

# Transcript - From the Mic Episode 16 - Catherine Burns

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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.

## Catherine Intro

**Mary Wesley** Hello everyone! Welcome back to From the Mic. Today I'm thrilled to share my interview with Catherine Burns, of Ottawa, Ontario, the first time we've heard from a Canadian caller on this podcast!

Catherine has been at the heart of the Ottawa contra dance scene for decades. Born in Switzerland to Canadian parents Catherine traveled the world in her youth, following the diplomatic career of her parents. As an adult she sought to put down roots in one place, and what better way to do that than through traditional music and dance?

In the early 1980s she worked alongside her husband, Gord Peeling, who helped form the Old Sod Folk Music Society with musician Ian Robb. The group promoted traditionally-based folk performance in Ottawa into the late 90s when they added a regular, local contra dance to their offerings. Catherine, who had encountered contra dancing when visiting ales with her Northwest morris team, Hogs Back morris, became the house caller.

The rest is history! Catherine has been a steady presence in the Ottawa dance scene since its beginnings, helping to mentor new callers and helping to shape a warm and welcoming community in her chosen home town. I learned in this interview that as of July 2023, Catherine has stepped down from the dance organizing committee to enjoy some well deserved rest and spend more time with her family and grandchildren. She's truly an inspiration. Here's Catherine.

## Beginnings

**Mary Wesley** Catherine Burns, welcome to From the Mic. I'm really happy to see you.

**Catherine Burns** Thank you. Happy to be here.

**Mary Wesley** Yes. And as we were just saying as we were getting things set up, this podcast is trying to talk to contra and square dance callers from a really wide geographic range. And I haven't yet made it up to Canada, so to speak. I wish I was there with you in Ottawa, but we're joining virtually today. I'm really excited to get to talk with you a little bit about your experience, your dance community there in Ottawa. Lots of things that I haven't

gotten to talk to you about despite running into you at dances over the years. So thank you so much for joining us!

**Catherine Burns** My pleasure.

**Mary Wesley** Well, I often really just like to start at the beginning and hear how you came into the world of traditional music and dance. Was it something you encountered growing up? Something as a young adult? Give us the where the story started a little bit.

**Catherine Burns** Well it's not something I encountered growing up because I grew up here and there. My father was in the diplomatic corps, so I grew up here and there, but I've been in Canada since I was at university. So it all came through meeting Ian Robb that many people know I'm sure. A concertina player and great singer with Finest Kind, and my husband Gord wanted to learn how to play the concertina, so he went to the Folklore Center and asked who could teach the concertina? And the only person they knew was Ian. So Gord and Ian got together and quickly learned, as Ian says, he was not a good teacher and as Gord says, he was not a good student, but they struck up a friendship. And then we were in Toronto for a couple of years, and when we came back Ian had started to put on some traditional concerts, bringing musicians, mostly from the U.K. So we got involved in that and that became the Old Sad Folk Music Society, and we put on concerts for quite a while. And then in addition to that, we started a Northwest Morris team. You know, the clogging one?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah!

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, so that was great. We started to go to morris ales where there was usually a dance at night. So that was the first time I'd been to a contra dance. Really enjoyed that.

**Mary Wesley** Do you remember, which ale? Was it the Midwest Ale? Or Marlboro?

**Catherine Burns** We were the first mixed team allowed to go to Marlboro, which was an honor, I'll tell you.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, that's an historic moment for sure.

**Catherine Burns** Yes, something we're very proud of. We're called Hogs Back Morris, because that's where the Rideau River comes over, it's called the Hogs Back, in module. And then, you know, the morris team, some people left, some people got tired of it. We were teaching new people. So we're thinking, "You know what? Enough with performance dance. Let's do some community dance." So we got together in a small community hall, and we already had musicians and various of us tried calling. Some people were better at it. Some people, you know had a...you have to strike that tone, right? Where you're telling people, but not, you know, it has to be in a very friendly...and you can't get upset if people do the wrong thing; that's not going to go well for you. But anyway, I really took to it and so we started this little dance, contra dance, and some of the English country dancers in Ottawa were helping us, too. So we kind of mixed it up and then we started this dance series in the early nineties, which was the Old Sod Band, which was Ian Robb...it was a big band, so they never paid very much! Ian Robb, Philip Murphy, Tim Cutts, Ann Downey. At the time, I think Doug Hierlihy was playing. He played the hammer dulcimer. Various people moved in and out, but it was basically, so we had that band and so for 20 years maybe it was just The Old Sod Band and me.

**Mary Wesley** So you have some experience!

**Catherine Burns** Yeah! But we did that once a month and about ten years in, I think John Argus said to me, "We need two dances a month!" And I said, "Okay, start another one!" So he did. And he brought in more visiting bands. So we had both. And then about 12 years ago, we combined them both to make our contra dance once a month and, you know, such a great organization. So and that's what it's been in the last 15 years, I guess. 13 something. Who knows? Something like that? So then I started to call just occasionally, because we had people like you coming.

**Mary Wesley** Oh yeah. One of my favorite dances to visit. And I hope to visit it again.

**Catherine Burns** Yes. Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** As we all know, things are, we're all getting back on our feet in that way. Yeah, it's, it's definitely part of like the Northwest Circuit for sure.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, I know. We haven't had...well, because musicians haven't been able to cross the border until the last little while, without you know, vaccinations and paperwork. And then our border was closed right to the U.S. for so long. So and also, you know, whether we can pay a fair wage to people who have to travel right now.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Catherine Burns** So we're just relying on local bands.

