dance.

**Mary Wesley** Yes.

**Luke Donforth** And one of the great things I think about weekly or monthly dances is I make a big point of, "Oh, you've got an orientation lesson? I would love to do that." Because that lets me know who's in the hall and who I want to keep an eye on and make sure that they're succeeding and it's also a chance for me to welcome any regular dancers who were already in into the circle. And I always do. I always start my my orientation to confidences in a big circle. But getting experienced dancers in, and there's there's a multitude of reasons for that. There's giving them ownership of their own dance. There's subtly nudging them in perhaps dance behaviors that I want to encourage. And it's a chance for me to kind of observe and see, Oh, this is the style of the dance. This is, you know, how they're choosing to interact and what they are going for. And so when I'm walking into an unfamiliar dance, my hope is that they're being accommodating to new dancers, because we need at all times to be accommodating to new dancers and us using that as a place to scope out the lay of the land and kind of feel things out. And then, "Oh, okay, here's where we're at." And I've called 600 different gigs, I went back and checked my notes like, you do enough and with practice comes the ability to kind of read that room and say, "Oh, okay, we'll be getting to a hey at the end of the first half." Or, "No, we won't." And and it's more important to me to not go in with an expectation of this is what I need them to get to. There's no dance that I need them to get to. I want them to succeed.

[ [Luke calling the dance Homeward Bound](#) by Andrea Nettleton at the August, 2019 Portland (ME) Intown Contra Dance with music by Shandy (Eileen Kalfass, Rebecca McCallum, and Jane Knoeck) ]

## Writing Dances

**Luke Donforth** You know, I started by writing terrible dances...

**Mary Wesley** The Mad Robins walked through a lot of those dances, and they were not all terrible. They were not some of them were little unusual...

**Luke Donforth** I have dances that I will admit, for a while now I have had in my head who I am as a choreographer and who I am as a caller and which is, you know, which one is more successful. And if I were to walk into a dance hall as an unknown person,

like not something I'm calling but I'm just...I show up randomly at a dance and the caller on stage calls one of my dances without knowing who I am, then I've succeeded as a choreographer more than I've succeeded as a caller. Whereas if they see me and they're like, "Oh, that's Luke Donforth," when I haven't announced who I am, then I'm known as a caller, which has my face associated with it more than a choreographer. And at this point, I would say that I am probably more known as a caller than a choreographer. But I have had people that I don't know email me to tell me that they like a dance that I wrote or that it's in their box and they use it, and that, to give back to the community that way is so joyful to to get those notes. Like, something that I did, somebody else found value with and used to facilitate joy in their community. And that, I mean, that is successful as a choreographer.

**Luke Donforth** I make no bones about that. I am overjoyed to have that happen. But I do enjoy, I guess, competing with myself about my choreography, propagation and my recognition as a caller propagation. And I also make a point of doing, you know, the elementary school dances where they don't care who you are!. And, you know, it's I've got young kids. They keep you humble. But it's good to go out and try and herd cats and call elementary school dances to be like, "Right, work really hard, get better try and be successful. Try and facilitate their success." And and come back to that, too.

**Mary Wesley** It sounds like I sometimes hear people talk about needing to be proactive about staying engaged and staying fresh as a caller because there is a certain amount of repetition involved inherently, but you strike me as having no trouble whatsoever as staying fresh. You are constantly finding new ways to to play, to engage, to experiment. Does does that feel true?

**Luke Donforth** I think part of that comes from not just doing contra dance. Like. I have taken swing dance moves and put. Them in contra dances, and I don't call that contra dance regularly, but I have that in my pocket to kind of come out. I got to do, I've done the Dawn Dance, a Brattleboro tradition where they start it 8:00 at night and they go till 8:00 the next morning. And it's excellent fun and for whatever reason, the Brattleboro committee decided that I would be a good milkman shift. So that's the, you know, the 4 a.m. to 8 a.m.

**Mary Wesley** Milkman shift. Graveyard shift.

**Luke Donforth** Yeah. I think the graveyard is technically the one that starts at midnight.

**Mary Wesley** Really?

**Luke Donforth** Yeah. I always thought the graveyard was over the midnight hour, and then the milkman was like the baker, was the early morning one. But I've done the Dawn Dance three different times. And it's always, always the early morning one. And my attitude at that point is I'm not doing walkthroughs. If I take the time to talk it through, they're going to fall asleep. So we're just going to dance. And you've got to coordinate with the band ahead of time, because it's a lot of work on the band to not get the break

of the walk through, but I've been lucky and grateful to have excellent bands at the Dawn Dance and just kind of go through. But coming back to staying fresh, I went down to a Dawn Dance and I was...this was right after my child was born and I was like my sleep schedule bonked. Anyway, I've got a two month old at home. I'll go down onto the afternoon English country dance and then I'll do a little bit of the contra and then I'll go to sleep and then I'll wake up at 3:00 in the morning and go back to the hall and call for them. But like, it's my responsibility to think for everyone at 4 a.m., I better get some rest. And I went to the English and somebody did Sapphire Sea, which is a beautiful English dance with a dolphin hey, and I'd never done a dolphin hey before. And so I went to the the bed that I was supposed to sleep in and I spent like an hour and a half or two hours when I was supposed to be sleeping before my milkman shift for Dawn Dance, writing, contra dances with a dolphin hey in them.

