

Transcript - From the Mic Episode 18 - David Smukler

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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.

David Intro

Hi there From the Mic listeners. Welcome back! Today we are joined by the most wonderful David Smukler. A dance caller, scholar, organizer, choreographer, teacher, champion of chestnuts...the list goes on. David joined me over zoom from his home in Syracuse, New York. Behind him in the background I could see rows and rows of books about dance, music, and song. He grew up singing folk songs with his mom and began dancing contras in New Hampshire as a teen. In 1981 he was drafted to call for his local dance and has been calling ever since. David calls contras and squares, English country dances, and family and community dances.

It seems to me that David never tires of finding new ways to participate in and contribute to the dance community. He has been a long-time Board member of the Syracuse Country Dancers. He helped create an innovative Central New York gathering for callers, as well as the world's first Contra Prom.

He's a retired inclusive early childhood and childhood educator. He has also taught for years at the college level in a teacher preparation program. Not a surprise, David has frequently used dance and song in his teaching, both with children and adults (well, sometimes his students are surprised!) A teacher through and through, David believes that people can always learn and grow. While welcoming, I would say *embracing* change and evolution, David has enormous respect for the value of folk traditions. In 2008 with David Millstone he co-authored the CDSS publication *Cracking Chestnuts: The Living Tradition of Classic American Contra Dances*.

As if this wasn't enough, after serving two previous terms on the CDSS board in the early 2000s, David has recently returned for another term and is next in line to serve as board president! CDSS, you are lucky to have him!

I'm so excited to share our interview with you. Just a heads up, the first 10 minutes or so will sound a little bit muffled, but we made adjustments so the rest of the recording will be clearer! Here's David.

Mary Wesley Greetings. Hello, David Smukler. Welcome to From the Mic!

David Smukler It's great to be here.

Mary Wesley I'm so glad to be speaking with you today. I love your backdrop that I'm seeing on our Zoom call. You seem like maybe you're surrounded by dance books. If I had to make a guess.

David Smukler Yeah. Song and dance. Yeah.

Mary Wesley Song and dance—it looks like you're in good company. They're a cozy place to be on a fall day. Well, as I think you know, this podcast is dedicated to talking with dance callers, particularly people who call North American dance styles and traditions, focusing on contra, square, and community style dancing. And you call some of all of those styles, I believe, and more. So it's very exciting to get to chat with you a little bit today. You are certainly someone who has been an influence on me as a caller and we I know that we share a love of chestnuts, New England chestnuts. I was doing a little bit of looking around your website to prepare for this interview, and I went down a wonderful 30-minute rabbit hole looking at all the different Money Musk videos and recordings that you have on your website and seeing familiar faces. And I'm in a few of them, which I felt honored to be. And I've come to some of your caller gatherings in Syracuse. So anyway, we've got lots and lots in common. And I also have never sat down and sort of started from the beginning and gotten to have a bit more in-depth conversation, which is what this podcast makes space for. So here we go. I usually start just asking people to share a little bit about how they got into this world. Whatever the starting point was for you, was it dancing, was it in your family...what kind of lit the match for you?

Beginnings

David Smukler So I guess I started being interested in folk music as a kid. My mom played guitar and we grew up with a lot of that music in the house. And I went to summer camp in southern New Hampshire, and we used to have people come to the camp and do dancing with us. I think Dudley Laufman used to come and dance with the kids, and when I was a counselor in training a CIT, the exciting thing to do when our nights off was to go to the contra dance nearby. There was a dance...I don't remember if it was...it might have been Frankestown. And we would stand on one side of the hall and anxiously wonder if we'd get partners. So that was my first American contra dance kind of experience. Then in college, I went to Oberlin, which has since become kind of a hotbed of this kind of dance. But a lot of Pinewoods kids end up at Oberlin for some reason. And there was a guy there named Rodney Miller, who was one of my classmates. And so and I recognized him from some of the dances in New England that I'd been going to. So I just got more and more connected over time to that kind of dancing and really interested in that. I moved after college to the Boston area and there was a lot of dancing. Ted Sannella and Tony Parkes was becoming popular there. There was just lots of dancing for me to go to and learn from. I didn't start calling yet then. I started calling when I lived in Salem, MA. I used to go to our local contra dances there, which were in Salem and later in Beverly, and the caller was Sarah Gregory Smith, who was a close friend, and Sarah and her husband Bill used to go away for the summers, and some of the local dancers wanted to keep the dance going. So I was recruited. The dancers said, "Oh, come on David you know all these dances you can..." So that's how I first got into it. Sarah kind of mentored me and I started calling. I don't think I was very good at it, but I stumbled through and, you know, gradually learned more just from doing. And Sarah always called squares as well as contras. So that's how I was brought up as a caller is that an evening of dance meant contras and squares. Later I moved to where I live now in Syracuse, and the local dance was just all modern contra dances, all duple improper or Becket, and no squares, no triplets, no circles, you know. And I was just used to a different kind of culture of what a dance was. So when I started calling here, it was yet another adjustment to figure out how to call in a way that would please the local dancers and meanwhile, start slipping in some squares or triplets or

whatever that I thought would be winning ones that people would like to do so. Hmm, what else is in my origin story here that I can tell you? I used to do international dance as a teen on the steps of the art museum in Philadelphia where I grew up. There are these landings, if you remember the Rocky movie, where he's running up those steps, and we would meet right on one of those landings. And someone had a battery operated phonograph, and that was our music. And we would do Troika and Misirlou and that sort of repertoire. So that was also some of my early dancing.

Mary Wesley So it sounds like participating in social dance and music has been a through line.

David Smukler Yeah, there's something that I really liked about it. At Oberlin, we had a physical education requirement and one of the options was square dancing. So I thought, "Well, sure, I'll do that". And again, it was kind of very different from what I was used to. It was a record player and, you know, a very cornball sort of 50s squares. But I had fun. I liked doing that.