**Mary Wesley** Kind of going back to your roots. It sounds like you started that way.

**Catherine Burns** Well, there's still an Old Sod Band, only now they're called "Odds and Sods" because it's whoever...Ann Downey and Tim Cutts basically, and Phillip can...and Ian Clark can get to play with them. So they'll just play one or two dances, I mean. Yeah. So that's the long origin story in Ottawa. All because Gord wanted to learn the concertina.

**Mary Wesley** So you're, right and you're very much at the at the center of it in a lot of ways. And and so backing up a little, did you grow up in Canada?

**Catherine Burns** I grew up, I was born in Switzerland. My parents are Canadian, were Canadian. My dad was from Winnipeg, my mom's from Toronto, and he was in the war and then when he got, when you're...discharged? There is a proper word. Anyway, it was in Kingston, and he and his buddies just walked over to Queen's University in Kingston and because we had, as you did in the U.S. right? The Veterans Act, for free education. And then he and his buddies all heard there were jobs in the Foreign Service and they all got on a train and came to Ottawa. So, and he met my mother at Queen's. So they were posted in Switzerland, which is where I was born. And we were in London for four years, oh before that, we were in Sri Lanka, then we were in London for four years, then California and D.C. then...and by the way, I can still pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. Four years in school there...

**Mary Wesley** Every day you had to say it.

**Catherine Burns** Yes, and, you know, my dad said, "Is it okay if they just stand out of respect but not say because they're not actually American?" "No, sir. They must say it." So I can still say it. And then we were in Geneva for three years and then back in Ottawa. And then I was at university after that.

**Mary Wesley** Wow, what a journey.

**Catherine Burns** We lived in, by the time I was in grade eight, I'd lived in five countries and been in seven schools, so... well adjusted.

**Mary Wesley** Well traveled, yes! And so in all of that, moving around and living in different places and communities and cultures, you know, even though you weren't doing contra dance or, you know, the kind of trad scene that you're into now, were you aware of music and dance? What was kind of the the environment that you grew up in in that respect?

**Catherine Burns** No, not really, because I was you know, I was in primary school and it was in middle school here in Ottawa, and then I was in high school in Geneva. So even when you're in another country...when we were in Switzerland we were, I wouldn't say we were very involved in Swiss cultural life, right? So, my parents always tried to be you know, we lived in the community, we didn't live in a separate area or anything. And then when I was at university, not really. I mean, it's thanks to the community here, that was already here, the traditional musicians that just got me.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, and then...so sort of since university have you mostly been based in Ottawa, then?

**Catherine Burns** Yes, we, Gord and I lived in Toronto for three years, and then we moved back here. So, yes, we've been in this house for 42 years. I was like, "I'm staying here!"

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. Do you think you kind of craved that after a very different experience in your formative years?

**Catherine Burns** Some kids who grow up in military families or diplomatic families, some kids keep on moving. They just yeah, that's part of them. And others are like, yeah, I'm here and I'm not going anywhere. So I think, yes, I fall in that category.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. And then you've built a whole community around yourself, it sounds like through the music and dance scene.

**Catherine Burns** Well, not around me. More...

**Mary Wesley** Not just you, right! But you became part of one.

**Catherine Burns** Yes. Well, that's it, right? That's...I never...you know, you're getting into some deep psychological stuff here.

**Mary Wesley** We do not have to!

**Catherine Burns** It's probably why, in all my travels and changing schools you know, I didn't have like a strong group of friends even in all that time. So, and that community is what I have here. Because when we moved to California, we went from London to California, L.A., Pasadena, my parents put us in public school, and then the next year, they

put us in private school. And then we moved to Washington, and they believe in public school, so they put us in public schools. And then they put us in private school. So in those four years I was in four schools. So it's, and you're, you know, seven, eight, nine years old, so.

## **Bringing community and contra dance to Ottawa**

**Mary Wesley** And so, is there anything that you recall about your first encountering contra dancing at the morris ales? Do you remember who was leading it and what the scene was? I'm kind of curious, you know, those early?

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, So that was Marlboro. And then we used to go to the London Ale and the Toronto Ale. But I think Marlboro was the only one we went to in the US. Who was there? I don't know, Paul Eric Smith I think and that whole, the Marlboro Men. Tony...

**Mary Wesley** Tony Barrand, yes.

**Catherine Burns** With those guys. Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** And then you said you felt drawn to do the kind of dancing that was less a display dance or a performance and more participatory. And how did that play out as you started up with Old Sod and finding the hall? And how did you get people to come, you know?

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. How did we get people to come? We just started off slowly and the word got out. You know Ottawa, it might be a million people, but it's, it's also a fairly small town in many ways. And that traditional community, I think we put up signs at the Folklore Center and we had a mailing list for concerts. So, you know, that's not an automatic thing that someone hears the music and wants to dance, but we got enough people and then, you know, for many years we had it, I can't remember which Saturday it was maybe the second Saturday, but every month in the same place in a church hall downtown. And so people knew we were there. The challenge for me, which was a good thing, was if it was me every time I had to have new dances. You know, people can't come and say, "Oh, yeah, same program." You know, people do notice. So, and the Callers Box did not exist at that time.

**Mary Wesley** You couldn't just type in something that you were interested in. Right, so how were you building your repertoire?