**Mary Wesley** I mean, it sounds like a bodily function Luke, like the dance writing. I just...it blows my mind.

**Luke Donforth** It comes in fits and spurts. And the more I call, the more I kind of steeped myself in it, the more my brain turns it around. And it was. I missed it during the pandemic, not being in it. And occasionally I would get the like, "Oh, well, let me play with the things and work on something." But it really does come from just kind of soaking myself in it, is where it bubbles. But then also soaking myself in other things like, "Oh, let's look at swing dancing. Let's look at contra dancing." Let's look at English dancing and what can I steal, what can I borrow, what can I run away with? What can I get away with? And that's been fun. I'm really grateful to the people that kept the community going through the pandemic with Zoom dances or other events and tried to keep all of those things. I personally could not do a Zoom dance. It was like salt in the wound to me. I just, I think I logged on to one and didn't last 5 minutes. I was like, "No." It it just drove home how much we were missing. And I am so, so grateful to the community for coming back and vociferously saying, "No, we need this. We miss this. We want this." And working to make it happen and bring it back. And I'm so, so glad that it is here again.

**Mary Wesley** Oh, my gosh. Me too, I felt similarly about Zoom dancing. I called a few because I just wanted to see that moment and experience that moment. And yeah, I felt a lot of gratitude for the folks who were creating that little piece of continuity for these traditions and our communities. And it was it was very moving to see familiar faces, to see people in their homes dancing with stuffed animals and pillows or plants and, you know, and then extremely surreal to sort of mentally step back and see myself standing in my guest room with my laptop on like, a stool and a tower of books. And I put stuffed animals around me to, like, have, I don't know, some other...

**Luke Donforth** Yeah somebody, eyes...something...

**Mary Wesley** And I found that I did just a little bit get that feeling, like the feeling that you have when you're, you're in it. You're in that special caller place between the band, between the dancers, the crowd. It was so fleeting, you know, But it was just a little like,

"Oh, it's kind of right there," But so, yeah, so, so diluted. But it's so remarkable to me the way that folks found to work within those constraints.

**Luke Donforth** And I'm happy for the folks that it was more interesting for them.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, I think it was vital for a lot of people. We all had to find our different ways to keep going. I'm super curious to hear more from your choreographer brain.

**Luke Donforth** That's a dark hole. I don't know you want to crack open.

**Mary Wesley** Well we'll just like, you know, inch it open just a few. I mean, I wonder if you can just talk about your process a little bit and...

**Luke Donforth** Insomnia.

**Mary Wesley** Okay. Yes, clearly.

**Luke Donforth** Often, with the dolphin hey, there was a genesis idea of, like, "How do I get this cool thing? How do I make this transition? How do I, you know, work that in." And so some dances...and you know, I said that I've wrote 400 dances. I've got half a dozen different variations of how am I going to set it up so that getting into that dolphin hey feels...so that it works. That there is a logical continuity, a storyline, to the dance. And some of, you know, the half dozen that I have that I did that technically work....I don't know if you've ever seen Dr. Bob's random contra generator, like there was a website that you could like: "Give me a dance!" And it would give you a dance that technically worked. And usually they were crap. And I say that as somebody who's written a lot of crap. But the, you know, finding half a dozen different variations and like, okay two of those are worth workshopping. And then, all right of those two, this one seems to work better. Or both of these work. This one has this advantage. This one has that advantage. Can I come up with the third that kind of compounds those are do I need these to be separate, different things. So that's that's one thing is what's a move, what's a hook, what's a unique piece that I want to get. So, "Leave 'Em Hanging" has that. I was thinking, "What would it be to have an inside-out circle? And well, four people, an inside-out circle...like elbows and shoulders and wrists. Well, I've got to break that. Like, I don't want to completely constrain that. But what if we're circling facing out instead of circling facing in? And the entire dance grew out of that. What does that look like? And that particular part is the last half of B2, right? But I think that is probably one of my. Most collected dances. It's not the one that I've called the most, but of mine. But it is, it is one that I know is has made the rounds and it was just, "Oh, here's an idea." Here's an idea that I can kind of kick around.