Mary Wesley And thankfully that didn't become an impediment for your continued interest in square dancing, which for some it didn't it didn't go that way. So I'm glad that it was enjoyable. Can you share more about when you first started learning to call? It sounded like Sarah was a mentor in many ways, and I wonder what that mentorship looked like?

David Smukler Yeah. So I don't know if you know Sarah very well, but while we were living with Sarah and Bill, Laurel and I and they got married around the same time, so that's one thing. And we were very close friends. I actually moved to Salem to work with Bill in a woodworking shop, and Sarah was losing her vision around that time. So by the time we were in Salem, she was really completely blind. And I think her calling definitely improved as she lost her vision, which was really interesting to me. She just became very aware of the floor because she felt a need to. So she would do things like point to the far left corner of the room and say, "You in that square, you're having some trouble." Like she could hear that and she'd say, you know, "Do you want another walk through for that group?" She was just very tuned in because of her lack of vision. And I don't know if she might have had spies in the band telling her stuff, but I think she was just really listening. And she was a very warm caller, just a very, very inviting voice and very, very warm. And she had a repertoire that was lots of the classics, lots of the kind of easier, straightforward squares and a lot of the hot new dances of that time, which were some of the zesty contra repertoire from Larry Jennings' book. So that's what I started with is just trying to do the dances that she was already doing so that the dancers would be familiar with the style and the repertoire. Occasionally we would get people dropping in on our dance who were quite good callers. And so that was nerve wracking as a new caller to see, you know, suddenly I'm calling a singing square that I learned from Tod Whittemore and there's Tod on the floor. And I would freeze, you know, I can really remember a moment to this day where I was doing the walk through and I completely had no idea what came next. And, you know, I've never really liked to depend on having my notes with me and I made it a point of pride for a while not to. I've gotten myself in enough trouble that I do have them available, but I don't tend to refer to them. But anyway, that was one example of I had no idea what it was and everybody was waiting and I was there frozen on stage and all eyes were on me. Just your nightmare, you know? And I'm looking pleadingly at Tod, "What comes next?" I mean, I didn't say that, but he must have known from my face and finally he took pity on me and told me what came next. So the dance went on and it was fine.

Mary Wesley In that process of becoming a caller, I'm wondering, did you immediately like calling? When you stepped from the dance floor up to the mic?

David Smukler Yes. I loved it. I didn't feel like I was that good at it at first, but I still loved it. It was wonderful to be in that space where I'm interacting with the band, interacting with the dancers, and just feel like I'm making this magic thing happen. It's just so fun. And I think there were times when I could fill a role that no one else could fill. I think I told you the story once before about being the hip on which a baby could rest because nobody else had a free hip. The musician's arms were full of their instruments and the dancers were busy. So while I was calling, I got to do that and it was a crowd that often had kids. And so they would be bedded down in the corners on piles of coats while we danced. But anyway, yeah, I loved that. Standing in that place where the caller stands. I loved also that I was bringing forward a tradition, that I was calling dances, some of which were hours old, and others of which were decades old, and others of which were hundreds of years old. I just think that's so cool and I've always loved that, and I continue to love that.

Exploring different styles

Mary Wesley You've mentioned traveling and moving between different dance communities and noticing different preferences and even just traditions within a dance community, with Salem it being quite the norm to call a variety of formations, you know, squares or triplets thrown in and Syracuse being at a moment in time when that community was excited about zesty contras, you know, sort of new choreography. How did you find your own space and balance your taste and kind of, what you perceive the taste of your communities to be? Because the caller has a little bit of influence in shaping those experiences for a group.

David Smukler So when I came here the first time, I said on the mic, "Next dance will be a square," there was an audible groan and a number of people sat down and it didn't feel good. And I persisted. I said, "Well we'll do this square, and then we'll do some more of the other stuff." And it took me aback. So a friend of mine, another caller here, and I kind of sat down together and plotted, you know, if we want people to be more accepting of squares, which squares should we use? Like which ones keep everyone moving, feel like they have enough swinging in them, like would feel exciting to contra dancers. Then we kind of strategically picked squares and we offered them at particular times. And I will say there is one dancer to this day who very politely doesn't make noise about it. But, you know, when I announce a square, he will sit down and I have seen him dance to a square when someone had already asked him to dance and he didn't want to be rude. But generally he's very good about sussing out when they'll be squares and he won't dance them. But, you know, I'd say the rest of our community had become converts, that we picked our dances carefully and introduced them and won people over. So I'm pleased that we sort of have over time, developed a community that's very accepting. If I want to throw a chestnut in, they are game. If I say triplet, three couple longways people line up happily and they'll pretty much do anything with only one or two exceptions. And even those people are very polite about it they don't, they don't groan anymore. So that's great. Now, you know, having said that, it's a negotiation, I would say, between the dancers and the caller. It's not that I have entirely imposed my particular set of tastes on the locals, right? And the example I should use of this is the clapping in Petronella. That is something that I don't mind but I never would do because I didn't grow up doing it and it's not my particular preference. But you know, people do that and it doesn't matter how much I say something like, "You know..." It's like having a smoking area in a restaurant you can't really do that. If somebody

clapped, everybody's affected. I can't really do that. The dancing is just going to include the clapping and people will do it joyfully and I'm all for that. So the tradition is not mine. I have my little corner of it and I do what I like and try and do it in a way that will please the dancers wherever I am. But it will develop the way that people want it to develop, the dancers on the floor. And as long as it's safe, I'm all for that.

Cracking Chestnuts

Mary Wesley Yeah. So it sounds like you have a very kind of balanced approach to navigating these scenarios. I do in some ways, you as an advocate, a gentle advocate for for that variety of styles and in particular for chestnuts. I'm of course, thinking of your Cracking Chestnuts book that you created with David Millstone. I believe that that began as a column in the CDSS news. But would you talk a little bit about that work as well and where it fits in?