**Catherine Burns** Well, yeah, I had...well, the books like Becky Hill, Jim Flaherty, who else? There were a bunch.

**Mary Wesley** Ted Sannella maybe?

**Catherine Burns** Ted Sannella.

**Mary Wesley** Larry Jennings would have come along.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. And Tony Parkes. Tony Parkes was my hero pretty much. His book helped me so much.

**Mary Wesley** So his book on calling?

**Catherine Burns** On how to be a caller. And I remember where was it? I think I was at NEFFA dancing and, "Oh, my gosh, I'm swinging with Tony Parkes!" And of course, I'm like, "Ahhh!" And then I completely messed up. Right? We were supposed to do something and I'm doing the wrong thing.

**Mary Wesley** He is kind of a rock star.

**Catherine Burns** Oh, yes. So, you know, I had to go to Old Songs and go to the dances and sit at the side and write down the dance or ask the caller. So I had to be out there collecting dances, which was great for me. But no, the kids have it easy Mary.

**Mary Wesley** It's true, though it's almost overwhelming the amount of material at one's fingertips now. There is something about, you know, collecting from the dance floor, especially, you know, having done a dance. Felt it in your body and realizing, okay, I like this, and add it to the box.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. Well, one of my favorite dances is one that you called here: Birmingham's by Gary Nelson.

**Mary Wesley** Gary Nelson? Yup, I love that dance. And I got it when Adina Gordon called it somewhere. I thought, that's a great dance. I know, some people are really good about tracing those kind of lineages of like where, you know, writing down where... Do you do that? Do you keep track of where you get dances?

**Catherine Burns** I usually on my card I'll put, like on my Birmingham's and I have "From Mary Wesley" on it just to remind me. So I like to finish a dance with that because you end up swinging your partner.

**Mary Wesley** Exactly. Yeah. And so, you know, part of what I'm just kind of curious about are all the individual perspectives on being a caller and also especially kind of how that's shaped by the different places and communities where someone calls. And you have such a strong home community so you know but it sounds like you've also gone further afield to dance or to attend these festivals. NEFFA, and Old Songs and Flurry and things like that. So you're sort of doing this cross-pollinating and then coming back home to cultivate things. So how would you describe the Ottawa dance scene or ecosystem? And are there things about it that stand out to you or that feel unique when you go elsewhere? Give us a little insider view on Ottawa.

**Catherine Burns** I feel we have a very welcoming community and we have a very egalitarian community, too. You know, in the past, years ago, certain dancers would say, "Could we have a dance just for the experts?" And we would always say no, because that was never our philosophy. Our philosophy was always accessible to everybody any time. And nobody should feel unwelcome. And the thing about our dances, we always have five, six, seven, eight new people every time. Some of them stick and some don't. So you can't, you know, you have to choose your material to be interesting and yet not too complex. But I think, I mean, I'm not part of a lot of other communities. I called a bit, like 20, 30 years

ago, I called in Syracuse and here and there and we called in, oh, what's the one in Vermont?

**Mary Wesley** Montpelier?

**Catherine Burns** Yes. Thank you. And that's that hall, Right. The Grange?

**Mary Wesley** The Capital City Grange. Yeah. It's still there.

**Catherine Burns** I have a good story about that if you want to hear it.

**Mary Wesley** I would love to hear it. That's my home dance hall.

**Catherine Burns** Awesome, it's a lovely hall. Well the Old Sod Band were always, you know, "Can we play this? Can we play that?" And I'd say "No, you can't play that." They love the the Reel de Béatrice, which is a three part tune. I'm like, "No, you can't." "Well, can you write a dance?" This is the only dance I've ever written. And it was so they can play the Reel Béatrice. So I'm teaching the dance at the Grange and I get to the end of the B part and I just keep going, and they're like, "No, no, no, no, no." The dancers!

**Mary Wesley** They're like, "This can't be right!"

**Catherine Burns** "No, just wait!" So was great. That was fun. They enjoyed it. That's the only dance I've ever written. Do you write dances?

**Mary Wesley** I don't. I think I tried to write one once, and I just, you know, I've talked to some people who just write...I just interviewed Luke Donforth, who just writes them, you know, practically in his sleep. And I think I just sort of felt like, one, there's so much out there and, and two it's just not, it doesn't seem to be something that's sort of a knack or comes naturally to me. I really enjoy just getting to explore and see what everybody else has written. And so, yeah, but it is, you know, it is kind of a curious part of the contra dance tradition is that there is this possibility to innovate. So like you said, there was this opportunity to make your band happy, which is always important. And you know, now that I think about it, I certainly know of maybe a handful of other three part dances that probably emerged for similar reasons of musicians saying, you know...it is, that is one thing about contra dancing is that you do have these constraints which, you know, can lead to a lot of creativity. Like, what can I fit into the 32 bars? But then I understand from the musician's point of view, wanting to bust out sometimes.

**Catherine Burns** Yes. Yeah no, I've never written any other dance because I've never felt, you know, I don't know, yeah, the inspiration to do it really. Like you said, there's so many great dances.

[ *Clip of [Catherine calling the dance Trip to Margaree](#) by Sue Rosen at the Ottawa Contra Dance in 2012 with music by The Old Sod Band. ]*

## **Working with the Old Sod Band**

**Mary Wesley** And so when you started out, you would work with...you and Old Sod Band were really a team?

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. Yes, pretty much. I think there was seven of them at one time. It settled down to six. A lot of musicians. There's a good story because, you know, Ian Clark? You know, Lynn and Ian?