And then other times it's...I don't like to call the same dance that I've called before when I go back to a place, you know? I don't think that other people notice. But if I have been to a hall and I'm calling more than once a year there, you know, I have a rule for myself. I don't want to call any dance that was a dance that I've called here in the last year or since the last time I've been here. Like, if I get to go back to Ottawa, it's been well,

because of the pandemic, it's been four years, you know, five years since I've been to Ottawa. I'm not going to call the dances that I went there the last time. And so that is one way that I keep fresh. But it also means I like to do the beginner workshop and I like my first dance after that orientation to logically flow and be a very accessible dance from that. And so I teach the progression in my orientation by having, you know, small groups of four balance the ring pass on to a new neighbor. Small group of four, balance the ring, pass on to a new neighbor. So I need a dance that ends, "You're back where you started, balance the ring, walk on to a new neighbor. Do-si-do that neighbor, swing that neighbor." Okay, so I'm at maybe 40% of the dance. But I don't want to call the same one that I did last time. And so I sat down and just methodically wrote, "All right, I could do, you know, larks allemand by the left. I could do circles, I could do this well..." And so I have a dozen first dances that are all glossary dances, and they have different names just so that I can keep track of which ones that I called last time. But that was a challenge for me to say, "How can I manipulate all of the exact same glossary things that I do in my orientation so that I have a successful first dance that is different than the successful first dance that I did 30 miles up the road last night. Because I did a tour where I'm, you know, Friday and Saturday or Thursday, Friday, Saturday or like, I'm going to all these little tiny dances and I don't want to call the same thing. So let me have something that both guarantees success, but also keeps me engaged and let me have a good second dance where I teach the chain to a neighbor because I feel like, well, if you're teaching a chain, it's better if it goes to somebody who isn't their partners, they have a chance of learning from different people and having these community transfers of knowledge.

And so I had to sit down and write a dozen different second dances for the chain. And you know, or "Oh, I want accessible beginner dances that don't have circles," because sometimes you're like, "I need the entire first half of my program to be accessible beginner dances. And I don't want every dance to have the circle to the left. And so let me make sure that I'm doing dances that have down the halls and back and then allemandes as opposed to a circle and then a swing, you know, these different transitions. And so thinking systematically, and I use a crutch, I use Will Loving's Caller's Companion, which is a software program. I don't know if any of the other callers on the podcast have mentioned it. And it feeds, it's a crutch in that it lets me search for dances. Like I want something that has a balance in the A2 but doesn't have any chains or heys. And so I can quickly pair down my dances and kind of go through and find things that way. And possibly it feeds into my keeping track of where the moves are in an evening so that I can make sure that I have that variety. And different callers use different systems and kind of, you know, they'll annotate their cards or kind of keep track and some people just keep it all in their heads. But I offload some of that to a software program and use that which allows me to find the next dance in that happy moment when the dancers have what they're doing. And when I first started calling, I would program an entire evening. And now I will often program an estimate of what I'm going to do for my first half with the ability to shift up or down as needed. And then during the break, I will often program my second half.

**Mary Wesley** When you're like, where do you position yourself when you're envisioning a new dance? Can you see it all in your mind's eye? Are you up and physically moving around? Do you have salt and pepper shakers? You know, how do you think through your movement.

**Luke Donforth** Yes.

**Mary Wesley** All the things.

**Luke Donforth** All the things. I will say, you know, at 2 a.m. when I'm lying in bed, I am further ahead getting out of bed and kicking it around that I am trying to walk it in bed, and my wife wouldn't put up with that. I have never woken her up to ask her to work through a dance with me, but I have utilized her, you know, the following morning or something like, okay I think this is the one that I want to talk through and I've got kids and I'm pulling them into it as well.

**Mary Wesley** Great. Yeah. You have a hands four, right?

**Luke Donforth** I have a hands four in my household and I have written dances inspired by my children. "Depositing Juices and Picking up Pears," which was when my child rolled an apple that she had half eaten across the floor. And yeah, there's a lovely down the hall, revolving doors figure, swap as couples come back up. I don't call it very often, but it's a fun dance. But I do have a hands four in my household now and it's important to me that my kids be exposed to contra dancing. You know we're we're go we went to Ogontz last year, the final year of Ogontz. We are planning on going to Agassi Village this summer. I hope to see all of you listening to this podcast there. As CDSS helps start a new iteration of that tradition. But my family has also given me, possibly because they were sick of me telling them what to do, little pegs, short and tall, decorated heads. Sofia made the pegs and then the kids decorated them so that I could tell this is the lark and this is the robin. You can't see, I'm talking with, my hands. I have a big one and a little one. And they live in a caller box. And sometimes I play with them and sometimes my kids play with them. They have occasionally tried to create dances. Nothing that I have been able to put on a floor yet. So sometimes it's lying in bed visualizing. Sometimes it's moving around. I will admit, as a...I'm a physics professor at the University of Vermont, I'm a teacher as I feel a lot of contra dance callers are. I know you've talked about math brain, you've talked about teacher brain with some of the other callers on the series. I fall asleep during physics colloquium. I will admit part of not going into a research track is that I really like teaching. I'm a lecturer. I focus on just the teaching and part of it is really liking teaching. Part of it is not really liking doing physics research and staying current on physics research. And so I would often doodle on pieces of paper that I was taking notes on colloquium, conference ideas that came to me. One of the contra dances that I wrote, Entangled in Monte Carlo, came out of a physics colloquium that I was trying to keep myself awake. And it was good research, it just I was a grad student and I was tired.