David Smukler Yeah. So when I first started dancing, the repertoire was pretty narrow. Like you kind of knew what you were going to do every night. You do Hull's Victory and Chorus Jig and maybe Rory O'More and definitely Money Musk and you know, you would do sort of the same sets of dances over and over and a few squares, usually a singing one and maybe something else. And, you know, that's always what the dances would include. I remember actually, I once went to Nova Scotia and went to a dance there, and it was amazing. They all knew all their dances, so much so that the caller was entirely unintelligible. So the caller would say "balrkhs," and everyone would do something. And then he'd say "asdkjl" and everyone would do something else. It was it was delightful, you know. But since I didn't know any of those dances, people were pushing me around and we were all having fun. But the dances I grew up with as a teenager in New England were similar that everyone kind of knew what they were already. So, you know, dances that we now find difficult to teach because they're not the style anymore, they were just always done and so everyone knew them. So I really like those dances because they're what I grew up with. And so I started writing a column for the CDSS news, I can't remember the exact date, but anyway, it ran for three years.

We did 17 dances in those because Money Musk took two columns because we had so much to say about it. And each column was focused on a particular chestnut, some of them pretty common ones that we would do all the time, and others less so, just historical contra dances that we're lesser known dances but we could still call them chestnuts because they were old. And each of the columns was an excuse to get on my soapbox and talk about something that mattered to me in dancing. So, you know, I talked about things like insider outsider stuff. You know, like the insiders would know that in Lamplighters, you really had to come all the way back. That there was this real tendency to, because you your swing was below you were already progressed when you did the swing and then you went down the center and back and cast off. There was a possibility that you would cast off with the wrong person, you know, you would turn it into a double progression. So, you know, I would use the column as an excuse to talk about that. How do you become an insider and how do you how do you accept everybody at a dance when...because that's really what we want to do. I talked about things like, I use the the notion of "balance and swing" and saying, we want both of those things in our dance. We want a balance of styles and and things like that. And we want zesty-ness, like we want the swing in there, too. So I played with the language a little there, but I would in each column I would find a notion like that and use that dance as an excuse to to talk about things that I cared about in dancing. And that was where the book really came from.

It wasn't really a scholarly work on chestnuts. And in fact, we we put that disclaimer in the intro and, and I still get people thinking that I'm an authority on historical dance and it's ridiculous. I know so little compared to many people about it. But anyway that was a great project. It was really fun. So I like that repertoire and I include it still. I include some of those dances on a regular basis in our dance, and people are used to them for me.

Mary Wesley Yeah, you know, I would just say that. I'm a firm believer in the scholarship of everyday individuals drawing on their experience and their passions. And, you know, that is what you and the other David have created. And I don't know if you actually identify with that title of "advocate" for chestnuts. But you know in many ways I feel like that's how I received it. You conveyed something about the value and importance and, you know the joy of these dances. And it was convincing because it came from a personal experiential place.

David Smukler Yeah. I mean, we talk about "the living tradition," and we're all people who are part of that. So if it's really alive, then it's all of us. And I think that's so sweet. It's so lovely that this tradition keeps going. So I am someone who likes all of that old stuff and likes all of the new stuff too. So I want it all, and I'm really interested in how choreography keeps developing and changing. And I love trying to create dances that go somewhere else that we haven't tried yet. I wish I was more creative and can do it better, but sometimes, like I get there. I also was very involved with the syllabi for the Ralph Page Dance Legacy weekend for many years. I was their historian or something.

Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend

Mary Wesley Yes will you just briefly introduced that weekend?

David Smukler Yes, that's a weekend that is part of NEFFA that happens in southern New Hampshire, or this year it's going to be in Massachusetts. But it's a weekend every year that's dedicated to the full range of the history of contra dance. So typically there's always a bunch of the chestnut repertoire represented there, and there will be the latest interesting hot new moves and dances represented there as well. So it's people who really try and dance well, try and dance...by dancing well, I think they mean dancing in a way that takes care of other dancers, that makes everyone move in synchrony. And this weekend started to honor Ralph Page when he passed away. It started in 1988. It's been going every year with the exception of those couple of years recently that we don't count anymore of, as they say, they don't count. So I'm two years younger than I think I am. And for a big chunk of that time, people had a syllabus. Well, there was a syllabus being created when I first went that I had nothing to do with. And then at some point they were having trouble getting it done and I volunteered. And for, I don't know, maybe 20 years of the Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend, I created what we call the syllabus. But what it was was a record of what was danced, all the choreography. I would collect the names of the tunes that were done with it. There were workshops held there on different topics, and I would write summaries of those workshops, just a record of what happened. And those are all available online through the Diamond Library at UNH, collected them all, and so it represents a big chunk of work. I mean, you can look through them and mine it for all kinds of interesting dances. So anyway, I did that as well. And I think that's part of what led to the Cracking Chestnuts is doing those syllabi sparked my interest in the chestnuts. And I also really loved doing them because, like your podcast, it was an opportunity for me to connect with a whole bunch of other callers because I would write to choreographers in particular

and say, "Did I get it right? Can you fix my mistakes, please?" And people would then have conversations with me back and forth about their work. So I loved that.

[[David calling the traditional chestnut British Sorrow](#) for the Country Dancers of Rochester at Harmony House in Webster New York in April, 2023 with music by "Confluence" (Nadine Dyskant-Miller and Barbara Dyskant.)]

