

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.

Susan Intro

Mary Hello everyone! Happy fall and welcome back to From the Mic. This episode we head to northern California for a conversation with the wonderful Susan Petrick. An avid dancer for many years, Susan started calling for contra dances in 2000 and teaching couple dances, including waltz, cross-step waltz, and hambo, shortly thereafter. She is known for her clear teaching, efficient guidance, and expert pacing, making even complex dances accessible to all.

Susan and I chatted about her beginnings in the New England contra dance scene in college and the ways in which dance and calling followed her through several moves across the country. She now lives in Redwood City, CA and has become a regional treasure with national prominence, calling for dance weekends and festivals throughout the country.

By profession Susan is a cognitive psychologist who, before retiring in 2021, managed a team of User Experience researchers at Google in Mountain View, CA. I loved hearing about the echoes between her professional work and the realm of dance calling. In both worlds, clear communication is key. Here's Susan!

Mary Hello Susan Petrick! Welcome to From the Mic.

Susan Thank you. Hi, Mary, good to see you.

Mary It's good to see you, too and tell us where you're speaking to us from today.

Susan I'm speaking to you from Redwood City, California, which is about halfway between San Francisco and San Jose.

Mary Wonderful. Wonderful. It looks like a nice, maybe sunny day there, it's always hard to tell.

Susan But it is lovely weather, September is usually the hot month, but not this year.

Mary Wonderful. Well, thanks so much for making time to join me Tell us a little bit about yourself as a caller and the Northern California dance scene. We've seen each other at various dance events over the years, but I'm excited to get to have a fuller conversation with you. So I usually ask people to just start out introducing themselves and sort of telling about how you found your way to the dance floor to the callers mic, kind of what were the steps along the way in your your journey to becoming a caller?

Susan Sure. Well, it definitely starts East Coast, not West Coast. My college boyfriend was the eldest son of Ted Sannella.

Mary Oh, my gosh.

Susan And so it was at that point in the mid seventies that I started contra dancing with them and they were a very welcoming family and I spent several years going to a lot of the dances that Ted called or that other New England callers called. After that, I continued as a grad student in the Boston area, doing a lot of contra dancing. I had a boyfriend who had gone to Hampshire, and we used to go and visit with David Cantini and drive to Brattleboro for the Dawn Dance with him and stay with him. So just very much loved dancing, loved contra dancing, did some other kinds, Scottish country dancing, some other things but really, it was country dancing that I did the most of, square dancing.

Mary Nice. And was that something that you had been aware of before meeting the Sannella family, or was that brand new discovery?

Susan Not at all. I think I remember, you know, physical education class, square dancing that I always looked forward to, field hockey ending and that starting. I think my parents did a little bit of square dancing, but not much. So I certainly wasn't aware about contra dancing specifically before that but I liked it, liked dancing.

Mary Yeah, that's how it is sometimes isn't it?

Susan I found it intimidating, definitely intimidating as a new person to be, you know, in a big room with lots of people making lots of eye contact, intimidated by any dance with any level of complexity, as dances were just starting to be in Beckett formation, I remember lining up and saying, oh, wait a minute, this one's Beckett, let's sit out and wait for the next one that is properly active and inactive and something I'm used to.

Mary Wow. And so, yeah, you kind of jumped in at a real hotbed. So were you going to school in Boston?

Susan For grad school it was at MIT. As an undergraduate, when I was seeing the Sannella family, I was at Yale, so just dancing all over and the Sannella family lived in the Boston area.

Mary Nice. And so where were some of the dances that you went to at that time? Was it the VFW?

Susan Oh, yes, and the Scout House also. I remembered actually, I had lived in Lexington, Massachusetts, as a child and remembered the Scout House as a scout, in addition to dancing, then later as a graduate student. So, yeah, once I was dancing more and staying with David Cantini, it was Western Massachusetts and Greenfield area and Brattleboro dances. From when I finished school and moved away and took my first job, it was in New Jersey, I danced more sporadically then. When my son was little, I remember bringing him as baby and letting him sleep during dancing, but I wasn't dancing nearly as regularly. And then I came back to it as a regular dancer when I lived in Lexington, Kentucky, and just really enjoyed the dancing community there and started going to both Lexington and Berea. Berea as as a mom with a child, at that point, Berea had a children's room, so you could easily bring a child along and have them well entertained and happy to

go with you and dance yourself. So that worked out really well. But the calling came during that period when I then was already in Kentucky and somebody said to me at a party, it was actually Cary Ravitz, the choreographer, said, your voice isn't too bad, you could try calling. I was very much introverted. I know that's one of your usual later questions in your podcast, but just the idea of doing it was kind of terrifying. But I had a friend who hadn't been dancing all that long, who took up calling within six months of starting contra dancing, who didn't have the preferences about dances and wasn't wild about putting together programs. So he let me do all his programming, and that's what drew me in to become a caller, no doubt about it. I loved the puzzle aspect of collecting dances and then fitting them together to make a fun and accessible evening for different groups and so as long as I could do that, I had very little desire to get in front of the mic.

Mary You started off just completely behind the scenes programming a dance?