**Mary Wesley** Yes.

**Luke Donforth** So...you write contra dances. You know, it's like knitting, I think for some people. Like you just have to have something. And so I can go back and look at old notepads and be like, "Oh," you know, you come up with symbols. Like it's a dot in the middle of a semi-circle so you can see both which way their arms are facing and also, you know, how they are...to think about flow. And I think flow is a really important thing for me in contra dances. I really like a storyline, a connection to like, well, my body is doing this. And for me as a choreographer, it's important to dance both a lark and a robin role. When I go to dances and think about how does this feel for these people? How does this feel for these people? I remember calling down in D.C. that I'd written a dance and I called it, and a woman came up to me afterwards and she said, "Your dance is wrong. The lady should roll the gents away." And we were using Ladies and gents at the time, it was a while ago, "The ladies should roll the gents away instead of the gents rolling the ladies away. It feels way better." I'm like, "Okay." And just, you know, being reminded that you need to dance both parts. You need to think about how that feels to both parts. And so I am grateful that the community is moving in a way of inclusive dancing and encouraging people to be willing to dance both roles because I think it both gives dancers better situational awareness, and I think other choreographers are going to benefit from growing up kind of steeping in, "Oh, this is what it feels like from the side. This is what it feels like from this side."

## Thinking about Tradition

**Mary Wesley** Mm hmm. I'm curious, you talk about incorporating moves from swing, dance or English. How do you think about, like, the contra dance tradition? And, you know, at what point upon borrowing from from different genres, how do we ensure that it's still a contra dance? This is a total hypothetical.

**Luke Donforth** Yeah. I will admit I am not a traditionalist in the way that some practitioners of our tradition are. I remember being at the Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend and having an absolutely lovely dance with a wonderful partner to beautiful music and the end of the music came and I dipped my partner. And nobody chastised me, but they informed me that had Ralph Page still been there I would have been chastised and that this was you know a different thing. And it was like it, "It's what the music said. And I had my partner's permission. Y'all can butt out." And, you know, the folks there were certainly having that conversation with us in good fun. It was also, there was a news crew there and they videotaped us doing it. And so the news clip actually showed the dip in that. And so I will probably burn in traditionalists afterlife for, you know, for doing that. I fully anticipate that at some point I will have a "Get off my lawn whippersnappers" curmudgeonly-ness about me.

**Mary Wesley** In other words, like the tradition will continue to evolve to a point...

**Luke Donforth** I hope that tradition continues to evolve such that I am an old fogy and I hope that I am still dancing. And that I remember that I wanted to be an old fogy in this



evolving tradition. I have had the benefit. Of knowing a lot of people who have been doing contra dance music and calling longer than I've been alive and it would be excessively egotistical of me and rude to not listen to their experience and not find value in all they have done to keep this tradition alive and flourishing. That does not mean that we have an obligation to do it exactly as it was done 100 years ago. There are a lot of changes. There are a lot of things that are pendulum's, I think, that swing back and forth. I've talked to organizers of gender free dances that used to use "Arm bands" and "Bare Arms" and talking about, "Oh, yeah, we've been gender free technically for decades, but this was a gender free dance where all the gay men danced in this set and all the lesbians danced in that set because they didn't want to have anything to do with each other. And they were more segregated and separated than a modern dance that uses gents and ladies. And so for them, at that moment, that's what they needed. They needed a community where they could go and be and connect. And they worked to find something that gave them that space. And I'm so happy for them. I so hate "armbands" and "Bare Arms." It's such a terrible choice. I'm so glad that we've moved on to something else. Is larks and robins the be all end all? I don't know. But it's answering a need for some members of the dance community now, and I'm so grateful it's there.

**Mary Wesley** And I think, in essence what we sometimes forget is that the answering of a need is actually the function of tradition...

**Luke Donforth** Of the contra dance.

**Mary Wesley** Well and of tradition. That tradition is a dynamic, always moving process that's actually shaped by all of us, by all, all of these individuals. And you know, it is the tension between past and present and future and how something keeps its form, keeps its form as something recognizable, like this is still contra dancing, even though, oh, now this active and inactive thing is like barely even a thing. But, you know, all of those shifts over time were in response to needs or, you know, desires or tastes. And they were brought about by individuals, by dancers, by callers, by musicians. And, you know, that's partly what this podcast is about, just kind of looking at all those different pieces. And I by no means was trying to trap you by asking you about tradition, but it's like, tell me about your tradition, right? Because we each carry it forward in our own way.