**Mary Wesley** I know of them, yes.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, he's a great guitar player. He plays in the Old Sod Band. The regular Philip who's a quiet spoken man from Dublin. He was guitar player forever and he had to miss a dance. So they asked Ian Clark to play, to sit in for Philip and then Ian's been in the band ever since. So there were two guitar players after that. And Philip always called Ian, "The other fella."

**Mary Wesley** The other fella.

**Catherine Burns** The other fella. So he's been in the band for 15, 20 years or something. He's still the other fella.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, and that sounds like it was a big band. That's a big sound you can get from five or six musicians there.

**Catherine Burns** The quality of their musicianship. Like, I don't think...we would say, "Do you think people in Ottawa know exactly what they've got here as a house band?" I mean, they were amazing. I mean, Ian Robb is not playing because of his arthritis in his fingers. And to play, he can accompany himself on songs, but to play like that for so long, you know, to a whole band is too hard on him. So it's you know, some of them have retired, but it was just the sound. I just loved, loved, loved standing in front of that and hearing that music, you know?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, isn't that the best part as a caller to stand up there with the with the musicians?

**Catherine Burns** And sometimes I'm like, "Oh, yes, what!?"

**Mary Wesley** Right, you're just dancing away.

**Catherine Burns** They're like, "Are we changing the tune yet?"

**Mary Wesley** Like, "Oh, I was just grooving out." Yeah.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** So what was the...in addition to getting to stand next to the band, what other things kind of drew you to keep learning dances and keep calling? So people try it and they're like, "Well, that's nice, but I'm going to keep dancing," you know?

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I like dancing too, for sure. Yeah, I don't know. I just, you know, you're standing up there, you're full of the music and people are smiling and you're just watching people. And then, you know, maybe you have to help people a little bit, get back on the mic and help... there's a little scattering over here and you have to start calling again. And I'm always watching them to make sure, you know, because I try to drop out as soon as I can. They're not there to listen to me, they're there to dance to the music. But, you know, keep an eye on everything. So then I'm just watching and it's just great.



**Mary Wesley** And what has your other career been? Do you do teaching or kind of have a leadership role in other settings in your life?

**Catherine Burns** I was a teacher of English as a second language. And then I stayed home with my kids until the youngest was, what was she, ten or something like that. And then my friend Val Robb had bought a drapery business with a friend. And another friend was her accountant, and they were still writing everything in books. And Trudy, the accountants said, "No, no, you have to use QuickBooks." And I said, "Oh well I'll come in and put the data in for you if you want to get it started." 15 years later...

**Mary Wesley** So you're, you're the "other fella" of the drapery business!

**Catherine Burns** So I worked part time, you know, a couple of days for them. And then I worked also as a part time bookkeeper for a couple of other small businesses. So that's what I ended up doing, just filling in, kind of. But teaching is what I enjoy.

**Mary Wesley** So that makes sense that you would have a bit of that foundation in there when you're...

**Catherine Burns** Yeah that and numbers are good when you're a caller.

**Mary Wesley** It's true. Yes there is some math, there's some counting. And so you mentioned Tony Parkes obviously being a big influence. Did you have other mentors, and in particular kind of like in the Ottawa community or farther afield in Canada, who were some of the other folks here who were kind of in the ecosystem?

**Catherine Burns** As callers?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. You know, like, we were pretty well self taught. And I would see, because, you know, it's not a tradition in our country, contra dance. So there's a group in Toronto and their group scattered here and there, but it's not...I mean in the Ottawa Valley it's step dancing you know is the dance of choice. All our daughters were step dancers. And then that's competitive, which isn't always...

**Mary Wesley** So is that Irish step dancing?

**Catherine Burns** Ottawa Valley step dancing.

**Mary Wesley** Ottawa Valley. Okay, I do not know about this tradition.

**Catherine Burns** There's a whole dance, you've got double clackers on your toes, so you "da-dit-da-dit-da-dit," and it's way looser than Irish, right? It's very, kind of a cross...Ilan had a good term for it. I can't remember. But you know how Irish you have to be straight? Yeah. It's not so much like that. And it's the double tap. You've got the clickety clack on your shoes. So, and there's always like fiddle and step fencing competitions all around the Ottawa Valley. The fiddle players have to play a jig, a reel, and then a waltz. And then they would play for the step dancers, you know, the five year olds all the way up, and the group dancing. And so they all did that. So it's the music, but not contra dancing.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, that's. And this is where I probably have some homework to do to be a bit more well versed and some of the other, you know, kind of local traditions and practices in Ontario. You know, Quebec, I live in Vermont, which borders Quebec, and there's obviously a whole host of music and dance traditions there. I'm familiar with the Maritimes, but you know, then when you're going going west from Quebec, I have to imagine that there that there were also some social dance traditions that would have come with settlers, probably some square dancing and other social dance. It wouldn't have been called contra dance.

**Catherine Burns** But yeah, there's certainly square dancing in Ottawa. No, it's not like in some communities in the Maritimes where you go to the dance hall and they're doing dance number two.

**Mary Wesley** They're doing the dance. Yeah. Or the other dance.

**Catherine Burns** Dance number three and yeah, right. So yeah. You should look for some videos of Ottawa Valley step dancing.

**Mary Wesley** I certainly will. Yeah, we'll have to share some.

**Catherine Burns** I can't remember with how Ian described it. A cross between Fred Astaire and something.

**Mary Wesley** Oh, wow. Can't wait to see.

**Catherine Burns** It's much showier in a sense.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. Oh, how cool. And so then when you were introducing contra dancing, it was sort of a new kind of thing?