Trying positional calling

More recently, so we had those couple of years of pandemic, and I have had a couple of projects during that time for myself because I couldn't dance and I wanted to feed my dance and music habit. So I did a lot of choreography during that time. I wrote a lot of dances and was unable to test them with actual people. But eventually I was, I've been able to test many of them, which meant that I could discard lots of the ones that weren't so good and keep the ones that I liked. Another thing I really wanted to work on, because there was a lot of conversation about it, was as a personal challenge, I wanted to learn to call without using role names of any kind. So I know that there's what I think of as pretty unfortunate divisions in the community at times now between people who really want the names to stay the same and others who really want them to change. And my personal point of view on that is that I want to be able to dance and I'm happy to dance and it doesn't really matter to me all that much how the role names are used. But I do think it's a really interesting challenge for me as a caller to think about how would I teach a dance without using them at all, just using positional language to convey what I want. And is it possible to do that efficiently and clearly without frustrating the dancers. So I've been working on that and I'm 70% there. I mean, if I go through my collection, there are lots and lots of dances where it's just trivial. It's easy. There's a couple of things that I feel like start having to happen. Like most chains are right hand chains. So I feel like you can just say "chain." And if it's different, then you can indicate that. And the dancers that I've taught that way since starting this project have not had any trouble with that at all. I say "chain" and the people who expect to chain do it and it's fine. If I teach a chain to newcomers same thing, I can teach if your right hand's free, you pull by and so forth. Sometimes you get a dance: neighbors balance, box and gnat, allemande left once in a half, that's the start. Both of you have your right hands connected, so you both have your left hand free. But one of you is facing in and the other's facing out. So the correct person, again, is just going to be the person to do it. So I'm finding that that positional calling for me for lots and lots of my dances works fine. There's so many ways to orient people that don't have to do with what you call them. So I just feel like it's easier than we think it is most of the time.

Mary Wesley And what do you hope that offers for the dancers?

David Smukler So I don't think it offers anything actually special for the dancers. I think first and foremost that it's a personal challenge for myself. But I do think that the space we've gotten ourselves into, where there's a lot of conflict in many communities is just so unfortunate. And so what it offers is actually a way forward where I don't have to think about which community am I in. I can just call what I call, and I'm not going to make anyone grumpy. I do have a commitment to doing all the dances in my collection, so I'm not going to avoid the dance just because it's harder to do positionally. But I am going to have to be very creative when I get to those. And at this point, as I say, I think I have ways pretty much for everything in my collection just some of them are cumbersome and some of them are less cumbersome than with role names. You know, if you start to say the first

gent and the third lady doing this around each other...you know, after a while, it's hard to process all of that. And sometimes if you just say "the outsides" do this or that. In a mixer or a square, I've been experimenting more with insides and outsides as role names that works pretty well. Like if you're doing a promenade and a circle mixer outside, it's turn back, you know, or something like that works quite well.

Calling - Nuts and Bolts

Mary Wesley Yeah, it sounds like you're...I mean language is, I think, super important for callers in general. And I wonder, getting into kind of the nuts and bolts of calling a little bit, you know, are there parts of the process that that intrigue you particularly? Language is really important, not not only in terms of role terminology, but also teaching and communication. You know, there's also considerations of working with the band and choosing a program. I wonder if you might kind of just take us through some of those different areas that are part of the caller role.

David Smukler Yes. So we were talking about how much I got from being shepherded into the role by Sarah Smith, that her mentorship really helped me get started. And thinking about that, I've actually had mentees all along the way. Once I got to a certain point, I started helping others to start calling as well. And I have two right now, as a matter of fact, one English mentee and one contra. And I really like that because it makes me think about all this stuff that you're talking about in great detail because they have questions like, how do you do that...

Mary Wesley And how does it all work?

David Smukler Right and what words do you use when and as you can imagine, the answer to so many questions, "It depends." Right? It depends. So if I'm calling for a bunch of kids, my goal is to just manage the chaos, right like, I know there's going to be chaos. It's fine. Make it feel good to everyone who's there. That's my goal. So I'm choosing dances where you know, I might choose a dance where it's a big circle. I did this once and I had this enormous crowd in Ottawa of families and kids and people who were three people to a couple, four people to a couple, three year olds, ten year olds, 80 year olds, like everybody there. And it was just total madness. And I thought, "What am I going to call next?" I had a list of dances and I didn't want it to look too much like the one before. So I said "Line up for a circle." And we had this enormous circle in this space, and we went in and out and circle left and right or whatever to start. And then I said, I can't remember how I did it, but I said, you know, if you're wearing red or something, run all the way around the outside of the circle until you're back to where you started. You know, I just was making this up on the spot. And that's perfectly legitimate in that situation. Everyone had a great time, they said that was the best dance, where does that come from? It was so funny. That was their favorite dance because it was just silliness. And, you know, in that situation, that's what you want.

People come to a workshop where they want to hear about the historical dances because of what I've done with those. And so the workshop might be, where did that come from? Like, dances that have the Rory O'More spin in it. And so we do Rory O'More and then we do another dance that's a modern dance that uses that in a clever way. And then we do, you know, contra corners and then we use in a modern dance that uses that. So that's a whole different kind of audience and so your language is different, your approach is different, how much you talk is different, you know? In an evening dance that's a social

dance the goal is to not talk too much. You want to just get them going efficiently and let them have fun, and they'll have fun if the dances are, I think, varied somewhat. If they're not all the same, then there's something a little piquant about this next idea, you know? Oh, now we're doing Sackett's Harbor, and you turn the set sideways, oh, my goodness look at that! So there's that. That's the overview in terms of like programming, thinking about that. Sometimes if it's, you know, a particular kind of community, I'm not going to do too much of that chestnut stuff. They don't want it from me. So I'll just, you know, lean on dances from the 21st century, of which there are a million wonderful ones. There's no dearth of good dances, no matter what repertoire you lean on. So that's the programming side. The language side is, what words connect with people? It's amazing to me to say, "Chain" and watch what happens. Sometimes it's fine. You say "chain," one word, you're done. There's, you know, four bars all taken care of. Sometimes you say chain and people do, you know, grand chain, is it? Like people will interpret from whatever contexts they're used to. So you have to watch what happens when the words come out of your mouth and respond accordingly. And that's part of the fun of it all. It's fun to watch the effect of a word on a person or on a group. I danced recently to a caller who uses different words than I'm used to. And it was really interesting to watch the community go, "Huh? You know, as as this person was trying out the words they wanted to use. I don't know, it's a dance. Another kind of dance you know, which words kind of connect with this group. And if it doesn't connect, I'll try another one. But I don't want to talk too much. A conversation like we're having is wonderful, a self-indulgent thing to do for callers. We love doing this because when we're working, our goal is to talk less. So to give ourselves this opportunity to talk more about what we love, it's delicious.