**Luke Donforth** And I think one of the things that I've come to realize is what we think of the tradition being is not always an accurate representation of the history that we came from. That the stories we tell about what we do shift and what exactly it was and how it was framed... And this is not just contra dance. This is, this is humans living in the world, taking the stories and telling them to be good stories at the expense of complete accuracy or misremembering things, or having their own experience. And telling the story of their experience, which is held up as "The" experience, which is not an accurate reflection of the experience for other people, but is the one that was recorded and passed on. And so I am grateful to you, for this on the mic podcast and kind of archiving all the different ways. I don't actually think it's going to stop people from arguing that the way it was done in the 2020s was... Like, Yeah, yeah, I love democracy, it's a messy folk process. And I know people will have the things that are important to them that are

maybe not as important to somebody else and I freely admit, tradition is not my strength. And so when it comes to conversations about tradition, I will think about them, but I can't say, "Well, this is the tradition or this is the history." I'm like, this is my experience. I do hope the tradition of community coming together to connect to live music and moving to that music continues.

[ [Luke calling his own dance, If You Can Walk, You Can Dance](#) at the Feb. 2017 Mad Robin Contra Dance in Burlington, VT with music by [Maivish](#) ]

**Luke Donforth** Now communities connecting to music as a tradition. Excellent. What differentiates Contra dancing? There is one person facilitating what the dance is. That is different than swing dancing where individual partners are happening. But it is not different than square dancing or English dancing or Scottish dancing or, you know, a variety of other led dances. The thing that I value about the contra dance community specifically is that you can walk in and succeed. And so you don't need to take lessons you don't need to know a vernacular. You can walk in and if the caller is doing their job, you will have a successful experience dancing. Now, if you walk in at the 4 a.m. shift of the Dawn Dance, you're probably not going to have a successful experience. And so is the Dawn Dance part of the contra dance tradition? Absolutely. Because to support the dance community such that we can have our weekly and monthly dances, that anyone can find this tradition I think we need things for the people in it that are also answering deeper issues for them. So please don't feel that I am excluding the Dawn Dance from from this tradition. I do think it is a beautiful thing. The other thing that I think makes contra dancing a specific tradition outside of English or Scottish is the music. And we haven't talked a whole lot about music. I am not the most musical of callers out there. Again, different strengths, different weaknesses. But even within the contra dance music tradition, there's a lot of brands, there's a lot of diversity. And I think that's one of the great strengths of the contra dance tradition is that we have these different ways of expressing this music. Because it is about moving together to music and there's different types of music. And so those things are going to answer and feel different for some folks. Scottish, English has beautiful music, has a lot of overlap and similarities, doesn't have a swing. I like the swing. Do I need every dance to have a neighbor and a partner swing? No. Do I think that most contra dancers currently coming to regular contra dances expect neighboring partner swings? Yeah. Are there other opportunities for them to dance if they don't want that? Yeah. And so I don't feel like I need to steer a national conversation about swings because, well, people want to connect to music if they want the swings, come to contra. If you don't want swings, go to English. Start your techno English? I don't know.

**Mary Wesley** We got options.

**Luke Donforth** And, you know, connecting with people and getting excited about... "We could...!!" Great do it.

## The Mad Robins

**Mary Wesley** Right. Right. Which, like, brings me back to the Mad Robin Callers Collective, which you know we touched on briefly. But just as we've been talking I've been thinking about how, you know, it was a space for a group of us to learn to call, you know, have a group of compatriots to, you know, get feedback on walkthroughs and just have dancers to work with as you're trying to figure out this relationship between, "Oh, when I say these words, what do they do?"

**Luke Donforth** And playing the game with each other of being as deliberately interpretive...incorrectly interpretive as possible.

**Mary Wesley** Right. As literal...

**Luke Donforth** As literal as I am going to do what no one would ever do. Peter was really good at that.

**Mary Wesley** I know, I'm trying to think of an example like, uh, it's just like, as you're working through your word salad to kind of, like, pare it down your essential words, you know, it would be like, "Continue to the left," and someone just continues, like...out the door or something. Which would just make you think, "Oh, maybe I need an 'until' in there, "or something like that. But, you know, yes, so much opportunity there to grow as callers. But we also, I think, you know, without tooting our horn too much, had an effect on our dance community, on the larger dance community by being really transparent that we were in the learning process and really inviting people into that. I think when people heard, oh, this caller's collective is in charge of the dance tonight, and it's a group of people who are all at varying stages of learning to call. And I guess we're in on that now. Like, if we came to this dance, we are in on this group learning experience. And I think that was valuable.

**Luke Donforth** And it was, the community, they supported us so well. They gave so much and so much love and you know, I often say that organizing is a gift to the community and I stand by that. Organizing a dance is a gift to the community. And when we organized that dance, it was a gift to the community. But the community also gave us the gift of an incredibly supportive environment and cheering people on and people who I don't think ever called on any other stage but said, "Well, I want to try it," and I can't think of a better place to try it than here. And...yeah.