**Catherine Burns** Nobody....

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, okay.

**Catherine Burns** There was an English group, English dance group here that's been going for 50 years. It's an international dance group also that's been going for a long, long time. And they would occasionally do contra dance. International, they would occasionally do a contra dance.

**Mary Wesley** So, yeah, thinking more about the your role as the caller, I mean, there's obviously a teaching element, but, you know, when you're getting up on stage, getting ready to to lead a group of people, do you have any kind of guiding principles or ways of thinking about it that you've developed over the years?

**Catherine Burns** Well, I try to be humorous.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. You mentioned kind of a lightness, especially when people are brand new to it...

**Catherine Burns** Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** ...can go a long way.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. So, you know, it's funny some callers might think more about the dance in the sense that, you know, when they're choosing dances, "Oh, this looks a really interesting dance to teach and do." And I'm always trying to think of it from the point of view of the dancers. You want it to be interesting, but I don't go for really a lot of complexity. I don't really go for straight easiness either, it's got to be interesting to the really more experienced dancers. But yeah, the really complex ones are not my bag at all. But interesting, like if I look through my box, there are way more complicated dances in here that I used to call regularly, that I now don't. And I'm not sure why. I'm not sure if it's because I'm not calling every month so I'm not...or if it's because we're getting a lot of new people so I don't want to...or it's because I'm doubting whether I can teach it well enough anymore. So, you know, I hate when the dance falls apart...

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. And I mean, I think we are, you know, all of us have had to do a big restart, for dancers, for callers, for musicians and organizers. It's totally understandable that...I think I still have dances that I'm like, I mean, yeah, sort of the same thing. I'm like, "I know I used to call this..."

**Catherine Burns** Yes.

**Mary Wesley** I'm not sure if I'm ready.

**Catherine Burns** I know, so...and then we're larks and robins here. So, you know, I'm pretty good at that now. I don't think I fall back into the old terms very often, if at all now. But that's also part of, you know, I'm teaching something complex, and keeping it...you know, Michael Dyck, who works with Chris Page? He lives in Ottawa.

**Mary Wesley** Oh, I didn't know that. So, Michael Dyck is the one who worked with Chris Page to create the Caller's Box.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** Which is a database, an amazing tool to look up dances. You know, you don't even have to know the name of the dance, you could just look for all the dances that have Petronella bounces, or dances that have wavy lines, but not a hey, or not A hey in the B! Yeah. It's just it's mind boggling.

**Catherine Burns** What I love too, is that they have the links to so many videos. Yeah, I'm planning a dance, even if it's a dance I've called many times. I like to watch it just to see. Really super helpful. But I always liked...they moved here, Michael and June when they retired and they looked here and there in Canada to see which dance community they liked. She's an artist, June and they chose Ottawa. And so they've been here...I don't know if they've been here a decade yet, but I would be calling and I would see Michael...

**Mary Wesley** Writing, writing, taking notes...

**Catherine Burns** Oh, it's my great but impossible wish to call it dance that he does not have the database.

**Mary Wesley** Oh, that's a good...it's good to have a quest.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, good to have a goal.

**Mary Wesley** And so, yeah. You mentioned larks and robins being a transition. And it's true, I think if you're still, you know, in the process of kind of needing to make sure you do that little switch in your head, I certainly haven't, like, changed over all of my cards.

**Catherine Burns** No.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. Another advantage to computers is it's probably easier to switch those out. But, you know, yeah, it's terminology that's becoming more and more widespread. And so it feels like we're all getting a chance to get up to speed and be able to do that well. Are there are there other changes in that you've observed in your local dance community, you know, either from the dance floor or that you notice as a caller in particular?

**Catherine Burns** I mean, we've changed, yes.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, of course.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. It's an evolution, right? As there is in everything. But we've still got some of the old dancers, you know?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. You still see people who were with you from the beginning?

**Catherine Burns** Yes. Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** That's a testament to a to a great community.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, we've got a good core. Not all of them have come back in masking/not masking/don't want to dance at all yet era. Yeah, because we would like to bring in bands and callers from outside too. but, you know, we're still getting new, we do this thing, if it's someone's first dance, they get a "second dance free" pass. So we give them a pass for the second dance. And it can be a year later or the next month, so there's no... And we ask them to write down how they heard about it. And the great majority it's from a friend. So, we try to keep our dancers happy. Yep.

**Mary Wesley** And then make it as easy as possible for them to come back. That's very smart.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, but I'm stepping down this year. I have stepped down from the organizing committee.

**Mary Wesley** Oh, my goodness.

**Catherine Burns** After 35 years.

**Mary Wesley** That's big news and, well, well-deserved, I would say. I think you've done a lot.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** So you're going to? Or have you have already stepped down?

**Catherine Burns** Just last night was the last meeting that I attended.

**Mary Wesley** Oh, my gosh.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** Congratulations. That's huge.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. And how did you come to that decision?

**Catherine Burns** Well, I was the treasurer for most of those years, so someone has come along who's interested and willing to do it and so I think it's great. I think I'm the last one of the old guard that's still on the organizing side of things, so...

**Mary Wesley** It's good. It's amazing!

**Catherine Burns** Younger people are taking over.

**Mary Wesley** And that's what happens. That's what we hope happens so that things continue. And has that been something that's happened pretty naturally in Ottawa kind of since you started? Has there been a good...kind of people coming in?