Susan As a dancer, I started collecting dances, paying more attention to what callers were doing and what created a good evening during that period. But I was collecting dances only to be able to program, not ever really wanting to do much calling myself. As a dancer, attending weekends I remember going to one brief caller's workshop that Cis Hinkle did, somewhere there in the Midwest or Kentucky. And so that was something that kind of got me started a little bit. At some point, my friend decided he wanted to do his own programming and so I was losing the fun of that puzzle experience. And at that point, I think I was more willing to try calling one dance in an open mic situation. A little bit later, I did a week long caller's course with Lisa Greenleaf at Lady of the Lake Camp, and I think that really got me interested in the walk through teaching aspects and orientation, teaching aspects of it, and I turned out to really enjoy that too. But the idea of just being up in front of a mic I knew was attractive to people who are very fluent and articulate in that kind of situation and for me it was just terrifying. Luckily, when I moved to California, an organizer in my local Santa Cruz mountain area dancers was willing to book me at least every month or two and that was often enough that I kind of habituated to the fear part of it. And I'm sure it was empowering to some, like managing a challenge that you didn't expect you'd be able to manage. But during that period, I was definitely still nervous about it. I wouldn't eat well or sleep well the week before having to call, even just half an evening or a full evening. I found the concentration needed to do a really good clean job of calling, to be difficult to sustain a whole evening's worth. So I'd do really well the first half and then the second half was more of a challenge to get through things without without making any errors. But doing anything that's scary enough, I've kind of always managed to habituate to it and to get to where I actually enjoy it and it's not scary anymore and that's what happened with calling.

Mary That's so great. I don't know that I've talked to anyone yet who started with the programming aspect. What is it about your kind of personality or what attracted you to that part of it?

Susan Definitely loving the dances as a dancer and having pretty strong opinions. Oh my gosh, that was like the best dance ever, and liking things about the choreography and the flow and the mesh with the the music. I think the other thing is the music itself. So I've done a lot of instrumental music performance, not necessarily traditional, although I have done drop in bands at various points and also for English country dance, playing wind instruments. So I loved the music, I loved the whole repertoire that was mostly in use then. I loved the variety that was developing in being added to what had been traditional tunes and instrumental arrangements that you'd hear for contra dancing, all of that. Plus I realized that people, when I was living in Lexington, Kentucky, they actually knew each

other within the community. The same people came to dance once, if not twice a week and that aspect of community and making friends and feeling connected also drew me in just to be willing to do more in different roles within that community, to try them at least.

Mary And it sounds like you just at some point made a choice to kind of stay dedicated to overcoming some significant stage fright. What kind of kept you coming back, there was enough return on what you were doing?

Susan The first time I called, I can remember thinking, oh, my goodness, I got to stand right next to the musicians and the instrumentalists who are playing a variety of things. I was hearing it acoustically as opposed to through a sound system out far on the floor, and it sounded really great. And so it was really fun to get to be up there that close. It's fun to watch a big group of people in synchrony. That was actually something that was a challenge. Many things were a challenge and are for most people and learning to call. One of them is paying attention to everybody in a large hall. My friend who'd let me create the programs for him was a huge help, as were other callers within that community. When I was starting to do half evenings, my friend would actually circulate. First I felt I could only look at one or two squares at the top of the line in front of me and then I was able to kind of feel like, okay, I'm kind of in charge of the whole line, am able to look after them. I can realize when I need to do something different to help them out. But I couldn't begin to think of how would you possibly focus on a second line, and so he would actually sit one out, not dance it himself, roam up and down the line to make me feel secure. If anything really went wrong, he could fix it. And so that kind of support from other callers, from other dance community members when you're just starting out gave me the confidence that everything wouldn't be a total train wreck and I would be able to learn to do it cleanly. And clearly the workshop I mentioned with Lisa Greenleaf was a huge help in making me feel confident about the teach for the walk throughs. Lisa did the exercise that I know has been mentioned in at least one or two of your other podcasts where people take everything, the confederates take everything perfectly literally. You act dumb as a board. That was a huge help in realizing just how concise and how clear one should strive to be. So that was a good experience along with many other things that Lisa imparted during that week.

Calling across the country

Mary That was a similar turning point for me in learning to call was taking a week long with Lisa. She's just also just such a good teacher, teaching how to teach. It's amazing. It sounds like, you know, also like a lot of people, the dance community was a way for you to sort of plug in to a new place, because you've moved around quite a bit. But in this place you've been able to connect in that scene.

Susan I've been fortunate and never lived in a place that really had no dancing. When I lived in Dayton, Ohio, we went down to Cincinnati, it wasn't that far. And you know, there's always been a dance I could get to. So there was never a period when I never danced for like years at a time. Just as my son got older, it got easier and easier to dance more regularly.

Mary And so was Santa Cruz was the first place you moved in California?

Susan Yes, I lived in the Santa Cruz mountains. So north of there, in the mountains above Santa Cruz. There was a dance in Felton as well as a dance in Santa Cruz and those were

the the closest two and the two who gave me the experiences calling that at that point was crucial to having me just not stop at that point.

Mary So nice. Has your career been in kind of computer programming or in that realm? And does that relate to your interest in kind of the puzzling and programming much?

Susan In addition to puzzles you asked before what it is about or are there are other things that are puzzle like. I've always liked puzzles of lots of different sorts, both mathy and wordy. My graduate work was all in cognitive psychology. I took a job with Bell Labs immediately after grad school and from from there, all the way through my career, I worked on improving user experiences for people, which is very much redesigning something or writing instructions, hopefully redesigning the thing itself so that people don't struggle with it, which is very much like what you as a caller do in trying to present a dance that's going to have people not frustrated, have them feel empowered and like they're doing a really good, fun thing. So I think the two are really related. I gave at least one talk at Google about contra dance calling as another avenue for clear communication, clear, concise communication of steps to help people accomplish what they're trying to accomplish.