**Mary Wesley** And that I think is an essential part of the tradition, is that it's sort of...sometimes I say "open source" not knowing anything about coding and whether that's actually an accurate metaphor, but just the fact that you know, that the formulas are all shared the and someone can step in and participate sort of at any level. And that was the thing I loved about the Mad Robin Callers Collective dance series was that, yeah, you didn't have to decide that you were going to be a, you know, a traveling dance caller going to 20 states. Maybe you just wanted to see what it was like to call a couple of dances.

**Luke Donforth** You know, Sophia, my wife tried calling and was like, "Yeah, I could, but I don't want to. It's like driving a 20-foot bus and you don't know where the blind spots are," which is her experience of it and valid and not something that she enjoys, but she knows that. Um, I will say coming back to the history, so I started calling in Ithaca briefly. I came to Vermont, and then we had, you know, the Mad Robins and then you all kept it going while I moved first to Texas and then Connecticut and got to connect to those dance communities there. And I got to come back to Vermont. I was so excited. And by the time I was back, you and Peter who had kind of had it going for a while...

**Mary Wesley** Peter Johnson.

**Luke Donforth** Peter Johnson, thank you, had faded into other projects and other things. And Sophia and I, you know, had it going with help from various members of the community and other folks coming through. And that dance series closed. It wasn't actually one of the many that fell to the pandemic, but we had actually decided ahead of the pandemic happening that we've had a good run, but we didn't have a critical mass of people that were interested in trying to find that step. And for us, I was a new father at the time, there was a certain amount of, "If I keep doing this I will resent it." And so I stepped away from the organizing piece and I thought that there would just be other dances in the area. And then we had a pandemic, which really drove home how important it was to miss it. But I think also part of keeping this tradition alive is when you feel you can give, do and when you feel you can't, stop. And I joked earlier about, I look forward to being the old curmudgeon and having my whippersnapper moments. But I also I hope it's a long way off and I hope that I continue to do the parts that I find joyous so that I can bring my joy to the stage and that if it stops being fun, if it stops being joyful, I don't belong there because it's my job to facilitate joy and remembering, as traditions evolve and change, we do this to answer human need. And we do this for the joy of doing it and just keeping those two pieces and reminding myself, you know, I'm taking my kids to dance camp. I want them to have access to the joy but it's also important to me that it's a choice that they can make and they can't choose if they don't know. But if they do know, and they say no, well, I need to listen to that.

## Closing

**Mary Wesley** Right. Right. Well, to close, I sort of have three survey questions that I ask everybody. The first is feeling curious about your dance notation and kind of, "collecting" aspect of being a caller. So how do you keep your dance collection? You've mentioned "Callers Companion," which is, as you said, Will Loving's database.

**Luke Donforth** Yes Will Loving's database with a front end graphic user interface, a GUI, and so that is where I have the 1200 dances in my box. And I have multiple backups of that because it's a digital thing.

**Mary Wesley** So it's a virtual, yeah, it's a digital box?

**Luke Donforth** Yeah it's a software protocol that I can pass from computer to computer. And so there's a freeware version that you can kind of get and put 50 dances in if you're the type person that wants to, and I think it comes with ten dances in it already in it and a sample program. And it lets me not only see my dances, but also the programs that I last called them on. So that's how I know that I've called La Bastringue over 100 times. I can pull up the individual programs in there. In terms of collecting dances, I don't bring a computer to...well, I don't bring a laptop computer to every dance that I go to. If I'm at a dance and a caller calls a dance that I like...and I will say as a caller, it's important for me, to maintain my joy, to continue to go to other callers and dance. And not just to steal stuff!

**Mary Wesley** Absolutely.

**Luke Donforth** But to keep the joy to remember why we connect to this. I don't think I would be as good of a caller if I stopped dancing. And so I very much enjoy dancing. If I am at a dance and a caller calls a dance that I like, I will make a point of talking to the caller if I can, either then, at the break or via email afterwards and ask them, "Hey, I like this." If I liked it, I will probably remember it enough to write it down or enough of it to say my memory of the dance is, you know: this. And then you know, where did you get it? What's the name? If they didn't say it, sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. Is this the original version? Is this a modification that you made of their dance and kind of acknowledge to them that I am collecting from them. And I freely share my dances. I published them on the web for a while. I'm off social media these days but like, people write to me and like, "I heard about this thing," I'm like, "Oh yeah, totally." Chris Page, who I believe was on the Mic, has an online repository. And I said: "Here, have everything that I've written. If you're willing to organize it and codify it, more power to you." There's a lot of junk in there but...so for me it's a very digital process. And, you know, people will ask me, "Oh, what did you...I really like to dance," and like, "Oh, let me email it." Or, now that everyone carries around phones and that are computers and cameras, I will often pull it up on my computer and just let them take a picture of it. I will say from my own experience if I take in more than a couple of dances at any one time, I don't integrate them into my gestalt, my thought process. And so when a caller says, "I loved your entire program, could you send me your entire program," I'll say, "I can. I would encourage you to think about one to maybe three dances and collect those, because if you get 12 new dances all at once, you're probably not processing them in a way that is actually going to put them into your brain in a useful way." Now. If they're using a digital database like I am, then they can search for it later. Maybe that's fine, But I do for myself and when people ask me for dances, I often like...let me give you two. Let me give you three. Not you know...I have all 12, if you really want all 12 for some reason I will give them to you. But my own process is usually maybe I get one, maybe I get two out of an evening.