**Catherine Burns** A lot of people. Yeah. We've had a lot of people who will help out for a few years and then other people come in. That's been good.

[ *Clip of [Catherine calling the dance Feet in Flight](#) by Dale Rempert at the Ottawa Contra Dance in 2015 with music by Genticorum. ]*

**Catherine Burns** David Smuckler was another person that I really admired...

**Mary Wesley** David, yes, right because Syracuse is not too far from you.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, yeah.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. And he's quite active with callers in his area and sort of teaching and...

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. And he would do those and they started...they had one this year I think in March, a callers gathering. And I did go to the first. I don't know, he's probably done about ten by now. So those were great. He facilitated a great learning experience in all of those ways. I don't think you've been to one, have you?

**Mary Wesley** I have been to one of the chestnuts focused gatherings that he did. I think it may have been the first, but I can't remember. Maybe it was the second anyway. Yeah, I was particularly drawn to that because I do a lot of the older dances or just staying connected to those a little bit in the trajectory of the tradition. So, yeah, and it was wonderful. I mean callers just, it's always nice in any kind of vocation to chat with people who are at the same level of sort of, nerdery as you are. Who want to really go deep.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah! No, those were great. Those were really helpful to me. Since since I was quite isolated here, so those kinds of gatherings were really super.

**Mary Wesley** But it sounds like now you're less isolated. There have been some other I mean, one you said, John Argus started bringing, started the second dance series, which started bringing people in from farther afield. Did that result in more people locally getting excited about it, or do you have local callers?

**Catherine Burns** Oh, well, we did. Pippa Hall was their main caller. But it was funny because there was one group that went to his dances, and one group...there was not a lot of cross-over, strangely. Some people with people for sure. So some people kind of learned how to contra dance from me and some from Pippa. So, Pippa Hall, who was quite involved in that too, with John. So they played for those dances. And then John, you know, occasionally would bring in bands from other places. So he tried to do that. And then when we put everything together, then the Old Sod Band played for some dances. And then we had, you know, Noah and all of those guys coming up, and Andrew and those people.

**Mary Wesley** The Great Bear musicians who were in the neighborhood.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, for many, many years. And we would have callers gatherings here, like just all the people locally who wanted to learn to call, at Mary Jane's house in the basement. She had a dance floor down there. Julie and Emily and Peter, and so we would get together on a Sunday and use recorded music and they would call dances, and then we would talk about it as a group after. What went wrong, what should you have said here to help people? Why this might not be a great dance for our dance group because it's too complex. All that kind of stuff and learning timing and all of that. So we did that and we also had once a month on Tuesday, in a little small hall near where I live, a monthly dance where the band was Stolen Goods, which Emily Addison was leading and that was a great band. Very good. A lot of people in that band too. And so they played for free and then we charged a minimum amount for the dancers to pay for the hall, which costs us \$100 or something like that. So it was really great. And then the callers who have been practicing in the basement had a chance to call for...

**Mary Wesley** To come out of the basement and onto the dance floor!

**Catherine Burns** Exactly. So we did that for many years. Because on the Saturday night dances, there's pretty high expectation from some of the dancers, for the dances for the callers. And then on Tuesday nights if there was something going wrong you could stop the dance, start again. People were very understanding because they knew that they were going. So we would get about 20 people, 25 people to do that, which was plenty. The hall really could only, I guess we could have had two sets. So that was a great spot for people to learn how to call. And for Stolen Goods, who were just learning how to play for contra dances, too. So and that fell by the wayside after...well, it wasn't the pandemic. It was, I think, the price raised of the hall. We tried it.

**Mary Wesley** Oh that's hard.

**Catherine Burns** We tried the community center...and the floor, one thing about the hall that we used before was a sprung floor, wood floor. And so then we were at a community center on linoleum or whatever. For a while the sound wasn't...it just, the small hall felt like a small country hall, right? So it had a good feeling for the dance.

**Mary Wesley** For a small dance, right.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. So that kind of fell away and we haven't revived it at all, since we're trying to get everybody to come on Saturdays.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, but it sounds like some of the people who started to getting involved through that dance, Emily Addison, Peter Simonyi, and it also strikes me as just having a little echo of, you know, the beginnings of the Old Sod Band and, you know, just kind of a self-starting, very community oriented...like, let's just all get together and make this thing happen. Because we want to be a part of it and we want to make it something that happens in our community. So it sounds like there is a nicely paved path for Stolen Goods and for the callers group to, you know...when the time was right for for them to do that, you know, sometimes those things don't last a long time but they kind of provide that leg up for people to go in and still be really active in the dance scene. So, that's really cool.

**Catherine Burns** We did it for, I don't know, feels like a long time. Maybe, I don't know, seven or eight years, probably. Something like that. And now, like we still have some people who would like to get into calling, so I think Peter's organizing kind of a workshop for that, too, so that people feel comfortable. And then, you know, if I'm calling one night and someone wants to for one dance, then that's also what happened. It's a safer way than just to feel you have to call the whole night or something.

**Mary Wesley** And now that you're just looking at the horizon of kind of a new chapter for yourself, stepping down and knowing that you helped create an organization that is going to going to keep going. What are you looking forward to?