The Upstate New York Callers Gathering

Mary Wesley Exactly! And am I right that you do...well, you did just mention that you have several mentees and you've worked with mentees over the years. I think you've also organized kind of gatherings for callers. I've been to one of those, which is a wonderful offering.

David Smukler All right. So this is...

Mary Wesley Because as you said, we like to self indulge.

David Smukler So this started actually with triplets. We're talking about the Upstate New York Callers Gathering. And the way this started was with an email conversation between David Millstone and me, when email was pretty new. We were talking about Ted Sannella's triplets because I had been asked to do a program of them at a weekend, and I was trying to pick ones that, like the square that we were talking about earlier, ones that would please people who liked the lot of swinging that that would feel good to, what then was the modern contra dancer. And so we came up with a nice program and somewhere in there David said something like, "It would be fun sometimes to just dance through all 41 of them, wouldn't it?" And I decided to run with that idea. So I said, "Yeah, let's do that." So we set up a workshop here in Syracuse, where we were going to try and dance to all 41 triplets and take notes about it. And David got excited about this, too. So he, on the same day, did the same workshop in his kitchen in Lebanon, New Hampshire. And Lynn Ackerson got wind of this and she did the same thing.

Mary Wesley On the West Coast

David Smukler On the West Coast in California, did a triplet workshop where they were going to dance to all 41 of them. So the other two groups successfully danced through all 41 of them. My group didn't quite make it. We got to, you know, 30 something because we talked too much. We would do the triplet, we would then sit down to discuss its ins and outs and then move on to the next one and we took notes throughout the whole thing. And then all three groups compiled their notes and this was the Ted's Triplet Marathon. There are still, you might see occasional people wearing a button that says "I was there. Ted's Triplet Marathon," and the three groups all did the triplets. And so we liked it so much in Syracuse that every year since we've tried to have a callers workshop where people get together and the idea is to focus on repertoire. So each workshop focuses on some chunk of dance repertoire that we're interested in. Like we might have one on English calling for contra callers, you know, who want to get started, or squares, or the chestnuts we did a couple of times, or dances of Gene Hubert or, you know, dances from the Zesty contras collection. And the reason we focus on repertoire is because we're trying to be different from the callers intensives that CDSS runs, where they hire a really brilliant caller, and then the students learn from this brilliant caller. Rather than have that model, we just have a more sort of democratic, everybody comes and we're all brilliant, including the person who's been calling for a week. So we have people of every level from that to people who are, you know, like on our square dance one Nils Friedland came and he was just another caller in that group. You came to one of our chestnuts ones and you were just another caller in the group. You weren't the amazing Mary Wesley from, you know... So that's the model is we're learning all together from the repertoire by talking about it. And the skill building that happens happens incidentally, because. When you get to geek out about this, then you say, "Ooh, that's an idea." And you might pick up ideas that you hadn't thought of no matter what level you are.

Mary Wesley I love hearing all the different ways that you're cultivating, you know, skills and community for callers. And you know, your first answer when I asked about the caller skill set or the tool box is you said, "It depends," which is just kind of almost anything...any scenario you're trying to envision. And that's what's so interesting about our ecosystem in which we're working is that we only have so much control. And so I'm curious when you're doing more one-on-one mentorship, how do you talk about and teach people or get them to that place where they can contend with all of the varying factors, which will never be predictable.

David Smukler So I do try and distinguish between three things: between how you would describe a dance, like for your own personal notes, what do you put in your notes; how would you teach that dance to a group, and that, of course, depends a lot on the group; and then how do you prompt the dance once the music is going? And those are all very different things. You have to really distinguish those. So when I have a new caller, I talk about that and try and help them come up with whatever is going to work for them as a system for their notes. And then I try and help them think about how would you teach that to our regular group? Like just as a starting point, the group you're used to dancing in. What do those people need? You know? And then later we can get into what the five year olds need and what does the blind person need and that sort of thing. Then I get into the prompting as well, like we do all three simultaneously. But I think all three of those are so important and I have to think about them differently. Prompting is knowing where to place the word, and which word, and you know how to orient people. People think positional calling is new. It's not. We've always said, "Face the next, do si do," you know, or things like that where you orient the person before you tell them what to do. And you do it with the fewest syllables necessary, usually because it depends. Sometimes you want a few more syllables because it's going to fit the music. You want the prompting to become part

of the music. So you know, you have to think about, well, how many beats does it take to say, X, Y or Z? And there are probably 17 different ways you could say, "Face the next and do si do, but you know which one here? Do you just say, "do si do?" Do you say, "Go?" Do you say, "On to the next?" You know, all of those are possible and all can be completely clear, even though they're ambiguous when you just say them, but in context they are clear. And I go back to that thing of when you're prompting, if you've taught it well and things are going smoothly, fewer words, down to zero words is really good. Like as soon as you can drop out and not lose too many people, that's a good thing. Because then the musicians get to do their thing and that's where it really cooks. You know? Like the good musician next to you is so nice.

Mary Wesley And you just get to sit back and watch.

David Smukler We went to a dance recently, so we were not in my home community and we went to this dance and it was a day when we'd been walking around, we were jetlagged, we were exhausted and we thought, "Well, we'll do a dance or two and then we'll go home." From the first four potatoes we were totally in. This band, it was two 20-somethings guitar and fiddle with such incredible energy and skill and they just lifted your feet, lifted your heart. Yeah, and I had the greatest time.