**Mary Wesley** And does part of you feel at all, I don't know, protective of your dance...of your set? If someone asks for a full set, do you feel like, "You know, I kind of put this together, I crafted this. I'd prefer not to give..."

**Luke Donforth** No, I...

**Mary Wesley** It's a fine line.

**Luke Donforth** Yeah, it's. You could, you could take my set and call it, and it would be a different experience. It would be different music, it would be a different hall. It would be people would have different partners. I don't feel like, you know, I. I built this Lego ship out of Lego. This is my Lego ship. It's, here are the pieces. Here are the you know, here's the ship. If you want the ship, I'll give you the ship. But I guess I feel like I always. M crafting the program in response to the whole that the idea that somebody would take a program and assume that it translates to a different thing, like I just. Yeah I don't know that I've ever called the same program twice, so I can't imagine why somebody would take a program and call my program. I take it back. There are probably in the...I don't know, a hundred weddings or something that I've done, I don't know about that many maybe 50 like you do three, maybe four dances at a wedding. I've probably call it the same wedding program.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, that checks out.

**Luke Donforth** That checks out. But like...

**Mary Wesley** Because often it's like, three dances.

**Luke Donforth** Yeah, it's three dances and a waltz. But yeah, outside of that kind of small thing, like the monthly family dance that I'm running, I've been running for four months. It's a family dance. And I've done a different program every month because it's different people. But I mean, they're all family dances. So yeah, I would share my program, but I would do it with a quizzical, "Are you sure it's going to do what you want?" Like, if you want to talk about structuring a program and having a thing like I'm happy to share the program to have as a substrate for that conversation, but I guess I...and I think this actually came out of working with the Mad Robins and us wanting to be like, alright, "Who's teaching the half hey, before the actual hey? Who's got the chain?" And when we would structure. Like, oh, it's your first time we're going to put you either late in the first half or early in the second half while the dancers are fresh. And we're going to give you a dance where a more experienced dancer has taught all of the moves for your first time so that you can actually feel the different that you can feel the calling. Because, and I'm sure I know many callers on your program have talked about this, the difference between calling and teaching and programing. Like these are three different skill sets for a contra dance caller. And so thinking systematically about programming and setting new callers up to succeed and so having this like, all right we have structured this evening so that the person calling for their first time can do a dance they're excited about but doesn't have to teach more than a petronella.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. It's a whole other level of programming for a group of callers and a group of learning callers. And it is really, it's actually a great way to sort of address that

paradox that you've mentioned a couple of times, that actually skilled dancers are better to pair with a brand new caller, versus brand new dancers really benefit from a skilled caller. Ok, gigs. Do you have any pre- or post- gig rituals, things that you do to kind of get ready or or wind down after a gig?

**Luke Donforth** Again, I'm going to put out that there, there are three in my main categories of gigs. So, you know, weddings, community dances, harvest festivals, school dances, that kind of thing is a very different mental space than a weekly or monthly contra dance with a bunch of regular dancers is a very different space than a weekend dance you know...a dance weekend. And with dance weekends you know, the tradition is you fly home and you're exhausted but joyous. And one of the things I love about dance weekends is getting to connect with other callers. Like going out naturally, "Oh, I get to share a stage with Mary Wesley. What? I get to share a stage with Mary Wesley. That's awesome. And, you know, geek out behind stage, and the horse trading about, "Well, I want to call that Linda Leslie dance." "Okay, well, you can have that Bob Isaacs..." You know, that kind of stuff. And so, and also getting to dance. Like when I go to a dance weekend, I probably get to dance in a way that when I'm doing a regular dance, I am probably not. And so the tradition for a weekend, I would say is the travel home and just kind of glowing in that, that sense of steeping in it for a while.