**Catherine Burns** I'm hoping they'll hire me from time to time!

**Mary Wesley** I'm sure they will. I'll have words with them if they don't.

**Catherine Burns** Oh, please, please do. Yeah, just to enjoy it. Enjoy the music and the...there's other music going on in town. Not a lot of other...there's other dances for sure, but not, you know, there's swing dances and all that kind of thing going on here too. But there's lots of good traditional music to go listen to. So, I've got grandchildren and all of that, you know. So it's, which is a pleasure for us.

**Mary Wesley** Do they dance, any of them?

**Catherine Burns** They used to come. My daughters used to come, too. Mary who's, 41 I'm guessing? Hmm, let me see yes she was born in 1981 so that would make her...

**Mary Wesley** Maybe even 42?

**Catherine Burns** Not 42, not yet. Later in the year. But so she, and then Paul's daughter Lindsay, who's a few years younger than Mary. So Val Robb and I, and Lindsay and Mary used to go to NEFFA together. So I don't I haven't been to NEFFA in forever. But do they still do the medley dance at the end?

**Mary Wesley** They do, yes.

**Catherine Burns** Mary was always like, "Got to get myself a partner." She was like 12 or 13.

**Mary Wesley** It's so good.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. So, you know, that was great with our kids being involved with that. And then we had a family dance here. When I went to "Putting on the Dance..."

**Mary Wesley** A conference for dance organizers.

**Catherine Burns** Oh, yes. Yes, we, do remember you were there, right?

**Mary Wesley** Yes I was. I want to say it was 2011? Yeah, I was one of the organizers.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, so you remember we had to write down what we were going to take back to our community and we were given a card, a name, right? And then we had to tell that person: "By a year I will have done X in my community." And they were to get back to you to say...

**Mary Wesley** Right then you were to follow up with each other. Yeah.

**Catherine Burns** So what I wrote down was to start a family series. And so we did. And that was we did it, I think, maybe three, four afternoons through the year. And I really like that. I mean, well, as you know, calling weddings is not really...you end up calling three dances and at the rest of the time you're... But the family dances were just so much fun because the parents fully participated with their kids. And so my grandkids came to those, but I really enjoyed calling those. That was really, and then that's gone by the bye for now, too. But yeah, that's because of the thing you organized. We have a family dance here.

**Mary Wesley** That's wonderful to hear. How special.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, so we would get like, you know, 90 people to those. Yeah, that was great. I really, really enjoyed that.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, it's nice how different phases or eras in life, you know, it sort of tell you like, "Oh, this is the time for this and it serves its role. And then, you know, I'm excited to see see the next phase of Ottawa Contra and I'm sure it's in good hands.

**Catherine Burns** Hundred percent.

## Closing

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, and you know, it has been tricky to navigate the past couple of years, but I think it's something that's so, so valuable to have in a community. And so I hope that you continue to grow. And, you know, I may just have to schedule a little vacation in Ottawa around the time when maybe there's a dance, because I really...that has been a lovely thing since the start of restart of dancing to get to come back to dance communities where I used to come more regularly and catch up with old friends and you know, Ottawa and Montreal are ones that just keep crossing my mind and I'd really like to go back. So we'll work on it. Great. Well, I have three questions that I usually close with a little sort of end, sort of the little questions. So we've talked a little bit about this already, but I have been tracking with each person that I talked to how they, how you keep your dance collection and how you notate dances. You know, you've mentioned the Caller's Box, which is this database, but it sounds like you at least started with dance cards. Is that still



how you keep your collection or what's... Oh, there she goes, she's got her nice recipe box full of index cards.

**Catherine Burns** And falling apart. I need a new recipe box. No, I can't, like, I don't know how people... David, well David Smuckler has about a thousand dances in his head.

**Mary Wesley** I know. Yes.

**Catherine Burns** Sometimes he's like, "Oh, I started with one dance, but then I switched to another. Oh, well, it worked out fine." Yes, it did, David. But how he, he has them on his phone, right?

**Mary Wesley** I think he's switched to something digital.

**Catherine Burns** Yes, I just, well first of all I have my glasses off/on. So, yeah, I still go with cards. I always write the author of the dance, and if I've got it from another caller, I always put that in too. And then I have some squiggly things in other colors.

**Mary Wesley** Yes, reminders.

**Catherine Burns** Yes, and so I just have them alphabetical. I don't have them by the main figure or anything like that. I know some people do. And then I have a section for "easy" and the section for barn dances, for weddings and whatnot. And a section for family dances and it crosses over with barn dances and stuff. So that's, oh and I have a little section for mixers. Mixers are tricky, though, aren't they? Sometimes people don't like mixers?

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, I use them disarmingly. I am a pretty diehard circle mixer person, so I just try to keep my chin up and just say, "This is what we're doing." And yes, I am definitely aware that some some people would rather not. And I, you know, I would never call more than one mixer, you know, unless I was at a family dance or barn dance or something like that. But at a regular dance I will stand by my feeling that they're...they do something good to the dance hall, which is in their name! They mix us up, they get us, you know, singing and dancing with new folks. And I think that can be a good thing to do.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, I still have my, you know, whole little section of mixers. And otherwise, they're just alphabetical. Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** So you are dedicated to your dance cards

**Catherine Burns** Yes. But you know, all the young callers, probably including yourself, spread their cards all over while they're calling.