[[David calling the traditional dance "Careless Sally" at the Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend in 2009 with music by George Wilson, Deanna Stiles, Bob McQuillen](#)]

Mentors and Influences

Mary Wesley Did you have a relationship with Ted Sannella? I'm always curious about other mentors or influences, just because it's nice to hear that.

David Smukler He was definitely an influence.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

David Smukler And, you know, in the early Ralph Page weekends that I would go to, well I'd see him, you know, in the Boston scene when I was first dancing, he was often the behind the mic. And there's...I loved his calling. You know, some people have a beautiful voice. I don't feel like I have a beautiful voice. I'm always envious of people with a really good instrument. He didn't have a particularly beautiful voice, I don't think. And his timing was not super crisp, he never had the total clarity that you know, there are other callers who do that better. He was so good at calling. It didn't matter any of that. I think, first of all, there's a personality coming across the mic and his personality was very upbeat and he wanted something from you as a dancer. He asked you to do something at every dance. He didn't say specifically this, it just came out in his calling. So I loved all that about him and I definitely feel like that was an influence on what I wanted to do in my calling. I don't know if I get there, but that's something I really admired.

David Smukler I definitely was influenced a lot by Tony Parkes. He was calling quite a bit when I was first calling. And Tod Whittemore had a series at the VFW hall with the rocket in front of it. There's a dance he composed called Rocket Reel for that setting, and he would wear a cowboy hat and do his yodeling. And at that time he was a kind of young star, you know, and had a following. People devoted to him would come to those dances,

and they were big dances. So those are people who I heard a lot. I was impressed by Sarah, in part because she was a woman. There weren't as many female voices at the time, and she just held her own. Just did great. Larry Jennings was certainly there and around and very influential. He was quirky. And I had some interesting back and forth with him, like I wrote a dance, I hope we'll talk more about the dances I write. But I wrote a dance way back when based on his dance called "Give and Take," and at the time...I forget, I've renamed the dance because at the time I called it "Gents Give, Ladies Take" or something like that because I was reversing his give and take where he conceptualized the figure as men bringing women back to their side of the line for a swing. And I thought, 'Well, let's turn that on its head and have the women bring the men back.' And I will claim that I'm the first person to do that. Lots of dances do that now, but I did that and I showed it to Larry and I thought, 'Oh, he's going to love this.' And he hated it. He said, "No, no, that's not how my figure goes. You can't do that." But I did it anyway. And people liked the dance, and I've renamed it [this dance is now called "Robinhood"], but I can't remember off the top of my head. Maybe I'll tell you for the notes or something.

Mary Wesley: Okay, wow.

David Smukler Anyway, he eventually changed his mind, and he liked it. But when he first saw it he didn't like it. But, Larry, he was very opinionated and wonderful, and his opinions were really always interesting and worth listening to and I really appreciated him. But he was also kind of a itchy kind of personality or something. So I guess those were some of my influences.

Choreography

Mary Wesley Yeah. We haven't talked too much about your choreography. you said you were working on some during the pandemic, but you've been writing dances throughout your career, it sounds like?

David Smukler So I originally got interested in writing dances because I would come up with a need, like I would need a dance that did a certain thing and I would just sort of figure out something that would do that. I think we talked about that with that dance where I had the kids running all the way around the circle. So that's an example of that. The other thing that often would happen to me is I would really like a dance, except for one thing. You know, like there would be something, some nugget I would really like but I didn't like the transition somewhere. I didn't like something that happened in it as much. And so I would be tweaking dances, and I don't know at what point you just call it folk process, at what point it becomes my dance, you know? I mean, that's a really funny line, you know? Like, where does a dance become your own, especially when you only have 32 bars and lots of it's kind of taken up with the obligatory stuff that people want to see in a dance like, like a swing or whatever. So it's an interesting question. I'm not quite sure always. I've also more than once had the experience of writing a dance and then discovering to my chagrin that someone else wrote the same dance three or four years earlier. You know, one of my first triplets was an attempt to write a contra corner triplet to introduce contra corners in a context that was otherwise totally simple. So I wrote that dance and it was I think David's Triplet number one. And then I decided, no, it wasn't very simple, it wasn't that easy. So I tried to simplify it further and I called that David's Triplet Number 1.5 and I really liked that one. I still use that a lot. So just this easy, introduce contra corners triplet. And I discovered that Linda Leslie wrote the same dance long before I did. She just calls it "Your Corner Triplet," or something like that. So when I introduce it, I say—and you know, the game with triplets where you say that a number to get people to applaud as if they recognize it, "This

is Ted's Triplet number 39," and everybody yells, "Hooray!" as if they recognize it of course. So I would introduce that as, "This is David's Triplet Number 1.5," and big applause. And then I say, "Of course, Linda Leslie wrote the same one before me, but I like this one better." Or you know, something like that anyway. And it's not the only dance where that's happened to me.

Mary Wesley Well it's a limited vocabulary. So there's only so many combinations.