Mary So can you talk a little bit about, I don't know your your approach to calling, but maybe even as it sort of changed over time because it sounds like you've been doing it for some some time now. And you mentioned a little the early days of just kind of the repetition and getting that sort of thicker skin to stay up at the mic and where else has your caller development taken you and what are the things that are important to you when you're up at the mic?

Susan I think the things that are most important to me are the experience that I'm creating for the musicians, for the people organizing the dance, but especially for the dancers themselves. I want people to go away not talking about me. I want me to be almost invisible. Not that there aren't a huge number of things that the caller should be responsible for, has to be responsible for, because there's nobody else in that central position of coordinating between all the different things that go into making a good dance. I think it's really great that every caller has a different style and different kind of philosophy about what they're trying to create. But for me, maybe because of being such an introvert, I don't want me to stand out. But the voice is mixing in with the music is as you're needing to prompt. But I'm happiest when I've chosen a dance, it's exactly the right level and the right next thing for the group of dancers, and they're not needing a huge amount of support. It's not bad to have a challenging one or two where your voice is a little more prominent than you'd like, but I really like it when it gets going. Among other things, I can relax more and get to enjoy the music more up there close and hearing it acoustically if they're on their own running and everything is insecure and happy. So, you know, the things that I think are challenges for me are to bring in anything extra. So I know some dancers really like stories, anecdotes, things that connect. I lived in fear of somebody's string breaking and them turning and saying, tell a joke, tell a story because I certainly wasn't fluent at doing that. I thought, should I bring a book of poetry and just read it to them? You know, what am I going to do here? I never did that, I did think about it, though. But now with especially local dances where people know me well, after this many years of dancing, I moved to California in about 2000, and that was when I was just starting to call, as I said so that's a lot of years of dancing in the same communities. One worry I had about learning to call was that I wouldn't be able to dance as much as I would want if I really got serious about trying to call a lot and I still feel like that. I don't get to dance enough, especially coming back from COVID. The area has suffered with losing some callers who've moved out of area, and it's been way heavy on the calling. That's why I like

getting asked to do weekends, because I get to dance at least half the time and call half the time, which for me would be ideal. But I've strayed away from the question here, sorry.

Mary Oh, it's okay, everything leads to everything else. So we were talking about what's important to you as a caller.

Susan I think it's again, I've become relaxed enough that I'm trying to make sure if I do know something about a particular dance, can I tell them a little bit extra if it will enhance their enjoyment or their fun with that dance. Yeah, it's a good thing. My husband, in the car, on the way home will say that was really good you told one story and it's like, aha, I did!

Mary I love that.

Susan That's the part that's somewhat of a challenge. It would be nice to be able to cover when somebody breaks a string, for example. I mean, that is part of the role is to make sure things stay happy and moving along and feel like a nice planned complete evening, not gaps of silence. Sometimes I feel apologetic to bands. I tend to teach really quite quickly and it's time to have your next set ready but it's worked out fine.

Mary I am very similar in my presence at the mic and for a lot of the same reasons. I'm just not an entertainer like that. It's a question that I'm curious if you have thoughts on whether a caller is a performer and not that it really matters, it's sort of just like a philosophical question. But, you know, I find it interesting because we're up on stage. The band, to me, are clearly performing, and it's just kind of a role that's all its own.

Susan Yeah. I think of it much more as a organizer or a facilitator than as a performer. But I'm also glad that there are people who started doing it in the first place because they are seeing themselves as performer entertainers in front of a mic. I think it makes for varied dances and varied experience for dancers as they go to different dances with a different callers are in charge of. You know, I think it's good that both of us be relaxed enough that we could add in extra information. But at the same time, I don't think we have a burden to be super entertaining, fitting in a lot of good dances in the course of an evening because there aren't a huge number of extra things that one wants to impart from the mic is my goal and that's my style. So there's no right or wrong. When I teach people to call, I say start paying a lot of attention to other callers, decide what feels natural. What do you like as a dancer in terms of is the caller more of a performer adding in or is the caller less prominent, more invisible?

Mary And like you said, be yourself. I think that's all any of us can do. And it also helps me to remember that people aren't there to watch a show or look at the stage, they're there to dance with each other. And so also in those moments where there's a pause or the band isn't ready yet, I also have just learned to get a little more comfortable with just not saying anything and then people start talking to each other, which is also why they're there.

Susan Yeah.

Mary I assume that you still enjoy the programing aspect of being a caller. Has that changed over time? Because you're mentioning, you know, when you first discovered dancing it sounds like you were describing being just sort of right at that moment where there was starting to be a broadening of of dance, choreography, and repertoire beyond sort of chestnuts or dances that had really active and inactive roles.

Susan I think by then it was probably already ones and twos when I came back to it at the point that I lived in Lexington, Kentucky. But one thing that attracted me to doing more dancing and being more involved in the community was I think that shift to to more equal dances and more creating a more aerobic evening. But not that I saw it as a substitute for other kinds of physical training, but it's a great fun form of exercise and the sociability and the enjoying of the music and moving to music. So because that's what attracted me and made me so drawn to it as a dancer, it's definitely the repertoire that I was interested in presenting as I was learning to call. I've always collected dances as a dancer, having enjoyed something. Definitely it was that move to modern smooth flow and less inactive time that drew me back into it more majorly than I had been before.

[[Susan calling at the Lake City Contra Dance in Seattle 2023 with music by "The Electrodes" \(Joe Bowbeer, Joe Micheals, Marcy Kubbs\)](#)]

Programming

Mary What's your process when when you are programing?