**Mary Wesley** I do do that. Adina definitely does that.

**Catherine Burns** Why do you do that?

**Mary Wesley** Because I like to see all the options. And sometimes I'm changing my program midstream. And so I want to kind of have my different stacks of cards there to flip through while one dance is ending. So, yeah, it's very much. I think that's the sort of the thing that I would really struggle to transfer to a digital device. There's something about the

sort of tangible, spreading things out, looking at them, moving them around, rearranging them that I just don't think I can do on an iPad or a laptop.

**Catherine Burns** I don't know how you have time to. Well, what I do is I plan my dance and then at the front of my box, I put about a dozen other things that maybe are...I'll put something that's interesting, but easy to learn or...

**Mary Wesley** Backup dances.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. And then that's what I look through. But it's like you guys having a whole, like, how do they know what they're looking at?

**Mary Wesley** It's true.

**Catherine Burns** So, yeah, Adina definitely, right?

**Mary Wesley** And then my next question is, you know, thinking about going out to a gig that you're calling. Do you have anything that you do kind of pre- dance or post- dance that's like a ritual, or something that you do to kind of get ready to get on stage or to wind down afterwards?

**Catherine Burns** Other than you mean planning the evening?

**Mary Wesley** That would certainly be one. But some people, you know, have quirks. They want a piece of chocolate before, have to make sure they brush their teeth.

**Catherine Burns** Oh, interesting. Well, so I take peppermint tea with me.

**Mary Wesley** Well, there you go.

**Catherine Burns** But it's usually, I made it at home, and then it never cools off until about halfway through the second half of the night. But...I can't really think of anything that I...Should I? Should I?

**Mary Wesley** You're just kind of in the moment. No, no, I'm just looking for, you know, what are... I'm just thinking about the life of a caller...

**Catherine Burns** You know here's what I do. I go downstairs and I take out Tony Parkes' book, and I kiss the back of the book, and then I come upstairs. No, I don't.

**Mary Wesley** Catherine's now, going to invent some rituals for herself.

**Catherine Burns** Yes. Intriguing.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah. No, I love it. You're like, "No, I just go to the dance and I do it."

**Catherine Burns** Yeah I plan, like I plan.

**Mary Wesley** Yes, Yes.

**Catherine Burns** I still plan thoroughly. Even after 30 years. I do not ever just throw a program together? This is why I like that, like I said, the Caller's Box. I like to actually

watch the dance to, and then see oh, yeah, that's how it goes. This one I had put away, but oh, well, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's good dance, you know? Yeah, actually the beginner's lesson has been the hardest thing for me. I struggle with that beginner's lesson.

**Mary Wesley** How to teach it?

**Catherine Burns** Well, I get flustered or something. I don't...I prefer to be up, you know, up on the little box. Not...

**Mary Wesley** Not on the floor, kind of face to face with everyone. Yep.

**Catherine Burns** But that's something, so Peter and I, I don't know before the season started or I don't know what it was, in the last little while. We sat down and we watched, Seth Tephner has it on YouTube, and are about four or five people who had their beginner lessons on YouTube and we watched all of them and we made notes what we didn't like. And so I made a lot of notes to myself. And then I when I taught the beginner's lessons, one of our dancers told me that that was the best beginner's lesson she had ever seen, she said. So you still have to put the work in, right?

**Mary Wesley** Yes, it definitely shows as you know.

**Catherine Burns** But I didn't know. I mean, when I've seen you do a beginner's lesson and it's very, I don't know you're very much relaxed in yourself. I don't know why the beginners lesson, I don't know what it is.

**Mary Wesley** I think it's hard too because it's like the start, you know, it's like once you're up there and they're lining up for the first dance there's a bit of a formula, you know. But the beginners lesson, it's like you kind of are starting from zero and you have to bring everybody into this, "OK this is what we're doing." It is a lot of pressure.

**Catherine Burns** And it's, will I remember? Remembers to teach everything, right? I don't know, so anyway, thorough preparation helped me out there.

**Mary Wesley** That's your ritual.

**Catherine Burns** Really preparing is my ritual, yes.

**Mary Wesley** You had one. And then my last question, which if you know, do you think of yourself as an introvert or an extrovert?

**Catherine Burns** I'm not an introvert, but I know, you know, I don't think of myself...well I like talking to people and, you know, yeah. Because there are definitely callers who are introverts.

**Mary Wesley** Yeah, it's really kind of pretty divided. But I'm just always curious about it since it's a job that requires kind of being with a lot of people and there's different ways that people approach that.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah, no, I like telling people what to.

**Mary Wesley** There you go.

**Catherine Burns** I'm an older sister, you know, So, well, I do have an older brother, but you know, I have two younger siblings.

**Mary Wesley** Yes, but clearly as your community voted with with their attendance and participation. I think people people like like when you tell them what to do. And so you're doing it in a way that makes it inviting and and fun.

**Catherine Burns** And there's nothing I like better than when I'm not having to say anything. And I'm just watching the dance and the band is playing and I'm just up there bathing in it. The glow of it all. The glow of all the, you know, the good feelings people have. Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** Absolutely.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah. Wonderful.

**Mary Wesley** Well, Catherine thanks so much for talking with me today.

**Catherine Burns** Well, you're welcome.

**Mary Wesley** Great to check in with the Ottawa scene. And I feel like it's maybe a great timing that we caught you just as we're kind of making this transition.

**Catherine Burns** Yeah.

**Mary Wesley** A little cherry on top!

[ *Musical transition* ]

**Mary Wesley** Thanks so much to Catherine for talking with me! You can check out the show notes for today's episode at [cdss.org/podcasts](http://cdss.org/podcasts).

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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