David Smukler Although it's amazing how creative some people can be. Anyway, so I continue to do that. And during the pandemic, when I couldn't do much else, I wrote probably 60 dances or something like that. I wrote a lot of dances, more English than contra. English is a bit of a wider palette of kinds of tunes and the kinds of things you can do. But I wrote lots of contras as well, and you know, some of them I quite like. And so I had this large body of dances during the pandemic and no way to test them. And so I've been gradually sneaking them into programs here and there and testing them out, and quietly discarding many of them. On my website I list dances as "untested," "beta," and "tried and true." I have three categories and "beta," it can be a quite a long lived dance that I just haven't found the right home for. Like a dance that's not the style. Dances where it's proper and there's not a lot of swinging and stuff like that, that I still think are good choreography but I don't expect we'll get much use. And sometimes "beta" means I have no idea how to teach this. So the "tried and true" dances are all ones where I've had the experience of teaching it and people really liking it and me coming together that way. When you write a dance, there's an interesting ego thing that happens because people will tell you, "Oh, that was wonderful!" And I will look at the floor and think, 'I don't think it was that wonderful,' you know. So it's interesting to try and decide when a dance is really ready and I'm not sure I always get that line right. But that's another interesting part for me. I think ego is a big part of teaching and calling in general. I remember at a wonderful intensive class in square dance calling that Larry Edelman taught at Pinewoods one year that I was part of. And he talked about the caller's role as juggling. That, you know, you have a lot of balls in the air and you have the band to pay attention to, and the teaching, and the prompting, and the dancers at whatever levels, and how mixed, and is there a center set thing going on... And all of these balls that are in the air. And he said there's this one other ball that he calls, "the bowling ball." So while you have all these other balls in the air, you're also juggling the bowling ball, which is your ego. And I thought that was a really interesting image because callers, to get up and have thechutzpah to say, "I'm in charge of all of you people," and then, you know, to be there and you're actually very vulnerable up there. Bruce Hamilton talks about this, too, in the English world. He talks about how dancers tolerate callers because it's the fastest way to get dancing. And I love that. I love reminding myself that I've got a certain amount of goodwill. I can blow that pretty easily if I'm not careful. So if I'm pushing people too far because I have an agenda, then I'm going to push that line too far.

Mary Wesley It's some very good wisdom.

David Smukler Yeah, and so to me, all of that is tied up with that big bowling ball.

Roles in the community

Mary Wesley I love it. You're describing so many different ways that you're involved in the dance and music community. We've heard about calling and choreography and mentorship. Do you enjoy kind of, trying out or being of service in these different ways? Does it keep it interesting for you? It just sounds like you're tried every corner that you can.

David Smukler Yeah, I do like the different aspects of it because, I guess what it really boils down to is I love dancing, and I want the dancing to go on. And at certain point I needed to be the caller because there was no caller to keep the dancing going on. And at another point, you know, I played the guitar, someone needed a guitar to make the band happen. So I did that because I wanted the dancing to go on. And I wrote the Chestnuts articles and later the book, because I loved that kind of dancing and didn't want it to totally disappear. And I wanted to write the sort of thing that would excite people about that repertoire. And similarly, I got involved in my local dance community's board—It's not really a board so much as a working committee that puts on the dances. Like, we have this set of bylaws that I think is one page long. We strove for, what's the simplest bylaws we could have that would count legally as bylaws? So the roles of the officers are described, and then there's a sentence about, "And any of them can do any of the things that the other ones do." Because whoever needs to do something has to do it for our small group to function. So that's the way that group works. And now, so I did a stint on the board of CDSS in the early 2000s, and that was a six year stint. They had three year terms and you could re-up for two in a row, so I did that. And then recently I was invited to rejoin the board of CDSS and I've become the president elect of the board. So beginning next April, I'll be the president of the board. I'm very excited about that. I've been so enjoying my time on the board this year that the board members are all really engaged, committed, interesting people really wanting to do great work. The executive director right now, Katy German, is a huge blessing to this organization. She's so steeped in the traditions and has her head screwed on right about so many things. And I'm just really excited to be getting to do that work too right now at this time. And it's a time when we just have all survived this period of time where there was so much uncertainty and unhappiness and inability to dance—and how to keep things going is a big priority of the organization right now. How to support local organizations and affiliates of CDSS to thrive now that people are back dancing again. And, you know, there are a lot of controversies, as I think there always will be and CDSS can have a role in them. But I think one of the things I love about the board is how much we don't necessarily all agree. Increasingly it's a geographically diverse board and a board where people can bring different points of view and respectfully share them. And so we're an organization that will support folks wherever they are in these areas—culture conflicts within the culture of dance. I'm excited to be doing that.

Mary Wesley Congratulations!

David Smukler Thank you so much.

Mary Wesley We were talking about David Kaynor before we started recording and he has a wonderful passage that I'm sure I've mentioned on this show already in his "Calling for Beginners by Beginners" book that he wrote in the introduction he just kind of talks about the the value of debate and sort of how our dance communities can be a good place for debate. That debate is healthy and you know, I think he's kind of implying that practicing those skills within our dance communities can also have an impact on our larger communities maybe, and the world! You know, it's a very...he goes big, but it's great!

David Smukler He's right to do it. I mean, how many parts of our lives are all organized around this idea of joyful interaction? I mean, when we dance, why are we getting together except to do this beautiful thing that's been around forever and that keeps evolving and that involves people of many types and ages and places and kinds of musical background, and it's just so luscious of a world. And I just hope people really appreciate the value of what we have. It's so precious.

Closing

Mary Wesley Very special. Oh, David, it's been so great to chat with you and get to indulge ourselves, as we've said, in our caller talk. I usually close with three questions, so I might get us going in that direction. And the first one is to ask about your dance notation, because this is something, you know, when I thought about my interests in making this show, one of the first things I was drawn to as a caller was that box of cards. You know I like the sort of tangible aspect of them. I like hand-writing things. You know, callers are "keepers" of a certain kind in terms of our dances and choreography. So I always like to ask people both kind of physically, how do you keep your notation, and how do you think about it?

David Smukler So I had a box of cards for many years and I had little dividers for "proper," "improper," "other formations," "easy ones," things like that. I didn't color them I just did that. And I would haul them out and then get them all mixed up and then I try and reclassify them and I'd be confused about where to put them sometimes—which place did a dance belong. I went with 3x5 cards and then I went with bigger ones and then computers came along and I started putting all my dances into a database. I used different database programs at different times, and then getting the database to print out cards. And then I would carry the cards to the gig and so on. I'd often lose cards. I mean, you're looking at, through Zoom at my study and you're actually getting a view that makes it look tidier than it is. My physical space is not as organized as I want it to be, and it never is. And the cards were driving me nuts because I would lose the important one, the coffee would spill, I don't know. So I really liked, once the computers became more prevalent, putting everything into a database and I was an early adopter of little devices that I could bring to the dance with me. Like I had a Palm Pilot.