Susan Oh, sometimes it's very, very easy. I'll have in mind something that's either a newly collected dance or something I haven't called in a while that I thought, oh, finally, here's a group that one would be right for and sometimes the rest of the program comes together very easily. I use a completely non-digital process other than possibly grabbing a dance off YouTube, if there was one that I'd heard a name of or was interested in, or a choreographer that I like had a new posted. But most of the dances I collect, I collect just again by dancing them or someone else telling me about them. I look at cards that are arranged from books, and I pull them out and put them in order. Sometimes it goes really smoothly, and many times I agonize over it for long periods. But I do tend to program in advance, often with substitute dances also pulled out so if one is more complex than I was expecting would work, because there are a lot of newcomers, or for whatever reason, I would have a backup one either that I knew about or had actually pulled the card for already, ready to go. But generally I like to program and have a pretty good idea, it doesn't mean that I don't throw it all out on dance number two when I realize, oh boy, the information I had about this dance was just not what I'm seeing either way, either with something more higher or lower general experience level on the floor. But a lot of times I can put my program together and I enjoy the time, quiet time at home alone as I do that. Occasionally I will walk through, maybe more than occasionally, the whole scheme of them just to make sure that I haven't missed anything that counts as too much of something in a given evening. But I do enjoy the programing part and I do like being prepared and coming with some idea of what I want to do. The other thing is especially calling a lot in the Bay Area, the dances that I know the same dancers may attend or calling repeatedly at somewhere that I travel to like Pacific Northwest, I pull out whatever programs I've used the last time or two that I called there or within the last, you know, 4 to 6 months if it's an area I call often and make sure and not reuse dances. It's part of the constraint challenge that I put together for the puzzle. Would anyone really know if I called and overlapped a lot? No. But again, as a dancer, I like variety, so whether they'd notice or not, it's part of the ethic goes, my programing is not to reuse dances too soon.

Mary Yeah. And, I mean, that's especially when you are active in local scene that's good motivation too. What is your local dance scene? What's your local geography and what's your calling schedule like these days? What are you up to?

Susan Well, with the pets it's made it a little harder to travel weekends. In terms of driving, it's from north north Bay to Sacramento down to Monterey kind of is the main area in which I'm calling on most weekends. But, you know, flying Southwest is great. Flying either north to Seattle or Portland or flying south to L.A. or San Diego is just really, really easy. So getting around prior to COVID and pets I was really doing a lot of traveling, flying on weekends. So that's the usual, once or twice a year we tend to go somewhere else. Someone will say, do you want to call a dance, are you going to be out my way? And if it looks like fun and it can be rolled into a vacation, will often do that. I did a couple of dances in Massachusetts and we had a lovely Massachusetts vacation in July. So just that.

Mary Nice. Can you speak to anything that's sort of unique about the the West Coast dance ecosystem? I mean, something that I am really trying to be intentional about in this podcast is to be hearing from kind of like all corners. It's described as a podcast about North American dance calling so just really excited to show the broad geography of where dancing is happening all over the place, and especially since you've had perspectives on several regions over the years. Is there anything you would really like to say?

Susan Really varied, really varied, and some dances having changed a lot during the COVID period of of shutdown down. Some dance communities have managed to come back and be super healthy, attracting people from different age and other demographics and are bigger than they were. Some have ended up with kind of people aging during the time and becoming less physically capable and kind of struggling to get back to a healthy number of dancers. So some dances have been quite small, I'd say, whereas others are bigger than they were in the Bay Area. The Circle Left dance in the East Bay has come back and been bigger, more healthy than than ever, while some others have gotten quite, quite small, so I think, highly varied. Probably like everywhere else in the in the country, there isn't one thing that a West Coast dance is, you know, are this way. I certainly noticed when I moved here that there were regional differences. So as I've learned to the length that I learned as a just beginning caller to run dances when I was in Kentucky and Ohio area, when I came to California and in the Bay Area started calling, people would come up and like make cutting gestures across their throats to say, you had run this one long enough, stop it now. And it's like, oh, but I'd look at my watch, it's like, it hasn't been that long. But to them they were used to more shorter dances in the course of the evening. That was something to realize, it's like, oh, okay, I don't think that's particularly true anymore. I don't know if just people traveling around more to dance or there's become more trend toward slightly shorter dances. But I think the mix of dances, when I came here in the Bay Area, there was always at least one or two of the callers always did a chestnut as the first dance after the break, and I haven't seen that, that's changed both with callers getting older and stopping calling as often. It's the kind of thing that, you know, it comes and goes. Someone will get interested in something like chestnut dances and bring them back for a while and make that be part of what they're known for and then for a while you won't see it as much.

Mary Sure, and how much are you involved in organizing any of your local dances or you have your hands full as a traveling caller?

Susan So when I was first year, I did a lot of organizing the dances closest to where I lived in the Santa Cruz Mountains and [the dance in] Felton was kind of a turning point with

organizers stepping away and saying, I think this dance is going to have to stop now. And because I lived in an area that required kind of a lot of windy road driving to get down to other dances, I wanted that one to thrive and so I started doing organizing, the programming, the liaison with the hall that kind of role. I did some organizing for the weeklong camp that was American Week that was at Mendocino camp. At this point, as I started calling more and more, I stepped away from more of the organizing roles, just lack of time but I am hugely grateful to people that that have continued on or taken up the the reins in organizing. It can be a thankless job, it can be a hard job, just like the caller, that you're kind of between lots of different things with lots of different conflicting requests. Organizer, it's that times ten I think.

Mary Yeah, I'm very grateful for the people who hire me. And I also have had times where I've been in the organizing role and less so now but yeah, certainly gives you a real appreciation for the people who kind of hold that foundation that makes makes all of this dancing and enjoyment possible to. You know, book the venue, get the insurance, all the fun things.