**Mary Wesley** Slash sleep deprivation.

**Luke Donforth** Slash sleep deprivation, yeah. Whereas you know, if I'm. If I'm on a tour. Where I've I've gone, you know, to a place and I'm not driving home that evening it's oh, post dance who's hosting me and having those. Conversations and, you know, figuring out where we're going and kind of settling in and having. Often it's organizers that are hosting you, and so you get some of those, you know, organizer How is the dance community? How's the health of the dance community, the national conversation. Who's hot? Who should I get through? Like the kind of the shop talk about running a dance is often what happens after a dance for me until the end of the tour where I have that drive home. Having lived in California and now the East Coast and having friends in different time zones, I will say when I'm driving home after a dance and it's like, it's 11:30 and I've got a two hour drive for, you know, coming back from Boston, a four hour drive. Who do I know who's going to be awake in California right now? And so I have maintained friendships and utilized that time difference to be like, I'm going to call a buddy that's going to talk to me and help me stay awake so I can get home safely. You know, if I need to pull over a nap in the car, I will. But that is one of the side effects of like, all right, well, it's a three, three hour drive starting at 11:30 at night but I get to talk to Mick and Sarah, so that'll be awesome.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. Who can give me 100 miles?

**Luke Donforth** Who can give me 100 miles, right, well, they're only 2 hours off, so I should call them first, and then I'll tap into my California friends. Yeah. If there's any contra dancers in Hawaii who want to be on my speed dial, let me know.

**Mary Wesley** Do you ever call other callers who are on their way home from another gig?

**Luke Donforth** I have occasionally sent text messages to people. Um, the lovely Cornwall dance that used to happen ended earlier and there would be evenings where like, "I'm driving home because I got to do the lovely Cornwall dance and you don't get to start driving home for another 45 minutes." I think I have had that text exchange on both sides, actually a couple of times.

**Mary Wesley** I remember in the early days keeping track of when there would be multiple. Robins out at different gigs. When we, when some of us started flying solo, we really did try to find as many bird, sort of puns as possible.

**Luke Donforth** You're saying "We" there. I think that was you.

**Mary Wesley** Was that me? What!?

**Luke Donforth** Yes, I think there is a penchant for callers to lean in to bad puns and such. It's why they shouldn't let collars ever name a band.

**Mary Wesley** I don't know, but musicians do pretty well themselves on that front. Okay, My closing question, a little social experiment. If you know, do you identify as an introvert or an extrovert?

**Luke Donforth** I feel comfortable interacting with other people when there is a substrate to base it on. I host a weekly game night, happens in different people's houses but board games for me are fun. But it's also a way to have a structured social interaction and so I enjoy getting together with people. And when there isn't something to talk about, we can play the game. And when there is something to talk about, we talk about it, and play the game. But for me, one of the strengths, one of the underlying pillars of the contra dance community is it gives people structure to a social interaction that might otherwise be awkward. You've walked into a room with 40, 60, 100 strangers and you're going to get in their personal space and look them in the eye. And it's hard to imagine doing that without the structure and the social pressure, the social normalization, that is a contra dance. And so. I find it hard to claim that I am an introvert when I enjoy that. But I know that part of why I enjoy it is that it has been structured in a way that introverts and extroverts can succeed and feel comfortable. I don't know that I've answered your question.

**Mary Wesley** No, well I mean, you're hitting on all the reasons I'm curious about it. Callers have to interact with a large group of people. They're on stage. I'm often saying they're "the loudest voice in the room," you know, And so that just always makes me curious about how they relate to two other humans on the whole. And that is one set of categories that we have to kind of explore that and I've heard a lot of people point to what you just described. And certainly for me, I definitely feel like an introvert and I definitely relate to that feeling of, "Ooh it's overwhelming to be with a lot of people, but



it's so nice. It's so nice to be amongst that crowd and have this kind of structure to lean on. It's very comforting.

**Luke Donforth** So, you know, my other job, I teach physics and I'll get up in front of students who are not nearly as excited to be in my physics classroom as counter dancers are to be in the dance hall and I can be welcoming and engaging and my same teaching philosophy of wanting people to succeed with less music there, but still wanting them to feel successful is there. And you know, valid to say that's an extroverted side of me. But that is not all of who I am.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Luke Donforth** But it is something that I enjoy getting to do and be and facilitate.

**Mary Wesley** Well, we are lucky to have you. I feel lucky to be in your orbit here and to share a home dance community and, a last plug to check out the *ABCs of Contra Dancing*. Thank you. It is a great read. It is beautifully illustrated by Sarah Hirsch.

**Luke Donforth** Yeah. And it wouldn't have happened without the incredible support of the country dance community. And it was a gift back to them for my kids, but also a gift to everyone. And I'm so grateful for their support there. And in all the ways that let me connect with people and help them connect with music.

**Mary Wesley** Nice. Well, thanks for dropping by.

**Luke Donforth** Good to see you.

**Mary Wesley** Thanks so much to Luke for talking with me and make sure to check out the show notes today to get more information about where you can buy the *ABCs of Contra Dancing*!

This project is supported by CDSS, The Country Dance and Song Society and is produced by Ben Williams and me, Mary Wesley.

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

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Happy dancing!

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