Mary Wesley Oh yeah!

David Smukler Yeah! And I learned all the handwriting tricks to get it to do the thing. And there was a little database program that worked great on the Palm Pilot, and I used that. I put all my dances into that and one of the things that I keep doing is putting my dances into new things. And that is actually quite useful because it reacquaints me with my repertoire and then I find myself weeding things and putting in new things. And so I got Caller's Companion for my contra dances and I put them all in there and went through and again weeded and sorted and so now they're all in there. And I took all my English dances and there's a program called, "The Dancing Master," which is also a database. It's based on a spreadsheet, actually, and it's a shell. Both of these programs are shells. You have to put all the data in them. So all my English dances and my squares as well went into Dancing Master. And that's because Caller's Companion is really built around AABB, which is perfect for those millions of 32-bar contra dances. But when you get into the English world, it just is a lot. That's a lot of "square peg in a round hole" to try and put the dances into that program. So Dancing Masters is a spreadsheet and you put a lot of data about each dance into that spreadsheet, and then it creates the the output that you want, like here's the gig, here's the individual dances, that sort of thing. And it's based on having a PDF of your instructions. I just now put all my dances that aren't contra dances, that aren't a 32-bar structure, like lots of the squares and all the English stuff. I spent the pandemic putting them all there and reorganizing, and so I'm constantly playing with this. But as I say, doing that actually helps me because it keeps me thinking about the dances. You can't believe how many mistakes I find after, you know, 40 times of running this dance through some editing process, you'd think I would have the directions corrected. But

there's still times where I say, "Oh, wait a minute. That couldn't possibly be 1973 when she wrote that, she wasn't even alive." Or 1917 or whatever I had.

Mary Wesley So it's the caller as sort of, archivist and database manager.

David Smukler Yeah. And, you know, 'Wait a minute, isn't there a do-si-do over there? Oh, yes, of course.' You know, it's just amazing. And it's funny because I'm at the dance and I do it right, and the notes don't have it right sometimes. But anyway, it's an ongoing process, but that's how I keep my notes at the moment. Who knows ten years, five years from now... At the moment, they're in those two big electronic programs. And I take my iPad with me to the dance and the silliest part of this is I mostly use my notes for planning. I almost never look at notes at the dance because I feel like when I get to the dance, I like to be prepared enough that I really know that the dance is on my program. So occasionally I have a moment of panic and I look at the thing and I'm usually seeing just what I was saying anyway. But it's reassuring to have it there. But I almost never look at it anymore. And I've gotten myself in trouble by not wanting to look at my notes, you know, trying to be the caller who doesn't need notes. I've given up on that as my brain ages. I'll have them there, but I don't refer to them often.

Mary Wesley It's good to have them there. But that's admirable to just be able to be present.

David Smukler Well there's so many balls in the air, as it were, you know already that I don't want another one. I have trouble juggling the ones I'm juggling already.

Mary Wesley Yeah, I love it. My next question is, do you have any pre- or post- gig rituals? Things that you do to get ready to get on stage, and then kind of wind down after?

David Smukler Yeah. The pre- gig ritual for me it starts weeks in advance with prep. Honestly, I am very obsessive about...like, I'll organize my program and then reorganize it. In the English world we send the tunes to the band before the dance because the dances all require particular tunes. In the contra world I do that too, to some extent. If I want a singing square, if I want a chestnut that needs a particular tune, I make sure the band is comfortable with that or I'll change the program to leave that out. So I'll be playing with my program, I'll change it two, three times. And bands know this from me now, they roll their eyes. I'll send them a list, and then two days later I'll say, "Oh, I want to do this instead." I try and curb that, but...I'm obsessive about prep because when I get to the dance, I want to do that. If I'm driving to a dance like, you know, often in upstate New York you're going to be in over an hour in the car to get to a gig unless it's right here in our local community, I'm often putting music on and calling the dances in the car, you know, just to feel like I really know that one. I'm good. And then when I walk into the hall, I put all that aside, I'm done with prep. I've done it. I'm as ready as I'm going to be and I just chat people up and chat with the band, I chat with whatever organizers are there, I chat with dancers. I just try and be a person present at that moment. After the dance, nothing that I can think of that's consistent you know. I'm often really buzzy after a dance. Like after I've called the dance. I'm so excited, my mind is racing, I'm so interested in everything that's happened. And if I have a long drive home that often gets me at least half of the way home without coffee or anything else. But I don't have any particular ritual there, it's just whatever happens.

Mary Wesley Yeah, wonderful. And then my last question, if you know, is whether you're an introvert or an extrovert?

David Smukler Um...

Mary Wesley My little sociology project on the side here.

David Smukler Yeah. I don't know. I don't know if I'm sure about that. There are certainly times I feel overwhelmed and need to just find a quiet place and be myself, and that feels introverted. But I do love chatting people up and there are people I know who are just able to work the party in a way that's amazing. So I think I'm in the middle of that spectrum somewhere. I'm not sure I'd be too far one way or the other.

Mary Wesley Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And it's been interesting to me that callers can be anywhere along that spectrum. Wonderful, well, thank you so much, David. I really loved getting to talk with you. And congratulations again on your appointment to the CDSS board as their next president! They are lucky to have you

David Smukler Thank you so much. I have big shoes to step into because the current president, Gaye Fifer, is just so good.

Mary Wesley So good.

David Smukler Good in that role and good in so many ways.

Mary Wesley I think you're up to the task.

David Smukler Well, we'll see.

Mary Wesley Thanks.

David Smukler Thanks Mary.

[*Musical transition*]

Mary Wesley Thanks so much to David 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