Susan Clean the floor afterwards.

Leadership as a caller

Mary Exactly. I wonder, too, how you think about your role as sort of a leader in the sort of broader dance community as a caller beyond standing at the mic and teaching the dances, Are there other values or ways of thinking that you try to put out into the world as you are either at the mic or on the dance floor? I think there is, like you said, callers are often in that very visible spot where perhaps we have more put on us than we should but it is also a position of influence in some ways.

Susan So yeah, I mean, things that I'd like to encourage either as a dancer or a caller is people being really kind and caring for each other when out on the floor and appreciative for the music, to the musicians. So anything I can do, whether dancing with newer dancers or calling for newer dancers and making sure and talking to them at the break and making sure they know they're doing really well. And, you know, all of that I think is really important toward keeping communities healthy in that callers do have a role to play in that. If someone up at the mic was feeling resentful of having to cater to beginners or having beginners, you know, in the way of something complex that they had in mind that they wanted to do on the floor, I think that would communicate itself and be a really bad thing. I think callers usually are very sensitive to reminding experienced dancers to help newer people, letting experienced dancers know there are newer people on the floor, sometimes they hardly realize it. If people are hanging out and not getting drawn in or people are dancing in a line that that's ending up filling up late with newer people. So anything a caller can do, or me as a dancer can do toward making sure that it's a very inclusive atmosphere that we're all working together toward one aim, which is a happy coordinated floor and that I'm hugely as a caller, I try to express how proud I am when when things go really well, because it does feel like I'm proud for the group. You should all be feeling proud. The musicians should feel proud. Everything came together and worked really well. Yeah, that's kind of my philosophy of what I hope happens.

Mary Lovely. I'm curious, I'm sure this rarely happens, but do you, if you ever have a moment of frustration at the mic, how do you navigate that for yourself?

Susan Occasionally I hear myself saying the left hand, your other left hand. And so I try not to allow myself to do that more than once or twice an evening or occasionally I'll say stay alert at this point, because otherwise there'll be somebody chaining and there'll be nobody there for the chain to it'll be pathetic. And it's become a little bit of a of a running joke with people who dance to my calling all the time, they'll say pathetic before I even get there so I try not to overdo that. It doesn't feel like frustration in the moment, and I tend to take it on myself when something doesn't go well and each time I teach and call a particular dance it's a new experience. it's different people on the floor and it's different musicians and different hall. It's different everything. So I'll kind of debrief with myself. It's like, whoa, that was not the right sentence to use to describe that. I try not to get too upset about it, but to take it as data coming in like any other experiment, experiment with a particular design back when I was doing user experience design. That's interesting information. Let's take it and let's use it, let's do it differently next time, but let's not have it derail everything. I think the main thing I do with frustrations about things that didn't go right is debrief in the car with my husband on the way home, which helps a lot because he's there dancing and often dancing with beginners, which I'm hugely grateful for. I'll be able to hear different perspectives of how did that feel at that point? You know, ask him at the break, the sound seems to be not good at the back, Is that true or are you having trouble hearing me there? It's really helpful to haveand friend dancers will will also give feedback when asked to.

Mary Yeah. It's so good to have those sounding boards for that, absolutely.

Susan Yeah. I think it's been really helpful for me for life in general to develop skills toward not being immediately defensive when somebody provides negative feedback. So that's been a good one to learn. Lisa and other coaches have modeled good ways of doing that. I know it's helpful in general for me to develop the skill of at least some of the time to be able to say thank you for the feedback when what's in your head is, oh my gosh, they don't know anything. Maybe we'll take this part out.

Mary No, I was just going to say I just love that that was part of Lisa's caller's course was to sort of talk about how to manage one's sort of emotions at the mic and also how to kind of deal with that interaction and getting feedback because again, it's just this public role and that's this group experience that you're shaping. I think people, you know, to a certain extent are entitled to to have opinions and and want to be able to have some input on this experience that they are a part of. And it's also like any any relationship, you know, it's like it can be some challenging communication to figure out how to have a good exchange if someone is is offering feedback. So yeah, super interesting.

Susan What I've strived for has partly come out of my reaction as a dancer to callers handling their frustration in different ways. So I'm not someone that's ever been happy to hear a caller, as a dancer on the floor, to hear a caller shush the crowd or get after people for not following directions well, or for not listening carefully during walkthrough. Or if you're not, whatever, I don't think it's helpful. It just doesn't feel to me like a helpful thing and I resent it as a dancer. So I try to be very careful never to do anything that sounds like that. Once or twice what I've tried to say, early in my career or something, joking that would quiet the floor, not helpful.

Mary Didn't work?

Susan No, not at all. Oh, terrible. What's worked best is just setting a rhythm in terms of keeping people focused and all working together again, pulling together toward it, toward

the common goal of lovely, coordinated, happy dancing just to keep a very constant tempo. It's like quite soon after you line up you can go ahead, especially if I'm encouraging you go ahead and have the ones cross over and I'm going to start teaching right away. People get used to my rhythm and it works out as well as anything else in trying to keep people focused and together, when I'm ready to go on to the next thing.

Choreography

Mary Yeah. Really nice. So how do you think about choreography as a caller?

Mary I do a little bit of choreography myself but only when I've found myself unable to find a dance that has something that I want. So as a dancer, if I've enjoyed something, but, you know, there's. no Neighbor Swing, there's not much neighbor interaction, there's something I don't like but the one particular sequence is lovely. Then I will write a dance if I'm able that incorporates that. An example is facing someone across the dance, boxing the net and pulling through into a right and left through. And, you know, I had an older dance that had that figure or a star to a box-the-gnat to a right and left through that kind of thing. And so I've written several dances that played with that, just to give it a more modern setting. Similarly, I found myself wanting a dance with a neighbor swing that had a line of four with the center facing across at the center, a couple back to back, everybody boxes the gnat and pulls into a hey. And so for a long time we had Treasures of the Sierra Madre collected that had that figure, but had no Neighbor Swing. And there were enough other dances I wanted to do with Neighbor Swing and I wanted to not do more than a couple in the course of an evening without but that was one I didn't have to write myself. I found 50/50 by Bob Isaacs and that met the need perfectly for that. So again, the choreography I've done has been almost completely just to have a dance that I otherwise couldn't find and very happy for other people who are good, strong choreographers to do new and interesting things and to have dances to collect that they've written.

Mary Nice, but it's great to be able to shape what you want or create what you want in life.

Susan So actually, I think some of my best choreography that I've seen people using a lot is mis transcriptions. So because I collect a lot of my dances as a dancer, I'll take a moment's break, write something down, hoping to not even miss the next dance and when I try to reconstruct it, it's perfectly clear in my mind at that point. But what I've written down doesn't quite work one way or another or I've added in something like there aren't two ricochets, there are four, and often the result is a really happy accident, like baking and putting the wrong amount or not tablespoon, but something comes out and you particularly like it and it's been a little bit like that with mis-transcriptions on my part.

Mary Nice. So, poof you have a new dance!

Susan There are one or two that I've tried hard to attribute to somebody after even asking the caller, and it was so far from whatever I'd actually danced that nobody recognized it. It's like, okay, new dance.

[[Susan calling the dance "Barbarella"](#) by Tom Thoreau at the Burning Man Contra Dance in 2014 with music by The Syncopaths and Ed Howe]

Collecting Dances

Mary Yeah well I was just going to ask a little bit more about how you organize your dance collection and whether that's connected to kind of choreography and if that plays into how you approach programming to kind of arranging for the figures.

Susan I have three books that are like photo albums so I can see the cards, although they're three deep sometimes and I'll occasionally lose track of a card for a long enough period. Then it's an exciting discovery when I, Oh, I love that dance, I remember. And then within the books, when I really take the trouble to get them organized, it's by kind of signature move like all the Petronella dances together. So that's it, and I start again. That helps me pick and choose and move around in the book and not take three in the same area because they're going to be too similar. Between that and kind of looking at some other....I rarely, like maybe never, reuse the same program exactly as is but you know I might start from another program, kind of look, see what I liked or didn't like or I really like these two dances back to back, let's put that in and a lot is trying to guess who'll be at which dances and will they've traveled from the North Bay all the way down to Monterey, maybe if it's a big enough, exciting enough dance. So how many how many evenings programs do I want to avoid anything from? But yeah, that's the way I approach it. Sometimes it's super fast and it takes me hardly any time to pull the cards out of those books and have a have a nice evening ready to go and then other times it just feels like it takes me forever and I'm having to do variations and modifications of dances to avoid. It's like, there can't be another Robins Chain, there just can't be another, it's in every dance. It's a matter of should we rewrite those as something else, a few of them? Should we just throw out dances altogether and replace? What do we do? But that's the puzzle part that I really like.

Mary Yeah. Do you have a favorite figure or a favorite dance? Something that you just love?

Susan Oh, it's hard to pick. it would be very hard to pick. There are a lot of them, you know, useful for different things. The choreographers, I've mentioned a couple of them already, but I find myself using Rick Mohr dances and Bob Isaacs dances, and sometimes there'll be a bunch in a row. Look, it's another, you know, Bob Isaacs dance. So I will try to add to my collection as they explore different things. But it's a large set of choreographers that I think are great and that I really like, I look for extra dances from.

Role Terminology

Mary Nice. And just because you just mentioned a Robins Chain, I'm curious what terminology or what you use for role terms in your calling.

Susan Basically the answer is I use whatever organizers ask me to use and whatever is currently right for any given community. Yeah, you know, was happy to call with bare arms and bands when when that was being done. The one thing that I hope people realize is that it is an extra cognitive challenge for the caller. If sometimes in groups who have moved to gender free terms being upset when a caller makes an error, especially a visiting

caller from an area where they hadn't yet done the terminology swap when it'd already happened here in California. I felt really unhappy that that the caller had that experience. People can be trying their very best and still make mistakes and there are just lots of ways that a caller could make errors. If you think they're really unaware of it and you feel a need to tell them afterwards nicely, gently, softly but no hissing and booing. No, no, none.

Mary But it's a really tough spot to be in and I feel like it's pretty fair to say that all of us are in good faith, like you said, trying, trying to do what we can then and at least on places that I've been calling, it seems like there is. I don't think we're at like full standardization, but I've mostly been using larks and robins and in a lot of places it seems like that's evening out. But I can remember as many different, really interesting rich discussions happening around this topic and that was also resulting and in trying out a lot of different terms and that was hard. I can remember one weekend doing a gendered terms dance, a Jets and Rubies dance and then a Larks and Robin dance sort of all on a weekend. And my brain, you know, it's a fun challenge, but there were definitely some slip ups. I've liked growing that ability but like you say, it's something that just takes time and practice.

Susan The other thing that's been good learning for me is that even though people see everything as my responsibility, really referring them to the right person who can maybe more productively use the feedback they're giving is a good way to go. They have no sense of callers, or at least I do what the organizers ask me to do, as opposed to I do something because I have strong political belief in it. And so that's a case, even something like sound, getting the sound right, people will come up and tell callers, you know, your voice sounds this way or I can't hear you or it's muddy. And it's like, that's great feedback and I'm glad I know it, but here's somebody I want you to go say that to right now.

Mary Right, who has more agency over that.

Susan And can do something faster than I can about that, be more helpful than I can.

Mary Yeah. We really do exist in an ecosystem and it's good for people to see how all the parts work together.

Susan Oh, I may have to say that. No bark there.

Mary We have a furry friend visiting on screen. Well, I was wondering who the pandemic pets were.

Susan Yes that one's a doodle, a different mix.

Mary I think we're maybe wrapping up. One little thing that was sticking in my head. I was curious, you mentioned doing a presentation at Google where you used to work about contra dancing, and I don't know if there's anything to share there, but that just piqued my interest. I was curious what you talked about and how your colleagues received it.

Susan I think a lot had to do with using language that was really concise and clear in communication. They really liked it because it was, if you think a lot of people talking about work that they'd done, I got to use beautiful photographs and music background that was appropriate and it was just really fun. It was a fun talk. I know I couldn't have been there in person, I was working in a remote office, I think, at that time, I recorded the whole thing in advance, but it's lost. I don't know where it ended up. I think that Lindsey Dono may have

also done something similar and done talks that connected up her professional career with contra dance calling.

Mary I just love seeing how dancing can find relevance in the broader world and offer lessons and wisdom that are out there because I think there's a lot, it's a lovely space to kind of experiment, learn, and then bring it out to the world.

Susan I love treating each night as an experiment, and it really is, everything comes together differently. No two dances, no two evenings of contra dancing are ever exactly the same. You never know what it's going to turn out like, but you know it's going to be unique, never to be exactly duplicated and that's part of the joy of it for dancers and for a caller.

Knowing Ted Sannella

Mary Absolutely, and always something to learn. The other thing, I don't know if there's more to say, but I'm just curious what your interaction was with Ted Sannella? I mean, it must have kind of just been starting, but it's like you can't really just like drop that name without being like, wait a minute, did you get a chance to, you know, I don't know, learn anything about him as a caller? Was he just kind of like your boyfriend's dad at that point?

Susan Oh no, very much. I walked dances as he had written them in the living room. Went with him to smaller gigs that were done at like a country club using a portable phonograph and a record as the music and also more standard, larger things. So I saw him call for small groups, for more experienced groups, for people who it was a one night kind of event. And so that was really fun to see the variety of that. I also saw him as a really active member of his community with the Sannella family I helped set up for NEFFA as a student and really kind of appreciated then how much work, volunteer work, went into all the great dancing that I'd been enjoying as a dancer. My mother also says he wouldn't let me serve a pie that I made warm, while it was still warm, it had to cool first. It's like, no, no, it's supposed to be for dinner. And she said that that hugely frustrated me as a college aged kid. I don't remember that, but that was...

Mary That's a funny thing that just stuck with her, huh?

Susan Yeah, but really, you know, I'd had so much fun with the with the calling, not to mention the dancing and that came from my association with with the Sannella family. So hugely, hugely grateful to them and for how welcoming and lovely they were to include me in all of the dance activities that were going on, including Ted's calling.

Mary Very cool. Is there anything when you kind of think of the future for your calling and for dancing, is there anything that you're excited about or directions that you're going in or is everything feel pretty in motion and balanced right now?

Susan I'm pretty balanced. I'm always excited about weekends is coming up because because that's something different. Traveling some distance, I see different people, that's fun. There's a weeklong camp next summer that I'm calling that I'm looking forward to just different opportunities, different kinds of connection because of the events that are a one time event, a one night that's part of a series, a whole weekend, a whole week. It's all different kinds of contacts that you, as a caller and planner, get to have with the people who are there to dance and with musicians, too. I mean, that's the other thing we haven't touched on much, but I've had lovely times traveling with and working with really good

musicians, and I love it when new people come along from different traditions and start playing for contra dances. That's been super satisfying, is to get time knowing musicians as people and as friends, and having friends all over the country is just really fun and that's something that I completely thank the dance community for. I don't think that would happen for me otherwise.

Working with the band

Mary Yes, it is a very significant bonus to this job. And like you said, just getting to stand right next to the band, that's one of the best things about it.

Susan One thing I'd say is, I have a lot of admiration for people who come to the calling thing without having done a lot of music performance themselves. It's something that got to be kind of for free for me because I had done a lot of playing and performing. But there are people who come to it never having played an instrument, who end up being great callers and just being able to take that on in addition to all the other things that you're having to learn when you're learning to call. Again, just a lot of admiration for that and also a lot of gratitude that I didn't go through that myself.

Mary Yeah, it's true. I know, it's not a given. And like you say, there are some people who they have those strengths that you need to tackle and then they sort of fill in the pieces that you need to be able to communicate with the band and you know, sort of count and manage the hall. And that's the other aspect that I love is just the teamwork with the musicians, too. And knowing that I know some stuff, but they really are holding down that aspect of things and just getting to be colleagues for for an evening, it's so fun.

Susan That's something I know you've covered in some of the other podcasts, but just the idea of when you start out calling you may be working with bands that are newer too and that are struggling more. And it's just so easy when you get to work with a really experienced band, when you're used to working with an Irish band that plays a lot of crooked tunes and you got to deal with that as a newer caller when there's five other things that are grabbing your attention. So for people, anybody listening who's more starting out, it gets a lot easier. Both with more experienced dancers and with more experienced musicians, it all gets easier.

Mary It does, keep doing it.

Susan You'll still have the skills you develop to working in tougher situations. But it can just be a complete joy to be able to relax more.

Mary And it's all part of the experiment, and I love when you just get something completely new and unexpected. I was calling at a little festival in Vermont here a couple weeks ago, and I was doing a community contra dance. It was kind of all comers, all different levels but the organizers happened to put me together with kind of two different bands that they combined. So we had a six piece band with three fiddles, an accordion player, a guitar player and a bagpipe player. A few of them had experience playing for contras, a few of them did not but we all just got together and made it work. Sometimes that element of inexperience, but like courage and sort of necessity of having to make something happen can result in something really fun. So I think it was a successful experiment, but it was certainly exciting.

Susan So glad to hear it. I definitely talk to musicians ahead of time if they haven't done many contra dances so they know what to expect from me and from the evening I'm going to create.

Mary Yeah, establish some ground rules, common language helps.

Susan Common language, it helps me know what support they're going to need from me, to know something about their level of experience and helps me know are they going to be able to play up to tempo, likely or not. What do I planning ahead of time if I know, probably not, yeah.

Mary Always something to learn. Great. Well, as I think you know, I have three closing questions, and we've touched on some of them a little bit, which is totally fine. But the first one you have mentioned a little bit, but I usually ask people about how they notate and keep their dance collection, because that's something that's really central to being a caller. You have to sort of build this library of repertoire. So it sounds like you have been cards from the start and into the future, it sounds like.

Susan Only once have I managed to get to a dance, not having any cards with me. And luckily I had a pet sitter who photographed and sent the program for the night. But yeah, just the physical cards and card collection over the years. I do occasionally now use some of the online resources to be able to do searches if I'm really stuck in looking for something particular, it doesn't happen too often, but either it will remind me of a card that I didn't think to look at or, you know, add a new dance to the collection.

Mary Nice. And do you have a box of cards or, you said you had binders?

Susan Books, books designed for holding photographs that the cards slide into. You know, it used to be very tidy and there was one card per slot and plenty of spaces to add new dances because of these three, you know, kind of by complexity level, books of cards. I weed dances out and remove them from books as I replace them with things I like better or things I just find I haven't called in a long time, I haven't needed. But right now there are about two or three cards per slot and they kind of hide each other a little bit. It's not an ideal situation and it kind of drives my husband crazy. I like using my own, over the years...notation. A lot of my cards are completely illegible because at first especially, I was so nervous with the sweaty hand holding the paper card that the writing has come right off and it doesn't matter, it's still the card I've always used. It doesn't matter if you can't read, B1 and B2. I really do know the dances, but it's just the familiarity of seeing my own thing in my own hand. But I love it when musicians say, could I look at your card? It's like, sure, you can, good luck to you. Let me tell you what it actually is and they said, you can't read this at all, the writing is completely gone, but it's my card.

Mary But I know what it says and it's true, the longer you've been using a system, it is harder to change. I think.

Susan Because regardless of, you know, internet connection it's guaranteed to work. Some of the halls actually are remote enough and don't always have good cell signal, it works well.

Mary So you're safe with your cards. Do you have any pre- or post- gig rituals, things that you like to do to get ready for a dance or to wind down afterwards?

Susan For getting ready, I definitely like to have done programming in advance. I now can sleep and eat normally, I'm not tense, thank goodness. To to wind down, I think it's really important to me that I be able to chat in the car on the way home. So having a husband who loves to dance, who's there, who's helping out with newcomers on the floor, and then who will listen to me go back over things, it's like, boy, that didn't feel so good. Why do you think that was confusing or, you know, this aspect of this dance didn't seem as good as I would like it to be. Should we change that up next time? So that's really helpful, that's pretty much the debrief afterwards or, you know, did that story work or was it just like, oh, we'll just leave that out? It didn't feel good.

Mary Nice. Yeah, it's true, because you're just up there on stage, kind of, you know, not totally alone, but you're holding the whole room for 3 hours. It's so great to be able to check in with other other witnesses to sort of see, "Did you have the experience that I had?" Yeah, I totally get it. And then I have been asking everyone if they're an introvert or an extrovert, which you've also answered a little bit. Sounds like you feel pretty sure where you are on that.

Susan On that one, it always amazes me when people ask me to do something that kind of makes clear that they think I'm extroverted because they're used to me up there in front of lots of people speaking into a mic. As long as it's nice, structured, I have a purpose and I know what I'm trying to accomplish, it's not scary anymore. I like it but it never ceases to amaze me when people say you're kind of quiet away from that mic and they weren't expecting it. The structure has given me freedom to connect with more people actually in a fun way than without coming to calling I would ever have experienced, I think.

Mary Yeah, it has to have something for everyone. I find it just really heartening that it can accommodate a lot of different people with a lot of...

Susan With a lot of styles...

Mary Exactly! It's what makes it so interesting. Wonderful. Well, Susan, thank you so much for chatting with me, it's been really nice to hear a little bit more about your caller life. I hope you have fun at your next dance wherever you're off to next and fun with your pandemic pups.

Susan I think the next one is a dance weekend in Oregon at the end of the month.

Mary Wonderful, great.

Susan I look forward to being able to dance, half the time and call half the time, which is ideal.

Mary That's the dream. All right, thank you.

Susan Good to talk, thanks for having me.

[*Musical transition*]

Mary Wesley Thanks so much to Susan for talking with me! You can check out the show notes for today's episode at 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